

The Revolutionary Potential of the Peasants According to Lenin and Mao Zedong

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Introduction

The "revolutionary potential" of the peasants refers to the significance of the peasant class in establishing a Communist government and society. Vladimir Illyich Lenin and Mao Zedong were the influential founders of the revolution in their respective countries, and hence the revolutions in China and Russia were primarily guided by the ideology of these two leaders. Karl Marx, the father of communism, played an influential role in the dogma of both Mao and Lenin, yet practical problems in their respective nations forced the two to revise their ideology to suit the situations of their countries. Dialectic thought drives socialist leaders to resolve the basic contradictions in society, and the leaders' attempts to do this have led them to converge in many areas. Pragmatism, however, forced the leaders to deviate from a strict dogma and to develop new theories on revolutionary practice. It is commonly believed that Lenin ignored the peasant element in Russia, whereas the slogan of "Peace, Land, Bread," used to pacify peasants in the Ukraine suggests otherwise. When examining the revolutionary potential of the peasants, it is equally relevant to refer to the role of the revolutionary proletariat. Due to their pragmatism, Lenin and Mao share fundamental similarities in terms of their assessment of the revolutionary potential of the peasants, yet Mao held a more genuine belief in the peasantry.

Traditional Marxist Considerations

Lenin and Mao traveled in a unique direction away from classical Marxism. Karl Marx attested to the "idiocy of rural life,"¹ and firmly proclaimed a proletarian revolution as the only path to be followed. Marx suggested that the history of nations is characterized by a "constant war" between its urban centers and the countryside, since they lie in contradiction to one another, and the periods in history which are rural-based indicate times of stagnation and retrogressive development.² Marx maintained that the peasantry would eventually be dominated by the urbanized, industrialized sectors, and then disappear as a class. This view was shared by Engels: "Our small peasant, like every survivor of a past mode of production, is hopelessly doomed. He is a future proletarian."³ According to Marx, there is no active role for the peasant in what he believes to be the inevitable transition from feudalism to capitalism and then to socialism - they could only hope to fall under the leadership of urbanite intellectuals. Peasants were viewed as pathetic, mindless toilers; they were only concerned with the acquisition of land, and were 'reactionary' rather than 'revolutionary.' In what appears to be a direct attack on Mao, had it not been before Mao's time, Engels proclaims,

Hence a man who will say that this revolution can be more easily carried out in a country, because, *although* it has no proletariat, it has no bourgeoisie *either*, only proves he has still to learn the ABC of Socialism.⁴

Showing some leniency, Marx suggested that the alliance of the bourgeoisie and proletariat would be too weak to surpass autocratic and feudal forces in the East, and would therefore require the active support of the peasantry.⁵ However, this was further qualified by the fact that this period would be short-lived and that the rural element could not be trusted. It is interesting to note that Lenin used Marx's sparse words on this issue later in defending his call for worker-peasant alliances, in which they would play a more influential revolutionary role.

The Task of Classifying Peasants in Relation to the Revolution

Lenin and Mao made class distinctions within the peasantry, attributing different levels of revolutionary potential to each subsidiary class. In March 1926, Mao wrote the *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* in which he identified the peasant as part of the semi-proletariat, at a time when he regarded the industrial proletariat as

¹ Esther Kingston-Mann, *Lenin and the Problem of the Marxist Peasant Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983):9.

² John Wilson Lewis, *Peasant Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974): 209.

³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵ John G. Gurley, *Challengers to Capitalism* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1988):66.

the leading force in the revolution.⁶ Mao later revised his analysis to place the peasantry in separate classes consisting of rich, middle and poor peasants. The rich peasants, or rural bourgeoisie, contributed to anti-imperialism, one of the greatest threats to China, and were therefore tolerated. The middle peasants would join the fight against imperialism and landlords and would accept socialism, rendering the class a 'reliable ally of the proletariat.'⁷ The poor peasants are identified as the class with the most revolutionary potential, having been exploited for millennia in a country where ninety percent of the population owned only twenty to thirty percent of the land. Lenin distinguished three subdivisions within the peasantry, each with conflicting class interests. Twelve percent of the rural population of Russia consisted of rich farmers, termed *kulaks* ("hard-fisted" in Russian), who held thirty one percent of the land. The middle peasants held only seven percent and are described as small proprietors. The poor peasants consisted of eighty-one percent of the rural population and held only thirty-five percent of the land.⁸ In terms of subsidiary classes of peasantry, Lenin and Mao were in agreement that the poorest section of the peasantry was the most revolutionary.

