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Lev N. Tolstoy: A Radical Critic of Industrialisation*

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Il'ja Efimovič Repin, *Tolstoj ploughing* (1887)

*This is an abridged version, translated by Edward Smith, of my Introduction to Lev. N. Tolstoj, *La schiavitù del nostro tempo. Scritti su lavoro e proprietà*, Orthotes, Napoli, 2011, pp. 9-42.

Abstract

Among the sources of “degrowth”, it is worth considering the work of Lev Tolstoy. The Russian writer was, in fact, one of the most radical critics of industrialisation and of the economic thinkers who justified and supported economic development.

In the last years of his life, the Russian writer followed a simple lifestyle: he rejected luxury, the consumption of meat and the products of industry, and praised country life. His choice of simplicity, which in his time was an object of derision and underestimation, rested on deep religious convictions and on articulate analysis of the consequences of industrialization in society, of the role of money in the economy and in human relations, of the consequences of the division of labour in the minds and lives of workers. As is well known, his thought profoundly influenced Gandhi and his project of village economy.

A reflection on the thought of Tolstoy in the light of our present problems should start with the issue of the ownership of the common good of the land, a property that Tolstoy considered unacceptable on moral and social grounds. It was “the great iniquity” from which all other forms of dispossession, slavery and social injustice derived.

Through Tolstoy’s letters and some of his fundamental works – *What Then Must We Do?* (1882-1886), *The first step* (1891), *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893); *The Slavery of Our Time* (1900); *The great iniquity* (1905) – it is possible to reconstruct his critical analysis of the economic and political thought of his time and reflect on the radical solutions he proposed.

Religious Premises

At the end of the sixties, Tolstoy went through a crisis of anxiety and despair. Tormented by the thought of suffering and death, by the sense of vanity in everything, and disgusted by the mendacity that surrounded him, he pondered the meaning of existence, renouncing his own convictions and his own way of life. It was then that the peasants, workers, appeared to him as the singular keepers of existential truth, of an understanding that the rich, the educated and the idlers had mislaid.

I began to grow attached to these men. The more I learned of their lives, the lives [...] the more I liked them [...] the life of my own circle of rich and learned men, not only became repulsive, but lost all meaning whatever. All our actions, our reasoning, our science and art, all appeared to me in a new light. I understood that it was all child’s play, that it was useless to seek a meaning in it. The life of the working classes, of the whole of mankind, of those that create life, appeared to me in its true significance. I understood that this was life itself, and that the meaning given to this life was a true one, and I accepted it.¹

The years that followed, the period that he considered “the most fervent of a new inner orientation of [his] entire conception of the world”,² were years of intense religious research. In some works: *A Confession* (1880), *The Four Gospels Unified and Translated* (1880-1881), *What I Believe* (1884), he traced his anguished path. He had sought the fundamentals of Christianity in a reading of the Gospel that ignored the interpretation and theology of the Church. To read the Gospel in a simple and direct way, and to understand the teachings of Christ, meant to render himself as a child. The words of Jesus: “if you do not receive me like a child you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” are, for Tolstoy, the key to reading the New Testament. The helpless condition of childhood assumes an exemplary value: it is a way to knowledge and a life choice.

In the principle of non-resistance to evil, expressed in the *Sermon on the Mount*

¹ L.N. TOLSTOY, *A Confession* (1884), Walter Scott, London 1889, pp. 100-101.

² L.N. TOLSTOY, *Prefazione alle opere di Guy de Maupassant*, in ID., *Scritti sull'arte*, Boringhieri, Torino 1964, p. 100.

(Matthew 5:39-41), Tolstoy identified the binding law of human action, the foundation common to all religions, the law written on the heart of everyone.³ His vision of life, in fact, is based on the certainty of universal human feeling, whereby essential needs, affections and moral guidelines are always and everywhere fundamentally recognizable and he comes to conceive of the divine as “the only way to consider the fundamental principles to the understanding of good and evil”.⁴

True religion appears to him to be in harmony with reason; the relationship between man and the infinite life that surrounds him and guides his actions cannot but be in agreement with his reason.⁵ To the word “reason”, the Russian writer attributed an essentially ethical significance; it is not abstract rationality, rather the capacity to combine thought and action, wisdom from life, the search for the meaning of life. And life is a divine principle that manifests itself in love, “the awareness, in ourselves, of the divine”.

Adhering to one's own authentic nature means, then, recognizing the ethical foundation that exists in every human being, and the law of love as the supreme law of life, a universal law, comprehensible to everyone and which cannot admit any exceptions without its meaning being entirely destroyed.

From such premises – ethical, religious and interpretative – Tolstoy's criticism of society takes its starting point; they allow him to recognize, in all its breadth and depth, the violence inherent in human relationships, a violence that has its origins in the organization of the State and the perversion of the Christian message by the Church. The universal law and simple “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” had gone unnoticed, obscured by mendacity and all the laws – ecclesiastical, political and scientific – invented by “rulers, scholars and the wealthy” – aimed at maintaining inequality among men, particularly that which divided them into workers and parasites.

Towards a spiritual conception of work

By reflecting on the condition of the workers, those who “bear the weight of their own lives and ours”, on the gap between manual and intellectual labor, he approached a new spiritual conception of work, a constant subject in his theoretical and political writings in the years to come. Artistic activity, to which he had dedicated “all his strength”, becomes distasteful to him and is the first form of human activity he puts up for discussion. Since it presupposes the exploitation of others' work, artistic activity is an integral part of a system of corruption, an expression of the wealthy classes' cult of pleasure. In contemporary literary trends, in fact, he identified disinterest, even disdain, for the working classes that replicated the unjust division between human beings.

Artistic creativity should have had the goal of raising awareness, communicating feelings that spring from a moral awakening – as had happened in America at the time of the development of the Abolitionist movement, and in Russia with the repeal of serfdom – but instead it ignored the crucial contemporary question: the subjugation of workers who lived in perpetual misery, in ignorance, “disdained by those whom they dressed, nourished and served”. Such a contradiction had to be resolved. He would write to Romain Rolland in

³ For Tolstoy's thoughts on religion see P.C. BORI, *Tolstoj. Oltre la letteratura (1875-1910)*, Edizioni cultura della pace, Fiesole 1991 e a A. SALOMONI, *Il pensiero religioso e politico di Tolstoj in Italia (1886-1910)*, Olschki, Firenze 1996.

