Introduction: Capitalist Modernity and Communist Revolution

This book is an exploration of how the social identities of peasants who left their villages to work and settle in St Petersburg, from the 1880s to 1917, and in Shanghai, from the 1900s to the 1940s, were transformed under the impact of capitalist modernity. St Petersburg and Shanghai stood out as the exemplars of capitalist modernity in Russia and China, respectively, two societies that were very different in cultural terms yet which shared the condition of being overwhelmingly agrarian and politically enfeebled. The book explores how the experience of wage labour and city life challenged migrants’ understandings of themselves, and asks how changes in their social identities contributed to the political, social and cultural ferment that eventuated in revolution. It is an attempt to explore the formation of a working class from a new angle, by focusing on transformations of social identity that did not relate directly to the growth of class consciousness or to the growth of revolutionary political sentiment, the aspects of class formation on which the historiography to date has tended to concentrate. Its central thesis is that the identities of peasants who became workers were transformed by a number of processes other than those directly related to wage labour and capitalist production and along a number of axes other than that of class, and that capitalist modernity provides a better optic than capitalist production through which to analyse identity formation.

In 2007, according to the United Nations, the earth’s population for the first time tilted from being predominantly rural to predominantly urban.¹ The subjects of this book – those who left the countryside during the first wave of capitalist industrialization and urbanization – may be seen as harbingers of this most significant of twentieth-century developments. The focus of the book is on that subset of rural-to-urban migrants who chose to settle in the cities of St Petersburg and Shanghai. This group may have been outnumbered by seasonal migrants and

temporary sojourners, but it was they who evolved, however unevenly, into an industrial working class and it was among them that transformations in social identity were most marked.² The social identities with which the four central chapters deal are, respectively: native-place identity, i.e. the identification of these peasants-turned-workers with their place of birth; individuality, i.e. their new understandings of selfhood; gender identity, i.e. their changed conceptions of themselves as men and women; and, finally, their identifications with the nation state. Each chapter asks how far identities did change as a result of the move to the city and then analyses the implications of any such changes for how peasants-turned-workers conceived of their place in the larger social and political order.

The book contends that we can best appreciate why migrants responded to revolution – however short-lived that response may have been – by situating their experiences and self-understandings against a backdrop in which capitalist modernity irrupted into economically, socially and politically backward societies. It argues that the response of workers to revolution was shaped not only by the experience of capitalist exploitation, bleak though that was, but also by the crisis of an entire order that encompassed autocratic government, rural patriarchy, the constraints of the Confucian moral order, which was compounded by the upheavals wrought by war and foreign imperialism; more positively, it was shaped by exposure to the disorientation and speed of urban life, to the pleasures of consumer culture, to the intimacy of the nuclear family, and to the emancipating influence of literacy and mass entertainment. The argument is not that the challenges posed by capitalist modernity in a context of economic and political backwardness served seamlessly to render workers receptive to revolution. Workers experienced these challenges variably and their significance was always contested; indeed many of the new orientations fostered by modernity, such as interest in fashion, pulp fiction, or new forms of religious affiliation, were seen by revolutionaries as fundamentally antipathetic to the promotion of revolutionary consciousness. By widening the analytical focus in this way, however, the book hopes to show that the identity transformation undergone by migrants to St Petersburg and Shanghai went beyond the transformation of peasants into proletarians, and hopes to help answer the question posed by the late Reginald Zelnik, pioneering

² Daniel Brower reckons that in 1900 up to one-fifth of the population of Moscow and St Petersburg had either just arrived or would leave before the end of the year. Daniel Brower, ‘Urban Revolution in the Late Russian Empire’, in Michael F. Hamm (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 327.
historian of Russian labour, who asked with characteristic perspicacity: ‘What further readings of workers’ life experiences would help us to make sense of the revolution in their values that preceded the revolution in the streets?’

In both Russia and China powerful working-class movements sprang up in societies where many of the prerequisites conventionally deemed crucial to working-class formation – such as significant levels of industrialization and urbanization, basic rights to organize, a relatively high level of popular education – were absent. In the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 in Russia and in the ‘national revolution’ of 1925–7 in China, a small industrial working class, comprising mainly if not exclusively former peasants, came to the fore of the revolutionary movement. This is not to claim that either revolution was ‘proletarian’ in any substantial sense. In Russia in 1905, the political leverage exercised by the general strike was critical in forcing Nicholas II to concede a constitutional monarchy; but for most of that year, the nascent labour movement operated in uneasy conjunction with the liberal and radical opposition groups in an ‘all-nation struggle’ against autocracy. Similarly, in 1917, workers proved to be the most organized and politically conscious of the mobilized masses, spearheading the formation of soviets, factory committees, trade unions and other organizations, yet the labour movement was only one of the forces – the others being a peasant war against the landowning gentry, a mutiny in the army and navy, and mobilization by non-Russian ethnicities – that undermined the Provisional Government.

