

Talking to Myself

The above title may sound strange but it is one way in which I make notes for future development, not only on the book-to-be on organization, but in all of my works when I have not yet worked out a definitive form in which to present the issue. The focus is on the May 12, 1953, Letter on the Absolute Idea. The point is to catch the dialectical flow of the self-determination of the Idea, paragraph by paragraph.

Page 21¹² [of the Letter of May 12, 1953] calls attention to p. 483 of the *Science of Logic* [SLII, p. 483; SLM, pp. 840–41], which shows how the stage of “exteriorization” is also that of intensification, i.e., “interiorization,” i.e., *objective* manifestation makes the inward extension more intense.

The paragraph on p. 21, which attacks impatience in “*an absolutely unpromising Bolshevik*” manner, I attribute to Hegel, after which I quote from p. 484 of the *Science of Logic* [SLII, p. 484; SLM, pp. 841–42]:

That impatience whose only wish is to go beyond the determinant . . . to be immediately in the absolute, has nothing before it as object of its cognition but the empty negative . . . or else would-be absolute, which is imaginary because it is neither posited nor comprehended.

The dialectic flow of this quotation is in no way related to the two names quoted in the preceding paragraph of the letter, but even if said unconsciously, has everything to do with what I follow the Hegel quotation with:

I am shaking all over for we have come to *where we part from Lenin*. I mentioned that, although in the *approach* to the Absolute Idea Lenin had mentioned that man's cognition not only reflects the objective world but creates it, but that *within*

the chapter he never developed it. Objective world connections, materialism, dialectical materialism, it is true, but not the object and subject as one fully developed.

Stop for a moment. Hold tightly to the fact that ever since 1948–49, when I first translated Lenin's Abstract of the *Science of Logic*, I have done nothing less than extol Lenin philosophically, specifically on the *Science of Logic*. There is no question about the fact that it was Lenin who created the great divide in Marxism in 1914–17. Our present *changed* perception of Lenin's philosophic ambivalence shows here that I actually did have some philosophic differences as far back as the early 1950s.

The fact is that it was not only Lenin who, by keeping the *Philosophic Notebooks* to himself, separated philosophy from politics. When we broke politically with the concept of the vanguard party, we kept philosophy and politics in two separate compartments.¹³ What this 1953 Letter shows now is that embedded in it was a sharper critique of Lenin's philosophic ambivalence than shown in *Marxism and Freedom*. In 1953, on the other hand, as we saw above, I had stressed that in the chapter on The Idea of Cognition Lenin had not concretized the *objectivity* of cognition.

Here I wish to introduce something totally new . . . a letter to me from Grace Lee dated August 31, 1952. With her usual hyperbole, here is part of what she wrote me:

You have mastered Hegel. You write in your letter of August 29 as you have never written before. Instead of that one-to-one correspondence where you impose a movement on the *Logic*, you are now inside the movement of the *Logic*, caught up in its rhythms. The number of people in the world who can do that can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. You are absolutely right in characterizing Herman's (Johnny Zupan)¹⁴ search for the party as the Logic of the "Idea of the Good"—which stands in its own way and hence must in the end turn against itself.

We haven't found my letter of August 29, 1952, which produced that enthusiasm a year before I broke through on the Absolute, but it is clear from what she said on August 31 that I had evidently been writing on the penultimate chapter from the *Science of Logic*, "The Idea of Cognition." She further points to that specific chapter because, very clearly, I had been relating the [chapter on the] Idea of Cognition to the concept of organization. What was facing the Johnson-Forest Tendency now that it finally broke fully with Trotskyism was the question: What kind of organization now? This took a most ominous turn as I was coming to a break with Johnsonism, 1950–53.

