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Late Marx and Russian peasants: an aside concerning 'deviations'^{*}

Teodor Shanin

The peculiar puzzle of late Marx, i.e. the massive intellectual effort and total publishing silence of the last twelve years of his life, the affinity he showed then with the Russian revolutionary populists of the day, the changing focus of Marx's readings and notes to himself in 1875–81, all have a particular peasant and Russian dimension. My *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (London 1983) explored this new stage in Marxist thought – 'an unrecognizable Marx'. What follows is a piece particularly relevant to the transformation of Marx's view concerning peasantry's political status vis-à-vis the socialist movement. There was a touch of genius there, when, defying the time span and Marx's own earlier writings, came passages which can be read as a realistic critique of Stalin's collectivization or of peasantry's political response to social regimes in the 'developing societies' of today.

In 1881 Marx spent three weeks contemplating, one can say struggling with, an answer to a letter concerning the Russian peasant commune. It came from Vera Zasulich, made famous by her *earlier* attempt on the life of a particularly vicious tsarist dignitary, *currently* of the Black Repartition group and the *future* coeditor of the marxist *Iskra*. The four drafts of the reply Marx wrote testify to the immensity of work and thought which underlay it – as if the last decade of Marx's studies with its 30,000 pages of notes, but no new major text finalized, came together. The drafts are testimony of puzzlement but also of a growing consciousness of a new approach to major problem. It is a veritable display of 'the kitchen' of Marx's thought at a frontier of knowledge at which he, once more, found himself a forerunner to his own generation and friends.

The discovery of the peasant commune by the Russian intelligentsia led to a sharp debate about its nature and historiography. To its detractors, the peasant commune was a creation of the tsarist state to police and tax the countryside, a device which conserved the backward ('archaic') characteristics of Russian agriculture and its political economy *in toto*.¹ To the revolutionary populists and their academic allies, it was a survival of the social organization of primary communism, i.e. of the pre-class society, a remnant to be sure but a positive one, both in its present function and future potential. Behind the debate about the historiography of the commune stood fundamental political issues of strategy, of the class nature of the revolutionary camp, and its enemies and even of the

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^{*}*Editorial Note: The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* is republishing Teodor Shanin's 'Marxism and the vernacular revolutionary traditions' – alongside this introduction to the 1881 letters of Vera Zasulich and Karl Marx and the letters themselves – as one of the journal's contributions to various initiatives worldwide in 2018 marking the 200th birthday of Karl Marx.

¹Central to that line of argument were the works and views of B. Chicherin adapted in Marx's time by A. Wagner and in later generations by P. Miliukov, K. Kocharovskii, etc., as well as by G. Plekhanov and I. Chernyshev in the marxist camp. This view was often referred to as the 'state school'. It was opposed by an equally impressive list of scholars and political theorists of whom N. Chernyshevskii and I. Belyaev were paramount to Marx's own generation. Marx himself spoke up sharply against Chicherin.

nature of the future (post-revolutionary?) regime. To Marx the issue of the peasant commune, significant as it was for Russia, was also a point of entry to a variety of issues of much broader significance, theoretically and politically. These were the issues of peasantry within a capitalist (capitalism-centred?) world, and the type of sub-worlds and sub-economies such 'irregularity' is bound to produce. It was also that of the socialist revolutions in the world at large, i.e. of the 'peasant chorus' without which, he said once, the proletariat's 'solo song, becomes a swan song, in all peasant countries'.²

Already in the *Grundrisse* (1857) Marx had undertaken extensive comparative studies of peasant agriculture and of communal land ownership within the major pre-capitalist modes of production. The peasant commune was not to him (or to the revolutionary populists) exceptional to Russia. It was simply the best preserved one in Europe – persisting for sound 'materialistic' reasons and by then increasingly placed in a new international and local context of advancing capitalism. Still, in 1868 in a letter to Engels he was clearly delighted with 'all that trash', i.e. the Russian peasant communal structure, 'coming now to its end'.³ During the 1870s the works of Mourer and Morgan strengthened Marx's conviction, however, as to the positive qualities of the primary-tribal communities in the ethnocentricity (i.e. their concentration on human needs rather than on production for profits), and their inherent democracy as against capitalist alienation and hierarchies of privileges. The man of capitalism – the most progressive mode of production in evidence – was not the ultimate man of human history up-to-date. The Iroquois 'red skin hunter' was, in some ways, more essentially human and liberated than a clerk in the City and in that sense closer to the man of the socialist future. Marx had no doubts about the limitations of the 'archaic' commune: material 'poverty', its parochiality and its weakness against eternal exploitative forces. Its decay under capitalism would be necessary. Yet that was clearly not the whole story. The experience and excitement of the Parisienne Commune – to Marx the first direct experiment in a new plebian democracy and revolutionary polity – were by now part of the picture. With the evidence of what appeared as the first post-capitalist experiment, Marx was more ready than before to consider anew the actual nature of social and political organization in the world he strived for. To all those steeped in Hegelian dialectics, children resembled indeed their grandparents more than their parents. The 'primary' commune, dialectically restored on a new and higher level of material wealth and global interaction, entered Marx's images of the future communist society, one in which once more the 'individuals behave not as labourers but as owners – as members of a community which also labours' (Marx 1964, 68).

