

PROBLÉMATIQUE

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Re-Reading Barrington Moore: on the Social Origins of *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*

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Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) stands as a pioneering attempt to provide a comparative historical materialist account of the transformation of agrarian societies into modern industrial ones. Published in the latter half of the 1960s, it presented a challenge to the orthodoxy of its time which held that after economic "take-off", all societies would basically follow the same route to the "modern world". For the so-called modernization theorists whose claim this was, this modern world was characteristically industrialized, complex and differentiated in its social structure, and liberal democratic in its politics. For the sociologist Talcott Parsons—whose work built on classical sociology and in many respects laid the foundations for modernization theory—the modern society upon which all developmental paths were to converge was ostensibly modeled from Britain and the U.S..

Social Origins, however, argued that there had been essentially three routes to the modern world—but only the one characterized by "bourgeois revolution" had culminated in industrialization and liberal democracy. Modernization/industrialization had also been possible in a context of fascist "revolutions from above", as well as "peasant-mobilizing communist revolutions" from below. Moore explained

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these divergent routes in terms of differing patterns of social class development and struggle, a critical aspect of which had been violence—revolutionary violence in particular. This latter point was in fact one of *Social Origins* most controversial claims: revolution had been an historical prerequisite for whatever liberal freedom and rationality there was at the present time.

Both the espousal of socio-economic class analysis and the final conclusion that “as long as powerful vested interests oppose changes that lead toward a less oppressive world, no commitment to a free society can dispense with some conception of revolutionary coercion” (Moore 1966: 508) were of course quite literally red flags to many mainstream scholars, especially in the U.S.. This surely accounts for many of the hostile reviews which targeted *Social Origins*, characterized as these were by knee-jerk accusations of “marxist economic determinism” and reductionism.

But *Social Origins* was widely received, critiqued and praised because it aggravated theoretical raw nerves at both ends of academia’s political spectrum. Its subtitle reads: *Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, intimating Moore’s criticism of the more European marxist orthodoxies of that time. Too often, for Moore, critical scholars took the two moving classes of contemporary capitalist society—the bourgeoisie and proletariat—and projected their centrality in social processes back into the past, giving their historical agency far too much weight in explanations of capitalist development and revolution. Juxtaposed with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the agrarian classes are made to seem quite lumpen—teleologically destined for extinction. Now, Moore displaces the bourgeois-proletarian dyad from the central axis of class analysis with lord-peasant. In so doing he aligns *Social Origins* with the tradition of E.P. Thompson’s path-breaking *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) insofar as both of these social histories recast as historical subjects, classes which had previously been portrayed as more-or-less lumpen objects. Indeed, *Social Origins* views the bourgeoisie in effect only through the lens of their relationship with the agrarian classes; in its index there is no reference as such to the working class; and it is the aggravated peasantry who recur as the substantial social force behind revolutions. So it is that Moore dramatically reconfigures the social-structural framework

for explaining the politics of capitalist development.

With these prefatory remarks I hope I have set the tone for what will be the main purpose of this essay. What is not called for, I believe, is yet another methodological and/or substantive critique of *Social Origins*. To date, the latter has generated a large and impressive body of criticism (For a comprehensive survey of reviews of *Social Origins* which I have drawn on here see Wiener: 1976). Instead, I intend to develop my opening allusion which is that *Social Origins can be read as a critical moment in a dialogue between its author and the theoreticians and advocates of western liberalism, and to a lesser extent western marxism.*

Surveying the afore mentioned body of criticism it is surprising that so little space has been given over to an exploration of the social origins of *Social Origins*. Following a brief digression into historiography intended to sketch the sort of philosophy of history which my essay adopts, I will attempt a precis of the ensemble of political and intellectual conditions out of which *Social Origins* arose. The remainder of the essay will consider the nature of the relationship of the text in question to those conditions.

What is “History”?

The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce’s remark that all history is “contemporary history” provides the point of departure for E. H. Carr’s treatise *What is History?* (1961: 22). “History” is contemporary because it does not await the historian’s discovery as an object body of facts. Rather, history, as we understand it in an academic context, is the result of the historian’s interpretation and ordering of what data is available and deemed relevant to the reconstruction of the past events, epochs and processes in which she is interested. As Carr has it: “By and large the historian will get the facts he wants. History means interpretation” (1961: 26).