In China the political potential of the tiny working class became evident in the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, a broad-based anti-imperialist movement, triggered by the shooting of unarmed demonstrators in the British-controlled International Settlement in Shanghai, which spilled over into a sixteen-month-long strike-boycott in Guangzhou (Canton) and Hong Kong. During the Northern Expedition of 1926–7, when the Guomindang (GMD), or Nationalist Party, and its National Revolutionary Army led an armed campaign to suppress warlordism and reunify the country, conditions were created that were conducive to the formation of mass associations of workers, peasants, students, women and even merchants. Throughout this period of ‘national revolution’, mass politics took place within the framework of a ‘united front’ (1923–7) between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the GMD. In spring 1927, workers led by the CCP briefly took power

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in Shanghai, expelling northern warlord forces from the Chinese areas of the city in advance of the arrival of the National Revolutionary Army. This provoked Chiang Kai-shek into brutally suppressing his erstwhile Communist allies. Thereafter, it is often suggested, the CCP was forced out of the cities, with the result that the Chinese revolution became a ‘peasant revolution’. Recent scholarship has questioned this characterization. Local studies of the CCP’s activities in rural areas in the period of the Sino-Japanese war (1937–45) and the civil war (1946–9) suggest, above all, that the key to the CCP’s success lay in its skill in building coalitions of diverse social constituencies, including teachers, students, intellectuals, ‘enlightened gentry’, merchants, nationalist army officers, former warlords, workers, religious groups and secret-society members. Certainly, peasants – usually middle rather than poor peasants – were mobilized by the CCP, but usually only after it had managed to establish a secure base by manipulating the aforementioned social coalitions.\(^4\) In the words of Lucien Bianco, ‘the fact that the revolution triumphed with the assistance of the peasantry does not make it a peasant revolution. The peasants participated in a revolution undertaken and directed by others, and this little by little modified their conceptions and behaviour.’\(^5\) The working class, moreover, did not disappear as an agent of revolution after 1927, especially in Shanghai. Workers in that city made a major contribution to the national salvation movement of the 1930s, a substantial contribution to the creation of the Communist New Fourth Army after 1937, and a more modest contribution to the CCP’s final victory in 1949. In broad terms, as Odoric Wou contends, ‘the revolution was a circular movement that shifted from the cities to the countryside and then back to the cities’.\(^6\)

In the former Soviet Union and in Maoist China, the official explanation of the political precocity of the working class rested heavily on a narrative of proletarianization. Peasants coming to the cities were deemed to have been proletarianized both objectively, i.e. separated from their means of production and made fully dependent on waged work, and subjectively, i.e. to have undergone a transformation of consciousness as they went from being a class ‘in itself’ to a class ‘for itself’. According to the legitimating ideology, the acquisition of class


consciousness was made possible because of the political leadership provided by the Bolshevik party and the CCP. According to Mao Zedong, the Chinese revolution during its ‘new-democratic’ stage took the historically original form of ‘New Democracy’, a bloc comprising workers, peasants, the intelligentsia and sections of the petty bourgeoisie, yet it fell to the proletariat to lead the bloc onward towards socialism. In the Soviet Union, where the state claimed to have been born out of a proletarian revolution, the narrative of proletarianization spawned a huge historiography that sought to demonstrate that a majority of workers in tsarist Russia had become proletarianized. Soviet historians invested great energy in analysing such issues as workers’ ownership of land in the countryside; the extent to which they farmed it; the extent to which workers’ families resided in the village; the extent to which workers sent money back to the village; the proportion of workers who were children of workers and/or who had been born in the city. While western historians were broadly sceptical of the claim that most Russian workers had cut their ties with the land and become fully dependent on wages, they nevertheless tended to cast their own researches within this peasant-to-proletarian paradigm. This book tries to bypass this now rather stale debate, by exploring how the experience of moving from village to the city set in train a multiplicity of transformations in social identity that cannot be captured by single-minded focus on class identity.

