

The Problematic of non-capitalist Road to Socialism in Marx*

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I

The whole of Marx's Critique of Political Economy ('Critique' for short) is informed by what he wrote in two texts referring, respectively, to two great philosophers – Spinoza and Hegel. In his 1844 Parisian manuscripts, referring to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Marx underlined that its "greatness" lay in the "dialectic of negativity as the moving and creating principle" (MEW. EBI: 575). Years later, in the first manuscript for *Capital II*, Marx completed Spinoza's famous phrase thus: "all determination is negation, and all negation is determination" (MEGA II.4.1: 316). Marx shows in the 'Critique' how capital creates the objective and subjective conditions of its own negation, and, at the same time, elements of the new society that is to supersede it – socialism. In the 'Critique' socialism or communism (equivalent in Marx) signifies a society of free and associated producers based on the 'associated mode of production' (AMP). This "(re)union of free individuals", the crowning point of the producers' act of self-emancipation., where individuals are subject neither to personal dependence – as in pre-capitalism – nor to material dependence – as in capitalism, excludes, by definition, private ownership of the means of production (both in its individual and class sense), commodity form of the product of labour, wage labour and state. Here the freely associated 'social individuals' are the masters of their own social movement, subjecting their social relations to their own control (MEGA II.6: 110; RUBEL I: 614). However, the existence of universally developed individuals subordinating their social relations to their own control – in a word socialism – is not something naturally given, it is a "product of history" presupposing a whole series of material conditions, themselves the product of "a long and painful development" (Gr.79; MEGA II.6: 110). And if the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of circulation for a classless society do not exist in a latent form in the society as it is, (then) "all attempts at exploding the society would be Don Qixotism" (Gr.77). Precisely it is capital which creates the requisite material conditions of the proletarian (and thereby human) emancipation.

Wealth in its autonomous being exists only for either directly forced labour-slavery or mediated forced labour-wage labour. The directly forced labour does

not confront wealth as capital, but only as a relation of (personal) domination. Therefore on the basis of forced labour there will only be reproduction of the relation of (personal) domination for which wealth itself has value only as enjoyment, not as wealth as such, “a relation, therefore, which can never create universal industry” (Gr.232). “The original unity between labourer and the conditions of production” wrote Marx, “has two main forms (leaving aside slavery where the labourer himself is a part of the objective conditions of production): the Asiatic community (natural communism) and the small family agriculture (bound with household industry) in one or the other form. Both are infantile forms and equally little suited to develop labour as *social labour* and productive power of social labour, whence the necessity of separation, of rupture, of the opposition between labour and ownership (in the conditions of production). The extreme form of this rupture within which at the same time the productive forces of social labour are most powerfully developed is the form of capital. On the material basis which it creates and by the means of the revolutions which the working class and the whole society undergoes in the process of creating it can the original unity be restored” (MEW XXVI.3: 419). The expressions ‘in one or the other form’ and ‘the productive forces of social labour are powerfully developed’ are in English in the text). Of course production for production’s sake takes place under capital at the cost of the human individual. The economy of the means of production becomes, in the hands of capital “a system of robbery of the conditions of the life of the worker, of space, air, light and the personal conditions of safety against the dangers and the unhealthy environment of the production process” and the “most shameless robbery” of the normal conditions of labour’s functioning (MEGA II.6: 413,443; RUBEL I: 959–60, 983; MEGA II.4.1: 107). Thus under capital the “productive forces know only a unilateral development and become the destructive forces for the majority” (MEW III: 60).

Now, the development of antagonisms of a social form of production is the “only historical (real) way towards its dissolution and metamorphosis” (MEGA II.6: 467; RUBEL I: 993). It is capital itself which creates its own negation. In an early text addressed to the workers Marx clearly underlines what he calls the “positive side of capital”, that is, without the big industry, free competition, the world market and the corresponding means of production “there would be no material resources for the emancipation of the proletariat and the creation of a new society” (MEW6: 555). With the material conditions and social combinations of production capital develops simultaneously the contradictions and antagonisms, “the forces of destruction of the old society and the elements of for-

mation of a new society” (MEGA II.6: 475; RUBEL I: 995-96). While the capitalist mode of production, in contrast with the earlier modes of production, generates immense progress as regards the development of the productive powers of labour ,” it also includes within its antagonistic form, ...the necessity of its downfall.” (MEW 26.3: 426).