But the historian is ontologically a product of the historical circumstances she finds herself in. Hence we can concur with advocates of philosophical hermeneutics who claim that:

[O]ur historicity (who we are is through and through historical) colours all our rational activities, that is, our ability to order and

make sense of our world. What this implies is that all human knowledge claims bear with them an essential relation to the historical process out of which they emerge. ... [T]he very meaning and validity of any knowledge-claim is inextricably intertwined with the historical situation of both its formulators and evaluators (Wachterhauser, 1986b: 7)

Or, as Carr succinctly puts it: "The historian is the product of history" (1961: 48).

Conceptually, then, history resembles a dialogue between past and present mediated by the historian. Her "present" shapes her interests, values, and questions which she takes to the past—the latter she will interpret, *sui generis*, accordingly. However, since the past that is revealed will probably pose new questions for the historian, and because the present is always in flux, then no history is ever complete. It is instead an unending process of (re-)interpretation and (re-)discovery. There are as many "pasts" as there are "presents".

Lefebvre (1975) takes this theme further. Past events make later (perhaps much later) events possible. When these come about, the significance of the past "enabling" event is newly comprehended and a new history of it can be written. The English Civil War—to take one of Moore's themes—provides a case in point. Its outcome served to bolster the enclosure movement, and with it, the decimation of England's peasantry. However, this event becomes newly significant in the 1930s when the virtual absence of a peasantry in England may have inhibited the sort of reactionary developments common to continental Europe where fascism enjoyed substantial peasant support.

History is always written from the present. As such, Carr tells us to study the historian and her society before we look at her history. However, this dictum has scarcely been applied to Barrington Moore. In what follows I will argue that political and academic conditions in the U.S. at the zenith of its world power shape Moore in his approach to his materials. And conversely, what he comes up with speaks tacitly, and at times, overtly, to those arrangements.

Moore on Mainstream Social Science in the 1950s

Moore's reflections on the state of North American social science

are set out in the collection of his essays, *Political Power and Social Theory* (1958). There, his dual targets of attack are positivistic empiricist approaches (e.g. behaviourism) which he alleges tend to adopt a stance of ethical neutrality, and neo-scholastic, formal deductionist approaches (e.g. Parsonian structural-functionalism and its derivatives) which to the contrary assume implicitly or explicitly moral absolutist standpoints.

Moore dispenses with the first target quite easily. Its theoretical paucity and limited range preclude it from addressing questions of qualitative change. Furthermore, he warns that the self-proclaimed ethical neutrality of its practitioners and the very technical nature of the work done means that this branch of social science can easily and unquestioningly lend itself to those in power who seek straightforward solutions to technically conceived problems.

It is the neo-scholastic Parsonianism that attracts the full weight of Moore's critical attention. Unlike the empiricist school there is an overt emphasis on theory here. But it is poor theory whose generalizations and abstracted distance from any empirical grounding liken it to theology.¹

Moore justifiably depicts this brand of social theory as ahistorical and uncritical. This is evident in the way that Parsons and his followers generalize from their experience of the U.S. in the post-war era to establish a descriptive, and prescriptive, model for all societies in which liberal democracy and social stability are posited as unquestioned norms. This belief in the universal applicability of liberal values is for Moore a form of moral absolutism and both evidences and stems from mainstream sociology's lack of critical impulse and historical vision.

To move beyond this impasse in social theory Moore advocates the revival of an historical-sociological tradition. A large part of mainstream sociology's failings arise from its indifference to the historical and the specific. Mainstream history is limited in the opposing sense: it deals almost exclusively with the particular. Historical sociology promises to reconcile these seemingly disparate approaches for it seeks the traces of the general manifested concretely in the particular. Smith

1. There is an interesting parallel in the relations of Moore to Parsons and E. P. Thompson to Althusser. In each instance the historian accuses the theorist of theologism.

(1983) rightly identifies the latter emphasis as one of the two definitive features of Moore's social theory.

