

Nov. 18, 1967

Dear Bessie:

I'd like to pose some theoretical problems to you, the historical part of which you know very well and therefore may also be able to help me theoretically. The difficulty arose in trying to write Chapter I on the world economic situation. As you know I was very much impressed with the E.E. Friend's chapter not only because of the greatness of collaboration across national boundaries, but also because the economic analysis was on solid foundations both as to view of developed and underdeveloped economies. Therefore I thought it would be an easy job to "rewrite" into my style of placing greater emphasis on philosophy than economics. Nothing of the sort happened. It was more, rather than less, difficult to rework and I began to see how much, if you remain in the economic sphere, you keep beating "dead horses." For example, state planning; it simply is no longer a point at issue; even private capitalists accept it to such an extent that it can be dismissed in a single page, if not a single paragraph. The one great point he did make is that while it would appear state planning has overcome major crises because it has learned to control some of the worst elements and will not let it run to a Great Depression, it has learned "to control labor movement"—a variant of "labor aristocracy of labor"—it in fact creates such pockets of poverty and unemployment that that these have become permanent features that can only be resolved in wars, as ~~Wittfogel~~ outlay on "defense" expenditures shows.

If it is not all that easy to "add" philosophy—the SCMM pamphlet will, of course, because part of the book and will show why philosophy—the great need to undermine economic must come via an attack on those who have remained Trotskyist in mentality even where they have accepted state-capitalism as theory. Here is where you come in. I would like you to grapple with Tony Cliff's analysis of the "cultural revolution". Considering that his book, Mao's China was the best work he did and indeed, I criticized only his unnecessary reliance on Wittfogel's Oriental Despotism. Now I see that it was not accidental that he did rely on it—it was, more or less, a natural extension of the position of Trotsky on the backwardness of the peasantry. Above that, he could be correct in his analysis only up to 1957 (which is when his book breaks off) because until then Mao's China followed the Stalinist path of the Five Year Plan. Had the book been published later and he would have had to confront Great Leap Forward, all his categories would have been shattered as we can see when he approached the totally unforeseen phenomenon of the "Cultural Revolution."

Here is his thesis with my comments: (See Crisis in China International Socialism, summer 1967) 1) Although the First Five Year Plan (1953-57) was a great success insofar as heavy industry was concerned—a 14% annual rate of growth—the agricultural labor force did not decline as in Russia both because non-agricultural employment lagged far behind growth of population and agriculture threatened to lag behind multiplying population, especially to feed the towns, and he quotes himself "ever since Chinese agriculture became dependent on irrigation, serfdom gave place to a peasant economy based on private property. However exploited and oppressed, the peasant may have been, it was not the whip which urged him to work. As against this, serfdom and the feudal whip were the salient features of rural society in Russia, with its extensive agriculture, for a thousand years." And he brings this wrong counterposition of Russian and Chinese agriculture (into which I cannot now go in) with a totally unfounded 1967 conclusion: "In 1958, Mao tried to break out of the above contradictions by a new forced march."

The truth for taking the "Great Leap Forward" in 1958 had nothing whatever to do with this. First, the facts are wrong. There had been no better year in Chinese agriculture than 1957-58; this great harvest is one of the very key reasons underlying Mao's illusion that China could now "walk on both feet", that is to say, ~~simultaneously~~ develop industry and agriculture simultaneously, a possibility which could become truth only if world agricultural and industrial development was at the disposal of China. Without such backbone even in the limited framework

of Russian aid which was beginning to disappear that year because of the high costs of the counter-revolutionary action of destroying the Hungarian Revolution, the "Great Leap Forward" could only be pushed backward by the masses, proletarian and agricultural, exhausted by the insanity of working around the clock with primitive tools and no time to breathe, think or eat. Nature didn't help either. But Tony Cliff mentions neither the masses nor nature's havoc because he is busy forcing the 1958-62 failure into the framework of the old "scissors" dispute of the Russian debate on agriculture vs. industry as Trotsky analysed it in 1924-27 as if the new turn was "neo-ME-ism" and Bukharin's "socialism at small's pace."

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The truth is the exact opposite, / part which Tony quotes from the Chinese documents about the "People's Communes" being "the practical road of transition to Communism" should have surely opened his eyes that, far from "going back to agriculture", Mao thought this the road to skip capitalism and "Trotskyite revisionism." Of course, China had to retreat from the insanity of the "communes" but this was not the least bit due to any tendency in China as in the kulak in Russia. But if you are out to prove "centrifugal tendencies", backwardness of peasantry and regionalism of Army--none of which were the actual causes either of the "Leap" or the retreat, then you use, halter skelter, figures which would "prove" your case. In this instance, it is the jump to show that the students to be used against Party as new force because they at least do have consciousness of "nation" as if peasants didn't!

