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Author(s): D. Frances Ferguson

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Rural/Urban Relations and Peasant Radicalism: A Preliminary Statement

D. FRANCES FERGUSON

The University of Texas, Austin

A historical survey of social scientific literature would undoubtedly disclose a tendency (analogous, perhaps, to that evident in popular fiction) toward faddishness. From time to time certain topics enjoy great popularity and seem to attract more than their share of investigation and debate. Such is the case with the study of revolution, which is currently deemed a quite 'fashionable' object of scientific research.

While the interest in revolution may be sudden, it is by no means unwarranted, particularly when one considers the precarious state of political affairs within many Third World and other nations today. The problem, however, is that in their attempts to jump on the bandwagon many social scientists have abandoned rigor and systematic investigation in favor of premature generalization and 'theory' construction. Consequently, we are confronted by a proliferation of general 'theories of revolution', each of which is inadequate for explaining the dynamics of revolutionary social change. It will not be my intent in this essay to add to the growing body of macro-level theory. My more modest purpose is to provide a preliminary understanding of questions which must be answered before any general theory may emerge.

This essay will address the problem of peasant participation in social revolutions. Through a systematization of some existing theoretical works in the area, I will attempt to isolate the crucial empirical issues. Thus, the next logical methodological steps—the organization of variables into explanatory models and the development of indicators for theoretical concepts—will be reserved for future consideration.

One general assumption serves as the point of departure for the present analysis: Whenever peasants have been a major force in revolutionary political movements they have been organized for action by 'outsiders' who invariably come from urban centers and more often than not are members of the intelligentsia. To examine the process of

This paper has benefitted from the comments and criticisms of Anthony Orum and Alejandro Portes.

peasant mobilization I will begin with the premise that the most distinctive aspects of developing societies are: (1) rural social organization characterized by increasing socio-economic differentiation; and (2) a relationship between town and countryside which is both organic and dynamic. These two factors are closely interrelated and condition each other. That is, the changing nature of rural/urban relations has great implications for the participation of peasants in revolutions, and directly affects the revolutionary potential of all sectors of the peasantry. Because an exogenous organizing force is necessary for channeling 'free-floating' peasant discontent into collective, goal-oriented behavior, peasant revolutions will not occur until contact between rural and urban areas becomes extensive. Thus, I will be concerned to discover how this contact comes about and which sectors of a heterogeneous peasantry will be most strongly affected.

ANTAGONISM BETWEEN TOWN AND COUNTRY IN AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

A foremost writer on peasant societies, Robert Redfield (1953: 31), describes peasants as 'rural native[s] whose long established order of life takes important account of the city'. His definition points to the fact that the peasantry, like any other social group, cannot be understood apart from the broader socio-cultural context in which it is imbedded. Following Kroeber's (1948) thinking, then, it is useful to regard peasant communities and urban centers as separate 'part cultures' involved in an organic relationship. Although both partners do not benefit equally from the relationship, the fact is that neither could exist wholly apart from the other.

The city, for example, is dependent on the production of an agricultural surplus in the countryside. As the pace of industrialization and urbanization picks up, industrial centers also come to rely on importing labor from rural areas. Likewise, the countryside is partly dependent on the cities. Redfield (1956: 70) suggests that the intellectual, moral, and religious life of the peasant village is perpetually incomplete, and must inevitably rely on communication with the more advanced urban areas.

Relations between town and countryside are not as harmonious as they might appear, however. While it is true that the rural/urban relationship is an organic one, it cannot be seen as either egalitarian or mutually beneficial. In fact, the growth of the cities is attained largely at the expense of the peasantry; hence, the increasing tension between the two areas as modernization proceeds. Marx and Engels (1970: 69) were indeed justified in asserting that '[t]he antagonism between town and country begins with the transition from barbarism to civilization,

from tribe to State, from locality to nation, and runs through the whole history of civilization to the present day'.