⁴ *Le lettere di Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj 1876-1910*, vol. II, a cura di L. RADOYCE, Longanesi, Milano 1978, p. 42, letter to Strachov on 17-18 dicembre 1877.

⁵ “Reason, or rather Tolstoyan *razumenie*, is a wisdom that moves from the concrete, from life that comes before knowledge and transcends individuality. The origin of these terms in Tolstoy is not from the Enlightenment, but is Biblical, and goes back, above all, to his personal reading of the Wisdom Literature in 1879”, P.C. BORI, *L'altro Tolstoj*, cit., p. 162.

1887:

The main error of this society has been, and still is today, that of liberating itself from [manual] labor and to profit, without compensation, from the work of the people, from the poor, ignorant and unhappy classes who are slaves, like the slaves of ancient times. The first test of the sincerity of people from this society, which professes Christian, philosophical and humanitarian principles, is to try to escape, as much as possible, from this contradiction. The simplest method to manage it, and that is always within reach, is manual labor.⁶

From the end of the Seventies, Tolstoy abandoned his literary activities; he would still write stories, and some masterpieces – such as *Resurrection* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* – but he mainly dedicated himself to the production of essays and theoretical writings in which he set out his radical critique of power. He would perform manual work and practise vegetarianism, seeking to adapt his way of life to Christian precepts of voluntary simplicity, and adhere to a religious conception of life requiring action in consideration of others. In the satisfaction of the material and spiritual needs of human nature, for himself and others, the writer would discern with ever greater clarity the profound meaning of human existence.

When, in 1885, he read Timofei Bondarev's treatise,⁷ *Industry and Parasitism, or the Triumph of the Farmer*, Tolstoy, who was working on *What Then Must We Do?*, grasped the analogies with what he was elaborating on the moral value of working the land, and on the unjust division of humanity between those who produce the goods necessary for human life and those who consume them. The central theme of the work by Bondarev – a peasant who had read nothing other than the Bible – was the duty of accepting the original law, older than those received by Moses, dating from the beginning of human history: the law of “working by the sweat of your brow”. All the ills of the world, he maintained, derived from the denial of such an obligation; reflections that, to Tolstoy, appeared more real and penetrating than any to be found in all of Russian thought.

My opinion is that all Russian thought – from the time it first began to express itself – with all its universities and academies, with its books and newspapers, has not produced anything similar for merit, strength and clarity as has been expressed by two peasants: Sjutaev⁸ and Bondarev.⁹

In the introduction to the French translation, which appeared in 1890, Tolstoy praised the clarity with which Bondarev denounced the unnatural division between manual and intellectual labor, while emphasizing the universal value of his ideas. Everyone – those who believed in the Old Testament or the Gospel or simply followed their own reasoning – could recognize the intimate truth in Bondarev's words.

⁶ See the text of the letter in L. N. TOLSTOJ, *La schiavitù del nostro tempo. Scritti su lavoro e proprietà* a cura di B. Bianchi, Orthotes, Napoli 2010, p. 48.

⁷ Timofej Bondarev (1820-1898), born into a peasant family, renounced Christianity and embraced Judaism. For this he was first incarcerated and then deported to Siberia as an apostate. Tolstoy undertook to arrange for the publication of the Bondarev manuscript, which appeared in Russia only in 1906. Regarding Bondarev and his relationship with the Russian writer, see A. SALOMONI, *Il lavoro del pensiero. Il contadino Timofej Bondarev e lo scrittore Lev Tolstoj (1885-1898)*, Name, Genova 2001.

⁸ Tolstoy met the peasant Vasilij Sjutaev (1820-1892) in 1881. From his direct reading of the Gospel Sjutaev reached the conclusion that the Church had strayed from the evangelical message; he refused all its outward practices, including prayer, private property, the use of money, military service and the payment of taxes. Regarding Sjutaev, see A. SINJAVSKIJ, *Ivan lo scemo. Paganesimo, magia e religione del popolo russo*, Guida, Napoli 1993, pp. 403-419.

⁹ A. SALOMONI, *Il lavoro del pensiero...*, cit., p. 38.

Bondarev had expounded his conception of farm work as service, as an expression of the law of love that unites human beings and overcomes the hateful division into classes. Above all else, Tolstoy appreciated the reference to universal values and the fact that the author had not “skirted around the truth”, had not expressed reservations or imposed limits.

Earning one's daily bread is not a way of life amongst many, but “life itself, the only human life by which man can demonstrate his highest human qualities”.¹⁰ To work in close contact with nature is a source of joy, a joy born of the awareness of “our union with the whole, that time hides from us”.¹¹

Such a conception of work distanced Tolstoy from Bondarev who viewed “working by the sweat of your brow” as a painful expiation of original sin. While, furthermore, both Bondarev and Sjutaev saw the State as a force capable of remedying the ills of society – and invoked its intervention – Tolstoy condemned State power as the source of all violence. The writer's interest, in fact, turns rather on the theme of the origin of violence, on the relations of domination, and on the nature of oppression.

How had it happened that men had drifted away from the original law “you earn your bread by the sweat of your brow”? What were the human choices and the paths that had led to oppression and the social division of labor? In a letter to Bondarev on 26 March 1886, referring to the institution of monarchy amongst the Jews (Samuel 8 and 10:17-27), he indicated war as the origin of slavery:

Some took power over others, armed a certain number of men, and subdued them to themselves. Precisely these people, the leaders and soldiers, are the first ones to have renounced the original law. They began appropriating grain for themselves, and then money, so it was possible to avoid working in the fields. Afterwards they began to share it with their favorites. And so, men with white hands made their appearance.¹²

The original violence, then, derived from the desire to get away from the burden of work and load it onto the shoulders of others, placing oneself outside the basic human struggle to live, a violence legitimized by law, justified from time to time by the Churches, philosophy, and the economy. In the same way, in contemporary society, a “diabolical and astute” theory, that of the division of labor, justified the reduction of the majority to a condition of servility and offered the others a false sense of social usefulness.

