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to Karl & Thun with
but kept by [signature]

THE PREPARATORY PERIOD OF THE REVOLUTIONARY
PARTY: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON FRANCO VENTURIS'
*ROOTS OF REVOLUTION**

THE following observations are not intended to give a full appreciation of a book, the masterly and comprehensive character of which has been recognised by ~~all the~~ critics; they are solely intended to discuss the relevance of the movements of the Russian socialist *intelligentsia* in the 1860s and 1870s to the ancestry of the modern communist movement.

My very posing of this question may provoke objections, if not from Professor Venturi himself, at least from Sir Isaiah Berlin: in the opening passages of his Introduction he rejects critics 'who look on all history through the eyes of the victors, and for whom accounts of movements that failed, of martyrs and minorities, seem without interest as such'. Surely we should not look at past stages in the progress of social thought through the eyes of the 'victors'—if for no other reason than because the 'victors', in that case the Russian Social Democrats, in order to continue their predecessors' work on a new stage had to put emphasis on their own contribution rather than on what they had inherited. The Stalinist historians overdid the necessary distinction in their Narodnik inheritance, perhaps because their own ideas on the unlimited power of well-organised élites, on the role of personalities, etc., came so uncomfortably near just to the non-Marxist elements. The start of every great historical movement has to pass through different stages: the Russian Narodnik movement has 'failed' no more than Judaeo-Petrine Christianity failed when triumphant Christianity adopted the ideology and the organisation of the Hellenistic-Pauline trend. The attitude of the later Russian socialists to the developments described in this book was indicated a few years later when Plekhanov, the outstanding theorist of the subsequent stage, wrote in his Preface to Count Thun's *History of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia* that the Russian Social Democrats 'did not form their opinions from pieces of foreign theories . . . we deduced them, consistently, *from our own revolutionary experience* as illuminated in the bright light of Marxist theory'. Another forty years later it could be written, in Soviet Russia, that the formation of *Iskra* (in 1902) restored the inherent continuity (*preyemstvennost*) of the Russian revolutionary movement, which had

* Published, with an Introduction by Sir Isaiah Berlin, by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960. Quotations from the book refer to this edition.

The original Italian edition, of 1952, was published under the simple title *Il Populismo Russo*, which has no implications as to an interpretation of the developments within the revolutionary *intelligentsia* characteristic of the period as a main root of the subsequent revolutionary developments. On the contrary, Professor Venturi clearly states that he did not wish to deal with anything except a certain stage in the development of the Russian socialist movement.

been interrupted by Economism.¹ By promoting the defeat of those who had abused the 'penitent intelligentsia', the memories of Khalturin, Perovskaya, Zhelyabov and so many others helped to shape their country's future.

Professor Venturi defines the period studied in his book as that before Russian socialism was split into differing and sometimes conflicting components (p. xxxii). This statement can be accepted only with reservations: his own masterly presentation of the succession, and inherent connection, of circles and trends within the period is based upon an opposition, from the very start, of emphases on political power on the one hand, and on mobilisation of the broad masses of the people on the other hand. It would be incorrect to assert that, with the end of his period, the different trends were necessarily embodied in different organisations: they continued both within the surviving organisations of *Narodnaya Volya* (a point excluded by Professor Venturi's strict conclusion of his record with the assassination of Alexander II) and in Social Democracy. Here, they were resolved (so far as such disputes can be concluded at all) with the foundation of *Iskra*, nearly twenty years after 1 March 1881 and seventeen years before the Bolshevik revolution. Still it is possible to find a common denominator for the *Narodnik* period: it was that during which the Russian revolutionary *intelligentsia*, though with many delusions, came to realise that the reform of 1861 while leaving the basic aspirations of the peasantry unfulfilled had ended the period of serf insurrections, but had not yet grasped the implications of Russia's incipient industrialisation.