Undoubtedly the most sweeping changes in rural social organization have resulted from the growth of capitalism in the cities and its consequent intrusion into the rural areas. An 'imperfect form of capitalist production' (Silverman, 1970) temporarily prevails in the countryside, as the existing mode of production becomes incompatible with the changing means of production. During this period the antagonism between urban areas (centers of the new market economy) and rural regions (site of production for the market) are exacerbated, although the conflict is likely to remain latent in the early stages.

Two aspects, then, of the encroachment of capitalism into the countryside may be isolated. First, old methods of agricultural production are disrupted and must be replaced by newer forms of production for the market. Second, the coming of a market economy signals the breakdown of traditional social relations based on the former methods of production.

Turning first to the purely economic aspect of the spread of capitalism, it is evident that the result is often disastrous for the rural population. Rural classes are faced with economic crisis, whether they had been engaged in subsistence farming or were participants in some type of collective production. In the latter case, commercialization presents a constant threat to peasant access to communal land. Furthermore, the spread of doctrines of private property in land, often deliberately promoted by the State, leads to the breakup of farming communes. In such instances it is unlikely that there will be enough land to go around, and most former members of land communes are not able to successfully make the transition to individual production.

In areas in which individual subsistence farming had been predominant, the peasantry may be threatened even more by the spread of capitalism. The situation would be critical even if it were allowed to proceed 'naturally'. However, at this point in economic development the State is likely to sponsor a 'push' for industrialization, financed largely at the expense of the rural classes. Ever-increasing sums are extracted from the countryside in the form of rents, taxes, fixed prices, and the like, and are channeled into the emerging urban industrial sector.

At the same time as technological innovation picks up momentum in the cities, progress in agricultural technology remains stagnant. The attempt is not to increase agricultural output, but rather to increase the proportion of agricultural production which is taken from rural areas. The resulting squeeze on the peasantry causes some peasants to engage in additional cash-cropping to meet growing financial obligations,

but drives many into a class of 'lumpen-peasants'.¹ This transformation of rural social structure is a crucial determinant of peasant access and receptivity to revolutionary ideas, and will be treated more fully in the following sections.

As a result of changes in methods of production, the social relations based on these methods are disrupted. 'Capitalism,' asserts Wolf (1969: 69) 'cut[s] through the integument of custom, severing people from their accustomed social matrix in order to transform them into economic actors, independent of prior social commitments to kin and neighbors'. It is not only the relationship among peasant villagers, but relations between peasants and landowners which are disrupted as well. In traditional societies this relationship has often taken the form of a patron/client bond. Idealized by many writers, the paternalistic relationship between rural landowners and their peasant clients no doubt did provide some benefits for the latter. Peasants were, at least theoretically, assured of some financial security in time of famine, and could count on protection from other outside threats. In practice, however, the overall nature of the relationship was one of exploitation.² As agriculture becomes commercialized, the peasant loses even the minor benefits he had received from participation in relationships with rural patrons, and the degree of exploitation of the peasantry increases.

Perhaps even more significant than the breakdown of traditional patterns of interaction between peasant and landowner is the fact that the ideology which had served to legitimate the vertical relationship is rendered inadequate. The old structures of deference, as Scott and Kerkvliet (1973) point out, lose their moral force. Thus, in spite of their inability to accurately perceive the dynamic which is in operation, the peasants are likely to call into question the very nature of their relationships with the landowning class. Some discontent may become manifest, taking the form of local riots, grain seizures, and the like; the need for a strong exogenous organizing force possessing a vision of an egalitarian form of social organization is seen clearly at this point.

LENIN'S THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The effect of changing patterns of rural/urban relations on the structure of the peasantry was taken up by Lenin (1971) in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. His analysis, with some modification, will serve as a basis for the study of peasant participation in revolutions.

¹ This term is employed by Scott and Kerkvliet (1973) in their analysis of relations between the peasantry and landowners.

² Silverman (1970) depicts exploitation as an objectively measurable concept and develops a method for measuring the degree of exploitation in patron/client relationships.

