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ESSAY ARTICLE

by Eugene Walker

Marx and "non-capitalist lands": 1873-1883

Today's world economic crisis is most often spoken and written of in terms of the industrialized West with its stagnation in production and growing unemployment. When the nations of the Third World are mentioned, the context is usually that of the huge and growing indebtedness of these lands to the technologically advanced West, currently to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. The framework thus remains that of the capitalist lands.

The Afro-Asian-Latin American Revolutions which have encircled the globe over the past two and a half decades attempted to blaze an independent, non-capitalist pathway both economically and ideologically.[1] But viewed from the 1980s, country after country within this Third World has been swept into the economic vortex of capitalism, either in its private or state-capitalist form.

And at the same time, there has been a capitulation to the ideological vortex of nationalized property equaling socialism, or of narrow nationalism, or the outright bankruptcy of private enterprise. It is this twin vortex of economics and narrow class-based ideology, which has kept the Afro-Asian-Latin American world spinning outside both any genuine economic development and the theoretical-philosophic vision of freedom that had been the promise of its revolutionary beginnings.

Is there still the possibility of cracking the framework of capitalist non-development for the Third World? Is the only choice between a private capitalist West with its traditional bourgeoisie or a state-capitalist East with its single economic plan? Neither has been able to provide either a solution to the world economic crisis or a freedom vision as against the prevailing bankruptcy of thought.

OVER ONE HUNDRED years ago, from the mid-1870s to his death in 1883, Marx began a most intense study of "non-capitalist lands" and of pre-capitalist societies.[2] It was not his first study of these areas, (see especially "Pre-capitalist economic formations" in the Grundrisse) but it was a most unexpected development. After all, he had finished Capital in 1867 and had made significant additions to the French addition of 1872-75. He had spent some two decades on its writing describing the growth and development of capitalism, both within a nation and as a world phenomenon.

Capital contained the magnificent, seemingly definitive statement of capital accumulation — what we know as Part VIII (though Marx considered it a chapter within Part VII on Accumulation of Capital), "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation."

Its concluding crescendo was the penultimate chapter, "Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation." The path of capitalist development — beginning with the expropriation of the agricultural population from the land as industrial capitalism took its first step to Marx's projection of its uprooting as " . . . the expropriation of a few usurpers by the masses of the people" — characterized capitalism not only as a preliminary "primitive stage," but as a continuing characteristic at every stage.

Then, in the last decade of his life, as he worked on Volumes II and III of Capital Marx undertook a series of new studies which encompassed both Russian agriculture and the newly emerging science of anthropology, including Lewis H. Morgan's writings on the Iroquois in America.

As soon as Volume I of Capital was published debates arose not alone on its analysis of capitalist lands, but of non-capitalist lands as well. On the one hand, were those who wished to treat Marx's writing on the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation as an immediate world system, a universal encompassing every society; so that all countries, all societies, no matter at what economic stage, inevitably came under the rule of this constantly expanding system. On the other hand, were those who argued that Marx's analysis applied only to Western Europe, and argued not only against the inevitability of going through capitalism, but proclaimed that the skipping of capitalism was a rather simple matter since no proletariat and no bourgeoisie were present. These countries, they claimed, could simply skip capitalism and move directly to socialism.

The debate was not an abstract one. The ground was most concrete — Russia. In what direction would it go? Would it follow Western Europe's development, or could Russia "skip" capitalism and go directly to socialism based on the Russian agricultural commune, the mir?

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1. For a discussion of both the economic vortex of capitalism in underdeveloped lands and of the ideologies in dispute see Raya Dunayevskaya's Nationalism, Communism, Marxist-Humanism and the Afro-Asian Revolutions.
2. For a comprehensive view of Marx's last decade "as a trail for the 1980s," from the French edition of Capital and the Critique of the Gotha Program to his writings on Russia and Ethnological Notebooks, see Raya Dunayevskaya's newly published Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution.

While the question in Russia unfolded in the succeeding decades in terms of capitalist development, socialist revolution, and state-capitalist counter-revolution,[3] it remains a viable, indeed a burning question in today's Third World, especially on the African and Latin American continents where the world system of capitalism has certainly spread, but where the drive to crack the framework of capitalism remains ever alive.