Back from the past/future to the present, the consideration and mutual dependence of capitalist and non-capitalist (pre-capitalist?) social forms made Marx increasingly accept and consider 'uneven development' in all its complexity. New stress was also put on the regressive aspects of capitalism and on its link with the issue of the state in Russia. The acceptance of unilinear 'progress' was emphatically out. The extension of an essentially evolutionist model through the ideas of oriental despotism was by now insufficient. Specifically, Marx came to see the decline of the peasant commune in Western Europe and its crisis, in Russia, not as a law of the social sciences – spontaneous economic

²Marx wrote the passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), referring to France, but deleted it in the reprint of 1869.

³Marx and Engels, *Sochineniya* (Moscow 1961), vol. 32, p. 158. This sentence was removed by Marx in later editions of the text.

progress – but as the result of an assault on the majority of the people, which could and should be fought. The consideration of the Russian commune in the drafts of the ‘Letter of Zaslulich’ brought all this to the surface. It will be best to present the essence of the message in Marx’s own words:⁴

... the very existence of the Russian commune is now threatened by a conspiracy of powerful interests. [It is] a certain type of capitalism, fostered by the state at the peasants’ expense ... The landowners, too, have an interest in forming the more or less well-off peasants ... the poor farmers ... into mere wage labourers ... What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither a historical inevitability nor a theory; it is state oppression, and exploitation by capitalist intruders whom the state has made powerful at the peasants’ expense ...

‘What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither historical inevitability nor a theory but oppression by the State and exploitation by capitalist intruders whom the State made powerful at the peasants’ expense’. The type of society in question is singled out by its international context, i.e. ‘modern historical environment: it is contemporaneous with a higher culture and it is linked to a world market in which capitalist production is predominant’, while the country ‘is not, like the East Indies, the prey of a conquering foreign power’. The class-coalition of peasant-destroyers – the power-bloc in societies with peasant numerical predominance – was defined as ‘the *state* ... the *trade* ... the *landowners* and ... *from within* [the peasant commune] ... the *usurer*’ (italics added), i.e. state, merchant capitalists, squires and kulaks – in that order. The whole social system was referred to as a specific ‘type of capitalism fostered by the state’.

To Marx the fact that the Russian commune was relatively advanced in type, being based not on kinship but on locality, and its ‘dual nature’ represented by ‘individual’ as well as ‘communal land’ ownership, offered the possibility of two different roads of development. The state and the specific variety of state-bred capitalisms were assaulting, penetrating and destroying the commune. It could be destroyed, but there was no ‘fatal necessity’ for it. The corporate aspect of the commune’s existence could prevail, once revolution had removed the anti-commune pressures and the advanced technology developed by Western capitalism was put to new use under the communal control of the producers. Such a solution would indeed be best for Russia’s socialist future. The main limitation of the rural communes, i.e. their isolation, which facilitated a Russian edition of ‘centralized despotism’, could be overcome by popular insurrection and the consequent supplementing of the state-run *volost*’ by ‘assemblies elected by the communes – an economic and administrative body serving their own interest’. That is, shockingly, peasants running their own affairs, within and as part of a socialist society. Indeed, the Russian peasants’ ‘familiarity with corporate (“*artel*”) relations would greatly smooth their transition from small plot to collective farming’. But there is a condition to it: ‘Russian society having for so long lived at the expense of the rural commune owes it the initial resources required for such a change’, i.e. the precise reverse of ‘primitive accumulation’ was now defined by Marx as the condition for successful collectivization of the Russian peasant agriculture. Also, it would be gradual change, ‘[in which] the first step would be to place the commune under normal conditions [i.e. in a non-exploitative context] on its present basis’.

In conclusion, to Marx, a timely revolutionary victory could turn the Russian commune into a major ‘vehicle of social regeneration’, a ‘direct starting point of the system to which

⁴See Shanin (1983), part 2.

the contemporary society strives' and a grass-roots framework for 'large-scale cooperative labour' and the use of 'modern machinery'. Moreover, that might make some chiefly peasant countries 'supreme in that sense to the societies where capitalism rules'. That is, indeed, why 'the Western precedent would prove here nothing at all'. Moreover, 'the issue is not that of a problem to be solved but simply of an enemy, who had to be beaten ... to save the Russian commune one needs a Russian revolution'. Note the expression *Russian* revolution, twice repeated within the text. Finally, to understand it all 'one must descend from pure theory to Russian reality' and not be frightened by the word 'archaic', for 'the new system to which the modern society will be a revival in a superior form of an archaic social type.'