II

Having summarised Marx’s well-known views on capital’s contradictory character and on how capital through all its contradictions and antagonisms builds the necessary (pre)conditions for the advent of a new society based on the AMP we turn to the case, which shows, according to a number of people, that the ‘late’ Marx had changed his earlier view that humanity has to go through capitalism in order to arrive at socialism and that he now thought that the passage to socialism need not necessarily pass through capitalism. Marx now allegedly saw the possibility of building the new society completely bypassing capitalism. This point of view about the ‘late’ Marx was emphasized not very long ago by two scholars T. Shanin and H. Wada in a book (1983) which created waves among a number of Marx scholars-Marxist and non Marxist.

This refers particularly to Marx’s writings on Russia¹ towards the end of his life. Marx was responding to a question posed to him by these correspondents: could the existing rural communes in Russia be the basis for building socialism (communism) in that land without going through the capitalist mode of production or must Russia pass through the capitalist stage in order to arrive at the new society?

In his reply Marx first observed, referring to his *Capital* (the French version), that in that work he had underlined that his analysis of the capitalist mode of production (CMP) was confined strictly to “Western Europe”. Thus the analysis in *Capital* could not offer either a positive or a negative answer to the question posed to him. But, added Marx, from his independent studies on Russia he had concluded that the Russian rural commune could serve as the point of departure of “social regeneration” in Russia. However this transition could not be automatic. The communal ownership in land, the point of departure of this “regeneration”, has already been affected by the adverse forces – working inside and outside the commune – tending to undermine the system. On the one hand, parcelary cultivation of land and the private appropriation of its fruits by its mem-

¹ These are Marx’s letter to Mikhailovsky (1877), his letter as well as several drafts of the letter to Vera Zassulitch (1881) and his and Engels’s joint preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. The correspondence Marx wrote in French.

bers, and, on the other hand, State's fiscal exactions, fraudulent exploitation by usury and merchant capital happening since 1861 when the Tsarist State adopted measures for the "so-called emancipation of the peasants." Hence, "social regeneration" is possible provided the negative factors are eliminated, most importantly by a "Russian Revolution" by the peasant masses. In the process the commune could benefit from the scientific and technological acquisitions of the existing capitalism of the West.

According to Shanin, Marx's new familiarity with the Russian situation would as if make Marx uphold the position that a peasant revolution in Russia towards its immediate socialist transformation would serve as the prototype of revolution towards immediate transition to socialism from the peasant societies in the backward countries like the way England served as the prototype for the capitalist world (Shanin 1983: 18). This, opined Shanin, added a "fourth dimension" to "Marx's analytical thought" where to the "triple origin suggested by Engels – German philosophy, French socialism, English political economy" – should be added a "fourth one, that of Russian revolutionary populism" (1983; 20). Broadly the same point of view, somewhat nuanced, was shared by E. Dussel (1990: 260–61) and M. Löwy (1998: 200).

Let us now put Marx's discussion on Russia in the proper perspective to see, on the basis of his relevant texts, what exactly Marx was saying in 1877 and 1881. At the outset it is necessary to refer to the emphasis Marx put on what he called the "uniqueness" of the Russian case, which automatically excludes its generalization into some kind of 'law' applicable to the backward peasant societies. To Marx the Russian "agricultural communes" offered a "unique situation, without any precedent in history" (RUBEL II: 1566). First, contrary to India, the victim of a foreign conqueror who had violently destroyed its rural communes with "common land ownership", Russia had no foreign conqueror, and it was the "only European country where "till to-day" its communes" have maintained themselves on a national scale. Secondly, "along with communal property of the soil, its historical environment, the contemporaneity of the capitalist production in Western Europe" offers it "ready made the material conditions of cooperative labour on a vast scale" which allows it to incorporate all the "positive acquisitions of the capitalist system", the "fruits with which capitalist production has enriched humanity" avoiding it to go through the capitalist regime (RUBEL II: 1561, 1565, 1566).

