

Mar. 10, 1960

Dear Si: (copy to REB-NEB)

There is a certain philosopher in France, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who has done some very good things on Marxism, especially its Humanism. One article in particular, "Marxism and Philosophy", printed as far back as 1947, gave me a new insight when I reread it with Automation in mind.

So I decided to write you a letter and make copies for NEB-- however I do not wish the REB to discuss it, although I do not exclude doing that after you have done your first draft. Now, however, it would only be talk. Nor do I wish you to discuss it with intellectuals--they would only put in more abstract words what I have already said abstractly enough.

You may, however, discuss it with a worker, whether it is Hims or Inez or both doesn't matter. The point is whether the worker is new or an old hand at Marxist Humanism like Inez, they might be able to help because even when a worker says "I don't understand", he adds something concrete.

In any case do not worry if you do not grasp at once or all of it. If just a little sinks down somewhere in the unconscious, you may get help when you write the concrete about Automation, even if it is only on the question of what to put in and what to leave out. I do hope that Saul is helping cut out, neatly and only those sections that matter, of both your articles and Shorty's, especially yours.)

Now then to philosophy. I'll begin with the end of that article I referred to in my first paragraph. The point that he makes at the end is why Marx at one and the same time attacks philosophers ("philosophers have interpreted the world; the point is to change it.") and yet (2) attacks workers who would turn their back on philosophy "and by giving it softly and with averted glance a few ill-humored phrases"

It is because you cannot "negate", that is, abolish philosophy by evading it. And the philosopher surely cannot be used as the yardstick in any case. But, "says Merleau-Ponty, if the philosopher knows this, if he sets himself the task of following the other experiences and the other existences instead of putting himself in their place, if he abandons the illusion of contemplating the totality of fulfilled history and feels himself, like other men, caught in it, and before a future to build, then philosophy realizes itself and vanishes as separate philosophy."

I need not tell you, Si, that "other experiences and the other existences" are those of workers, and that when philosophy "vanishes as separate" it means that thought and existence have become one. Since it is Automation that is in the back of my mind, I would say that when workers pose questions, not answers, but questions, they are well on the way to hewing out a road to the vanishing of philosophy as "separate" and to unite theory and practice."

But you have to ask the serious questions that point to a new direction. In Hegelian philosophy "pathway" is a very important word, a "category" which, whether it is only remembrance or description of the moment, it nevertheless cuts through a dark forest and lets you see the light, the path.

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I will not jump back to the middle of the article where the subject considered is why Marx was not a vulgar materialist. (Indeed he never even used the word, materialist, by itself, to describe his philosophy. It was the unity of materialism and idealism, the human factor. Just as Marx refused to consider seriously "property forms", but insisted instead on production relations of men to men, so when he did use the expression "practical materialist" he meant practice pure and simple. Or, to put it another way, human activity. You have often heard me say "philosophy in the Marxist sense of human activity". But let us never forget that that human activity was all-comprehensive and meant not only practical work but the work of thinking, which is just as hard labor as anything else.

Merleau-Ponty says that this introduction of the "human object" into classical philosophy "was carrying to its concrete consequences the Hegelian conception of a "spirit-phenomenon".

Of all the mystical words, the one that get the greatest laugh out of what Marx calls "vulgar materialists" and what we know as "old radicals" is this word, "spirit-phenomenon". For Hegel had dehumanized the idea and instead of seeing workers, or even people in general, saw some sort of "Spirit" or God doing the work of history. Or so, he says. The truth is, his philosophy lives today because Marx had seen through this "spirit" and saw it was in actuality living history, or collective men shaping history, and doing so on the basis of a very concrete type of production, capitalistic production which "negated personality", made men into parts of machine, and therefore produced WORKERS' REVOLT.

At this point this French philosopher has something very wise to say for he stresses the fact that the so-called objectivity of scientists is itself a form of "alienation" and that it entered the Marxist movement "only when revolutionary consciousness wanes", and he points to the revisionist Bernstein.

What he is trying to do here is to sum up Marx's conception of the dialectic as TOTALITY, which not only denies the so-called "eternal" nature of man, and takes each specific concrete economic epoch up, and what relations men are to each other in these historic period of slavery and capitalism, but even though economics was the foundation of all thought and history its proof, ~~cannot~~ "cannot be reduced to economic skeleton." The human factor is the decisive factor and if that is so it is the total human being, not any single portion of him.

history

And because this is so, and because all history is the history of the struggles for freedom, Hegel's "Absolute Idea" was in actuality TOTAL FREEDOM. That is how Hegel and Marx met, so to speak, and why Hegel's abstract ideas are in actuality the reflections of this historic movement so that, as I put it in MARXISM & FREEDOM, Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND is in reality the philosophy of history established by the "indignant hearts" who made the French Revolution.

Finally, to get back from the history of the French Revolution when the machine age had just begun to the age of Automation, when the machine is the full master of man and they still don't have total freedom, we have to face the specific, concrete, daily experiences AND thoughts of workers on the job.

Yours, Roy

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