In Chapter III Venturi shows how the past record and the institutional structure of Tsarist Russia prevented her from anticipating the threatening storm by agrarian reforms early enough to avoid the assumption of a revolutionary position by a large section of the *intelligentsia* (the leading minds of which nearly up to 1862 put many hopes on a 'reforming Tsar'). Peter Scheibert, discussing the book in the *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*,² criticises both Venturi and the revolutionaries for failure to assess the limited possibilities of Tsarist Russia realistically, and also the Narodniks' failure to elaborate other than dilettante economic solutions. Yet to anyone who does not start from the basic assumption that reformers should not question the institutional structure of their societies, it follows the inherent necessity of the transition of the revolutionary *intelligentsia* from hopes for reform to revolutionary activities, and eventually, with the economic development of Russia herself, the transition to a new intellectual framework, in which the solutions to real economic problems could be sought, namely Marxism.

According to a long-standing tradition of the Russian revolutionary

movement, which Lenin repeatedly recalled in order to make his point about the need to organise the 'subjective factor', objectively revolutionary situations existed both in the early sixties (i.e. at the time of the peasants' emancipation) and then again in the late seventies (i.e. at the time when a large section of the Narodnik movement decided in favour of political terror). There is no need to read into such traditions more than the movement's self-criticism and self-assertion. Having read the evidence collected by Professor Venturi from sources who certainly were not unduly pessimistic from the revolutionary point of view, and also recent Soviet writings on the point,³ I can only maintain my long-standing⁴ scepticism about the very existence of those revolutionary situations, in particular the second one. Venturi's evidence shows that the organisers of *Narodnaya Volya* were even conscious of its absence: their decision to concentrate all the available resources on the assassination of Alexander II, even to the detriment of revolutionary propaganda amongst the masses, implied a decision to replace the revolutionary insurrection, the necessary resources for which were not available, by an action purely demonstrative in character.

True, the significance of the work described in Venturi's book was not the attempted use of two allegedly revolutionary situations but the growth, in the minds of an *intelligentsia* appalled by the horrors of early capitalist development, of concepts which were to bear their fruits much later. Russian capitalism did not, as some of the Narodniks imagined, run into a blind alley; on the contrary, just after having passed, without any progressive change in her regime, the second of the alleged 'revolutionary situations' Russia entered the quickest phase of her pre-1930 industrial development, which found its only counterpart in Japan under an only slightly less reactionary regime. In the Russian revolutionaries' hands lay the power to decide, not what would happen (apart from a change in persons) on or after 1 March 1881, but on which lines the thorough regeneration of Russia would start a quarter of a century later. In this perspective, Professor Venturi's decision to conclude his book with that fateful day of March represents an unjustified tribute to the concepts only of one group of the participants: a glance into the documents published during the 1920s⁵ shows that even *Narodnaya Volya* as such continued to develop during the early 1880s; indeed the development of the workers' and the army organisations was at its strongest between 1881 and 1885. This may to some extent be regarded as the spread of a fire whose heart was already extinguished; but the workers' circles were continuously regenerated, and intellectual developments showed a degree of continuity which is bound to astonish anyone who conceives the history of the Russian revolutionary movement mainly in the light of the self-delimitation

of each of its successive stages from its predecessors (in particular in publications abroad, where there was more opportunity, and demand, for theoretical clarification than in the underground circles inside Russia). Some post-1881 Narodnik publications show a fair balance between economic and political-revolutionary struggle, emphasise the need for a transitional dictatorship of the working class, and differ from Marxist concepts mainly by the vagueness with which the 'urban and rural' working class was fused into one hypothetical unit—a habit which had started in the publications of *Cherny Peredel*, Narodnaya Volya's antagonist in the split of 1879.⁶ Some later Social Democrats⁷ referred to the transition of their circles from the concepts of *Narodnaya Volya* to Marxism as a continuous process: to many underground workers in Russia things must have appeared in that light (certainly, a Narodnik movement which realised only that the workers were at least as important as the peasants, and that armed insurrection was preferable to the assassination of Tsars, was not yet Marxist).

