

Nov. 21, 1963

Dr. Erich Fromm
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Mexico 12, D. F.

Dear Dr. Fromm:

There has been such a long lapse since we last corresponded that I am not sure the above is still your address, and I'm therefore sending this via registered mail.

Two matters of unequal importance prompt this letter. One is purely informational. A paperback edition of my MARXISM AND FREEDOM will be out early next year with a new chapter ("The Challenge of Mao Tse-tung")* and a new introduction which makes reference to your "Marx's Concept of Man." In order to make room for the new chapter the publisher has made me sacrifice my translation of Marx's Early Essays. I therefore refer them to your book and its translations, calling attention to the fact that the Moscow translation is marred by footnotes which "interpret" Marx to say the exact opposite of what he is saying, whereas in your work they have both an authentic translation and valuable commentary.

The second, and central, reason for this correspondence is a sort of an appeal to you for a dialogue on Hegel between us. I believe I once told you that I had for a long time carried on such a written discussion with Herbert Marcuse, especially relating to the "Absolute Idea." With his publication of Soviet Marxism, this became impossible because, whereas we had never seen eye to eye, until his rationale for Communism, the difference in viewpoints only helped the development of ideas, but the gulf widened too much afterward. There are so few--in fact, to be perfectly frank, I know none--Hegelians in this country that are also interested in Marxism that I'm presently very nearly compelled "to talk to myself." Would a Hegelian dialogue interest you?

I should confess at once that I do not have your sympathy for Existentialism, but until Sartre's declaration that he was now a Marxist, our worlds were very far apart. With his Critique de la Raison Dialectique (the Introduction of which has just been published here under the title, Search for A Method) I felt I had to take issue. I enclose my review of it, which is mimeographed for the time being, but I hope to publish it both in English and French. In any case, it was in the process of my work on this that I reread the section of Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND which deals with "Spirit in Self-Estrangement--the Discipline of Culture." Not only did I find this a great deal more illuminating than the contemporary works on Sartre, but I suddenly also saw a parallel between this and Marx's "Fetishism of Commodities." With your indulgence, I would like to develop this here, and hope it elicits comments from you. (On p.6 of my review you'll find Sartre's critique of Marx's theory of fetishisms.)

*In 1961 I first analyzed "Mao Tse-Tun: From the Beginning of Power to the Sino-Soviet Conflict." It is this which I brought up to date as the new chapter in my book. I do not have a copy of this, but I do have a copy of the original article and will be glad to send it to you, should you be interested.

13878

Hegelian

The amazing/critique of culture relates both to the unusual sight of an intellectual criticizing culture, the culture of the Enlightenment at that; and to the historic period criticized since this form of alienation follows the victory of Reason over self-consciousness. Politically speaking, such a period I would call "What Happens After?", that is to say, what happens after a revolution has succeeded and we still get, not so much a new society, as a new bureaucracy? Now let's follow the dialectic of Hegel's argument:

First of all he establishes (p.510) that "spirit in this case, therefore, constructs not merely one world, but a twofold world, divided and self-opposed."

Secondly, it is not only those who aligned with state power ("the haughty vassal" (p.528)--from Louis XIV's "L'eta c'est moi" to the Maos of today-- who, now that they identify state power and wealth with themselves, of necessity enter a new stage: "in place of revolt appears arrogance." (p.539) who feel the potency of his dialectic. It is his own chosen field: knowledge, ranging all the way from a criticism of Bacon's "Knowledge is power." (p.515) to Kant's "Pure ego is the absolute unity of apperception." (p.552. Here is why he is so critical of thought: (p.541)

"This type of spiritual life is the absolute and universal inversion of reality and thought, their entire estrangement the one from the other; it is pure culture. What is found out in this sphere is that neither the concrete realities, state power and wealth, nor their determinate conceptions, good and bad, nor the consciousness of good and bad (the consciousness that is noble and the consciousness that is base) possess real truth; it is found that all these moments are inverted and transmuted the one into the other, and each is the opposite of itself."

