

Chapter 9

The Golden Regiment

I reject get-it-done, make-it-happen thinking. I want to slow things down so I understand them better.

Governor Jerry Brown.

A CURIOUS observer of the Moscow of 1881, one generation after the emancipation of the serfs, would have marvelled at the proliferation of beggars. They were to be found in every street. Unlike the beggars of the countryside, who still made a confident appeal in the name of Christ, they would attempt to catch the eye of passers-by, and delay their plea until they thought they detected a look of sympathy. Large numbers of them would congregate outside churches when services were in progress, especially funeral services.

The diffident approach of these beggars had a simple explanation. What they were doing was against the law. Count Leo Tolstoy, who was one observer of the scene,¹ not merely curious but deeply concerned, saw one of them, ragged and 'swollen with dropsy', being pushed into a cab by a policeman. Anxious to know what was going to happen, he followed in another cab to the police station, which he entered on the heels of the beggar and the policeman. A man armed with a sword and a pistol, and seated behind a table, when asked by Tolstoy, 'What has that peasant been arrested for?', replied briefly with some embarrassment, 'The authorities order such people to be arrested, so it has to be done'. This was, and still is, the standard reaction everywhere of subordinate officials, on whom the State depends.

Tolstoy witnessed such incidents on several subsequent occasions. On one of them, as many as thirty were being escorted away by police, marching in the front and the rear of

the little crowd. From the police station, as he now knew, they would be taken to the Usupov workhouse. He was never able to fathom why, despite all this police activity, the number of beggars on the streets always appeared to be the same. Were some of them perhaps begging legally? Were new ones constantly appearing to take the places of those arrested? Or were there altogether too many for the police to deal with?

The year 1881 has been named specifically, because that was the year in which Tolstoy, for family reasons, moved for the time being from Yasnaya Polyana to Moscow. The poverty he found there shocked him profoundly, accustomed though he was to the sight of the rural variety, and set him off on his new career of world reformer. His psychological disposition had for a long time been such as to fit him for this rôle.

There is an early period in the life of us all when, surrounded with love and care by the only adult beings that we know, we assume ourselves to be the centre of all life and activity. Different people take varying times to emerge from this state, which, when perpetuated and extended to include a belief that the universe was meant for man, is known as the fallacy of the central position. Some people never emerge from it. Tolstoy, according to his own account of his first visit to Moscow, did so at the age of nine:

For the first time I envisaged the idea that we – that is, our family – were not the only people in the world, that not every conceivable interest was centred in ourselves but that there existed another life – that of people who had nothing in common with us, cared nothing for us, had no idea of our existence even. I must have known all this before but I had not known it as I did now – I had not realized it; I had not felt it.²

Instead of forgetting about these people, he showed precocious originality by beginning to wonder how they lived, what they lived on, and how they brought up their children.

Now, in 1881, the mature Tolstoy, faced with the grim problem of the Moscow beggars, began in earnest to search for the solution, symbolised by the writing on the 'green stick' of his

brother Nicholas, to all the ills of the world.

When he spoke about these matters to his Muscovite acquaintances, he was told that what he had already seen was nothing compared with what he would see in the dosshouses at Khitrov market. That was where he could inspect the so-called 'Golden Company', or rather, as one humorist put it, the 'Golden Regiment', their numbers had swollen so much of late. In Tolstoy's opinion, 'army' was the right word for the people whose numbers he was later to estimate at 50,000. Several times he set off for Khitrov market, but was turned back by a sense of shame at going to look at people he could not help. It must have been the same feeling that caused his concern at the reaction to this social problem of the high society in which he moved. They seemed to him to be proud of knowing about it, just as London high society had seemed to be proud of knowing about the London poor when he visited England twenty years before. Nevertheless, in the end he went to see for himself, not only at Khitrov market, but also at the Rzhanov fortress and elsewhere.

Most of the inhabitants of these places, he found, were working people, contented and cheerful for the most part, though living in cramped and insanitary conditions. Categories more disturbing to his peace of mind consisted of those who had come down in the world, and were therefore alien to the dosshouse existence, and prostitutes, whose way of life seemed to have become a permanent and accepted feature of society.

His first reactions, he admitted, were self-centred and emotional. Guilt came first, then satisfaction, induced by his friends' praise, with his own goodness in feeling guilty, and then a feeling that this poverty was not a result of his own luxurious way of living, but was an inevitable condition of life. As a way, therefore, both of exhibiting his own goodness and of benefiting the destitute, he decided to organise some measures of practical relief. It so happened that a census was due at that time; so he planned, with the assistance of those participating in it, who were mostly students, to make an assessment of the needs of individuals, and to help them with money, with finding work, or, if appropriate, with getting back to their villages. Children were to be found places in schools, and old folk in almshouses.

