

May 16, 1972

Dear McKim Steele:

The pressures of a very heavy lecture schedule which I just finished and a hot objective situation heated up to inhuman, impossible assaults by Nixon have combined to give me no breathing space to answer your question on the role of intellectuals until now. I assume, however, that Olga has sent you some of the writings I had promised you both on Africa and and my new work on Philosophy and Revolution.

The serious question you raised is not something one can answer by merely pish to our work on the question. Since you are a historian, therefore I trust you will not mind going back to "beginnings", at least it is the beginning for Marxists who do accept that Marx discovered a new continent of thought and yet it never quite got an organizational expression that met that philosophic challenge. In a word, beginning with Engels (who certainly was loyal to Marx and tried hard till his death "to make something out of" the endless--and horribly scripted--manuscripts Marx left unfinished) we have not yet risen to that challenge. I never participated in the criticisms of Engels because they were directed, not in order to rise to the challenge, but because they meant consciously to divert from the chartered roads as if unchartered paths, by just being unchartered, are thereby "original."

At the same time it is true that Engels, especially, on the dialectic, could not measure up to Marx, and Engels, as the practical man, was so concerned with organization, individual roles, specificity of the empiric concrete, that he decided EEE to return to dialectic origins, but instead bring Feuerbach "up to date", answer the "immediate" questions (1880's instead of 1840's). We have suffered from that vulgarization of dialectic materialism, and are yet to free ourselves of it. This was so, not because, as Existentialists and Reformists and "Scientists" alike infer, because there is no dialectic in "Nature", but because the historic dialectic is so very differently--gloriously, humanly so-- that to search for a "common denominator" is to violate it entirely. Put differently, precisely because history is what men and women make it, because of the inseparability of the Subject as maker of history from the object (be it "matter" or Nature or "Society") any division of Subject from Object at that point-- the revolutionary transformation of society--kills the emergent new society because it kills the creativity of Subject, of the endless Movement, of what Hegel would call "Second Negativity", and Marx "the permanent revolution."

When all is said and done, subject-less motion, be it even as ceaseless and the "transforming" kind as the end of ice age or birth of nuclear age, "Nature" can still be as bleak without human nature and as barren as those planets we're "running" after or "up into". Now we admire the computer and degrade the human being, the human passion that strives for freedom instead of materiality!

Now, what has all this to do with the role of the intellectual in a Marxist-Humanist organization, you might ask impatiently? Well, just consider what intellectuals have been doing this past century, so fearful of there having been "one, only one Marx", that everything from "the Party" through the "Free Individual" (even in occupied France!) to crossing between existing State Powers has achieved in bringing us to the totality, absoluteness of the present world crisis.

The first Great Divide in Marxism came with the betrayal by the Second International. It took so great a catastrophe, a world holocaust, to make Lenin recognize that such organization wasn't really the answer, the "activity" which would make masses follow leaders, leaders who had "brought them" Marxism as against either exploitation or trade unionism. So the great genius who extended "the vanguard party to lead" to the point where that is that is history still all that "history" remembers about him. (I assume you do know all the changes that occurred in his concept of the party 1903-23 --Ch.XI of Marxism and Freedom deals extensively with the question of the relationship of spontaneity to organization.)

Yet the greatest part that Lenin has bequeathed is the philosophic

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return to Hegel, the revolutionary dialectic without which the revolution itself would have been endangered, and, indeed, was even after it had succeeded but he died; the philosophic ambivalence aided the objective situation of a new counter-revolutionary stage to gain dominance.

But if "the Party" (Trotsky, on the outside/ⁱⁿ included here for there was neither a difference in concept of party even when he was expelled) and mere opposition to bureaucratization (instead of discovering, along with a new stage in cognition, a new, live revolutionary force that was also Reason) did not lead way out, what did independent, non-Party intellectuals do?

Well, a new epoch had opened in the 1950's from below, from practice, from leaderless masses, be it in East Europe on June 17, 1953 (preceded in "backward USA" by workers battling with automation) or Africa (Ghana 1957-58, preceded by the Algerian Revolution) or Black Dimension in USA, and still there is greater dearth of thought among intellectuals than ever before. It is as if thought, contrary to Nature, does like a vacuum. But I refuse to believe that and, as I have shown in M&F which is fully built on that movement from practice to theory and a new society, over a period of nearly two centuries, there is nothing in the thought even of genius, that has not previously been in the activity of common man.

