

‘Primitive Socialist Accumulation’: Then and Now

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Preobrazhensky’s concept

What is ‘primitive socialist accumulation’? Although Evgeny Preobrazhensky was not the first to employ this term, the concept of primitive socialist accumulation is generally associated with his argument for rapid expansion of heavy industry at the expense of the peasantry in the USSR in the 1920s--- a position held by the Left Opposition (in which he was a prominent member) and subsequently enforced by Stalin (with the endorsement of Preobrazhensky and many other members of the Left Opposition).

For Preobrazhensky, the new socialist state had no alternative. ‘The enormous preponderance of petty commodity production combined with the relative weakness of the state sector,’ he noted in 1927, ‘forces the state economy into an uninterrupted economic war with the tendencies of capitalist development, with the tendencies of capitalist restoration’ (Preobrazhensky, 1979: 173). The state sector thus had to expand if socialism was to win. The ‘constantly expanded reproduction of socialist relations’, he insisted, means ‘struggling to increase the means of production belonging to the proletarian state, means uniting around these means of production ever greater numbers of workers, means raising the productivity of labour throughout the system’ (Preobrazhensky, 1965: 58). And, this meant ‘proportionately faster accumulation in the sphere of heavy industry at the expense of the economy as a whole’ because of the need for mechanisation and rapid industrialisation (Preobrazhensky, 1979: 68).

Precisely because of the backwardness of the economy, though, the material resources for this had to come ‘mainly or partly from sources lying outside the complex of state economy’ (Preobrazhensky, 1965: 84). Preobrazhensky’s ‘fundamental law of primitive socialist accumulation’ stated that ‘the more backward economically, petty-bourgeois, peasant, a particular country is which has gone over to the socialist organization of production,’ the more that socialist accumulation is ‘obliged to rely on alienating part of the surplus product of pre-socialist forms of economy’ (Preobrazhensky, 1965: 124). Under the given circumstances, ‘the maximum primitive socialist accumulation’ was essential; accordingly, he argued that what was to be ‘accumulated at the expense of peasant production, cannot drop below a certain minimum, a minimum that is dictated to the Soviet state with rigorous economic necessity’ (Preobrazhensky, 1979: 68).

Since our concern here is with the concept of ‘primitive socialist accumulation’ (and not with Preobrazhensky’s general argument or that of the Left Opposition on other matters), we can put aside on this occasion his immediate warnings about NEP (the New Economic Policy), his assertion that ‘the main forces of the counterrevolution are taking

shape in the countryside' and that the kulak was an *imminent* counter-revolutionary threat--- all in 1921, the very year NEP was introduced (i.e., without any actual experience with NEP). And we will also put aside his assumption of capitalist advance in the countryside --- a gross misconception revealed by subsequent research which has demonstrated that the share of households relying predominately on hired labour was 'statistically insignificant' in 1927, and that 'there is virtually no evidence of a trend towards a 'capitalist' differentiation of the peasantry, defined in terms of the employment of labour' (Merl, 1991: 50-57, 64).

Let us consider here instead the basic elements in Preobrazhensky's theory. Firstly, we see the complete identification of socialist relations with the state-owned industrial sector. Secondly, peasant production in the 1920s is identified unequivocally with the tendency toward capitalist restoration. Accordingly, it followed for him that primitive socialist accumulation requires the growth of state industry at the expense of the agriculture sector. Finally, the advance of socialist relations in agriculture has as its premise the development of productive forces in industry. Thus, while, acknowledging that appropriation of 'a couple of hundred million from the reserves of peasant accumulation for the development of industry' would generate discontent among peasants, Preobrazhensky argued that the 'aid to co-operation of which Lenin spoke' would have to wait until 'the period of primitive socialist accumulation is completed' and 'industry stands on a new technical foundation'. Russian peasants, in short, would have to wait until the appropriation of their resources had created the material conditions for ending their discontent (Preobrazhensky, 1979: 61).

