

to Vitkin

June 18, 1979

So many deadlines are pressing in on me that, I'm most sorry to say, I will not be able to make the trip to Winnipeg. When I did have some free days, the weather was so awful that that became impossible. (So you like even that weather?) And yet I feel we must meet. Is it possible for you to come either to Detroit or close enough to it on the Canadian side that we could meet sometime in the not-too-distant future? I had intended to leave the discussion on Engels until we met in person, so that we shouldn't start off with disagreeing, but since I'm not sure when that will happen, here goes:

I cannot for the life of me understand why it is necessary, in 1979, to once again "defend" Engels when, frankly, Marx is yet to be fully understood by Marxists. It is true that enemies -- be they capitalistic ideologues or existentialists -- or Lukacs trying to hit at science so totally as to not give it any dialectic development in the process of denying, incorrectly, that the dialectics of nature is not anywhere as sharp as that of social relations and the human being, as human being, reconstructing society, that is to say, shaping history -- have attacked Engels' Dialectics of Nature. One of the books, in turn, by a Trotskyist (George Novak) acts as if every word in that book is golden and has been written by Marx himself. But it really would be sheer anedonia, in the worst sense of the word, if we entered the debate on that low level of discussion.

What is at issue, and that is very important for the women's liberation movement, is Engels' Origin of the Family. You, for example, in your book show that Engels had been told by Marx about Morgan's Ancient Society, had not bothered to read it then; and when he, in turn, wanted to convince Bebel to read it and get interested in the question, explained in his usual superficial way that he was then busy on something else. To me it is very, very important we slough off Marx's request in such a manner. Here is a man, his closest collaborator, who has admitted that at most, he is talented, but Marx is a genius, having so fragmented a view of Marx's contribution as not to realize what I call Marx's new continent of thought. Insofar as Engels is concerned, Marx was a greater political economist than heretofore; a greater "historical materialist", as good at it as Darwin was in Origin of the Species. About the only thing he says in the funeral oration that is worthy of Marx is that "above all, he was a great revolutionary." So when he gets around to Morgan's Ancient Society -- and he gives Morgan credit for practically being a historical materialist -- he writes his own philosophy. It is not Marx's. (And incidentally, it isn't very good as "science" either.)

What, therefore, I was trying to do was, first, the facts themselves. In this, though Lawrence Krader is not fully a Marxist and has certainly, to me, gone a bit off the edge on Asiatic mode of production, he did a magnificent job in transcribing Marx's Ethnological Notebooks. Secondly, I tried to show (I assume you have my critique of Engels, in Jan. 1979 issue of News & Letters) how modern "Marxists", (in this case, one Hal Draper who's busy penning the most superficial, voluminous junk -- so far, three books and there's three more to go -- on what he calls Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution) are still using Engels' Origin of the Family as if it were penned by Marx himself.

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and disorienting the women's liberationists who have to work out a philosophy of liberation for our day.

Thirdly, -- that, unfortunately, will not be ready to be shown for another year -- I am relating Rosa Luxemburg, a great revolutionary, being especially so great on the 1905 Revolution nevertheless failing to extend her revolutionary theories to the question of women's liberation. I do not believe that it is possible to do so unless one does fully understand the totality, and totality as new beginning, for one's own age of Marx's philosophy of revolution.

So what exactly are you doing defending Engels? In relationship to what aspect of Marx's theory? If it is Asiatic mode of production -- and you are much more expert in that than I -- then how can that be left in its 19th century version?

I was surprised, for example, that you pay so little attention to Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks. First, let me stress the fact that the Collected Works of Lenin which, in Volume 38, finally reproduced Lenin's "Abstract of Hegel's 'Science of Logic'", did so in order to deliberately confuse the issue of Lenin's break with his own philosophic past by including anything and everything Lenin had written on philosophy. The truth is that unless one takes a category concretely, it means nothing except for academia's purposes. When Lenin, for example, wrote what I consider a vulgarly materialistic work, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, he was doing it for narrowly political reasons of fighting "the God-believers". When, however, 1914 came and the whole Second International collapsed, he found that not only the Machists but his "header", Karl Kautsky, had betrayed and the he, Lenin, must have been very blind on Kautsky and superficial in the understanding of dialectics not to have had a whiff of this. So when all the world was going to pieces, Lenin could think of nothing more serious to do, or at least as serious as writing political theses, than to go to the Berne Library and read Hegel's Science of Logic. (May I please ask you, if you have not done so already, to read Ch. 10 pp. 167-170, of Marxism and Freedom.) I could not guess from the way you referred to Vol. 38 whether you did feel that there was a break in Lenin's appreciation of dialectics in so totally new and urgent a manner that not only were all of his writings from 1914 to his death greatly influenced by this new reading of Hegel, but he could think of nothing more serious to leave as his legacy that Testament which not only broke with Stalin, not only criticised Trotsky, but said of that most beloved of Bolshevik leaders and one of its greatest theoreticians, Bukharin, that he "did not fully understand the dialectic and couldn't therefore be fully called a Marxist."

Now my dear Mikhail, don't you think it is time to take Lenin seriously on philosophy and not only politics? And isn't it time we took the founder of all of us, including Lenin, seriously enough to study him not as an economist or as a philosopher or as historian, but in his totality as having originally discovered a whole new continent of thought which he called a "new Humanism"?

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