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Land, Labour, and Literature: Evaluating the Role of Peasants in Revolutionary Movements through Marxist Writings

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the writings of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Tse-Tung to explore their depictions of the role of peasants in revolutionary movements. Each theorist provides distinct perspectives shaped by their historical contexts and ideological frameworks. While political literature has been instrumental in articulating revolutionary ideas, it often fails to create effective collective action among peasants, who are frequently viewed as a numerical force rather than as leaders. The study argues that peasant mobilisation is more feasible in societies without rigid social stratification and that the most destitute peasants—those who rely entirely on their land—tend to occupy minimal leadership positions. Additionally, the chances of successful peasant mobilisation and revolutionary activity increase when there is a closer power distance between central authorities and the common people. By engaging with these foundational texts and historical contexts, this paper contributes to understanding how literature can influence revolutionary potential while highlighting the complexities of peasant agency in socio-political movements.

Keywords: peasantry, class struggle, revolutionary literature, political agency, agrarian revolution, Marxist thought

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Introduction

The interplay between literature and revolution has been a powerful force throughout history. While the phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword" may face skepticism, it holds significant weight when examining how revolutionary writings have inspired societal change. Revolutionary literature has often played a crucial role in spreading ideas and values, elevating discourse, and creating conceptual frameworks for revolution. For instance, poems like "Kranti Gitanjali" in India glorified sacrifice for one's country, inspiring various movements worldwide. However, much of this literature has primarily appealed to the educated class and urban proletariat, often sidelining the peasantry who faced severe exploitation.

In Marxist theory, peasants are classified based on their political agency and isolation due to heterogeneity. They should be defined as small landowners or agricultural laborers farming for subsistence. A revolution, within this context, is a broader movement aimed at fundamentally altering societal structures through class struggle. While peasant-oriented works have existed, they often struggled to achieve mass mobilisation due to literacy barriers and limited access. For example, Bolshevik leaders like Lenin wrote pamphlets addressing immediate peasant concerns, but challenges persisted in reaching the rural masses effectively.

This paper argues that Marxist political literature, while aiming to inspire revolutionary movements, often fails to mobilise peasants effectively, instead promoting urban-centric revolutionary ideals. Peasant mobilisation is most successful in societies without rigid social stratification, where the most destitute peasants play minimal leadership roles. The impact of

peasant mobilisation is more significant when the power distance between central authorities and common people is reduced. By examining well-known revolutionary and political literature, this study will explore the complex relationship between written works and peasant mobilisation in revolutionary contexts.

Literature Review

The literature on the revolutionary and political depiction of the peasantry is limited, with many studies focusing on specific geographical contexts or historical case studies. Paul R. Brass (1980) explores peasant political engagement in Uttar Pradesh, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of peasant mobilisation within a specific Indian state. His analysis brilliantly highlights how the politicisation of middle and rich peasants has shaped political landscapes, often sidelining poorer peasants. Coronado (2021) offers a detailed examination of peasant agency's impact on agrarian institutions in Colombia, particularly regarding property rights over public lands. He writes, "the sinuano peasants 'make their own history, but they don't make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'" (Coronado Delgado, 2021, p.256). This perspective resonates with Marxist historical materialism, emphasising how material conditions and power relations shape peasant experiences. Huizer (1999) provides a comprehensive analysis of peasant mobilisation through comparative historical case studies. He identifies critical factors in peasant resistance, including socio-economic frustration, land redistribution demands, charismatic leadership, and the influence of religion and local customs. Foryś (2023) examines the evolution of peasant associations in Poland across different political eras, noting how agricultural modernisation has led to issue-specific protests that reflect changing socio-political landscapes. Alavi's (1965) seminal work "Peasants and Revolution" challenges generalisations about the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. He emphasises the need to understand the specific circumstances that shape peasant movements and highlights the internal stratification within these groups.

Despite these contributions, several gaps persist in the literature. Many studies suffer from geographic hyper specificity, limiting their applicability to broader contexts. There is often a tendency to focus on democratic struggles while overlooking radical alternatives, which restricts analyses to case studies without broader theoretical implications. Additionally, several works prioritise the revolutionary potential of middle-class farmers while neglecting the poorest peasants who endure the brunt of exploitation. Moreover, existing literature often overlooks the application of Marxist writings to modern peasant movements, attributing mobilisation efforts primarily to immediate factors such as institutional changes or legal mobilisation which ignores broader historical and structural forces at play. Notably absent from current scholarship is a simultaneous comparative study of MLM literature concerning the role of peasants in contemporary movements. A Marxist perspective on the peasant question could illuminate class relations by examining internal stratification and their connection to means of production. Such an approach is essential for moving beyond idealistic interpretations focused on moral agency and grounding revolutions in concrete realities. It also allows for a deeper exploration of class struggle, economic transformation, and political mobilisation within peasant movements.

