

Re-Read Marx's Two Letters About the Development Path of Russia in His Later Years

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Abstract

Marx's two letters on the path of Russian social development in his later years clearly reflected Marx's vision for the development path of Eastern society. Through a careful analysis of the texts of the two letters, it can be found that Marx believed that Russian society should not repeat the old way of Western Europe, which stripped peasants from the land and developed capitalist cities and industries. Instead, Russia should preserve the land ownership foundation of rural communes, feed agriculture with industry, import advanced technology and productivity from Europe, and transition to communism without going through the Caudine Forks of capitalism. Marx's conception of Russia's development path has a theoretical enlightening significance for our understanding of the Marxist social development model. This assumption provides a new enlightenment for the study of the regularity problem of social history and has a methodological guiding significance for the development of the Chinese model.

Keywords: Marx, Russia's development path, the theory of oriental society

1. Introduction

As we all know, the focus of Marx's theoretical research is on the critique of political economy, while the critique of political economy focuses on the contradictions of capitalist economic movements. Marx hoped to find a realistic way for capitalism to be replaced by communism. But let us not forget that, in Marx's view, the basic feature of the capitalist economic formation is globalization, which operates on the world market. Therefore, Marx necessarily looked at Eastern society and European capitalist society as a whole. This naturally has a question: How did Marx view the path of social development in the East?

In fact, in his later years, Marx began to study in this field, although he left the world without leaving a mature manuscript. In this regard, the most noteworthy are Marx's two letters on Russian society: "Letter to the Editorial Office of the Journal of the 'Motherland Chronicle'" and "Letter to Vera Zasulich". The socio-historical environment in Russia is obviously different from that of Western Europe. Russia is geographically close to Western Europe, but it is a more typical Eastern country. Marx's vision of the development path of Russia reflected how he regarded the development path of Eastern societies. These two letters clearly showed Marx's thinking on the development path of Russian society: Russian society should not repeat the old path of Western Europe, stripping farmers from the land and developing capitalist cities and industries. Instead, Russia should preserve the land ownership foundation of rural communes, introduce advanced European technology and productivity, and transition to communism without going through the Caudine Forks of the capitalist system.

China is a large agricultural country, and rural areas and agriculture are the foundation of our society. With the process of reform and opening up, industrialization, urbanization and marketization seem to have become an inevitable trend. Since the late 1990s, real estate development has blossomed all over China. China's urban

construction has grown rapidly, and at the same time, farmers have been forced to leave the land on which they have relied on for generations to survive. The forced demolition and occupation of land has triggered a series of social conflicts and tragedies. The indiscriminate exploitation and use of land is about to break through the red line of preserving cultivated land stipulated by the state. From a certain point of view, this situation bears some resemblance (certainly not equivalent) to the circulation of land in England during the enclosure movement and the fate of the lands of the Russian rural communes discussed by Marx in the above-mentioned correspondence.

This leads us to think: In Marx's view, what is the best way for the development of Russian society? How did he deal with the relationship between the land system of Russian rural communes and the advanced achievements of European capitalism? As a large agricultural country, is China somewhat similar to Russia that Marx faced at that time? If there are similarities, we might as well imagine: according to Marx's reasoning method and due logic, what kind of model and path is the best choice for China's transformation from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization?

2. The Social Context Addressed by Marx's Two Letters

Before answering the above question, let's look at the background in which Marx wrote these two letters. The immediate question for Marx was where Russia would go in the 19th century. At that time, the economy of Western Europe was in the forefront of the world, and a radiant circle centered in Western Europe was established, which also had a certain impact on Russia. Russia carried out reforms in 1861 and tended to move in the direction of capitalism. But at the same time, the internal contradictions in Russia are also very sharp, and people have discussed and explored the future development path of Russia. Marx's analysis of the way of Russian social development undoubtedly fully respected a basic premise, that is, the special social and historical background of Russia, especially its social basis and revolutionary background.

