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REFLECTIONS ON NOTES FROM A DIARY: LENIN'S PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS
AND THE STATE-CAPITALIST TENDENCY

by Raya Dunayevskaya

1978 is the 25th anniversary of the first convention of the state-capitalist tendency as an independent organization in the U.S. As I reflect upon that fact today because it was also the last of a united Johnson-Forest Tendency, it is not, as previously, in order "to set the record straight" That is to say, it not to establish the fact that my 1953 Letters on the Absolute Idea ⁽¹⁾ had laid the philosophic foundations which would develop the Tendency into Marxist-Humanism, because I saw inherent in the Absolute Idea not only a unity of theory and practice, but a movement from practice which was itself a form of theory--an achievement the co-founder of the Tendency, C.L.R. James (J.R. Johnson), had proved incapable of doing. Rather, it is that in the process of looking back at 1953, I realized that the beginnings of the division in Johnson-Forest had begun to emerge in 1949-50 with my translation of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks (specifically his Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic).

A Global Turning Point

It is true, of course--of that there is no shadow of doubt--that, both objectively and subjectively, 1953 was a great historic Turning Point. In March came the death of Stalin, and this signalled the lifting of an incubus from the head of the proletariat. In June came the first-ever revolt from under Russian Communist totalitarianism in East Germany, and with it, a new stage of cognition which, with the Hungarian Revolution, had clearly reconnected with what Marx's new continent of thought originally called itself: "a new Humanism." 1953 was also the year the Korean War ended, and it was soon followed by the Bandung Afro-Asian conference which signalled the birth of a Third World, to develop by the end of the decade with African and Latin American dimensions.

That is precisely the point. Why didn't the united Johnson-Forest Tendency meet the challenge of the times as the decade first opened when, at one and the same time, there was the Miners' General Strike, ⁽²⁾ in which I was actively involved and "happened" also to be translating, for the first time into English,

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Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks? Why did it take James from February 18 to June 18, 1949 to so much as acknowledge receiving the translation which he had never before read in full? Why couldn't the Johnson-Forest Tendency, as a united tendency, work out the philosophic ramifications of the economic analysis of state-capitalism as the absolute contradiction which was producing a movement from practice in the specificity of that revolt against the latest stage of production, later to be called Automation? And why had Grace Lee Boggs (Ria Stone), the other leader of the Tendency--who, once the three-way correspondence had developed, focused on how very much the Doctrine of the Notion is "our task" to work out--reverted back to the Doctrine of Essence where she stopped with Contradiction? That became the core of "The Philosophy of State Capitalism" that she wrote for the last theoretical (1950) document, State-Capitalism and World Revolution, that we submitted to the Socialist Workers Party.

Neither the co-founder of the state-capitalist tendency, James, nor the other leader of the tendency, Grace Lee, who was the professional philosopher, were philosophic lightweights. She was, as far back as 1947, the first to translate Marx's Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844. We announced that "our translator" would follow up the translation with an analysis of Marx's Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic. While this was never done and, instead, we concentrated on the other Essay, Alienated Labor, G.L.R. James did, in 1948, embark on his own extensive "Notes on the Dialectic" (then called the "Nevada Document").

In 1949, a correspondence began, lasting nearly two years, on my translation of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks. No matter what else was tackled, which I will develop in full later, all of us stressed the fact that it was the Doctrine of the Notion where Lenin made his great breakthrough of the dialectic for his age of imperialism. Building on Lenin's concretization of the principle of transformation into opposite from the Doctrine of the Notion, we would need to go the full length, to the Absolute Idea, to work out the problems of our age.

Yet, once we had to face Trotskyism with political resolutions and present a summation of the whole decade of our work on the theory of state-capitalism-- State Capitalism and World Revolution--we, instead, limited ourselves once again to the category of Contradiction. That seems to me most peculiar now, since Contradiction (that is to say, the class struggle) was the category which the Second International was founded on and which even it followed until it betrayed

in 1914. Contradiction reappeared in our age with Mao who introduced new deviations by making it "primary" only in the "final analysis."

