The Peasant Question from Marx to Lenin: The Russian Experience
Author(s): Nirmal Kumar Chandra
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The Peasant Question from Marx to Lenin

The Russian Experience

What is a class? Do peasants constitute a single class? What is the peasant question from the Marxists' revolutionary perspective? These issues are raised in this paper, based on the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin, above all. The empirical part, mainly on the Russian agrarian scene from the 1890s to 1930, explores if the peasants constituted a cohesive social force free from internal contradictions. There is also a brief discussion on the post-Soviet situation.

NIRMAL KUMAR CHANDRA

I

The peasant question has been of paramount importance for Marxism almost from its inception. It lurked somewhat in the background towards the end of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (henceforth the *Manifesto*) of 1848, but leaped to the forefront shortly thereafter in Marx's writings about the unfolding revolutions in France and Germany. Over the years Marx and Engels went more deeply into problems of developing countries outside of west Europe.

At one level, the peasant question is a very simple one. How can the mass of peasantry be drawn into a revolutionary movement spearheaded by the socialists, representing above all the proletariat? The difficulty, at bottom, stems from the fact, as Kalinin, a Soviet leader, is reported to have said, that the peasant possesses 'two souls', one of a proprietor, and the other of a worker [Davies 1980:85]. In all fairness, one must add that the peasant is far from being a unique 'species'; the urban petty bourgeois in all countries is in the same boat, and poses as much headache for the Marxists as the peasant does.

Apart from the writings of Marx and Engels on the notion of 'class', and the peasant question in west Europe and elsewhere, this essay focuses almost exclusively on Russia. What is the relevance for other developing countries, especially India? It is widely acknowledged that Russian or Soviet experience and discussion had an enormous impact both on the political agenda of Left parties and intellectual cross-currents in a large number of countries like China, India, and so on. Hence no further justification is necessary.

I begin in Section II with Marx's concept of class that was improved upon by Lenin many years later. Next, I take up the changing vision of Marx and Engels on a range of issues related to the practical one, namely 'what is to be done to win over the peasants'. Among the issues are: whether there is/are one or several classes within the peasantry, the link between socialist movements in industrially advanced countries and more traditional ones, and the special role of the Russian commune. In Section IV Lenin's position on peasant classes, and the shifts in his (and his party's) views on crucial questions that cropped up till Lenin's death are examined critically. Section V explores Shanin's contention that the Russian peasantry from 1905 to 1930 behaved as a single class, when contradictions between various segments remained muted. There is a brief concluding section at end.

II

Many years ago Lukacs (1971:105) observed that Marx never left behind a precise definition of class. Some passages in the unfinished final chapter of 'Capital', vol 3, contain quite illuminating remarks.

(a) 'The owners of labour-power, owners of capital, and landowners whose sources of income are wages, profits and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.'

(b) 'In England, modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, even here the stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form. Middle and intermediate strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere.'

(c) 'The first question to be answered is this: What constitutes a class?...What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landlords constitute the three great social classes?'

(d) 'At first glance – the identity of revenues and sources of revenue. There are three great social groups whose members, the individuals forming them, live on wages, profits and ground-rent respectively...'

(e) 'However, from this standpoint, physicians and officials, e g, would also constitute two classes, for they belong to two distinct social groups receiving their revenue from one and the same source. The same would also be true of the infinite fragmentation of interest rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords – the latter, e g, into owners of vineyards, farm owners, owners of forests, mine owners and owners of fisheries' [Marx 1964:862-63].

Several observations can be made with regard to the above.

(i) Any definition of class must allow for the separation of the three great classes of nineteenth century England as noted in excerpts (a) and (c)

(ii) The criteria spelled out in passage (d) are good enough to distinguish between a worker and a capitalist or a landlord but these also allow an almost indefinitely large number of classes to be identified within each of the three great classes, thereby defeating the objectives set out in (i) above. Hence these criteria are incomplete. Further, one of the two criteria is the same as 'livelihood source' used in the economic classification of population censuses in different countries, though the censuses rarely distinguish between workers, managers and owners engaged in, say, commerce.

(iii) From the excerpt (b) it follows that

the difficulties in stratifying the population into classes are such that even in mid-19th century England the entire population may not fall neatly into one of the three classes. The difficulties would be greater for countries on a lower scale of capitalist development owing to the wide prevalence of family enterprises in agriculture, industry, etc.

Marx's own ideas seem to be best approximated by Lenin in his 'A Great Beginning' (1919).

> Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation in most cases fixed and formulated in law to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people, one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy [LCW 29:421].

There are several elements in this definition, namely (a) the relations to the means of production; (b) the role in the social organisation of labour; (c) the relative dimensions of wealth; (d) the mode of acquiring wealth; and (e) the ability to appropriate the labour of another. It can easily be seen that these criteria taken together do distinguish between the three great classes of 19th century England that Marx spoke of.

Of these, the primacy, in my view, belongs to the first and the second. While the fifth is completely subsumed under the first two, and the same is true for the fourth, the third criterion is only broadly determined by the primary ones. This interpretation differs from that of others. Thus a Soviet textbook [Anon 1959:452] referred to (a) above as 'the fundamental and decisive indicator ('priznak') from which follows all remaining indicators of classes, including their role in the social organisation of labour as well as differences in the sizes and the sources of their income.' Similarly, Poulantzas (1974:14) writes: 'The position in economic relations has, however, the principal role in the determination of social classes. What is meant in Marxist theory by 'economic'? The economic sphere (or space) is determined by the 'process of production' and the position of agents, (as well as) their division into social classes by the 'relations of production'. The real distinction in the magnitudes of income (as between classes) is only a consequence of the relations of production.'

The approach of the Soviet textbook or of Poulantzas would leave two major problems unresolved. First, from criterion (a) alone it is not easy to distinguish between the capitalists and the landlords, or between workers and non-owning managers. But (a) and (b) together would remove these difficulties. Secondly, if one treats the criteria (c) and (d) on the size and source of wealth or income, as supplementary criteria, rather than considering them simply as derivatives of the first two, one can differentiate between the different strata within each of the three major classes. As explained below, such differentiation may at times play a crucial role in revolutionary strategy. Further, this approach also helps to resolve some well-known paradoxes, e g, the incomes of some propertyless managers and skilled workers exceeding those of petty capitalists and landowners. If wealth and/or income is used as indicator(s), Lenin's definition can capture adequately the class differences in both developed and developing countries.

I have so far described the 'objective' basis for a class, or 'the class in itself'. Referring again to England in the middle of the 19th century Marx wrote in 'The Poverty of Philosophy':

> Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. *The mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself.* In the struggle, of which we have pointed only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of the class against class is a political struggle' [MECW 6:211] [emphasis added].

It is thus explicitly stated that the existence of a class antedates class solidarity or class-consciousness.

There are, however, passages in different writings of Marx and Engels that might convey a different impression. Thus in 'The German Ideology' they wrote: 'The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other' [MECW 5:77]. In the *Manifesto* they stated: 'The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie. At first the contest is carried on by individual labourers, then by the workpeople of a factory, then by the operatives of one trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them...At this stage the labourers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition... But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows and it feels that strength more...The unceasing improvement of machinery, more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collision between two classes...This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier' [MECW 6:492-93].

The passage from 'The German Ideology' undoubtedly puts the accent on class-consciousness; there is hardly any mention of class in the other sense. On the other hand, the passage from 'The Poverty of Philosophy' uses the term in both senses. The same is true for the excerpt from the *Manifesto*. It begins with 'the proletariat'; here the singular is quite important, implying that the authors are referring to the class as a whole. Other expressions seem to imply that without appropriate organisation there cannot be a class in the full sense.

