

II - LETTERS OF 1958

June 27, 1958

Dear Bessie:

J.R. Johnson's "Facing Reality", 174 little pages of it, is off the press. How naive of me to have thought that the delay was due to the fact that he had sent it back to the press in order to have something to say on the coming of De Gaulle to power! The man who can write "It is agreed that the socialist society exists." need indeed never face reality: the convolutions of his own mind suffices, and so we have the key sentence of his reality that socialism already exists, and all we have to do is "to record the facts of its existence."

Moreover, that new society of his is broad enough so that we get as "the proof" of the new society "the new people": (hold on to your seat!) it includes "Nkrumah... (who) single-handedly outlined a program, based on the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Gandhi." Naturally that makes Gandhi new for he "introduced a new dimension into the technique of mass struggle for national independence and perhaps far more. His political genius, one of the greatest of our times". And of course if Gandhi, why not Nehru and "the Congress Party" or-- for that matter -- why not Mao Tse-tung among the new: "If China has gone the way of Stalinist totalitarianism, it is because faced with the implacable hostility of US Imperialism,... it had no choice but to follow the pattern of its Russian ally" but that should not make us forget that "Mao Tse-tung and his fellow revolutionists built a party and an army in strict relation to their objective environment and the need of self-preservation." I do not know whether you are quite prepared for all "the New" but you cannot be surprised that the Russian Revolution is equated to those of China and Ghana, nor -- to the opposite side of the same coin -- that 1917 is equated to the single party state! But J.R. Johnson says both with as much ballast: "The Russian Revolution

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shattered the structure of official Europe. The Chinese Revolution shattered the structure of official Asia. The revolution in Ghana has forever destroyed the structure which official society had imposed upon tropical Africa." "Beginning in 1917, the political form of the One-Party State, in direct contradiction to the aspirations of Europe for centuries, turn by turn has embraced such diverse areas as Russia, Italy, Germany and now China."

Perhaps I shouldn't have flung you so immediately into all his key passages and started you just with the signatures, for there are other signatures; indeed, Johnson has let them magnanimously precede his: Grace C. Lee and Pierre Chaulieu. If it surprises you that no explanation about how a Bureaucratic Collectivist and a State Capitalist theoretician can so fully merge, then know the extent of their honesty that somewhere it says that "doctrinal" differences notwithstanding, not that it specifies to whom that concerns. But then they have very few principles when there is no reference anywhere to state capitalism except when it mentions the title of the document "State Capitalism and World Revolution". I should have entitled the review: "A little honesty would have gone a long way; and a few principles even longer." The Appendix to that book is a masterpiece of double talk: 1) it says "the ideas and perspectives in Facing Reality are the result of 17 years of theoretical study", so we are back at 1941 and you would suppose it meant state capitalist theory, but you are wrong to think anything so simple and straightforward. It merely says that "the material, particularly that written before 1947, appeared only in mimeographed form" and that "the most complete file" is with "Socialisme ou Barbarie published since 1948." Then we hear that these intellectuals and workers "have governed all their activities by their conception that the main enemy of society today is the "bureaucracies of modern capitalism." Now, although state capitalism has gotten merged with bureaucratic collectivism

as "bureaucracies of modern capitalism," Johnson skips from 1948 all the way to the January-March 1954 issue of "Socialism ou Barbarie", i.e., after the Master landed in Europe. Then these "landmarks" finish soon and we get this "Another series of publications is the work of the Johnson-Forest Tendency which developed as a body of ideas inside the American Trotskyist organizations. The supporters of this Tendency have since broken completely with Trotskyism and the Leninist theory of the party and the Tendency no longer exists."

"The body of ideas" is never specified, nor is the author (myself) specified of "The Nature of the Russian Economy", also written in 1946, on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of all available data on the Russian 5 year Plans." But we hear that the "theoretical summation of the work of the Johnson-Forest Tendency is to be found in "State Capitalism and World Revolution," originally written in 1950 and reprinted in 1956 under the auspices of six Europeans representing three different countries". But it regrets that that document "has not made the complete break with the Leninist conception of the vanguard party."

We find that "Not until 1955 are theory and actual experiences of the working class joined together. This is in the account of the Shop Stewards Movement in Britain from which we have quoted extensively in the text and which is reprinted as an appendix to "State Capitalism and World Revolution". Now that joining together of philosophy and life is only natural for people who think that Shop Stewards are: "all-powerful", "the new society". No wonder then that their chapter on philosophy states that "Philosophy as such has come to an end," and while they condescend to say that previously philosophers at least "cleared away much that had become old and rotten and at least formulated the new. But the time for that is past", that "Philosophy must become proletarian" and since the new society already exists

and all you have to do is "record" (an abysmally poor recording it is) they promise that what they wrote on philosophy is "a methodological guide but no more" (they should have added, and much less), "The organization will not seek to propagate it, nor to convince men of it, but to use it so as the more quickly and clearly to recognize how it is concretely expressed in the lives and struggles of people."

The Appendix continues its tale of how all the journals arose "along the lines set forth in Facing Reality", the first of these was Correspondence -- and then "In 1955 there was a split from Correspondence and another publication, News & Letters, was begun along the general lines of Correspondence." For people who have conveniently forgotten our origins and development as a state capitalist tendency and so eagerly give that up for a merger with Chaulieu, why speak of war and his capitulation to the pacifism and cowardice that overcame him during the Formosa Crisis when he abandoned his co-founder? Isn't it magnanimous of them to state that we publish "along the general lines of Correspondence" (God Forbid!). Why state such old politics as anti-war positions along Marxist lines.