Marx's concept of primitive capitalist accumulation

Just as with the invocation of the term by Smirnov and Bukharin before him, Preobrazhensky's reference point was Marx's discussion in *Capital* of the original or primitive accumulation of capitalist relations. But Marx's discussion of 'so-called primitive accumulation' was not about expanding industry at the expense of agriculture nor did it focus upon the development of productive forces rather than relations of production. On the contrary, 'so-called primitive accumulation', Marx insisted in *Capital*, 'is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production'; it 'forms the pre-history of capital' (Marx, 1977: 874-5). As Marx subsequently wrote in his draft response to Vera Zasulich:

In discussing the genesis of capitalist production, I said [that the secret is that there is at bottom 'a complete separation of ... the producer from the means of production' (p. 315, column 1, French edition of *Capital*) and that '*the expropriation of the agricultural producer* is the basis of the whole process'. [First Draft]

Unless we contrast it to accumulation *within* capitalism, however, we don't understand Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation of capital, i.e. its historical genesis'. In Chapter 23 of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx demonstrated that capitalism is a system which contains within itself the conditions for its own reproduction--- one which, when viewed 'as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal,' is

understood as ‘a process of reproduction’ (Marx, 1977: 711). In particular, Marx concluded this chapter by stressing that the capitalist process of production ‘produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer’; in short, the essential premises of capitalism are produced within this process of reproduction.

Once Marx had identified the essential elements in capitalist relations of production as capital and wage-labour, then he could focus upon the preconditions for the *initial* emergence of each. *Theory, in short, guides the historical inquiry*. That is what so-called primitive accumulation or original accumulation is all about: it interrogates history to ask only one question: what was the original source of the essential elements of capitalism? In short, ‘primitive accumulation of capital, i.e. its historical genesis’ was a process of producing those essential premises of capitalism from *outside* the system. And, this is exactly what ‘*the expropriation of the agricultural producer*’ in Western Europe achieved, according to Marx: it produced a premise of capitalist production--- the wage-labourer--- from outside capitalist relations.

Rather than revolving around the growth of industry relative to agriculture or the increase in productive forces, primitive accumulation of capital for Marx was about a *rupture*--- a change in the relations of production. He described a double rupture in England and in the Western European countries following the same course: (1) where means of production became the property of those oriented to the logic of capital (M-C-M’) rather than e.g., to luxury consumption and (2) where the means of production were separated from independent peasant producers, creating the conditions in which ‘private property which is personally owned... is supplanted by capitalist private property, which rests on the exploitation of alien, but formally free labour’ (Marx, 1977: 928). With new capitalist relations of production based upon this rupture in property rights, capital then proceeded to develop productive forces specific to its nature, productive forces which strengthened those relations of production; and the result was reproduction of ‘the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer’.¹

primitive socialist accumulation: ‘the Western course’ and the Russian road

Did Marx envision an analogous path for the original development of socialist relations of production? We need to distinguish (as he did) between the pattern in Western Europe (which he called ‘the Western course’) and his conception of the potential Russian road. Certainly, *The Communist Manifesto* describes a critical rupture in which, after winning the battle of democracy, ‘the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State’ (Marx and Engels, 1976: 504). This sounding of the ‘knell of capitalist private property’ in which ‘the expropriators are expropriated’ is one aspect of primitive socialist accumulation (Marx, 1977: 929).

The other side is the necessity to reunite the producers with the means of production--- i.e., to reverse (and, indeed, negate) that process by which private property based ‘on the fusing together of the isolated, independent working individual with the

¹ See the discussion in Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative*, Ch. 4, ‘The Being and Becoming of an Organic System’ especially pp. 92-99 on capitalism.

conditions of his labour' was supplanted by capitalist private property. 'The negation of the negation,' coquetted Marx. But not a negation which re-establishes that old private property. Rather, this negation of the negation establishes property rights based upon 'cooperation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself' (Marx, 1977: 928-9). The rupture of the separation of the producers from the means of production (i.e., the recomposition of the unity of producers and the means of production) is the necessary second side of primitive socialist accumulation.