Now this inversion of thought to reality is exactly what Marx deals with in "The Fetishism of Commodities", and it is the reason for his confidence in the proletariat as Reason as against the bourgeois "false consciousness", or the fall of philosophy to ideology. Marx insists that a commodity, far from being something as simple as it appears, is a "fetish" which makes the conditions of capitalist production appear as self-evident truths of social production. All who look at the appearance, therefore, the duality of the commodity, of the labor incorporated in it, of the whole society based on commodity "culture." It is true that the greater part of his famous section is concerned with showing that the fantastic form of appearance of the relations between men as if it were an exchange of things is the truth of relations in the factory itself where the worker has been transformed into an appendage to a machine. But the very crucial footnotes all relate to the fact that even the discoverers of labor as the source of value, Smith and Ricardo, could not escape becoming prisoners of this fetishism because therein they met their historic barrier.

Whether you think of it as "fetishism of commodities" or "the discipline of culture", the "absolute inversion" of thought to reality has a dialectic all its own when it comes to the rootless intellectual. Take Enlightenment. Despite its great fight against superstition, despite its great achievement -- "Enlightenment upsets the household arrangements, which spirit carries out in the house of faith, by bringing in the goods and furnishings belonging to the world of the Here and Now..." (p.512) -- it remains "an alienated type of mind"; Enlightenment itself, however, which reminds belief of the opposite of its various separate moments, is just as little enlightened regarding its own nature. It takes up a purely negative attitude to belief..." (p.582)

In a word, because no new universal -- Marx too speaks that only true negativity can produce the "quest for universal" and hence a new society-- was born to counterpose to superstition or the unhappy consciousness, we remain within the narrow confines of "the discipline of culture" --and this even when Enlightenment has found its truth in Materialism, or Agnosticism, or Utilitarianism. For unless it has found it in freedom, there is no movement forward either of humanity or "the spirit". And what is freedom in this inverted world where the individual will is still struggling with the universal will? Well, it is nothing but --terror. The forms of alienation in "Absolute Freedom and Terror" are so bound up with "pure personality" that I could hardly keep myself, when reading, from "asking" Hegel: how did you meet Sartre? "It is conscious of its pure personality and with that of all spiritual reality; and all reality is solely spirituality; the world is for it absolutely its own will." (p.600) And further: (p.508:

"With that freedom contained was the world absolutely in the form of consciousness, as a universal will....The form of culture, which it attains in interaction with that essential nature, is, therefore, the grandest and the least, is that of seeing its pure and simple reality immediately disappear and pass away into empty nothingness....All these determinate elements disappear with the disaster and ruin that overtake the self in the state of disaster and ruin that overtake the self in the state of absolute freedom; its negation is meaningless death, sheer horror of the negative which has nothing positive in it, nothing that gives a filling."

This was the result of getting itself ("the pure personality") in "the rage and fury of destruction" --only to find "isolated singleness"; "Now that it is done with destroying the organization of the actual world, and subsists in isolated singleness, this is its sole object, an object that has no other content left, no other possession, existence and external extension, but is merely this knowledge of itself as absolutely pure and free individual self." (p.605)

I wish also that all the believers in the "vanguard party to lead" studied hard --and not as an "idealist", but as the most far-seeing realist --the manner in which Hegel arrives at his conclusions through a study that the state, far from representing the "universal will" represents not even a party, but only a "faction" (p.605, Hegel's emphasis) But then it really wouldn't be "the self-alienated type of mind" Hegel is tracing through development of the various stages of alienation in consciousness, and Marx does it in production and the intellectual spheres that correspond to these relations.

It happens that I take seriously Marx's statement that "all elements of criticism lie hidden in it (THE PHENOMENOLOGY) and are often already prepared and worked out in a manner extending far beyond the Hegelian standpoint. The sections on 'Unhappy Consciousness', the 'Honorable Consciousness', the fight of the noble and downtrodden consciousness, etc., etc. contain the critical elements--although still in an alienated form--of whole spheres like Religion, the State, Civil Life, etc." Furthermore, I believe that the unfinished state of Marx's Humanist Essays makes imperative that we delve into Hegel, not for any scholastic reasons, but because it is of the essence for the understanding of today. Well, I will not go until I hear from you.

Yours sincerely,

13880