In the years to come, in numerous writings, the Russian writer would thunder on the issue of the division of labor and its justification, which hides the priorities of human duty, particularly in the works “*What Then Must We Do?*” and *The Slavery of Our Times*.

What Then Must We Do?

To participate in the census as thousands are doing at the moment, is to look at oneself closely in the mirror¹³.

In 1881 Tolstoy moved to Moscow where he had the chance to observe and reflect on urban poverty. The Moscow census of 1882 appeared to him as the opportunity to address a great social question and to look at society and himself in its mirror.

In *What Then Must We Do?*, the work written between 1882 and 1886, he set out his

¹⁰ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, a cura di S. Bernardini, Garzanti, Milano 1980, p. 514, 2 aprile 1906.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 516, 17 aprile 1906.

¹² Cited in A. SALOMONI, *Il lavoro del pensiero...*, cit., p. 98.

¹³ Cited from R. WORTHMAN, *Tolstoy and the Perception of Poverty: Tolstoy's «What Then Must We do?»*, in *Tolstoj oggi*, a cura di S. Graciotti, V. Strada, Sansoni, Firenze 1980, p. 49.

impressions of this experience: the widespread acceptance of the ideas that it was legitimate to exploit the labor of others, of money as an instrument of power, and of notion of the corruption of workers' minds brought about by the use of money.

The first part is dedicated to his personal reactions to poverty, to his desperate attempts to alleviate it, and the ingrained prejudices that associate poverty with moral abasement. The gesture of offering money fills him with shame; poverty could not be mitigated by money and money could not bring the rich and the poor closer together. It was not money that could change their lives. In the course of his visits to the poorest areas of Moscow he observes himself most closely of all, and he condemns himself.

The sense of impotence and shame, revealing his errors to him, is the feeling that inclines him towards poverty, that indicates to him the need for a change in his own life and that of his social class. The answer to the question "What must we do" was, for Tolstoy, to repent, "in the fullest sense of the word".

I understood that men's misfortunes come from the slavery in which some hold others. I understood that the slavery of our time was produced by the violence of militarism, by the appropriation of the land and by the exaction. of money. And having understood the meaning of all three instruments of the new slavery, I could not but wish to free myself from taking part in it.¹⁴

He himself, his family, the wealthy, they should all feel ashamed, renounce their privileges, climb down off the backs of the workers and embrace a new ideal of life. If the members of the privileged classes did not see the error of their own way of life it was because they were convinced that the social differences had been introduced by an external force, beyond their control, a way of thinking instilled and supported by the Church, philosophy, the law, and the political economy. Those theories had to be demolished to expose the falsity of their supposed laws and the immorality of their aims.

The Tolstoyan critique of contemporary political thought takes its starting point in a reflection on the meaning of money. He needed to fully understand the nature of money. To understand it he "turned to science".

Money is not a means of exchange, as political economy claims, but rather an instrument of domination. The dominion of a few over the others "economists have called the 'iron law' while the instrument by means of which this action is produced they call a 'medium of exchange'".¹⁵ Money is not a commodity like all the others, its value is not objective, but constantly altered at the discretion of the dominator.

Money, the most convenient means to exploit labor, is necessary to increase the number of the subjugated and accomplices of subjugation. The economists, the socialists and the marxists consider the characteristics of production and exchange as objective data, they don't morally condemn this domination and, avoiding simple explanations, put forward a chimerical solution. The political economy, for example, claims that there are three factors that contribute to every product: land, capital and labor. Wealth is, in this way, divided into yield, capitalists' interest, and wages.

But I see that this is not true. Besides the land the sun, water, and the social organization (which preserves these fields from trespass), the workers' knowledge, and their ability to speak and to understand words, and many other factors which for some reason political economy does not take into account - all take part in the production of this hay¹⁶.

¹⁴ L. N. TOLSTOY, *What Then Must We Do?* (1886), translated by Aylmer Maude, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1925, p. 84 (<http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/whaththenmustwedo.pdf>).

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 66.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 56.

The elements of production are much more complex and include natural resources and cultural and social factors, such as the knowledge of the workers and their joint efforts. That which the economists describe as an objective characteristic of production is none other than the alteration of the natural way to produce; or, rather, that which you can observe before human nature has been violated when, with the division of labor, there have still been no illegitimate claims demanded by some over the freedom of others.

Via the critique of contemporary political thought, of the theories of Malthus, Comte, Darwin and Marx – or rather, of the “experimental, positivist, evolutionist and critical sciences” – in the last part of his book Tolstoy turns to the issue of the division of labor.

A new “imaginary science”, sociology – interpreting society as an organism in which each individual plays a role indispensable to the life of the whole – offered a further justification for the division of labor. As a paragon, perfect as a parable – that of society as a living organism – it was a fragile foundation for an entire discipline.

The division of labor in industrial society, rather than being an exchange of services, is the oldest and simplest form of the violence that lurks behind the false splendor of progress. The advantages of industrial and economic progress – the railway and machinery – presented as self-evident and indisputable, have not only worsened the workers' lives, but have tightened their chains even more.

In the years between *What Then Must We Do?* and *The Slavery of Our Times*, in particular during the Nineties, Tolstoy's thoughts turned primarily to the theme of war and militarism. The arms race and the adoption of compulsory military service by all the nations of Europe led the Russian writer to analyze in depth State violence and the ways of exercising power. These are the themes of his most extensive and articulated philosophical work of this period, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893). In it, Tolstoy focuses on the multiple influences that creep into the private and collective lives of individuals, placing at the center of his analysis the resources of power in the manipulation of the conscience, and investigating the motives that lead to obedience.¹⁷ In dealing with the topic of the contradiction between life and conscience, and everyone's participation in the violence that supports class divisions and war, he writes:

Our whole life is in flat contradiction with all we know, and with all we regard as necessary and right. This contradiction runs through everything, in economic life, in political life, and in international life. As though the had forgotten what we knew and put away for a time the principles we believe in (we cannot help still believing in them because they are the only foundation we have to base our life on) we do the very opposite of all that our conscience and our common sense require of us.¹⁸

The shift between conscience and action, the divergence between ethical principles and collective life, has penetrated all social relationships.

