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Marx's last writings on Russia: new paths to revolution and philosophic continuity

THEORY / PRACTICE

This month I am turning over *Theory/Practice* to my colleague Michael Connolly. — Raya Dunayevskaya.

Late Marx and the Russian Road — Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism' Edited by Teodor Shanin. Monthly Review Press N.Y. 286 pp.

What Teodor Shanin politely calls "a peculiar history" has characterized a full century of attitudes by post-Marx Marxists toward Karl Marx's crucial writings on Russia in the 1870s and 1880s. Marx's 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich, in which he examines the Russian peasant commune as a "fulcrum for social regeneration", was actually hidden by Zasulich and Plekhanov for decades until finally discovered and printed in 1924, 43 years later. The four lengthy drafts of that letter — Marx's fullest discussion of pathways to the needed Russian Revolution — were found by D. Riazanov in 1911, transcribed in 1913, yet only published in 1924.

Some illumination of the causes of such disregard for Marx's writings can be gleaned from reading Riazanov's 1924 article on the discovery of the Zasulich letter drafts, which dares to baselessly refer to Marx's "undermined capacity for work" in this period (the actual Russian word means something more like "torn") as the reason for the brevity of the reply Marx finally sent.

By the 1930s Stalin's Russia banned all discussion of Marx's concept of the "Asiatic mode of production" and his study of the commune, and portrayed Marx as an adherent of a unilinear evolutionism in which diversity of societal forms was explained by global developmental stages. The post-World War II era has done more, but not enough, to open these writings to a full discussion.

LISTEN TO MARX 'THINKING ALOUD'

In sharp contrast to that dismal record, we can say that the "case presented by Teodor Shanin" in this volume is one of the most important contributions to the understanding of Marx's last decade since Lawrence Krader transcribed Marx's 1880-82 Ethnological Notebooks in 1972. It provides new insights into years in which Marx was "thinking aloud" on multiple paths to revolution. Marx's final decade is one unlike those in which one can cite chapter and sentence from his printed work. The unfinished nature of his labors in those years, which included 30,000 pages of notes, have tested all Marxists since his death, beginning with Engels and including ourselves.

Part Two of *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'peripheries of capitalism'* offers us the first full English translations of the drafts of his letter to Zasulich, together with his 1877 answer to Mikhailovskii and the 1882 Preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. Helpful

to a view of Marx's study of the works of Russian populist revolutionaries is the translation of some 60 pages of writings from that movement in Part Three. From them we can see why Marx so firmly supported the struggles of the "People's Will" organization against Tsarist police terror, and why his interest in the work of these non-Marxists was often more intense than in the work of other Russian socialists who claimed to be applying Marxism to Russia.

The interpretive essays by Shanin, Haruki Wada, and by Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan that make up Part One of the book, as well as the chronology of Marx's work after *Capital* by Sayer, both trace the development of Marx's thinking and writing on Russia 1867-83, and raise crucial questions about the relation of this work to the whole of Marx's Marxism.

The nature of the Russian peasant commune and its relevance for revolutionary perspectives were already under sharp debate before the 1870s. One camp viewed the commune as a "creation of the Tsarist state," serving as means of control and preserving backwardness in agriculture. The other camp, including N. Chernyshevskii, saw in the peasant commune a remnant of pre-class society which controlled three-fifths of the arable land of European Russia, worked pasture, harvest and forest collectively, organized community services, and defended itself against outside intrusion.

LEARNING RUSSIAN AS 'LIFE AND DEATH'

Marx focused his attention on Russia in the fall of 1869, teaching himself the language. Jenny Marx reported that "he has begun to study Russian as if it were a matter of life and death."¹ From the first Russian book he read — V. Flerovskii's *Situation of the Working Class in Russia* — to the very end of his life, rarely did even two months pass in which he did not read and make notes on "the Eastern Question." In Aug. 1881, Marx compiled a list of Russian books in his personal library: there were then nearly 200.