He proposed to raise the necessary funds by canvassing his rich friends; but here he came across an unforeseen difficulty. Those who prided themselves on their philanthropy were already committed. Ladies were dressing little dolls, at minimal expense to themselves compared with their luxurious clothes and furnishings, and offering them for raffles to raise money for the poor. Gentlemen would make donations in consideration of grants of honours from the State; but they had already received all the existing ones, and the State was reluctant to institute any more. Tolstoy received numerous vague promises, but no hard cash, except from the students working on the census. To complete his embarrassment, he discovered that all the applications for financial help were from people who had come down in the world, and wanted to go back up again.

Realising at last that his scheme of relief was useless, he began to consider seriously why it was that such poverty existed. If the cause could be removed, then the effect should disappear. The first question he asked himself was why peasants should leave the country for the town. The obvious answer was that otherwise they would be unable to provide themselves with enough food. Too much of the wealth they produced went in taxes to the State and in rent to the landowner. This was a process amounting to 'the passing of wealth from the producers into the hands of non-producers'.³ So these producers, who are for this reason unable to gain a livelihood by carrying on with their traditional tasks, migrate to the towns, where the non-producers congregate to enjoy their idle life under police protection. There the migrants either perform menial work for the non-producers, or occupy the lowlier positions in industry and trade.

So far his assessment of the situation accorded with his experience, and was perfectly accurate. He had seen and spoken to ex-peasants in service with the rich, or in the dosshouses of Moscow; and he had had ample opportunity of observing them in their original surroundings. He could hardly have gone wrong. As soon, however, as his economic thought began to extend beyond what he had actually seen and heard, his sympathy for the victims of spoliation led him on to construct a

curiously elaborate economic model, marred by inconsistent analysis, which will not stand up to critical examination for a minute.

The classical economists, of whom the most prominent was Adam Smith,⁴ had identified three factors in the production of wealth, namely land, or the sum total of resources available in nature; labour, or all productive human effort, which, before it can be exerted, requires land, in the form of a plot to cultivate, raw materials, or a place to work; and capital, which is wealth set aside for the production of more wealth, or wealth in the process of exchange. They differed among themselves about some of the finer points; and the definitions they gave were not always mutually exclusive; but this can be taken as a rough summary of the basis on which they erected their theories. Tolstoy, however, would have nothing to do with the idea that there were only three factors of production, and proposed the additional ones of sunshine, water, air, social security, food, clothing, education and ability to speak. He could have filled a book with them, he said. Had he thought a bit more carefully, he would have realised that sunshine, water and air fall into the economic category of land; that food and clothing are wealth either in the process of exchange, when they are capital, or in the hands of the consumer, when they are wealth pure and simple; and that education, the ability to speak, and social security (meant presumably in its literal sense) are elements of labour.

When he turned from factors of production to human occupations, he showed a similar tendency to create unnecessary complications. Having made up his mind that labour was exclusively manual, he saw the peasants and factory hands as the only genuine producers. The non-producers he listed in the following order: big financiers – big industrialists – mine owners – great landowners and officials – middle-sized bankers, merchants, officials and landowners (of whom he was one) – petty traders – inn-keepers – usurers – policemen – teachers – chanters – clerks – servants – water-carriers – cabmen – pedlars.

'Big financiers' came first because, in the early 1880s, he considered, as many people still do, that money was the instrument

of the enslavement of the majority to a minority. In support of this opinion, he quoted two examples, one in general terms from ancient history, and the other more specific and modern. In ancient history, the first stage was the raid, a single operation conducted with the aim of carrying off human and material booty. The second stage was a more permanent arrangement based either on chattel slavery, or on a claim to ownership of the land, which would then be divided up for exploitation by one's followers. This involved the followers in the inconvenience of personal supervision, which would suggest the advantages of stage three, the levying of a periodic tribute. What Tolstoy failed to see during this early phase of his thinking, though no doubt his account of events is substantially correct, was that stage three was merely a more subtle way of taking advantage of land-ownership. Why bother to oversee work on the land, when all you need to do is exact the rent?