Indeed, one of the major objectives of Marx and Engels was to analyse the impediments to working class solidarity at different levels, economic as well as ideological. The fact that in ordinary times and in most societies the oppressed classes lack class-consciousness does not invalidate the concept of class as such. It was pointed out in 'The German Ideology': 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i e, the class which is ruling the material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who

lack the means of mental production are subject to it' [MECW 5:59].

III

In countries having large landed estates – whether capitalist, feudal or semi-feudal, a distinction is generally made between the landlords and the rest of the population living off agriculture. Further, in countries where capitalism is very weakly developed, there is a general consensus, stretching from the left- to right-wing governments in post-war Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, that the landlords act as fetters on economic development and that their land or at least the major part of it should be expropriated with or without compensation. On the other major segment of the agricultural population, namely the peasantry, there are quite important differences between Marxists and non-Marxists, and even among Marxists regarding stratification as well as in the appraisal of their political or revolutionary potentials. In the remainder of this section the views of Marx and Engels will be discussed.

The *Manifesto* contains only tangential remarks on the peasant question. While in a couple of places there is a mention of 'the peasant' or the 'peasants' as a whole, elsewhere it is stated that 'there is no need to abolish' certain types of property like that of the small peasant [MECW 6:488-98].

I shall first quote two passages from Marx's *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850* and then one from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon.*

(a) 'The French workers could not take a step forward, could not touch a hair of the bourgeois order, until the course of the revolution had aroused the mass of the nation, the peasants and petty bourgeois standing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, against this order, against the rule of capital, and had forced them to attach themselves to the proletarians as their protagonists.'

(b) 'Napoleon was the only man who had exhaustively represented the interests and the imagination of the peasant class, newly created in 1789' [MECW 10:57, 80].

(c) 'Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of the French society at that, the smallholding peasantry...A smallholding, a peasant and his family, alongside them another smallholding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these make up a village and a few score of villages make up a department. In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in sack form a sack of potatoes' [MECW 11:187].

Shanin (1976), in an edited book of readings, has put together excerpts from the last two works into a chapter by Marx with the heading, 'Peasantry as a Class'. The heading is rather misleading. Excerpt (c) above refers explicitly to the 'class of smallholding peasants'; bigger peasants and the landless would obviously remain outside the class. In the present context 'peasants' and 'smallholding peasants' are almost synonymous as latter was 'the most numerous class of French society'. Hence it would appear that the references to the 'peasant' or 'the peasant class' in the *Manifesto* or in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* were, indeed, to the smallholding class only. This reading appears all the more plausible since the Napoleonic Code benefited primarily the small peasantry. Last but not the least, the political implication of the excerpt (a) above points to the same conclusion: only the small peasantry could attach themselves to the proletariat and conversely, bigger peasants could not under almost any circumstances fight the bourgeoisie with the workers in the vanguard. One should add, however, that Marx himself perhaps never wrote on the stratification of the peasantry.

In point of fact, before the publication of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (December 1851) Engels had already dealt with the problem. In the very first article (September 1851) in the collection, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Germany*, Engels wrote: 'there was the great class of the small farmers, the peasantry, which with its appendix of farm-labourers constitutes a considerable majority of the entire nation. But this class again subdivided itself into different fractions. There were, firstly, the more wealthy farmers, what is called in Germany 'Gross'- and 'Mittel-Bauern', proprietors of more or less extensive farms, and each of them commanding the services of several agricultural labourers. This class, placed between the large untaxed feudal landowners and the smaller peasantry and farm-labourers, for obvious reasons found in an alliance with the anti-feudal middle class of the towns its most natural course' [MECW 11:11]. Further along the same paragraph Engels refers to three other classes – small freeholders, feudal tenants, and farm labourers. There is some confusion in the passage. Initially, Engels speaks of all these five groups as fractions of one class, while later on these are characterised as so many separate classes. On balance, the second interpretation is more appropriate for the simple reason that within the Marxist framework the Gross- and Mittel-Bauern as well as their farm-labourers, i e, the exploiters and the exploited, cannot constitute a single class. Even by treating the farm-labourers as an appendix does not sustain the first interpretation; for, an appendix cannot stand in an antagonistic relation with the main body.

In *The Peasant Question in France and Germany* (1894) Engels analysed various rural classes more extensively than before. As the title shows, the analysis was confined mainly to these two countries in the latter half of the 19th century. Engels also remarked that the class structure was quite different elsewhere. Leaving aside the big landed estates, there were four rural classes, namely big, middle and small peasants and farm servants. The key figure however was the small peasant, "the owner or tenant – particularly the former – of a patch of land no bigger, as a rule, than he and his family can till, and no smaller than can sustain his family" [MESW:383]. He was thus self-supporting in the double sense: his family labour sufficed for cultivation and the produce of the land was adequate for the maintenance of the family. There was a gradual worsening of his condition, he was increasingly unable to keep the necessary draft animals, he had already lost over half of his farm productive activity in handicrafts, while taxes, partition of the family land, and rising debts continued to cripple him. He 'is hopelessly doomed. He is a future proletarian' (p 384). As between big and middle peasants Engels does not indicate how they are to be differentiated. Both these categories 'cannot manage without wage workers...The big and middle peasant must likewise inevitably succumb to the competition of capitalist production and the cheap overseas corn as is proved by the growing indebtedness and the everywhere evident decay of these peasants as well' (p 396). The farm servants or day labourers obviously stand apart from the three peasant classes, as they do not have any land and wages are the only source of their livelihood.

At a programmatic level, the attitude of socialists to the last class posed no problem. 'Of course', said Engels "a workers' party has to fight, in the first place, on behalf of the wage workers, that is for the male and female servantry and the day labourers" (p 396). Engels quotes approv-

ingly from the French Party document of 1894: "it is the duty of socialism to put the agricultural proletarians again in possession – collective or social in form – of the great domains after expropriating their present idle owners" (p 386).

On the other hand, the attitude to the small peasant is more complex. Engels has no 'use for the small peasant as a party member if he expects us to perpetuate his property in his smallholding' (MESW:392) but the party is 'decidedly on the side of the small peasant', and should 'do everything at all permissible to make his lot more bearable, to facilitate his transition to the cooperative should he decide to do so', and even to help him remain on his small holding 'for a protracted length of time' till he decides to join the cooperative. Engels continued: "we do this not only because we consider the small peasant who does his own work as virtually belonging to us, but also in the direct interest of the party. The greater the number of peasants whom we can save from being actually hurled down into the proletariat, whom we can win to our side while they are still peasants, the more quickly and easily the social transformation will be accomplished" (pp 394-95).

Moving to the big and middle peasants, the party is 'more interested in their male and female servants and day labourers than in themselves' (p 396). The only way these peasants can be helped against the inevitable decay is by recommending "here too the pooling of farms to form cooperative enterprises, in which the exploitation of labour will be eliminated more and more... Otherwise we shall have to abandon them to their fate...Most likely we shall be able to abstain here from resorting to forcible expropriation" (p 397). Further, Engels 'flatly' denied that "the Socialist workers' party of any country is charged with the task of taking into fold in addition to the rural proletarians and the small peasants, also the middle and big peasants... On certain questions we make common cause with them and be able to fight side by side with them for definite aims" (p 389).