Now, while considering the positive side-emphasizes Marx-one has to reckon with the negative side contained in the "dualism inherent in the Russian communal constitution", namely, along with the communal land ownership there is

also “parcellary labour, the source of private appropriation” enabling the communes’ members to “accumulate moveable property, money, and sometimes even slaves and serfs, uncontrolled by the commune” – which constituted the “dissolvent of the original social and economic equality” (1564). Thus the “dualism” of the communes offers an alternative: either its ownership element will prevail over its collective element or its collective element will prevail over its ownership element” (1565). “Theoretically speaking” the Russian commune could conserve its soil by developing its base, the communal ownership of land, and by eliminating the “principle of private ownership which it also implies” and thereby become a “direct point of departure of the economic system to which the modern society tends” (1565). However, “coming down from theory to reality” no body can hide the fact that the Russian commune to-day “is facing a conspiracy of powerful forces and interests.” Besides exercising “incessant exploitation on the peasants the State has facilitated the domination (within the commune) of a certain part of the capitalist system, stock market, bank, railway, commerce”.² Similarly, the commune is “exploited fraudulently by the intruding capitalists, merchants, landed proprietors as well as undermined by usury”. These different factors have “unleashed inside the commune itself the conflict of interest already present and rapidly developed its germs of decomposition”. This “concourse of destructive influences, unless smashed by a powerful reaction will naturally end in the death of the rural commune” (1570, 1571, 1572). Hence Marx’s emphasis on the need of a “Russian Revolution”. However, even if this revolution is victorious and defeats the commune’s transformation into capitalism, the building of communism in the peasant and technologically backward Russia would absolutely require help of the advanced productive forces, the “positive acquisition elaborated by the capitalist system” (1566). This material aid Russia could obtain almost certainly not from the capitalist regimes but only from the victorious proletariat in Western Europe which naturally would also serve as a bulwark against any attempted capitalist armed intervention in Russia from outside. This seems to be the clear message that we get from the ‘Preface’ to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* the last to appear under the joint signatures of its authors. There, observing that though the Russian commune had already been “seriously undermined”, it could still directly go over to the “communist form of collective ownership” provided that there is a “revolu-

². This dualism, manifesting the contradictory reality of the Russian countryside Marx also notes in *Capital*, vol.2 in one of its last manuscripts, written probably after his letter to Mikhailovsky (see MEW XXIV: 39).

tion” in Russia which gives signal to a “proletarian revolution” in the West and that one complements the other. (MEW IV: 576).

Shanin and Wada impute uniquely to Engels the position that the Russian revolution needed a proletarian revolution as a complement which could not be Marx’s position inasmuch as – in the words of Shanin – “Marx was moving away from such views” (Shanin 1983: 22). Wada holds that the death of Marx’s wife made him ask Engels to write the draft and then put his signature on whatever Engels drafted (in Shanin 1983: 70). In his turn Dussel writes that the ‘Preface’ is a text of compromise between Marx and Engels on the question of the Russian commune – that is, between Marx’s “Russian Revolution” and Engels’s “proletarian revolution” – and that the “compromise” contained a contradiction indicative of the future” (Dussel 1990: 262). Now, in his different drafts and in the final version of his letter to Zassulich as well as in his letter to Mikhailovsky, Marx does not explicitly refer to ‘proletarian revolution’ (by name) in the West as a complement to the Russian (peasant) revolution, so that ‘proletarian revolution’ in the 1882 ‘Preface’ seems to come uniquely from Engels who had in a polemic in 1875, at Marx’s demand and developing their common point of view, had explicitly spoken of the necessity of this complement for successfully transforming the existing system into a higher form.³ However, a careful reading of Marx’s drafts shows that the question of a proletarian revolution in the West as an aid to the peasant revolution in Russia is very much present there, though the specific term is not used by Marx. In the very first draft (Engels was not aware of these drafts, later discovered by Rjazanov) Marx considers as a “very favourable circumstance” for the agricultural commune to go over to a higher form of society without passing through capitalism the fact that, after having survived a period when the capitalist system still appeared intact, bearing its technological fruits, the commune is now witness to this (capitalist) system “struggling, on the one hand, with its *labouring masses* and,

