

## Marx's late writings on Russia re-examined

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This year, we celebrate the 125th anniversary of Marx's 1882 Preface to the *COMMUNIST MANIFESTO*, co-authored by Engels, in which he espouses an alternate road toward communism for Russia, one based upon agricultural Russia's village communes, and different from that outlined in *CAPITAL*, Vol. I for Western Europe. The 1882 Preface is the culminating point of Marx's late writings on Russia, which to this day have been unassimilated into the framework of "Marxism" as developed by post-Marx Marxists.

This is a grave loss for those struggling against capital today. In many places, but especially Latin America, the anti-capitalist movement is seeking "autonomous" pathways toward a new society. Often, these movements look toward indigenous communal forms predating capitalism as loci of resistance. Too often, however, this search has fallen back toward the illusion of "socialism in one country," the notion that one can create socialism without breaking with the law of value in a large portion of the developed capitalist world, including one or more of the major industrialized regions, like North America or Western Europe. In his 1880s discussions of alternate pathways for Russia, Marx avoids this kind of illusory politics, while also taking account of the particularities of a non-industrialized land like Russia, with different historical and social conditions than the West.

Marx's late writings on Russia, which stretch from 1877 to 1882, have received some discussion, especially after being published with commentary by various scholars in Teodor Shanin's collection, *MARX AND THE RUSSIAN ROAD* (1983). A year earlier, they were highlighted in Dunayevskaya's *ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARX'S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION* (1982), and in other of her essays from that period.

Unfortunately, encouraged by the one-sidedness of some of the essays in Shanin's book, much of the discussion of Marx's late writings on Russia has obscured three crucial points:

- 1) Marx is stressing the revolutionary potential of the indigenous communal forms of the Russian village, but not unconditionally: The Russians would not be able to revolutionize their society without linking up to "a proletarian revolution in the West."

2) Marx is talking of an actual communist revolution in Russia, not merely a democratic one, one that would, given such a linkage, be able to skip over the capitalist stage and move directly to the new society.

3) Such a revolutionary outbreak in Russia could serve as a spark for a wider global revolution against capital.

## **I. MULTILINEARITY: THE 1877 REPLY TO MIKHAILOVSKY ON RUSSIA AND ROME**

In 1877, Marx drafted a response to an article on CAPITAL that the prominent Populist Nikolai Mikhailovsky had published earlier that year in the Russian journal OTECHESTVENNYE ZAPISKI [Notes of the Fatherland]. What distressed Marx was that Mikhailovsky, in seeking to defend him, ascribed to him a unilinear theory of human history. Marx may also have been troubled about the way in which Mikhailovsky distanced himself from the book's overall dialectical framework.

Marx begins his three-page draft of a letter to OTECHESTVENNYE ZAPISKI by denying that he had ever dismissed the possibility of a positive development on the basis of Russia's rural commune. He adds: "The chapter [of CAPITAL] on primitive accumulation claims no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order." Here, Marx cites the 1872-75 French edition, where he had altered the text of CAPITAL in the direction of a more multilinear perspective, writing regarding the "expropriation of the agricultural producer": "It has been accomplished in a radical manner only in England... But all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same development."

Marx also made an implicit answer to Mikhailovsky's strictures concerning Hegelian dialectics, writing that at the end of the discussion of primitive accumulation in CAPITAL, the historical tendency of capitalist production "is said to consist in the fact that it 'begets its own negation with the inexorability of a natural process'; that it has itself created the elements of a new economic order." This referred to the conclusion of the work, where capital was "negated" by revolt of labor, a process Marx characterized as "the negation of the negation." Ever since, anti-Hegelians like the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser have complained about Marx's use of the core Hegelian concept of negativity at this crucial juncture, with some non-Marxists claiming he had tried to "prove" his economic laws via Hegelian syllogisms.

Here in 1877, Marx answers the latter charge as follows: "I furnish no proof at this point, for the good reason that this statement merely summarizes in brief the long expositions given previously in the chapters on capitalist production." Thus, his recourse to Hegelian language at the end of CAPITAL was only a methodological indication. Dialectics fit into CAPITAL, he seems to suggest, not because he imposed dialectics on reality, but because reality is itself dialectical.

Returning to Russia, he writes that "if Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation like the nations of Western Europe," then and only then, 1) it would have to expropriate its

peasantry and make them into workers, and 2) it would come under the "pitiless laws" of capitalism. If Russia did not take step 1, then step 2 would not follow.

Marx gives another example of an alternate pathway of development that did not end in capitalism, that of ancient Rome: "At various points in CAPITAL, I have alluded to the fate that befell the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each tilling his own plot on his own behalf. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated.... What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage-laborers, but an idle 'mob' more abject than those who used to be called poor whites of the southern United States; and what unfolded alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production."

Although he drew these parallels between Rome and the American South, his emphasis ran in another direction, toward the radical differences between Roman and modern social forms.

