

4/56 edition

Part I - Translator's Introductory Note

Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks were written at the time the holocaust of World War I made a shambles of the world in general and of the "vanguard" (official Marxism) in particular. It was at this critical point in history that Lenin felt compelled to study Hegel's Science of Logic.

Far from being an evasion of the political tasks of the moment, it was a recognition that the time demanded infinitely more than the mere counterposition of a correct political policy against a wrong political policy. The German Social Democracy, the greatest party of the Second International, voted war credits to the Kaiser. Lenin thought the paper which announced this action to be a forgery. Once it was proven to be fact, he felt it necessary to examine the philosophic foundations of official Marxism.

These Notebooks mark the great divide in Marxism. As Lenin put it, "It is impossible fully to grasp Marx's Capital and especially its first chapter if you have not studied and understood the whole of Hegel's Logic. Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past 75 years have understood Marx."

With this new philosophic grasp Lenin examined the economic base for the transformation into opposite of competition into monopoly, and of a stratum of the working class into an aristocracy of labor: His studies of Imperialism and State and Revolution.

The present translation of the remarks which Lenin made to himself as he studied Hegel's Science of Logic and History of Philosophy is made from the Russian, as published from Lenin's handwriting by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, first in 1929, and again in 1947. Lenin used a German edition. To make it easier for the English reader to follow Lenin's references to Hegel, the translator has used the standard English edition. All page numbers cited herein refer to Hegel's Science of Logic, translated by Johnston and Struthers, MacMillan Co., 1929.

I made the rough translation of Lenin's Notebooks in 1948, but could find no publisher for them. The Communists have a concept of the "backwardness of the American workers" and have no interest in making these available to the American reader. The radicals were no different from the capitalist or Communist publishers and the translation remained unpublished for 7 more years. While it is impossible to reproduce the whole text as it is a book unto itself, consisting mainly of Hegel's writings, I do believe that Lenin's remarks deserve study by themselves and are sure to stimulate the readers to go to the full text by Lenin as well as Hegel's Science of Logic. Hence the decision at least to mimeograph the historic document in this form and thus make it available to the American public.

Where Lenin, in 1915, could keep his philosophic discoveries in private notebooks, we cannot do so in the 1950s. It did not

matter in 1915 because by 1917 the Russian workers had, in actuality, transformed the old order. But now that Russia, far from being a workers' state, is the greatest tyranny on earth, we have to face the question that is in everyone's mind: what happens AFTER workers gain power? Are we always to be confronted with a labor bureaucracy?

In 1959, under the impact of the miners' strike, sparked by automation (the continuous minor), I returned actively to the writing of a book on Marxism, which I now called "the Lenin book" because I conceived Lenin's Notebooks as central to it. I wanted a worker present at the oral presentation of the thesis. The whole point was that unless the most profound ideas of Marx were expressed so directly that the average worker could understand, it would have lost all its purpose for the new impulses can come from nowhere but out of the struggles, thinking, and aspirations of the working class -- especially the American workers.

Our age has so matured that we must begin with the workers themselves participating in the working out of the philosophic, that is to say, total outlook. That is the reason the recent series of lectures have been undertaken before the writing of the book.

Just as there is no assured success to practice, so there is no royal road to knowledge. Nothing is ever gained by man except through labor and struggle and patience. But for the reader who has the patience and grapples with these Philosophic Notebooks, all sorts of new vistas will unfold. It is high time to abolish the division between "theoretical leaders" and the "rank and file". The truth is that the workers, in their struggle for a new society those past decades since the death of Lenin, have gone a greater distance theoretically as well than the self-styled theoreticians.

"The philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, "wrote the young Marx in his Theses on Feuerbach, "the point, however, is to change it." Lenin in his Notebooks relates Hegel and Marx: "Undoubtedly practice in Hegel stands as a link in the analysis of the process of cognition and precisely as a transition to the objective ("absolute", according to Hegel) truth. Marx, consequently clings to Hegel, introducing criteria of practice into the theory of knowledge. Cf: Theses on Feuerbach." The maturity of our age is shown in this, that there is not only a movement from theory to practice but from practice to theory. It is to those workers who refuse to let "the leaders" do the thinking for them that this is dedicated.