According to Lenin, the crucial problem for developing societies is the formation of a home market for large-scale industry. One precondition for this process is the transformation of agriculture into an industry, that is, into a system of commodity production based on a division of labor. Like Marx, Lenin was aware of the progressive aspects of capitalist production. For the rural masses the coming of capitalism would mean liberation from the repressive feudal bonds—a new freedom of movement, the possibility of attaining higher levels of education, an escape from the ‘idiocy of rural life.’ Furthermore, capitalism would be likely to spur technological innovation in agricultural methods, leading to greater output and a higher standard of living (at least for some).

These liberating effects, however, would be attained at no small cost. For as the encroachment of capitalism into the countryside proceeded, a situation would arise whereby

. . . the system of social-economic relationships existing among the peasantry . . . reveals all the contradictions which are a feature of all commodity production and all capitalism; competition, the struggle for economic independence, competition for land (purchased or hired), the concentration of production in the hands of a minority, the driving of the majority into the ranks of the proletariat, the exploitation of the latter by the minority by the means of merchant capital and the hire of agricultural laborers. (Lenin, 1971: 14).

The effect of these simultaneous processes on rural social organization is devastating. Cleavages within the peasantry are sharpened as the old relations of production break down. This ‘disintegration of the peasantry’, as Lenin labels the process, results in the creation of at least three totally new rural subclasses.

A *rural bourgeoisie* emerges, comprised of those peasants who have successfully entered the market economy. Numerically a small proportion of the rural population, these rich peasants become capitalist farmers employing the wage labor of the other peasant strata. Members of the rural bourgeoisie frequently develop supplemental sources of income, such as money-lending, small shopkeeping or even light manufacturing (cf. Rochester, 1942: 24). The more highly developed this upper stratum becomes, the more the interests of its members diverge from those of the remaining peasant strata. In this sense, the degree to which the peasantry constitutes a ‘social class’ decreases; subclasses take on a higher degree of classness.

The *poor peasants* are found at the opposite end of the rural hierarchy. The landless rural proletarians are included in this stratum, which also includes peasants possessing small allotments.³ The determinant of

³ It would seem that only landless peasants would be seen as constituting the ‘poor peasantry’. Lenin points out, however, that in cases of peasants having less than subsistence allotments, their economic positions are those of agricultural laborers. They possess allotments only because ‘. . . the landlords themselves find

membership in the poor peasantry is the dependence on the sale of one's labor power. Peasants engage in wage labor either by hiring out to landowners or rich peasants, or through periodic migration to urban centers for employment in industry.

Standing between the poor peasantry and the rural bourgeoisie are the *middle peasants*, among whom 'commodity farming is least developed' (Lenin, 1971: 22). These consist of the independent smallholders. Although they may employ wage labor, their livelihood does not depend primarily on exploitation. The middle peasants engage in subsistence cultivation but may also produce small marketable surpluses.

The process of disintegration is most visible within the middle stratum of the peasantry. Fluctuations of the market and the general deteriorating economic state of affairs have the greatest impact on the middle peasant, whose position is precarious even in years of relative prosperity. Most of these peasants aspire to the rural bourgeoisie, but few achieve upward mobility. The rest are continually 'squeezed' by the rich peasantry and in increasing number fall into the ranks of the poor peasantry.

THE STATE AND PATTERNS OF RURAL STRATIFICATION

A modification of Lenin's account of the increasing differentiation of the peasantry will render his analysis more applicable to the problem of peasant revolution. Lenin did not consider the role of the state as a factor in determining patterns of social stratification, and this is a major shortcoming. In a study of social organization in American and Soviet societies, Stanislaw Ossowski (1963) correctly points out that not only the ownership of the means of production need be considered in noting changes in social stratification. Ownership of the 'means of compulsion' must also be taken into account.

Ossowski's suggestion is relevant to the present study. Its implication is that the State, either inadvertently or through conscious design, enacts policies which have tremendous effect on rural social organization. Thus, the disintegration of the peasantry does not proceed in some natural, unimpeded fashion. Rather, it must be seen, in part, as a response to the intervention of possessors of political power.⁴

The visibility of the State's role in shaping patterns of rural social organization has caused one economist to assert that 'it is the political forces which determine the agrarian structure in its broad lines. . .' (War-

it profitable to allot them land in partial payment for their work' (Lenin, 1971: 21).

