

Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*

tpavone@princeton.edu

February 25, 2015

1 Citation

Moore, Barrington. 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

2 Abstract

In *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore seeks to explain the developmental trajectories that transform agrarian societies into modern industrial ones. Leveraging a neo-marxist approach focused on the emergence of social classes and inter-class coalitions, Moore argues that there are three historical routes from agrarianism to the modern industrial world. In the *capitalist democratic route*, exemplified by England, France, and the United States, the peasantry was politically impotent or had been eradicated altogether, a strong bourgeoisie was present, and the aristocracy allied itself with the bourgeoisie or failed to oppose its democratizing efforts. In the *capitalist reactionary route*, exemplified by Germany and Japan, the peasantry posed a threat to the interests of both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, which consequently formed a conservative alliance against the peasantry; this alliance bolstered an autonomous, occasionally authoritarian state capable of being coopted by a fascist leader in a revolution from above. Finally, in the *communist route*, exemplified by China and Russia, the bourgeoisie failed to emerge and the the peasantry was strong and independent enough from the aristocracy to spur a radical revolution from below against the centralized agrarian bureaucracy. India is an awkward outlier, having subscribed to none of the foregoing paths (ibid: 413).

3 The Three Trajectories to the Modern World

Although Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* purports to explain "the varied political roles played by the landed upper classes and the peasantry in the transformation from agrarian society. . . to modern industrial ones," it is the presence of a strong bourgeoisie that ultimately is the crucial necessary condition for Moore in determining the developmental trajectory of particular societies (Moore 1966: xi). As he cogently states, "we may simply register strong agreement with the Marxist thesis that a vigorous and independent class of town dwellers has been an indispensable element in the growth of parliamentary democracy. No bourgeois, no democracy" (ibid: 418). To forward this argument, Moore leverages comparative historical analysis and case studies of France, England, the United States, Japan, China, and India, with some occasional references to Germany and Russia as well (ibid: xi-xii). He justifies the selection of these countries on the basis that they have been "political leaders at different points in time during the first half of the twentieth century" (ibid: xiii). From these case studies, he derives three developmental trajectories: (1) the capitalist democratic route, which engenders parliamentary democracy; (2) the capitalist-reactionary route, which engenders fascist dictatorship; and (3) the communist route, which engenders communist dictatorship. Let us consider each in turn.

3.1 The Capitalist-Democratic Route

In the capitalist democratic route, exemplified by England, France, and the United States, the peasantry was either subordinate to the political and economic power of the bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy, or it had been eliminated altogether. The urban bourgeoisie emerged as the most economically and politically powerful actor, and the aristocracy either did not oppose its democratizing efforts or it was destroyed by it in a bourgeois revolution (ibid: 430-431).

As an illustrative example, the *English path* to democracy can be summarized as follows:

- (1) *Peace between crown & aristocracy* →
- (2) *Capitalist agriculture* →
- (3) *Destruction of peasantry (via Enclosure Movement)* →
- (4) *Emergence of strong bourgeoisie* →
- (5) *Convergence of interests between aristocracy & bourgeoisie* →
- (6) *Bourgeois-aristocratic alliance* →
- (7) *Parliamentary democracy*

Specifically, the royal peace weakened the monarch's power vis-a-vis the landed aristocracy; the aristocracy's turn to commercial agriculture bolstered commerce and spurred the emergence of a vigorous urban bourgeoisie; commercial farming was accomplished via the aristocracy's forced expropriation of land from the peasantry in the Enclosure Movement; "convergent interests" between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie fostered an alliance between the two classes, and the aristocracy did not stand in the way of the urban town dwellers' efforts to foster capitalist democracy (ibid: 420; 424; 430-431). In the American case, on the other hand, the southern landed aristocracy opposed the northern bourgeoisie's democratizing efforts, sparking a civil war that proved to be the aristocracy's downfall due to its relative weakness (ibid: 431).

3.2 The Capitalist-Reactionary Route

In the capitalist reactionary route, exemplified by Germany and Japan, the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie were weaker than in the capitalist-democratic route, and the peasantry thus posed a legitimate threat to their interests. As a result, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie "thr[e]w themselves at the royal bureaucracy, exchanging the right to rule for the right to make money" (ibid: 437). This bourgeois-aristocratic coalition fostered a relatively autonomous authoritarian state punctured by brief periods of quasi-democratic rule (ibid: 437). What brought totalitarian fascism to these countries was their reluctance to enact structural changes in the face of political or economic crisis, which allowed reactionary leaders to appropriate the state apparatus for themselves and bring about a fascist revolution from above (ibid: 438-440).

As an illustrative example, the *German path* to fascism can be summarized as follows:

- (1) *Peasantry poses threat to aristocratic & bourgeois interests* →
- (2) *Bourgeoisie & aristocracy are independently too weak to suppress threat* →
- (3) *Aristocratic-bourgeois alliance turns to the state to protect their economic interests* →
- (4) *Autonomous, mildly authoritarian state emerges* →
- (5) *Economic crisis strikes & regime is unable to reform* →
- (6) *Fascist leader brings about revolution from above* →
- (7) *Fascist dictatorship*

3.3 The Communist Route

In the communist route, exemplified by Russia and China, the peasantry emerged as the historical agent of social change. What proved crucial was the presence of a non socially-stratified society, such that the peasantry was capable of uniting as a single collective actor (in highly segmented societies, such as India, the large peasant sector was divided by caste and thus proved to be "irrelevant") (ibid: 459). In these cases, the landed aristocracy was weaker; as a result, it was incapable of engendering a transition to commercial agriculture, of destroying the prevailing social structure of the peasant class, and of rendering the peasantry economically dependent upon landed elites (ibid: 467; 477). Absent a turn to commercial agriculture and

industry, an urban bourgeoisie failed to emerge (ibid: 467). Additionally, a centralized agrarian bureaucracy operated by a monarchical state was present, and consequently the peasantry became dependent on the state for sustenance and protection (ibid 467; 469; 471). Yet a centralized bureaucracy may at some point “infuriate” the peasants via a “sudden imposition or demand that strikes many people at once and that is a break with accepted rules and customs” (ibid: 474). Because the landed aristocracy was politically and economically displaced by the agrarian bureaucracy, and because it lacked social linkages with the peasantry, it was unable to oppose peasant revolt against the state, and some landed elites even joined the radical revolt. These conditions fostered a communist revolution from below.

As an illustrative example, the *Chinese path* to communism can be summarized as follows:

- (1) *Weak commerce* →
- (2) *No bourgeoisie* →
- (3) *Powerful peasantry* →
- (4) *Strong agrarian bureaucratic state* →
- (5) *Peasants become dependent on state rather than aristocracy* →
- (6) *State infuriates peasants via arbitrary extraction* →
- (7) *peasant-led revolution from below* →
- (8) *Communist dictatorship*