

Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World by Barrington Moore, Jr.

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SIS500 Professor Guy

In Barrington Moore, Jr.'s work we discover a quite different angle on the issue of the comparative evolution of the world political economy. Moore approaches the issue with a different sensibility than E.P. Thomson or Pomeranz. On the one hand, he evinces none of the mincing nostalgia for the feudal order that Thomson does. And regarding Pomeranz, while he allows for the existence of a Chinese market, his take on Chinese society is that Chinese society had serious flaws that predated colonial imperialism that caused China to disintegrate and re-integrate in the way that it did. Moore is not deterministic, and yet he appears to have a progressive view of history and of politics which allows scant space for inevitability and assigns much agency to political structures and the social decisions that create them.

Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy is a comparative survey of some of what Moore considers the major/most indicative world economies as they evolved out of pre-modern political systems into industrialism. As the title suggests, Moore is not ultimately concerned with explaining economic development so much as exploring why modes of development produced different political forms that managed the transition to industrialism and modernization. Why did one society modernize into a "relatively free," democratic society (by which Moore means England) while others metamorphosed into fascist or communist states? His core thesis is that in each country, the relationship between the landlord class and the peasants was a primary influence on the ultimate form of government the society arrived at upon arrival in its modern age.

Moore's first point of comparison is holding up the English political quasi-revolution (what Thomson called "the revolution that did not happen") to the quite violent Revolution that took place across the channel. First and foremost one is confronted by Moore's view that despite the class violence that he admits in England, he believes the enclosure movement ultimately provided benefits to English society. And he denies any validity to Thomson's view that the old feudal landlord was more benign- tied to the

peasantry through abstract concepts of duty and responsibility- than his capitalist replacement.

In fact, Moore routinely goes after Marxist ideas, or his interpretations thereof, most particularly with the idea that the “economic substructure determines the political superstructure.” One wonders to what extent Moore has created a straw man here, but some of his criticisms do resound when applied to Thomson, and when considering the form Chinese communism took in contrast to Russian communism.

Moore argues for a class structure based not on economic status per se but rather on political privilege. He would not, one suspects, admit to a meaningful unitary category called “the English Working Class.” However, he does not spend overmuch time analyzing English class structures, which he describes as extremely complex and various; a point on which there appears some unanimity. He largely ignores artisans and the urban workers except when their interests collide with those of the peasants, as he alleges they did in France. However, this may have been (certainly should have been) an editorial requirement, given the scope of the work.

Moore’s narrative of the English enclosure movement includes a discussion of what he calls The Puritan Revolution- to Moore’s mind, a revolution *did* happen in England, it just wasn’t class-based. He uses the term somewhat interchangeably with the English Civil War, but his general thesis is that English society was breaking apart “from the top downwards” as the capitalist bourgeoisie developed and the aristocracy was forced to adapt to it by becoming capitalists. This is a key point of distinction for him when considering the French experience, where he believes society also broke apart from the top downwards but in so doing consolidated the emergent capitalist class into a rent-seeking aristocratic model that did not produce industrial growth or political rights for the lower classes. Also he thinks it had something to do with wine. In his view, the English Puritan Revolution released a number of structural tensions that enacted themselves by violently kicking over two props of the *ancien regime* (a somewhat dirty word in Moore’s lexicon): the Church and the King. But these tensions were released in a diffused manner not controlled by the crown: “important segments of [aristocratic and capitalist] classes neither needed nor wanted political weapons borrowed from the arsenal of a dead feudalism or royal absolutism.” In France, on the other hand, where

the process was largely mediated by the French crown, these forces unleashed a civil war that pitted classes against each other: urban against rural, capitalist against feudal, radical against conservative, and religious versus secular. The precision of Moore's distinctions here is at times subtle; as far as I can understand, he argues that by consolidating the aristocracy and the emerging capitalist classes (and by exhibiting "character flaws"!), the French king put himself in a position where he could not leverage his position by playing classes against each other. He also appears to have painted himself as a singular target of everyone's ire.

However, he does not paint an idyllic picture of industrializing England or France, and it is likely that he would admit to all the abuses documented by Thomson without allowing for the existence of a preferable pre-industrial life. He discusses how English exports caused an increase in French unemployment; that price inflation put French peasants who could not sustain themselves on their own land in an increasingly indebted and desperate situation. Neither the nascent "free market" nor the regime of price controls appears to have corrected the situation as far as the peasantry was concerned. Nor does Moore equate modernization itself with political rights. "The partial truth emerges that non-democratic and even anti-democratic modernization works," he says, although his usage of terms like "partial truth" is a bit slippery. Like Thomson, Moore describes an England become reactionary and oppressive during the Napoleonic Wars, and believes that England was only able to peacefully modernize into a democratic state thanks to its victory at Waterloo. "If the menace of revolution," says Moore, "had not ended . . . it is highly unlikely that England would have resumed in the 19th century those slow and halting steps toward political and social reform."