Lenin, on the other hand, in breaking with his own philosophic past and preparing for actual proletarian revolution, had certainly gone far beyond Contradiction to an appreciation of Hegel's concept of the Idea, not only as "the very best on the dialectic," but also the unity of the objective and the subjective in outright revolution. The three of the Johnson-Forest Tendency had certainly recognized that much and, concretely on the ongoing Miners' General Strike, felt that the new stage of revolt had begun. Why, then, not also a new stage of cognition? It becomes necessary to retrace the sequence of the letters. (3)

A One-Way Correspondence Becomes Three Corners: Forest, Johnson, Stone

The letters began on Feb. 18, 1949, as I sent a covering note for each part of Lenin's Abstract, beginning of course with his notes on the Preface, Introduction, and Doctrine of Being. I called attention to the fact that what James had referred to as central in Lenin--the early recognition of "Leaps" rather than gradualness--had appeared in Measure, that is, at the end of the first book: "You will enjoy the notes on Being, which you practically skipped over in your hurry to get to Essence. It seemed to me one of the reasons was the necessity to begin with simplest categories, because both in philosophy, economics, politics and what have you, those simple categories 'contain in germ the whole'." I then proceeded to back up the point by quoting Lenin, who focused on the fact that in Hegel "Not only Wesen (Essence), but also Schein (Show) are objective. Even the distinction between subjective and objective has its limits."

I also called attention to the profundity Lenin showed in his attitude to Appearance by having his book on Imperialism subtitled "A Popular Outline," and by Lenin's special emphasis on Method as "the dialectic which it has in itself." Lenin had referred to Capital as illustrative of what Hegel means by a Universal when it is not "a more abstract Universal, but as a Universal which comprises in itself the full wealth of Particulars." Further, I added, by being concrete, it is not only the objective condition of Marx's time, and the present imperialist age, but the "ideology of the Bernsteins, Kautskys, and, yes, Rosa Luxemburg since in that very period he also made notes on her book. What rich

years were 1914-1916 for Lenin in his 'study room'!"

I end by focusing on the fact that Lenin was beginning to appreciate "self-development of the concepts," no matter how "idealistic" they sound: "Hegel analyzes concepts which usually appear dead and he shows that there is movement in them. The finito? That means movement has come to an end! Something? That means not what Other is. Being in general? That means such indeterminateness that Being=Not-Being..."

I asked James to be patient about how soon I would be able to do the follow-up, i.e., the translation of the Notes on Essence, as "I do this between many other activities." But since I continued with translation far into the night, I sent the translation of Lenin's Notes on the Doctrine of Essence the very next week (Feb. 25). Among the many significant commentaries by Lenin on Essence, I singled out the fact that Lenin was making a special category about the sequence of the dates of publication of Logic (1813), Marx's Communist Manifesto (1847), and Darwin's Origin of the Species (1859). I then continued: "Whoever is still so fool-hardy as to look for a 'primary cause' may do so if he has enough time to waste; Lenin will have none of that--he will have only totality and movement and break-up and movement." Lenin returns to Appearance and Kantian impenetrability of thing-in-itself by saying: "You include all the manifold riches of the world in Schein and you reject the objectivity of Schein!!" Continuing with his appreciation of Hegel's emphasis that Essence, too, must appear, Lenin writes: "The little philosophers dispute whether one should take as basis the essence or the immediately given...Hegel substitutes 'and' for 'or' and explains the concrete content with this 'and'."

At this stage, Lenin also breaks with his previous concept of Causality, seeing that what is cause becomes what is effect, and vice versa, and presses home the concept of totality, spelling it out as ten "moments," beginning with "unity of show and existence" and ending with "totality, wholeness is richer than law." And Lenin tells himself: "Must return here!" Lenin's appreciation of Hegel is also seen in the way he underlines something that Hegel didn't in this case, totality as "sundered completeness." My commentary continued: "What a dialectician Hegel was; nothing else can explain the sheer genius of Hegel's language which defines identity as 'unseparated difference' and totality as 'sundered completeness'," I end with: "The emphasis is Lenin's, which shows he was

not going to be outdone by a man who lived and died long before WWI."

On March 12, I concluded the translation, sending Lenin's Notes on the Doctrine of the Notion, which is where Lenin concluded that none could understand Capital who had not studied the whole of the Logic. I evidently was becoming conscious of differences between Lenin's and James's "versions" of the dialectic. The covering note to the last part of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks stated: "Let me say at the start that although you have entered into this 'conspiracy' with Lenin, the outstanding difference between the two 'versions' (of the Dialectic) is striking. You will note that Lenin's notes on the Notion are as lengthy as those on the Introduction, and Doctrines of Being and Essence combined...although you spent that much time on Notion, and included its practice, the thing you chose most to stop at and say: hic Rhodus, hic salta to was the Law of Contradiction in Essence...(but Lenin) chooses to single out the section on the Idea." I proceeded to cite Lenin's 16-point definition of the dialectic which shows that by then Lenin no longer "feared" the Absolute, seeing it both as unity of theoretical and practical idea, as the method of absolute cognition, and as criticism of all Marxists, including himself: "Aphorism: Marxists criticized the Kantians and Humists at the beginning of the 20th century more in the Feuerbachian (and Buchnerian) than in a Hegelian manner." The emphasis on the plural (Marxists) is Lenin's; it precedes the remark against Plekhanov.⁽⁴⁾