⁴The role of the State under conditions of slavery or serfdom is not treated here. Where these institutions exist the relationship between the State and social classes, especially the rural classes, presents a different case.

ner, 1939: 17). Forms of state intervention may fall into either of two general categories: economic/fiscal policies and administrative/legal measures.

Intervention of the economic/fiscal type occurs primarily as taxation, and affects rural social organization in three ways. First, increasing the burden of taxation is a means of forcing the peasant into participation in the emerging market economy.⁵ Subsistence farmers of the poor and particularly of the middle peasantry must try to increase the volume of marketable surpluses which they produce. As this may be impossible, given the low level of agricultural technology in most developing societies, many peasants are forced to seek part-time employment in industry. The obvious effect on the peasantry is more rapid disintegration, as larger numbers of middle peasants become downwardly mobile.

A second effect of taxation is the depression of domestic demand for consumer goods. The push toward industrialization undertaken by the State reflects its interest in promoting economic rather than social development. Scant attention is given the standard of living of the rural population. The primary goal is to squeeze as much as the rural areas can supply financially, and divert this into the burgeoning industrial sector. Furthermore, at this point in a nation's development the State is likely to need increasing sums for financing militaristic and imperialist ventures. Hence, the rural classes are prevailed upon to fund the cause of nationalism.⁶

These first two results of taxation may be related to measures actually designed to raise revenue. In such cases, the effect on rural social structure is seen as an unintended consequence of state policy. The third purpose for which taxes may be levied reflects an intentional effort to alter patterns of stratification by promoting the growth or deterioration of certain strata. An example of such attempts is seen in the effort to strengthen the rural middle class at the expense of the lower peasantry (cf. Erasmus, 1968; Huizer, 1970). Not only economic/fiscal measures but also administrative/legal policies are generally a part of such programs, as I will note below.

In addition to taxation several more indirect methods of intervention are employed. By fixing land prices and regulating the sale and rental of land the State may limit access of certain sectors of the peasantry to land. Furthermore, manipulation of interest rates and differential policies

⁵ This useful notion has been called to my attention by Samuel Popkin in a number of seminars and discussions.

⁶ Although I will focus on the internal affairs of the State, it should be noted that the position of a given society within the international network of nations is a significant factor in the study of development. The degree to which a nation's economy is controlled by foreign capital, for example, affects the behavior of national elites subject to cross-pressures from both native and exogenous classes.

of money-lending affect patterns of stratification. Finally, interference by government planning agencies with the relative levels of agricultural prices and the prices of manufactured goods may operate to create an 'unfavorable balance of trade' between industrial centers and rural peripheral areas.

The second general type of state intervention is administrative/legal in nature and may take several forms. The formation of local and regional administrative bodies often accompanies the liberalization of feudal regimes. If the national government vests broad powers in local administrators, who usually are upwardly mobile members of the middle and rich peasantry, the latter are likely to favor policies which benefit themselves at the expense of the lower strata. It should be noted that the State is subject to cross-pressures from various classes (deteriorating landed aristocracy, rising merchant and commercial classes, emergent rural bourgeoisie) and is likely to display ineptitude in resolving the conflicting demands of these groups. In any case, resolution invariably occurs to the detriment of the poorer rural sectors.

Other legal measures enacted by the State involve the legal definitions of property. Ownership may be vested in families, in heads of households, or in communal bodies. Changes in the basis of property ownership, whether consciously designed to do so or not, may have drastic effects on rural stratification patterns. The same is true, of course, of state policy regulating the repartition of lands which are owned by households or communally.