In the preface (1875) to *The Peasant War in Germany Engels* stated: "The bigger peasants belong to the bourgeoisie... The agricultural proletariat, the farm labourers – that is the class from which the bulk of the armies of the princes are recruited. It is this class which, thanks to the universal suffrage, now sends into parliament the large number of feudal lords and Junkers; but it is also the class nearest to the industrial workers of the towns...It is the immediate and most urgent task of the German labour movement to breathe life into this class and draw it into the movement" [MECW 21:99-100]. In a similar vein Marx in his letter to Engels (April 16, 1856) remarked: 'The whole thing in Germany will depend on the possibility of backing the proletarian revolution by some second edition of the Peasant War. Then the affair will be splendid' [MESC:92].

Although Engels spoke of the impending doom of the small peasant, he did not give any supporting figures. Kautsky (1899:II-IV, 348-50) examined the evidence and came to some unexpected conclusions. While agriculture was coming increasingly under the sway of modern industry in numerous ways, and this was a main finding of the study, there was no trend towards higher concentration in landholding either in Germany or in France. Indeed, during 1882-95 the distribution of land across size classes was rather stable in Germany, and, surprisingly, only the middle group of 5-20 hectares expanded both in numbers and in area under cultivation as against all farms taken together. Nevertheless, the process of proletarianisation continued as small farms were becoming more dependent than ever on wage or other earnings outside their own farms.

On the peasant question in other countries with a lower degree of industrialisation neither Marx nor Engels made a deep analysis, though they read voraciously, especially on Russia from the late 1860s. Many of their followers took a 'unilinear' position trying to make a simple extrapolation from west Europe. There are, indeed, two possible roots – one economic, and the other political, in *Capital* and the *Manifesto* respectively.

In setting up the theoretical model of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*, vol I, Marx leaned heavily on the English experience. In the preface to the first German edition of *Capital* (vol I: 9-10) Marx wrote: "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future. One nation can and should learn from others...it is the ultimate aim of this work to lay bare the economic law of motion of society – it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by successive stages of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs." On primitive accumulation, Marx underlined that capitalism required the actual tillers of the soil to be expropriated of any land and tools they possessed and turned into agricultural labourers. This had gone farthest in England, and was proceeding as well in west. One possible, though not the only one, inference from all this is that the same course must be taken by other societies.

On the political plane the *Manifesto* declared: 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class... (As a ruling class, as it) sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy' [MECW 6:504-06]. This idea later became 'Dictatorship of the working class!', as a banner of the revolutionary Paris workers proclaimed in June 1848 [MECW 10:69]. What is the import for countries where the industrial proletariat either does not exist or constitutes a tiny fraction of the workforce? One option is for socialists in these countries to join hands with the proletarian parties in a more advanced country and wait for a revolution in the latter.

That is what Marx and Engels advocated on some occasions, but not always. Hoping for a socialist revolution in England of the 1840s and 1850s, they advised against Irish independence from England. As Engels in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* [1845, in MECW 4:561] put it: 'Irish distress cannot be removed by any Act of Repeal (of the union with England)...the cause of Irish misery, which now seems to come from abroad, is really to be found at home.' By the late 1860s, both Marx and Engels changed track completely. In a letter to Engels (December 10, 1869) Marx [MECW 43:398] admitted: 'For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy... Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland.' And Engels [MECW 43:409] wrote to Marx on January 19, 1870: 'The more I study the subject, the clearer it becomes to me that, as a result of the English invasion, Ireland was cheated of its whole development, and thrown back. And this ever since the 12th century.'

Did not Marx say the opposite in 'The British Rule of India' (June 1853)? Ob-

serving that the English 'produced the greatest, and, to speak the truth, the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia', he concluded: 'Whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution' [MECW 12:133]. In 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India' (July 1853), Marx reiterated the destructive as well as the progressive features of British rule, but added significantly: "The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether" [MECW 12:221]. Barely four years later during the 'Revolt in India' as Marx christened it, as against the colonialists' Sepoy Mutiny, Marx and Engels wrote a large number of articles that underlined widespread support for the rebels and hatred toward the British across religious sects and social classes. They lamented the absence of centralised coordination among diverse rebel groups leading to their defeat (ME-India).

Comparatively little attention has been paid to Section IV of the *Manifesto* where it is stated: 'In Poland they (the Communists) support the party that insists on an agrarian revolution as the prime condition for national emancipation, that party which fomented the insurrection of Cracow in 1846.' The general principle is formulated thus: 'the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time' [MECW 6:518-19].[1] Curiously, one of the greatest Marxists, the Polish-born Rosa Luxemburg, fought strenuously over the years against Polish independence and wanted the working class movement in Russian- or Prussian-held territories to co-ordinate their activities with their counterparts in Russia or Prussia [Nettl 1966:312ff].

Referring to China where the Celestial Empire was going through a social crisis, people were pauperised, taxes were rising, and the foreigners, having won free trade by dint of force, were trying to flood the market with machine-made goods, Marx and Engels wrote in 'Review,' 31 January 1850 [MECW 10:266-67]: 'People have appeared among the rebellious plebs who point to the poverty of some and the wealth of others, who demand a different distribution of property – even the complete abolition of private property...When in their imminent flight across Asia our (European) reactionaries will ultimately arrive at the Wall of China, at the gates that lead to the stronghold of arch-reaction and arch-conservatism, who knows if they will not find there the inscription:

> République Chinoise – Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.'

The examples cited above show conclusively that Marx and Engels did not have a standard formula for socialists in developing countries. They also did not hesitate to own up past mistakes. Further, it is unwarranted to draw a line between the different phases of Marx's life or between Marx and Engels when they were both living. In the early phase they looked forward to independence for Poland and China, but not for Ireland, and were ambivalent on India until the Revolt of 1857. Wherever they supported independence there was no mention of proletarian dictatorship as a pre-condition. But for the success of Russian revolution, as shown below, they both harped on the need for a revolution in the west, either before or just after the former. After they seized power, one may add, the Bolsheviks were hoping for the same till the mid-1920s.

Turning to agrarian issues on which Engels probably contributed more than Marx, the former reversed his stand on a very crucial question within a short period. In 'The Communists and Karl Heinzen' (1847) he stated [MECW 6:295]: 'For 600 years, all progressive movements have issued so exclusively from our towns that the independent democratic movements of country people (Wat Tyler, Jack Cade, the Jacquerie, the Peasants' War) were first always reactionary manifestations and were secondarily always crushed. The editors to the series (p.681) remarked quite appropriately that Engels in 'The Peasant War in Germany' (1850) and other works 'showed the revolutionary liberation character of peasant revolts and their role in shaking the foundations of feudalism.' One can only surmise that Engels began his systematic investigations after the former piece appeared.

On the communal ownership of land in Russia there was a major shift in the views of Marx and Engels. According to Wada (1977:43), at the end of the first German edition of *Capital* (1867) there was the footnote 9 that was deleted in the second edition of 1873. The footnote was quite disparaging about those Russian intellectuals who thought that their commune was unique and held great promise in a socialist future. In his letter to Engels of November 7, 1868 [MECW 43:154]. Marx was still very scornful. 'The whole business down to the smallest detail, is absolutely identical with the 'primeval Germanic' communal system. Add to this, in the Russian case (and this may be found 'amongst a part of the Indian communal system', not in the Punjab, but in the south), (i) the 'non-democratic', but 'patriarchal' character of the commune leadership and (ii) the 'collective responsibility' for taxes to the state, etc. It follows from the second point that the more industrious a Russian peasant is, the more he is exploited by the state, not only in terms of taxes, but also for supplying provisions and horses, etc. for the constant passage of troops, for government couriers, etc. The whole shit is breaking down.'