The other concerns Moore's attempt to navigate the problematic extremes of moral absolutism and ethical neutrality via his primary emphasis on seeing the general in the particular. For any concrete situation Moore wants to delineate the historical constraints delimiting the possible outcomes of human action. Once this is done then appropriate moral criteria can be worked out for actions which can never take place outside the constraints of historical social structures. Hence a role for social science and its practitioners:

Humanity's freedom of manoeuvre lies within the framework created by history. Social scientists and allied scholars could help to widen the area of choice by analyzing the historical trends which now limit it. They could show, impartially, honestly, and free from the pleadings of governments and special interests the range of possible alternatives and the potentialities for effective action (1958: 159).

The vantage point from which *Social Origins* will implicitly critique modernization theory—an intellectual progeny of Parsonian science—should now become clear. If the process of modernization (the “general”) is always refracted through the specific socio-historical features of a given society (the “particular”) which must vary across space and time, then likewise the political outcome of that process must vary. Those expecting liberal democracy universally (*a fortiori*, those who advocate it) betray a certain myopic idealism, even political cynicism. Universal moral criteria can only be applied in the context of existing social structures. The latter must condition expectations for social change, if such expectations are to be realistic.

Now, developments in mainstream social science and in United States society in the years following Moore's *Political Power* can only have strengthened the author's concerns and reinforced the criticisms he subsequently builds into *Social Origins*. Let us now examine these developments as a preface to our discussion of that book.

Modernization Theory, Liberal Idealism and “National Purpose” in Early 1960s America

The McCarthyist purge of leftist academics coupled with the increasing influence of military and corporate funding upon university research meant that by the end of the 1950s the mainstream academic agenda was for the most part sympathetic towards government objectives. This gave rise to what C. Wright Mills (1958) called the “Bureaucratic Ethos”. No doubt impressed with the social stability that seemed to characterize the U.S. during the Eisenhower years and encouraged by the success of the U.S. led reconstruction of the western European and Japanese economies, this conjoined government-university outlook turned its attention to the “development” of the Third World—or rather, lack thereof. In that sphere of the world the “loss” of Cuba was but the most painful reminder that global stability remained chimerical.

For modernization theorists the answer to the problem seemed straightforward enough: political stability (which they associated with liberal democracy) would accompany socio-economic development. Influenced significantly by Parsonian sociology they extrapolated from the western—specifically UK and U.S.—experience of industrialization to propose that all societies, once they reach the “take-off” stage of economic growth, must pass through a given number of similar stages before becoming fully industrialized. Thereupon they exhibit the familiar traits of economic abundance, popular mass consumption, and critically, liberal democracy.

W. W. Rostow was the arch proponent and initial formulator of this “stagist” thesis which he first set out in his widely debated *Stages of Economic Growth* (1961). An academic at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he then became President Kennedy's Director of Policy and Planning in the State Department thus personifying the “bureaucratic ethos”. His theory laid the groundwork upon which the likes of Apter, Organski and others subsequently built (see *inter alia* Apter, 1972, and Organski, 1965).

In the area of economic development, academic theory and government policy formed a reasonably coherent whole in the early 1960s. The bureaucratic ethos held that: “massive financial and technical

assistance would transform the agrarian subsistence economies into modern industrial societies" (Chilcote 1981: 167); the economic and political modernization of large parts of the Third World would stabilize those societies, checking the threat of revolution from below as it had done in the west.

It is small coincidence that in the year that *Stages* was published the Kennedy administration projected its "new frontier" southwards, unveiling a seemingly comprehensive aid programme aimed at Latin America called the Alliance for Progress. In the words of one critic, this was "...a bold and comprehensive ideology of democratic development. It postulated not only rapid economic growth ... and social reform ... but at the same time *the strengthening of representative political democracy*" (Levinson 1970: 7. Emphasis added). Its guiding principle, according to the President, was that "free men working through the institutions of representative democracy can best satisfy man's aspirations".

The *Allianza*—in conception and initial implementation—put great emphasis on the moral and practical need for liberal democracy to accompany economic development. Yet 16 military-inspired coups in the eight years that followed the unveiling of the *Allianza* effectively crushed the vain belief that liberal democracy could be transplanted across the western hemisphere by American fiat. Not surprisingly, by 1964, the U.S. government no longer spoke of a commitment to democracy in Latin America. To the contrary, under President Johnson foreign policy in the area took one of its ominous "pragmatic" turns. With the Mann doctrine the containment of communism replaced the propagation of liberal democracy as government's principal objective. As such, the typical form of intervention came to be counter-insurgency (Levinson 1970: 88).