It is for this reason that we again turn to Marx as he faced this question at the end of his life. It is not that Marx had direct "answers" for the Third World, but that the method by which he chose to grapple with the question can cast an illumination for today.

THREE TEXTS OF MARX concern us here: Marx's letter to the Editorial Board of the **Otechestvennlye Zapiski**, November, 1877; his draft letters to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, late February and early March, 1881; and Marx's and Engels' Preface to the Russian edition of the **Communist Manifesto**, Jan. 21, 1882. These writings have long been available to all post-Marx-Marxists. What has been published only since the 1970s — and strongly reinforces the ideas presented in these texts is Marx's **Ethnological Notebooks**,[4] written in 1880-1882, which reveal how seriously and at length Marx studied the "primitive" societies from the new anthropological studies of his day. Together, this body of Marx's writings offer us what Raya Dunayevskaya has called "a trail to the 1980s." Let us examine them in more detail.

In his letter to the editorial board of the **Otechestvenniye Zapiski**, Marx was responding to an article titled "Karl Marx Before the Tribunal of Mr. Zhukovsky," written by N. K. Mikhailovsky, a theoretician of Narodism. Mikhailovksy had argued that Marx's view was that Russia's most urgent task was to destroy the peasant communal property, the mir, and plunge into capitalism. Instead of merely denying this fantastic accusation Marx restated his true views in so new a way that Russia's development actually shed a new illumination on what we now call the Third World:

In order that I might be specially qualified to estimate the economic development in Russia, 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 people and undergo all the fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist regime. (my emphasis)

The finest chance? Marx had, just prior to the above quote, paraphrased how the "great Russian scholar and critic" Chernyshevsky has posed the question:

...whether, as her liberal economists maintain, Russia must begin by destroying 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 the historical conditions specifically her own.

Marx then moved to show that it was not Russia alone which could develop along its own specific path:

... the chapter on primitive accumulation (in Capital) does not claim to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic system emerged from the womb of the feudal economic system. It therefore describes the historical process which by divorcing the producers from their means of production ... But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of peasants ...

And thus:

If Russia wants to become a capitalist nation ... she will not succeed without first transforming a good part of her peasants into proletariats.

But Marx then answered Mikhailovksy as follows:

He insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the general path of development prescribed by fate to all nations, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves ... But I beg his pardon ... one will never arrive there by using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical.

Marx refused to recognize any theory, any sweeping generalization, even when it was as magnificent as his own historical tendency of capitalist accumulation when it was placed outside of the historical process from which it was created. Marx recognized only one science: "history and its process."

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MARX FOLLOWED THROUGH on the question of particular historical process with regard to Russia. In February, 1881, Vera Zasulich wrote to Marx on the disputes of Russian socialists concerning Marx's **Capital** and the future of capitalism in Russia. In particular she asked Marx to state his views on the Russian commune as the basis of socialism. The four drafts Marx wrote revealed his concrete working out of a theoretical position in the circumstances of the Russian reality. In them he makes a direct reference to his latest studies, especially Morgan's **Ancient Society**.

First, he dug into why the commune still existed in Russia while it had disappeared throughout Western Europe. He wrote of "a unique combination of circumstances," and then leaped to the following: *It exists at the same time as capitalist production which enables it to take advantage of all the positive achievements of the latter without passing through all its dreadful vicissitudes.*

He searched to find what happened to the archaic commune, but noted the history of the decline of "primitive" communities still remained to be written. And he warned: *One should be on one's guard when reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois historians.*

Then followed the key sentence: "Everything depends upon the historical background in which it finds itself ..." stressing first that the historical environment cannot be separated from "the simultaneous existence of Western production ... the world market." He continued with other factors that need to be taken into account from the inherent "dualism" of communal property and private appropriation, to the actual physical configuration of the land.