The special social foundation of Russia lies in its rural communes, which still widespread and serve as the economic and political foundation. The fate of the rural commune became the source of controversy in the Russian intellectual circle. It also became the starting point of Marx's analysis of Russia's development path. The Russian Commune had a natural element of democracy, fairness and cooperation, which was considered by the populists to have the rudiments of a socialist system. The existence of rural communes makes Russia have a certain difference from Western Europe in the oriental mode of production. Although the social basis of Russia—rural communes still exist. However, Russia has been deeply influenced by Western Europe, and its original conditions have been constantly destroyed. The reform of serfdom did not emancipate the serfs but aggravated their oppression. Farmers “can neither die nor live”. As a result, the Russian proletariat continued to increase, and the rural communes were also constantly destroyed. With the expansion of class contradictions, the Russian revolution is constantly brewing, prompting Russia to join the world historical revolution, and even become a revolutionary vanguard. The Russian Turkish War broke out in 1877 at the moment of continuous capitalist crisis that began in 1873. Marx pointed out that this crisis is a new turning point in European history. Russia has long been at the door of change, and all the necessary factors for this have matured. All strata of Russian society are now in a state of economic, moral and intellectual disintegration. This time, the revolution will begin in the East, which has always been a safe fort and reserve force for counter revolution (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 1972). He had high hopes for the internal revolution within Russia, even that it would lead to the outbreak of revolution throughout Europe.

In a word, the rural communes still exist in Russia as the social basis, which is the starting point of Marx's analysis of Russia's development path. The upsurge of the Russian revolutionary situation played a role in promoting the European revolution, and its world-historical significance was the direct motivation for Marx to analyze and study the development of Russian society.

3. Russia Could Not Copy the Western European Model

When Marx conceived the development path of Russia, he first emphasized that the development model of Western Europe could not be copied. In the first volume of *Capital*, he described the process of primitive accumulation of capital in Britain. A typical example is the “enclosure movement”. By violently forcing countless peasants to leave the land, the capitalists obtained a large number of means of production and completed the primitive accumulation of capital. Let's call this process the Western European development model. This view was misunderstood by the Russian populist N. K. Mihaylovsky. He believed that the emergence and development of the capitalist mode of production were not caused by the separation of the peasants from the land and the means of production. The situation in Russia is different from that in Western Europe. And the Western European development model summarized by Marx does not apply to Russia. He agreed that “Russia can achieve all the fruits of the capitalist system while developing its unique historical conditions, without suffering from the capitalist system” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001). Vera Zasulich also consulted Marx about the fate of the Russian “rural communes” under the circumstances in his letter. As well as whether the various stages of capitalist development that Marx mentioned should be

experienced and faced by all nation states. In reply to these misinterpretations of Capital, Marx always stressed the process used to analyze and demonstrate the development model of Western Europe cannot be mechanically copied to Russia.

In his "Letter to the Editorial Office of the Journal of the 'Motherland Chronicle'", Marx already said the basis for the development of the capitalist mode of production was based on the plunder of the peasants. Only Britain has completely completed this process of exploitation. The rest of the nation-states of Western Europe are in the present state without completing this process of exploitation, much less the primitive accumulation of capital. Mihaylovsky only had a one-sided understanding of Marx's theory. If Mihaylovsky "must thoroughly turn my historical overview of the origins of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of the general path of development, all nations, regardless of their historical circumstances, are destined to follow this path." "In doing so, he will give me too much honor, but also too much insult." (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) Mihaylovsky believed that the process of capitalist development in Western Europe, as Marx said, was an inevitable process that every country had to go through. Marx vehemently denied this view of his. It was in this letter that Marx clearly expressed his thoughts. When analyzing the development of Russia, he could not use the model and theoretical method of analyzing Western Europe.