Governments and the ruling classes no longer take their stand on right or even on the semblance of justice, but on a skilful organization carried to such a point of perfection by the aid of science that everyone is caught in the circle of violence and has no chance of escaping from it. This

¹⁷ On this topic I refer to my essay *Tolstoj e l'obiezione di coscienza* in *Culture della disobbedienza. Tolstoj e I duchobory 1895-1910*, a cura di B. Bianchi, E. Magnanini, A. Salomoni, Bulzoni, Roma 2004, pp. 9-122.

¹⁸ L. N. TOLSTOY, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893), translated by Constance Garnett, New York 1994 (<http://www.blackmask.com>), pp. 54-55.

circle is made up now of four methods of working upon men, joined together like the limes of a chain ring.¹⁹

To the old methods of achieving submission, intimidation and corruption, they added insidious new practices to lead to the arrest of men's moral development. The entire power of the State is, in fact, based on a disconnect from responsibility. Tolstoy's reflection on the relationship of dominion, on the "seduction by the State" – in whose name "the most ferocious crimes against the masses"²⁰ are committed – leads him to return to the theme of labor and the relationship of domination inherent in industrial production, and to lay out what he had been developing over the years. He finished *The Slavery of Our Times* in the summer of 1900. Writing the book had completely absorbed him, as he notes in his diary on 23 June: "I have not written for more than a month. All this time I have spent writing *The Slavery of Our Times* in an uninterrupted outpouring. I added many new things and clarifications".²¹

The Slavery of Our Times

On the thirty-six hours, it seems to be going well. It is important to show that the actual liberation that lies ahead will be similar to that from serfdom, that is, they will loosen a chain only when will they have another one ready. Slavery gets abolished when serfdom is already in force. Serfdom gets abolished when the land is already expropriated and taxes have been established; now the means of employment are removed, they get rid of taxes. They will give, they have the intention of giving, the means of employment to the working class, only on the condition of compulsory work for everyone.²²

The underlying idea of the writing is that one part of humanity has never escaped from a condition of servility. There was never a form of slavery abolished without there being the prior presentation of conditions to achieve a new and more efficient form of slavery.

Like many of his contemporaries, Tolstoy denounces the worsening working conditions compared to direct and personal slavery. For most critics of industrial society, however, the comparison was little more than a rhetorical device. Tolstoy, on the other hand, sees, in a very profound way, the intimate connections between the various forms of slavery through history; the expansion of subservience and complicity in an ever increasing number of people; and identifies the subtle chains of voluntary servitude; in the first place the new habit of consumption that penetrates the minds of the workers "like water penetrates arid soil", holding them captive to forced labor. Some years earlier he had described his dark forebodings:

The factory chimney belches out a mass of products for the requirements of the world market that it now seeks to conquer [...] And so the civilized European horde [...] will throw itself on the defenseless people, "savages", and will conquer them... When this happens, when all the peoples bow before the black smoke of the workshops' chimneys, then the European working class, too will, corrupt itself with luxury, like the Romans debauched themselves after conquering the world.²³

Yet, economic and social thought did not analyze this form of voluntary slavery even

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 92.

²⁰ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, cit., p. 448.

²¹ Ivi, p. 445, 13 marzo 1900.

²² Ibidem.

²³ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Conversazione sul socialismo*, annotated by Secretary Teneromo, pseudonym of I.P. Fainerman (1862-1925), in ID., *Scritti politici. Per la liberazione nonviolenta dei popoli*, a cura degli Amici di Tolstoj, Sankara, Roma 2005, p. 110.

though it was the “most tenacious and difficult to eliminate”.

In the book *The Slavery of Our Times*, in comparison with most contemporary analyses, the interpretation of the expropriation of the workers is far more radical. It spoke not only of the extraction of surplus value, an extortion related to property and competition; the worker was not just expropriated from the land, from the value of his work, from the creative act and the from use of its product, but also from the moral choice and judgment on the subject of his own work, constrained as he was to produce useless and harmful goods that in the end would hold him in their thrall. “In my opinion, not only is work not a virtue, but in our badly organized society, it is most often a means to moral anesthesia”.²⁴

A society based on violence and exploitation, in fact, needs an organization that isolates individuals and severs the relationship between their actions – directed and coordinated by others – and their moral responsibility. Tolstoy returns to the theme of the division of labor, one of the most insidious fetishes of the time, as he had already written in *What Then Must We Do?*.

The division of labor is necessary, but to be just it must be born of free will and agreement. In industrial society it is the expression of dominion because it is based on the separation between those who do the work and those who coordinate it, a separation that only coercion can guarantee. The socialists and the Marxists, who do not hold it up for discussion but accept it as an inevitable consequence of progress, prefigure a hierarchically organized authoritarian society. It was an illusion to think that, once liberated from capitalistic economic forms, production would have allowed for the well-being of all and the harmonious development of society. Would collective ownership of the means of production perhaps have made capitalistic production's degrading specialization disappear? Might it have eliminated slavery?

To the questions, who will have to wear a muzzle and make white-lead ? who will be stokers ? miners ? and cesspool cleaners ? they are either silent, or foretell that all these things will be so improved that even work at cesspools, and underground, will afford pleasant occupation. That is how they represent to themselves future economic conditions, both in Utopias such as that of Bellamy and in scientific works.²⁵

The critique of Marxism

Marxism – Tolstoy writes – does not place the freedom of labor at the center of its analysis. Marx had identified the causes of industrial servitude in the acts of being turned off the land and repressive legislation, but on the need to remove those causes he remained silent. On the contrary, he considered the process of proletarianization inevitable and entrusted the arrival of a free society to a kind of fatalism.²⁶ Already in 1893, after a conversation with young social democrats, Tolstoy had noted these considerations in his diary:

They say: “the capitalist organization will pass into the hands of the workers and then the oppression of the workers will cease, and the unequal distribution of income” but who then will organize the workers and direct them?, I ask myself. “It stands to reason, the workers will organize themselves”. But the capitalist system is in place for the very reason that all technical workers need someone in charge. If there is production, there will be direction, there will be abuses of power,

²⁴ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Il non agire* (1893), in ID., *Il risveglio interiore. Scritti sull'uomo, la religione, la società*, a cura di G. Leoni, N. Caleffi, Incontri, Sassuolo 2010, p. 37.