In the meanwhile, two schools of revolutionaries, both owing allegiance to Marx, surfaced in Russia. One held that the commune would go the way that Marx foresaw in 1867-68, while the other camp thought that Russia could skip the stage of capitalist transformation of agriculture (de-peasantisation as in England) and the commune could serve as the embryo of future socialist reconstruction. Chernyshevskii (1859:188) who had not read Marx, took the latter position. Since the late 1860s Marx studied at depth the Russian communes and learnt the language. In the 1873 'Afterword to the Second German Edition' of *Capital*' (vol I:15) Marx called Chernyshevskii a 'great Russian scholar and critic...a mastermind.' In the 'Letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski' (probably, November 1877) Marx explicitly referred to the question posed by Chernyshevskii: 'Whether Russia should start, as its liberal economists wish, by destroying the rural community in order to pass to a capitalist system or whether, on the contrary, it can acquire all the fruits of the system without suffering its torment, by developing its own historical conditions'. He endorsed Chernyshevskii's view [MECW 24:196-97]. In the 'Preface to the Second Russian Edition' of the *Manifesto* (1882), Marx and Engels wrote: 'If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the west, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian communal owner-

ship may serve as the starting point for communist development' [MECW 24:426]. In his actual reply to Vera Zasulich's query broadly on the same two alternatives as above, Marx had earlier (1881) explained why the analysis of *Capital*, chapter XXXII, was not relevant to Russia. 'Private property, based on personal labour...will be supplanted by capitalist private property, based on exploitation of the labour of others, on wage labour.' In west Europe one form of private property was transformed into another, capitalist form. But that is not the case in Russia. He went on: 'the commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia, but in order that it may function as such, it would first be necessary to eliminate the deleterious influences which are assailing it from all sides, and then ensure for it the normal conditions of spontaneous development' [MECW 24:370-71].

A decade after Marx died Engels struck a somewhat different note in his letter (1893) to N F Danielson, a leading Narodnik thinker [MESW:463-65]. He mildly reproached Danielson for 'taking a gloomier view' of the emerging capitalism in Russia than was warranted by facts. The commune could hardly develop into a higher social form unless that 'higher form was already in existence in another country.' The commune, he continued, 'is doomed. But on the other hand, capitalism opens out new views [or vistas? ~ NKC] and new hopes. Look at what it has done and is doing in the west. A great nation like yours outlives every crisis...May destiny take its course!' Engels seemed to think that the die was cast in favour of capitalism in Russia just as Lenin did at about the same time.

IV

Lenin occupies a privileged position in the Marxist pantheon. After Marx and Engels there is no thinker who is revered more than Lenin. For a while Mao may have eclipsed him as an icon. But Mao always claimed to be a Leninist just as Lenin was unstinting in his loyalty to Marx and Engels.

Lenin was also an admirer of Chernyshevskii. In one of his earliest anti-Narodnik pamphlets (1894), he stated clearly: 'No Marxist ever argued anywhere that there 'must be' capitalism in Russia 'because' there was capitalism in the west, and so on' [LCW 1:192]. The question for him was whether capitalism was or was not emerging in Russia, and what socialists should do about it.

Lenin's most famous work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899, in LCW 3), was an attempt to demonstrate how capitalism was developing despite obstacles thrown in its path by strong remnants of feudalism, especially serfdom. There is a striking affinity between Engels' 1893 letter to Danielson, and Lenin's thesis. In arriving at the conclusion the author looked at a whole set of factors like the rapid growth of modern industry, including branches manufacturing producer goods, increasing urbanisation of the country, a shift away from agriculture in the occupational structure of the workforce, the spread of modern agriculture with inputs from industry, the emergence of progressive capitalist farmers hiring wage labour and producing commercial crops, growing differentiation among the peasantry or depeasantisation, signifying a thinning in the ranks of the middle peasants and a bulge in those of the rural proletariat, large-scale migration of rural labour into new areas of settlement with more abundant land, an ever-widening home market for industrial goods, and so on. More than a century later this study in the area of economic development remains unsurpassed in its analytical breadth combined with an avalanche of empirical evidence.

In his preface to the volume, Lenin paid glowing tributes to Kautsky's work cited earlier as 'the most noteworthy contribution to recent economic literature' after *Capital*, volume III. He was particularly pleased that the 'general process' of capitalist evolution of agriculture as depicted by Kautsky was nearly identical to that in Russia. In the light of subsequent development it appears that while Kautsky did make an accurate forecast for Germany, the same cannot be said for Lenin. From 1894 to 1913 Russia's national income rose by a substantial 50 per cent, but it was much lower than in most West European countries like England, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, etc. In a list of 11 leading countries, including Japan, US and nine in Europe, ranked according to a complex index of per capita outputs in a few critical industries, Russia's rank declined marginally from 9.5 to 10.0 over the period, 1860-1910 [Nove 1972:14-15]. One cannot discuss here where exactly Lenin erred, but there is one major lacuna in the evidence provided by Lenin on the middle peasants being 'ousted' by the rich ones [LCW 3:181, 592-94]. All the landholding data he cited pertained to a single point of time from which no time-trend can possibly be discerned. Besides, Lenin failed to notice that this conclusion of his was directly at variance with a major proposition of Kautsky (see above).

While Engels gave a qualitative description of several peasant classes, Lenin went much farther in showing for the first time how they can be stratified and also offered some figures on the numerical strength of these classes in Russia. Thanks to the development of capitalism 'the peasantry have completely split up into opposite groups' (p 187). At one end of the spectrum stood 'the rural bourgeoisie or the well-to-do peasantry. These include the independent farms who carry on commercial agriculture in all its varied forms...then come the owners of commercial and industrial establishments, the proprietors of commercial enterprises, etc. The combining of commercial agriculture with commercial and industrial enterprises is the type of combination of agriculture with industries that is specifically peculiar to this peasantry. From among these well-to-do peasants a class of capitalist farmers is created...The size of the farm, in a majority of cases, requires a labour force larger than that available in the family, for which reason the formation of a body of farm labourers and still more of day labourers, is a necessary condition for the existence of the well-to-do peasantry.' But 'the employment of wage labour is not an essential feature of the concept, 'petty bourgeoisie'', Lenin adds in a footnote. Further, 'the spare cash obtained by these peasants in the shape of net income is either directed towards commercial operations and usury, which are so excessively developed in our rural districts, or, under favourable conditions is invested in the purchase of land, farm implements, etc. In a word, these are small agrarians...They are the masters of the contemporary countryside' (pp 176-77). A few pages later, however, he amends the last remark: 'Actually, the real masters of the contemporary countryside are often enough not the representatives of the peasant bourgeoisie but the village usurers and the neighbouring landowners' (p 186). I may add that this shift is not a matter of detail. The latter group represents the feudal or semi-feudal interests, while the former is obviously capitalist. It would seem that Lenin was not sure which stratum dominated rural life at that time. If the feudal one was more powerful, that should have acted as a brake on capitalist transformation.

At the other end of the spectrum of peasant classes, 'is the rural proletariat, the class of allotment-holding wage-workers. This covers the poor peasants, including those that are completely landless, but the most typical representative of the Russian rural proletariat is the allotment-holding farm labourer, day labourer, unskilled labourer, building worker or other allotment-holding worker. Insignificant farming on a patch of land, with the farm in a state of utter ruin (particularly evidenced by the leasing out of land), inability to exist without the sale of labour-power (= 'industries' of the indigent peasants), an extremely low standard of living (probably lower even then that of the worker without an allotment) – such are the distinguishing features of this type.' Approximately 'all the horseless and a large part of the one-horse peasants' belong to this class (pp 177-78).