The book examines transformations in workers’ social identities in the broad context of capitalist modernity rather than of capitalist industrialization narrowly understood. It sees the different dimensions of modernity – technological innovation, industrialization, urbanization, demographic growth, the forging of nation states, and mass political movements – as ultimately embedded in what Marshall Berman calls the ‘ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating’ capitalist world market. Towards the end of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that despite its western origins, capitalist modernity has developed in

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8 Within historiography in general there has been a revival of interest in ‘modernity’ as a result of the shift from social to cultural history. In the case of Russia, this has led to a lessening of emphasis on the traditionalism of Russian society, on the crisis of autocracy, the revolutionary movement and the growth of social classes and a new emphasis on the fragmentation of social groups and on the ways in which identities were constructed within different cultural fields. David Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis (eds.), Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); David L. Hoffman, Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
geographically and historically variable forms. Modernities are ‘multiple’, insofar as the processes of structural differentiation of economy, society and polity common to modernization are powerfully shaped by factors such as the historical point at which a society is incorporated into the global capitalist system, its position within the international state system (in the Chinese case, a position that took the form of semi-colonialism), its domestic social structures and power relations and, not least, its cultural heritage.\(^\text{10}\) The western version of capitalist modernity now appears as one variant among several, and may not be taken as a norm against which other modernities – whether capitalist or Communist – are judged to be more or less successful, more or less complete. As a study of the growth and development of a working class in two areas of the globe outside the ‘West’, the book contributes to the debate about multiple modernities by pointing up not only the striking similarities between transformations of the workers’ identities in two vastly different countries but also the ways in which different social, political and cultural contexts inflected the process of working-class formation. In so doing, the book endorses the view of Goran Thernborn that modern development can no longer be ‘encapsulated in “the West and the rest” formula’.\(^\text{11}\)

Shmuel Eisenstadt suggests that modernity begins at the moment when the unquestioned legitimacy of a divinely ordained social order begins to be challenged, thereby enabling alternative social and political orders to be envisioned.\(^\text{12}\) With modernity, self-consciousness comes into its own, allowing people to reflect on available social roles and possibilities and to gain a critical distance on tradition. Out of it emerges what Marshall Berman calls the ‘amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own’.\(^\text{13}\) According to Douglas Kellner, in traditional societies, ‘identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths that

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\(^{13}\) Berman, All that is Solid, p. 16.
provided orientation and religious sanctions to one’s place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour.\(^\text{14}\)

The onset of modernity undermined all-encompassing identity schemes, such as those based on kinship, and brought forth what Craig Calhoun describes as ‘an increase in the multiplicity of identity schemes so substantial that it amounted to a qualitative break, albeit one unevenly distributed in time and space’.\(^\text{15}\) Modernity faces people with choices, yet at the same time can make it more difficult for them to determine who they are and thus to sustain a unified identity in their own eyes and those of others. As Leopold Haimson, the first historian of Russian labour to engage with the ‘growing confusion of social identities’ in late-imperial Russia, observed, during this era of acute political and social crisis ‘individuals and groups had to establish – indeed to decide – who they were in order to determine how they should feel and ultimately act’.\(^\text{16}\)

The shift of focus away from the construction of class identity is not intended to deny that the experience of work under industrial capitalism, together with the poverty and suffering that typified the lives of those compelled to sell their labour-power, were the primary forces shaping worker identities.\(^\text{17}\) Chapters 3, 4 and the first half of chapter 5 pay full attention to the workplace, and throughout the book is concerned to recognize that the particular types of social identity examined, though not reducible to class, nevertheless became overdetermined by a discourse of class or, in the Chinese case, by a discourse of what I have called ‘class-inflected anti-imperialist nationalism’.\(^\text{18}\)


book, however, is not to repeat what previous historians have done by reaffirming the salience of class identity, but to shift attention towards the less noticed and less well understood transformations of social identity that took place as migrants struggled to come to terms with the gamut of experiences engendered by capitalist modernity in the context of a multifaceted crisis of the old order.

The comparative study of revolutions has a distinguished pedigree. Most such work, however, has been done by historical sociologists rather than by historians and it has been primarily concerned either with building theories of revolution, or with constructing models of causal explanation, or with testing hypotheses about issues such as the origins and precipitating conditions of revolutions, the role of social classes and political parties, the dynamics of mass mobilization and mass demobilization, the typical stages of development of revolution and its typical outcomes. Much of this work is of great value, not least in forcing historians to think rigorously about the standard explanations and suppositions proffered within the historiographies of national revolutions. But such nomothetic endeavours are usually based on secondary historical works – i.e. they offer interpretations of other historians’ interpretations – and often lack the detailed knowledge of sociopolitical and cultural context, historical conjuncture and historical timing that matter to the practising historian. In these essays I try my hand at a style of comparative history that is designed to meet these latter desiderata: one that is less concerned with the ‘big structures, large processes and huge comparisons’ so fruitfully studied by Charles Tilly, and more with culture, human agency and the reconstruction of the micro-level contexts in which individuals acted upon and were shaped by those contexts. My concern is not to build an overarching explanatory model of revolution but to illuminate similarities and differences between the two revolutions by building local arguments inductively out of close engagement with the primary sources. In choosing two radically different societies for comparison, my concern is, partly, to show how similar processes and practices played out differently in different cultural contexts: to demonstrate that culture matters. My methodology, however, is emphatically not a culturalist one. If modernity played out differently in different cultural contexts, its fundamental character was determined by its place within the global capitalist system and by the