³ In this polemic Engels, affirming the possibility of the existing commune system to change into a higher form “without passing through the intermediate stage of bourgeois parcellary property” emphasized that this possibility could not be realized without the help of a successful proletarian revolution in Western Europe which could offer the Russian peasant the materials which the peasant needs to “carry through a revolution in his whole agricultural system”(MEAS II: 47–48). At the same time Engels underlined the importance of a revolution in Russia, “Undoubtedly Russia is on the eve of a revolution,...a revolution of the highest importance for Europe, since it will destroy with one stroke the reserve of the whole European reaction”(ibid: 49–50). The similarity with what Marx wrote (in a letter) two years later is striking: “Russia has been standing at the threshold of a revolution. All its elements are ready...The revolution this time begins in the East where the bulwark of the reserve army of counter-revolution has as yet remained unhurt”(MEW XXXIV: 296).

on the other, with science and the productive forces which it has itself engendered, in a word, in a *fatal crisis* which will end in the *system's elimination* by a return of the present society to a higher form of the most 'archaic' type of collective ownership and production" (1568, 1570; our emphasis). What else is Marx saying here but indicating – as if paraphrasing his famous, much misunderstood 'Preface' of 1859 – a situation of acute contradiction between the relations and the forces of production within western capitalism ending in a "fatal crisis" of the whole system and leading to its" elimination" and its substitution by a society of a higher type – obviously only possible through a revolution by its "labouring masses" that is, by the proletariat. If our textual reading is correct, Marx's position here is basically the same as that of the 'Preface' of 1882-only expressed in a different way – and certainly not essentially different from Engels's which is easily verified when we read Engels's two texts closely-those of 1875 and 1894-the first published at Marx's demand and with his full accord and the second without its author being aware of Marx's drafts (MEAS II and MEW XXII).

A couple of points should be pressed here concerning Marx's depicting the future society as a return, in a higher form, of the most 'archaic' type. This is in fact a paraphrase from Morgan, whom Marx mentions as an "American author", where the latter speaks of a 'new system' as a 'revival in a superior form of an archaic type'. Shanin cites Marx's expression and argues that this represented a new position for Marx (Shanin 1983: 17). We submit that the idea underlying Marx's expression here, far from representing a new enlightenment for Marx, rather confirmed his earlier position expressed, it is true, in a more condensed theoretical manner without much of empirical reference. Thus in his 1865 lecture to the workers Marx speaks of three "historical processes" of the relation between "the Man of Labour and the Means of Labour" – first, their "*Original Union*", then their "*Separation*" through the "*Decomposition of the Original Union*", third, the "restoration of the original union in a new historical form through a "fundamental revolution in the mode of production" (MEGA II.4.1: 412; emphasis in original). Earlier a passage from Marx's early eighteen sixties manuscripts was cited where Marx in the same way speaks of the "original unity between labourer and the conditions of production", separation between them under capital and the "restoration of the original unity" by means of a working class revolution.

Now the crucial question: does Marx's position on the Russian commune constitute a *fundamental* departure as regards his basic point of view on the question of the transition to a society of free associated producers? Reference

was already made earlier to the “uniqueness”, in Marx’s view, of the Russian situation (underlined by Marx more than once) sufficient to exclude any *generalization* of this case as a prototype to the pre-capitalist peasant society as such any where in the world. In this sense naturally this ‘unique’ example does not affect Marx’s *general* position. It is also clear from Marx’s correspondence that in its effort to go over to a higher type of society, assuming a successful ‘Russian Revolution’, the commune cannot, after all, avoid capitalism developed elsewhere which, through the proletarian revolution produced by capital itself through its own contradictions and the advanced forces of production which it had created and which would be made available precisely by the victorious proletariat in the West, would be indispensable for the commune’s survival as well as its enlarged reproduction. Thus the commune’s transformation into a higher type of society would be impossible in the absence of capitalism existing elsewhere in the world. All this of course assumes a successful “Russian Revolution”. However, even before arriving at this point, the Russian commune already faces a somber future – which Marx discerns in his work of dissecting the elements of decomposition of the commune contained in its “dualism” on the basis of the “Russian reality”, as was mentioned earlier.⁴ Even before he had composed his drafts to Zassulich Marx’s letter to Mikhailovsky (1877) clearly indicated the possibility of decomposition of the commune and clearly emphasized that the path of 1861, which the commune was already traversing, if continued, would exactly fall within the general case of *Capital* (which in fact turned out to be the case).

