

Marx on the Russian Mir, and misconceptions by Marxists



Marx's 1877 letter to the editor of *Otecestvenniye Zapisky* refuting the idea that all societies would transition from feudalism to capitalism before communism.

libcom editor's note - The idea that Marx proposed a strict progression from feudalism, then to capitalism, then to communism has been one of the strongest myths of Marxism in the 20th Century and is often falsely labeled as 'Historical Materialism'. Marx clarifies in this correspondence that he had only drawn this conclusion from Western Europe, as explicitly stated in Capital. Instead, rather than applying his conclusions from Western Europe to the rest of the world, it would be necessary to apply his method - i.e. an in-depth analysis of history and present social relations.

This productivist interpretation of Marxism had already begun to spread during Marx's lifetime, and here he is responding to one such misrepresentation.

He feels himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the marche generale [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. (He is both honouring and shaming me too much.)

Letter from Marx to Editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*

[Notes on the Fatherland]

The author of the article *Karl Marx Before the Tribunal of M. Shukovsky* is evidently a clever man and if, in my account of primitive accumulation, he had found a single passage to support his conclusions he would have quoted it. In the absence of any such passage he finds himself obliged to seize upon an hors d'oeuvre, a sort of polemic against a Russian "literary man," published in the postscript of the first German edition of *Capital*. What is my complaint against this writer there? That he discovered the Russian commune not in Russia but in the book written by Haxthausen, Prussian Counsellor of State, and that in his hands the Russian commune only serves as an argument to prove that rotten old Europe will be regenerated by the

victory of pan-Slavism. My estimate of this writer may be right or it may be wrong, but it cannot in any case furnish a clue to my views regarding the efforts “of Russians to find a path of development for their country which will be different from that which Western Europe pursued and still pursues,” etc.

In the postscript to the second German edition of *Capital* – which the author of the article on M. Shukovsky knows, because he quotes it – I speak of “a great Russian critic and man of learning” with the high consideration he deserves. In his remarkable articles this writer has dealt with the question whether, as her liberal economists maintain, Russia must begin by destroying *la commune rurale* (the village commune) in order to pass to the capitalist regime, or whether, on the contrary, she can without experiencing the tortures of this regime appropriate all its fruits by developing *ses propres donnes historiques* [the particular historic conditions already given her]. He pronounces in favour of this latter solution. And my honourable critic would have had at least as much reason for inferring from my consideration for this “great Russian critic and man of learning” that I shared his views on the question, as for concluding from my polemic against the “literary man” and Pan-Slavist that I rejected them.

To conclude, as I am not fond of leaving “something to be guessed,” I will come straight to the point. In order that I might be qualified to estimate the economic development in Russia to-day, I learnt Russian and then for many years studied the official publications and others bearing on this subject. I have arrived at this conclusion: If Russia continues to pursue the path she has followed since 1861, she will lose the finest chance ever offered by history to a nation, in order to undergo all the fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist regime.

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The chapter on primitive accumulation does not pretend to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist order of economy emerged from the womb of the feudal order of economy. It therefore describes the historic movement which by divorcing the producers from their means of production converts them into wage earners (proletarians in the modern sense of the word) while it converts into capitalists those who hold the means of production in possession. In that history, “all revolutions are epoch-making which serve as levers for the advancement of the capitalist class in course of formation; above all those which, after stripping great masses of men of their traditional means of production and subsistence, suddenly fling them on to the labour market. But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the cultivators.

“This has not yet been radically accomplished except in England....but all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same movement,” etc. (*Capital*, French Edition, 1879, p. 315). At the end of the chapter the historic tendency of production is summed up thus: That it itself begets its own negation with the inexorability which governs the metamorphoses of nature; that it has itself created the elements of a new economic order, by giving the greatest impulse at once to the productive forces of social labour and to the integral development of every individual producer; that capitalist property, resting as it actually does already on a form of collective production, cannot do other than transform itself into social property. At this point I have not furnished any proof, for the good reason that this statement is itself nothing else than the short summary of long developments previously given in the chapters on capitalist production.

Now what application to Russia can my critic make of this historical sketch? Only this: If Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation after the example of the Western European countries, and during the last years she has been taking a lot of trouble in this direction – she will not succeed without having first transformed a good part of her peasants into proletarians; and after that, once taken to the bosom of the capitalist regime, she will experience its pitiless laws like other profane peoples. That is all. But that is not enough for my critic. He feels himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest

expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. (He is both honouring and shaming me too much.) Let us take an example.

In several parts of Capital I allude to the fate which overtook the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each cultivating his own piece of land on his own account. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement which divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of big landed property but also of big money capital. And so one fine morning there were to be found on the one hand free men, stripped of everything except their labour power, and on the other, in order to exploit this labour, those who held all the acquired wealth in possession. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage labourers but a mob of do-nothings more abject than the former "poor whites" in the southern country of the United States, and alongside of them there developed a mode of production which was not capitalist but dependent upon slavery. Thus events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.

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