Chinese Communism's Urban Beginnings

Following the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, Marxism emerged in the city of Shanghai. A study group was formed under the leadership of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao in 1918, which provided the leadership for the beginning of an urban-based revolution, starting with the incitement of the workers. Even after the establishment of the CCP in 1921, the revolution continued to be urban-based, as illustrated by the increase in Communist-led trade unions in comparison with the neglected agrarian centers. The All-China Labor Federation (ACLF) convened in 1927, boasting 3 million workers and revealing the party's focus on the labor movement, as shown in the increase in number of strikes. This came to an end, however with the split of the United Front when Nationalist forces started to attack the Communist forces in the 'White Terror' of 1927. The structural characteristics of the city, i.e. the high concentration of population and the functional differentiation of socioeconomic life⁹ led to their downfall, as infiltration proved too difficult and the Nationalists found the purge relatively easy to perform. This era shows remarkable similarities to that of Lenin's experience, in that it supports the Marxist assumption that the revolution would start in the cities. The end result, however, shows the CCP flourishing in the countryside because they were able to implement their ideals rather than simply propagate their doctrines.

The city was determined by Mao to be an unsuitable setting for a revolution, another reason for the relative increase in the revolutionary potential of the peasants as compared to the proletariat. As in Russia, the city was considered to be a convenient location for the attainment of the revolution, yet its sociological and structural characteristics made this difficult. The successful and rapid establishment of the CCP in 1921 was partially due to its access to a wealth of intellect, transport facilities and mass media, which was vastly improved during the May Fourth Movement. However, Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalists used these same facilities against the Communists, and the embryonic movement was thus suppressed because the GMD had infiltrated the city to the extent that even the covert movements of the CCP were immediately noticed. The CCP was forced to the countryside where it became a revolutionary threat with its naturally defensive environment and the establishment of autonomous bases. In the countryside the CCP no longer had to deal with outside forces that undermined the party's development, was able to achieve mass mobilization by implementing social and economic reforms without interference, and succeeded in establishing the Red Army, which proved to be immensely important in the success of the revolution.

Mao's Reports and Their Cry for a Rural Revolution

From 1927 onwards, Mao strongly advocated a rural-based revolution predicated upon investigations he conducted in the countryside. In his words, "without the poor peasants there would be no revolution. To deny their role is to deny the revolution."¹⁰ Although urban-based intellectuals played leadership roles in the revolution, it can forcibly be said that the revolution in China was led by the peasantry. 'Maoism' is unique to any other form of socialism; it defies the basic Marxist-Leninist assumption that capitalism is a prerequisite for socialism. This deviation developed because China saw capitalism as a symptom of foreign imperialism and because of the absence of competing socialist theories. This raises the question of the appropriateness of applying Western theories to a

⁶ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume I* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965): 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁸ Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (London: Penguin Group, 1971):70.

⁹ *Ibid.*,258.

¹⁰ Kamal Sheel, *Peasant Society and Marxist Intellectuals in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 241.

significantly different environment. China was agrarian-based and therefore the urban proletariat, which was supposed to be the class with the most revolutionary potential, made up only a minute amount of the population. In his *Investigation of Peasant Movement in Hunan* in March 1927, Mao proclaims:

...several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation.¹¹

Although this claim was denounced as “an utter fantasy”¹² by an unnamed Western scholar, this immense faith in the peasantry’s potential was partly due to the view that urban centers were dominated by imperialist forces and were ‘alien influences.’ Mao also suggested that rural education was superior to urban education, and noted that their “cultural level has risen rapidly.”¹³ In the same report, Mao attributed seventy percent of revolutionary achievements to the peasants, reiterating their revolutionary potential. These differences between Chinese cities and the countryside made a rural-based revolution more appropriate.

Although the *Investigation of Peasant Movement in Hunan* is by far Mao’s most famous report, the *Report from Xunwu* is equally important in terms of Mao’s attempts to adapt Marxist theory to Chinese reality. Instead of attending a major conference in Shanghai attended by the Party Central of the CCP in May 1930, Mao journeyed to Xunwu County where he crystallized his method of inquiry -- the ‘investigation meeting’ (*diao cha hui*) -- which was to become the key element in the ‘mass line’ movement.¹⁴ At the time, Mao was accused of being a “mere empiricist,”¹⁵ and yet the investigations led to the important connection between theory and practice, which Mao referred to as ‘seeking truth from facts’ (*shishi quishi*)¹⁶ in his essay *On New Democracy* written in 1940. The reports were written despite attacks by Wang Ming, Li Lisan, the other members of the twenty-eight Bolsheviks, and the Central Committee of the CCP, which at the time followed the Russian model of dictatorship of the proletariat in alliance with the intellectuals. Criticism did not sway Mao, who strongly believed that “without investigation one has no right to make pronouncements.”¹⁷ This is reflected in his essay *On Practice*, written in July 1932 in order to persuade Party members against dogmatism and empiricism and to illustrate his theory of knowledge.¹⁸ Likewise, Lenin acknowledged that “Practice is higher than [theoretical] knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality.”¹⁹ It was due to these investigations that Mao was able to advance his revolution by transforming the disasters of 1927²⁰ into the implementation of a revolutionary base in Jiangxi. Mao recognized the error of applying the Russian model to China through his investigations and thus adapted Marxist theory to suit the Chinese revolution.