'The intermediary link' between these post-reform types of peasantry is the middle peasant, 'distinguished by the least development of commodity production', i e, market involvement. 'The independent agricultural labour of this category of peasant covers his maintenance in perhaps only the best years and under particularly favourable conditions, and that is why his position is an extremely precarious one. In the majority of cases the middle peasant cannot make ends meet without resorting to loans to be repaid by labour service, etc, without seeking 'subsidiary' employment on the side, which also consists partly in the sale of labour-power, etc. Every crop failure flings masses of the middle peasants into the ranks of the proletariat. In its social relations this group fluctuates between the top group (the rich peasantry) towards which it gravitates but which only a small minority of lucky ones succeed in entering, and the bottom group, into which it is pushed by the whole course of social evolution' (p 181).

Using these criteria one could set apart unambiguously all peasants from landlords since every peasant by definition uses family labour for tilling the family land, which the landlord does not. Also, the poor peasantry depends on the sale of labour power, while the others at most hire themselves out occasionally. But the dividing line between the middle and the rich peasants is rather vague as there is neither a ceiling nor a floor in the employment of outside labour to work on the family farm. Thus someone who does not hire himself out, but engages 1 to 2 outside day labourers or none at all, could well belong to either class. Bringing into the picture non-agricultural pursuits does not help matters as both the classes are engaged in these activities. Hence some arbitrary line based on the degree of affluence, following Lenin's 1929 definition of 'class' (vide section I above), appears to be the only way out.

Much later in 1920 he gave again a concise definition of different peasant classes in the 'Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Questions' prepared for the second Congress of the Comintern. Beside the proletarian and semi proletarian poor peasantry, the remainder was now stratified as small, medium and big peasants. While the first group does 'not hire outside labour', the second does so 'quite frequently' (for example, one farm out of every two or three)', and the last 'are capitalist entrepreneurs in agriculture, who as a rule employ several hired labourers' [LCW 31:154-57].

On the numerical strength of the peasant classes, Lenin used two approaches. The first was based on the ownership of horses [LCW 3:143-47]. As an approximate measure, families with one horse or none were classified as poor peasants, those with two horses as middle peasants, and those owing three or more horses as well-to-do or rich peasants. He also compared the army horse censuses of 1888-91 and 1896-1900. Over the period, the percentage in all peasant households went up from 55.8 to 59.5 for poor peasants, fell slightly from 22.2 to 22.0 for the middle group, and declined significantly from 22.0 to 18.5 for the top group. The figures cited do not bear out his contention on 'the growing 'expropriation' of the peasantry.' The average number of horses per household fell marginally from 1.6 to 1.5, the number of horseless families rose from 2.8 to 3.2 million, but simultaneously that of families with 1-2 horses rose from 5.1 to 5.8 million and that of families with 4 or more horses shrank by about 0.41 million. The second approach, used in later publications, is based on the official 'Landed Property Statistics for 1905', including allotment (commune) as well as private land, covering European Russia [LCW 13: 224-28; LCW 15:80]. Observing that a peasant family needs 15 desyatins (1 desyatin = 2.7 acres) of land to make both ends meet, Lenin classified as middle peasants those with 15 to 20 desyatins; their number (in million) came to 1.0 with a total landholding (in million desyatins) of 15.0; the corresponding figures for the peasant bourgeoisie and capitalist landowners (each having 20-500 desyatins) were 1.5 and 70.0, while those for the 'ruined peasantry crushed by feudal exploitation' (below 15 desyatins each) were 10.5 and 75.0 respectively. The percentage shares in all peasant families were 80.8 for the last group, 7.7 for the middle peasants, and 11.5 for the rich. In addition, there were 30,000 feudal latifundia (over 500 desyatins each) owning 70.0 million desyatins. Reclassifying the data from horse censuses cited earlier, Lenin now put the percentage of poor peasants (up to 1 horse) in the total at 56, of middle (2 to 3 horses) at 33, and of the well-to-do or rich (4 or more horses) at 11. The striking differences in the proportions, based respectively on horse ownership and landholdings, are left unexplained by Lenin.

In the 1920s there were animated discussions among eminent Soviet scholars both on the definition of the middle and rich peasants and on the numerical strength of each of the peasant classes. Referring to these, and keeping in view the conceptual difficulties in drawing precise boundaries between the peasant classes, the disputes about the criteria and the plethora of alternative estimates, Carr (1952:164) wrote: 'Such a classification was necessarily vague and statistics relating to it uncertain'. After summarising several of the estimates, Lewin (1968: 48) remarked: 'One could quote a dozen more such studies, almost all of which gave different results for each stratum, and which differed as much by the criteria adopted as by the classification itself.' In fact, it is highly doubtful if a large-scale survey can be organised and the results tabulated to reveal the exact numbers for different social classes. As seen in section I, 'class' has three or more critical dimensions that cannot be captured easily even in a complex table. Nevertheless, some rough estimates of numbers are required for a socialist party in drawing up its political programme.

On policy issues, one may consider first the commune. For the Narodniks, according to Lenin, 'the community principle prevents capitalism from seizing agricultural production'. But he felt that the commune failed to safeguard the peasants and de-peasantisation continued. The important question was the removal of feudal restrictions in various forms that run counter to the democratic norms [LCW3:323-24]. In their Agrarian

Programme of 1902 the Social-Democrats along with the Narodniks demanded that the 'cut-off lands' taken away from the communes and handed over to the nobles as part of the redemption payment when serfdom was legally abolished in 1861, should be given back to the communes and redistributed to peasants through the elected peasant committees. In this respect Lenin was 'supporting small-scale farming' as it was an anti-feudal step, and 'it is highly important that the socialist party begin to 'stand up' *at once* for the small peasants, and do 'everything possible' for them.' However, 'trying to save the peasantry by protecting small-scale farming and small holdings would be a useless retardation of social development' [LCW 6:114, 130,146].

Peasant uprisings in the early years of this century, and above all, the revolution of 1905 transformed Lenin's ideas on the political role of the peasantry. Rejecting the standard Marxist formulation of a revolutionary 'government of working-class democracy' on the ground that the workers were in a minority, he called for a 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship' comprising of workers, semi-proletarians (rural poor) and semi-proprietors (urban petty bourgeois); these classes would constitute an overwhelming majority of the population [LCW 8:291]. An alliance struck with the peasant bourgeoisie would not outlast the overthrow of feudalism and autocracy; in the next stage, struggle would also develop against the former in order to achieve socialism [LCW 9:84-85]. On the agrarian question, back in the late 1880s Plekhanov, then the leading Social Democrat, had argued for the 'eradication of all the vestiges of the old, feudal bondage system in Russia' and felt that in the democratic revolution a 'general redistribution' of land was possible (cited in LCW 10:170,173]. It was only in the wake of the 1905 Revolution that Lenin supported the call of the Trudoviki (formerly, Narodniks) for the confiscation of *all* landed estates (not just the cut-off land as before) for general redistribution. Although he would have preferred the poor peasantry to become the exclusive beneficiaries, he was prepared to accept the slogan of equal right of land that might lead to the better-off peasantry taking a good slice of land [LCW 10:194; LCW, 13:229-31, 271-72].

