

# Karl Marx

selected writings

Edited by

David McLellan

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## Letter to Vera Sassoulitch

In February 1881 a Russian Populist exile in Geneva, Vera Sassoulitch, wrote to Marx saying that his authority was being claimed in Russia for the view that the traditional peasant commune was doomed to disappear, and asking him to clarify his position. Marx drafted three separate lengthy answers, excerpted below, before finally sending a terse and ambivalent reply.

### Letter

Dear Citizeness,

A nervous disease that I have been suffering from periodically for the last ten years has prevented me from replying earlier to your letter of 16 February. To my regret I am unable to give you a succinct answer, prepared for publication, to the question which you have graciously submitted to me. Months have passed since I promised to write something on the same subject to the St. Petersburg Committee. However I hope a few lines will suffice to remove all doubt in your mind about the misunderstanding concerning my so-called theory.

In analysing the genesis of capitalist production I say:

‘The foundation of the capitalist system is therefore the utmost separation of the producer from the means of production . . . The basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the agricultural producer. This has been accomplished in radical fashion only in England . . . But all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same movement.’ (*Capital*, French ed., p. 315.)

Hence the ‘historical inevitability’ of this movement is expressly limited to the countries of Western Europe. The reason for this limitation is indicated in the following passage of Chapter XXXII:

‘Self-earned private property . . . will be supplanted by capitalistic private property, which rests on the exploitation of the labour of others, on wages-labour.’ (Ibid., p. 341.)

In this western movement the point in question therefore is the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property. With the Russian peasants one would on the contrary have to transform their common property into private property.

Thus the analysis given in *Capital* assigns no reasons for or against the vitality of the rural community, but the special research into this subject which I conducted, the materials for which I obtained from original sources, has convinced me that this community is the mainspring of Russia's social regeneration, but in order that it might function as such one would first have to eliminate the deleterious influences which assail it from every quarter and then to ensure the conditions normal for spontaneous development.

I have the honour, dear citizeness, to be wholly devoted.

Yours,  
Karl Marx

## From the Drafts

... If capitalist production is to establish its reign in Russia, the large majority of the peasants, that is of the Russian people, must become wage-earners and thus have been expropriated by the previous abolition of its communist property. But in every instance, the western precedent would prove nothing at all about the 'historical inevitability' of this process.

In this western movement, what is at issue, therefore, is the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property. With the Russian peasants, on the contrary, their common property would have to be transformed into private property. Whether one affirms or denies the inevitability of that transformation, the reasons for and the reasons against have nothing to do with my analysis of the genesis of the capitalist regime. The most that one could infer would be that, given the actual state of the large majority of Russian peasants, the act of their conversion into small-scale owners would only be the prologue to their rapid expropriation.

If, at the moment of emancipation the rural communes had first of all been placed in conditions of normal prosperity; if, then, the huge public debt raised for the most part at the expense of the peasantry—together with the other enormous sums furnished by the intermediary of the state (and always at the expense of the peasantry) to the 'new pillars of society' transformed into capitalists—if all these expenditures had been used for the further development of the rural commune; then no one today would dream of the 'historical inevitability' of the annihilation of the commune, and everyone would recognize in it the element of the regeneration of Russian society and an element of superiority over the countries still enslaved by the capitalist regime.

The Russian 'Marxists' of whom you speak are quite unknown to me. The Russians with whom I have personal contact entertain, as far as I know, views that are quite the contrary.

The most serious argument that has been put against the Russian commune

amounts to this: return to the origins of western societies and you will find everywhere common ownership of land; with social progress this disappeared everywhere to give rise to private property; therefore it cannot escape the same destiny in Russia alone . . .

Theoretically speaking the Russian ‘rural commune’ can keep its land—by developing its basis which is the common ownership of land and by eliminating the principle of private property which is also implicit in it. It can become a direct starting-point for the economic system towards which modern society is tending. It can acquire a new skin without beginning by its suicide. It can obtain the fruits with which capitalist production has enriched humanity without passing through the capitalist regime, a regime which, considered exclusively from the point of view of its possible duration, scarcely counts in the life of society. But we must come down from pure theory to Russian reality.

Russia is the only European country where the ‘agricultural commune’ has been maintained on a national scale until today. It is not the prey of a foreign conqueror, as in India. Nor is its life isolated from the modern world. From one aspect, its common property in land enables it directly and gradually to transform the system of individual plots into a collective agriculture that the Russian peasants already practise on the undivided prairies.

If the spokesmen of the ‘new pillars of society’ denied the theoretical possibility of the evolution of the modern rural commune that I have indicated, they would have to be asked whether Russia has been forced, like the west, to pass through a long period of the incubation of mechanical industry to arrive at machines, steam engines, railways, etc? They would have to be asked further how they have managed, at the drop of a hat, to introduce into their country all the mechanisms of exchange such as banks and joint stock companies whose elaboration cost centuries of elaboration to the West? . . .