Historians’ Assessments on the Rural Revolution in Russia

‘Paradox’ is the word commonly used by historians to describe the proletarian revolution that occurred in Russia, a country where peasants made up ninety percent of the population. However, according to Richard Pipes the revolution was not actually led by the proletariat. Since the industrial workers of Russia were only “superficially urbanized, they carried with them to the factory rural attitudes only slightly adjusted to industrial conditions.”²¹ The historian also suggests that the February 1917 incidents did not involve a proletarian revolution; rather the workers simply “played...the role of a chorus that reacted to and amplified the actions of the true protagonist, the army.”²² Pipes supports his claims by maintaining that the proletariat in Russia had no interest in politics and were insignificant, comprising only two percent of the population. Nevertheless, Pipes does not imply that the peasants were the true revolutionaries, as they were only revolutionary in that they did not acknowledge the private ownership of land, advocating instead ownership through the *mir*.²³ John Channon argues there was no Bolshevik

¹¹ Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume I*, 23.

¹² John K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China Volume 13* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986):303.

¹³ Kamal Sheel, *Peasant Society and Marxist Intellectuals in China*, 242.

¹⁴ Mao Zedong, *Report from Xunwu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume I*, 339.

¹⁷ Zedong, *Report from Xunwu*, 34.

¹⁸ Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume I*, 295.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁰ This refers to the split with the Guomindang, and the failure of the Autumn Harvest Uprisings.

²¹ Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime 1919-1924* (London: The Harvill Press, 1994): 494.

²² *Ibid.*, 497.

²³ A village commune.

sponsored rural revolution and that the so-called 'Rural Revolution' of 1917 to 1918 "had seemingly little to do with the revolutionary aspirations of the poor peasants or with Bolshevik influence."²⁴ Instead he argues that the revolution was promulgated at a village level as a "rational response of the community to a swift and dramatic increase in the man-to-land ratio."²⁵ Despite the lack of Bolshevik influence in the countryside and the presence of rural autarky, Lenin had definite ideas on the revolutionary potential of the peasants.

Lenin's Recognition of the Peasants

In the face of much criticism by early Russian Marxists who, according to Esther Kingston-Mann, were "rooted in denial of...sociological insights,"²⁶ Lenin formulated an ideology that featured the peasantry as a revolutionary ally. Vera Brodovitch suggests that Lenin was a mere opportunist who recognized the "desperate and dangerous" mood of the peasantry and "harnessed it to his advantage."²⁷ Lenin would have recognized the peasantry to represent the "sphinx of all the Russias"²⁸ (Turgenov) who, if on your side, would assure your victory. Esther Kingston-Mann defends Lenin in saying his opportunism had not "invalidated his real political insights or defined the overall character of his theory and practice."²⁹

Lenin was careful not to overlook the peasant question, which Stalin referred to as the 'national question.' Lenin believed the peasantry to be a potential revolutionary ally to the workers because of its antagonism to feudalism, and saw the peasantry as a tool to resolve the contradiction between industrial workers and feudalism. He attempted to formulate a Marxist peasant policy in his address "To the Rural Poor" (1903), in which he called the peasantry to realize their need for political and civil liberty, to be aware of the materialistic reasons for their poverty, and to finally recognize the urban workers as a body with similar goals. Maurice Meisner argues that Lenin only turned to the peasants when he discovered the failure of the bourgeoisie in the urban centers to uphold its political role, and saw the 'petty bourgeoisie' as a substitute that could play a role in his political strategy. However, Lenin never let go of his fundamental belief that workers were the central revolutionary force in Russia, and only accepted the peasantry as an ally led by the proletariat in the bourgeoisie-democratic phase in history:

...all Russian workers and all the rural poor must fight with both hands and on two sides; with one hand – fight against all the bourgeois, in alliance with all the workers; and with the other hand – fight against the rural officials, against the feudal landlords, in alliance with all the peasants.³⁰

Lenin saw the peasantry as a petty bourgeoisie whose main concern was attaining private plots of land, and although it was capable of revolutionary action, leadership could only lie in the hands of an urbanite. Only under the leadership of the cities could they hope to achieve the abolition of feudalism, the nationalization of land, and the establishment of a provisional revolutionary government. Lenin summarizes his perspective when speaking of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1905: "...the real 'possibility of holding power' -- namely, in the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, in their joint mass strength, which is capable of outweighing all the forces of counterrevolution."³¹ It is interesting to note that on the day of Lenin's death, January 24, 1924, the First National Congress of the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party included the peasantry in their strategy for national liberation.

Contradictions in Policy towards the Peasantry

Lenin and Mao's policy towards the peasantry sometimes seems contradictory and ambiguous, yet this can be explained in relationship to their period of ideological development. From 1917 to 1919, the era of the May Fourth Movement in China, young Mao Zedong gave great importance to the student movement. Despite his limited knowledge of Marxist thought, Mao was captivated by the victory of the Russian Revolution, and following the May Fourth movement, he supported Li Ta-chao's idea of proletarian China. Therefore from 1921 to 1923, Mao played an active role in the labor movement in Hunan, known as his 'workers' period,' which explains why he

²⁴ Edith Rogovin Frankel, *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 118.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁶ Kingston-Mann, *Lenin and the Problem of the Marxist Peasant Revolution*, 171.

²⁷ Vera Brodovitch, *Lenin and the Mensheviks: The Persecution of Socialists under Bolshevism* (Worcester: Billings & Sons Limited, 1987): 64.

²⁸ Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, 68.

²⁹ Kingston-Mann, *Lenin and the Problem of the Marxist Peasant Revolution*, 172.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

³¹ Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993): 21.

echoes Lenin in referring to the revolution as “a joint dictatorship of the revolutionary classes under the leadership of the proletariat.”³² From 1923 to 1924, Mao was known as the ‘organization man’ who played a primarily bureaucratic role in the Communist Party’s Central Committee. It was only from 1925 onwards, following his rhetorical question, “At present we are hardly able to carry out our work among the workers in the cities; how could we have time to work in the villages?”³³ His realization that the Chinese revolution lay in the hands of the peasants is announced in his address to the Second Congress of the Kuomintang in January 1926: “We have concentrated too much on the cities and ignored the peasants.”³⁴

Although Lenin is seemingly consistent in his evaluation of the peasantry, there are discrepancies in these evaluations and how he put them into practice. Lenin is best known for his demands for the “the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,”³⁵ and yet there have been times when he has contradicted this appeal. The Narodniks, early Russian socialists who advocated the support of the peasantry, were criticized in the late 1800s to early 1900s by Lenin, who supported G.V. Plekhanov, the founder of the first Russian Marxist group who argued the “development of the capitalist mode in industry and agriculture...as the achievement, not of the peasantry, but of the industrial proletariat.”³⁶ Despite his views on the dictatorship of the proletariat,³⁷ Vera Brodovaya argues Lenin “had no understanding of the workers as human beings and...when they proved too backward, too ignorant and too undisciplined to run the factories...he felt no compunction about sending them to concentration camps.”³⁸ In January 1919, Lenin used the workers as scapegoats to explain the standstill in industrial production, saying that they had not ‘learned’ and formed the Tsektran (Central Committee of trade unions of transport workers), which served as a symbol of oppression for the working class. The Tsektran overlooked the militarization of labor with commissars acting as watchmen over workers and managers. In 1921, however, the New Economic Policy induced an abatement of labor relations, suggesting Lenin had learned some lessons from the disaster caused by War Communism.

The Common Vision of the Rural Proletariat

Mao and Lenin hypothesized that a rural proletariat would develop out of the peasantry. In his essay on *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), Lenin exaggerated the development of capitalism in his nation by saying that the village commune was in dissolution and that a rural bourgeoisie dominated the countryside. He maintained that the capitalist farmer and the agricultural worker would replace the peasant. During the Great Leap Forward of 1958-61, Mao attempted the industrialization of the countryside by calling for the construction of backyard steel furnaces, a task ending in failure. Realizing that their premature attempts to spark a socialist revolution of the proletariat had failed, the leaders once again reverted to revising Marxist theory in order to resolve practical problems. When it came to land reform in the civil war era, Mao enforced different programs in different regions, either radically confiscating land or reducing rent as specified in his letter to Liu Shaoqi on February 3, 1948.³⁹ Mao won peasant sympathy during a period of struggle against Japanese imperialists and Chiang Kai-shek’s government with the slogans “Anti-starvation,” “Anti-persecution,” and “Anti-civil war,” showing remarkable likeness to Lenin’s slogan of “Peace, Land, Bread.” In *The Present Situation and our Tasks*, Mao suggested that the key to victory over class enemies was the solution of the agrarian problem, a notion supported by Liao Kai-lung in his statement “That the People’s War of Liberation could so speedily be brought to a victorious conclusion was due in a large measure to the successful implementation of the agrarian reform programme.”⁴⁰