After the revolution was suppressed, the government tried to alter the agrarian landscape in a major way. A powerful minister under the Tsar, Stolypin, 'wagered on the strong' and launched reforms to create a class of new farmers, the owners of 'khutor' and 'otruba', who would be separated from the communes, and hence not subject to the traditional system of repartitioning of land among the peasant members.[2] The new layer, it was hoped, would infuse dynamism into the agricultural sector, and also act as a buffer between the landlords and the gentry on the one hand, and the mass of peasantry on the other. Both the Social Revolutionaries (SR, the successor to the Trudoviki) and Social Democrats denounced the new scheme. Lenin observed 'a fundamental shift in the agrarian policies of the authorities on the peasant question; support and reinforcement of the old village community have been replaced by a policy of accelerated police destruction and plundering of that commune...[Stolypin's] success in the countryside now and in the coming years will necessarily inflame the struggle within the peasantry rather than quench it, for only by a long, a very long road, can the 'goal', i e, the final and complete consolidation of a *purely* bourgeois peasant economy, be achieved' [LCW 15:267, 271]. Here one finds an echo of one main contention of the Narodniks way back in the 1880s when they pointed out that capitalism would need decades to establish itself on the Russian soil.

The reform flopped, though it made some progress.[2] Of the two million separations from the commune effected during 1906-15, only one-third secured the mandated consent from the communal assemblies to which all applications had to be submitted in the first place. Even when the consent was obtained, there was often a very strong opposition. If the assembly refused, the head of the zemstvo (district) could still authorise a separation, and that is what happened in two-thirds of the cases [Robinson 1932:231-32].

Moving to the situation in 1917-18, there were widespread peasant uprisings shortly after the February 1917 revolution. Their number from March to October of that year came to 5782 all over Russia, and peasants seized lands, implements, granaries and other moveables belonging to the nobles and the gentry. Violence engulfed as many as 482 out of 624 districts of old Russia [Anweiler 1972:148; Liebman 1973:241]. It was in this context that Lenin put forward the famous 'April Theses' that had two new features: nationalisation of all lands in the country and their disposal by the local Soviets of Agricultural Labourers and Peasants' Deputies [LCW 24:23]. The Bolsheviks were the only party to support land seizure by the peasants, while the SR with a strong hold over the peasants, impotently denounced the lawless activities [Carr 1952:37]. In August, the SR adopted a radical programme of land reform, the Bolsheviks endorsed it, and it eventually became the first post-Revolution Land Decree of November 1917. The Decree stated: 'Land tenure shall be on an equality basis, i e, the land shall be distributed among the working people in conformity with a labour standard (according to the number of male adults) or a subsistence standard (according to the size of the family) depending on local conditions. Another clause in the Land Decree outlawed 'the employment of hired labour' [LCW 26:259]. What was the implication of 'equality'? According to Carr (1952:47), the decree appeared to suggest that all lands, belonging to landlords or to peasants, would be thrown into a common a pool and then divided up. But 'the Right SRs, representing the interests of the well-to-do peasants', argued that land 'already in individual or collective peasant ownership was untouchable', and that the poor and landless peasants should get a share only of landlords' lands. This 'was the rock on which the fundamental breach occurred between the Right and Left SRs and, eventually, between Left SRs and Bolsheviks.' Peasants continued to take the initiative, with scant regard for the provisions of the Decree; in certain areas local soviets were also active, as legally stipulated [Carr 1952:52-54]. But the Bolsheviks did not win much political support. Even two months after the Decree, the Bolsheviks could claim only 91 out of a total of 789 Deputies at the Second All Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies. From the country as a whole they could get no more than 24 per cent of the votes at the Constituent Assembly elections held on November 25, 1917 [Anweiler 1972:258, 278]. At the end of 1917 the party counted a meagre 4122 peasant members, rising to 14,794 in the next year [Bettelheim 1974:188].

What was the impact of reforms on land distribution? An estimate for 1917 indicated that 11.3 per cent of all peasants did not have any sown area, 58 per cent had up to 4 desyatins, 21.7 per cent had 4-8 desyatins, and 9 per cent had over 8 desyatins; by 1920 the percentages changed to 5.8, 86.0, 6.5 and 1.7 respectively. Over

the same period the percentage of holdings without a horse fell from 29 to 7.6, that of 1-horse holdings rose from 49.2 to 63.6, and that of holdings with 2 or more horses fell from 4.8 to 0.9 [Carr 1952:171]. About 40 per cent of total land in Russia belonging to the big estates or about 50 million hectares were confiscated and redistributed. The number of kulak holdings came down from 3 million before 1917 to around one million in the middle or late 1920s. In 1920, out of the total marketed cereals in the country as much as 40 per cent came from small peasants with a surplus of 7-16 puds (1 pud = 36 lbs.) per head of the family [LCW 27:602-03; Grosskopf 1976:72, 148]. It is generally held that after the reforms the proportion of middle peasants went up sharply, while that of poor peasants fell as drastically. If, however, one applies Lenin's 1907 yardstick for the middle peasant (15 desyatins of land or 2-3 horses), there were very few middle peasants left in 1920, not to speak of kulaks! Obviously, the yardstick was drastically altered.

Bettelheim (1974: 192-96) rightly characterised the agrarian transformation as 'democratic', rather than 'socialist'. I am rather puzzled by his further contention that: (a) before the food crisis of summer 1918, the party and the government treated the 'whole, undifferentiated peasantry' as a proletarian ally; (b) after the land redistribution the percentage of poor peasants declined 'somewhat' ('quelque peu') with a corresponding rise in the proportion of middle peasants; and (c) the communal assemblies continued to be dominated by the rich peasants. If (a) were true, it is difficult to explain why the Bolsheviks were the only party supporting land seizures or why the right and left SRs split. Data cited in the previous paragraph contradict Bettelheim's second point. As for (c), this was most probably true, except that the 'rich peasant' before and after 1917 may have been very different animals. Was not a great deal of land belonging to rich peasants redistributed in 1917-18 through the communal assemblies or local soviets?

An acute food shortage gripped the country, especially the cities of St Petersburg and Moscow, on the morrow of the October revolution, and worsened in the next two years. Area sown to different cereals fell by 30-38 per cent during 1914-20, and the average yield per hectare of all cereals dropped by one-third between 1909-13 and 1920 [Grosskopf 1976:102, 113]. Besides, in the wake of land reforms, average peasant consumption also went up marginally from 16 puds in a year in the pre-war days to 17 puds in 1918 and 1919 in the major producing regions [LCW 30:460]. In the country as a whole famine prevailed; along with pestilence and the civil war it caused over the years 1918-20 the deaths of 7.5 million persons, a staggering figure by all accounts [Bettelhein 1974:408].

Hemmed in as it was on all sides, the Soviet government from May 1918 resorted to grain requisition by force ('prodrazverstka') from those who had some surplus. Only the kulaks were supposed to have such surpluses and hence the policy was seen as carrying class struggle into the rural areas. Committees of poor peasants ('kombedy'), excluding the kulaks were formed, usually from above. These committees were entrusted with virtually the whole gamut of tasks of the village soviets. The most important one, of course, was grain collection. The urban proletariat was encouraged to go to the countryside and assist these committees in unearthing hoards of grain. The 'kombedy' were hardly effective in grain collection, antagonised a very large cross-section of peasants, and within about six months were wound up and merged with the local soviets. But grain requisition continued up to the end of the War Communism phase in March 1921. In the previous autumn there were widespread peasant disturbances and grain collection was suspended in 13 provinces [Carr 1952:56-63, 173].

