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978-0-521-56765-7 - The Egalitarian Moment: Asia and Africa, 1950-1980

D. A. Low

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General histories of the twentieth century will have much to say about the establishment, spread, maintenance and sudden collapse of Soviet Communism. This book outlines a cognate phenomenon which arguably affected even more people than the changes in eastern Europe: the range of attempts in the third quarter of the twentieth century in many Asian and African countries, and elsewhere too, to establish in the aftermath of the abolition of landlordism – and where it had not previously existed – essentially egalitarian rural regimes, all of which also failed.

It also includes sketches of the extensive similarities in the differentiated rural regimes which outlasted these attempts, despite the very different ideologies in the state superstructures which ruled over them. The case studies include Egypt, India, the three East African countries, Papua New Guinea, Iran, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Ethiopia, China, and Vietnam. Among the principle actors are Lenin, Stalin, Nasser, Nehru, Kenyatta, Nyerere, the Shah of Iran, Mengistu, Mao and Ho. The book highlights a major and, hitherto, disaggregated aspect of twentieth-century world history.

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The Wiles Lectures given at The Queen's University of Belfast, 1994

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For
May, Anthony and Georgina
Inheritors of the twentieth century

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The opportune moment for a radical reshaping of the agrarian structure has passed . . . The . . . reforms have bolstered the political, social and economic position of the rural upper strata on which the present governments depend for crucial support.

Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish Nobel Laureate in Economics, 1968

I thought you would have found it [collectivisation] bad, because you were not dealing with a few score thousands of aristocrats or big landowners, but with millions of small men.

Winston Churchill to Joseph Stalin, 1942

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PREFACE

IN substance this book is made up of the Wiles Lectures which I was honoured to be invited to give at Queen's University, Belfast, in May 1994. It was a special honour that Mrs Janet Boyd, Trustee and principal benefactress, should in her ninetieth year along with her son and daughter-in-law have attended all four of the lectures and been so gracious afterwards.

The outlines of what follows were earlier presented as the inaugural William W. Gallagher Lecture in International Studies at Pacific University, Oregon, at the very kind invitation of President Robert E. Duvall. My wife and I were received in Forest Grove and Portland with the very greatest kindness and we remember our visit with the warmest pleasure.

In Belfast David Hempton displayed both singular skill and great kindness as an astonishingly conscientious chairman. Peter Jupp was the no less remarkable impresario of the quite exceptional hospitality which Queen's University seems to provide upon such occasions. It was a great pleasure too to have David Harkness, Declan Quigley, and Joyce Pettigrew, amongst others, of the company, and two former Queen's academics, Deborah Lavin, and my longsince colleague at what is now Makerere University in Uganda, Cyril Ehrlich, as well.

A striking feature of the Wiles programme is the invitation to the lecturer to suggest half a dozen or so younger scholars who can be invited to Belfast to attend the lectures, and who, following a post-lecture reception and dinner each evening, can then be asked to open

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the subsequent hour and a half's seminar on each lecture, before the inevitable adjournment to the bar. It was sad that Dipesh Chakrabarty was not able in the end to come from Chicago: but Toyin Falola came from Austin, Texas; David Hardiman and David Anderson from London; David Throup from Keele; Subrata Mitra from Hull; and my colleagues Tim Harper and Hans van de Ven from Cambridge. Along with a vigorous local team and not least one of the continuing academic Trustees, Ian Kershaw from Sheffield, who was exceedingly helpful, they made the four days into what it is no exaggeration to say was for me a quite exceptional experience, for which to all of them, to the University, and to the Wiles Trustees, I shall always be exceedingly grateful. It was my great good fortune to give my first lectures as a University teacher to African students at Makerere (in what was generally their third language). It was a quite special climax to give my last lectures as an academic-in-post as these Wiles Lectures in Belfast.

There is a sense in which they had their genesis in those Makerere days when I learnt so much from the ever engaging Audrey Richards, and the still deeply mourned mentor and friend, 'Tom', Lloyd Fallers. Some of the ideas presented here began to take shape in the 1970s as something of what is described here was beginning to emerge, and it was then a particular boon, during a seven-year term as Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, to go with my wife as a Scholar-in-Residence in February 1980 to the splendid Rockefeller centre at the Villa Serbelloni above Lake Como in Italy armed with a pile of monographs. From that memorable opportunity, for which we continue to be very grateful, came my ANU University Lectures in 1980 on 'Peasants and Political Power. Asia, Africa and the Pacific', and the Flinders Asian Studies Lecture on 'Dominant Peasants: intimations from Asia' in 1981.

