In a century which has become acutely conscious of the phenomenon of peasant rebellion, it sometimes comes as a surprise that Marx and many classical Marxists viewed the peasantry as a conservative force in politics. In his analysis of Bonapartism in France, Marx argued that the individualism of the petty-proprietor peasantry prevented it from coalescing as a class with a clear class consciousness. Just as potatoes in a sack would always be nothing more than a sack of potatoes, the individual form of production would keep the peasants isolated from one another and would predispose them to follow authoritarian leaders such as Bonaparte (Marx, 1967).

Some contemporary anthropologists have lent support to this notion of a conservative peasantry. In his study of Southern Italian peasants, Banfield claimed that peasant social structure was pervaded by a form of ‘amoral familism’, a belief that one’s only loyalty was to the family, and a total distrust of anyone outside the family (Banfield, 1958). A similar conclusion was drawn by George Foster in his study of the peasants of Zintzuntzan in Mexico. They behaved, he claimed, as though their conduct was governed by an ‘image of limited good’. That is, the peasants believed that the sum total of happiness, good fortune, wealth, health, etc. available to the villagers was fixed. Any increase in some kind of good to someone, therefore, was bound to be complemented by a corresponding loss elsewhere. The consequence of both amoral familism and the image of the limited good was an atmosphere of hostility and distrust, and a total inability to work together in a co-operative manner (Foster, 1967).

Yet, against this dismal picture of the egocentric and reactionary peasant, other analysts have stressed the fact of peasant participation
in the great revolutions of the twentieth century. Some, following certain strains in Maoist thought, have argued that the peasantry has displaced the proletariat as the revolutionary vanguard (Calwell, 1969).

In an excellent book, Eric Wolf analyses six major revolutions or independence struggles which have occurred in the twentieth century: the Mexican Revolution (1910–17), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Chinese Revolution (1927–49), the Cuban Revolution (1959), and the independence struggles in Algeria (1961) and Vietnam (1945–75). Describing these as ‘peasant wars’ Wolf attempts to explain their causes and to identify the types of peasantry which take the lead (Wolf, 1969). However, before examining Wolf’s analysis in detail, one must first ask, in what sense are these events all ‘peasant wars’ or ‘peasant revolutions’?

The Mexican Revolution began, and ended, as a bourgeois revolution against a modernising dictatorship. The peasantry, under Zapata and Villa, was not mobilised during the first stage of the revolution under Madero. Only when Madero was assassinated by the reactionary Huerta and after one of Madero’s followers, Venustiano Carranza, took to the field against Huerta, were large peasant armies mobilised. Later, with the split in the revolutionary forces between the Constitutionalists and the Conventionalists, the bourgeois armies turned against the peasant armies of Villa and Zapata and smashed them. Out of the revolution came the agrarian reform, benefiting many peasants, but, after decades of persistent violence and sporadic rebellion, the new state, answerable to urban interests, finally dominated and subdued the peasantry. Some of the causes of the Mexican Revolution may have been agrarian, and in the course of the revolution the peasantry may have been mobilised as never before, but it was in its innermost nature not a peasant revolution but a bourgeois revolution.

In Russia, the insurrection was led by a party of the urban proletariat in the midst of a disintegration of the Army. The peasants in uniform, having brought about the collapse of Tsarism, returned to their villages in the expectation that the Bolsheviks would implement their programme of land, peace and bread. But from the very first days of the revolution, the Bolsheviks found themselves in a virtual civil war with the peasantry in an attempt to divert resources from the countryside to the city. That conflict lasted (like the Mexican one) until the Second World War.