Left out entirely from both the 1958 "Leap" and the critical year 1965 which TC mentions only as the year which saw the first class graduate of the Army's new "Arts Institute" are the international situations, in the first case the destruction of the Hungarian Revolution and the "100 Flowers" campaign, not to mention the Sputnik which gave Mao illusions of Russian world power sufficient to challenge USA, which he urged, which was refused by Mao, and which began saw the emergence of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The second instance is, of course, closer to the period under discussion, indeed is directly responsible for "the cultural revolution" for, without the collapse of the Djakarta-Peking axis, the cultural revolution would have been nothing more than the "socialist education" campaign of 1962 plus attacks in the cultural field expanded. Now, how does it happen, that TC who, as a good "permanent revolution" adherent, has "world revolution" on his lips at all times, has so left out the world situation when the question concerns objective world development?

I'm not sure that the easy answer would be the whole answer for his conclusion is not separated from his political outlook. Rather, what is involved is the incapacity to see any philosophical problems. For example, TC laughs uproariously--and who wouldn't?--at the Maoist type articles like "A Talk on the Philosophical Problem of Selling Watermelons in a Large City." The point, however, is not the inanities of selling watermelons by Mao's thought, but why, always, always, always does Maoism call upon philosophy, rather than value controversies even "party building?"

Instead of trying to face that problem, TC finds that the "missing link" between the Russian and Chinese debates on industrialisation is the absence of the Trotskyist Left Opposition! Without acknowledgement, he steals a bit from me, to the extent, of bringing in masses as subject rather than object, but it is no accident he gives Trotsky credit for having seen that because all it means to him is not the self-developing proletariat who would show a new way to resolve contradictions, but a Trotskyist thesis re internationalism vs. "socialism in one country" which has nothing whatever to say that is relevant on the present development in China.

(Incidentally, TC recognizes that, in suddenly bringing in Bukharin as an enemy, he is treading on dangerous ground since Stalin destroyed Bukharin as he had Trotsky. Therefore, he says that, whereas, "formally", he was with Stalin in opposing Trotskyist Plan, "actually" he was with Trotsky insofar as he remained loyal to the revolution. The latter part is true, but means nothing here, that is to say, it says nothing about the theory that was the foundation of both Stalinism and Trotskyism. When Bukharin did not have to solve human problems, he was a planner par excellence, far in advance of Trotsky both as theoretician and as economist. That is to say, both in his analysis of imperialism before the revolution and in the trade union debate in 1920-21 when he sided with Trotsky against Lenin, he had developed a theory of state-capitalism that was comprehensive and to which state planning was pivotal. Naturally, it wasn't our theory, as I explained in S-CAN-H but if he knew all the implications and ramifications, the very ones Lenin attacked, Trotsky was so superficial a theoretician that he did not ever work out the ramifications of a theory, and never saw state-capitalism either in Marxist theory or in practice of capitalist development following the Depression. When Bukharin began his "socialism at small's price theory", he feared/the possibility of kulak counter-revolution and had given up hope that the European revolution would save the Russian Revolution. Wanting to "preserve" the Soviet state and not shake the boat internationally, he took that way out, and Stalin used him only to the extent to which he was necessary to defeat Trotsky. Stalin alone was brutal enough to undertake the one and the other, but by then he had perfected his monolithic party and his state "socialism." But he was even less a theoretician than was Trotsky. Once a Marxist departs from the proletariat as self-developing subject there is no place for him to go, but to the alien class, state capitalism in this case, and so it is that Bukharin who was, as a person, on the level of Trotsky rather than the rude and disloyal Stalin, formulated the theory both for the latter and the administrative mentality of Trotsky. But we have so far removed from any conception of what theory is that TC doesn't even know a problem exists, much less how to resolve it.)

But to return to the main point, and the one I began with, how does one make philosophy concrete; how to show that, despite the fact that "economics", or at least materialism, is crucial, the foundation for any leap into a classless society, still to establish a new beginning, today, what is needed is philosophy, not one more economics? If the very first chapter on the objective economic situation must emerge out of philosophic preoccupation, then how do you "divert" to statistical tables, without seeming to be entirely two different persons speaking two different languages? The answer to the question resides somewhere in the comprehension that materialism is not a diversion. The whole tragedy of the third world is that they did divert to one or the other world camp not only because they had no confidence in their own masses, but also because they saw no proletariat in the advanced technological world willing to sacrifice for them. Indeed, this is why Mao is believed; though he offers nothing but empty thought, politically, he did put his finger on the pulse of Russia as interested in its own development out for high stakes as against US world ambitions, not for world revolution. The fact that China is out for the same thing doesn't mean he isn't right when he exposes Russia.

When I first analyzed Mao's thought on contradiction in 1957 (NAL, 7/16/57) I pointed to the difference between the Russian revisions being mainly in economics whilst the Chinese were in philosophy: "Russia has become an important industrial land that possesses values, China is a vast underdeveloped land whose main possession is not the land, but the machine." Begin there and see whether you can get me out of my dilemma. Perhaps I'll also send this note to the NSB and ask others for their comments. Yours, R.W.