CHINA'S SOCIALIST REVOLUTION, PEASANT FAMILIES, AND THE USES OF THE PAST

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Because peasants, far more than proletarians, have been decisive agents in the successful communist revolutions of the twentieth century, many within the marxist tradition have been moved to seriously reappraise classical views of the peasantry's capacity for progressive social action. James Scott's work on Southeast Asian peasants has made a major contribution to this project. His article "Hegemony and the Peasantry" explicitly addressed the paradox posed by the history of peasant revolutions and the "canons of Marxist theory," and suggested a resolution based upon an analysis of the progressive "advantages" enjoyed by the peasantry as a class.\footnote{Elsewhere Scott has combed the depths of what Redfield called the "Little Tradition" to develop an appreciation of the political culture of the peasantry that helps explain the progressive role peasants have played in revolution.} Scott and sympathetic Sinologists, like Edward Friedman and Ralph Thaxton, have interpreted the Chinese Revolution as particularly impressive evidence of the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry.\footnote{Scott and sympathetic Sinologists, like Edward Friedman and Ralph Thaxton, have interpreted the Chinese Revolution as particularly impressive evidence of the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry.}

My work on the role of women and the family in the Chinese Revolution\footnote{My work on the role of women and the family in the Chinese Revolution has been informed by this revisionist literature and confirms the fruitfulness of its basic approach. However, by placing feminist questions and categories at the center of my inquiry, I have encountered a glaring oversight in this theoretical corpus that further complicates its analytical task. In the discussion that follows, I wish to bring the nature of this theoretical difficulty into focus. I will begin by briefly characterizing the emerging revisionist view of peasants and revolution with especial regard to the Chinese case. Then I will summarize my interpretation of the role played by the rural family system in the Chinese Revolution. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this interpretation for theoretical attempts to understand the progressive aspects of the Chinese Revolution and for marxist-feminist analyses of social change generally.} has been informed by this revisionist literature and confirms the fruitfulness of its basic approach. However, by placing feminist questions and categories at the center of my inquiry, I have encountered a glaring oversight in this theoretical corpus that further complicates its analytical task. In the discussion that follows, I wish to bring the nature of this theoretical difficulty into focus. I will begin by briefly characterizing the emerging revisionist view of peasants and revolution with especial regard to the Chinese case. Then I will summarize my interpretation of the role played by the rural family system in the Chinese Revolution. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this interpretation for theoretical attempts to understand the progressive aspects of the Chinese Revolution and for marxist-feminist analyses of social change generally.

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The paramount advantage of the peasantry that Scott identifies is precisely the pre-capitalist nature of peasant values and social structure marxists have misunderstood and too hastily disparaged:

The relative isolation of the peasantry from the cultural and institutional life of the state and its ruling elites has meant that, as a class, it has been more immune than has the proletariat to the social and moral hegemony (in the sense in which Gramsci used that word) of the dominant classes.  

In such comparatively autonomous cultural circumstances, Scott suggests, peasants create and transmit a Little Tradition that furnishes them with an invaluable system of shared values and moral cohesion distinctive from and representing opposing interests to that of the corresponding elite tradition. At its center is a moral economy that guarantees to each peasant family its subsistence niche in the local community. Embedded in the peasants’ millennial expectations for the earthly fulfillment of these values is a utopian vision, which, Scott claims, is almost always a society of brotherhood in which there will be no rich or poor and in which distinctions of rank and status (save those between believers and nonbelievers) will vanish.  

When the traditional values of the Little Tradition are violated or threatened severely, peasants can be aroused to pursue their restoration with a commitment of passionate intensity prerequisite to revolution. At such moments, the very backwardness that marxists have characteristically regarded as the peasants’ primary ideological handicap becomes instead their main advantage:

For it is precisely the fact that peasants and artisans have one foot in the pre-capitalist economy that explains why they have provided the mass impetus for so many “forward-looking” movements. Their opposition to capitalism, based as it is on a utopian image of an earlier age, is as tenacious, if not more so, as the opposition of a proletariat which has both feet in the new society.  

The Chinese Revolution, according to this line of analysis, was a process in which “modern” revolutionaries learned successfully to root the revolutionary movement in the restorationist motives of the peasantry. Friedman identifies twentieth century China as a village society whose members took up arms to restore traditional values which had been massively