If we treat the material, not as the formation process of a definite ideology, broken off by the catastrophe of 1 March 1881, but as the preparation of subsequent developments, we may note, at first, that the preoccupation with the *obshchina* (village community) as the supposedly central institution of the Russian socialism to come was the contribution of a few émigré authors which dominated the underground movement only in the 1870s. In Chernyshevski's concepts the *obshchina* played no part larger than that naturally conditioned by the fact that Russia was a peasant country and that some peasant protest was in evidence while no industrial labour movement was yet in existence. More relevant than romantic tribute paid to the form of life of the overwhelming majority of the people to be emancipated is the question of how far the early revolutionaries realised the positive need for Russia's industrialisation, i.e. that very task in fulfilling which the Bolsheviks eventually scored their major achievement and are at present making their impact upon many underdeveloped countries, the conditions of some of which are comparable to those of pre-capitalist Russia. From Venturi's book it is evident that *no* one of the contending trends envisaged industrialisation of Russia (even on the lines of 'cooperative socialism') as an outcome of the revolution. Even Tkachev, who in some respects came nearest to later Bolshevik concepts, merely advocated an egalitarian distribution of the national income without devoting much attention to the problem of increasing it—not to speak of systematic industrialisation, which would have appeared to him as a Western concept irrelevant for Russia. Yet the mere urgency of a peasant problem plus its corollary, the predominance, in the revolutionary movement, of an *intelligentsia* dominated by

idealisation of the peasantry, does not lead to relevant results, even if parts of this *intelligentsia* (a minority amongst the Narodniks) have developed concepts of a revolutionary vanguard which, in appearance, approach the later treatment of 'the organisation problem' by the Leninists.

The circles of the young intellectuals served as a clearing house through which thought-material supplied by the early and mid-nineteenth century progressive writers entered Russia; this material was digested through trial and error in the course of the circles' own activities. In the very first stages, the Utopian socialists, Feuerbach (in particular with Chernyshevski) and Comte were prominent, but Marx's early work figured in the library of the Petrashevski group; from the late 1860s onwards he was regarded as the outstanding teacher of economics even by those who disagreed with his sociological and political theories. Yet at the end of the period Kibalchich, writing on behalf of *Narodnaya Volya*, opposed Plekhanov's (at that time) under-estimation of political institutions by reference to Marx's political writings, which excluded an interpretation of *Capital* in the sense of a purely economic determinism (pp. 679-80); Marx himself (whose letters to the Editor of *Otechestvenniya zapiski* have, unhappily, not been quoted by Venturi) would have fully supported the argument, eager as he was to avoid distortion of his theory into a 'supra-historical schematism'. The one-sidedness culminated in the remark reluctantly made by Vera Zasulich, the unwilling heroine of terrorism who, on the very eve of her acceptance of Marxism, deemed that it would restrict the new party to quiet organisational work until, after decades, if not centuries, Russia would have become ripe for a revolution of the industrial proletariat, superseding a fully developed capitalism.⁸ Marx himself, however, envisaged the possibility of a direct transition of the Russian village community to socialism, avoiding the capitalist stage of development: as he hoped at that time, the industrial basis required for such a transition would be created by socialist revolutions in Western Europe, to which a democratic revolution in Russia might give the decisive impulse.⁹ There is a logical continuity between this assessment of the potentialities of pre-capitalist Russia by Marx, and the present communists' envisaging a non-capitalist development of former colonial countries, supported by the Soviet industry created, during the half-century following Marx's letter, by the sequence of capitalist and Soviet industrialisation of Russia.

Emphasis on the more spectacular, namely the terrorist, side of the activities of *Narodnaya Volya*, and the fact that Russian Social Democracy started with a self-delimitation of *Cherny Peredel* (redistribution of land without compensation) from its earlier emphasis on amorphous