At that stage I was essentially concerned with what then seemed to be contemporary developments. But when, following a plethora of other preoccupations, I came to pursue these issues further it soon became clear that upon one central matter what I had hitherto been exploring had now become past history. It might well have been possible to enlarge upon the whole story at considerable length, but the invitation to give the Wiles Lectures gave me the far better

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opportunity to present the case as it has come to seem to me in its present much pithier form.

Had I offered a longer version I would have elaborated on the great benefit I have received, along with many others, from the stellar publications which over a twenty-year period illuminated this whole field. Among those I have particularly in mind are Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston 1966; J. C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven 1966; E. R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, London 1970; T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class. Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society. Russia 1910-1925*, Oxford 1972; J. S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics and Revolution. Pressures toward Political and Social Change in the Third World*, Princeton 1974; M. Lipton, *Why Poor People Stay Poor: A Study of Urban Bias in World Development*, London 1977; J. Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe*, Princeton 1978; S. L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant. The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, Berkeley 1979; G. Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania. Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*, London 1980; R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, successive vols., Delhi 1982-; J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven 1985; and the collection which U. Patnaik edited, *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation. The 'Mode of Production' Debate in India*, Bombay 1990. I have to say that with several of these I have had some difficulties. Michael Lipton, my former and very distinguished colleague at Sussex, did not, for example, persuade me that the rural poor would not have remained poor even had urban bias been righted. There is a strong tendency, moreover, in some of this literature to imply that peasants were all but invariably in revolt, when the evidence is not that at all. While with some notable exceptions it seems to me that the differentiations which patently exist within peasant societies were much too often underplayed. But of the stimulation which these various studies gave me there can be no doubt at all.

Three generations back it might have been possible to speak of some of the issues here from first-hand experience. By the 1880s my great-grandfather, Robert Low, had obviously become a very substantial farmer on the Cambridgeshire-Hertfordshire border.

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When he died in 1882 they carried his body 25 miles to bury it where his father had had his farm before him. It seems probable that his two eldest sons who also became farmers went bankrupt in the ensuing agricultural depression. Characteristically (thanks, I like to think, to their mother, the daughter of a schoolmaster from St Ives) the two younger sons (the elder being my own grandfather) went into the professions. Thereafter his branch of the family lost its direct contact with the land, and I have had almost none myself.

Amongst the very many things I owe Belle, my wife, has, however, been that through her I have for many years had connections with a wide-ranging farming cousinage in the north-eastern counties of England, Northumberland and Durham and places roundabout (its up-to-date family tree has at least fifteen Adams and at least as many Catherines), and this I like to think has given me at least some feeling for some aspects of the story that is canvassed here.

Within this cousinage there is, for example, quite clearly at one and the same time both differentiation and cohesion, as there appears to be in so many other farming communities. The key differentiation in this instance, it has always seemed to me, has not been between those who own the land they farm and those who do not, but between those who own the capital with which they run their farms – and sometimes, but only sometimes, own the farm as well – and those who have no such capital and are farm managers and farm labourers (not least because – along Shanin's lines – they or their fathers have at some stage gone bankrupt). Despite this distinction there can be absolutely no doubt, however, of both the strength and the warmth of the familial bonds that link this cousinage together – and any kind of external kin who become part of it as well. At the same time one has only to go with one or other of them to the mart to sense without ever a word being said who are accounted the most prominent personages among them. That too seems to be the case elsewhere as well. They are the 'big' farmers. I pursue these themes amongst others in the pages which follow.

Down the years I have accumulated a host of debts to a legion of people who have been good enough to bear with my questions on the countries, the issues and the studies which are traversed here. I hope that with the present publication my pestering of them will be

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reduced. My thanks to them are at once heartfelt and abundant, and I only hope I have not too greatly misconstrued what they were good enough to expound to me.

Anthony Low
Clare Hall, Cambridge