

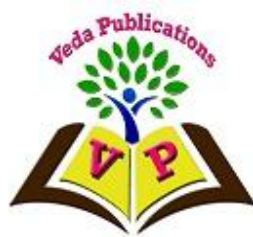


“NEITHER BE YE CALLED MASTERS”: MARXISM AND LEO TOLSTOY'S EMANCIPATORY TENETS

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ABSTRACT



One of the thematic proposition of Leo Tolstoy's fiction is the unconcealed concern over the fight between the haves and have nots. His art illustrates the distressing tale of many a proletariat and the advocacy for equality in a world that is torn apart by economic and social differences. Tolstoy's economic and social tenets suggest a strong similitude to the emancipatory tenets propounded by Karl Marx.

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Lev Nikolaevitch Tolstoy, popularly known as Leo Tolstoy, and widely regarded as a preacher and social reformer stands out as one of the most gigantic personalities in world literature; “a mighty oak towering high and solitary above his fellows in the field of literature” (Seltzer 7). Born on 28 August 1828 to a rich aristocratic family, Tolstoy spent much of his life at his family estate at Yasnaya Polyana, 200 miles from Moscow. T. Sharper Knowlson says, “By birth he is an aristocrat; by choice he is a peasant” (12). After a debauched youthful life, and service in the army, Tolstoy set up a school for peasant children and devoted his life to theological studies and emancipation of the working class. It was during his time as a commissioned officer in the army that he began his literary career, and his fame as a writer spread with the publication of his stories in *Sevastopol Sketches* (1855–56) and the novella *The Cossacks* (1863). During his long literary career, Tolstoy produced a number of novels, plays, pamphlets, short stories and critical essays. These have been translated into many languages including

English. His principal works among his short fiction are *Childhood and Youth* (1862); *The Cossacks* (1878); *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (1886); *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1887); *Family Happiness* (1888); *The Kreutzer Sonata*, (1890); *Master and Man* (1895); *Sevastopol* (1904-05); *Father Sergius and Other Stories and Plays* (1911); and *Hadji Murad and Other Stories* (1912). His notable works in fiction include *War and Peace* (1869); *Anna Karenina* (1877); *A Confession* (1882); and *Resurrection* (1899). After a long and distinguished literary career which spanned over a period of five decades, Tolstoy died in November 1910 at the age of eighty-two.

As an ardent disciple of the Gospel, Tolstoy interpreted the maxim, “Neither be ye called masters” (Matt, xxiii.10, 11), as that there should not be any class distinctions in society, and that no man should serve another man. The cause of evil in the world is the multiple divisions in society. Tolstoy sought for the abolition of law and governments. Seltzer says, “Tolstoy believed that Christianity is opposed to law, he necessarily believes also that it



puts an end to government which is based on law...It matters little what the form of government may be, he declares. The only difference is that under a despotic form of government, the authority is concentrated in a small number of oppressors and violence takes a crude form; under constitutional monarchies and republics, as in France and America, authority is divided among a great number of oppressors and the forms assumed by violence are less crude" (14). He rejects "laws that are written in books" (Stanoyevich 577), and accepts the divine law enshrined by Christ in the Bible.

Tolstoy was highly influenced by the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, particularly by the latter's theory of Social Contract. According to Levy, "In the Social Contract (1762), which begins with the memorable line, 'Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains,' Rousseau argues that a civil society based on a genuine social contract rather than a fraudulent one would provide people with a better kind of freedom in exchange for their natural independence, namely, political liberty, which he understands as obedience to a self-imposed law created by the 'general will'" (442). Like Rousseau, who propagated the need for freedom of the people in general, Tolstoy was concerned with the fettered life of the Russian peasants, who were strangulated by the manipulative and affluent landed bourgeoisie. Despite belonging to the aristocratic class, Tolstoy was moved by the plight of the Russian peasants, who were simple in ways and manners. In an article, *To the Working People*, written in 1902, Tolstoy attempted to enlighten the people, by arguing that they were deprived of the land which they formerly possessed and were forced to come to the cities as wage-workers or, practically, as slaves. The working people in cities, according to him, were in complete slavish dependence on their masters. These slaves could be liberated from the chains of bonded labour to which they were fettered only by the abolition of private and capitalistic property.

In ways more than one, Tolstoy echoes the socialist sentiment expressed by economists Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. In the jointly written *Communist Manifesto*, they say, "the distinguishing feature of communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois

property. But the modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few" (Marx 19). The installation of a classless society after a violent revolution by the proletariat is the aim of Marx. However, Tolstoy was an upholder and practitioner of non-violence. In his quest to find a pacific mode to bring about justice for the working people, he turned to the economic theory propounded by the American Herbert George. Tolstoy subscribed to Henry George's solution to the private land-holding problem in his book, *Progress and Poverty*. The American political economist proposed the abolishment of all private ownership of land, and establishment of a single tax to be paid to the government — by those who wanted to use the land, the amount of the tax depending on the land's location and value. Tolstoy was preoccupied with the twin problem of the abolition of serfdom and the abolition of private ownership of land. After reading George's book, he wrote that "it is a great step forward in our general social life" (Tolstoy 151). In the notable novella *Resurrection*, Prince Nekhyudov, the protagonist, who desires to relinquish his estates, speaks with his peasants and essentially explains the single tax system as propounded by Henry George.

Tolstoy disclaimed private land holding as much as he despised human law and governance, as demonstrated in *Ivan the Fool, God Sees the Truth But Waits* and *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Together with laws, Tolstoy repudiated property maintained by law. Property is opposed to love and to the principle of absolute equality among men. He believed that the peasant feeds the world through his labour and hard work, and thus plays an altruistic role:

The peasant was sorry to lose his breakfast, but 'It can't be helped,' said he. 'After all, I shan't die of hunger! No doubt whoever took the bread needed it. May it do him good!'

(*Selected Stories*, 314)

According to Alexandra Tolstoy, "for Tolstoy, the peasants were the real people — those who work with their hands and feed the world with what they



produce; they are close to nature and therefore closest to God" (150). He believed that in the proletariat were buried undetected talents, wisdom, and unflinching perseverance which could not develop without education. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" also explores this same theme when the poet wonders about the unknown and untried potential of the rural rustics.

Tolstoy devoted himself to the task of providing education for the peasant children. It was during these years that Tolstoy came to understand and love the Russian peasants. "It has been my whole life," he wrote to Alexandra Tolstoy, "it has been my monastery, my church into which I escaped, finding refuge from all the anxieties, doubts and temptations of life" (Tolstoy 151). The closer he came to the peasants, the more Tolstoy was concerned about their poverty. In his articles *What Is to Be Done?* and *The Slavery of Our Time* he tried to find a solution to the problem of increasing the amount of land for those who really worked on it and thus improve their condition. Through the stories of the simple rustic peasants, he imparts a moral message for the necessity of simplicity as exemplified by them:

We [peasants] may live roughly but at least we are free from anxiety. You [the wealthy] live in better style than we do but though you often earn more than you need, you are likely to lose all you have...Our way is safer. Though a peasant's life is not a fat one, it is a long one.

(*Selected Stories*, 317)

Tolstoy's concern for the emancipation of the rustic peasants and his love for the commoners, made him seek for an economic policy which could deliver justice bereft of violence. As an ardent admirer of Christ, his primary source was the Bible from which he based his socialistic maxim on the line, 'Neither be ye called masters'. He also believed that Henry George's economic policy was the best suited for the Russian people.

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