Appendix Four

Marx’s Shift of Attention Towards Agrarian Communities

There is good reason to suggest that Marx’s shift of attention towards pre-capitalist societies is but a particular case of a more general phenomenon affecting the European intellectual scene in the final third of the nineteenth century. The process of capitalism’s expansion into the colonial world and the backward regions of southern and south-eastern Europe sparked the breakdown of whole societies and the emergence of new problems that needed to be addressed. It is no coincidence that the exhumation of Haxthausen via Maurer and the discovery that the rural community based on collective land-possession was the primitive form of society from Ireland to India – as Engels made clear in his corrective note to the 1888 English edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* – took place at the same time as Russia ‘began to move’ and great struggles broke out in various political forms across large areas of rural Europe and Asia. Marx and Engels drew significantly on the scientific investigations of the time, not only to verify their own theory of society against a new backdrop, but also to consider the political fruitfulness of such investigations. In our understanding, and particularly if we look at Marx’s case, his growing interest in the theory and history of the rural commune implied an opening towards subaltern peoples, one with unforeseeable effects on Marxist theory itself, at least at the time. From this perspective, the fact that the Marxism of the Second International – with, to some degree, the exception of the Austro-Marxist current and ‘Russian’ Marxism – chose to
dodge this question, of such fundamental importance to Marx, entailed malign consequences for the study of problems as significant as the peasant-question and the national and colonial question, thus gravely affecting even the Marxist theory of society and the state. The fact that Marx’s studies concerned problematics as distinct as those of Morgan – focused on kinship – and those of Kovalevsky – essentially interested in analysing the nature of the primitive community and its survivals in modern societies – allowed, via Engels’s recasting of his points on Morgan, for what was of only incidental importance in Marx to be misconstrued as the essentials of his work. Of his studies from the 1870s and early 1880s, the Marxist tradition only assimilated those devoted to Morgan, burying those concerning Kovalevsky and the rural community. Engels’s interpretation of Morgan – based on Marx’s notebooks and put into print with his *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* – meant the impoverishment of studies on the history and theory of society by the socialists and Marxists of the second and Third Internationals, as has been highlighted in the interesting contribution of Lawrence Krader.¹

To return to the point raised at the beginning of this appendix, we can say that Marx’s 1870s change of perspective was motivated by the need to resolve theoretical problems that arose in the process of finishing the later volumes of *Capital*, but also for more narrowly political reasons: the social conditions of Russia and the problems this entailed for the triumph of a revolution now considered imminent. Given Marx’s breadth of focus and analytical capacity, his reading of Maurer, Kovalevsky, Morgan, Tylor, Lubbock, Phear, Maine and of Russian economists and sociologists allowed him to take on board the science of the time, finding within it the elements necessary to fully develop his theoretical critique. In this same period, moreover, he took meticulous notes on Bakunin’s *Statism and Anarchy*, with reference to the question of the state. For Marx, the emancipation of the serfs indicated that the cements of Tsarist autocracy were beginning to break apart, a disaggregation that was inevitably bound to intensify. But the spread of peasant-rebellions and the growth of the Narodnik movement, pushing Russia to the edge of its own ‘1789’, posed with unusual force a problem that Russian intellectuals had long since been confronting, thus bringing about the two great – and complementary – ideological and political movements of Westernism and Slavophilism. Westernisers and Slavophiles discussed the ultimate destiny of their country with a romantic passion typical of Russian debates. Would it be condemned to reproducing the barbaric forms of bourgeois exploitation characteristic of post-1848 Europe, or would awareness of the social ills of the advanced countries allow the backward countries to avoid repeating