²⁵ L.N. TOLSTOY, *The Slavery of Our Time*, The Free Age Press, Maldon 1900, pp. 4-5

²⁶ Refer particularly to paragraph IV of *Slavery of Our Time*.

precisely that which you are currently fighting against.²⁷

A production system dominated by technology, and therefore by the division of labor, would not be put at the service of a free society, but would reproduce a slavery “just as frightening, but more humiliating than the old one”.²⁸ The Tolstoyan critique of Marxism anticipates, in many ways, that of Simone Weil. For the Russian writer, as for the French philosopher, the mine is “an evil vision for the socialist doctrine”, “the bankruptcy of the doctrine”:

When the factories are nationalized [...], no one will want to go into the coal mines. It will require the renunciation of civilization or the introduction of the lash. In one case or the other it is the bankruptcy of the doctrine.²⁹

And Simone Weil in 1934:

The suppression of private property will certainly not be enough to lessen the exhaustion in the mines and the factories that will continue to weigh as heavily as slavery on those who are subject to it.³⁰

It was not possible, therefore, to discern any premise of liberation in capitalism; the capitalist society was so remote as to have developed inside itself the conditions to give rise to socialism.

Perhaps it can even lead to [socialism], but a forced socialism. The workers will be constrained to work together and will work less, and the pay will be higher, but the same servitude will remain. It will be necessary for men to work together for one another [...] And from this forced capitalist relationship an improvement of the material conditions of the workers may arrive, but it cannot by any means lead to a satisfied life.³¹

The Russian thinker criticized the analytical presuppositions of Marxism and the socialist movement as much as their solutions to the social question. Socialism is a “weak, deceptive and misleading theory”,³² he had written to the Japanese pacifist Abe-Isō, because it purports to derive the laws of human nature from external observation and not from its conscience, and doesn't consider each person's way of life. For this reason, as Maude wrote in 1901, Tolstoj had scant respect for Marx's doctrine.³³

It was not objective general laws that could guide the individual, but moral law, it alone indisputable.

Moral Law does not preestablish any form of political or family life, nor the relationships between States, nor economics, but demands only to refrain, in all the areas of human life, from actions contrary to that single law that is innate in the soul of everyone and is expressed and recognized by all the great religions of the world. To set down in advance the best forms of social and economic life according to one's own point of view

²⁷ For this extract from the diary, L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Il risveglio interiore...*, cit., p. 114, 16 agosto 1893.

²⁸ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Conversazione sul socialismo*, cit., p. 109.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ S. WEIL, *Riflessioni sulle cause della libertà e dell'oppressione sociale* (1934), Adelphi, Milano 2008, p. 24.

³¹ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, cit., p. 397, 2 maggio 1896.

³² Letter of 23 ottobre 1904, in *Le lettere di Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj 1876-1910*, cit., pp. 453-454. Abe-Isō (1865-1949), Christian socialist and pacifist, during the Russo-Japanese War he opposed the conflict and entered into contact with Tolstoj.

³³ A. MAUDE, *Tolstoj and His Problems*, G. Richards, London 1904, pp. 43-44.

always ends up in violation of the imperatives of moral law: “The laws that govern the economic development of humanity – I do not pretend to know them and I would not assume the responsibility to say I do”.³⁴ Tolstoy would focus on the negative meaning of freedom in a letter to Chertkov on 20 May 1904.

Governments – like revolutionaries – consider freedom as something positive, as the sum of human rights. Freedom for each one of us must be such as not to violate the freedom of others. Mountains of books have been written on this topic, with various commentaries and explanations. So much has been written about it precisely because the definition that serves as a basis is wrong. Freedom of individuals in relation to other people is not a positive concept, but negative. Man is free not when his rights are determined in this or that way, but only when no one forces him to do anything. The determination of man's rights includes the concept of the limitation of man's activities and the limitation can be arrived at only by force or by the threat of force.³⁵

The socialist message, furthermore, like that of the Church, is all projected towards the future. With the exception of the struggle for the improvement of working conditions, “something useful and natural”, socialism has “no content nor achievements in the present”.³⁶

Freeing ourselves from Slavery

To liberate ourselves from slavery required, in the first place, to recognize its deepest causes. The “root of evil”, of the enslavement of many on the part of a few, for which has arisen a complex organization of violence and oppression, lay in the desire to dominate, “to win for oneself as much power as possible over others”.

Taxation. The usurpation of land, and the power of capitalists, do not constitute the fundamental cause of the miserable condition of the working classes, but only a consequence. The essential reason why millions of workingmen live and labor under the orders of the minority, is not that the minority has usurped the land and the instruments of labor and gathers taxes, but that it has the power to do so; because there is force, and because there is an army which is in the hands of the minority and is ready to kill those who refuse to obey the will of the minority.³⁷

The diffusion and justification of violence is explained, then, by the power of the interests, with a benefit to individuals or groups, but above all with the perversion of the Christian doctrine by the Churches, with the deceit of governments intent on arresting men's moral development, to make them lose the deeper meaning of the religious message.

It was important, to Tolstoy, to reaffirm these principles to the workers to whom, in 1901, he dedicated the book, *The Only Way*, in which he picks up the conclusions of the work of the previous year.

To free themselves from slavery the workers would have to exercise negative freedom: disobedience. As soon as they had the possibility, they should refuse to work for the capitalists, to work for less than the agreed salary, to cover supervising roles, to offer themselves for military service, or to be customs officers or policemen.³⁸ Only obedience to Divine Law – the only one common to all human beings – is truly revolutionary and can free them from criminal obedience to the State.

³⁴ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Sul socialismo*, in ID., *Scritti politici*, cit.

³⁵ *Le lettere di Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj 1876-1910*, cit., pp. 430-431.

³⁶ L.N. TOLSTOJ, annotation in his diary 17 luglio 1904, in ID., *Scritti politici*, cit., p. 118. In referring to Marxism, Tolstoy sometimes uses the term “science” or “socialism”.

