

Mar. 20, 1959

Dear Bess:

I escaped to the "Y" for two days to get a chance away from telephone and refrigerator to sum up the dozens and dozens of books I've been reading on China from its beginnings through the "communes." Between the part of the bourgeois scholars who treat these thousands of years as if it were one long continuous pattern of "Oriental Despotism" that had "inherent socialist traits all along", and the stupid Trotskyists who, when it was a revolution in 1949-50, saw its capitalistic nature and clung to the "permanent revolution" to explain their bystander policy, but now when the counter-revolution has triumphed so firmly, rush to extoll the forced labor of the "communes"; it seems almost impossible to get a clear picture of the movement from 1924 on. Of course--as our superior front pages on China prove--we saw it from the start as state capitalish. What is new, however, and very much more complex, is the role of the peasantry which would thus shed light on the whole Middle, East, Asian, and African revolts which have been continuous and will continue from WWII till any outbreak of WWII, and (b) "the party" that did not go through a counter-revolution and beheading of its general staff as did Stalinist Russia and yet was completely and thoroughly the exploiter, bureaucratized from the word go, power or no power.

Luckily, we have, first Marx himself, who, despite all slanders against his position on peasantry, saw its revolutionary implications as well as the National Question which would rise from it. At the same time--and this is where all the slanders arise--he saw also that it could not fundamentally reorganize relations unless it was proletarian led. For example, he felt very sure that unless there was a "second edition" of the Civil War in the US, i.e., one by the Northern proletariat, it would fail agric. would inevitably lose to industry.

Above everything, in this case because it is our age, we have Lenin, and no one of us should rest until they know every word, comma, period, and implication, of Lenin's Theses on the National Question and Colonial Question at 2nd CI. (Selected Wks, Vol. X) We have often quoted the one on the NQ, and whenever we are on the question of "internationalism", we show how Lenin was willing to give up even FR if the revolution in the East would develop and demand priority. What we have not done heretofore is (1) to stress that this revolutionary outlook on "the East" was not due to any defeat in the "West". Quite the contrary, it was 1920 and everyone, especially Lenin, fully believed that the West European Revolution, especially the German, would burst forth; 2) the role of the party, though "vanguard", was less important than the mass outburst and therefore, for ex., in China it could go into another party, provided it never gave up either its right to criticize or develop a theory of the developing revolution and organize accordingly.

At that very time therefore of development of revolutions that would be "permanent", i.e., go from bourgeois to socialism, LT's the cry of permanent revolution proved entirely useless and he himself had very little to say when Lenin was alive and when he was dead and had to act on his own in the 1925-7 Chinese Revolution, we will show what he has to say isn't much, which is precisely why his principles haven't been able to keep the Trotskyites on the right class line.

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Here is what we must get straight about that theory of the permanent revolution upon which we old ones lived so long and made simply synonymous with "world rev." vs. "socialism in one country." First, the theory, elaborated in 1903, stated Russia could go from democratic (bourgeois) to socialist because of the hegemony of the proletariat. The corollary to it, however, which is why Lenin was opposed to it & the Stalinists used it for their own purposes to talk of his "underestimation of the peasantry", was that, on their own the peasantry was not much. Lenin, the supreme realist, kept saying, in the concrete circumstances of Russia, the question was not whether the peasantry "on their own" can do much--Altho here too you underestimate their revolutionary potentialities as well as acts--but whether the proletariat, being as small as it is, must get as its ally "the liberal bourgeois" or "the peasant." I say: the peasant & I say the perfect proof you have repeated nonsense about him is that you still act as if the dispersal of the peasant household over wide areas meant "no party of their own"; just look at the Social Revolutionary Party and you will see.

Secondly, the theory of the permanent revolution, was very abstract in its "internationalism" for while it used the word in every other phrase, and understood well that the "world market" not any one single country, was the point of departure for the estimate of any country, it was absolutely blind to the fact that the greatest part of the world was unindustrialized & hence unproletarianized and therefore, failed to answer, what concretely should be the "line" in that vast area of the world. Surely repeating ad nauseum "hegemony of proletariat" simply answered nothing where no proletariat existed. In truth, it answered very little when a small proletariat, such as in China did exist. For what happened in 1925-27 is that IT's position was entirely defensive once there were no strikes or the strikes in the great cities were ruthlessly put down by Chiang Kai Shek. He therefore limited, 1st his dispute, to the fantastic notion of Stalin of "a bloc of 4 classes", and the complete submersion of CP to Kuomintang which had led to the disaster, but he had nothing, ~~not one single word~~ to say on the great agrarian unrest and what to do there.