The Russian case also, far from invalidating, rather confirms Marx’s 1860s assertion – given earlier – that the two basic (pre)conditions of building the new “(re)union of free individuals” namely, the development of labour as social labour and a high development of the productive powers of labour, could not be generated by the “original unity” of labour and the conditions of production as manifested in the different forms of “natural communism” (and small family mode of production). In Russia not only the productive powers of labour were very backward but also the rural commune was “struck by a weakness hostile in every sense” – besides the parcellary mode of labour – namely, its existence as a “localised microcosm”, the isolation and the “lack of contact of its life with the

⁴ The enthusiasts of Marx’s ‘Russian road’ leading directly to communism seem to have paid little attention to the “dialectic of negativity” in the commune’s “dualism”. These readers mainly see the positive side of “dualism” not the negative side – the elements of contradiction contained in it which Marx repeatedly stresses. As an example see the otherwise interesting paper by Anderson (2002).

life of the other communes” (far from developing labour as social labour) (RUBEL II: 1567).

It would of course be wrong to hold that there was nothing new in Marx’s thought in his reflections on the Russian commune. Marx and Engels were undoubtedly impressed by the commune which still had about a little less than half of the total land under its ownership which existed in no other country at that period. This is seen in their continued interest in the question for at least two decades beginning with the early 1870s. Common ownership of the means of production by the producers themselves, being the very basis of the new society, its existence in the Russian communal system-absent elsewhere – would be, so thought Marx and Engels, a very favourable factor enabling, to that extent, the Russian peasants to skip the stage of capitalist private ownership and start right away with this great asset, provided of course they eliminate beforehand the Tsarist regime, the system’s principal enemy, and are helped by capitalism’s positive achievements, necessarily mediated by the victorious proletariat in the West.

However, the reason why we hold that this does not change *fundamentally* Marx’s thought in general is simply because it does not affect Marx’s *general position* on the transition to a ‘reunion of free individuals’ at a higher level whose indispensable (pre)conditions are first, the existence of social labour (with socialization of production) not at a local level but at the level of the whole society, and, secondly, a high level of the productive powers of social labour contributing not only to an abundance of material wealth in order to free the “social individuals” from the struggle for necessities, but also contributing to the increasing availability of “free time” beyond labour time thus enabling the individuals to enjoy the wealth produced as well as showing them time for “free activity” undetermined by the compulsion of an external necessity” (MEW XXVI.3: 266). Ideally, capitalism need not be the system under which these conditions are created, and it would certainly be better if it were not. After all, Marx considers the capitalist mode of production not as natural but only as a (necessary) “passage point” towards a “free human society” (MEGA II.1: 65). Indeed, the CMP alone among all the modes of production, appearing in history so far, tends to create, through all its contradictions, the conditions for the advent of a free human society, and its historical justification is over as soon as it will have created those conditions, as Marx never tires of repeating. As we see in Marx’s correspondence, the Russian communal system – abstracting from its factors of decomposition already operating within it – even as an exceptional case due solely to its communal land ownership, had to depend on capitalism’s

“positive achievements”, the “ready made material conditions of co-operative labour” (1566), that is, the conditions of socialising labour at the level of society. Finally it is only the Western proletariat, itself a product of capital, which could, through its own revolution, stand as a bulwark against all intervention from outside in order to ensure, a successful Russian Revolution against the Tsarist regime, the traditional reserve and “head of European reaction”, as the 1882 ‘Preface’ observes.⁵ In short, what was new in Marx’s thinking confronted with the Russian commune, was his theoretical non-exclusion of the possibility for a society to go over directly to socialism without passing through capitalism, though not without the help of capitalism prevailing elsewhere which could both generate a proletarian revolution and make available to the society in question – precisely mediated by the victorious proletariat – the fruits of its advanced technology. At the same time Marx severely qualified this perspective by stressing the uniqueness of the Russian case and underlining the negative factors inherent in the commune’s “dualism” working steadily towards its decomposition with the possibility of transforming the situation into the general case as depicted in *Capital*. In the event “history the best of all Marxists” (Hilferding 1972: 517) has vindicated Marx’s dire prognosis.

