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Book Review: Shanin's "The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of the Century"

# The First Revolution of the Twentieth Century

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**Review: *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of the Century*, by Teodor Shanin.**

This two-volume work is not only "a distinguished piece of scholarship" (Dennis Wrong), representing "historical sociology at its best" (William G. Rosenberg). It is all that and also something else: a radical change of paradigm in the historical and sociological understanding of the Russian Revolution. Real breakthroughs in social sciences are rare and should not be overlooked: Shanin's book is one of them.

From the late nineteenth century to 1917 most scholars, historians, political leaders, and social philosophers saw Tsarist Russia as either totally unique or as a backward section of Europe. It was neither. As Shanin persuasively shows, Russia at the turn of the century was not unique, nor was it on the threshold of becoming another England; it was the first country in which the specific social syndrome of what we call today a "developing" society had materialized. The Russian Revolution of 1905-1907 marked the time and the place of the first fundamental challenge to the relevance of the Western experience for the rest of humanity. It was not the last of the European revolutions of the nineteenth century but the first of a new series of revolutionary movements in the dependent, peripheral, "developing" societies which unfolded during the twentieth century.

What is at issue is not just a historical debate, since up to now the conventional wisdom—the so-called Modernization Theory—has tried to interpret such "developing" societies simply as backward, that is, as societies proceeding toward modernity along a necessary scale of social and economic advances but for some reason not yet "there" or else moving "there" too slowly. What is needed is a different approach which considers the possibility of different models of development, not necessarily following the Western (European and North American pattern).

Inspired by Paul Baran's pioneering work on imperialism and underdevelopment, as well as (with some reservations) by Gunder Frank's dependency theory, Shanin's first volume presents dependent development as Russia's major characteristic. The centerpiece of this demonstration is a remarkable analysis of the Russian countryside at the turn of the century, incorporating historical, sociological, economic, and anthropological elements, and focusing on the "rural triangle of (mutual) determination" between capitalism, the state, and the peasantry. Criticizing the linear conception of both liberals and Second International Marxists in their interpretation of Tsarist Russia and its future—in particular their prediction that capitalism soon would "disintegrate" the peasantry—Shanin rescues the fruitful intuitions of the revolutionary populists and the late Marx. Drawing on his previous work (*Late Marx and the Russian Road*, Monthly Review Press, 1983)—a brilliant piece of unorthodox Marxology—he shows that both Marx (in his later years) and his friends from *The People's Will* (*Narodnaya Volya*) considered the peasant commune (*obshchina*) as the

source for the regeneration of Russian society; for them post-capitalist society would dialectically resemble the communalism of capitalism's predecessors.

In the 1905-1907 Revolution, the Russian peasant commune would dramatically reveal its characteristics as at once a unit of class organization, a generator of egalitarian ideology, and a school for collective action capable of turning overnight into well-organized revolt. A careful study of this fruitful historical event is the object of the second volume.

The Russian revolutionaries, considering that Russia was backward by half a century at least, hoped for a Russian version of 1789 or of 1848. What happened was quite unexpected and "deviated" from this classic European norm. The Russian Revolution of 1905-1907 was the first of a distinctive set of revolutionary upheavals characteristic of the twentieth century. In quick succession it was followed by Turkey (1908), Iran (1909), Mexico (1910), and China (1911), and in Russia itself the revolution resumed in 1917. Revolutions in the periphery have proceeded apace ever since.

Shanin's analysis of the revolutionary process is not a piece of dry academia: it is full of the vitality of the real thing. One methodological remark deserves to be quoted at length, because it reveals the kind of empathic quality which distinguishes Shanin's work, and gives it such a superiority over most scholarly studies of the same kind:

Social scientists often miss a centerpiece of any revolutionary struggle—the fervor and anger which drives revolutionaries and makes them into what they are. Academic training and bourgeois convention deaden its appreciation. The "phenomenon" cannot be easily "operationalized" into factors, tables and figures. . . . Yet, without this factor, any understanding of revolutions falls flat. That is why clerks, bankers, generals, and social scientists so often fail to see revolutionary upswing even when looking at it directly. At the very center of revolution lies an emotional upheaval of moral indignation, revulsion, and fury with the powers-that-be, such that one cannot demur or remain silent, whatever the cost. Within its glow, for a while, men surpass themselves, breaking the shackles of intuitive self-preservation, convention, day-to-day convenience, and routine.

