

Stephen A. Smith: Revolution and the People in Russia and China. A Comparative History, Cambridge e.a., Cambridge University Press, 2008. VIII + 249 p. ISBN 978-0-521-88637-6.

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This is a book, comparative in approach and historical in treatment, yet methodologically, grounded in cultural anthropology. Although this is a case study of how the peasants who settled down in St.Petersburg in 1880-1917 and in Shanghai in 1900-1940s encountered the complexities of modernity under capitalism and subsequently contributed in a unique manner to the making of the two revolutions in China and Russia, a number of issues having crucial sociological implications emerge out of the author's analysis. In the process, Smith has questioned the validity of some of the traditional positions on formation of working class consciousness in the making of the two revolutions and has come out with new theses on the basis of new findings. These focus on awakening of selfhood and identity formation, the rural-urban interface in the shaping of the consciousness of the migrants who settled down in the two aforesaid cities and related issues. Based on primary sources, together with new studies on this question which have come out in recent years, this is a commendable work that deserves serious attention of all concerned scholars.

The study is based on a number of premises, which are broadly outlined in the long, very well-written, scholarly introduction of the author. First, while capitalist modernity was something alien for St. Petersburg as well as Shanghai, it was not a unilinear process of Westernization, which generally is considered as equivalent to industrialization. Powerful resources within the prevalent indigenous traditions in these societies acted as countervailing forces, shaping thereby the process of identity formation (p. 10). Second, while in Russia the class factor was quite important, in China it was 'class-inflected' national identity which distinguished it from Russia (p. 12). Third, the claims of the Communist Parties in both Russia and China that a transformation of consciousness had been effected by them is not much tenable, since the persistence of tradition is a factor they had to reckon with. The following chapters are illustrative of these theses.

In Chapter One the author shows that compared with Russia native place identities were far stronger in China and this constituted a major impediment to working class unity when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stepped in, St. Petersburg and Shanghai being two contrasting cases. Consequently, while the Bolsheviks in Russia portrayed the Russian countryside, the abode of peasantry, in a negative light, in China the CCP's attitude towards the peasantry was softer, despite its initial scepticism concerning the backwardness of China's countryside. Thus, despite the presence of *zemliachestva* (civic organizational networks, set up by all parties, but notably by the SRs, the Socialist Revolutionaries, which sent agitators and propaganda activists to the villages for raising the political consciousness of the peasants) in the Russian villages, which aimed at bonding of the workers, soldiers and the peasants from the same province or country, their significance in the making of the Russian Revolution needs not be overrated, since their organizational strength was no match for workers' soviets or factory committees which emerged later. The important fact that the author points out in this context is that all these organizational efforts, despite their uneven strength, largely facilitated the Russian peasant's identification with the working class for a common cause, namely, "the struggle against war, the Provisional Government and for socialism." (pp. 60-61).

In China, apart from the problem of dialect in places like Shanghai, native place identities stood in the way of the CCP's efforts to build up a labour movement along class lines. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the author explains, native place identities, however, ultimately gave the working masses a sense of organizational bonding, which served the cause of class politics. This suggests, as Smith points out, that the traditional suspicion of the Bolsheviks as well as the CCP towards the parochialism of native-place identity is not tenable, and it is also not correct to suggest that identity awareness necessarily runs against class mobilization. In Chapter Two, this discussion assumes an interesting theoretical angle, since the author raises the question that, as the impact of capitalist modernity led to assertion of individuality among the workers in Russia and China, the most important aspect of which was the demand for recognition of the 'self' as a noun (vide Charles Taylor) and their dignity, was it then antithetical to class solidarity? The author convincingly argues that, although compared with China, in Russia the spirit of individualism was stronger, in both the cases "the intrinsic worth of the individual became a potent means of political critique that empowered people to come together to fight for social and political change" (p.110). This then contests the somewhat standard understanding that claims of individuality and collectivism being mutually exclusive. In other words, modernity gave them a new sense of identity in the form of individuation, which ultimately served the cause of class solidarity.

Further, in a subsequent Chapter the author addresses another contentious issue that has always been a subject of debate, namely, the class vs. nation question. While it is generally true that in Russia the pulls of class overshadowed those of the nation, in China it was vice versa; the author shows, with reference to suitable examples, that in Russia national and class identities were mutually reinforcing despite the apparent primacy of the class factor. As Smith explains, the rhetoric of so-called patriotism of the Russian elite was challenged by the nationalism of the suffering toilers, which eventually dovetailed with the class aims of their struggle. It thus became a battle of true vs. false nationalism, the class struggle of the workers being considered as an expression of authentic nationalism. Similarly, in the case of China, radical anti-imperialism ultimately became a class question, as manifest, for instance, in the workers' protests against Japanese- and British-owned companies in Shanghai (p. 190).

In the concluding Chapter the author comes out with the bold formulation that it would be a misstatement to view the two Revolutions simply as instances of worker-peasant alliance. Many other factors like the army and the party acted as overdeterminants. Besides, communist ideology, while introducing a challengingly new notion of modernity, which impinged on identities and loyalties, also thrived on tradition and focused on values that highlighted the importance of the social collective or recuperated certain elements of the traditional male-dominated society, despite talks of women's emancipation.

This is a refreshingly new analysis, full of deep insights, based on new historical data. The findings of the author would motivate any serious historian of the Russian or the Chinese Revolution to look more carefully into their complexities. The interpretations, which are provocative as well as debatable, provide food for thought to the discerning reader.