Finally, measures concerning migration to and from urban areas have an impact on rural social organization. While the State may have various motivations for desiring to force or retard migration, the unintended outcome is usually increasing disintegration among the middle peasantry. If migration is tightly controlled, those middle peasants who would have left the village must remain even if their financial ruin results. On the other hand, if migration is encouraged it is usually the middle peasant who seizes the opportunity to relocate. Rich peasants, comprising the emergent capitalist farming class, are reluctant to surrender their increasingly secure positions to risk establishing themselves in the cities. The lower peasants, on the other hand, are generally forced to cling to their subsistence plots and are unable to afford the costs of migration. The departing middle peasants, then, leave behind increasingly polarized rural villages.

In sum, during the early stages of capitalist development in agrarian societies, the role of the State is crucial in determining patterns of rural social organization. The results of state economic and administrative policies may be unanticipated or intentional. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect is generally increasing differentiation of the peasantry. To

relate this issue to the question of peasant mobilization, we must then examine the revolutionary potential of the various peasant strata.

POSSIBILITIES FOR ORGANIZATION OF PEASANT SUBSTRATA

The sharpening of class distinctions among the peasantry heightens the general possibility of mobilization for political action. One fact must be remembered if we are to make a valid assessment of the revolutionary potential of the various substrata: it is not each sector's relationship to the other rural sectors but its relationship to the society as a whole which is the determinant of a stratum's revolutionary potential.

The upper stratum of rich peasants has, for obvious reasons, the least revolutionary potential of any peasant subclass. This group stands to gain from the downward mobility of other peasant substrata and will advocate maintenance of the economic *status quo* with its resultant disintegration of the middle peasantry. Rich peasants will most likely align themselves with urban commercial interests and state administrators favoring the development of a strong rural bourgeoisie.

What factors, then, account for the participation of other peasant substrata in revolutionary movements? The crucial determinant of radical political action is not the degree of poverty, either absolute or relative. For Wolf (1969: 290) the 'decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it'. Thus, the poor landless laborers are unlikely revolutionaries because they lack 'internal leverage', that is, the resources with which to engage in a struggle for power. By the process of elimination the middle peasant comes to represent the most militant element in the countryside.

Wolf's assessment of the revolutionary potential of the middle peasantry is correct, but his conclusion is drawn from invalid premises. Neither the middle nor the poor peasant in general possesses the clarity of vision and understanding of the complexity of social organization to adequately evaluate his degrees of 'tactical leverage'. Organized political action⁷ will not occur until peasants come into contact with persons who are not only aware of contradictions of the existing system, but are able to present an alternative to it.

There are a number of ways in which this contact can come about, but it is generally (although not inevitably) the middle peasant whose situation brings him into closest proximity with such 'enlightened' per-

⁷ It should be noted once more that this statement does not preclude the occurrence of spontaneous uprising, riots, rebellions and the like. I refer only to the impossibility of the peasantry's unaided organization of a revolution (i.e., a class-based movement bringing about basic, structural transformation of societal political and social institutions).

sons. The disintegration of the peasantry is crucial because as the position of the middle peasants is undermined they establish contact with industrial cities. As a result, both access and receptivity to urban revolutionary ideas is increased.

In sum, the conditions which facilitate radical political action on the part of any rural substratum are those conditions which increase contact between members of that substratum and urban revolutionary ideas. The group which is in general most affected by such conditions are the downwardly mobile members of the disintegrating middle peasantry. Accordingly, such people comprise the most politically militant sector of the rural population.

CONDITIONS FACILITATING ACTIVISM OF THE MIDDLE PEASANTRY

At least five factors are conducive to the political mobilization of the peasantry in general, and each of these seems to affect the middle peasantry most directly. Furthermore, these conditions become more prevalent as industrialization and the commercialization of agriculture proceed.

First among these conditions is the migration, either temporary or permanent, of urbanites to rural areas. In developing societies the amount of *permanent* urban to rural migration may be negligible. More significant is the migration to the countryside of urban proponents of liberal political views with the explicit purpose of disseminating these ideas among the rural population. Such proselytizing, while relatively infrequent, may have an effect on rural political beliefs and activity. The impact is likely to be limited, however, unless urban/rural migration occurs simultaneously with other facilitating conditions.