In the Third Draft, this view was once again demonstrated and deepened. Marx pointed out that "in this Western movement, the problem is to change one form of private property into another. On the contrary, among the Russian peasants, it was to turn their public ownership into private ownership. Whether people acknowledge or deny the inevitability of this transformation, and make arguments for or against it, has nothing to do with my analysis of the origins of the capitalist system." (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) Here Marx argues that the liberal bourgeoisie in Russia advocates the abolition of rural communal ownership and puts forward various reasons why it must be abolished. Populists, on the other hand, advocated the preservation of rural communal ownership, using rural communes as a starting point to move Russia towards an advanced form of communism. Neither of these ideas has anything to do with Marx's analysis and views on the origins of the capitalist system. Because Russia's national situation is different from that of the West, the theory used to argue the origin of Western capitalism cannot be used to explain the Russian problem. In the Four Drafts and the Official Reply, two short manuscripts, Marx still insisted on emphasizing the above views. He argues that his analysis in Capital "does not offer anything that affirms the vitality of the Russian rural communes, nor does it provide anything that denies the vitality of the rural communes" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001). The theory of primitive accumulation of capital is to demonstrate the origin of western capitalism. It has nothing to do with the vitality of Russian rural communes and whether Russia can take rural communes as the starting point to move towards the communist system. It cannot be used to explain the Russian problem.

4. Emphasizing the Public Ownership Factor of Russian Rural Commune

When Marx examined the reality of Russia and explored the way of social development in Russia, he regarded the rural commune as the fulcrum of the new birth of Russian society. He valued the great vitality of the Russian rural communes. Russia "is the only country in Europe that preserved rural communes on a national scale" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001). The source of the strong vitality of rural communes is the duality factor inherent in communes. Marx repeatedly analyzed how the future of the Russian Commune would develop, and whether it could take a different path from the course of development in Western Europe. The most important internal determinant is whether the public ownership factor of the rural commune can prevail over the private ownership factor. Marx was quite sure of the significance of the factors of public ownership contained in the rural communes for Russia to embark on a development path different from that of Western Europe.

In the First Draft, Marx affirmed the role of the factor of public ownership in stabilizing the foundation of the commune. "Public ownership and various social relations caused by public ownership make the foundation of the commune stable." (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) And the reality in Russia is that the peasants have begun a model of collective labor on land that has not been distributed. In Marx's view, communal ownership of land in communes formed the basis of collective production and collective possession. Moreover, the flat terrain of the Russian land is conducive to large-scale joint cultivation using machines. Farmers are also accustomed to labor cooperation, which facilitates the transition from individual to collective farming. So, in this sense, the rural commune is the fulcrum of the new life of Russian society. Engels also said that rural communes and labor unions "contain some kind of germ that can be developed under certain conditions to save Russia without having to go through the suffering of the capitalist system" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 1974). In this case, it is possible for Russia to cross the capitalist Caudine Forks.

In the Third Draft, Marx once again affirmed that "throughout Europe, it is the only form of organization that dominates rural life in a huge empire. Public ownership of land endows it with the natural basis of collective possession, while its historical environment (capitalist production and it coexist). It is also given the ready-made material conditions to realize large-scale organized cooperative labor. Therefore, it can absorb all the positive

achievements of the capitalist system without passing through the Caudine Forks of the capitalist system.” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) Marx repeatedly affirmed the factor of public ownership in rural communes. On the European continent, only the Russian rural communes were able to maintain a dominant organizational form in a large country. Marx analyzed the natural advantages of Russia’s transition to communism without passing through the “Caudine Valley”. The rural commune contains a traditional Russian model of cooperative labor, collective ownership factors. “If it is guided to a normal state in the present form in advance, it can become the starting point of the kind of economic system directly that modern society tends to, and can gain new life without committing suicide.” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) So we can see Marx’s great affirmation of Russia and the factor of public ownership.

5. Compensating Agriculture by Industry and Feeding Rural Commune Back

As mentioned above, Marx’s vision of the future development of the Russian rural communes was, first of all, to repeatedly emphasize that the Western European model of development could not be used to explain the Russian question. And that the analysis of the Russian problem should examine the reality of Russia. When he explored the way of Russian social development based on the actual situation in Russia, he regarded the Russian Commune as the fulcrum of Russia’s new birth. But whether this point can play a role depends on whether the commune’s own public factors can prevail over private factors. The result of the game of public and private factors within the Russian commune is not only the problem of the commune itself, but also the influence of the domestic environment. Marx proposed that the funds exploited from the peasants should not be used to develop capitalism, but to feed back to the rural communes. Or the sectors of the capitalist system, developed by squeezing the peasants, were able to feed back to the commune. In this way, the rural communes will develop tremendously, and Russia will usher in a new life. As he said in the First Draft: “If the huge national debt, which was paid mainly by the peasants, and other huge sums of money provided through the state (which still had to be paid by the peasants) to those ‘new pillars of society’ that had been transformed into capitalists, were used for the further development of the rural communes... The commune was a rebirth factor in Russian society and a factor superior to other countries still under the enslavement of the capitalist system.” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001)