competitive pressures of the international state system. Migrants were thrust into the modern world by these impersonal forces, yet they also made themselves modern by using the cultural resources at their disposal to confront and mould the impact of these forces on their lives.\footnote{Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ‘On Alternative Modernities’, in D. P. Gaonkar (ed.), \textit{Alternative Modernities} (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 18.}

The book may be seen as an attempt to bring together the two ‘analytics’ which, according to Geoff Eley, continue to be polarized at the start of the twenty-first century: the ‘older prioritizing of societal development and change’, on the one hand, and the ‘new preference for more modest and individualized sites of social and cultural investigation’, on the other.\footnote{Geoff Eley, \textit{A Crooked Line: from Cultural History to the History of Society} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 193.} In breaking the unities of time and place, the hope is to stimulate the historical imagination, to open up a new perspective on labour history, to provoke new questions about the twentieth century’s most important revolutions and to contribute a historical perspective to somewhat reified debates about ‘multiple modernities’.

In addition to engaging with the contexts of capitalist industrialization and urbanization, the analysis offered in each of the first four chapters puts emphasis on three supplementary contexts that shaped the changing identities of migrants to the cities, contexts that may be seen as dimensions of capitalist modernity. First, and arguably the most important of these supplementary arenas of identity formation, was the crisis of the old order. This was a political crisis – centred on the inability of dynastic empires and autocratic polities to cope with the demands of modernization and the pressures of the international state system – but it was not merely a crisis of state: it extended to the entire traditional social order. In China a sense of national crisis – the fear that Chinese faced extinction at the hands of aggressive foreign powers – cast a shadow over the entire period from 1895 to 1945, and it is impossible to understand the production of social identity except in that context. I have argued elsewhere, in relation to Shanghai, that insofar as a working-class movement came into existence in that city, it did so as the by-product of the growth of nationalism, which was itself a response to the collapse of the imperial bureaucracy and to the encroachment on China’s sovereignty by the foreign powers.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Like Cattle and Horses}.} In Russia the political crisis took a different form, a growing perception that every level of the social order was characterized by arbitrariness and despotism, and that only the overthrow of tsarism and the establishment of a democratic polity (and/or some form of socialism) could bring about social progress and individual
freedom. In Russia, moreover, socialist revolution came about very much as a consequence of war between rapacious states not as a consequence of a crisis of the capitalist system per se. Each of the four chapters thus highlights different aspects of the political crisis that beset the traditional order and seeks to show how this influenced the process of identity formation among migrants to the city.

Second, the book explores the ways in which identities were shaped by transnational forces, whether economic, political or cultural in nature. For those who came to St Petersburg and Shanghai the experience of modernity was indistinguishable from exposure to western technology, commodities, institutions, practices and ideologies. For centuries, Russians had measured themselves against the West, either positively – by aspiring to its norms, lifestyle and prosperity – or negatively, by rejecting it as a bastion of materialism antithetical to the spirituality of the Russian people. St Petersburg, as is discussed below, was the major vector of westernization in Russian culture, even as it served as a symbolic site on which debate about the value of things western and Russian could be played out. In China, traditional culture was called into question far more dramatically than in Russia. The intrusion of foreign powers following the Opium War, the decline and ultimate collapse of the imperial bureaucracy, the attack on Confucianism by champions of ‘science and democracy’ all led to profound questioning as to what it might mean to be Chinese in the modern world. Paradoxically, the struggle to ‘save’ China encouraged intellectuals and nationalist politicians to turn to European, Japanese, American and Soviet models for inspiration. However, in neither Russia nor China did modernization equate with westernization: much as the experience of modernity was about exposure to things foreign, differences in Russian and Chinese modernities derived very much from the ways in which resources within the indigenous culture were used to cope with the practices and representations that flooded in from outside.

Third, emphasis is laid on the sphere of consumption – understood broadly to include everything from mass-produced subsistence items, to fashions in clothes or home furnishings, to newspapers and pulp fiction, to mass entertainment – as a site of identity construction. Gary Cross defines consumerism as ‘the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their role in society’, and dubs it the ‘ism that won’ in the twentieth century.24 Neither Russia nor China became ‘consumer