But not in Russia, Marx insisted! Not in Russia because that process in which 'one form of private property is transformed into another form of private property; (the Western course)' did not characterise the Russian countryside. Responding to Vera Zasulich's question as to whether it was possible to build socialism on the basis of the Russian village commune (the *mir*) without going through capitalism, Marx insisted that 'since the Russian peasant lands have never been *their private property*,' how could the pattern of Western Europe be assumed to be applicable to Russia?

Indeed, Marx argued that there was nothing at all inevitable about the decline of the *mir*: 'What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither a historical inevitability nor a theory; it is state oppression and exploitation by capitalist intruders whom the state has made powerful at the peasants' expense' [Second Draft]. If the Tsarist state had not extracted enormous sums from the peasantry in order to build capitalism and if these funds had been available instead 'for the further development of the rural commune, no one would be dreaming today of the "historical inevitability" of the annihilation of the commune. Everyone would see the commune as the element in the regeneration of Russian society, and an element of superiority over countries still enslaved by the capitalist regime.'

What was it, then, that could permit the commune to 'become the direct starting-point of the economic system towards which modern society is tending?' Very simply that 'the arable land remained communal property', and that 'it was periodically divided among the members of the agricultural commune.' That fundamental characteristic of 'common land ownership,' Marx proposed, 'forms the natural basis of collective production and appropriation.' Indeed, this 'communal land ownership allows it directly and gradually to transform fragmented, individualist agriculture into collective agriculture'. Russian peasants, he noted, already practised cooperative labour in 'the jointly owned meadows for the drying of grass and other ventures of general interest', and their 'familiarity with the *artel* relationship (*contrat d'arte*) could help to make the transition from augmented to co-operative labour.'

Further, 'while it has in common land ownership the natural basis of collective appropriation, its historical context – the contemporaneity of capitalist production – provides it with ready-made material conditions for huge-scale common labour.' In particular, 'the commune may gradually replace fragmented agriculture with large-scale, machine-assisted agriculture particularly suited to the physical configuration of Russia.' Indeed, Marx pointed out that 'the physical configuration of the Russian land is eminently suited to machine-assisted agriculture, organised on a large scale and [in the hands] performed by co-operative labour.' In short, no negation of the negation was needed in the Russian countryside for primitive socialist accumulation: 'cooperation and

the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself' could build directly upon the village commune.

Yet, that village commune contained an inner contradiction. Characteristic of the mir was dualism: besides common ownership of the land, 'each farmer tilled on his own behalf the various fields allocated to him and individually appropriated their fruits'. This other side, Marx indicated, could eventually become a source of disintegration because of the potential for dissolving 'economic and social equality, generating within the commune itself a conflict of interests which leads, first, to the conversion of arable land into private property, and ultimately to the private appropriation of forests, pastures, waste ground, etc' The dualism of the mir meant that 'either the element of private property which it implies gains the upper hand over the collective element, or the reverse takes place. Everything depends upon the historical context in which it is situated.'

And the current context, Marx warned, threatened 'the very existence of the Russian commune'. Given the effects of state tax demands, 'the commune became a kind of inert matter easily exploited by traders, landowners and usurers. This oppression from without unleashed the conflict of interests already present at the heart of the commune, rapidly developing the seeds of its disintegration.' It was clear to Marx: 'One can see at a glance that unless there is a powerful reaction, this combination of hostile forces will inevitably bring about the ruin of the commune through the simple pressure of events.' The answer was obvious: 'To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian Revolution.'

Two developments then would be necessary were such a revolution to occur. One would be to end the 'isolation, the lack of connection between the lives of different communes.' Wherever such isolation exists, 'it leads to the formation of a more or less central despotism above the communes.'" But this obstacle 'could be removed with the utmost ease' with the creation of 'a peasant assembly chosen by the communes themselves – an economic and administrative body serving their own interests.' Here, again, revolution was the precondition: the isolation of the commune, 'its existence as a localised microcosm which denies it any historical initiative', Marx argued, 'can only be ended through 'a general uprising'.