It is no coincidence that mirroring this shift in governmental priorities the technicist-empiricist current in social science was re-emphasized and revalued by policy makers. With military-university collaborations such as Project Camelot—an undertaking which aspired to predict the onset of political turmoil and revolution using statistical models—the putatively ethically neutral, positivist empiricists gained a new prominence over the descendants of the deductive formalists, the modernization theorists (For an account of Project Camelot see

Horowitz, (1965). Cf. Wolin, 1973.)

Given what we know about his views on social science, we are now in a position to suppose how these developments impinged upon Moore as he wrote *Social Origins*. How they inform a political reading of *Social Origins* should also become clear.

American foreign policy had with support from the academy, defined itself around the two positions that Moore had declared himself in opposition to in the 1950s. It had shifted from declaring near universal support for liberal democratic forms ("moral absolutism") once this had failed, to the indifference of the Mann doctrine ("ethical neutrality"). What both positions held in common, however, was an undifferentiated view of revolution as anathema, something to be avoided at all cost.

Moore wants to propose a morally grounded alternative to these two positions, one that takes into consideration socio-historical realities. The principal impediments to the *Allianza's* attempt to institutionalize liberal democracy in Latin America seemed to be the agrarian classes—landowners predisposed to social repression and labile peasantries. *Social Origins* looks to liberal democracy's origins in the west, and also at societies that could not sustain it in order to answer the question: How has liberal democracy historically contended with the "problem" of the agrarian classes? In this way it illustrates why liberal democracy cannot be introduced by fiat. In the process, Moore seeks to unpack and destigmatize the whole concept of revolution. He does this by historicizing it. In fact he will try to show that revolution has been and may still be a prerequisite for greater human freedoms—be they liberal democratic or not.

To take this argument further we must now interrogate *Social Origins* more closely.

Social Origins: Making Sense of the Present via the Past

We now have a working idea of the likely motivations Moore had for writing *Social Origins*, the likely audience and issues he is addressing, and the academic and political background against which his work is set.

In all these respects what is the significance of *Social Origins*, how

does it respond to the questions raised at the end of the last section? In answering I will confine myself on the whole to the case studies in Moore's "bourgeois revolution" route to the modern world for these pertain most directly to the issues at hand.

In looking at his account of the origins of liberal democracy in England, France and briefly, the U.S., we will see how: (i) in his dialogue with various strands of liberalism, Moore is concerned to show that liberal democracy emerged under particular, historically determined, socio-structural and ideological circumstances—these were indeed its prerequisites, its social origins, (ii) following on from this, the overarching conditions for stable liberal democracy were frequently the legacy of revolutions, themselves but the most acute instances of a more enduring and pervasive class violence, and (iii) in his dialogue with marxism Moore argues that it has been the peasantry that has historically provided the social weight behind successful revolutions, not the working class. This makes problematical the Marxist political project since for Moore the industrial proletariat has shown itself to be anything but revolutionary.

(i) *The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy*. A key rhetorical question which orients *Social Origins* and sets it apart from contemporary modernization theory asks:

Are there structural differences in agrarian societies that might in some cases favour subsequent development towards parliamentary democracy while other starting points would make the achievement difficult or rule it out altogether? (415). (Page references are to Moore, 1966, unless otherwise stated.)

Social Origins responds in the affirmative. This is best explained by making explicit the theoretical apparatus with which Moore accounts for the three principal paths of modernization taken by the ("large") countries he studies. Their differences are explicable in terms of three clusters of variables (423). Furthermore, these variables can be employed to explain differences within the bourgeois democratic path itself. What are they and critically, what are their combinations? (The following summary draws on Skocpol's (1973) lucid dissection of *Social Origins'* theoretical framework.)

First, the strength or weakness of the "commercial impulse": That this be strong was a requisite for the evolution of bourgeois democracies. In addition, this "impulse" colours the political propensities of the bourgeoisie, as well as their opportunities for extra-agrarian alliances.

