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Populism and Orthodox Marxism in the 1890s

1 Introduction

Plekhanov developed his Marxism primarily in opposition to populist intellectuals. The underdeveloped nature of the Russian labour movement in the 1880s meant that his immediate aim became that of converting revolutionaries of the intelligentsia to his position, rather than seeking to influence the proletariat directly.1 Plekhanov's attack on populism, however, was part of a broader Marxist critique. The first round had been fired by Engels in 1873,2 and debates with populism in Russia were to end only with Stalin's collectivisation in the late 1920s. The high point of the controversy came between 1894 and 1899, when there was a significant increase in the number of critical publications. This was also the period which saw the intellectual breakthrough of Marxist social democracy. In particular, the economic theory on which populist philosophy rested was undermined by a battery of sophisticated counter-arguments. While populism survived—principally in the socialist revolutionary party—it did so only by transforming its stand in ways which made major concessions to the Marxist critics.3

There was a material base to this victory of ideas. The intensified polemics of the 1890s were prompted by the famine which gripped rural Russia at the beginning of the decade, and revealed that the peasant economy was in a deep crisis.4 The Marxist position was further buttressed during subsequent years by the very rapid industrial growth and the unmistakable emergence of an urban proletariat as a political force.5 Capitalism was clearly gaining ground, and the radicalism of the working class appeared in sharp contrast to the passivity of the peasantry. The principles of Plekhanov's Marxism, therefore, received concrete vindication; the ranks of social democracy swelled as those of populism diminished.

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The fact that the victory proved incomplete— that populism lived on in altered form— also reflected weaknesses in Plekhanov's system. However inarticulately, the non-Marxist socialists recognised that the nature of backward capitalism was not wholly as Plekhanov pictured it; there were significant barriers to a full-blown development of capitalism in Russia, and the peasantry was inadequately analysed in Marxian theory. As capitalism has 'spread East' during the twentieth century, and Marxism has become associated with anti-colonial movements in which peasants have played a central role, populism has exacted revenge; its characteristic themes have re-emerged in new contexts and significantly influenced Marxism itself. In this sense the intellectual inferiority of the 'Late Marx' discussed in Chapter 7 has not proved to be a terminal weakness. During the second half of the present century, it has proved to be closer to Marxism as a world political movement than the 'mature Marx,' which provided the basis of Russian orthodoxy prior to 1914.

II The Populist Theory of Russian Capitalism

Populism incorporated a variety of ideas and represented a unity only insofar as they all embodied a hostility to capitalist development, and a disposition to base progress upon the traditional institutions of Russian economic life. There was considerable diversity of opinion as to what exactly constituted 'progress', how it was best achieved, the extent to which capitalism posed a threat, and the health and adaptability of non-capitalist institutions. But in the last two decades of the nineteenth century there was increasing coherence in populist theory. It was generally held that Russian capitalist development was blocked, so that comprehensive emulation of Europe was not only undesirable but also impossible. If Russia was to survive as a sovereign power, economic evolution had therefore to be predominantly non-capitalist. The alternative was a subordination to Western nations, perhaps even formal colonisation.

The principal theorists involved were Vasily Vorontsov and N. F. Danielson. Each used elements of Marxian economic theory, and especially Danielson who translated *Capital* into Russian and corresponded with Marx and Engels over a period of nearly three decades. In fact he regarded himself as a Marxist and was widely thought of as such. What he and Vorontsov did, however, was to integrate themes of Marxian economics with those of populism, as support for the latter. This was an enduring feature of populist writers as we have seen in Chapter 7, and although there was a tendency to become increasingly critical of Marx and Engels as their arguments met social democratic opposition, most populists remained well-disposed toward the founders. They often viewed Russian