The specific objective event that precipitated the crisis in 1953 was Stalin's death.[†]

In March 1953 I felt very strongly that an incubus had been lifted from the heads of the Russian and East European masses (evidently also from my head) and that revolts were sure to happen. It was a very exciting day in Detroit, both because the Black production worker Charles Denby, and the head of the Youth, Ben, had independently thought that, no doubt, I wished to write a political estimate of that world-shaking event; they volunteered to work with me all night. When Denby appeared after his day at Chrysler he concretized this further, laughing jubilantly and saying that what all the workers were talking about, as the radio blared forth the news of Stalin's death, was: "I've got just the person to take his place—my foreman." Denby asked if I had that article I was always talking about on the great trade union debate between Lenin and Trotsky in 1920 (on which I had been working since the 1940s). Denby felt that the workers would now welcome such a revelation; he wished to distribute it to them.¹⁵

Think of the unpleasant shock that then occurred when Grace, who was in California and the responsible editor for the issue of the mimeographed *Correspondence*, felt that the Lead article could not be on Stalin's death, but on the "new" women around Selma [James] who disregarded the blare from the radio announcing Stalin's death. Instead, they were exchanging recipes for hamburgers. Not only was that idiotic suggestion floated, but she undertook to censor my analysis on the significance of Stalin's death, so that it too sounded not so world-shaking. Such an attitude toward a world event produced such a struggle between me and Grace, that it actually affected the whole Johnson-Forest Tendency.¹⁶

What was C. L. R. James's "solution" to the crisis created by the different attitudes, both to Stalin's death and to the tasks of a Marxist newspaper? It was typically Jamesian: I was judged to be "politically" right, but nevertheless totally wrong because of my sharp attack on Grace. Grace was judged to be "politically" wrong, but absolutely right because she listened to the "new." After two months of this type of meaningless, diversionary, empty "solution"

[†]The same type of crisis as occurred in March-April 1953 over the Johnson-Forest Tendency's attitude to Stalin's death recurred with the first issue of *Correspondence* on October 3, 1953, for which I had written the lead on the Beria Purge. Reexamining this in 1987, I realize that what looks like the "Russian Question"—that same old "Russian Question" which caused the first break with Trotskyism at the approach of World War II and reoccurred in 1950 on the Korean War—far from being on the "Russian Question," was actually on the decisive question of war and revolution which has always marked that new continent of thought and revolution of Marxism from its birth. 1917 designated its move to the twentieth century. It was Stalin's counter-revolution that gave it a narrow nationalist stamp. Why the hell have all of us been caught in that linguistic web?

to both things happening in the objective world and attitudes to what are the tasks of a Marxist newspaper to objective events, I asked for a week off, left Detroit for Ann Arbor, and out of me poured those Letters of May 12 and 20 on the Absolute Idea.

Now then, because the dialectic flow in the present singling out of p. 21¹⁷ of the May 12, 1953, Letter points also to the relevance of looking at it with eyes of 1987, let me examine the new find, the 1952 letter which shows I had made a plunge into the Idea of Cognition, especially on the section "The Idea of the Good." Clearly, I definitely had organization in mind. This was not on the level of James and Grace and their dialectic of the "Party," but on the question of dialectic "in and of itself." While I do not remember where I raised the question that I wasn't quite happy with Lenin's 16-point definition of the dialectic, I had called attention to the fact that Lenin says its final two points (15 and 16) are "examples of point 9."¹⁸ This, I felt, was a step back from proceeding with the Absolute Idea and returning to the Doctrine of Essence, Form, and Content specifically.

At the same time—and that's when I did get brave and started arguing with Lenin as if he were right there—I began arguing with Lenin because he had asked the readers to disregard the last half paragraph of the chapter on the Absolute Idea while I insisted that had he suffered from Stalinism for three long decades he would have seen the relevance of following Hegel's Absolutes to the end. (This of course is taken up in the May 20, 1953, Letter, where I deal with the three final syllogisms [of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*], but for the present what is compelling is to trace the many ways of the development of the Self-Determination of the Idea.)