The main focus of Shanin's interpretation of the revolutionary events of 1905-1907 is the peasant struggle for land and liberty. After the defeat of Pugachev (eighteenth century), peasant revolts seemed to have disappeared from the Russian countryside—except for a few local "agrarian disturbances." Peasant rebellions seemed a thing of the past for Russia and for the world at large. With hindsight, however, we now know that what happened in Russia in 1905-1907 was only the beginning of a new wave of peasant wars at the periphery of the global capitalist system: Mexico, Russia again, China, Algeria, Vietnam, etc.

The autonomous struggle of the Russian noncapitalist peasantry—a struggle for communal property, against private ownership of land—upset the evolutionist predictions of most Russian Marxists (particularly Phekhanov and his followers), which considered peasants conservative, backward, "petty-bourgeois," and unlikely to become a revolutionary force. Other unexpected surprises occurred in 1905-1907: the massive revolutionary mobilization of the ethnic minorities, the outstanding importance of alternative bases of authority (the workers' Soviets, the All-Russian Peasant Union), the major revolutionary role of the students and the left intelligentsia, etc.

Of course, one can try to treat these "deviations" from the expected as exceptions which require only partial revision and adjustments of an analysis which did not fit some particularly obnoxious facts—without putting the more general theoretical understanding in question. Shanin calls for a different approach to consider these deviations to be elements of a syndrome representing a social reality systematically different from the "orthodox" conceptual model. This implies that Russia at the turn of the century can be best understood neither as exceptional nor as yet another case of the

“general” development of Western Europe—a delayed carriage rolling along a well-known track. The only way to a full grasp of the new realities of the 1905-1907 revolution is through an understanding that the Russian Empire displayed the characteristics of a “developing society” without yet recognizing itself as such.

As a matter of fact, so radical a reconceptualization is not accepted even today—a tribute to the power of the Modernization Theory in the West and the combination of Russian evolutionism and nationalism in the East. It is therefore no surprise that most of the contemporary Russian political leaders (conservative, liberal, or revolutionary) were not able to draw any original or important lessons from 1905-1907. Only a minority were open to and willing to learn from the teachings of history. But for these few, even if what they learned amounted to no more than a partial and contradictory revision of the conventional wisdom, their new understanding gave them an immense political superiority.

Among the rulers it was Peter Stolypin who drew the most far-reaching conclusions. His policy has since become a standard model for authoritarian regimes in developing societies: a kind of “revolution from above,” including an agrarian reform based on the privatization of communal lands and a modernization/reformation of the administrative apparatus, combined with brutal repressive measures against the popular “revolution from below.” Shanin describes this as the “Second Amendment” to Smith and Ricardo’s classical political economy—the First Amendment being Friedrich List’s doctrine of state intervention and protectionism, implemented by Bismarck.

Among the revolutionaries the main exceptions were Trotsky and Lenin. Shanin also mentions the Georgian Menshevik leader Zhordania, but his innovations were limited to the willingness to fight for a Social-Democratic government in Georgia. Although leading the world’s first Marxist party outside Europe with a mass peasant membership, Zhordania was unable to overcome the traditional Menshevik distrust of the peasantry.

Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution was a major “unorthodox” rebellion against Second International evolutionism. While the political imagination of his friend Parvus (Alexander Helphand) stopped at the proposition of a workers’ post-revolutionary government which would accomplish the most democratic version of capitalism (the first bourgeois “stage”), Trotsky made a decisive step forward by suggesting that once set in motion proletarian rule would necessarily transcend bourgeois democracy and directly attack capitalist property. Trotsky’s main conclusion from 1905-1907 about the possibility of a “great leap” into immediate socialist-led and socialist-aimed transformation of Russia became crucial in 1917: “its essence was part of the political masterplan which the Bolsheviks adopted in April 1917.”