The second variable concerns the form of commercial agriculture that the landed classes get involved in—whether it is labour market-based, or labour-repressive (i.e. forcibly maintaining labour on the land).

The third variable is the revolutionary potential of the peasantry (which in turn depends on whether they survive the commercialization of agriculture as a class), their internal structure, and the nature of their relations to the aristocracy.

These are the key variables. Specifically, which historical configurations have been necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for liberal democracy?

Moore writes: "Among the most decisive determinants influencing the course of ... political evolution are whether or not a landed aristocracy has turned to commercial agriculture and, if so, the form that this commercialization has taken" (419).

In England, the aristocracy's response to the advance of commerce in the towns and the increased exactions of an absolutist monarchy was to commercialize agriculture. This entailed expelling peasants from the land and turning it over to what was to become a new tenant class of farmers and ex-peasants. Now, a considerable community of interest—ostensibly centred on the wool trade—formed between the emerging town-based bourgeoisie and the enterprising landed gentry. A base in the nascent capitalist economy gave this community new autonomy from the monarchy. Its opposition to absolutism became a key factor leading into the irreducibly complex English Civil War whose outcome was to further the interests of the commercially oriented alliance insofar as it bolstered the enclosure movement and circumscribed the power of the monarchy.

From the Civil War onwards, conditions were propitious for political developments to take a generally progressive direction: the aristocracy's social power was not undermined by modernization; the first bourgeoisie had an interest in expanding individual liberties; and the

destruction of the peasantry meant that an extensively repressive state was not required to shackle labour to the land. All told, the outcome of 1640 and then 1688 was a "strong and independent parliament".

This is how, for Moore, the basic social and institutional framework for eventual parliamentary democracy in England was founded. However, in France the key variables assumed a dramatically different configuration which was nevertheless still to favour liberal democracy—even if the persistence of a peasantry was, for Moore, to leave its foundations less sure than its English homologue.

In the French case the "commercial impulse" was weaker. Indeed, the aristocracy did not re-orient their economic *modus operandi*. With little material autonomy *vis-à-vis* the absolutist state their response to increased taxation was to up the surplus drawn from the peasantry through increased repression. This served to catalyze the protest of peasantry, which, conjoined with urban tumult and coming in the context of political crisis culminated in the revolution of 1789. The back of the feudal order was broken. Again, the revolution's long-term legacy was institutions (e.g. law) favourable to modernization and liberal democracy.

The path to full liberal democracy in the U.S. is yet one more particular case which satisfies the general conditions of the theoretical model. There, capitalist development proceeded rapidly. But because plantation slavery was an integral part of it, this was a process, to put it mildly, inimicable to democracy. Indeed, the needs of the southern landowning plantocracy were for a decidedly undemocratic and repressive state. Only with the bloody defeat of the landowners in the Civil War and the reconstruction of their economy would the way be opened to formally extensive liberal democracy in the U.S..

For each of the three pathways discussed, Moore can hence claim that:

The taming of the agrarian sector has been a decisive feature of the whole historical process that produced [modern liberal] society. ... In this process the landed upper classes either became an important part of the capitalist democratic tide, as in England, or, if they came to oppose it they were swept aside in the convulsions of revolution or civil war (429-30).

This key conclusion lends weight to my claim that *Social Origins* illustrates in exemplary fashion how any work of historical-sociological reconstruction is invariably shaped by the burning issues of its day. To the familiar historical materialist assertion that social forces make history we must add the caveat that history's interpretation is always a function of the social context of its interpreter(s) at any later moment.

If Moore's present urged him to look to the past then what he subsequently reconstructs as "history" provides, once skillfully shaped, a damning critique of certain features of that present: namely, U.S. foreign policy and its western liberal underpinnings. Side-by-side with the history that *Social Origins* marshalls, the structural flaws in a policy which dictates that parliamentary democracy be adopted forthwith, with little regard for social and historical context, appear all too clearly. What are the chances of stable liberal democracy when powerful Latin American landowning classes are threatened by domestic-oriented industrialization and constitute the social base of the military's support, when the wealth of these classes depends on maintaining the sort of repressive labour system in the countryside which Moore identified as inimicable to democratic developments, and when the peasantry themselves constitute a potential mass base for right-wing populist or revolutionary politics? These were all questions that modernization theory had not posed and which it was the achievement of *Social Origins* to bring to the academic agenda.