However, in Russia at that time, this part of the capital was in the hands of the “new pillars of society”, that is, emerging capitalists, large landowners, etc. This creates obstacles to the development of rural communes. Marx also said in the First Draft that Russian society was obliged to pay the initial founding costs. Because “it has long depended on the rural communes for its survival, and it must also be found in rural communes for its new elements” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001). In Marx’s vision, the state should support and pay for the transformation of rural communes. Because Russian society has long relied on sucking the blood of the communes to survive, even the funds used to pay for it were taken away from the communes and peasants. When the commune has the conditions to evolve to a higher level, it is precisely when the state needs to feed back the commune, which the state should and can do.

In reality, the rural communes were constantly under oppression, and brutal political and economic dispossession brought them to a desperate situation. “The state has cultivated at the expense of the peasants are such sectors of the Western capitalist system, which do not exert the agricultural productive capacity in the slightest, but especially help the middlemen who are not engaged in production to plunder the agricultural products more easily and quickly. In this way, the state helped the neo-capitalist parasites that sucked the already dried blood of the rural communes to get rich.” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) In short, all the technical and economic means that most promoted and accelerated the exploitation of the peasantry (the greatest productive force in Russia) and the enrichment of the “new pillars of society” were prematurely developed with the promotion of the state. New sectors that developed at the expense of farmers included railways, joint-stock companies, banks, and exchanges. These sectors are easy to combine with capitalist factors. Instead of taking advantage of their emerging sectors to feed agriculture, they intensified their oppression of the commune. The development of rural communes in Russia would have come to its most difficult point. These newly capitalist branches of production exploited him even more. Therefore, the biggest obstacle to the development of rural communes is not only the authoritarian empire, but also the emerging capitalists.

6. Absorb the Positive Achievements of Capitalism

When exploring the future prospects of the Russian Commune, Marx noted that the development of the Commune was influenced not only by the domestic environment mentioned above, but also by the international environment. An important backdrop for Russia is that it has joined the world market. This made it possible for the Russian rural communes to absorb the positive fruits of capitalism, and it was possible that the communes would not fall apart.

In the 70s and 80s of the 19th century, the Western capitalist mode of production and the world market were fully developed. The invention and application of electric energy, the internal combustion engine, the emergence

of new chemical industries, and the rapid development of capitalist industry. At the same time, the concentration and monopoly of capital also appeared. First, concentration and monopolies were formed in the industrial and transportation sectors. Concentration and monopoly also emerged in the banking sector. After the establishment of monopolies in various countries, given the relatively small domestic market, the needs of capitalists to pursue high profits could not be satisfied. Therefore, on the one hand, the capitalists intensified the exploitation of their own working people, and on the other hand, they exported the “surplus” capital to economically backward countries, especially colonies and semi-colonies, in order to ensure high profits. In this way, the world market was formed and developed. And Russia is already involved in the chain of the world market. Russian production is linked to the world market. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 led to the rapid development of capitalism. By the 80s of the 19th century, Russia basically completed the industrial revolution. As a link in the chain of the world market, Russia can obtain advanced Western theoretical and technological achievements through the world market. Marx had a profound understanding of this.

In the Second Draft, Marx had the idea that if Russia did not have contact with the world, he would like to rely on its own internal forces to experience the development model of Western Europe. Then the rural communes will surely continue to die out with the Russian transformation. At that time, Russia was the only country that could preserve the ownership of rural communes. And Russia is precisely in the chain of large-scale industrial production. Compared with Western countries, Russia has a certain latecomer advantage. If it can absorb some of the positive results of capitalism, then Russia can transform the shortcomings of the commune and consolidate the development of the commune. The Russian Commune did not have to commit suicide to gain new life. This would be extremely helpful for Russia to move towards a new system.

