Letter from Raya on Nicolaus Forward to the Grundrisse

Dear Friends, July 1, 1973

Grundrisse has finally been translated into English and published in full. (Olga, of course, has sent away to Pelican Press to find out whether we could get a reduction from $4.95 price.)

Unfortunatley, this edition is burdened by so fantastic a foreword by its translator, Martin Nicolaus, that we must all over again divert from Marx to his interpreters. You, of course, have the chapter on the Grundrisse in Philosophy and Revolution and since you will soon have the whole of Marx's work, you could skip over the 60 pp. foreword. However, the foreword has a significance because it is by the youth who, in giving us a rigorous translation and having the advantage of being or knowing Greek, translated also all those passages that are always left to tantalize, and who, being New Left, gives us an indication of all that will befall us in the battle of ideas.

By stating that his foreword is "fantastic" I do not mean it departs in any fundamental way from established Marxism, which, with reformism, began demanding the removal of the "Hegelian dialectic scaffolding" of Marx's works. And I certainly do not mean that "orthodoxy" rested with Stalin who threw out "the negation of the negation" from the "dialectic laws", much less with Mao who perverted contradiction from the elemental class struggle to "principal" and "subordinate" forever changing places in "bloc of four classes." (The latter two, especially Mao, get praised to the skies, so that we read that On Contradiction and On Practice "are at one and the same time strictly othodox in the Marxist sense and highly original," p.43, ftn. 39.) I mean that the pull of pragmatism, state-capitalism, and the administrative mentality that characterizes our age are so overwhelming that all the years put into the translation, the recognition that "The Grundrisse challenges and puts to the test every serious interpretation of Marx yet conceived." (p.7) and the subjective wish to be revolutionary, are still no shield from the objective pull of state-capitalist age once your ears are not close to the ground so that you see all the elemental forces from practice uniting with the self-determination of the philosophy of liberation.

From the very first page, first paragraph, Nicolaus announces that the 1857-8 Notebooks (that did not see publication in Marx's time; were kept from public eye till World War II when they were first published in the original German only in Moscow; didn't really reach front center stage until after Chinese Revolution and Korean War in 1953; and were disregarded for two further decades before they reach Anglo-Saxon world) "display the key elements in Marx's development and overthrow of the Hegelian philosophy." (p.7, my emphasis.) With this as his ground, how could the translator possibly learn anything from the 893 pages?

(Add to this false beginning also the first footnote on that same page which shows the heavy dependence on Rosdolsky's work which Nikolaus himself later (p.23, ftn.16) admits is exclusively economic and results in "the virtual exclusion of the question of method (and of Hegel) from the debates of this epoch" and, of course, in Rosdolsky himself. In that footnote 1, Nicolaus also quotes Rosdolsky as stating "that only three or four copies of the 1939-41 edition ever reached 'the western world.'" I myself, however, knew of more than that many copies in New York alone. While it certainly was no "mass" circulation, the truth was that so great was the hunger for philosophy, for Marx's original philosophy, so great the disgust with what the Communists made of it plus Trotskyists' disregard of it, that passages would be translated and passed around in small circles of revolutionary Marxists long before the current dissenters in Russia made Samizdat, the

popular self-publication, a universal.

The next 15 pages of his Foreword Nicolaus devotes to background plus a few pages in trying to summarize the first chapter of Marx's On Money and into the first section On Capital. All is devoted to the translator's view of "the structure of the argument" (p.23) only to conclude: "All that follows in the remaining 400 pp. of the Grundrisse is built on the basic elements here outlined."

Having thus cavalierly virtually dismissed one-half of the book (he will later return in bits and pieces), he is off on his own. It is here, then, that we have to search for his method and aim and originality of contribution. Quoting Marx on the difference between a method of presentation and a method of inquiry, which Nicolaus translates as "method of working", Nicolaus concludes that this is the unique feature of the Grundrisse. Directly after this he once again quotes Marx, this time Marx's letter to Engels (1-16-1858) on the fact that Marx did indeed find Hegel's Logic of great service "in the method of working." Unfortunately, Nicolaus has no comprehension whatever, either of this sentence or the the one he quotes from Lenin that it was "impossible completely to understand Marx's Capital, especially Chapter 1, without having thoroughly studied the whole of Hegel's Logic."

Far from basing himself on either, Nicolaus is on his way to construct something altogether different. First, he brings in a character from Brecht's dramas who states that, though Hegel could have been "one of the greatest humorists among philosophers, like Socrates...he sold himself to the state." Nicolaus concludes: "That is to say, Hegel's philosophy was at once dialectical, subversive, as was Socrates', and idealist, mystical like a priests." (p.27) So satisfied is he with that red herring of old, that he reiterates, "it left Hegel towards the end a philosopher-pope bestowing benedictions, as popes must, on the temporal emporer." As for the dialectic, he returns us to the origin of the word: in "Greek, dia, meaning split in two, opposed, clashing; and 'logos', reason; hence, 'to reason by splitting in two.'"

