

March 2, 1979

Dear Mikhail Vitkin:

Now that I have read your work; now that we have reached the month of March and in April you hope to have more free time, perhaps we can get down to the very crucial period in Marx's life where we would have to face the fact, the total impact of the fact that Engels was no Marx.

I'm sure that, though you always talk of Marx "and Engels", you are profoundly aware of the fact that it just isn't true. This is no simple matter of refusing to credit Engels either with all his great accomplishments or with trying to disassociate him from Marx, in the vulgar way in which either bourgeois academics or French intellectual arrogance (be it Gadamer, who too superficially speaks about "what is living and what is dead in Marx"; or Sartre, the existentialist, who likes empty, sweeping generalizations such as "the greatest error in Marx's life was meeting Engels") have done it. Rather, this is a confrontation with Marx and what he has to say to us today.

I certainly like, and learned considerably from, your book,

The very title is both philosophically and historically on a very different level than works like Kradner's "Asiatic Mode of Production". And you certainly didn't spare Engels just for the sake of sparing him by keeping letters in which he showed that Marx had told him about Morgan, but that he was "too busy" at the time to pay attention, from public view. And I do not believe that you think that it's only a matter of the Asiatic mode of production. Even if it were for no other reason than Morgan's work had nothing to do with the Asiatic mode of production. We are back within America, with the truly native Americans, from a very different historic period, and this origin of society, with its greater equality not only for women but for humanity, brings such paeans of praise from Engels as to make us think that we had practically nothing more to do but to add technology to primitive communism and we would have the new society. That certainly wasn't Marx's view. Indeed, in his letter to Zasulich, much as he praises Morgan's discoveries and thinks it's a sort of model, he goes way out of his way to stress that the study was "government-sponsored".

So what was it? What hit Marx so now? What was the dialectic? How did it relate to his very first humanist writings when he likewise dealt with not only the fundamental Man/Woman relationship, but the five senses and just how stupid private property made us act? Was it really just the difference between private and collective property? That's impossible. In the very first writings, he already rejected the idea that just a substitution of collective for private property would make the difference. It's in those early writings that he insists that only a transcendence "of this mediation" (i.e. communal property -rd) which is nevertheless a necessary presupposition, does there arise positive humanism, beginning from itself." And the "from itself" is, of course, the self-development of labor. You know that even in the Grundrisse, (where the pre-capitalist forms, especially Asiatic mode of production, is central) so far as I was concerned I singled out, not only the Asiatic mode of production, but the "absolute movement of becoming".

The key everywhere is second negativity. So may I ask you two questions? Why is it that I have seen no reference in your work to Lenin's "Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic"? And while I did see a reference to the III Congresses, why didn't I feel that you paid the greatest attention to the Second III Congress where Lenin

*The Orient in the Philosophic-Hisotric Conception of Marx and Engels (rd wrote this in by hand in Russian)

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first posed the question: If not via Berlin, perhaps via Peking? Those two works of Lenin may not seem to be related. Certainly there is nothing in his Philosophic Notebooks which relates to anything concrete other than his reference to Capital. And, even more certain is it that in that year, 1914, the last thing he would have thought of would have been that we in Russia are already successful, and since the Russian Revolution didn't get extended to Germany, let's try the Orient. Nevertheless, anything as decisive as a break in one's whole method of thinking -- and Lenin certainly broke with his own vulgar materialism as expressed in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism -- signified also the specifics, and the specifics in the years of WWI was the simultaneity of the collapse of the Second International, the outbreak of war, and no established Marxism anywhere. And it's all very clear in the many debates on national self-determination, when he now insists that self-determination isn't just a "principle" but both the bacillus for proletarian revolution, and the actual leap ahead. And it's that question of national self-determination which he insists remains a truth that the Russian Communists must likewise follow. In those Philosophic Notebooks, therefore, what predominates is this appreciation for so-called idealism, this continuity of revolution, not only for the gaining of power but afterward, etc. etc.

In your work, what I felt was critical (that you, however, left very deliberately unanswered) were pp. 103 - 105. On page 100, where you speak of the letter to Zasulich and you quote Marx as saying that everything depends on the historic means, I wrote: "Yes, but the Great Divide is not collective vs. private property; the Great Divide is relationship of revolution and history, and in this case world revolution, not just Russia but Europe, not just Europe but Asia; the globe." And on p. 104, where you speak about the working out of the concept being left incompleated by Marx, and that the important task remained to Engels, I wrote: "And that's exactly what was wrong. Engels was no Marx." Frankly, I don't believe that Marx left that work for Engels. He died just four months after he completed his Notebooks, and it's a task of this generation, with the advantage of nearly a century of hindsight, plus the whole question of nothing short of WWII and decolonization, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a revolutionary movement from below, whether that started in Vorikuta in 1953, Hungary 1956, Africa 1960, followed by the Black Revolution in the U.S., as well as a new force of revolution -- the Women's Liberation Movement, that had better start digging for itself.

May I also ask you what you think about the fact that the new preface (1881) to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, which posed the question of a possibly revolution in Russia and did not change anything else in the Communist Manifesto, was changed by a footnote in future editions by Engels to read that this meant "written" history had been a history of class struggle. Marx had already read all these works and more than Engels got to read after Marx's death. Marx had already written about this to Zasulich; had already asked Engels to study it, and had made no such conclusion that history wasn't all history of class struggles.

No, my dear Mikhail, it just isn't true that Engels either carried out that "legacy", and it would indeed be fantastic if we began either just academically or, what is worse, actually acting as if Marx's new continent of thought is just a "legacy" instead of a compelling need for us to do what has to be done for our own generation.

How are you? Can you find time now? Under separate cover I am sending you my very first (1942-46) writings on the nature of the Russian economy.