The second requirement relates to the need for collective labour to supplant 'fragmented labour (the form of private appropriation)'. For this, Russian peasants need to benefit from the achievements of capitalism and to develop that 'large-scale, machine-assisted agriculture particularly suited to the physical configuration of Russia.' But, how, Marx asked? 'But where is the peasant to find the tools, the fertiliser, the agronomic methods, etc. – all the things required for collective labour?' Marx's answer was clear: 'To be sure, the first step should be to create normal conditions for the commune on its present basis, for the peasant is above all hostile to any abrupt change.' Very simply, end those state extractions from the commune. Again, he stressed that 'it is understood that the commune would develop gradually, and that the first step would be to place it under normal conditions on its present basis.'

But that would only be the first step. Where would it get the material support to make the transition to modern agriculture? Here again, Marx was clear. The resources must come from the State: 'As for the initial expenses, both intellectual and material, Russian society owes them to the "rural commune" at whose expense it has lived for so long and in which it must seek its "regenerative element"'. This is a point Marx repeated

several times in his response to Zasluch. 'Russian society, having for so long lived at the expense of the rural commune, owes it the initial funds required for such a change.'

There can be little doubt that Marx's conception of the path for primitive socialist accumulation in Russia differed substantially from 'the Western course'. Given the already existing possession in common of the land, the negation of capitalist private property there was unnecessary. Rather, what was called upon was the need to build upon cooperative ownership to introduce gradually new forms of collective production. In this way, Russia could develop those 'self-working and self-governing communes' that would characterise the new society he identified after the Paris Commune.

After Marx

In the following generation, despite the continued 'state oppression and exploitation by capitalist intruders whom the state has made powerful at the peasants' expense,' the mir proved quite hardy. And so, following the fierce peasant uprisings of 1905, there was a conscious political attempt to defeat the mir. Yet, despite Stolypin's 1907 attempt to establish 'strong peasant farms with privately owned land in place of the commune' (an initiative which in itself demonstrated the slow progress of any spontaneous process of disintegration), 'relatively few peasants wanted to separate.' In other words, the actions of the Tsarist state had not succeeded in vanquishing the mir. And then came the Soviet Revolution which created an entirely *new* historical context for the mir. The existing enemies of the mir were defeated.

The Soviet Revolution 'ended all forms of private ownership, whether by landlords or by peasants' and brought with it 'the revival of the commune and the periodical redistribution of land' (Merl, 1991: 54). Indeed, the village communes had been the key actors in the revolutionary confiscation and redistribution of land of the gentry. Private parcels of land that had been separated under Stolypin's reforms were returned to the mir, and by 1927 an estimated 95.5% of peasant holdings fell within communal ownership (Merl, 1991: 54; Lewin, 1968: 26, 85). The result, in short, was a considerable *strengthening* of the mir; as Mark Harrison indicated, 'in the course of appropriation of the landlord estates and reabsorption of Stolypin farmsteads into the old open-field system, the repartitional village commune revived and became more active and more widespread amongst the peasantry than at any time since 1861.' Indeed, with the 'destruction of the old, centralised political bureaucracy', the 'political self-determination of the village' predominated (Harrison, 1991: 107-8).

In short, as Marx had projected, the Soviet Revolution had saved the commune. And that leads to the question of the two developments that Marx saw as necessary for primitive socialist accumulation. One was the need to break down the 'isolation, the lack of connection between the lives of different communes.' This could be achieved, Marx proposed, by the creation of 'a peasant assembly chosen by the communes themselves – an economic and administrative body serving their own interests'. This certainly was possible after the Revolution through the creation of Peasant Soviets; to the extent to which these served the interests of the communes, such economic and administrative bodies could end the isolation of the commune 'which denies it any historical initiative' and thereby could prevent 'the formation of a more or less central despotism above the communes.'