Marx's main point in the letter to Mikhailovsky was that he had not, as Mikhailovsky had argued, developed "a whole philosophical-historical theory" society that was generalizable for all times and places: "Thus events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon, but this will never be attained with the master-key of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical."

Moreover, it is not inevitable that Russia would become capitalist, for Marx rejects what he terms "a historico-philosophical theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed."

Thus, Marx is denying that he had developed 1) a unilinear theory of history, 2) that he had a deterministic model of social development, or 3) that in particular, Russia was bound to development in the manner of Western capitalism.

Commentators since the 1960s have differed strongly concerning just how new Marx's 1877 rejection of a unilinear framework was, with some viewing it as a break with his past in too one-sided a fashion. In MARX AND THE RUSSIAN ROAD, Teodor Shanin characterizes it as a move away from the "unilinear determinism" of CAPITAL, while Haruki Wada argues that Marx "underwent significant change after he wrote the first German edition of CAPITAL." In KARL MARX AND THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM (1996), James White claims that it "imposed retrospectively on CAPITAL an interpretation completely at variance with the spirit in which it was conceived."

In an equally one-sided fashion, other scholars have held that no fundamental change occurred: Also in MARX AND THE RUSSIAN ROAD, Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan argue persuasively that "Shanin overstates... the extent of the break between the 'late Marx'...and what went before." But then they minimize the extent of the changes

when they describe the late writings on Russia as "not so much a radical break as a clarification of how his 'mature' texts should have been read in the first place." In ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARX'S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION, Dunayevskaya avoids these forms of one-sidedness in writing that in his last decade, "it was clear that Marx was working out new paths to revolution, not, as some current sociological studies would have us believe, by scuttling his own life's work of analyzing capitalism's development in West Europe."

## **II. 1881 LETTER TO ZASULICH: CONCRETE REALITY OF RUSSIAN COMMUNAL FORMS**

The 1877 letter stresses Marx's multilinear standpoint but does not analyze the situation in Russia any more than had CAPITAL, Vol. I. In his March 1881 drafts of a letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, however, Marx begins to do so.

In a letter of Feb. 16, 1881, Zasulich, a self-described member of Russia's "socialist party," asks Marx whether "the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction," or whether "the commune is destined to perish" and Russian socialists need to await capitalist development, the rise of a proletariat, and far in the future, a socialist revolution. Marx's Russian followers held the latter view, she adds.

In his reply, dated March 8, Marx again refers to the above-cited passage from the French edition of CAPITAL bracketing the discussion of primitive accumulation to Western Europe, before concluding: "The 'historical inevitability' of this course is therefore EXPLICITLY restricted to the COUNTRIES OF WESTERN EUROPE." Marx ends the letter with a few tentative remarks about Russia: "...but the special study I have made of it...has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the deleterious influences assailing it from all sides must first be eliminated and then it must be assured the normal conditions for a spontaneous development."

He indicates that he was basing this judgment in large part upon the marked differences between the social structure of the Russian village, with its communal property, and the medieval village in Western Europe. He adds that his recent studies of Russian society had "convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for a social regeneration in Russia."

### **A. RUSSIA AND MULTILINEARITY**

In the much more substantial preparatory drafts, Marx covers these points in more depth, as well as other ones left out of his reply to Zasulich. As in the 1877 letter, multilinearity is one major theme of the drafts.

It should be underlined, however, that Marx is not proposing anything like autarky for Russia, but a new unity of the archaic and the modern, one that took advantage of the highest achievements of capitalist modernity:

"Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate for itself all the POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS and this without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes.... Should the Russian admirers of the capitalist system deny that such a development is theoretically possible, then I would ask them the following question: Did Russia have to go a long Western-style incubation of mechanical industry before it could make use of machinery, steamships, railways, etc.? Let them also explain how the Russians managed to introduce, in the twinkling of an eye, that whole machinery of exchange (banks, credit companies, etc.), which was the work of centuries in the West."

## **B. RUSSIA, INDIA, and BEYOND**

A second theme in the drafts, not present in the letter Marx actually sent to Zasulich, concerns the interweaving of issues from his 1879-82 notebooks on anthropology and on India with these reflections on Russia. Marx alluded, for example, to the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's notion that in the future, Western civilization would revive archaic communism in a higher form. He also mentions, but not without criticism, Henry Sumner Maine's work on communal forms in India and Ireland, which showed:

"1) that the primitive communities had incomparably greater vitality than the Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and, a fortiori [even more decisively], that of the modern capitalist societies; 2) that the causes of their decline lie in economic conditions that prevented them from passing beyond a certain level of development, this in historical contexts not at all analogous with the present-day Russian commune."