At this point, Marx pinpointed the human forces for revolutionary change: *All that needs to be done is to replace the volost, a government institution, by an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves ...*

Marx also pointed to all the pressures put on the commune: "Weakened by the state's fiscal extortion, the commune had become an easy target for exploitation by traders, landowners and money-lenders." Marx concluded that, "destructive influences will lead inevitably to destruction of the village commune, unless it is crushed by a powerful counteraction."

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3. See especially Lenin's **The Development of Capitalism in Russia** (Vol. 3, **Collected Works**) and Dunayevskaya's **Marxism and Freedom** (Chaps. 8 and 13).
4. See Lawrence Krader's transcription and fine introduction to **The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx**.

What was that powerful counteraction? It is here that Marx introduces his last word. When all these factors are taken into account, the key to the future rests on revolution:

In order to save the Russian commune there must be a Russian Revolution . . . If the revolution takes place at the right time, if it concentrates all its forces to ensure the free development of the village commune, the latter will soon emerge as the regenerative forces in Russian society and as something superior to those countries which are still enslaved by the capitalist regime.

All of the above was from Marx's rich first draft of his letter to Zasulich. The second and third drafts inform Marx's discussion still further.

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LET US TRACE MARX'S development on the relation of developed and underdeveloped lands: In his reply to Mikhailovsky he had sharply taken issue with any interpretation of his historical tendency of capitalist accumulation which would situate itself outside the historical circumstances of its creation. Furthermore, he had opened the possibility of Russia taking a different path of development, although he warned that the path it had already taken was leading in the direction Western Europe had taken.

In his drafts to Vera Zasulich he investigated the Russian land commune at the time of the simultaneous existence of Western production and against the background of the earlier archaic commune. Marx had pointed to the dualism in the primitive communities and warned that dualism was the ground upon which the Russian commune was being attacked. At the same time he pointed to the need for a powerful counteraction, concluding, "to save the Russian commune there must be a Russian Revolution."

In the third work on the subject — the Preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, January 21, 1882 — Marx proceeded to tie the "peasant East" to the "proletarian West" in an unprecedented revolutionary linking. The question he had been grappling with for the better part of a decade was posed once more:

Can the Russian obshchina, though greatly undermined, yet a form of the primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of Communist common ownership? Or, on the contrary, must it first pass through the same process of dissolution such as constitutes the historical evolution of the West?

And the answer that comes forth is not only revolution, but permanent revolution; not only revolution in the peasant East, but that revolution as a spark for revolution in the proletarian West, which can in turn re-enforce the East's revolution:

The only answer to that possible to-day is this: if the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.

The vicissitudes of Russia since then are, of course, well known. What is not well known, and in fact, has been studiously ignored, is precisely the *way* Marx worked through the question of underdeveloped and developed lands.

The particulars of the Russian peasant commune have been obliterated both by capitalism's encroachment into Russia prior to 1917, and Stalin's forced collectivization of the 1930s. But Marx's methodology is still alive. And so is the dialectical method which enabled him to see such phenomenal new pathways to social revolution, not in isolation from the realities of capitalism, but by finding the revolutionary forces within capitalism's developed lands.

In returning to today the question is not so much to search for where there is a particular social organization on the land in one part of the world or another which is still surviving capitalism's encroachments. Where such forms exist, it is likely that capitalism has not yet found a way to fully exploit those regions. Instead, what remains as alive in our day as in Marx's — indeed, what compelled Marx to study any particular social organization of his day — are the human forces which challenge capitalism's drive for accumulation, whether primitive or "advanced."

Whether the indigenous social forms still existing in such dispersed places as Namibia's communal relations and Guatemala's Indian peasant communities can form the basis for new human beginnings in each land is an open question. But what makes both places so alive for us today is that in Namibia, in Guatemala, there are peasant masses who are fighting to be rid of capitalism's direct encroachments — its brutal slaughter of men, women and children; its destruction of the land. But their fight cannot be in isolation. Can it not be a signal for the rest of us to make the revolution continuous, to make real what Marx had called "revolution in permanence?" Only such simultaneous working out of complementary new pathways for social revolution can crack the capitalist framework both in thought, as Marx had done, hand in hand with doing it in reality, which is the task for this generation to accomplish.