Moore recognizes that liberal democracy is more than an institutional arrangement: it rests upon a certain type of social structure which is the historical achievement of the struggles of social forces. It cannot "happen" anywhere—and the same goes for the communist and fascist paths of modernization. In this respect Moore can defend certain non-liberal paths of development against the criticisms of liberal purists. For the political options open to any regime are inevitably delimited by its history and supporting social structure. Liberal democracy may simply not be practicable in certain places for certain periods.

(ii) *Violence and Revolution in the Prehistory of Liberal Democracy*. One recurrent aspect of the social interactions that have made liberal democracy historically and socially possible has been vio-

lence, particularly in the form of revolution. It is for this reason that Moore rejects the gradualist, progressivist interpretation of the modernization of "traditional" into "modern" societies. Amongst many things, modernization entails ruptures, discontinuity and unavoidable social conflict. As Rostow argued, societies *do* move through stages in this process. But these transitions are invariably marked by social convulsion.

In *Political Power*, Moore identifies what he calls the "libertarian-progressivist" ideal which holds that (in the best tradition of J. S. Mill) institutionalized, rational discussion should be the exclusive domain for arbitrating the manifold process of change. (For a very readable exposition of these principles see Crick, 1976.) From this perspective, revolutions are eschewed as irrational, unfortunate and aberrant acts of social violence. In *Social Origins*, Moore contests this position on three interrelated counts:

(a) Quite simply, the historical record does not support the liberal conception of history. This is a central theme of *Social Origins* provocatively expressed in chapter titles like "Revolutionary Origins of Capitalist Democracy", "England and the Contribution of Violence to Gradualism", and, "Evolution and Revolution in France". Repeatedly the author points out that revolution and violence were not incidental or aberrant moments in the modernization process that culminated in bourgeois democracy. Rather, they were constitutive moments:

In the Western democratic countries revolutionary violence (and other forms as well) were part of the world historical process that made possible subsequent peaceful change (506). ... [T]he achievement of a [social] balance, so dear to the liberal and pluralist tradition, has been the fruit of violent and occasionally revolutionary methods that contemporary liberals reject (418). ... The admitted brutality of the enclosures confronts us with the limitations on the possibility of peaceful transitions to democracy and reminds us of the open and violent conflicts that have preceded its establishment (426).

The conditions under which large-scale political change could proceed pacifically through negotiation have been rare in human history;

enough so for Moore to challenge his liberal "humanist" opponents:

Can [you] point to any significant area of human affairs in which liberal methods have solved a problem and won a clear victory over the forces of blood and iron, without calling on these forces and becoming in great measure their prisoner? (214).

Moore's historically grounded realism strikes at the heart of the ahistorical idealist pronouncements of western—particularly American—politicians, planners and academics of that time. Given that liberal democracy is the outcome, in the west, of a particular course of modernization—an integral aspect of which was revolutionary violence—then with what moral foundations can western intellectuals sweepingly deny to progressive forces in Third World countries the right of recourse to violence. Surely their rhetoric evidences an ahistorical transposition of values—a form of moral absolutism that is anachronistic.

(b) The liberal rejection of revolution on the grounds that violence is to be opposed on principle is, for Moore, either hypocritical or naive. What it elides is any attempt at a calculus of the costs of a revolution set against the so-called "costs of going without a revolution" (504). The latter comprise the excessive suffering that will persist if nothing is done about, say, existing oppression and/or existing conditions of economic "backwardness". They must be set against the suffering that will undeniably result from a revolution. Conservative and liberal historiography tends only to register the costs of revolution: "the day-to-day repression of "normal" society hovers dimly in the background of most history books" (505). Depending on what the revolution is able to achieve—and this is by no means easily established—it may well alleviate aggregate suffering.