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This is where Mao Tse-tung comes in--and I might say comes in on his own, not as any mouthpiece of Stalin; indeed, he, not Stalin, is the innovator and practitioner at once. (The key document is when he is in the doghouse, "Report on the Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, 2/1927"--it is reprinted in "A Documentary Hist. of Ch. Communism by Brandt, Schwartz & Fairbank & I'll have Barbara copy out the whole thesis and send it to you.) Seeing that the proletariat, once its revolution was bloodily put down by Chiang Kai-shek, lies prostrate, Mao disappears into the mountains and looks at how long the peasant revolt can continue precisely because it is isolated from center and the "center"--government--cannot keep after it. He thereupon (I do not mean that day--it took 4 years minimum for him to have a "theory" instead of just a report)

Contrary to what all other revolutionaries did when their revolution was put down--go to prison or exile--disappear into the mountains and becomes a guerilla fighter. Thus, transforming the revolt of the peasantry, into an army and placing it at a locale (much smaller, I can assure you, than Stalin's "socialism in one country" for even bandits found that an excellent place to hid.) he builds up a state machine--all

without benefit of a revolution, proletarian or peasant.

Let us not forget that the proclamation of a "Soviet Republic" in the vastness of China in 1931 was laughed off the face of the earth by LI (or so he thought he did) only to have it re-born as 8th and 4th Route Army that 1st fought Japan in a "national revolution" and then won the whole continent!). It is true it had no resemblance whatsoever to any "soviet" or "republic" and even its "peasant revolution" was limited indeed because it neither distributed nor nationalized land but only let down the barriers on usurious rents and interest--but it was sufficient, as against Chiang, to give it "a mass base."

Now then; army, state power, party, combine to give Mao power and power he will never relinquish although there will be no proletariat either at its base or in its composition. Stalin could not do same because there was a proletariat and it would not let him rest. Mao too had to have his counter-revolution, but it was just a "little one", putting down the peasantry that moved with Li-Li-san, his protagonist but now "one of them" who tried to at least have an agricultural revolution & establish "soviets" other than as a mockery. That was (1930) and Mao by shooting on them for wanting land "prematurely" when he still needed "all" except "the reactionary gentry" showed precisely what power did mean to him.

In the 1930s when Japan tries to grab China, Mao offers help to Chiang and a truce is once again established. He does more than Chiang to whip up the nationalist sentiment and partisan movement--and the overwhelming majority of the CP of China gains its membership then. It was never at any time a proletarian party; it was "more" of a peasant party but even there it is not the poor peasantry but the "middle peasant"--but most of all it is just plain administrative bureaucracy with all the warlord trappings needed to strike terror.

*(ftn to p.1) We should not turn our head away and pretend it didn't happen that that fantastic caricature of a revolutionary with a state capitalist "theory"--T.Cliff of Britain--also now is for "Mao in a limited war with US". Everybody has suddenly become a military spots and can say what is "limited" or "all out war". The point is: if all the world is divided into but 2 camps*USA & USSR struggling for world power--you couldn't possibly chose a "lesser evil"--you must go in a different class direction entirely. But if "planning" and "popular base" is exempted from that because it "makes possible" quick industrialization, then, etc.etc.etc. Evidently the error of IT's theory that "on their own" the peasantry can go nowhere is so thoroughly disproven in life, that you are willing to forget that where they are going is in a state capitalist direction.

Finally, Mao had one other "advantage" over Stalin. The latter had need of theory since that had been the basis of proletarian revolution. Mao had no such need and therefore reversed entirely the process saying "On Practice"--that's "theory". So that while Stalin, at least in words, had to explain "the withering of the state", or rather why it didn't if it were socialist--Mao had to say "This is what we do as state, as practice and therefore it is the verification of the ~~ory~~ on Chinese soil."

But, one might say, what is state capitalism if it isn't state intervention in an industrial economy? How could Mao introduce it when he had none? That's just it--given the world technological level, and the need to introduce industrialization--the state army would take care of the rest and of those 2 he had ~~muchly~~. You know one of the most infamous Emperors of China is Ch'in--the first to unify China. And having done it militarily he was going to stay there, protected intellectually as well as physically. So he had himself a great big book burning--all of Confucius plus all classics, except those on science. The scholars were horror struck--not at the forced labor that was building the Great Wall, but at book burning, so they protested. Whereupon Ch'in ordered the scholars as well as masses into the forced labor army--that is also Mao's conception of the breakdown of the division between mental and manual labor! Mao thinks he has one on Ch'in, however, for the Great Wall did not keep civilization out forever whereas "heavy industry" will and this being not b.c. but a.d. he is going helter skelter via "communes"

If anything--any single thing, I mean--proved the humanism of Marxism, it is that, despite all analysis and theory and knowledge that the Industrial Revolution meant capitalism and it was an advance over agricultural economy because it created base after which "production" would not need to take up your whole life time just to exist and therefore "common sense" should tell the peasant he is fighting in vain if he fights for an acre and a half in stead for that productive base which would make a new social order possible, Marx said, "well, we can't handle the human beings by just decrees and so that peasant must be 'won over' and we better go slow and use use the commune type of self-government as the political form to work out economic emancipation without standing armies, prisons, and states. It is this humanism in the Russia of 1917-21 that the peasant disregarded and demanded NEP, so that thereafter you needed to have the bloodbath of "collectivization." Mao feels that with the army he can avoid "bloodbath" by transforming the whole vast continent into one ^{mammoth} sweatshop. But the proletariat will yet have the last word and know how to restore humanism to the concept of a new society.

I'll end abruptly because I must now leave but it'll suffice as a starter for a discussion.

Yours,

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