No word came from James on any of this. On May 14, 1949, I nevertheless returned to the one-way correspondence by (1) citing Krupskaya's Memoirs on these critical years, 1914-1916, in Lenin's development; (2) calling attention to Doborin's Introduction to Lenin's Notebooks as they were first published in 1929 (Leninski Sbornik, IX), and to Adoratsky's Preface to the 1933 edition of Lenin's Notebooks (Leninski Sbornik, XII); as well as (3) pointing to the fact that the Lenin Institute recorded that on Nov. 30, 1920, Lenin asked for the Russian translation of Hegel's Science of Logic--not to mention the letter he sent to the editors of the new magazine, Under the Banner of Marxism, asking them to consider themselves to be "Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics" and to quote Hegel extensively.

Three days later, I wrote James again, this time because I was delving into Lenin's Notebooks on Imperialism and finding that he had also been reading Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind. He was very clearly separating himself from all others who

had written on Imperialism, not only the bourgeois Hobson (1902), but the revolutionaries Hilferding (1910), and Rosa Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital (1913), about which he had evidently intended to write an article. Moreover, he had evidently also become dissatisfied with his own essay on "Karl Marx" that he had written for the Granat Encyclopaedia before he had completed his study of the Science of Logic, and now wanted them to return it to him for expanding on the dialectic. (5)

I then both singled out all of Lenin's references to Capital as he was reading the Science of Logic and showed how very concrete Lenin always was, whether in 1915-1916 as he was preparing to write Imperialism and State and Marxism (which was to become State and Revolution in 1917), or after he got to power and still used the dialectic in his Critical Notes on Bukharin's Economics of the Transition Period.

While James and Grace still did not acknowledge either Lenin's Notebooks or my covering letters, they did, on May 27, 1949, have a discussion between themselves. Here is how it read: "Previous to 1914 the whole revolutionary movement, the Second International and all the rest of them were essentially in the Realm of Being. Even Lenin before 1914 was not very conscious of Essence, although objective situation in Russia drove him to the Logic. The key to Lenin's notes on Logic is this relation to Essence. We today have not only to do Essence, but also Notion, the dialectic of the party." Lenin, they claimed, "is more concerned with self-movement than he is with Notion."

It is very nearly beyond comprehension to find how they could make such a claim in face of the fact that Lenin's commentary on the Doctrine of the Notion was more comprehensive than what Lenin had written on all the rest of the Logic combined. (6) In truth, as early as the Preface and Introduction, before he ever got into the Science of Logic "proper," Lenin called attention to the fact that the three categories of Notion--Universal, Particular, Individual--were precisely where Marx "flirted" with Hegel, especially in Chapter 1 of Capital. Which is why, when Lenin made his own leaps, he insisted that no Marxist had understood Capital, "especially Chapter 1," unless he had studied the whole of Logic.

Perhaps we can understand part of the reason why when we read the letter where James first finally, on June 10, 1949, got to acknowledge the translation

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of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks and my commentaries. He wrote: "You are covering a lot of ground and it is pretty good. But after conversations with G & reading (carefully, this time) your correspondence, I feel that we are still off the point..." Clearly, it is not I with whom they disagreed as hotly as they did with Lenin. Indeed, they had not the slightest notion of what Lenin was talking about until July 9, when finally Grace did get down to the Doctrine of Notion as Lenin worked it out. Between that June 20, when James finally got to read me "carefully this time," they were preoccupied with their own great philosophic knowledge, James stressing, on June 19* as he is writing to Grace, criticizing her for abstractness, that "After weeks of painful back and forth, in and out, you and I bearing the burden..."