³⁷ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *The Root of the Evil*, «North American Review», n. DXXXIII, april 1901, pp. 493-494.

³⁸ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *L'unico mezzo*, in ID., *Scritti politici*, cit., p. 64.

The purely human ideals – justice, the common good, progress – being able to be understood by each in his own way, are not able to oppose violence and the power of government that try to apply every kind of ideological and psychological conditioning.

Only the religious conception of life, incompatible with submission or the participation in power, could really destroy power; only the recognition of inviolable equality between human beings could get rid of slavery.

With these words, in January 1904, when thanking Chertkov for the biography of Garrison³⁹ that he had sent, he indicated the way to eliminate slavery:

Garrison [...] understood very early that the reason for slavery was not the accidental and temporary seizure of millions of blacks by the Southerners, but in the general and radical recognition, against Christian doctrine, on the right of coercion by some people over others [...] Garrison disagreed with slavery not based on the suffering of the slaves, nor the cruelty of the Southerners, nor the social equality of all men, but rather on the eternal Christian law of the renunciation of responding to evil by force. Garrison grasped what the most progressive amongst the opposers of slavery did not understand: the only irrefutable argument against slavery lay in contesting the right of every man to limit the freedom of another under any circumstances.⁴⁰

The inviolability of freedom and life is, then, an absolute principle that admits no exceptions; it is valid in every circumstance and extends to all living creatures.⁴¹

The Tolstoyan reflection on slavery, “on the right of coercion by some over others”, does not overlook the topic of domination by men over women. The writer dedicated particularly intense pages to female enslavement in the spheres of both work and home in *What Then Must we Do?* and in *The Kretzer Sonata*.

The influence of Henry George

But in reality, the cause is that which always has and always must result in slavery—the monopolization by some of what nature has designed for all.⁴²

In all his theoretical writings on the issue of work and on the workplace question, Tolstoy had identified the private ownership of land as one of the causes of the slavery of the workers. The land, like air, water, and sunlight, conditions indispensable to human life, cannot be considered the exclusive property of anyone. Despite every attempt to turn it into a right, the ownership of land exists by virtue of violence.

Both in *What Then Must We Do?*, and *The Slavery of Our Times*, Tolstoy referred to Henry George,⁴³ his proposal for the abolition of property in land and a single tax on land,

³⁹ William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), cofounder of the American Antislavery Society in 1883, he inserted his principles inspired by non-violence into the *Declaration of Sentiments*, the constituting document of the first abolitionist association. Garrison's son entered into correspondence with Tolstoy.

⁴⁰ The letter, to my knowledge, has not been translated into Italian. Cited by H. STÖCKER, *Verkünder und Verwirklicher: Beiträge zum Gewaltproblem nebst einem zum ersten Male in deutscher Sprache veröffentlichten Briefe Tolstois*, Verlag der Neuen Generation, Berlin 1928, pp. 23-27.

⁴¹ On the exploitation of animals, on the inviolability of their lives, and on the ethical choice of vegetarianism I refer to L. N. TOLSTOJ, *Contro la caccia e il mangiar carne*, a cura di G. Ditadi, trad. it. di G. Gazzeri, Este (Padova), Isonomia, 1994.

⁴² H. GEORGE, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth, The Remedy* (1879), Page, & Co., Garden City, NY 1912, p. 210.

⁴³ Henry George (1839-1897), American politician and economist, known for his proposal of a “single tax”, through which private ownership of land would be abolished and it would be recognized as a common good. George's most important writing was published in 1879, in New York, with the title *Progress and Poverty. An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth. The Remedy*. The first Russian edition appeared in 1896, and in Italian in 1888. For Henry George, Christianity, condemnation by the Pope see: F. NICKLASON, *Henry George: Social Gospeller*, “American Quarterly”, a. 3,

as a useful proposition, but not conclusive. Any system of taxation, in fact, having to rely on government action, would have left the way open to State violence and slavery.

In his diaries and in his correspondence, by contrast, particularly from the beginning of the century until the year of his death, Tolstoy devotes a lot of attention to the American economist. The first mention of George is found in a letter to his wife, Sofia Andreevna, on 22 February 1885.

I read my George [...]. It is an important book. This step is an important one on the roads towards the common good, as the freeing of the peasant and the liberation from private property in land [...] It is necessary to read George, who has clearly and definitely presented this problem [...] My demands go much further than his, but this step is one on the first rung of the ladder that I'm climbing.⁴⁴

That same day, and again on 24 February, he expresses his appreciation for *Progress and Poverty* to Chertkov.

This book is wonderful, but is beyond value, for it destroys all the cobwebs of Spencer-Mill political economy [...] There is weakness in it, as with anything created by man, but there is a genuine humanitarian thought and hearth, not scientific trash. I would like to learn his address and write a letter. I see in him a brother.⁴⁵

Attracting Tolstoy to George in the first place was the call to universal principles and the evangelical message, as he would write on 31 March 1909 to English supporters of the single tax,

Henry George is especially to be appreciated by those who profess Christianity in its true sense, for not only are the foundations of his teaching, but also the method truly Christian. As Jesus in his utterance, "Ye have heard that it was said: Thou shalt not kill, ... but I say unto you, Resist no evil", never, absolutely in no case, can be broken, that neither may the pretext of retribution or of defense serve as a reason for the violation of this commandment: exactly does Henry George point out that the commandment "Thou shalt not steal", can and should in no case be violated.⁴⁶

Like Tolstoy, Henry George too had come into conflict with Church hierarchy: in 1881 he had published *The Land Question*, a work in which he accused the Churches of impeding social justice; in 1887 one of his most ardent supporters, Father Edward McGlynn,⁴⁷ had been excommunicated. In 1891 George published *The Condition of Labor, an Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII*, a response to the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in which the Pontiff condemned theories that denied the right to private property. The proposal for the single tax struck Tolstoy by its simplicity, its universal applicability and its proximity to the spirit of Russian peasants and their way of thinking.

vol. 22, 1970, pp. 649-664. For George's influence on Tolstoy's thought, see K.C. WENZER, *The Influence of Henry George on Tolstoy*, in ID., *An Anthology of Tolstoy's Spiritual Economics*, vol. II of the Henry George Centennial Trilogy, University of Rochester Press, Rochester-New York 1997, pp. 17-52.