The second development that Marx stressed was the need for the peasants to move from common ownership of the land to cooperative and collective production. To secure 'the tools, the fertiliser, the agronomic methods, etc. – all the things required for collective labour', peasants needed the support of the Soviet state. And this was precisely the position that Lenin took in his seminal article, 'On Co-operation', written in January 1923. It wasn't enough, he concluded, to restore the shattered link between the peasants and the Soviet state, a process that NEP was intended to achieve. 'We lost sight of the cooperatives' when NEP was introduced, Lenin insisted. With political power in the hands of the working class and ownership of the means of production, he argued, 'the only task, indeed, that remains for us is to organize the population in cooperative societies.' It is essential to understand 'how vastly, how infinitely important it is now to organize the population of Russia in cooperative societies.' Indeed, Lenin insisted, 'if the whole of the peasantry had been organized in cooperatives, we would by now have been standing with both feet on the soil of socialism'.

So, what was to be done? 'Economic, financial and banking privileges,' Lenin argued, 'must be granted to the cooperatives--- this is the way our socialist state must promote the new principle on which the population must be organized.' It was necessary to search for ways to encourage peasants to join cooperatives: 'we must find what form of "bonus" to give for joining the cooperatives (and the terms on which we should give it), the form of bonus by which we shall assist the cooperative sufficiently, the form of bonus that will produce the civilized cooperator.' Consistent with the focus of NEP upon building that link with the peasant majority, Lenin stressed 'the exceptional importance' of encouraging cooperatives at this stage and argued that 'from the standpoint of transition to the new system', this process was the 'means that are the *simplest, easiest and most acceptable to the peasant*.' Now, it was essential to educate the peasants in order to organise them in cooperatives. Without question, Lenin's conclusion in 'On Cooperation' that the growth of cooperation under these new circumstances was 'identical with the growth of socialism' marked a significant shift in his position: 'we have to admit that there has been a radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism' (Lenin, 1923a: 467-75).²

In short, by subsidising those who joined cooperatives (in contrast to those who did not), i.e., by using the state to change relations within the countryside, agriculture could become the site of new productive relations, of emerging socialist relations--- i.e., of primitive socialist accumulation.³ This was a conception quite consistent with Marx's discussion of primitive capitalist accumulation and with his view of the potential in

² Another aspect of that shift was his rejection in the same month (January 1923) of what Lenin called 'pedantic' Marxism and its 'incontrovertible proposition' (learned by rote repetition from West-European Social Democracy) that 'the objective economic premises for socialism do not exist in our country' (Lenin, 1923b: 476-80). Where is it proven, Lenin (1923b) continued, that the combined efforts of the workers and peasants, 'with the aid of the workers' and peasants' government and Soviet system' cannot proceed to overtake other nations! Why can't we expel the landlords and capitalists 'and then start moving toward socialism? Where, in what books, have you read that such variations of the customary historical sequence of events are impermissible or impossible?'

³ This became as well Bukharin's emphasis--- the need to offer material privileges (i.e., 'by using the peasantry's own economic *interest*') as an incentive to join cooperatives. The party's basic tasks in the villages, he argued in his 1925 article, 'The Road to Socialism and the Worker-Peasant Alliance,' involved 'a revitalization of the soviets and an expansion of the cooperative movement' (Bukharin, 1982: 204-5, 288).

Russia to build upon common land ownership in the mir. The contrast to Preobrazhensky's insistence upon 'the maximum primitive socialist accumulation' at the expense of the peasantry could not be greater. In this conception, as it had for the Tsarist government, the countryside served principally as the source of resources to expand heavy industry (as it did in the policies of the Left Opposition and the policies and practices of Stalin).

Underlying theoretical differences

Underlying these two conceptions of primitive socialist accumulation are significant theoretical differences which transcend the concrete Russian/Soviet case. One difference revolves around the relative priority assigned to productive forces and relations of production. For example, although Preobrazhensky's theory is known for stressing maximum extraction of resources from the countryside, this is not its essential character; if there were an *alternate* source of funds (such as rents from resource exports), Preobrazhensky's emphasis upon development of productive forces in state industry would be unaffected. Similarly, if Russia had not inherited the village commune with its particular characteristic of common land ownership, Marx's focus would still stress the need to build 'cooperation and the possession in common of the land'. The theoretical dividing line here is the emphasis of the one upon development of productive forces (in industry and agriculture) compared to the emphasis of the other upon development of socialist relations of production.