But, whatever "burden" they were bearing, it certainly wasn't comprehension of Lenin's Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic, though James continued to tell me precisely how many words I was to write on Capital, how many on Logic (1,000 words on each topic!). I plunged into a concrete study of differences in Lenin, pre- and post-1914, and then into how the dialectic affected the varying structural changes in Capital, as well as the objective development of capitalist production from the end of the 19th century to the present.**

Finally, on July 9, 1949, Grace began seriously to go at Lenin's Notebooks as well as Hegel's Doctrine of the Notion: "In the final section on Essence (Causality) and the beginning of the section on Notion, Lenin breaks with this kind (Kantian) of inconsistent empiricism. He sees the limitation of the scientific method, e.g., the category of causality to explain the relation between mind and matter. Freedom, subjectivity, notion--those are the categories by which we will gain knowledge of the objectively real." She continues: "I am writing these notes with the Logic and with Lenin's Notes on the Notion before me. In both you sense this plunge into Freedom."

She proceeded to analyze the major categories on the Doctrine of the Notion--the Universal, Particular, Individual--showing that the whole structure, as well as each separate part of the Science of Logic, was grounded in them. This was spelled out especially clearly in her letter of September 4, 1949. And, having made a leap in cognition, she became most concrete regarding Lenin, on the one

* The dating must be wrong since reference is to something I wrote on June 20.

** See especially my letters of June 20, July 6, July 20 and July 25, 1949.

hand, especially as it related to Imperialism, and, on the other hand, as a critique of Bukharin. I am not now sure whether one fragment I have of that critique is part of a letter she had written to James on Bukharin's Historical Materialism at the end of May or early June, or in August-September when she had dug into the Doctrine of Notion. But the key section I remember clearly:

"Now for some abstract observations: I think Bukharin is using the method of thought of Essence--Identity, Opposition, ground, all going to absolute substance. Then, at the end, the proletariat takes over this absolute substance.

"Hence to be noted and carefully thought out is the way that Hegel

- (1) deals with the Notion as the beginning--after Absolute Substance
- (2) deals with Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant at the beginning of the Doctrine of the Notion
- (3) insists that the dialectic of the realm of Notion is the movement of Universal, Particular, and Concrete, rather than as in Being--Quality, Quantity and Measure; and in Essence--Identity, Opposition, Ground

"Development is the absolute mediation of Universal, particular and singular.

"Isn't this the Logic of Self-determination when growing internationalization

"Destruction of state machine when bourgeois state has reached highest stage of organization?..."

Now, compare this clarity on self-determination with what we wrote in State-Capitalism and World Revolution as we skipped over the stage of unfolding national revolutions: "the struggle for national independence since World War II is an illusion and cannot fail to have reactionary consequences."

Objective-Subjective

How can there possibly be such retreats, i.e., how can opposite positions be taken in what was worked out philosophically, when we weren't writing a "Resolution" and when we were? Upon reflection, it appears that, had it been worked out seriously, that is to say, not just abstractly but concretely, that couldn't have happened. But then that is speculation--no one can tell what is going on in another's mind--and I do not appreciate any indulgence in speculation. What I do know, for sure, is that with the outbreak of the Korean War, June, 1950,

and the Trotskyists once again tailoring Stalinism, the Johnson-Forest Tendency felt it imperative to leave the SWP once and for all. (7)

The whole objective post-World War II situation, which looked so ripe for revolution in the 1940s, was once again plunged into a new war. The fact that the superpowers, U.S. imperialism, and the only other power that remained standing on its feet, Russia, were fighting through surrogates couldn't possibly hide the state-capitalist nature of our age, with the two Big Powers fighting for single world mastery. All the more did it become imperative, I thought, to work out all philosophic ramifications and not allow our analysis of state-capitalism to remain at essence of economics. In any case, I continued to work at philosophy as I began to develop the research I had been doing for years on "Marxism and State-Capitalism," the book that was to become Marxism and Freedom. I proposed two new points of departure: (1) Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks, and (2) the American proletariat as seen in the Miners' General Strike of 1949-1950. (8)

Not only was it unforgettable as an "experience," but it did not appear to me that it could possibly be separated from the philosophic problems we had been tackling, even if we evidently were unable to work out the Absolute Idea. So, while we were experimenting in mimeographed form with a workers' paper, called Correspondence, I continued work on the projected book.