Marx's views are constantly evolving. This view was raised in the First Draft, but it is still not clear enough. In the first draft, it was only emphasized that coexistence with Western capitalist production allowed the Russian rural communes to obtain ready-made material conditions. By the time of the Second Draft, it was clearly stated that Russia “lived in a modern historical environment, coexisted with a higher culture, and was linked to the world market dominated by capitalist production.” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2001) Marx's exposition in the Second Draft is clearer and more profound. Through his multifaceted examination of Russia's international environment, he believed that it was possible for Russia to achieve a transition to socialism. As long as Russia can absorb the positive results of the capitalist mode of production and transform the ancient forms of the rural communes, bringing out the aspect of public ownership, rather than destroying it.

7. Conclusion

Carefully studying the texts of Marx's two letters on Russia's development path, combined with the background of East-West interaction in the context of world history, we can summarize Marx's ideas on the Russian development model. Marx believed that Russian society should not repeat the old path of Western Europe and should preserve the basis of public ownership of land in rural communes. And the state should feed the rural communes with subsidizing agriculture with work and introduce advanced European technology and productivity. The factors of public ownership in rural communes have been strengthened and their own advantages have been brought into play. On this basis, it is possible for Russia to transition to communism without passing through the Caudine Valley of the capitalist system. From Marx's view of the best model of Russian social development, we can get the following inspiration.

First of all, the assumption of Marx's Russian development path can draw some inspiration for the overall study of Marx's thought, the study of the history of the development of Marxism, and the study of Marxism's model of social development. We should not use the existing model to study the problems of Eastern and Western societies, homogenize Eastern and Western societies, and ignore the characteristics of Eastern societies themselves; Or completely severing the East and the West, without seeing the wholeness between the two; Or it is abstract and empty to use unity and diversity, or universality and particularity, to explain the seemingly different development models of the East and the West. None of these three broader views are desirable. We should examine Eastern societies in the context of the general crisis of capital as capitalism extends globally. In this economic structure, European capitalism is at the core, radiating its influence on other countries and connecting the whole world. Eastern countries such as Russia also reacted differently to the impact of capitalism. To understand Marx's theory of Eastern society, we should think in this way.

Second, we can gain new enlightenment on the question of how Marx understood the regularity of social history. Marx clearly put forward the “two Nevers” in the preface to the Critique of Political Economy in January 1859, and in the preface to Capital in 1867, he also clearly stated that the development of social and economic formations is a natural historical process, which can shorten but not cancel a certain stage of social and historical development. At this time, Marx was limited by the socio-historical environment, did not know more about the history outside Western Europe, and was also influenced by evolutionary ideas. He regarded the laws summarized from the typical historical development process of Western Europe as the universal laws of the

development of all human society. Therefore, at this time, Marx could not completely transcend the deterministic model of single-line development of social history. In Marx's later years, in these two letters, Marx expounded his leapfrogging ideas on the path of Russian social development. That is, Russia can meet certain conditions and not pass through the Caudine Valley of the capitalist system. This leapfrog theory has new inspiration for the theory of social development.

Finally, the Russian social development model proposed by Marx has methodological guiding significance for the development of the Chinese model. Marx's Russian development model was interpenetrating, and Russia and Western Europe were interpenetrating. The path of development of Russian society in Marx's writing is neither a reproduction of the European model, nor is Russia developed in isolation on its own. Instead, it develops under the influence of the interaction between the two currents at home and abroad. Fairbank referred to the "shock-response" model when discussing China's social development. European capitalism had an impact on modern China, and China reacted on its own basis and in its own way. These two forces played and finally merged, creating modern Chinese society. Marx presented a similar line of thought in his way, and the impact of European capitalism in Russia was also a process of learning from rural communes. This mode of interpretation has methodological guiding significance for our discussion of China's future development. In the process of opening up to the outside world, China and other countries have formed an interactive whole. China must retain and adhere to its own socialist foundation, persist in developing collectivized management, and increase efforts to supplement agriculture with work. It should also absorb the favorable experience and lessons of developed countries, minimize the problems brought about by development, give full play to the advantages of being a latecomer, and develop the Chinese model.

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