Tolstoy's hazy understanding of political economy and its terminology is further illustrated by the following quotation from *Anna Karenina*, published three years before the move to Moscow:

He [i.e. Levin, alias Tolstoy] saw that Metrov, like all the rest, in spite of his article refuting the teachings of the economists, still looked at the position of the Russian peasant merely from the standpoint of capital, wages and rent [he meant either *interest, wages and rent* or capital, *labour and land*]. *Though he would indeed have been obliged to admit that in the eastern, and by far the larger, part of Russia there was no such thing as rent, that for nine-tenths of Russia's eighty millions wages meant no more than a bare subsistence, and that capital did not exist except in the form of the most primitive tools, yet he regarded every labourer from that one point of view – though in many points he disagreed with the economists and had his own theory of pay, which he expounded to Levin.*⁵

If agricultural capital in Russia then consisted only 'of the most primitive tools', the conclusion must be that interest, or the return on capital, may be taken to be negligible, and that the

total produce therefore fell to be divided into only two parts, wages and rent. It is frankly incredible that, in these circumstances, most of Russia should yield but a bare subsistence to the labourer as wages, and nothing at all to the landowner.

Make of all this what one will, in the ancient situation described by Tolstoy, the terms 'tribute' and 'rent' denote the same phenomenon. In other words, it is ownership of the land by the minority, and not the payment of money, that accounts for the subjection of the majority. At this time he had succeeded neither in proving his case nor in evolving on his own a coherent economic philosophy.

His second example was the occupation of the Fiji Islands by the Americans, who, he relates, seized much of the best land for cotton and coffee plantations, hired natives to work them, and treated them as slaves. So far, Tolstoy's argument cannot be faulted: seizure of the best land would have deprived many natives of their source of livelihood, and compelled them to work for the Americans on terms fixed from unequal bargaining positions. Conflicts with the natives then gave the Americans an excuse, Tolstoy went on, to demand \$45,000 in compensation. This is his third stage, that of exacting tribute. When the natives failed to pay the money – for the simple reason that they had none – the Americans seized more land, and raised their demand to \$90,000. In order to escape from this predicament, the nominal rulers of Fiji, in 1868, signed an agreement with an Australian trading company, whereby the company paid off the Fijians' debt in return for 200,000 more acres of their best land, with freedom from all taxes, and the exclusive right to establish banks and issue bank-notes.

This left the local rulers with no alternative for their own source of revenue but a poll tax, to raise which the natives had to resort in large numbers to the Americans and Australians for employment and wages in cash. Tolstoy's contention here was that the exaction of sums of money in fact replaced the confiscation of the land as a means of enslavement. His analysis was fallacious. It was because the land stayed confiscated that the natives were forced into the state of hired labour. The

intruders' strength rested simply and solely on their possession of the land. The 'big financiers', the 'middle-sized bankers' and the 'usurers', unless they happen also to be landowners, may accordingly be deleted from Tolstoy's list of non-producers who enslave the producers. The latter have already been enslaved by the 'great landowners', the 'mine owners' and the 'middle-sized landowners'.

The same may be said of the 'great industrialists'; for, when men are assembled in large numbers for the production of an article, it is necessary for some of them to supervise the activities of the others, and provide the capital. They also have to undertake such responsibilities as estimating the demand for their products, and deciding on prices that will be competitive and also represent an adequate return on their outlay.

To continue with the list, it is hard to agree that 'merchants', 'petty traders' [including 'inn-keepers' and 'pedlars'] are unproductive. Trade, on a large or small scale, has been attested from the earliest times, and, under conditions in which land is available on equal terms to all, should be to the advantage of all participants. Based on occupational specialisation, it should ensure that peoples and individuals produce the goods and services for which their abilities best suit them, and receive in return for their surplus such goods and services as others are better able to provide. By such means, the aggregate wealth of the world is increased. How it is distributed depends to a considerable degree on the allocation of land rights.

Given Tolstoy's attitude to the State, it is surprising that he did not classify officials and policemen as counter – rather than non-productive; but at least there is no need for further discussion of this subject. It is also surprising to see 'teachers' on the list. Did he not think, while he was running his schools for peasants' children, that he was helping them to grow up to be more intelligent and efficient peasants, and therefore more productive? The remainder, as he probably realised, were innocent victims of the social system, exploited not exploiting.

This then was the Russian economic problem as Tolstoy saw it in the first half of the 1880s. The only genuine producers were those, such as peasants and factory workers, who worked with

their hands; and all other categories of occupation came under the heading of 'exploiters'. It would be unrealistic to expect these opinions to remain unamended for the last thirty years of his life – he was far too volatile for that, and there was room for improvement – but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity with which he held them, remarkable enough in a man of his wealth and antecedents, or to question the genuineness of his search for the 'green stick' and its secret.