Everything changed in 1953 with Stalin's death in March. Not only was I writing politically on that event, but I decided also to try out the analysis of the 1920-21 Trade Union debate between Lenin and Trotsky, in the context of the 1950s and, again, with the American proletariat's attitude to these events. The Correspondence special was called "Then and Now," and was distributed at factory gates. By May, 1953, I not only returned to the Absolute Idea in Science of Logic and tackled also Absolute Knowledge in Phenomenology of Mind, but also plunged into Absolute Mind in Philosophy of Mind, from which C.L.R. James had said "he got nothing." The Letters on the Absolute Idea got an enthusiastic response from Grace who declared them to be "our Philosophic Notebooks." She was then in California, while I was in Detroit preparing for our convention in July, 1953, while James was in New York. James, once again, as in 1949-50, said nothing for months. Not only that. This time, he called Grace back to New York, and convinced her that the Letters should not be discussed "now."

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Within six weeks of my Letters, an actual proletarian revolt had broken out spontaneously, and inside a state-capitalist land calling itself Communist--East Germany. This June 17, 1953 revolt, which signalled a new age, was followed by the Beria purge, and once again, I returned to "politics," writing the lead for the very first issue of the published Correspondence, October, 1953. McCarthyism was in full swing and it took less than a year for us to be "listed." By then, Johnson was in England, but still "The Leader," and instigating the break-up of the Johnson-Forest Tendency. What was great about that was that it permitted us to work out those philosophic ramifications so that, instead of just "state-capitalist tendency," we became Marxist-Humanists. The very first mimeographed pamphlet we published was Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks, but it took another two years of not finding a publisher,⁽⁹⁾ for it, along with Marx's Humanist Essays, to be printed as Appendices to Marxism and Freedom...from 1776 until today.

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Notes:

- (1) For the Letters on the Absolute Idea, see Sec. I, Vol. VI, "Creation of Marxist-Humanist Tendency," of the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, available on microfilm from the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 48202.
- (2) See Sec. II, Vol. V of the Collection for minutes of the special Tri-State (West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio) meeting of the SWP and discussion with F. Forest on the strike, Feb. 26, 1950, on file at the Archives.
- (3) The Letters are now available on microfilm. See Vol. XIII of the Collection, "Raya Dunayevskaya, G.L.R. James and Grace Lee (Boggs): Philosophic Correspondence, 1949-1951."
- (4) See Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 38, p.277: "To be elaborated: Plekhanov wrote on philosophy (dialectics) probably about 1,000 pages (Belov + against Bogdanov + against the Kantians + fundamental questions, etc., etc.). Among them, about the larger Logic, in connection with it, its thought (i.e., dialectics proper, as philosophical science) nil!!
- (5) For detailed development of Lenin's break with his philosophic past, see "Lenin and the Dialectic: A Mind in Action," Section 1, Ch. 10 (pp.167-172) in Marxism and Freedom, and "The Shock of Recognition and the Philosophic Ambivalence of Lenin," Ch. 3 (pp.95-120) in Philosophy and Revolution, where I also deal with the latest Russian philosopher Kedrov's "explanation" of what Lenin "really meant" by writing: "Alias: Man's cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it."

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(6) And on that section, no place was greater than that devoted to Absolute Idea, a fact for which Althusser has not yet "forgiven" Lenin. (See Lenin and Philosophy, pp. 116-120.)

(7) State-Capitalism and World Revolution was dated August 4, 1950, but we did not actually leave the SWP until August 7, 1951. At that time, instead of handing in a document for debate, we simply handed in an article entitled, "The Balance Sheet Completed", and walked out. Although the article contained my name and several others, it was written by Johnson. I had handed in, on June 5, for the SWP Discussion Bulletin, an answer to W. Warde and J.G. Wright's critique of our Resolution, which was titled "The Revolt of the Workers and the Plan of the Intellectuals." This, as well as another article, written May 21, on "The International Situation in the Fourth International", were included in the Bulletin which the Tendency published as "The Balance Sheet Completed".

(8) When I wrote Marxism and Freedom (1957), the final chapter (XVI), "Automation and the New Humanism" (pp. 266-287) was given to miners to discuss. The Black dimension came out so sharply that it made it possible to relate the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the Hungarian Revolution and the rebirth of Marx's Humanism. In the Preface I called attention to the new way of producing the book: "Because we live in an age of absolutes -- on the threshold of absolute freedom out of the struggle against absolute tyranny -- the compelling need for a new unity of theory and practice dictates a new method of writing. At least, it dictated the method by which this book was written." (See the many writings on the Black dimension in the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection in WSU Labor History Archives Library.)

(9) I tried to give my translations "free" both to the SWP, which considered the Notebooks hardly more than "scribbles," "too rough and incomplete," and to Columbia University's Russian Institute, which said none would be interested in Lenin's "philosophy," only his politics.