

Karl Marx

[LETTER TO OTECHESTVENNIYE ZAPISKI]²²⁷Dear Sir,^a

The author^b of the article "Karl Marx Before the Tribunal of Mr. Zhukovsky" is obviously an intelligent man and, had he found a single passage in my account of "primitive accumulation" to support his conclusions, he would have quoted it. For want of such a passage he considers it necessary to seize hold of an annexe, a polemical sortie against a Russian "belletrist"^c printed in the appendix to the first German edition of *Capital*. What do I there reproach this writer for? The fact that he discovered "Russian" communism not in Russia but in the book by Haxthausen,^d the adviser to the Prussian Government, and that in his hands the Russian community serves only as an argument to prove that the old, rotten Europe must be regenerated by the victory of Pan-Slavism. My appreciation of this writer may be correct, it may be wrong, but in neither case could it provide the key to my views on the efforts "русскихъ людей найти для своего отечества путь развитія, отличный отъ того, которымъ шла и идетъ Западная Европа etc."^e

In the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*—which the author of the article about Mr. Zhukovsky knows,

^a M. Ye. Saltykov-Shchedrin.— *Ed.*

^b N. K. Mikhailovsky.— *Ed.*

^c A. I. Herzen.— *Ed.*

^d A. Haxthausen, *Studien über die innern Zustände, das Volksleben und insbesondere die ländlichen Einrichtungen Rußlands*.— *Ed.*

^e "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."— *Ed.*

because he quotes it—I speak of “a great Russian scholar and critic”^a with the high esteem which he deserves. In his noteworthy articles^b the latter dealt with the question whether Russia should start, as its liberal economists wish, by destroying the rural community in order to pass to a capitalist system or whether, on the contrary, it can acquire all the fruits of this system without suffering its torments, by developing its own historical conditions. He comes out in favour of the second solution. And my honourable critic would have been at least as justified in inferring from my esteem for this “great Russian scholar and critic” that I shared his views on this question as he is in concluding from my polemic against the “belletrist” and Pan-Slavist that I rejected them.

Be that as it may, as I do not like to leave anything to “guesswork”, I shall speak straight out. In order to reach an informed judgment of the economic development of contemporary Russia, I learned Russian and then spent several long years studying official publications and others with a bearing on this subject. I have arrived at this result: if Russia continues along the path it has followed since 1861, it will miss the finest chance that history has ever offered to a nation, only to undergo all the fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist system.^c

II

The chapter on primitive accumulation does not pretend to do more than trace the road by which in Western Europe the capitalist economic order emerged from the entrails of the feudal economic order. It thus describes the historical movement which by divorcing the producers from their means of production transforms them into wage-workers (proletarians in the modern sense of the word) and the owners of the means of production into capitalists. In this history, “every revolution which acts as a lever for the advancement of the capitalist class in its process of formation marks an epoch; above all that which, by stripping great masses of men of their traditional means of production and subsistence, suddenly hurls them on the labour market. But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the agricultural

^a N. G. Chernyshevsky.— *Ed.*

^b Н. Чернышевский, *Письма безъ адреса*, Цюрихъ, 1874.— *Ed.*

^c This paragraph is crossed out in Marx's manuscript.— *Ed.*

producer. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England ... but all the other countries of Western Europe are undergoing the same process etc." (*Capital*, French edition, p. 315). At the end of the chapter the historical tendency of capitalist 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, which actually rests already on a collective mode of production, can only be transformed into social property.

I do not give any proof at this point for the very good reason that this assertion itself is nothing but a summary recapitulation of long developments previously set out in the chapters on capitalist production.

