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A 1981 view of Marx's 1841 dialectic

THEORY / PRACTICE

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Dear CD:

I'd like to discuss with you the reason for my beginning the part of the book¹ on Marx in 1841 rather than 1843. The latter is the usual starting point for analyzing Marxism since that is the year Marx broke from bourgeois society. I find the year 1841 especially exciting because there we see Marx as a revolutionary before ever he developed a totally new body of ideas — a whole new continent of thought and of revolution we know as Marx's Marxism. We become witness to him speaking to himself so to speak in preparing his doctoral thesis on ancient Greek philosophy, specifically Epicurus and Democritus, we become witness to the fact that, despite his erudition and concentration on Greek philosophy, what preoccupies him is the reality of Germany, 1840, the great, irresolvable contradiction between Hegel's Absolute Idea and Prussian reality.

TO THE EXTENT to which 1841 was mentioned at all by Marxists, it was simply to show that, even in the realm of thought and even when Marx himself was still a Hegelian, he "deviated" from Hegel's analysis of those Greek philosophers. What, however, is of the essence, as his Notebooks rather than just the thesis show, is truly phenomenal: Marx is actually probing heretofore unprobed depths of consciousness as well as of reality.

"While philosophy has sealed itself off to form a consummate, total world... The world confronting a philosophy total in itself is therefore a world torn apart. He who does not acknowledge this historical necessity must be consistent and deny that men can live at all after a total philosophy." (p.491)²

Naturally, it isn't Epicurus and Democritus that interests us, but how Marx in writing on that, was having his eyes fixed on and opposing the German reality of his day. As a young Hegelian he is asking himself: where is humanity heading? And it is this which leads him to the conclusion to break with the bourgeoisie as he begins his struggle against Prussian censorship, and feels the urgency to oppose the status quo. He starts to

engage in "Ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless in the sense that the criticism is neither afraid of its own results nor of confronting the powers that be."

Clearly, what is tugging at the young Marx in reality and in thought is something in the air — revolution. The key word for the young Marx is history. The contemporary history which was pulling at the student Marx was in his thesis stated as if it were only the history of thought, but the non-muted form in which it was expressed in his so-called Notebooks makes it clear that it was actual history — the crisis in contemporary Germany in reality as well as in thought. And because that was so, it was both Hegel and the Left Hegelians (of whom he was one) that Marx was breaking from. His point was that it is insufficient simply to show that the master (Hegel) had accommodated himself to reactionary reality. One must analyze the accommodation not merely to expose it, but in order thereby to discover the inadequacy of the philosophical principle which compelled that accommodation. Only in that way could the critique produce an advance in knowledge which would create the possibility of a new beginning.

MARX HELD THAT because Hegel's philosophy wasn't the unity of reason and reality which it claimed to be — the present period of crisis revealed the total diremption of the two separate totalities. Reality and Reason confronted each other hostilely. This duality of philosophical self-consciousness appears finally as a double trend, each side utterly opposed to the other." (p. 86)

Discerning the inadequacy in both Hegel and the Young Hegelians, Marx was heading, his Notebooks reveal, toward both attacking philosophy and opposing reality. He turned first to a search for what he called a new "energizing principle," as he wrote: "It is a psychological law that theoretical mind once liberated in itself turned to practical energy... but the practice of philosophy is itself theoretical. It is the critique that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality vs. the idea." (p. 85)

The question that Marx kept asking himself is: where and how to begin anew both in philosophy and in trying to transform reality. The new beginning that Marx had worked out over the next two to three years was nothing short of a whole new continent of thought and of revolution. For, as he left the academic world and became a journalist, a revolutionary journalist, he was at once engaged both in battles with Prussian censorship and the legal system, specifically the laws on wood theft, taking, instead, the part of the rebellious peasants. Just as revolutionary journalism led to a break with the

¹ Rosa Luxemburg, *Woman's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, is still in manuscript form, but should be off the press next year.

² Both the Notebooks and the doctoral thesis on Epicurus and Democritus are quoted from Karl Marx, *Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 1*, International Publishers, 1975. The disparity in the pages referred to above in these two works is due to the fact that, whereas the thesis, pp.25-108, appears in Sec. 1, the Preparatory Materials, i.e., Notebooks (pp. 403-515) do not appear till the end of the volume.

bourgeoisie and its state, so the Philosophic-Economic Essays led in 1844 to a new world view, a new Humanism, and a new concept of revolution — proletarian revolution.

WHAT I FOUND most exciting about that year, 1844, is to see the ideas while it is germinating, rather than when it is already a conclusion. The process of breaking, moreover, is what shows at one and the same time what is old and what is new-born, that is, just "influences," but discontinuous with old; the great divide in historic age. And what sets off one age from another both as birth-time of history and of philosophy are those breaking-points of departure from old which point to the direction forward.

It is true that Marx would not work out that new beginning until he had broken with bourgeois society as he had already in 1841 broken with religion and Prussian censorship, and until he discerned the working class as Subject. But, philosophically, there is no doubt where he was headed, as he contrasted practice to theory, and developed his most original interpretation of praxis. That was to remain his unique category for breaking both with "idealism" and "materialism."

Finally, can I confide in you something that may sound fantastic? May I ask you whether you see any relationship between the questions that preoccupied Marx in 1841 to what has been happening in our age in the early years of the 1950s? You remember, I am sure, two very different events in the early 1950s that would disclose, at one and the same time, the new stage of production — Automation — and a new stage of cognition, whether that be the break I saw in the Absolute Idea as reflecting not just a movement from theory, but a movement from practice that was itself a form of theory, or something as seemingly simple as your own life's story which you called Indignant Heart and which actually was pointing to a new stage of Black consciousness that was soon to be revealed in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Well, it happened that in this year's lecture tour when I spoke on the book and on the year, 1841, I was asked by Iranian and Latin American revolutionaries about those early 1950s when on the one hand, U.S. imperialism was acting in a most brutal imperialist way by bringing back the Shah in Iran, and causing a counter-revolution in Guatemala; and on the other hand, there was a second revolutionary USA, which today's revolutionaries wished to get a feeling about.

Let's discuss that when we begin the preliminary discussions next month. O.K.

Yours,
Raya