Of course they also mention Indignant Heart as if it is theirs -- and then proceed to mention some bourgeois books to show "the new". The understatement of the year is the final one "This Appendix does not pretend to be in any way complete. It shows an attitude of mind." It most certainly does -- a pathetically dishonest and unprincipled attitude of mind, from its very first statement in the Introduction to that last sentence.

The Introduction starts with: "The whole world today lives in the shadow of the state power....This state power, by whatever name it is called, One-Party State or Welfare State, destroys all pretense of government by the people, of the people. All that remains is government for the people."

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Now statism has become the evil -- not state capitalism or the world's division (not as this book suddenly finds -- into totalitarianism and parliamentary democracy, but into the two poles of world capital, fighting for world domination) -- and we find that the "Hungarian people have restored the belief of the 19th century in progress." Then we find it was after all more than that and the Hungarian Revolution and its Workers Councils is made the key to all else -- only to find that when it comes to THEIR ONE GREAT AND SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION ("THE KEystone OF THE ARCH IS INDEPENDENT EDITORIAL COMMITTEES. 'INDEPENDENT' SIGNIFYING THAT THESE COMMITTEES ARE INDEPENDENT OF THE ORGANIZATION.")-- they are in fact asking for much greater "independence" than just from the organization for they demand that each country and each independent committee become "chroniclers", "recorders", and all other things that "we and only we" can do in order to depart from making these great Hungarian Workers Councils the center. For example, in America, where the Hungarian Revolution was not quite understood because Emmett Till's murder was predominant -- why they should have the freedom to write what is seen by them as critical. Just like these people play up "the new" in all the underdeveloped countries who combine "Lenin, Marx and Gandhi" (Bess, I'm here reminded of U Nu who combines "Marx, Lenin and Buddha" on the ground that "Marx and Lenin answer all the problems of the earth and body" and "Buddha of the heaven and soul!") -- so in the great land of ours that also has "the framework of Workers Councils" -- we nevertheless have special issues: 1) on skilled workers that broke away from the UAW, 2) on Motor-men's Benevolent Association who broke away from the overwhelming majority of subway workers, etc. etc. etc. -- not to forget now their concern for "bloc clubs" and "homeowners" who fight against foreclosures!

What an utter mess! Even I wouldn't have believed that there could be such a complete collapse of any thinking in the 4 short years we have been apart, principles left behind, and complete impotence in the face of not being able to break through philosophically on the Absolute Idea. Oh, I should not forget that they flamboyantly also entitle one part "The Marxist Organization, 1903-1958" and after rejecting "root and branch" "The Leninist concept of the party", that we no further have use for "proletarian Jesuits" and assuring us over and over again, after fighting a lot of straw men of 1903 and never getting beyond that, that "Every nail in the coffin must be driven firmly home" and that they are Marxists "only to the extent" they then proceed to talk of themselves as "the Marxist organization" -- the genius, the contemporary nature, the "what to do and how to do it" all being summed up in "Independent Editorial Committee" that record and inform -- only to have such careless information in 1958 as "Khrushchev and Shepilov" -- too bad only one is in Siberia -- I'm sure Grace would see socialism there too!

Yours,
Raya

[From a follow-up letter of July 15th, 1958, we reprint the following footnote which deals with J.R. Johnson's statement that "Philosophy as such has come to an end."]

This "as such" reminds me of Marx's attack on the economists who said that since the machines "as such" do not come out to attack labor, that therefore there is no "exploitation" or "domination" by them. Marx's reply was that there are no such things as machines "as such". Truth is always concrete. The machines we are talking about are

the only machines there are and they are used in a specific way by the capitalists to exploit labor and indeed the capitalists themselves become just "agents" of this domination of dead over living labor. I know of no other machines in this society. The Johnsonite pronouncement that philosophy "as such" has ended reflects the very specific fact that they as Marxist philosophers have come to an end. Philosophy "as such" or otherwise has certainly ended for them when they cannot get beyond a double-tongued abstraction of philosophy as freedom that is to be "used" but kept from the masses while the very concrete unity of theory and practice is reduced by them to "a single document" by a Shop-Steward-engineer-old politico: "Not until 1955 are theory and actual experience of the working class joined together in a single document. This is the account of the Shop Steward movement". This great masterpiece of a document which glorifies the British shop stewards as against the Vanguard Party (and we also have his word that they do not care for any political parties; that is why I suppose they vote by the millions for the Labour Party) is insane enough also to see shop stewards as "alive and vigorous" during the Nazi rule! "But I am as certain, utterly certain that in every German factory, even from 1933 to 1945, Nazis or no Nazis, the history and aims and methods of the shop stewards and committees must have been kept alive and vigorous, the genuine living tradition of the German working class, ready out at the slightest opportunity." Not only philosophy has come to an end; pure simple common sense has left them when this is presented as the missing link in "State Capitalism and World Revolution" which had "not made the complete break with the Leninist concept of the vanguard party" and which therefore needed reprinting in 1956 with this monumental addition of "theory and actual experience of the working class." No wonder the Absolute Idea could not penetrate such thick skulls -- the Nazis had been there first to utterly dismember thought!

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