Here is how the May 12, 1953 Letter manifested the dialectical flow on p. 21¹⁹ from exteriorization/interiorization it lapsed into a would-be "absolute" which led Lenin to remain at the "approach to," i.e., on the threshold of the Absolute Idea. This is the reason why Lenin preferred to let the Absolute Idea stop at *Nature* (Practice), crediting Hegel with "stretching a hand to materialism," instead of following Hegel to the last part of that paragraph when Hegel insists that the Absolutes had not been completed with the Absolute Idea, and must still go through the *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Mind* before completion is reached with Absolute Mind. Put another way, in place of any *self-criticism*, or *objectivity*, Lenin left future generations without full illumination of what may befall them—Stalinism. It is the generation that followed, our age that suffered through those three decades of Stalinism, that had to face the reality of what happens after. It is *this* point, *this* objectivity, *this* concreteness, that emboldened me not to stop where Lenin stopped at the approach to the Absolute Idea, but to follow Hegel to the *Philosophy of Mind*.

The Absolute Method opened new doors already in the Absolute Idea, which Hegel defined as:

The pure Idea, in which the determinateness or reality of the Notion is itself raised to the level of Notion, is an absolute *liberation*, having no further immediate determination which is not equally *posited* and equally Notion. Consequently there is no transition in this freedom. . . . The transition here therefore must rather be taken to mean that the Idea freely releases itself. [SLII, pp. 485–86; SLM, p. 843]

Now stand up and shout: "The Idea freely releases itself." Shout this while a flashing light illuminates Reality and its meaning, philosophy and revolution.

Instead of placing a "No Entrance" sign over organization as "pure politics," we finally are in the process of working out dialectics of philosophy *and* organization.

On Political Divides and Philosophic New Beginnings

The abysmal lower depths that the Reagan retrogression has sunk the world into throughout the seven years of this decade have polluted the ideological air, not only of the ruling class, but have penetrated the Left itself. Such a deep retrogression urgently demands that, along with the economic and political tasks facing us, we look for philosophic new beginnings.

In the midst of the work I am doing on my new book, "Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy," I have been digging into research on two opposed forms of organization—that is, our opposition to the vanguard party-to-lead, and our support of forms of organization born out of the spontaneous activity of the masses. Suddenly I realized that the relationship between these two opposed forms was exactly what I had posed back in 1982, on the eve of the publication of my third book, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*. I then (September 1982) added a paragraph to chapter 12 of that just-completed work. It was this articulation, which I reached only after the book was completed, that made me feel that the process of working out such questions demanded a book unto themselves.

This became even clearer when I realized that though [*Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*] was already at the printer, and had dealt with forms of organization both in Marx's day and in the early 20th century—with Lenin, Luxemburg, and the council communists—I nevertheless felt compelled to write a Philosophic-Political Letter to

quence of these philosophies shows the course which thought has taken" [*History of Philosophy*, Vol. III (New York: The Humanities Press, 1974), p. 409].

12. This corresponds to the page number of the May 12th Letter as found in this work, in chapter 2, above.

13. By 1950, James and Dunayevskaya had broken with the concept of the vanguard party. Her view that the break stayed on a political level, and did not reach directly into philosophy itself, is illustrated by *State-Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950), written by James in collaboration with Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee. The chapter on philosophy presents Hegel merely as a critic of rationalism, and does not go into detail on the serious discussions on Hegel and dialectics found in their correspondence of 1949–50.

14. Johnny Zupan, a Detroit auto worker, became the editor of the tendency's newspaper, *Correspondence* in 1953.

15. The article on the 1920 trade union debate in Russia, "Then and Now," was published in the mimeographed *Correspondence* in 1952, and can be found in *The Raya Dunayevskaya Collection*, 2181–92. This article became the basis of the chapter on the 1920 trade union debate in *Marxism and Freedom*.

16. The debate around Dunayevskaya's analysis of Stalin's death occupied the first several printed issues of *Correspondence*, in October and November 1953.

17. In this volume.

18. Points 15 and 16 of Lenin's 16-point definition of dialectic were "the struggle of content with form and conversely. The throwing off of the form, the transformation of the content" and "The transition of quantity into quality and vice versa." Point 9 was "not only the unity of opposites, but the transition of every determination, quality, feature, side, property, into every other (into its opposite)." [LCW 38, p. 222]. In point 14 Lenin had gone further than this, in singling out "the negation of the negation."

19. In this volume.

20. See this volume, pp. 237–49.

21. See p. 267, note 13.

22. See p. 267, note 16.

23. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 11.