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Part II — An Exchange of Letters on Hegel's Absolute Idea

When the great German philosopher, Hegel, reached the end of his SCIENCE OF LOGIC, and entitled the final chapter, The Absolute Idea, he suddenly began to realize that under that tent all his philosophic enemies and all sorts of religion, including the worship of the golden calf, would try to find a hiding place. He therefore warned:

"It is certainly possible to indulge in a vast amount of senseless declamations about the idea absolute. But its true content is only the whole system, of which we have been hitherto examining the development."

Now the true content of what the writer of the present exchange of letters was dealing with was a study of workingclass struggles and workingclass thought as they appeared in history and were analyzed by Marx and as they appear in the daily lives of workers nowadays. But the greatest illumination of these struggles in the year 1953 was thrown by a reading of Hegel's Absolute Idea, which the present writer identified with a concept of the new society and the struggle for total freedom.

A new era of struggle for freedom had certainly opened in the year 1953. That was the year of Stalin's death on the one hand, and the East German Revolt, on the other hand. This was followed within a few weeks by a revolt in the slave labor camps of Vorkuta inside Russia itself. Clearly, Stalin's death symbolized the beginning of the end of totalitarianism. We leaped generations ahead when the workers in a satellite country and those in the slave labor camps took matters into their own hands. The two new pages of history illuminated the road to a new society by answering in the affirmative what had preoccupied both the average man on the street and the philosopher in his ivory tower: Can man be free in this age of totalitarianism?

In a sense the 1953 European struggles had been anticipated in America in 1950 with the great miners strike. A new era in production had been opened with the first serious introduction of automation in the form of the continuous miner. Under its impact there was also born a new attitude to theory.

From the first industrial revolution, the newly-born factory proletariat gained the impulse to struggle for the shortening of the working day, and thereby established a new philosophy. "In place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man', Marx wrote in his greatest theoretical work, CAPITAL, "comes the modest Magna Charta of a legally limited working-day, which shall make clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins.' What a distance we have travelled!"

The present industrial revolution of automation was being translated the world over into a new humanism. Never have they posed the question more clearly as not being one of material possessions nor annual wages, but of conditions of labor and a fundamentally new way of life. Without this universal philosophic form, state capitalism as a tendency would remain economist and incomplete.

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Although the leaders of the state capitalist tendency had been saying for years that we live in an age of absolutes, that the task of the theoreticians was the working out materialistically of Hegel's last chapter on The Absolute Idea, we were unable to relate the daily struggles of the workers to this total conception. The maturity of our age, on the other hand, disclosed itself in the fact that, with automation, the workers began to question the very mode of labor. Thus they began to make concrete, and thereby extended, Marx's profoundest conceptions. The innermost core of the Marxian dialectic, around which everything turns, is that the transformation of society must begin with the material life of the producer, that is, the worker.

In 1953, during the preparations to come out with a paper that would be a break from all previous radical papers, I turned to philosophy and saw, in the Absolute Idea, the breakdown of the division between theory and practice—the movement to total freedom.

What was new was that there was movement (a dialectic) not alone in the development from theory to practice, but from practice to theory. That, in essence, was the gist of the letters to Hausser, the philosopher-designate, who, after demurring a day or so, came back with her usual hyperbole; "I think that these notes represent our Philosophic Notebooks, comparable to those of Lenin in 1915."

Johnson, the titular founder of the state capitalist tendency, however, had other ideas. He never bothered to inform anyone what those were. However, he was very active in seeing that no one is moved by those ideas on practice contained in the letters on the absolute idea. When Hausser came to him with enthusiasm for all the "discoveries" I had made, he managed to shut her up. That was not too hard to do. What had previously been a literary clique now became a philosophic clique. No one else had a chance to see these letters.

The titular head of the state capitalist tendency failed to grasp the new stage of production and the new stage of workers revolt. He could not do so because he was altogether preoccupied with probing the "social personality" of "original characters" and the "uniqueness" of the great literary writer and the greater-literary critic. The new humanism of the great East German Revolt played a secondary role to the humanism of "the great writer". That alone should have called for the abolition of the division between "theoretical leaders" and "the rank and file". It is high time to abolish that division as well as the division between "the inside" and "the outside". While the form in which the ideas first evolved in the mind of the author are rough and even abstruse, no stage in the evolution of the book need be kept private. These notes and these letters are being published for all who are interested.

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