This does not (does NOT) mean therefore there is nothing for intellectuals to do. What it means is that that is where the intellectuals' task first begins. The moments in history when he did recognize that his generalization have helped leap ahead because practice, too, is one-side, and only the unity of theory and practice leads to revolutionary transformation, then humanity did discover as great dimensions within itself as outside continents to conquer. (May I be so conceited as to ask you to read the 2 final pages of first edition of M&F, pp.286-7 and write me your commentary?)

Now I will admit to one great failing: ever since giving up the "party to lead" concept, "forcing" all intellectuals to listen, listen, listen, "our" intellectuals have very nearly transformed themselves into "full fountain pens" to take down what others said rather than projecting their own ideas, since they did recognize the revolutionary forces are also Reason and wisdom comes from the counsel of many. But Philosophy and Revolution does, in fact, reverse the process, that is to say, begins and ends, instead, with self-development of thought itself. But we have not gotten far and now I feel very strongly intellectuals are of the essence. I was especially impressed by your questions because your interest, long before you met any of us, did begin where a revolution was going on, in Algeria, and your field remains Africa where, despite the revolutions, we are witnessing backward moves!

When you consider the hotless theoretic void since the death of Lenin, there is hardly an end to all the theoretic void that needs to be done if ever it is to catch up to the challenge from below, not to mention when it finally will make its leap at unity of the two. Nothing is more urgent these days than to work out a totally new relationship of theory to practice, and nothing more needed than some original contributions that come from self-discipline as well as reading, not the monstrous "symptomale" reading of an Althusser who reads into every one from Marx down what his empty but "erudite" casuistry spins out of the convolutions of his gray matter, but a historic reading that does not separate the yesterday from the today-ness of history. The one great original contribution to "the theory of the party" Lenin did make was the definition of what is a party member, that is to say, the denial of membership to those who would just write but not "belong" for there is no more disorganized person than an intellectual and he, he above all, needs the belonging, the discipline of a local, not "voting", much less "reading out"

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of members because some one on high or low declares to be "undisciplined," but the full collectivity in working out ideas as well as strategy and tactics. That is why, at one and the same time, News & Letters Committees' Resolution has practically no discipline--you cannot be expelled except for an anti-class struggle action or manifestation of racial chauvinism--while daily activity is, again, very much up to the individual and not only local or national, and yet there is no way to be a Marxist-Humanist and not belong and not feel that the very organization of your ideas cannot be achieved in isolation alone. At the same time the isolation to be avoided is not only from rank and file but from the masses outside. Outside of the vote there practically is no difference between outside and inside.

Since it all is so now, you can help us work out some specifications about special tasks for intellectuals. You were right when you said we have a lot to say about what intellectuals cannot do, but little of what they should. It was, and is, imperative that they recognize books as not the "source" of Reason, but realize it comes spontaneously from the masses, from all the forces of liberation--Women Liberation and youth as well as the crucial Black Dimension. But after that you better dig, dig deep into books, into history, into philosophy for without catching that single link of continuity (the lifeblood of the dialectic) with historic past, with Marxism in its origins, there is no way to single out the new and develop the original for our day as both historic contribution of our age and the revolutionary transformation of the age.

The one thing that impressed me from the lecture tour this year is precisely the intellectuals' own realization and hunger for theory in a serious Marxist-Humanist sense. Heretofore it used to be very much the students, the activists who would listen while their professors took the hour off from "non-academic responsibilities." This year the professors who did attend--and in UCL especially it was also in special colloquiums with on Marxism--philosophy's relationship to economics, the dialectics of liberation, as a unity of theory and practice; can Althusser be called a Marxist at all? what is the Black Dimension globally? and even the question of how does one project philosophy organizationally?

I'm most sorry that we got to speak so little outside of "formal" talks. I do hope that this can be the beginning of a dialogue--and I mean it orally and not only in written form. Our weakest point is the oral projection, the challenge to other tendencies and not only to the state or academia or the capitalist factory; there we can leave it to the proletariat who fight it day in and day out. But what do we do to counter the daily droning by the status quo, the brainwashing sans terror, the passing off of false consciousness for Ideas, ~~the status quo~~ and, instead, elicit from those deep passions for freedom that hunger for expression and lack both the confidence, and the forum? I hope you will help us and that, soon, this comradeship will become the form of reorganization of one's own thoughts and life for we must also know how to speak in future tense, not as Utopia, but as what will be this very day if, if, if...

Yours,

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