Haruki Wada's essay, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia," traces Marx's studies, contrasting his footnote to the 1867 German edition of *Capital*, which had attacked Herzen's optimism on the Russian commune, with the 1873 German edition, which both deleted that footnote and added a postscript praising Chernyshevskii's work. Marx's reading of Chernyshevskii directly preceded his clarification of a key sentence in the 1875 French edition of *Capital*, where Marx now strictly limits the expropriation of the peasant from the soil in the English translation to "the countries of Western Europe."¹

The years 1875-77 saw Marx's most intensive study of Russia, leading to his answer to Mikhailovskii, with its insistence that Russia's future path was still open to avoiding the "fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist regime."

By the time we reach Marx's 1881 drafts of his letter to ¹ For further discussion of the changes Marx made in the 1875 French edition of *Capital*, see Ch. 10 of Raya Dunayevskaya's *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Humanities, 1962). See also Kevin A. Barry's "The French edition of *Capital*, 100 years after," in *N&L*, Oct. 1961.

Zasulich, it is clear that what was the determinant for Marx's analysis of Russia was not the "peasant commune" (though that was the point of study), but the "needed Russian Revolution" that alone could save the commune. What was at issue was the commune's "internal dualism", with "property elements" at odds with "collective elements", a dualism which remained to be worked out.

Finally we come to the Preface to the second Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, written in Jan. 1882. It concludes: "If the Russian Revolution becomes a signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two can supplement each other, then present Russian communal land ownership can serve as a point of departure for a communist development". Though jointly signed by Marx and Engels, Wada believes that it "expresses the opinion of Engels more directly than that of Marx," and cites Jenny Marx's death as well as Karl Marx's poor health as the reason. Politically, Wada views the Preface as differing from the Zasulich letter drafts in that it "postulates" revolution in the West "as a precondition" for a Russian Revolution.

Sayer and Corrigan, in their "Late Marx: continuity, contradiction and learning," on the other hand, demonstrate that

what we know of Marx's reading and correspondence in Jan. 1882 reveals no paralysis of mind. Further, this reviewer does not see in the text of the Preface any such "precondition," but rather a vision of the way revolutions in technologically backward lands can spark revolution in advanced ones, "so that the two supplement each other." From our perspective 100 years later, that formulation seems more relevant than ever.

'BREAK' OR 'DEVELOPMENT' IN MARX?

Throughout the book, the "new moments" from Marx's last decade raise questions on the extent to which they represent a break with Marx's previous 30 years of work, and on the way in which his view of the "Russian road" relates to other breakthroughs in the years after the Paris Commune. These questions form the centerpoint of Sayer and Corrigan's critique of the Shanin and Wada essays. Shanin had argued in "Late Marx: gods and craftsmen" that Capital "did not fetter the kernel of evolutionism" widespread in mid-19th century Britain. And even though Marx had, in the 1850s, already presented the concepts of "Oriental Despotism" and the "Asiatic mode of production" as "supplement and alternative to unilinear explanations", those concepts are seen as insufficient. Shanin contends that such societies were viewed by Marx as "a-historical" until disrupted by capitalism, at which time "the iron laws of evolution finally assume their global and universal pace."

To Sayer and Corrigan this "overstates the degree to which the Marx of Capital was a consistent evolutionist." One might also argue that in Marx's writings (1850-62) on China's Taiping Rebellion, dualities within the Asiatic mode of production are suggested. And far from Europe unilinearly showing China the "image of its own future", the Taiping Rebellion re-appears in the first chapter of Capital as encouragement to European revolutionary perspectives.

Nevertheless, Shanin makes an important contribution on the divergence between Marx and Engels on the Asiatic mode of production: when he pinpoints Engels' last use of the concept as Feb. 1884, and reveals that in the next 11 years, through "3,000 pages of writings and letters, it was not even mentioned once". Hobshawm's argument that Engels replaced it with the "broader concept of the Archaic Formation," is shown to be far off the mark.

The notes on "Marx after Capital" offered by Sayer shed light on the breadth of Marx's study and activity in this period, and on the way seemingly separate "topics" are related in thought as well as in date. Looming above all in that last decade was the experience of the 1871 Paris Commune. It resulted, Sayer and Corrigan point out, "in a body of material as important, as neglected, and as subversive of much 'Marxism' as the writings on Russia published in this volume."