However, this was, according to Shanin, a one-sided intellectual breakthrough: Trotsky was indifferent or hostile to both ethnicity and the peasantry. His short-sightedness concerning peasants was quite remarkable. Against Lenin, Trotsky insisted that peasants could under no circumstances play an independent political role nor form a party of their own. Rejecting Lenin’s suggestion of a “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants,” Trotsky insisted that the only viable regime would be a workers’ dictatorship “resting on” the peasant majority and its good-will-cum-indifference, but in no way accepting peasants as partners in state power.

But for Lenin the most important lesson from the revolution of 1905-1907 was a new strategy of a revolutionary alliance (and government) of workers and peasants. This decisive change from his own previous ideas (inherited from Plekhanov) about the “disintegration” of the peasantry was eventually to make Bolshevism into a new ideological creed of global appeal embedded in the Third International and the USSR. This meant an immediate revolutionary alliance between the Bolsheviks and the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR); it also implied a new agrarian program, including the call

for the nationalization of the land (until then considered a typically “populist” demand).

In April 1917 Lenin raised the call for a socialist revolution, for the establishment of a Republic of Soviets along the lines of the Paris Commune of 1871. The “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants” as defined in 1905 was treated as “overtaken by the events”—the aim was a socialist revolution led by socialists. But as the Civil War unfolded, the issues which had surfaced in 1905-1907 came back into focus. Adopting lock, stock, and barrel the SR agrarian program, Lenin was able to win massive support from the peasantry—an important element in the revolutionary victory. And in 1921 he decided for a full-scale conciliatory policy toward the peasants: the New Economic Policy (NEP).

One brief comment on Shanin’s assessment of Trotsky and Lenin: it seems to me that his criticism of Trotsky’s “shortsightedness” in relation to the decisive role of the peasantry in the revolution of 1905-1907 is quite justified. However, in view of what happened in 1917-1922, there is at least one key aspect where Trotsky’s predictions proved more realistic than Lenin’s: the revolutionary peasantry had to follow the political leadership of the proletariat. Except for a short period (the coalition with the left-SR), the proletarian party (i.e., the Bolsheviks) did not share power with a “peasant party,” and the Soviet government looked much more like “a proletarian dictatorship supported by the peasantry” than a “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants.” Peasant participation on the revolutionary side in the civil war was indeed decisive, but again the leadership of the process was firmly in the hands of the workers’ party (and of Trotsky himself as head of the Red Army). And the economic concessions to the peasantry through the NEP did not change the basic “proletarian” (albeit with bureaucratic deformations) character of the Soviet power. But these questions are beyond the scope of the book, which deals with 1905-1907 and not with the October Revolution.

Shanin’s conclusion is a passionate plea for a dialectical method in history inspired by German critical philosophy, Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” Max Weber, Sartre, and Gramsci. Rejecting determinism, fatalism, and reductionism, which perceive only structural determinants but omit choice, this method is able to grasp the interdependence between material circumstances and individual or collective decisions. In this context, Shanin offers two methodological remarks which are of utmost importance and combine to make his work an outstanding contribution not only to the history of turn-of-century Russia, but to history as a social science:

(1) We need a historiography which centers on potentials, alternatives, and diversities, an approach which is open to alternativity (“to build some flexibility into a stubborn English noun”) in history. During well-patterned, repetitive stages, when historical processes behave themselves in a nicely predictable manner, the “alternativity” of history is low. But, once in a while, comes a period of major crisis, a revolution: the constraints of rigidly patterned behaviors, self-censored imaginations, and self-evident stereotypes are broken. At such moments, the “alternativity” of history, the significance of consciousness, and the scope for originality and choice increase dramatically.

(2) We are living through a paradigmatic change—the collapse of (or at least a major challenge to) the theory of progress as an archmodel of historical time. What is slowly taking its place is a conceptualization of no agreed label, which substitutes for the models of linear rise models of multi-directionality and unevenness of related changes.

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