A related and more basic difference, though, concerns the relative focus of each upon concrete human subjects. Recall Marx's stress on the need for a gradual shift to collective agriculture, his warning that 'the peasant is above all hostile to any abrupt change' and his appreciation of the experience of members of the village communes in working in the artel cooperatives. Similarly, note Lenin's recognition of the 'exceptional importance' of the cooperatives because they are 'means that are the *simplest, easiest and most acceptable to the peasant.*' This, indeed, was Lenin's conclusion in 'On Cooperation': it was necessary 'to learn to build socialism in practice in such a way that *every* small peasant could take part in it.' The necessary starting point for Marx and Lenin was really existing, concrete human beings rather than abstractions.

Contrast this perspective to Preobrazhensky's argument against providing economic support for cooperatives. The little aid that could be provided, Preobrazhensky argued, 'is more likely to irritate the peasants by the contrast between its scantiness and the inevitably large expenditure on the state machine than to call forth a feeling of gratitude to the class which is granting the credit' (Preobrazhensky, 1965: 237). And, in any event, he argued that peasants had the money because of 'the positive changes in the structure of the peasant budget that have been affected by our October Revolution'.⁴ In

⁴ Since peasants no longer were compelled (as in Tsarist Russia) to sell their products in order to cover three requirements: central and local taxes, rental payments and usurious interest charges to kulaks, landowners, etc., they were 'in no hurry to sell grain,' could increase their consumption of food and '*feed more grain* to their cattle and poultry'. Finally, there was an 'increase in the peasantry's effective demand for industrial commodities and products within peasant exchange,' and the undersupply of industrial commodities meant that 'the peasants received more money than they could spend'. All problems came

this context, it is useful to note that in 1922 Lenin described the 'Theses' on policies for the countryside that Preobrazhensky prepared for the 11th Party Congress as abstract, filled with pious wishes and assumptions unsupported by facts, 'ultra- and super-academic' and characteristic of 'the intelligentsia, the study circle and the litterateur'. What those Theses lacked, Lenin argued, was knowledge of practical experience, and in their place was self-delusion and 'false communist self-adulation' which '*quite unnecessarily* irritates and offends the peasants' (Lenin, 1922: 237-242).

These two dividing lines are linked. Start with a concept of abstract human beings, and relations of production disappear from sight, leaving all circumstances to be changed by the development of productive forces initiated by those who would deliver socialism as a gift from above. In contrast, start with a focus upon real, concrete human beings and you necessarily must consider the social relations in which they produce and which produce them; accordingly, you recognise the importance of the change in the ensemble of social relations--- of the simultaneous change in circumstances and human activity and self-change.

Primitive socialist accumulation in the 21st Century?

Time prevents us from exploring primitive socialist accumulation in the 21st Century. Yet, its outlines should be clear. To consider aspects pointing toward the initial emergence of socialist relations in this century, we need to begin with a concept of socialism and to let theory guide our enquiry. At the core of the concept of socialism for the 21st century is the centrality of human development. And, that concept was articulated most clearly by Chavez when he introduced 'the elementary triangle of socialism': (1) social ownership of the means of production, (2) social production organised by workers and (3) for satisfaction of social needs and purposes. This is a concept which stresses the need to struggle on all three fronts at once and thus rejects the idea of waiting for a stage in which the productive forces have been developed sufficiently for us to begin to realise the socialist dream.

Have there been inroads and movements in this century which have attempted to make real the elements of the socialist triangle? Although that clearly is a subject for another time, it should be apparent that Preobrazhensky's concept of primitive socialist accumulation points in the wrong direction and that it is time to rethink the concept of primitive socialist accumulation then and now.

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back to 'the positive changes in the structure of the peasant budget that have been affected by our October Revolution' (Preobrazhensky, 1979:34-7, 43-4, 69; 1965: 180).

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