At this point let us dispose of a serious confusion resulting from an *ideological* reading of the ‘late’ Marx’s writings on Russia. A number of distinguished people have read Marx’s idea of a “Russian Revolution” in his correspondence and in the 1882 ‘Preface’ to the *Manifesto* as the prefiguration of the twentieth century revolutions led by the ‘Marxists’, beginning with the Bolshevik seizure of power. A typical example is Shanin’s declaration according to which Marx’s new position was vindicated by the “victorious revolutions led by the Marxists” in the backward countries, some of which starting with Russia and led by “Lenin, Mao and Ho, proved socialist in leadership and results” whereas “no socialist revolution came in the West.” (1983: 25, 254).

In his turn Dussel writes: “Russia has certainly followed the road foreseen by Marx. Without passing through capitalism it has realized its revolution allowing the rural Russian commune to pass, in great measure, *directly* from the communal ownership to the social ownership...since the revolution of 1917” (1990: 261; emphasis in text). Similarly Michael Löwy says: “It is often forgotten that in their preface to the Russian translation of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels en-

⁵ It is interesting to note that at the same period when Marx was composing his correspondence in question –in 1880, to be precise- he, in a different context, also maintained that the “material and intellectual elements of the collective form of the means of production are constituted by the development of the capitalist class itself”(RUBEL I: 1538).

visaged a hypothetical situation in which socialist revolution could begin in Russia and then spread to western Europe” (1998: 18–19).⁶

Now, if one reads Marx’s relevant writings under consideration *non-ideologically* it is not difficult to see that these texts contain no reference to a ‘socialist’ revolution. In those texts it is always a question of “Russian Revolution” *tout court* as opposed to a ‘proletarian revolution’ in western Europe. It is a question of revolution by the communal peasant masses of Russia against the principal enemy of the communal system—the Tsarist regime. Naturally in the thinking of Marx (and Engels), following the materialist conception of history, there could be no question of a socialist (or proletarian) revolution in the virtual absence of the proletariat.

Apart from the absence of any idea of such a revolution existing in Marx’s texts, there is a more important point that should be stressed in this connection. There is in fact an unbridgeable gulf between the socialist revolution as envisaged by Marx, the revolution being led by the immediate producers themselves towards a society of free individuals by their “self activity” (*Selbstbetätigung*) and the revolutions of the twentieth century taking place under the leadership of a tiny group of radicalized intelligentsia *in their name* – undoubtedly with mass *support* at the *initial* stage – beginning particularly with the Bolshevik seizure of power which far from representing the “autonomous movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority”, as the *Communist Manifesto* famously emphasizes, from the start *excluded* the “immense majority” of the immediate producers from all real powers excepting in name (see Anweiler 1958, Daniels 1967, Ferro 1967, 1980). In fact reading Marx’s correspondence in question one is struck by the stress that Marx puts on the creative power of the immediate producers in the transformation of their society. Absolutely nowhere Marx mentions the need of a special apparatus to substitute for the spontaneous self activity of the producers towards their own emancipation. Thus Marx emphasizes the need of “substituting the governmental institution ‘*volost*’ by an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves and serving as the economic and administrative organ of their interests” (RUBEL II; 1567). The contrast with the *actualité* of the Bolshevik regime could not be starker.

⁶ In the same way R. Dunayevskaya interpreted the 1882 ‘Preface’ as “projecting the idea that Russia could be the first to have a proletarian revolution ahead of the west” (1991: 1).

* This paper is a part of a much longer article “Passage to Socialism: Dialectic of Progress in Marx”, forthcoming in the British journal *Historical Materialism*. In the following ‘RUBEL’ signifies Marx’s works edited by Maximilian RUBEL.

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