Chapter 8

Marx’s *Grundrisse* and the Dialectic in Life and in Thought

The 1973 publication of the first English translation of Marx’s Grundrisse, also called the “Rough Draft” of Capital, was hailed by Dunayevskaya for how it showed the self-determination of the Idea. The two letters presented here take up the illumination shed by the Grundrisse on the break in Marx’s concept of theory, his restructuring of Capital, and the relationship between the dialectic in life and in theory. The second letter addresses these themes and Marx’s method rooted in the Hegelian dialectic through a detailed critique of the Foreword by the translator, Martin Nicolaus. The letters are included in The Supplement to the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, pp. 15099–100 and 12435–39.

September 24, 1978

To all teachers, students, readers and re-readers of *Marxism and Freedom*

Dear Colleagues:

I should like to call your attention to p. 89, ¶2, of *Marxism and Freedom*:

He who glorifies theory and genius but fails to recognize the *limits* of a theoretical work, fails likewise to recognize the *indispensability* of the theoretician.

Although the last five words of the sentence are underlined, it has heretofore had little attention since the other underlined word, “*limits*,” had to be stressed in this section on “The Working Day and the Break with the Concept of Theory.”

However, it has to be stressed now that, first, I then had only a bowdlerized¹ version of the *Grundrisse*. Indeed, I began stressing that as soon as I was able to get *Grundrisse* translated for me at the end of the 1960s, at which point I was so

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¹ I found the *Grundrisse* about the same time Roman Rosdolsky did in the immediate post-World War II period; we probably both used that same copy. In any case, I asked Grace [Lee Boggs] to translate it and she presented twelve pages of quotations which were so busy proving that Marx, 1857, was not Marx, 1867, on twofold labor and the decline in the rate of profit that she left out entirely the crucial section on Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations—in fact she seems to have skipped all the way from somewhere in the 300s (pages) to the 600s. That was way back in the mid-1940s, and I rediscovered that section in the early 1960s as I was working on the Third World, especially China.
anxious that all others read it that I made it a condition for preparing *Philosophy and Revolution* to be published, at which point it was to be an Appendix. That became unnecessary to insist upon, as by then, 1973, a full translation appeared in England. Needless to say, far from agreeing with Nicolaus’s Foreword to it, I wrote a special section on it for *Philosophy and Revolution*: “The 1850s: The Grundrisse, Then and Now.” I now propose that those pages (61–75) of *Philosophy and Revolution* be made part of the study of Marxism and Freedom, as without it the 1850s are incomplete in *Marxism and Freedom*, which concentrates on what followed the Grundrisse, i.e., *Critique of Political Economy*.

From those pages in *Philosophy and Revolution* you will see that—while everything said in *Marxism and Freedom* is correct on the question of the relationship of history and theory, on the discarding by Marx of these first forms of *Capital*, to which the actual movement from practice of the 1860s was indispensable—yet, the fact that “the indispensability of the theoretician” could have been slighted over shows that, until the actual Grundrisse was known, it remained an abstraction. As we know, not only from *Philosophy and Revolution*, but from the objective world situations of the 1950s—the Chinese Revolution, which forced Russia and European Communism to turn back to just how Oriental society had brought a new stage of revolution to the European stage 100 years ago, the Taiping Revolution—the self-development of the Idea, in Marx’s hands, went a great deal further than Marx gave himself credit.

Put another way, Marx was absolutely right to be dissatisfied with the form of the Grundrisse, to feel he was only “applying” the Hegelian dialectic, not recreating it on the basis of his own new continent of thought and the dialectic that came out of the Civil War in the U.S. and the Paris Commune. But once he had worked out that magnificent form of *Capital*, he had to discard much of the historical material of the Grundrisse. That not only did not mean that what he discarded was “wrong,” but in fact could, and indeed would, have been rewritten for Volumes II and III, which remained incomplete. Those who taught us that, in their own truncated form, were the Chinese revolutionaries; at least for them what Marx said on Oriental society was both concrete and crucial. For our age—and here I am referring to the post-1968 period—it became as crucial as V.I. Lenin’s *Philosophic Notebooks*, which is why both subjects became crucial for *Philosophy and Revolution*.

There is another reason for my proposing that the Grundrisse section in *Philosophy and Revolution* be taken up in the study of *Marxism and Freedom*. (Incidentally, I don’t know whether you received from Eugene [Gogol] his outline of the classes in *Marxism and Freedom* that Los Angeles will conduct at Compton College; it is good, except that I suggested it have an extra lecture on the 1850s. In fact, it was not seeing it that led to my present proposal for all.) That