Concentrating on Marx's drafts of *The Civil War in France*, their powerful and thought-provoking essay points both to

2. By the late 1870s, and into the 1880s, Marx's work extended to non-capitalist societies world-wide. In the months after Jenny Marx's death, Marx traveled to Algeria where he observed anti-colonial resistance and investigated Arab landed property forms. About the same time he compiled a 1,700 page manuscript chronology of world history "from the first century BC to the mid-17th century," a manuscript still unpublished today.

Marx's self-critique on the role of the state machinery in working class emancipation and to his new perspectives on the means through which this emancipation is possible. Those means are spelled out as a "sustained attack on the divisions of labor that render administrations and government 'mysterious, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste.'" And they conclude with Marx's declaration that "whatever the merits of the single measures of the Commune, its greatest measure was its own organization."

MARX'S VIEW OF WOMEN; AUTHORS' DISREGARD OF PHILOSOPHY

In a book as path-breaking as this it is necessary to ask: how does it happen that Marx's view of women, as Subjects of revolution, gets left out of the account of his last decade? Whether Sayer and Corrigan on the Paris Commune, or Shanin or Wada on Marx and the "Russian road", the story of Elizaveta Dmitrievna Tomanovskaya is hardly told. Yet here is a Russian revolutionist who joined the International, met regularly with Marx in London in 1870-71, and discussed with him the destiny of the peasant commune. Before the Commune burst forth, it was she Marx sent to Paris to organize a women's section of the International; she became an activist in the Union des Femmes, and reported to Marx on the magnificent self-organization of the women of Paris. It is disturbing to see that not even a sketch of her life is included among the 23 biographical paragraphs from the "Russian scene."

The immediate ramifications of the participation of women in the Commune included for Marx a resolution at the 1871 London conference calling for the formation of IWA branches exclusively for women. The ramifications in thought were to last the rest of his life. By 1878, Marx was concerned with the dialectics of man/woman relations in "primitive" societies as well, compiling in that year a "copious bibliography on matriarchal law."

Marx's Ethnological Notebooks of 1860-82, which inquired into the destiny of women in primitive communism, are among his final writings. When we were able to see how Marx pointed to both the greater freedom of women in pre-class society, and the fact that elements of women's oppression arose from within primitive communism, the contrast between Marx's view on the man/woman relationship and

Engels' later expression in *Origin of the Family* was uncovered. But what was also visible was a divergence on method, on dialectics.

None of the participants in this volume seem concerned with dialectics. Shanin only raises the question of Marx's method in the framework of whether Marx was "god or craftsman." Sayer and Corrigan pose his development from the 1840s to the 1880s as: "Marx was supremely good at learning. It is to assert a continuity of concern" (Their emphasis).

The point, however, for our age, is not continuity of concern, but the continuity of a philosophy of revolution — and not alone in Marx's time, but in ours. It is, after all, a fact that none of the present authors take note of, that the theory of state-capitalism was being worked out as early as 1941 by Raya Dunayevskaya, when she was inspired by her study of the 1875 French edition of *Capital* as she labored over the original Russian documents of the Five Year Plans. The specific paragraph that Marx had added in 1875 was in the section on accumulation of capital, analyzing the law of concentration and centralization of capital as reaching its ultimate "in the hands of a single capitalist or capitalist corporation."

Such a philosophic ground can lead us toward a view of the uniqueness of Marx's method, and toward his concretization of revolution in permanence "for one technologically backward society, in which human forces of revolution, in the right 'historic context', could change the world. Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, the authors of this remarkable book have given us an opportunity to 'hear Marx think' and work it out for ourselves." — Michael Connolly

3. Long before our age's creation of the concept of the Third World, Dunayevskaya was taking issue with Rosa Luxemburg's counterposing Third World "reality" against Marx's theory of accumulation of capital. By the time she wrote *Marxism and Freedom* in 1957, she summed up 18 years of development of the theory of state-capitalism (pp. 132-137), by not only differentiating Marx's theory from Luxemburg's, but pointing to Marx's 1863 legacy as a new direction for our age.

4. Marx's concept is to be sharply distinguished from its near opposite, Leon Trotsky's "theory of permanent revolution," as well as from Mao Zedong's "uninterrupted revolution," which will require "a century or several centuries" to complete after the conquest of power. See Dunayevskaya's discussion of Marx as a philosopher of permanent revolution in Chapter 11 of the above 1962 work.