A second factor conducive to political mobilization of the peasantry is increasing peasant participation in the market economy which has its center in urban industrializing areas. As Eric Wolf (1955: 465) notes, ' . . . when cash crop production grows important, there is a tightening of bonds between town and country'. Peasants who deal with commercialized crops have frequent occasion to travel to the cities, causing a general broadening of their social perspectives. Contact between peasants and the industrial cities has the greatest impact, as these are the most progressive centers within developing societies. Furthermore, crop-commercialization fosters the formation of marketing and other types of co-operatives which may serve as a first step toward unified action among the rural population (cf. Barnett, 1973: 20; Shanin, 1971: 249).

Third, stepped-up labor exportation among the peasantry is conducive to radicalization. The situation most likely to foster political action is

one in which peasants remain legally tied to the land but are forced to migrate temporarily to cities in order to engage in wage labor. Peasants seeking employment in industry necessarily establish contact with the most industrialized, progressive cities. These migrant laborers periodically return to the countryside, serving as vital links between urban and rural groups and ideas. Furthermore, although data is sketchy and at times inconsistent, some evidence suggests a high rate of participation in voluntary associations among peasant migrants to cities (cf. Doughty, 1970), pointing up the possibility that valuable experience in working collectively may be had in the cities. Finally, it has been suggested that cyclical participation in both the urban and rural subcultures weakens patterns of traditionalism and conservative resistance to change (Barnett, 1973; Galeski, 1971).

A fourth condition favorable to contact between peasants and urban dwellers is the involvement of nations in foreign wars. The usual result of the undertaking of military ventures by the governments of industrializing societies is the conscription of a large proportion of the rural population. Notwithstanding the resultant hardships and disruption of village life, military service has positive unintended consequences for the peasant soldier. It provides him with an opportunity for contact with urban citizens of his own country as well as with members of other societies. Moreover, the disillusionment which accompanies involuntary participation in an unsuccessful war is undoubtedly a major incitement to the development of a revolutionary consciousness.

Finally, the formation of local and regional administrative bodies which may accompany the liberalization of feudal-type regimes has some bearing on peasant mobilization. Although peasants are frequently under-represented, even in their own regional organizations, when they do participate in local government they attain both valuable experience and access to revolutionary ideas. Another effect of the spread of local self-government is that as possessors of power may seem more visible, peasants' feelings of powerlessness are likely to diminish. This is true whether the power of local administrators is real or ostensible; in either case, failure to meet expectations of reform is more liable to provoke overt displays of discontent than when the loci of power seem both distant and amorphous from the peasant point of view.

As one or more of the above conditions lead to more frequent contact between urban and rural elements within a society, the receptivity of the latter to revolutionary ideas increases. Effective political action, however, will not occur without the presence of an exogenous organizing group. Even then, members of such groups may encounter difficulties. Numerous writers have described the 'unorganizability' of peasants, their inability to co-operate, their extreme passivity, conservatism and

desire to succeed individually at the expense of their fellow villagers (Banfield, 1958; Erasmus, 1968; Foster, 1965). However, I would agree with Huizer (1970) that such characteristics are not inherent in peasant culture, but are a consequence of the 'culture of repression' under which much of the peasantry exists. Resistance to change can be overcome when peasants are confronted by members of the urban intelligentsia capable of envisioning a new social order. Only then does the peasantry become 'conscious of [the] inherent possibilities' (Mills, 1951), the first step toward organized class action.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present essay is seen as twofold: that, first, of providing at least some minor *theoretical* insights within a particular, substantive area; and, secondly, that of suggesting a re-evaluation of some *methodological* issues of more general relevance.

Regarding the former goal, I have attempted to isolate those factors having the greatest impact as determinants of peasant radicalism. In so doing, my intent has been to direct the attention of sociologists of revolution investigating agrarian societies to (1) the degree to which boundaries between town and country in such societies are becoming blurred; (2) the changing pattern of rural social organization (in particular, the stratification system; and (3) the role of the State in affecting both of these processes.

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