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Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative literary analysis of selected works by Marx, Lenin, and Mao to facilitate a comparative analysis and explore ideological contradictions in their depiction of the peasantry. The study uses content analysis and discourse analysis techniques to examine these primary texts, focusing on their portrayal of peasant roles in revolutionary movements. A comparative framework is established to evaluate the theories of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. This framework considers factors such as their literary conceptualisation of peasant classes, writings on peasant revolutionary potential, assumption of the needs and aspirations of the diverse strata, integration into the broader movement, and proposed strategies for peasant mobilisation. To ensure proper contextualisation, each text is situated within its specific historical and socio-political context, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the authors' perspectives and the evolution of Marxist thought on peasantry.

The selection of primary texts focuses on seminal works that directly address the peasant question, including Marx's "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," and “Das Kapital (Vol. I, Part VIII)”, Lenin’s “On the Agrarian Question in Russia Towards The Nineteenth Century”, and "Socialism and the Peasantry”. Mao’s selected works include “On Agricultural Cooperation,” “Report on the Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” and “Analysis of Classes in Chinese Society.” The secondary texts offer greater contextual understanding of revolutionary theory including an analysis of Marx’s writings on food systems (Foster, 2016) and peasant communes (Foster, 2022), as well as broader historical perspectives on peasant resistance (Hobsbawm, 1998). These sources provide valuable context for interpreting Marx, Lenin, and Mao's original works.

Discussion

Marx's understanding of the rural peasantry was nuanced and showed evolution. His theory of historical materialism predicted the capitalist transformation of agriculture. Marx criticised the private enclosures in Scotland, condemning "the whole series of thefts....and popular misery that accompanied the violent expropriation of the people" (Capital, Part VIII). Despite his emphasis on the proletariat, Marx recognised the integration of the countryside in the capitalist system. He writes,“Farms and landholdings.....were transformed into mere commodities under the capitalist system. The commodification of essential goods.....opened a new market for capitalist production, now making them a slave to the system.” **(Capital. Part VIII, Ch. 31)**

Though seemingly dismissive of peasant perspectives, Marx highlighted their potential for mobilisation. However, his work showed contradictions. By acknowledging the injustices felt by the peasants, he argues that expropriation creates wage labourers for capitalist exploitation and destruction of the rural economy, forcing peasants to depend on the rural market for subsistence. This dependence, coupled with harsh industrial work, allows the newly formed proletariat to develop a revolutionary conscience. Thus, the creation of a new proletariat from the disenfranchised peasantry seemed to be the only course of action.

It is crucial to note that Marx's views were not static. He clarified that his observations in *Capital* were specific to Western Europe's capitalist development, rejecting a unilinear view of history. This argument is strengthened in his reply to Zasulich on the Russian commune, mentioning its ability to “act as a fulcrum for Russian societal regeneration.” (Marx)

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In the *18th Brumaire*, Marx attributed Napoleon's rise to power partly to peasant support and blamed those perpetuating the feudal system responsible for preserving bourgeois despotism. Highlighting the isolation of small-holding peasants, he argues that it rendered them incapable of asserting their class interests, classifying the small-holding peasantry as a "sack of potatoes." Marx distinguished between revolutionised peasants allied with urban centers and conservative peasants supporting reactionary forces. His theory of "false consciousness" is exemplified by the peasants' support for Napoleon, as their isolation and susceptibility to manipulation led them to support a leader whose class interests served the bourgeoisie.

While acknowledging the peasantry's conservative tendencies, Marx recognised their revolutionary potential under exploitative conditions. However, he noted their fragmented nature and lack of political organisation as barriers to change. His general views of the peasantry were based on prevalent societal and material conditions. While not suggesting recommendations, his writings contributed significantly to policies on the role of rural populations in social transformation

Lenin's understanding of the agrarian question was rooted in the socio-economic realities of Tsarist Russia. Following the 1861 emancipation, while intending to modernise agriculture, created a system of land ownership that perpetuated inequality. Peasants faced significant burdens, including redemption payments and limited land access. This, coupled with the rise of industrial capitalism, shaped Lenin's views on the peasantry and their role in the revolution. Initially skeptical of the peasantry's revolutionary potential, Lenin recognised their crucial role in the struggle against Tsarism. Through an extensive study of rural conditions, he observed the stark differences in land ownership between the destitute peasants and noble landholders owing to the exploitative nature of land purchases. Citing agrarian statistics, he writes that peasants who owned lesser landholdings paid a higher price. Peasants with smaller landholdings (up to 5 dessiatines) paid 15.25 rubles per dessiatine compared to wealthier peasants (up to 50 dessiatines) who paid only 3.55 rubles**.** The impoverished farmer was forced to accept these disadvantageous terms creating a form of bondage while rich peasants buy wholesale and rent it at higher prices, thus allowing wealthier peasants to accumulate more wealth and consolidate their position within the commune. His works also highlighted the emergence of a wealthy peasant class alongside a mass of impoverished farmers struggling to survive. V. Lenin observed that the allotment system, intended to ensure equitable land distribution, instead perpetuated a system of exploitation. Peasants were often forced to rent out allotted land to wealthier landowners, As Lenin poignantly observed:
"Under this system of farming, the peasant 'allotment' is a means of supplying the landlord with farm hands, and.....also with implements and livestock, which,.....serve to cultivate the landlords land." (Lenin, p.9)

Considering the numerical strength of the peasantry and their support for socialist reforms, Lenin emphasised the need for unified action between workers and peasants led by a proletarian vanguard against the bourgeoisie, thus exemplifying his "Worker-Peasant" alliance theory. In "Socialism and the Peasantry," Lenin elaborated on strategies for mobilising peasants, primarily the nationalisation of private land to eradicate feudal remnants and facilitate capitalist agricultural development. He believed that nationalisation could free land from medieval constraints and promote agricultural growth.