(c) Eulogizing institutionalized rational discussion and compromise as the only acceptable means for bringing about political change is all fair and well when the power resources of the parties to that discussion are more-or-less evenly matched. However, when they are not then the liberal maxim frequently becomes a euphemism for the preservation of the status quo. This is of course one reason why it might appeal to advocates of capitalism whether at the level of intranational class rela-

tions or international relations—typically between First and Third Worlds. It is also why Moore is adamant that “as long as powerful vested interests oppose changes that lead to a less oppressive world, no commitment to a free society can dispense with some conception of revolutionary coercion” (508).

As Moore recognizes, this assertion begs the question: When is revolutionary coercion to be preferred? As I will suggest further in concluding this essay, it is precisely these sorts of question that Moore wants to see progressive social scientists tackling.

We should bear in mind the political mood of the period when Moore was writing. As late as 1960 the Supreme Court was able to imprison a mathematics professor for refusing to testify before the House on Un-American Activities (Schrecker 1986). That *Social Origins* might now appear somewhat tame and self-evident in its cautious defense of revolutionary action should not be allowed to obscure the novelty and challenge it presented to the liberal orthodoxy upon its publication. As its author admitted: “For a Western scholar to say a good word on behalf of revolutionary radicalism is not easy because it runs counter to deeply grooved mental reflexes” (505).

It is thus perhaps testimony to the cogency of Moore's overall argument that only two out of the many reviews of the book disparaged it for its qualified defense of violence: Lawrence Stone asserting that violence is almost always “self-defeating”, and Lee Benson finding that it was “terribly wrong and damaging to the noble cause it [was] designed to advance” (cf. Wiener 1976: 164).

(iii) *Moore on Marxism*. I have argued that although *Social Origins* did not concern itself overtly with contemporary political issues, in its interpretation of the past it was intentionally (and perhaps un-intentionally) germane to contemporary political-theoretical debates and events. Thus far we have seen how its conclusions speak to western liberalism. In this last section I wish to suggest tentatively that just as, for example, Perry Anderson configures his *Lineages of the Absolutist State* in a way that supports his overall political position and expectations—arguing that western Europe remains a possible locale for revolutionary advance—*Social Origins* presents historical evidence intended to consolidate Moore's position relative to marxism. To

begin, let us briefly reflect on this relationship.

A succinct statement of Moore's reflections on the contemporary relevance of marxism is provided by the collection of essays that makes up *Political Power*. In the essay “On the Notions of Progress, Revolution and Freedom” he defines “progress” as “... advance in the prerequisites of [humankind's] freedom” (Moore 1958: 200). That is, progress is commensurate with technological advance insofar as the latter eliminates, or reduces, the necessity for hunger, disease and toil etc. However, progress is not co-terminous with freedom: this latter depends on social and political arrangements that are related but by no means reducible to the extant level of technology. Thus an increase in humankind's overall level of freedom requires for Moore changes in the social and political sphere. Which practical and theoretical project is best equipped to achieve this?

We have seen that liberalism is considered out of the running: the distribution of material resources and rewards is so markedly skewed under capitalism that “rational debate” alone can make little dent upon the status quo. So far Moore basically concurs with marxist arguments. However, he digresses when he points to a form of dialectical change which he claims Marx did not foresee. That is, “progress” (as defined) has all but removed any stimulus there may have been for revolution in the west by mitigating considerably the harshness of day-to-day living for large parts of the populations there. Hence:

There has been a fundamental change in the character of the revolutionary task since Marx's day ... [i]n advanced societies only tiny and ineffective minorities are interested in changing the situation radically enough to make any difference. At a moment in history when, from the standpoint of a commitment to freedom, there may be the greatest need for revolution there is the least desire for it. ... One obvious implication is that crucial aspects of the Marxist analysis are obsolete (Moore 1958: 213).

Of course, the argument that “progress” deprives marxism of its social agency—a revolutionary working class—and in all likelihood, humanity of any realistic prospect of emancipation from capitalist irrationality is not entirely unfamiliar. Its proximity to the Frankfurt

School critique—in particular Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*—is apparent and indeed betokens the friendship between Moore and Marcuse.