But just as we are about to think he is finally, more or less, on the right track (that is, though it is in Greece and times of Socrates rather than in Germany in the times of the French Revolution and Napoleon), he develops neither contradiction nor self-motion, but jumps at once to Kriff (concept). As if Hegel didn't grasp that any more than he grasped that very unique Hegelianism, "moment" because, allegedly, it was from Newton, from mechanics, and not from history's self-movement, that Hegel took the word "moment." While this flies in the face of Marx's critique of the dialectic as rooted in history, self-development, the self-making of labor, Nicolaus stresses how "profoundly contrary to Hegel's method" is Marx's. (Nicolaus here limits himself to the concreteness of Marx's concept of time especially on the question of production, which is, of course, crucial, but we will see later that what he leaves out, in turn, is the whole of Marxism: SUBJECT, self-development, masses as reason and not just as labor time.)

At the moment Nicolaus was altogether too busy denying Hegel: "The idealist side of his philosophy was that he denied the reality of what the senses perceive." (p.27) Not a word about the fact that so great was Hegel's discovery, according to Marx--the second negativity, the creativity, and so rooted in the revolutionary period--that Hegel had to "throw a mystical veil" over that reality. It is of course at reality where Marx did transcend Hegel--and so did the historic period of 1848 as against 1789--but, again, it was the Subject, the proletariat, that made the Great Divide between Hegel the bourgeois philosopher and Marx who had discovered a new continent

of thought that was not merely materialism vs. idealism but the unity of the two in "the new Humanism", and that carried through into Vol. III of Capital as "Human power is its own end."

So preoccupied is Nicolaus with contrasting materialism to idealism (though he himself will later (p.34) need to admit that if it were only a question of "standing Hegel right side up" then that "was accomplished in the early 1840's by both Feuerbach and Marx..." (my emphasis) that he forgets the true uniqueness of Marx and repeats outworn revisionisms about "Hegelian language" to tell us that "Before Capital found its way into print Marx discarded most of this lexicon as baggage which had served for its journey but outlasted its day." (pp.32-3) Then what did that "service" that Hegel rendered Marx achieve? Nicolaus's answer is indeed the most petty-bourgeois intellectualistic idealism yet heard: "The usefulness of Hegel lay in providing guide-lines for what to do in order to grasp a moving developing totality with the mind." (p.33)

Now if it is nothing less than "guide-lines" that Hegel provided and if he also provided "a grip on the entire realm of the 'independent objective Mind' which Hegel had sent floating into the heavens...", what exactly was new in Marx's discovery? Where was that proletariat Marx held on to as the Subject for transformation of society, the shaper of history, the mass that is a product of history but also "makes" it? Nicolaus can't seem to get further than "standing right side up" and "removing mystical shell from rational core".

He does get to two other philosophic concepts: where to begin? and Mediation. And, at one point I even thought he would get to a genuine divide, when he pointed to the difference between starting with the abstract Being and Nothing in Hegel, and the concrete Commodity--which Marx didn't reach till the very last page of the Grundrisse (p.881) but which then became the beginning both of Critique of Political Economy built on Grundrisse, and Capital. But he was altogether too eager to stick at the "overthrow of the Hegelian system": "This is the critique of Hegel's dialectic method, therefore a critique of his theory of contradiction, hence a critique of the fundamental processes of the Hegelian concept, of Hegel's basic grasp of movement." (p.34)

The result was self-paralysis, blindness to that crucial Ch. 1 of Capital, which (1) Lenin called attention to as requiring the whole of Logic but which Nicolaus reduces to zero stating "it would be a misreading of Lenin's intent to argue that...This is a project for a long term in prison." (pp.60-1) (2) He never once questions himself as to that constant reappearance of Ch. 1 at each revolutionary period and counter-revolutionaries demanding it be thrown out of the teaching of Capital, as Stalin did in 1943. Moreover, and above all, (3) what exactly is Ch. 1, and its 1873-5 rewriting by Marx himself of final section "Fetishism of Commodities" and why did Marx ask readers of the German edition which did not have that essential part to please read the French edition following the Paris Commune? Nothing, nothing whatever, is greater proof of the recreation of the dialectic on the basis of this elemental outpouring and the self-development of Marx's Begriff of Commodity. In "nothing whatever" I include all the great dialectical development in Grundrisse, even its Hegelian-Marxian "absolute movement of becoming." For the most mature, most creative genius learned from the Parisian masses that that perverse form, a commodity, the value-form of a product of labor, can never be stripped of its fetishism except by "freely associated labor." So his beginning, as against Hegel's in Science of Logic, was not only concrete, tangible as against abstract

universal of Being, but it was also the not-concrete, not-tangible bourgeois fetish which reduced labor itself itself to the commodity, labor-power. And this was not only production exploitation vs. market equality, but that Absolute, the specifically capitalistic stage of production, whose Notion had to be split into two: bourgeois reification vs. freely associated labor showing it is all relations of production that must be uprooted and recreated on altogether other foundations.