A Question of Sincerity

Lenin often allowed the peasants to suffer in order to achieve his aims. The Land Decree of 1917 expropriated land, yet its unequal distribution disappointed peasants’ expectations of a ‘Black Repartition’. Moreover, knowledge that the decree was only temporary and that collectivization was on its way was suggested by the Decree on the Socialization of Land in April 1918. War Communism was a time of severe hardship for peasants

³² Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume II* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967):327.

³³ Lazlo Ladany, *The Communist Party of China and Marxism* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1988):52.

³⁴ Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China Volume 13*, 811.

³⁵ Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, 21.

³⁶ Gurley, *Challengers to Capitalism*,66.

³⁷ Roy Medvedev, *Leninism and Western Socialism* (Worcester: Blackwell Press Ltd., 1981):34.

³⁸ Brodovaya, *Lenin and the Mensheviks: The Persecution of Socialists under Bolshevism*,57.

³⁹ S.M. Chiu, *Chinese Communist Revolutionary Strategy, 1945-1949* (New York: Princeton University, 1961): 18.

⁴⁰ Liao Kai-lung, *From Yenan to Peking* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1954): 70.

whose food was forcibly extracted for cities and troops. Although there is not much information on the matter, an anti-Communist peasant uprising of 1918-19 is known to have been suppressed. A directive issued by Lenin on May 26, 1918 instructed the Red Army to battle the peasantry who withheld food or fuel. Bertrand Russel relates how Lenin described “with a chuckle how the government had forced the *muzhik* [peasant] to take worthless paper for money.”⁴¹ It was only in 1921 with the advent of the New Economic Policy that the peasants could market their grain, after Lenin’s realization that the peasantry would no longer tolerate his decrees.

Mao abandoned the peasantry during the Great Leap Forward in favor of industrialization, yet he was more genuine in his desire to include the peasantry. The mass line movement suggests that he wanted the peasants to be directly involved in the revolution, and did not intend to merely exploit them in order to further the revolution.

General Differences between Chinese and Russian Communism

Leninism and Maoism proved to be a unique brand of communism, with Maoism deviating more from classical Marxism. In both Russia and China, the revolution was led by ‘professionals,’ yet in Russia it was the urban workers rather than the peasantry that lent decisive support to the revolution. In China, four classes as well as non-communist parties were allowed to coexist in a limited fashion, yet in Russia only one class and party was permitted. In addition, the nature of the Chinese and Russian revolutions differed to a large extent. The Chinese revolution involved the seizure of power from rural bases over a long period of time, whereas the Russian revolution consisted of uprisings in urban areas over a very short period of time. Mao denied the universal applicability of the Soviet model and asserted the Chinese model as a prototype for the rest of Asia during the Bandung Conference of 1955, which signaled the irreversible separation of the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

Conclusion

Lenin and Mao’s revolution differed greatly in terms of their nature, yet in terms of their assessment of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, they showed remarkable similarities. Both advocated the alliance of peasantry and proletariat as a requisite for a successful revolution, although Lenin tended to place more emphasis on the role of the proletariat. If Lenin had lived on and Stalin had not pursued rapid industrialization, it would be interesting to see if the peasantry would have continued to play a large part in the post-revolutionary era, since in the April Theses of 1917 he mentions, “we must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.”⁴² A man described by Leon Trotsky as having “not only the outward look of a muzhik, but ...in his innermost being,”⁴³ Lenin himself revolutionized the role played by peasants in Russian Marxism, but acknowledged peasants more as a means to an end, and with less sincerity than Mao. Mao was pragmatic enough to recognize the incompatibility of Chinese reality and classical Marxism, and with this recognition led his party to victory.

⁴¹ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (London: Fontana Press, 1990): 743.

⁴² John Daborn, *Russia: Revolution and Counter Revolution 1917-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991):.66.

⁴³ Leon Trotsky, *On Lenin* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1971) :145.