From the historical point of view, a circumstance very favourable to the preservation of the ‘agricultural commune’ by continuing its further development is that it is not only the contemporary of western capitalist production and can thus obtain its fruits without enslaving itself to its *modus operandi*; the commune has also survived beyond the period when the capitalist system was still intact and, on the contrary, it now finds it both in western Europe and the United States struggling both with the mass of workers and with science and with the very productive forces it has engendered—in a word, in a crisis which will end with its elimination and a return by modern societies to a superior form of an ‘archaic’ type of property and collective production.

It is understood that the evolution of the commune would be gradual and the first step would be to put it in normal conditions on its actual basis, for the peasant is everywhere the enemy of any sudden change.

To expropriate the cultivators, it is not necessary to expel them from their lands as was done in England and elsewhere; nor is it necessary to abolish

common property by an *ukase*. Snatch from the peasants the product of their labour beyond a certain point and, despite your police force and your army, you will not succeed in chaining them to their fields. In the last stages of the Roman Empire, provincial decurions—not peasants but landed proprietors—fled their houses, abandoned their lands, and even sold themselves into slavery, and all only to get rid of property which was merely an official pretext for bringing pressure to bear on them without mercy or pity.

Since the so-called emancipation of the serfs, the Russian commune was placed by the state in abnormal economic conditions, and since that time the state has not ceased to heap on it all the social forces concentrated in its hands. Weakened by fiscal exactions, it became inert matter easily exploited by commerce, landed property, and usury. This external oppression let loose inside the commune itself the conflict of interests that was already present and rapidly developed the seeds of its decomposition. But that is not all. At the expense of the peasantry, the state has cultivated, in a hot-house, branches of the western capitalist system which, without in any way developing the productive bases of its agriculture, are precisely calculated to facilitate and precipitate the theft of its fruits by unproductive intermediaries. It has thus co-operated in the production of a new capitalist vermin sucking the blood of the ‘rural commune’ that was already so impoverished.

In a word, the state has given its assistance in precociously developing the technical and economic means most calculated to facilitate and precipitate the exploitation of the cultivator, that is, of the largest productive force in Russia, and to enrich the ‘new pillars of society’.

This concourse of destructive influences, unless broken by a powerful reaction, must naturally result in the death of the rural commune.

But the question arises: Why have all these interests (I include large industries placed under governmental tutelage) found advantages in the present state of the rural commune, why do they deliberately conspire to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? Precisely because they consider ‘this present state’ to be no longer tenable and that therefore the present method of exploiting it is no longer fitting. Already the poverty of the cultivator has spread to the earth which is becoming sterile. Good harvests are balanced by famines. The average of the ten last years revealed an agricultural production not only stagnant but also retrogressive. For the first time Russia must import cereals instead of exporting them. There is thus no more time to be lost. The issue must be decided.

Since so many diverse interests, and above all those of the ‘new social pillars’ erected under the benign empire of Alexander II, have made gains from the present state of the ‘rural commune’, why would they deliberately move to conspire at its death? Why do their spokesmen denounce the wounds inflicted on the commune as so many irrefutable proofs of its natural decline? Simply

because the economic facts, whose analysis would take me too far, have unveiled the mystery that the present state of the commune is no longer tenable and that through the necessity of things alone the present state of exploiting the popular masses will no longer be suitable. So something new is necessary and that something, insinuated under the most diverse forms, always amounts to this: abolish common property, allow the more or less well off minority of peasants to form a rural middle class, and transform the large majority into proletarians pure and simple.

On the one hand, the ‘rural commune’ is almost reduced to its last extremity, and on the other there is a powerful conspiracy to give it the *coup de grâce*. At the same time as the commune is being bled and tortured and its earth sterilized and pauperized, the literary lackeys of the ‘new pillars of society’ ironically describe the wounds inflicted on it as so many signs of its spontaneous and incontestable decrepitude, that it is dying a natural death, and that they are doing it a favour by shortening its agony. Here, there is no problem to be solved; there is quite simply an enemy to be beaten. It is thus no longer a theoretical problem. To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is necessary. Moreover, the Russian government and the ‘new pillars of society’ are doing their best to prepare the masses for such a catastrophe. If the revolution comes at an opportune moment, if it concentrates all its forces to ensure the free development of the rural commune, this commune will soon develop into an element that regenerates Russian society and guarantees superiority over countries enslaved by the capitalist regime. . . .

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### ORIGINAL

K. Marx, *Oeuvres*, ed. M. Rubel, Paris, 1968, Vol. 2, pp. 1557 ff.

### PRESENT TRANSLATION

*MESC*, pp. 339 f. The Drafts are translated by the present editor. Reproduced by kind permission of Lawrence & Wishart Ltd. See also K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, New York, 1992, p. 71.

### OTHER TRANSLATIONS

Selections in K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Russian Menace to Europe*, ed. P. Blackstock and B. Hoselitz, London, 1953. T. Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, New York, 1983, pp. 98 ff.

## COMMENTARIES

J. Bergman, *Vera Zasulich: A Biography*, Stanford, Calif., 1983.

P. Blackstock and B. Hoselitz, edition cited above.

P. Kain, *Marx and Modern Political Theory*, Lanham, Md., 1993, pp. 279 ff.

T. Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*, New York, 1983.

A. Walicki, *The Controversy over Capitalism*, Oxford, 1969.