Having "overthrown Hegelian philosophy" he goes into Mediation, a central category surely but not an Absolute, and furthermore long since cleansed by Marx of its "idealism" once he stated "immediate identities leave immediate dualities intact." Nicolaus quotes that statement on p.39 only as preliminary to first going in on his own. By no accident, therefore, on the very next page (40, ftn.36) though he wishes to criticize Althusser's "Over-determination" concept, he ends by saying that Althusser is "ambiguous." If anything can be said about Althusser, despite his deliberately obfuscating his attack not only on Hegel but Marx whose affinity to Hegel he calls nothing short of "abreaction."

No, dear Nicolaus, all your praise of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks means nothing, nothing at all, once you consign anyone who wishes to study Logic to fully comprehend Capital to "a long term in prison" and think, now that you have presented (and how presented!) Grundrisse which Lenin hadn't known about, no further need is there for Hegel. Is there any for Capital or Grundrisse when you assure us that, in place of awaiting a long term in prison, "meanwhile much can be gained from Wages, Prices, and Profit and On Contradiction" (p.61), having already (p.43, ftn.39) assured us that Mao's essays are "at one and the same time strictly orthodox in the Marxist sense and highly original." In their perversity, they surely are "highly original" for a Marxist, but shouldn't you ask yourself: how did it happen you went back to 1937 when, in fact, the Chinese Revolution is what brought onto the historic stage "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations" (you more precisely do translate it as "Forms which precede capitalist production. (Concerning the process which precedes the formation of capital relation or of original accumulation.)"

Let me expand on this. Nicolaus stopped before he reached that crucial section (pp.471-514) of the Grundrisse which he barely mentions anywhere as if what he called "the structure of the argument" could possibly have been made on what preceded it. Clearly, the section was neither merely economy nor even "merely" historic, that is to say, history as past instead of as present and future. The dialectic in that historic period had all the elements of a new role for peasantry, a new role for so-called "Oriental despotism", a more comprehensive view of becoming. For all those reasons, it is only when an actual revolution occurred in China and that country actually was the first to translate the section on pre-capitalist formations, that all established Communist regimes were compelled to grapple with what Marx had written in 1857-8. Insofar as the question of "backwardness" is concerned, Marx reiterated that in altogether new form in the very last year of his life, 1882-3. Put in a different way, he now said that "backward" Russia might, ahead of the "advanced" countries, have a social revolution. He showed the same type of attitude in his relationship to the "Automaton". Nicolaus does mention that section more often than the one on Oriental society. But again, his hostility to Hegel--and being stuck in the mud of our age's administrative mentality--limited his perception of that section as if it were only against the "New Left's" view that engineers will, with automation, invent machines who will replace the proletariat, etc. etc. In actuality it is the multidimensionality that Marx was analyzing. He saw the limitations

of both the Hegelian dialectic sans Subject and his own economics, great as it was, sans the masses in motion. In the 1850's this is what made him discard all, start anew, and include both the Civil War and the Paris Commune. Both the struggle for shortening the working day and the new Black Dimension releasing labor led to the restructuring of Grundrisse as Capital.

The new in the Grundrisse even now is not merely "method of working", great as that is. It is the continuity of the affinity of the Marxian and Hegelian dialectic. From the moment of break with bourgeois society, 1843, all the way through Grundrisse and total break with vulgar materialists (not merely as utopians or Proudhonists but as Lassalleans) to Capital and the First International, Marx's self-development is in no sense a break from the young Marx that discovered a new continent of thought. Any who question, as Nicolaus does, whether "it is any longer necessary to read Hegel's Logic in order to completely understand Capital" when Grundrisse is finally available; and then claim that Grundrisse is just to see a mind at work, are indeed the worst kind of petty-bourgeois "idealists". They are completely dead to the whole of the past 2 decades when from below, from the East German Revolt in 1953 on to Paris and Peking, 1968, as well as from "above" (self-determination of Idea finally catching up with self-determination of nations) "new passions and new forces" have arisen. This movement surely has passed by progeny of the Stalins, Maos, not to mention the Trotskyists and all who thought they can catch theory "en route." The task for us, however, has just begun.

Yours,

Raya