The grain requisition policy was in sharp conflict with Lenin's own ideas about the middle peasantry. Clauses (5) and (6) of the Land Decree protected them against confiscation. In November 1917 Lenin stressed the need for a 'close alliance of the working (middle) and exploited (poor) peasantry with the working class' [LCW 26:328]. At the Eighth Congress of the Party in March, 1919 he declared: 'Nothing is more stupid than the very idea of applying coercion in economic relations with the peasant' [LCW 29:211]. The food requisitions in fact hurt the middle peasants very deeply. Thanks to the land reforms they provided the overwhelming bulk of the marketed grains. Whereas before the war, according to Stalin, 22 per cent of the total came from landlords, 50 per cent from kulaks, and 28 per cent from the middle and poor peasants, in 1925-26 the kulaks' percentages share was down to 20, while that of the last two groups had risen to 74, the remaining 6 coming from the 'sovkhozy' (state farms) and 'kolkhozy' (collective farms) [Carr and Davies 1974:77; Grosskopf 1976:160]. It is likely that the respective shares in 1918 to 1920 were close to those in 1925-26. Moreover, the peasants were reluctant to sell grains because the free market price was 10 times higher than what the government offered [LCW 30:114]. Besides, supplies of industrial goods to the rural areas had dwindled sharply, and ordinary peasants could not buy articles of daily consumption. A study for 1925 showed that the rich peasants purchased only 6.5 per cent of industrial goods sold in the rural areas, the middle and the poor accounting respectively for 58.9 and 34.6 per cent [Grosskopf 1976:142].

Right through 1919 Lenin's own approach was somewhat contradictory. In March he called for a shift from the policy of 'neutralising the (middle) peasantry' to one of relations 'on the basis of a firm alliance'. He also admitted: 'owing to the inexperience of our Soviet officials and to the difficulties of the problem, the blows which were intended for the kulaks fell very frequently on the middle peasants' [LCW 29:144,159]. But in November he wrote: 'whoever possess a surplus of grain and profiteers in that grain is an exploiter of the hungry worker' [LCW 30:114].

How does one explain the havoc of those years? My answer in short would be as follows. Over the years the party could not draw up a programme to attract the bulk of middle and poor peasants, and at crucial moments in 1905 and 1917 literally borrowed the agenda of the rival SR. This lack of familiarity with the 'ground reality' in rural areas was compounded by an attempted leap forward towards socialism by introducing War Communism with its 'moneyless economy', and central direction of production and distribution of all goods. The creation of the kombedy was a corollary of this grand design. At the same time, acute food shortage in the big cities, difficulties in supplying food to the Red Army fighting the civil war, and the trade blockade imposed by the western governments, left very few options for the Soviet leaders. But the chosen path of food requisition was full of landmines as it led to many peasant uprisings as noted above. However, the anti-Bolshevik White Guards led by Kolchak, according to Carr (1952:357), carried out 'savage punitive expeditions as a reprisal for recurrent

peasant disorders'. Thus the Bolshevik regime survived, to a large extent, because of the sheer stupidity of their opponents.

Lenin and his party also reformed themselves. They abandoned War Communism and food requisition, and introduced a market-oriented New Economic Policy (NEP). Social tensions were greatly reduced, agricultural production (helped by good weather) revived, and shortages were to a great extent overcome. Yet the Party was unable to pursue its class line among the peasantry. Despite all Lenin's emphasis on the creation of cooperatives that were virtually equated with socialism in the countryside, despite promises of many economic, financial and other privileges, e g, cheaper and more abundant bank credit, etc [LCW 33:470-74], progress on this front was rather slow. In fact, the kulaks and the well-to-do middle presents apparently dominated these cooperatives, and the 'skhod', the village assembly, that regulated the rotation of the commune land and continued to guide village life till the end of 1928. In practice, the terms of loans to the poor peasantry were rather harsher than those for the middle and the rich. The poor and middle peasants had to pay taxes in kind accounting for a larger part of their crop output as compared to the rich peasants. It was generally believed that the well-to-do middle peasantry and the kulaks prospered at the expense of the poor peasants during the NEP [Carr and Davies 1974:159, 165, 254ff; Bettelheim 1974: 209; Grosskopf 1974:142].

V

As briefly mentioned earlier, Shanin has argued that the peasantry constitutes a single class. He sought to validate his position by referring to three critical events in Russian history, namely, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (both anti-feudal) and the forced collectivisation at the end of the 1920s. Up to a point Shanin is right. As in all anti-feudal uprisings anywhere in the world, there was massive peasant support behind the first two events. As for collectivisation under Stalin, Shanin is only party correct, as discussed below. It is important to recall the two meanings of 'class', emphasising respectively the 'objective' and the 'subjective' aspects. I shall seek to show that the 'objective' differences in the material interests of different peasant classes were always present but at the level of consciousness, or 'in action', the antagonisms gave way to solidarity in certain situations, but surfaced in others.

What happened after the defeat of the 1905 revolution? On the most important development, namely, the Stolypin reform mentioned earlier, there was widespread hostility among the peasants. Their party, the SR, also opposed it. Yet the scheme made some progress. According to Anfimov (1996:62), around 1916 there were about 1.4 million new farmers separated from the communes, constituting 7.5 per cent of all peasants, and they held 14.9 million desyatins of land, including communal land and private lands purchased by peasants from banks, etc. The reform, on the whole, flopped. Given time, and less of obstruction from the communal assemblies, there would be more of new farmers. Why was there obstruction? If the land taken out of the common pool by a peasant were small in size and of poor quality, others would hardly suffer. When better-off peasants left the commune, their land would no longer be available for future repartitioning, and hence the rest of the commune members would be impoverished in the long run. Lenin correctly foresaw that the reform would 'inflame struggle within the peasantry'. To put it differently, both sides, namely, the new farmers and their opponents within the communes, were conscious of the divergence in their material interests.

In an absorbing study on the Volga region during 1917-21, Figes (1989) has probed into the agrarian issues, giving prominence equally to voices from below and to the official records. His main thrust is against the large number of Soviet writings that described much of the post-revolution peasant unrest as kulak-inspired. His view, established with massive documentation, is that while peasants welcomed the Bolshevik revolution and its land decrees, they were quite hostile to food requisition. So far one can hardly disagree. But the author tends to go to the other extreme of denying any antagonistic relation between peasant classes over these years. The redistribution of land after the revolution, Figes (p 123) claimed, took place with some minor disturbances and without any bloodshed. 'Ergo', there was no class struggle. But class struggle is not necessarily violent; peaceful factory strikes are the prime counter-example. Apart from the big landed property of the feudal lords and the urban bourgeois, that of the new farmers (owners of 'khutor' and 'otruba') was drastically reduced in the wake of land redistribution. Figes noted that in 1916 some 27-33 per cent of Russian peasants cultivated on non-communal lands, and the ratio fell to less than 2 per cent in the major producing regions. In provinces of the Volga region the percentage of such peasants in the total ranged from 16 to 25 in 1916, and less than one in 1922 (p 59). Also redistributed were lands purchased by the peasants from the Land Banks or taken by them on lease from the landowners.[3] Nearly all these changes took place during the first six months of the Soviet regime when the villages were actually ruled by the peasants themselves through their assemblies or village soviets with little interference from Moscow. Were the dispossessed consumed by a spirit of 'peasant brotherhood'? Figes (p130) cites a Central Statistical Office survey of 1922 (after the NEP was introduced), indicating that in 28-50 per cent of the villages in the Volga region, a part of the peasantry, 'especially, in the middle and richer groups – wanted to leave the commune and set up khutor'. Thus the farmers' consciousness did not undergo any transformation at all. If they accepted the land seizures peacefully, that was because they had no alternative.

