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Letter to Some Friends

Back when some of us first got together (about a year ago), I voiced the opinion that it was very important to come to terms with Political Economy, specifically with the political economy of the present period.

1. It is of importance that we understand the relatively lengthy boom—decrepit & lurching though it has been—that imperialism has enjoyed since the end of WW II. Closely connected to this broad question is that of why revolution been reversed in the former USSR & the PRC.
2. What was correct & what was incorrect in the thinking of the RCP/USA in its “WW or revolution” view of the motion of imperialism? I voiced the opinion that Raymond’s work, *AID*, was the best, most scientific study of political economy that has emerged since Lenin & needs to be examined very critically. If this assessment is correct, then where it goes off methodologically is of the greatest importance for Marxism. Hence its method must be criticized sharply if we are to build on its strength & advance.
3. It is not merely that *AID* got a few facts wrong, in my opinion. It upholds Marx’s basic analysis in but it is guided by Avakian’s philosophical views which I have come to see as deviating from dialectical materialism on a very basic level. The negation of the negation is basic to dialectical materialism & its rejection reduces dialectical materialism to a caricature of itself. In particular, the muddle over the nature of laws of society compromises the possibility of a science of society & in so doing, converts Marxism into the credo of a religious cult.

I think there is a great deal of unstated, implicit disagreement over the importance of studying political economy, that somehow, magically, good political line can be divorced from a good line on political economy. This may be one of the legacies of the 60s, primarily engendered by the pragmatism that is so rampant in the belly of the beast, though actually appearing the world over since the beat dominates worldwide. However, the tendency towards such an attitude might well have been fostered by a bad approach to Mao. There is so little of direct political economy in the works of Mao that were typically read in the 60s that many may have drawn the unconscious conclusion that the subject was unnecessary for formulating a good line on the world. After all, if it ain’t in Mao, who needs it?

Well, I have included two articles by the RCP criticizing the radical political economy that arose during the 60s, primarily concentrated in the Sweezy school of thought. I believe these articles still have a lot of merit, despite a few errors & overblown statements. They hit at the fundamental errors in the methodology of the petty bourgeois outlook, as it exists in the imperialist countries of the West, & connect the political economic errors with reformism. I believe that these criticisms are helpful in understanding the recent Brenner article, which methodologically, goes no further than the radical political economists criticized by the RCP 20 years ago. In my opinion, the RCP did some of the best revolutionary work in political economy since Lenin & their work should be the starting point of summation that aspires to be revolutionary.

As I have stated before, the RCP should not be tailed, however. Their philosophical errors run deep & infect their outlook & line. I have raised the question of them missing the import of their correct assessment concerning the single world process. As the world becomes increasingly integrated, does this not tend to make nuclear war “unthinkable?” Can the collapse of Soviet social imperialism be viewed as an analog to the “hostile takeover” of one corporation by another? That this is a possible alternative in the contention between contending capitals is certainly borne out by real-world economic events, such as the recent merger of Mobil & Exxon. In other words, contention between capitals have historically changed in *form*, depending on circumstances, one of which is the

question of the degree of integration—after all, they not only contend but also *need* each other—the manyness of capital is *fundamental!* Thus I think the RCP was very one-sided, undialectical, in its view that WW III was inevitable prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The RCP overemphasized competition inordinately over the collusion that is also of fundamental importance to capitalism.

There is also another philosophical point concerning the question of law & deterministic behavior. I believe that the RCP has long been in a muddle over this point. They have been partially correct but also partially wrong.

The laws of capitalist political economy are general or universal laws. However, the universal cannot exist apart from & alongside of the individual. The trajectory (in time) of any social configuration or system is highly individual, despite the fact that there are nonetheless underlying laws that govern its development in time. The laws of capitalism are universal laws that apply to all capitalist societies (& in particular to the single world capitalist society that is now in a quite discernible stage of formation), but each individual instance has its particularities that distinguish it from other instances & hence its own particular trajectory. Also, chance plays a vital role in producing the individuality of each trajectory & the universal laws must operate within these constraints. Applying Marx's understanding of capitalism to any particular instance, especially to its trajectory during the time frame when a crisis looms & then occurs, is of great interest.

There is an analogy here with the question of whether or not medicine can be a science. After all, aren't we all individuals? While we all individuals, there is a level of abstraction where, to a good approximation in many situations, we are identical. For example, similar organs, when functioning properly, behave more or less alike. This is what makes possible general treatments of particular ailments that a group of individuals might suffer. A science of medicine is possible but it cannot be demanded of this science that it predicts the trajectory of each individual life. Limited portions of the trajectory for an individual might be somewhat predictable, as for example, undergoing a procedure of some sort or another that leads to a cure of a particular condition. Through the accidents & particularities inherent in each individual, a predetermined course of action can be taken in order to move an individual along a certain trajectory towards good health. There are aspects of the trajectory for each individual that are universal to all individuals. Yet, ultimately, we are truly individual. The general treatment produces different effects in the different individuals. Thus good medicine melds a thorough grasp of the universals with the particularities of each individual.

In *Capital*, Marx pursued the *universal*, the laws underlying the functioning of capitalism, drawing at times on particular examples as illustrations. In other writings such as his studies of late 19th century France, he also applied his understanding to the analysis of particular instances. Scientific laws apply to the universals & in any individual instance, modifications & departures from the laws pertaining to any given universal are to be expected. This occurs simply because

Every individual enters incompletely into the universal, etc., etc. Every individual is connected by thousands of transitions with other *kinds* of individuals (things, phenomena, processes), etc.¹

Hence, a thoroughly scientific view of nature, society & thought pays attention to the deterministic aspects of phenomena without neglecting their accidental, individual aspects. While it is possible in many situations to get away with muddling the universal & the individual, this method can be very dangerous for it contains the seeds of a pragmatic perspective which ends up denying the existence of any laws underlying reality. My philosophical beef with the RCP has this point as its central theme.

¹Lenin, *On the Question of Dialectics*, LCW 38, p. 361.

This point about the relation of the universal & the individual is central to the ongoing battle between allopathy (AMA style medicine) & homoeopathy. The allopaths emphasize treating the *disease* while the homoeopaths emphasized the uniqueness of the *individual*.

This point was also important during the 60s & 70s in particle physics² in regard to the question of how laws of physics could be highly symmetrical but individual instances of systems obeying those laws were not. For example, the laws of magnetism or Newton's law of universal gravitation possess spherical symmetry. Yet every bar magnet has to point in a certain direction & every planet has to move along an elliptical path lying in a certain plane (Keplerian approximation). The spherical symmetry in both cases reveals itself, not in the characteristics of each individual instance but in the range of instances: bar magnets can have arbitrary directions; planetary ellipses can lie in planes having arbitrary orientation.

The point in raising all of this natural science stuff is that while communists are so fond of thinking that they stand apart from the society in which they have developed, this is far from true. We are also products of this society & the questions that we must grapple with do not stand apart from those that are "in the air."

I am still in the process of evaluating how this appears in *AID* & what kind of impact it has on the analysis.

—A.M.
c. 12-3-98

² Technical point: This issue arose around the question of spontaneous symmetry breaking in the SU_3 scheme for the strong interactions.