

March 19, 1968

Dear Richard Ashcraft,

Thank you very much for your serious, detailed and helpful letter of the 12th. You may rest assured that differences of viewpoint have always stimulated, rather than hindered, any dialogues that I have carried on, both on a theoretical and practical level. This is especially true as it relates to yourself for, outside of Herbert Marcuse, I have none in the professorial field with whom I can discuss dialectics. It is true that your last letter was more on the political field than the philosophic,* but it is no less appreciated.

I am only sorry that I evidently had not sent you the chapter, "The Shock of Recognition and the Philosophic Ambivalence of Lenin", and I will try to find a copy to send you now. Also, enclosed is the pamphlet that will, likewise, become a chapter of the book, which deals mainly with Lenin's dispute with Bukharin on the ^{subject} of the proletariat as Subject and which I call State Capitalism and Marxist Humanism. Also, I wondered whether you hadn't read the two chapters (XI and XII, pp. 177-207) in Marxism and Freedom, which deal with the change in Lenin's position on the Vanguard party from 1903 through 1923.

No doubt I should wait until I hear from you on the above questions before I comment on your letter since the question as to your position, as stated in your letter, is not the whole if it had been written without consideration of my interpretation. At the same time, however, I must take note of at least a few points that you mention. I wasn't so much interested in the quotations from What is to be Done? since I consider it the most misused book, the one on which he changed his position quite drastically. It is true that he, himself, continued to use it long after he stated, most categorically, -- on the basis of the 1905 Revolution (which is where the expression "masses as reason" appears) and, of course, on the basis of the 1917 Revolution -- that the proletariat was far in advance of the party and the party far in advance of the leaders. What I am concerned with is the references to the works after 1914 and especially after 1917. For example, you quote Volume VII., DKL, X and XII. of the Selected Works, all of which I, of course, read and from none of which did I seem to have the same interpretation as you did. Take p. 238 of Volume VII., where Lenin definitely uses "backward sections of the German proletariat" and the fact that the Soviet system was "not clear to large masses of the politically educated German workers;" and p. 279, in which the peasant is likewise included as among the backward elements. It is in the very same article (p. 277) in which he wrote "we wanted to show that we recognized only one road -- changes from below; we wanted the workers themselves to draw up, from below, the new principle of economic conditions."

Very obviously, it is not a question of me quoting one thing and you quoting another, but of Lenin himself, supposedly, saying very opposite things on very nearly the same page. The point, it seems to me, is one of taking not only the whole of the article as against any single section but, above all, of considering who is being addressed, what are the historic circumstances, what, if you'll pardon me, is the dialectic of each moment.

* Incidentally, there was an error in my chapter on Trotsky -- I never read what I dictate unfortunately and I dictated (p. 16) "philosophic", not "political concepts." I do not consider, however, that that is the real reason for the differences between us because even though I stressed there and everywhere also the philosophic changes, politics is also involved.

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In the two quotations, under discussion, the first was an attack on Kautsky and Hilferding who were attacked, not only as "bankrupt theoreticians" but as representative of the "mood of the backward sections of the German proletariat." Usually, when Lenin attacked the Second International, it was because it reflected the "aristocracy of labor". Perhaps the latter expression sounds more "advanced" than any talk of backward sections. But in both cases, the reference is not to the proletariat as a whole, but to certain sections of it. And the whole thrill in rediscovering Hegel was the Hegelian concept that each unit contains the opposite within itself; that every single thing, element, person, principle, can be transformed into its opposite. He had had no trouble with seeing the degradation of capitalism. What was new and shocking was to see labor, sections of it, transformed into their opposite, including that part which had been reared on Marxism and, here, I might add, not only the section of the Marxists who betrayed, but those, like Bukharin, who was a Bolshevik, a sterling revolutionary, whose method of thinking was nevertheless, etc. etc. etc.

What I am saying, therefore, is that the section you quoted did not "prove" Lenin to have considered that the proletariat was incapable of getting to socialism on its own as he certainly thought in 1903, but that under certain historic conditions and in periods of crises they could certainly aid the status quo. This appears to be not much different than what Marx said when he held that the proletariat was revolutionary -- or it was nothing. His point was that it was revolutionary, but you always had to go "deeper and lower" into the masses to find the truly revolutionary.

One quotation that you used was, however, more, seemingly, all-inclusive since it referred, not to any one section, advanced or backward, proletariat or peasant, but the masses as a whole, who didn't seem to grasp all the ramifications of the Soviet. Obviously, it could not have meant the whole or the Soviets would never have arisen. What it did mean was that the Bolsheviks, who were already thinking of the conquest of political power, whereas, the proletariat still had illusions about the newly gained democracy or, perhaps, even believed, as many did in the July Days that the Bolsheviks were either no better than the Mensheviks or even not as good, although the Mensheviks were insisting on holding on to the bourgeois elements in the government. In any case, Lenin, at various times, in opposing the so-called "storming of the proletariat" by ultra-leftists that since it was the proletariat that hadn't understood, one had to be patient, explain fully, more cautiously etc. etc.

By making a distinction between either the party or the theory, or both, and the masses as a whole, Lenin didn't, surely not in 1917 to 1923, mean that the proletariat wasn't Subject or couldn't act spontaneously on political, and even philosophic matters without the guide of the party, but that the party had a contribution to make. The historic continuity as well as the dialectic of development applies as much to theory as it does to the proletariat and the peasant. Each -- practice and theory; proletariat and party; peasant and Soviet -- is one-sided by itself; only in unity can they hope to close the chapter of the pre-history of mankind and begin the development of human power, from itself, as both means and end.

I do hope I will hear from you, not to much on the letter, although I naturally want your comments, but on the subject, as a whole, as it is dealt with by me, both in the book that has already been published and in the projected work.

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Yours

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