On the other hand, Moore also considers the structure of agricultural reform key to the process. While he considers the structure of landlord-peasant relations critical to predicting the forms political revolutions took, he does not idealize the peasant and he frequently expresses sympathy for the challenges the middle and upper classes faced. "Without these ideas of benefit to society [asserted by enclosing capitalists] and *the substantial element of truth* they contained," he says, "it would be impossible to understand the ruthlessness of the enclosure movement." This is a difficult phrase for me, as it both admits to ruthlessness and justifies it without documenting exactly why it was necessary to be *ruthless* above and beyond a footnote from the Hammonds, saying it was

“maddening to have to set your pace by the slow, bucolic temperament of the small farmers, nursed in a simple and old-fashioned routine, who looked with suspicion on any proposal that was strange to them.” Certainly peasant conservatism is a sensible reaction from people who could allow little margin of error when it came to social experiments conducted by their landlords, but one must then document the benefits they received from the ultimate end of the process. Moore takes the benefits for granted, it appears; while I personally consider it firmly demonstrated that the lot of the lower classes improved materially in the long run thanks to the industrial and capitalist revolutions- indeed it seems a matter of consensus that even Chinese communism managed to improve the material lot of the Chinese peasant- the question remains what the critical common factor was. Was the destruction of the commons the only route to the “rationalization” of agriculture?

Moore’s chapter dedicated to China is more difficult, for the same reasons: lack of hard data force him to speculate as to the actual state of Chinese society, and his speculations, and his desire to produce quotable truisms, serve him ill from time to time. As his sources in this chapter are overwhelmingly secondary, it is difficult to judge his argument’s merit without knowing the merit of the secondary arguments. He makes a comment that makes me slightly nervous:

To discuss the dynastic cycle is beyond the author’s competence. Modern sinologists are prone to deny that Chinese history has been fundamentally unchanged for two thousand years, asserting that this is an illusion due to our ignorance. Nevertheless to a non-specialist it seems quite obvious that, in comparison with Europe, Chinese civilization remained largely static.

The flaw here is of course that it removes the compulsion to consult with specialists when one believes the answer is obvious, and of course if we were silly enough to apply this we would still believe the sun orbits the earth.

It is in the China chapter that Moore really takes the tar and feather to the pre-modern aristocratic classes. He discusses the difference between the European landed aristocracy and the imperial bureaucracy, composed largely of landowners and scholars, who effectively ran the lives of the peasants in China. He asserts a system of diffuse but weak central control where the emperor was forced to turn his bureaucracy to corruption in order to supplement their incomes, thus making them less dependent on him. He discusses and appears to support the idea that “hydraulic despotism” was a

factor, although he doesn't admit to a particularly effective form of imperial despotism. Interestingly enough, he asserts that Chinese peasants worked under "tenancy arrangements that do not differ in any essential way from those under modern capitalism . . . in essence a form of sharecropping supplemented by hired labor."

Moore also considers the Chinese population explosion discussed by other authors of primary importance: it increased peasant demand for land and thus the leverage of landlords, who in turn depended on the corrupt imperial bureaucracy for their existence. It increased the need for a strong state, which China ultimately failed to provide thanks to same. While Moore allows, briefly, for a negative impact of Western imperialism and allows that opium helped sedate the Chinese population, an assertion he does not bother to support as it would be difficult to explain the numerous opium-driven insurrections of the period according to this thesis. He asserts that the causes of Chinese decline to civil war and anarchy predate the arrival of Western colonizers. "Chinese society choked off modernization until it was too late for piecemeal adoption." He pooh-poohs the Confucian restoration as a "backwards-looking" attempt to hold off modernization as long as possible, and this is, in my view, his weakest point; would we describe the Reformation as an attempt to hold off modernization simply because it was conducted in the context of an existing religious tradition? However, he does specify that the neo-Confucian reformers considered trade and commerce "parasitic."

Moore strongly denies any benefit that the Chinese ruling classes provided to the peasantry. They ultimately failed to provide justice or security from brigandage (he takes a sideways swipe at European feudalism here by characterizing it as a sort of socially codified "gangsterism"). They failed to secure grain supplies against famine and ensure water provision. He giggles at theories that attribute a meteorological role to the gentry. The misjudgements of the various pre-modern privileged classes are easy targets and I am hesitant to take up any offense, but to say that a bureaucratic class that devoted itself to producing, promulgating, and preserving the art and literature of a Chinese culture that had lasted- according to Moore- for two thousand years, served no function in Chinese society is to similarly condemn the Christian monks who did little more than preserved the record of European civilization and yet are due some degree of gratitude despite their failure to reform agricultural policy.

To his somewhat dim credit, Moore does allow for regional differentiation across China. I can't take a reaction here; for admitted non-sinologists such as Moore and I, to attempt to discuss China in terms of detailed regional analyses may well require us to abandon discussing "China" at all as a political entity. But to say that weak imperial authority is equal to weak central authority is to admit to only one viable center as defined by the imperial government. This may be the line of a modern nationalist like Sun Yatsen, but to take a more federal view of Chinese politics might allow that some regional powers, provincial governors etc. might have indeed succeeded in overcoming all the problems that Moore discusses and have yet been dragged down with the imperial ship. Which would say something very different indeed about China's problem, to my view. But Moore blows straight through this on his way to reiterate his themes about social changes that "released powerful antagonisms across class lines."

To be honest, I'm not at all confident that the chapter on China is not a bit too fond of glib one-liners like "no property, no family, no religion." I suspect at times that Moore would rather be clever than correct. The main point of his China chapter seems to be to explain the success of the Chinese communists in terms of their appeal to the peasantry, and the Kuomintang's failure in terms of their desire to preserve "the status quo." As far as I can tell, by the time Chiang Kai Shek took power, there was precious little status quo left to preserve, although Moore is limiting his argument to the status quo of rural land ownership patterns, which may not have *formally* changed as much as the urban environment. Although on the other hand to ignore the capitalizing impact of domestic opium production on the rural landscape, as Moore does, is a fairly grave omission, isn't it?

That said, I believe the chapters comparing France and England are worth considering, but all in all I think Moore loads too much onto his particular mule, which is, I suppose, what people mean by "hypothesis."