Figes (p 153) writes: "The communes and the soviets were, for the most part, organs of the middle 'peasantry'. As a result, the poorest peasants were allotted lands far-away from the village, and belonging to former landowners; these lands were kept in a separate pool (*fond*), which could be returned to the previous owners in case the Bolsheviks lost power. Most of these poor peasants lacked transport to travel to their fields, and hence their plots were often illegally rented out, or even sold, to the 'wealthiest farmers' " (pp 104-05,130).

Figes gives an interesting account of the 'happenings' when an anti-Bolshevik government ruled in Samara province for many weeks in the summer of 1918. The former landowners came back in many

Table: Peasant Families as Kolkhoz Members

	June 1928	June 1929	Oct 1929	Jan 1930	Feb 1930	Mar 1930	Apr 1930	Sep 1930	Jan 1931
Number (000)	417	1008	1919	4627	8077	14597	9837	5495	6609
Percentage	1.7	3.9	7.5	18.1	31.7	57.2	38.6	21.5	25.9

Source: Davies 1980, pp 441-42.

places to take punitive action against those who refused to return the land and the grain harvested. The government sought volunteers for the People's Army to fight the Bolsheviks, but the response in the rural areas 'was insignificant. Most of them must have come from the richest peasant stratum...(Some) middle peasants had good cause to join the People's Army in those villages where the Red Army had terrorised the population, or where the *kombed* had brutalised' the peasants during the food requisition (pp 173-74). This passage underlines once again the folly of the latter policy, but also demonstrates that divisions existed among the peasants.

Coming to forced collectivisation in the late 1920s, there is an abundance of materials on the horrors of collectivisation, and many more are coming out of the archives. But several questions remain. First, did the whole peasantry oppose the new policy? The following Table gives for the USSR the number of peasant families who were kolkhoz members and their percentage in all peasant families on the first day of the relevant month, reproduced from Davies (1980:441-42).

There was no compulsion on peasants to join the kolkhoz before autumn, 1929 when the Party decided to hasten the pace. One can see that membership jumped from 1.0 to 14.6 million between June 1, 1929 and March 1, 1930, and reached nearly 15 million on March 10. On March 2, *Pravda* published Stalin's famous article, 'Dizzy with Success: Problems of the Kolkhoz Movement', in which he berated the party cadres for compelling, in violation of the party directive, middle peasants by force to join the kolkhoz. (It was ironical as two years earlier Stalin had lauded the Ural-Siberian method of forced collection of grain against stiff opposition from Bukharin and others!) Shortly thereafter, the party decided that peasants could leave the kolkhoz if they so wished. By April 1, nearly one-third left, and the percentage of those remaining shrank to just above one-fifth on September 1, from nearly three-fifths in March; it crawled up slowly in the next few months.

Now, if all peasants rejected the kolkhoz, at least those who were forced to join from the autumn of 1929 should have left by April or September 1930. But one-fifth, a far from negligible fraction, of all families decided to stay on, signifying a divergence in peasants' attitude toward collectivisation. At the same time one must admit that the vast majority in 1930 were at least sceptical of the advantages of joining the kolkhozy as the figures above show.

Over the next few years, kolkhoz membership became almost universal. In view of the prevailing terror throughout the rest of the Stalin era one cannot assume that peasants joined voluntarily. However, sometime during the next few decades, though one does not know when, there was a sea change in peasants' attitude. The majority of western experts, though with many notable exceptions, have been asserting over the decades that socialised agriculture was grossly inefficient from its inception right up to the moment of the Soviet collapse. The private plots of the collective farmers, for instance, yielded much higher income (per day of work) than what they obtained from the kolkhoz. Given a free choice, they would leave such units in droves and set up private farms.

They got this freedom in post-Soviet Russia. Western loans were poured into certain regions like the Nizhnyi Novgorod to create model private farms, encouraging other regions to emulate [Shirokalova 1997]. The results so far have been quite disappointing. In 1998 out of 91.7 million hectares of land under crops in the whole of Russia, 5.9 million hectares were cultivated by new farmers, the 'citizen's garden plots' accounted for another 4.6 million hectares, and the rest was with 'agricultural enterprises' of the Soviet era. In the value of total agricultural output in Russia, the share of farmers stagnated at a paltry 2 per cent during 1994-98 [Goskomstat 1999, tables 15.3 and 15.9]. Thus de-collectivisation has not made much headway in contemporary Russia despite official and foreign patronage. That should lead to a rethinking on the role of socialised agriculture in the USSR, the peasants' perception of it, and its contemporary relevance.

VI

As I have made my own observations at the relevant places in previous sections, and there is little point in summarising them, I shall make just a couple of points of a general nature. By showing how Marx, Engels and Lenin drastically revised their perspectives on many occasions, and retracted from their earlier positions, I do not suggest that 'everything is possible' in the name of Marxism. Rather, these revisions testify to the authors' conviction that the 'core' of the theory was not vitiated, and that the 'mistakes' had to be rectified in the light of more recent experience. By implication, the idea of 'infallibility' of Marxism or of the party, which gained currency not only in the USSR and China, but also in countries where the party was in opposition, runs counter to the legacy of Marx, Engels and Lenin. It often leads to a situation where the party retains only the empty outer shell of Marxism.

Secondly, class analysis and a political programme based on such analysis, are pertinent, not just in times of social upheaval, but also in peaceful times. For 'peace' does not reflect a resolution of the underlying contradictions, but rather the realisation by contending groups with mutually incompatible interests that the 'balance of class forces' cannot be altered in the immediate future. It can happen to people on both sides of the fence. After the revolutions in Russia and China a large number of persons from the formerly affluent classes stayed on and accepted the new regime, but bourgeois ideas persisted all through. Conversely, the disadvantaged, and often severely exploited, majorities in parliamentary democracies never cease to aspire for social justice, but regularly elect governments that perpetuate the existing social order. Somehow the electors are made to feel that 'there is no alternative'. Yet social turmoil does erupt from time to time in one country or another, and is likely to do so as long as gross socio-economic inequities within and across countries persist. EPW

Notes

[This essay was stimulated by the highly perceptive survey of Alice Thorner (1982) on the Indian debate on capitalism or semi-feudalism, focusing on agrarian aspects. A good part of it was completed many years ago, and I have taken advantage of penetrating comments from her as well as from Sailo Ghosh and N Krishnaji.]

1 Among all the regions of Poland feudal oppression was probably at its worst in Galicia of which Cracow was the main town. Armed peasants belonging to the Society for Democratic Poland rose in arms against the landed gentry and for the emancipation of the whole country from foreign rule. While they burnt many manors and even killed their owners, the movement was brutally suppressed within a few weeks by the Austro-Hungarian army [Gieysztor et al 1979:409-13; Kostrowicka et al 1978: 88-90]. After 1846 the question of Polish independence, according to Ryazanoff (1922:250-51), featured regularly at congresses of European Democrats.

2 Under the reforms a peasant could, after paying his dues, demand a compact bloc of land (for crops, pasture, forest and homestead) out of the communal property; it would in effect become his private property and heritable. In practice, the new farmers rarely got consolidated holdings. Khutor was one where the homestead land was

situated within the separated farm, while for otruba the owner continued to live within the old village.

3 These figures are different from those of Anfimov quoted earlier. Figes' source is an essay by Danilov that I could not consult.

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