Now, in what way was my critic^a able to apply this historical sketch to Russia? Only this: if Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation, on the model of the countries of Western Europe,—and in recent years it has gone to great pains to move in this direction—it will not succeed without having first transformed a large proportion of its peasants into proletarians; and after that, once it has been placed in the bosom of the capitalist system, it will be subjected to its pitiless laws, like other profane peoples. That is all! But this is too little for my critic. It is absolutely necessary for him to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer. But I beg his pardon. This does me too much honour, and yet puts me to shame at the same time. Let us take an example. In various places in *Capital* I allude to the destiny of the plebeians of Ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants cultivating their own plots of land on their own account. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement which cut them off from their means of production and subsistence involved not only the formation of large landed property but also the formation of large money capital. Thus, one fine morning, there

^a N. K. Mikhailovsky.—Ed.

were on the one hand free men stripped of everything except their labour power, and on the other, in order to exploit this labour, the owners of all the acquired wealth. What happened? The Roman proletarians became not wage labourers but an idle "MOB", more abject than the former "POOR WHITES"²²⁸ of the southern states of America; and alongside them there developed a mode of production that was not capitalist but based on slavery. Thus events strikingly analogous, but occurring in different historical milieux, led to quite disparate results. By studying each of these evolutions on its own, and then comparing them, one will easily discover the key to the phenomenon, but it will never be arrived at by employing the all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical.

Written presumably in November 1877

First published in *Vestnik Narodnoi Voli*,
No. 5, Geneva, 1886

Printed according to the manuscript

Translated from the French

to July 8, 1859). On July 11, the French and Austrian emperors concluded a separate preliminary peace in Villafranca. p. 189

225 See Note 191. p. 189

226 See Note 84. p. 193

227 Marx wrote this letter to the *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* editorial board probably in November 1877, soon after the magazine had printed, in October 1877, an article by the ideologist of Russian Narodism (populism) Nikolai Mikhailovsky, "Karl Marx Before the Tribunal of Mr. Zhukovsky". Mikhailovsky's article was a reply to the review of Volume One of Marx's *Capital* written by the Russian bourgeois economist Yuly Zhukovsky, "Karl Marx and His Book on Capital", and printed by *Vestnik Yevropy*, No. IX, 1877.

Marx's manuscript has come down to us in the form of a rough draft and contains many corrections and deletions. Two versions of the second part of the letter are extant, a concise and a longer one. With slight stylistic changes, the concise version repeats the more detailed one. The letter had not been posted and was found by Engels among Marx's papers after his death. Engels considered it necessary to make copies of the manuscript and enclosed one of them in his letter to Vera Zasulich in Geneva of March 6, 1884 (see present edition, Vol. 47). Marx's letter was first published in Russian in 1886 in *Vestnik Narodnoi Voli*, No. 5, in Geneva, and in German in the *New-Yorker Volkszeitung*, No. 5, May 3, 1887 and in the *Sozialdemokrat*, No. 23, June 3, 1887 in Zurich.

The letter was published in English for the first time in: K. Marx, "The Economic Development of Russia", *The Plebs*, No. 5, May 1920, pp. 70-72.

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228 The term *poor whites* was applied in the ante-bellum South to those non-slaveholders who fell in the social class below yeomen farmers, artisans and sturdy frontiersmen. As originally used, the term carried a stigma beyond poverty and was applied only to a small group, usually squatters on the poorest lands. p. 201

229 This article, published unsigned in *La Plebe*, No. 3, January 22, 1878 (in the "Da Londra" section), had a short editorial preface: "From our vast and important correspondence from London we cite passages which are relevant to our present-day political and social situation."

The article was published in English for the first time, abridged, in: K. Marx, F. Engels, *On the United States*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979.

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230 Engels borrowed the data pertaining to the development of the socialist press in these countries mostly from the *Vorwärts*, No. 152, December 30, 1877, and No. 3, January 9, 1878. p. 203

231 *Kathedersozialisten* (armchair or academic socialists)—representatives of a trend in bourgeois socialism that emerged in Germany in the 1860s-70s. In 1873 its champions (Gustav Schmoller, Adolph Wagner and Lujo Brentano) set up the society *Verein für Sozialpolitik* which had its own printed organ, *Schriften des Vereins für Sozialpolitik*. Katheder-Socialists supported Bismarck's social policy, advocated class harmony and opposed the workers' revolutionary action. The term was used by a liberal, one Heinrich Bernhard Oppenheim, in the polemic with Adolph Wagner (see *National-Zeitung*, No. 573, December 7, 1871).

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