This second theme in Marx's drafts centered on the common features of Russia's communes and those in other times and places. To be sure, he had not yet worked out a theory of social development or revolution for that country, let alone the colonized lands of Asia and Africa, or for Latin America. In fact, he mentions India only briefly, only in order to contrast it with politically independent Russia. At the same time, here and in CAPITAL, he steered clear of applying the logic of primitive accumulation to India, any more than to Russia. For as in Russia, the development of modern capitalist private property in India involved a transition not from feudal private property, as in Western Europe, but from communal property.

The broad sweep of Marx's notebooks on communal forms during the years 1879 to 1882--covering contemporary ones in Russia, Algeria, India, Indonesia, and Latin America--suggests, however, that he was searching for new sources of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist resistance from within the communal forms of these varied societies.

## **C. THE FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN AND WORLD REVOLUTION**

A third theme in the drafts for the letter to Zasulich concerned the prospects for revolution in Russia and the form that revolution might assume, issues barely hinted at in the letter Marx sent to Zasulich. Here, Marx weighed the Russian communal form's strengths against the threats it faced from capital and the state.

At an international level, however, other conjunctural factors operated in a more positive direction: "the CONTEMPORANEITY of Western production, which dominates the world market, enables Russia to incorporate into the commune all the positive achievements of the capitalist system, without passing under its humiliating tribute."

What would be the character of the Russian revolution and how would it affect that society's future development? "To save the Russian commune," he writes, "a Russian revolution is needed.... If the revolution takes place at an opportune moment, if it concentrates all its forces to ensure the free unfolding of the rural commune, the latter will soon develop itself as a regenerating element of Russian society and as an element of superiority over those countries enslaved by the capitalist regime."

But the point here in 1881 was that communal forms, when they were 1) thrown into crisis as they were undermined by capitalism, and yet 2) able to take advantage of the achievements of capitalist modernity, could give birth to new types of socialism. This lesson, I would suggest, had implications beyond Russia, stretching to India and the other non-Western societies taken up in the 1879-82 excerpt notebooks.

The last part of Marx's late writings on Russia was a preface, co-authored by Engels, to the 1882 second Russian edition of the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO. In ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARX'S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION, Dunayevskaya terms it "the most important of his writings on this subject." It was also the last essay Marx published on any topic before his death the following year. Dated Jan. 21, 1882, it was translated into Russian and published almost immediately in NARODNYA VOLYA, a Populist journal, and again later that year in a new translation of the MANIFESTO by Georgi Plekhanov. The preface also appeared in German in 1882, but has been largely ignored by Western Marxists ever since. It notes the rise of a serious revolutionary movement at a time when the rest of Europe was relatively quiescent: "Russia forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe."

### **III. 1882: A NEW TYPE OF COMMUNIST REVOLUTION, AND ITS LINKS TO THE WESTERN PROLETARIAT**

What would be the character of that revolution? Here, Marx and Engels sketch the revolutionary possibilities within the communal form of the Russian village, governed its communal association (obshchina): "Can the Russian obshchina, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of the primeval communal ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution that marks the West's historical development? Today there is only one possible answer: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia's peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development."

Two points stand out here. First, the last sentence makes crystal clear a point to which Marx alluded in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich, that a Russian revolution based upon its agrarian communal forms would be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the development of socialism in that country. What was also needed was a revolution by the

Western working classes, which would allow the achievements of capitalist modernity to be shared with technologically backward Russia. (In *MARX AND THE RUSSIAN ROAD*, Wada argues unconvincingly that Engels introduced this condition into the 1882 preface and that Marx signed onto a text with which he did not agree.) At the same time, however, a Russian revolution would not need to follow one in the West; in fact, it could be "the point of departure" for revolution in the West.

A second point implicit in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich is also made crystal clear here: A Russian revolution could lead to a "communist development." This is a very important point. In his otherwise careful examination of these texts, Paresh Chattopadhyay stumbles over this point when he asserts that the late writings on Russia "contain no reference to a 'proletarian' or 'socialist' revolution in Russia," but only refer to "the 'Russian Revolution' tout court" (See his 2006 article, "Passage to Socialism: The Dialectic of Progress in Marx," *HISTORICAL MATERIALISM* 14:3, pp. 45-84). Marx and Engels's language about "a communist development" out of the Russian communal forms would refute this. Chattopadhyay also mounts a strong but ultimately unconvincing case for a sort of Russian exceptionalism, wherein Marx was seeking to link communal forms to revolution apply solely in Russia.

In the 1882 preface to the *MANIFESTO*, Marx and Engels write that Russia would not need to go through an independent capitalist development to reap the fruits of modern communism, provided that its revolution became the spark for a working-class uprising in the technologically developed world. This is a different and more radical claim than the one Marx made in the late 1850s, when he hailed the national movements of resistance in China and India as, at best, carrying the potential for a democratic transformation in those lands.

Here, in the 1882 Preface, Marx and Engels are arguing that a communist transformation is possible in a technologically backward land like Russia. Did Marx also discern such possibilities in places like India, whose communal forms he had also been studying? I think the preponderance of the evidence points toward the affirmative on that score as well.