⁴⁴ Cited in K.C. WENZER, *The Influence...*, cit., p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 22.

⁴⁶ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij* (Complete Works), Moskva 1928-1958, vol. LXXIX, pp. 136-137.

⁴⁷ Edward McGlynn (1837-1900) was one of the most influential Catholic clergymen in New York. He supported Henry George's candidacy for City mayor in 1886 and founded the Anti-Poverty Society with him in 1887. He came into conflict with the Church hierarchy and was excommunicated. For more about McGlynn see: M. GAFFNEY, *Henry George, Dr. Edward McGlynn, and Pope Leo XIII*, University of California, Riverside 2001. In the preparatory documents for the Encyclical, analyzed in recent years, George's name is the one that recurs most frequently.

This project is as right as it is effective, and is especially easy to apply in every place, in every society, whatever the laws that govern land ownership.⁴⁸

In particular, in the chapter *The Enslavement of Laborers the Ultimate Result of Private Property in Land*, Tolstoy picked up many similarities with his own views. Many pages, in fact, could seem to have come from his own pen.

Henry George saw in the private ownership of land the cause of social inequality and slavery. The necessary relationship that is there between work and the land, “source of all wealth and field of all work”, implies that those who possess the land would also be the masters of men who live off it. In argument with Malthus he wrote:

The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air—it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men have a right to be in this world and others no right.⁴⁹

The right to private property in land is the negation of the original right of the individual to exercise his own choices, the right that man has over himself, that he carries with him at birth, that he shares with future generations and that which, therefore, he cannot surrender.

These rights are denied when the equal right to land – on which and by which men alone can live – is denied. Equality of political rights will not compensate for the denial of the equal right to the bounty of nature. Political liberty, when the equal right to land is denied, becomes, as population increases and invention goes on, merely the liberty to compete for employment at starvation wages. This is the truth that we have ignored.⁵⁰

In September 1894, in a letter to Mrs MacGahan, thanking her for having sent him some of George's books, Tolstoy wrote that whoever might want to tackle the land question could not do less than have as a reference point the theories of George, who “had laid the foundation of future economic organization”.⁵¹

During the famine of the early Nineties, when he was immersing himself in assisting the population and trying to elaborate practical proposals for the solution of the land problem, Tolstoy turned to George's books, read passages to the peasant farmers and proposed a form of self-taxation, the proceeds of which would be utilized for common needs.⁵²

The Russian writer and the American economist came into contact in Spring 1896, when Henry George, who was supposed to go to Yasnaya Polyana, announced that he was obliged to cancel the trip because of commitments made in the electoral campaign for the office of Mayor of New York. Tolstoy responded on 4 April expressing his esteem for him and the hope to meet him in the future.⁵³

Tolstoy and George would never meet;⁵⁴ only many years later, in June 1909, Henry

⁴⁸ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Al popolo lavoratore* (1902), in ID., *Perché la gente si droga? e altri saggi su società, politica e religione*, a cura di I. Sibaldi, Mondadori, Milano 2008, p. 289.

⁴⁹ H. GEORGE, *Progress and Poverty...*, cit., p. 200.

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 311-312.

⁵¹ K.C. WENZER, *The Influence...*, cit., pp. 25-26.

⁵² The same urgency to find a solution to the land question haunts the protagonist of the novel *Resurrection*, in which Tolstoy himself is reflected.

⁵³ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, cit., vol. LXVIII, pp. 76-77.

⁵⁴ Henry George died suddenly in 1897.

George's son went to Yasnaya Polyana. It was a moment of intense emotion for Tolstoy who wanted to welcome his visitor with a written eulogy for the writer of *Progress and Poverty* that he sent to a St Petersburg newspaper. The conversation reinforced his desire for action and shortly after the meeting Tolstoy was thinking about writing a letter to the Tsar on the agrarian question.⁵⁵

Already in 1894 he had wanted to approach the Tsar. He confided to his American disciple, Ernest Crosby:⁵⁶ It was not until January 1902 that Tolstoy wrote to Nicholas II. If the Russian people had been able – one reads in his letter – they would have asked for the abolition of the right of private ownership of land.

And it is precisely the right of private ownership of land that is, in my opinion, the immediate purpose which must be dealt with by the Russian government as its duty [...] For the Russian people this liberation can only be achieved by abolishing private ownership of land and recognizing land as a common good.⁵⁷

That same year, in the pamphlet *To the Working People*, Tolstoy set out Henry George's proposal presenting it as the only one capable of initiating justice in the social order and of bringing peace to rural areas.

Anxiety about revolutionary violence, horror at repression, and concerns raised by agrarian reform that threatened to completely destroy the old community structures in the Russian countryside, would continue to drive Tolstoy in the later years to promote George's proposal to representatives of the Duma, to send them George's books, to recommend them to his visitors, and to write to the government minister Stolypin.⁵⁸

On 1 August 1905, *The Great Iniquity*, appeared in London, in *The Times*, an appeal that resonated widely, in which Tolstoy explained George's theory and solution, and denounced the conspiracy of silence that surrounded the proposal for a single tax. As well, that year, he reworked the letter written to Bondarev in 1894 outlining the single tax, and in 1906 he returned to the land question in *An Appeal to the Russians*, and wrote the introduction to the Russian edition of Henry George's book, *Social Problems*. To his numerous visitors he never failed to elaborate its merits⁵⁹ and the advisability of its adoption.

In the summer of 1907 Tolstoy wrote to Stolypin hoping the Prime Minister would recognize his mistakes and decide against going ahead with a reform that favored private smallholding landownership, and in 1909 he tried again to draw the Duma's attention to the single tax.

⁵⁵ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, cit., p. 605, 28 settembre 1909.