The issue of the peasant commune was used by Marx also as a major way to approach a set of fundamental problems, new to his generation, but which would be nowadays easily recognized as those of 'developing societies', 'modernization', 'dependency' or the 'combined and uneven' spread of global capitalism and its specifically 'peripheral' expression. There were several such components of Marx's new itinerary of topics for study and preliminary conclusions, none of which was worked out in full. At the centre lies the newly perceived notion of 'uneven development', interpreted not quantitatively (i.e. that 'some societies move faster than others') but as global interdependence of societal transformations. The 'Chronological Notes', i.e. a massive conspectus of Marx written in 1880–2, is directly relevant here. As rightly noticed in an interesting contribution by B. Porshnev (who refers it to the 'last 9–12 ears period of Marx's life'), it shows Marx's attention turning to 'the problem of historical interdependence of people and countries in the different period of global history, i.e. the synchronic unity of history' (and one should add to dichronic intersocietal unity) (Zhelubovskaya 1968, 373). Marx now comes to assume also for the future multiplicity of roads of societal transformation, within the global framework of mutual and differential impact. (In the *Grundrisse* he had already accepted it manifestly for the pre-capitalist past.) That is indeed why the generalized application of the discussion of 'primitive accumulation' in volume I of *Capital* is by 1877 so explicitly rejected. As is documented and argued by Wada, it meant also that Marx had begun to 'perceive the structure unique to backward capitalism' (Shanin 1983, 63) – to say 'structures' would probably be to say it better. The idea of 'dependent development' is not yet there, but the foundation to it is laid. To sum it up bluntly, to Marx, the England he knew and 'that is more developed industrially' did not and indeed could not any longer 'show to the less developed' Russia the 'image of its own future'. By one of history's ironies, a century later we are still trying to shed the opposite claim of post-1917 Russia's monopoly over revolutionary imagination, the assumption that it is Russia which is to show to all of the Englands of our time the image of their socialist futures.

Marx's new turn of mind was unmistakably recognized and acknowledged after their own fashion by doctrinaire Marxists of his days. The 'Letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*' was left unpublished by the Emancipation of Labour group, despite promises to Engels who let them have it for publication. The 'Letter to Zasulich', written by explicit request to make Marx's views known, was not published by them either. (The first of these was initially published in 1887 by the *Messenger of the People's Will*, the second only in 1924.) Much psychologistic rubbish was written in Russia and the West about how and why those writings were forgotten by Plekhanov, Zasulich,

Axelrod, etc., and about the 'need for specialized psychologists to have it explained'.⁵ It was probably simpler and cruder. In Marx's own generation there were already Marxists who knew better than Marx what Marxism is and who were prepared to censor him on the sly, for his own sake.

The clearest salute to Marx's originality and to his new views was given a generation later by the most erudite of the Russian Marxists of his time, Ryazanov, the first director of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, who published in 1924 the four drafts of the 'Letter to Zasulich' (discovered by him in 1911). To him, the four drafts written during less than two weeks of intensive intellectual and political considerations indicated the decline of Marx's capacities (Shanin 1983, 129).⁶ On top of that he has added, quoting Edward Bernstein, an additional explanation for Marx's populist deviation: 'Marx and Engels have restricted the expression of their skepticism not to discourage too much the Russian revolutionaries.' Poor old Marx was clearly going senile at 63 or else engaging in little lies of civility and expedience, once he departed from the 'straight and narrow' of the Marxism of his epigones. An amusing affinity – during and after the 1905–7 Revolution, Lenin was accused of leaning toward populism by some of his Marxist adversaries and associates.⁷ It seems that those two have had in common a peasant 'deviation' from Marxism.

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Teodor Shanin is a professor emeritus at the University of Manchester, Fellow of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences of the Russian Federation, and President of the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. He was a co-editor (together with Terence J. Byres and Charles Curwen) of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1973–1975.

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⁵How much all that still aches can be best exemplified by a short aside from P. Konyushaya, *Karl Marx I revolyutsionnaya rossiya* (Moscow 1975), where after a stream of invectives against the multiplicity of 'falsifiers of Marx', i.e. everybody who discussed him outside the USSR, tells us that Plekhanov 'based his argument on the position formulated by Marx in his letter to "Otechestvennye Zapiski"' (p. 357). She forgets to inform us when, where and how.

⁶David Ryazanov, see Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, Part Two. For contemporary Western equivalents of that view see Marx and Engels (1952), *The Russian Menace to Europe*, p. 266, and on the left, J. Elster in K. Marx, *Verker I Utlag* (Oslo 1970), p. 46.

⁷Plekhanov's speech at the Fourth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1906 stated it explicitly. On the other hand, the year 1905 also saw the appeals of the Saratov Bolsheviks and of Nikodim (A. Shestakov, the chief of the agrarian section of the Bolsheviks' Moscow committee) against Lenin's new agrarian programme, treated by them as 'capitulation' to the populist petty bourgeoisie.

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