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Ilyich's perspectives on the agrarian question were characterised by a nuanced understanding of class divisions among peasants and their evolving role in the revolution. His analysis laid the foundation for significant changes in Russian agriculture and contributed to shaping Bolshevik policies during and after the revolution.

Mao's understanding of the peasantry emerged from the tumultuous era of 20th century China; a period categorised by internal strife, foreign intervention, and a decline of the Qing dynasty. China was an agrarian society grappling with the twin pressures of regional factionalism and external aggression. The nation was beset by poverty, family, and social unrest. The newly formed United Front between the Kuomintang and CCP attempted to maintain stability and unify the Chinese nation amid these pressures while the peasantry endured the most of these hardships. The broader political context influenced Mao's revolutionary thought, shaped his views on the peasantry's role in the struggle for national liberation and socialist revolution.
While the Party focused on the revolutionary appeal of the proletariat, Mao recognised the immense potential of the peasantry. In "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society" (1926), he identified the peasantry, particularly the impoverished, as the "staunchest and numerically largest ally of the Chinese proletariat"(Zedong). He observed that the peasantry, burdened by exploitation and ravaged by poverty and famine, possessed a keen understanding of societal contradictions. This understanding, rooted in their lived experiences, formed the basis of Mao's emphasis on "knowledge derived from practice."(conceptualised in "On Practice"). His analysis, informed by his extensive investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan, highlighted the crucial role of the poor peasants. Mao recognised that the peasantry, particularly the impoverished, were not merely passive victims but active agents of historical change.

However, Mao's work shows contradictions. While he calls the Chinese proletariat the most progressive force that shares similar conditions of exploitation and advocates for their leadership in the revolution, he simultaneously calls for the leadership role of the peasantry in their revolution despite their fragmentations. He writes,
Without the poor peasants there would be no revolution. To attack them is to attack the revolution" (Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan, p.16).
M. Zedong advocated for the formation of peasant associations to organise rural communities, implement land reforms, and challenge the power of landlords. He emphasised the need for the Communist Party to provide leadership and guidance to the peasant movement, ensuring its alignment with broader revolutionary goals. However, Mao also acknowledged the internal contradictions within the peasantry, recognising the potential for resistance from wealthier peasants who benefited from the existing system. This recognition of internal class differentiation within the peasantry further refined his understanding of the complexities of peasant mobilisation.

Results
This analysis reveals that while Marx, Lenin, and Mao acknowledged the peasantry's significance in revolutionary movements, they often prioritised the proletariat as the vanguard. Their writings suggest an urban bias, constraining peasant agency within a proletariat-led framework. Moreover, the conceptualisation of peasant classes presents challenges. While Marx and Lenin identified broad categories, Mao offered more nuanced stratification. However, defining peasant classes based on wealth can be subjective and context dependent.

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The CCP's redefinition of social status post-land reforms demonstrate how class categories evolve with political interventions.

Peasant mobilisation success depends on various factors. In pre-revolutionary Russia, rigid social stratification hindered mobilisation, while the fall of the Qing Dynasty in China facilitated greater peasant participation. The 2020-21 Indian farmers' protests show how closer connections between grassroots movements and political leaders can aid mobilisation. This analysis highlights the limitations of existing frameworks in recognising peasant agency complexities. It underscores the need for future research to explore internal class differentiation, social hierarchies' impact, local leadership roles, and external factors influencing peasant movements' success.

Conclusion

This study reveals a key tension within Marxist theory: while aiming to inspire revolutionary movements, its emphasis on the urban proletariat often overshadows the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Marx's focus on the development of industrial capitalism in Western Europe, as detailed in *Kapital*, contributed to this urban-centric bias. However, as demonstrated by Mao Zedong's successful mobilisation of the peasantry in the Chinese Revolution, peasants serve as a force for revolutionary support under specific conditions.

This study suggests that the effectiveness of peasant mobilisation is significantly enhanced in societies without rigid social stratification, where power distance between the central authorities and the common people is minimised. The absence of strict social barriers allows for greater interaction and the development of solidarity among peasants, facilitating the spread of revolutionary ideas and collective action. Furthermore, when peasants have more avenues for communication and engagement with the ruling elite, they are less likely to resort to radical action, suggesting that inclusive political systems can mitigate the potential for peasant uprisings.

By examining historical examples of peasant movements across diverse contexts, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to their success or failure. Future research should delve deeper into the interplay of social, political, and economic conditions in shaping the role of peasants in revolutionary struggles.

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