⁵⁶ On his American visitors see R. WITTAKER, *Tolstoy's American Visitors: Memoirs of Personal Encounters (1896-1909)*, «TriQuarterly», voll. 110-111, 2001, pp. 213-273. On Tolstoy's influence in the United States and his correspondence with Ernest Crosby, I refer to B. BIANCHI, *Tolstoj e il movimento riformatore americano. Il carteggio con Ernest Howard Crosby (1894-1896)*, «La società degli individui», VIII, 2, 2005, pp. 123-138. On Tolstoy's meeting with H. George Jr. see his own account which also appears with the English translation of Tolstoy's article, H. GEORGE JR., *Tolstoy in the Twilight*, «Land and Values», 1910, pp. 208-210.

⁵⁷ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Lettere agli zar (1862-1905)*, a cura di S. Bartolissi, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, pp. 51-52.

⁵⁸ Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin (1862-1911) Interior Minister and Prime Minister, was the architect of the agrarian reform approved by the decree of 1906. See Tolstoy's letter of 26 luglio 1907 in L. N. Tolstoj, *La schiavitù del nostro tempo. Scritti su lavoro e proprietà*, cit., pp. 137-143.

⁵⁹ In 1908, when William Jennings Bryan, who considered himself a follower, stood as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States, Tolstoy expressed the hope that, if successful, Bryan might introduce the single tax. Cfr. R. WITTAKER, *Tolstoy's American Visitors...*, cit. William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) visited Yasnaya Polyana in 1903.

Yesterday morning Maklakov, Cinger and Semënov came to visit. I took Maklakov aside and spoke with him, telling him to raise the question in the Duma. He said he knows nothing of Henry George and the proposal, and not only does it have no possibility in a vote, but it could also provoke hostile reactions. He is a man of great practical intelligence, but closed to all the real and essential problems of mankind, just like many, many others.⁶⁰

How do we interpret such a zealous endorsement by the writer? His entreaties to the authorities, invoking State intervention, looked like a flagrant contradiction to everything he believed. As his translator and biographer Aylmer Maude wrote:

We here come upon what, at first sight, looks like a strange contradiction. Tolstoy disapproves of the use of violence between man and man. Not even an Emperor, or a Government elected by a majority, has a right to execute anybody or to imprison anybody. He is a peaceful anarchist. Yet he is delighted with Henry George, whose system pre-supposes the existence of a government enforcing the decisions of a majority on a possibly reluctant minority – and he would be glad to see the single-tax introduced in Russia. But the contradiction admits of explanation. [...] “The great majority of people still believe in governments and legality – then let them at least see that they get good laws”, says Tolstoy.⁶¹

On 2 April 1906 he had confided to his diary that from a practical point of view he had been unable to find anything more convincing than George's system:

They talk and discuss Henry George's system. What interests me is not the system (even though I do not know and cannot imagine anything better), but that the system establishes a relationship to the land that is common and equal for all. May they find something better.⁶²

But it is in the course of a conversation with the socialist Pavel Axelrod that Tolstoy addresses the issue of the gradualness in the process of personal and social improvement, the relationship between the theory and the problems connected with its application:⁶³

For a true Christian neither Henry George exists nor anything else. [...] Henry George is a concession, a weakness. Not to kill people is good; not to kill people, animals or parasites is better. [...] some say that for the good of the people a gallows has to be put in every town; others say: “No, socialist planning is better”, and we say that Henry George is still better.⁶⁴

For this reason, in his philosophical works, the Russian thinker made no concessions whatsoever, and insisted on the negative meaning of freedom and the duties of man.

“If the application of every doctrine is always a compromise” – he had written in 1889 to Adin Ballou⁶⁵ – “in the theory we cannot accept any compromise; although we know we

⁶⁰ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, cit., p. 600, 28 agosto 1909.

⁶¹ A. MAUDE, *Tolstoy and His Problems*, cit., pp. 203-204.

⁶² L. N. TOLSTOJ, *I diari*, cit., p. 515.

⁶³ Pavel Axelrod (1850-1928), influenced in his youth by Bakunin, he joined the Social Democratic Party Workers Party, then the Mensheviks. After the October Revolution, he was part of the Socialist opposition to the Bolsheviks.

⁶⁴ Cited in K.C. WENZER, *The Influence...*, cit., p. 60.

⁶⁵ Adin Ballou (1803-1890) founded the celebrated Christian-utopian community at Hopedale in Massachusetts; among his writings: *Christian Non Resistance in Its All Important Bearings Illustrated and Defended*, Philadelphia 1846, e *Practical Christian Socialism. A Controversial Exposition of the Human Society*, New York, Hopedale 1954. For more on Ballou's philosophy and activities see: P. BROCK, *Pacifism in the United States...*, cit., pp. 590-604.

can never draw a straight line, we can never define differently the shortest distance between two points". "The great sin", he added, "is to accept a debasement of the Christian ideal to render it applicable".⁶⁶

Under the pressure of events, faced with the specter of the Revolution and the advance of the industrialization process, Tolstoy felt the need to act, to take the first steps towards social justice. Even action from above that ratified the aspirations of the popular masses, as had happened with the abolition of slavery and serfdom, could have avoided the evils of industrialization that he had foreseen with such clarity.

Tolstoy dedicated all his energies to this possibility during his last difficult years. To his daughter, Tatiana, who very strongly embraced the ideals of her father, he wrote in November 1909:

I am tormented by the stupid cynical decision of that question accepted by our unfortunate government, and by the complete misunderstanding of it by people who are considered advanced [...] This question torments me so much that I recently had a vivid dream in which, while I was in the company of "the learned" I had disputed their views.⁶⁷

And, a few months later, that dream inspired one of his final writings, *A Dream*, inserted into a series of sketches of peasant life, *Three Days in the Village*.

I know I have often written about it; but under the influence of that dream, even at the risk of repeating myself, I once more felt the need to express myself. *Carthago delenda est*. As long as people's attitude towards private property in land remains unchanged, the cruelty, madness and evil of this form of the enslavement of some men by others, cannot be pointed out too frequently.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Letter cited in P. BROCK, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972, p. 463.

⁶⁷ Cited in K.C. WENZER, *The Influence...*, cit., pp. 229-230.

⁶⁸ L.N. TOLSTOJ, *Three Days in the Village and Other Sketches*, The Free Age Press, London 1900, p. 45.