At issue here are not the obvious problems with such a viewpoint which are not a concern of this essay—they have been extensively gone through elsewhere. Moore's reflections on marxism are discussed here for their pertinence to a political and hermeneutical reading of *Social Origins*. For when Moore wrote the latter it was certainly his impression that the fordist working class which emerged from the Eisenhower years was not, and would not in the foreseeable future be predisposed to revolutionary action. Moore consolidates this position contra marxism by recourse to the past showing that the proletariat has in fact rarely been at the centre of major revolutionary events. As Hobsbawm (1967) points out, it is the belief that the peasantry rather than the proletariat has been the key class in anti-capitalist revolutions that sets Moore apart from most marxist historiography.

Speaking of modern revolutions beginning with the Puritan Revolution in England a conclusion *Social Origins* reaches is thus:

[T]he chief social basis of radicalism has been the peasants and the smaller artisans in the towns.. [O]ne may conclude that the wellsprings of human freedom lie not only where Marx saw them, in the aspirations of classes about to take power, but perhaps even more in the dying wail of a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll. Industrialism, as it continues to spread, may in some distant future still these voices forever and make revolutionary radicalism as anachronistic as cuneiform writing (505).

The implications of this last sentence are clear. With the successful transformation of agrarian into industrial societies, Moore expects the world-historical era of revolution, at least in the west, to come to an end. With peasantries erased from the class map leaving societally integrated proletariats to comprise the bulk of the subordinated masses there is left unpropitious social material for revolutionaries.

Such a scheme can still account for the occurrence of Third World revolutions where peasantries persist as it can the Chinese and Russian Revolutions where agrarian masses were decisive. But how does it

accommodate, say, the post World War I revolutions in central Europe—particularly Germany? For the latter showed a highly industrialized class structure.

Moore does not allow that the revolutionary events of 1918-1920 contravene his theory of working class politics. For his argument in *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (1978) is that the German working class sought not the overthrow of the existing, oppressive capitalist order. Instead, their protest was an angry plea for "decent human treatment" and a place within the existing arrangement of things—ostensibly quite conservative motivations. It was only given revolutionary inflections by the interventions and promptings of a radical intelligensia, that is, from "outside".

Once again, the rights and wrongs of Moore's argument need not detain us. Suffice it to say that in a probing critique, the German scholar Tenfelde (1980) finds this a rather one-sided and essentialist depiction of the German proletariat. He contends that Moore silences the many instances of utopian visions aspiring to a very different society that were preferred by workers on a self-organized basis. In his treatment of the proletariat, what Moore achieves in his reconstruction of the 1918-1920 events parallels in microcosm his sweeping account of bourgeois democratic development in, for example, England. As Richard Johnson (1980) has argued, in the *Social Origins* version of English political development, the working class hardly features at all as a radical historical agent. Omitting any tangible "pressure from below" its account of the 19th century process of reform often lapses into Whiggism, relying on the actions of enlightened statesmen and so on for its explanations.

My tentative and closing hypothesis—one that cannot at present be further substantiated—is that the pessimism occasioned by the social stasis Moore perceives in the west inflects his historical depiction of the working class. It makes attractive the interpretation of prior events and processes through an historical grid which relies principally on the agrarian classes (in alliance with the emerging bourgeoisie) to animate its historical materialism. While the agrarian emphasis proved a timely corrective to marxist shortcomings, it clearly moved too far the other way in neglecting the impact the working class had on its own history and simultaneously on the course of political development.

Conclusion

We have looked at the ensemble of political, ideological and social scientific conditions out of which *Social Origins* arose and attempted to describe how, as a text, it relates to those conditions of possibility. Moreover, we have seen that it in its structure and its argument *Social Origins* challenges the principal frameworks of intellectual production of its time, marxism and liberalism. Where, we might then ask, does this leave its author? What is Moore's political project?

Like many of the Frankfurt School intellectuals Moore overtly supports no organized political programme. Smith (1983) rightly places him in the tradition of the Enlightenment intellectual and it is in this respect that he makes his interventions. As a previously quoted remark illustrates, he sees his role as a social scientist as producing the knowledge and delineating as clearly as possible the alternatives available to society so that informed moral choices might be made. Emancipation requires enlightenment and so *Social Origins* ends thus:

Whether the ancient Western dream of a free and rational society will always remain a chimera, no one can say for sure. But if the men of the future are ever to break the chains of the present, they will have to understand the forces that forged them (508).

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