**The Agrarian Question: The Scholarship of David Mitrany Revisited[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**

This paper reassesses aspects of the scholarship of David Mitrany, who first in the 1920s and then in the late 1940s approached the “agrarian question” - whether and if so how socialism is possible in a state where there is only a small manufacturing sector and therefore no significant industrial proletariat – from the perspective of countries in Central and Eastern Europe where between the two World Wars political parties representing small scale agricultural producers won large numbers of votes in democratic elections. His 1951 book *Marx against the Peasant* was his response to the failure of those parties to hold onto power, and their crushing by the Communist governments that took control from 1948 on.

Mitrany showed that the populist tradition, the ideology of independent small farmers, came from similar roots to Marxism, and that Marx himself late in his life came close to endorsing it. Whether increased agricultural productivity is feasible without large scale farming was the subject of intense debate among socialists in Europe from the 1850s onwards. It is on the agenda today in many underdeveloped countries where there are strong disagreements about the role of agriculture and rural development in development strategy.

**The Work of David Mitrany**

*“Communism has only come to power where by all Marxist tenets it might have been least expected that it could. In every instance, from 1917 in Russia to 1949 in China, communism has ridden to victory on the back of discontented peasantries … a proletarian revolution without a proletariat; a matter of communist management of peasant discontent.”* (Mitrany 1951, 226-7)

David Mitrany was born in Romania in 1888.[[2]](#footnote-2) He left Romania in 1908 and worked and studied in Hamburg, before moving to the London School of Economics in 1912 where he studied sociology, politics and economics, attending lectures from, among others, L T Hobhouse, M M Ginsberg, T Lowes Dickinson, Graham Wallas and Edwin Cannan. From 1919-1922 he worked as a journalist, *de facto* foreign affairs editor, at the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper, where he became a family friend of its editor C P Scott.[[3]](#footnote-3) This enabled him to travel across Europe and the Soviet Union. His fluency in German, French, Russian, Romanian, the Slav languages, as well as English, and his personal contacts with many of the protagonists in the debates around socialist strategy before and after the First World War, gave him insights into the positions taken by the political leaders and thinkers from across Central and Eastern Europe. From 1922 he was employed as an editor in a project sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that documented the history of the First World War, which allowed him to continue his travels and interviews.[[4]](#footnote-4) [[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1927 his 17,000 word essay *Marx v. the Peasant* was published in a festschrift in honour of the economist Edwin Cannan, who had recently retired from the London School of Economics (Mitrany 1927). It was written during the period of the New Economic Policy in Russia, i.e. before the forced collectivisations, the “elimination of the kulaks” and the purges, primarily as a study of the deep-seated hostility of the Communist Parties in Eastern Europe to peasants, and their unwillingness to form worker-peasant alliances, which left their countries vulnerable to takeovers by dictators. Its conclusion was that by rejecting the possibilities of reform in the countryside and allying with the urban bourgeoisie “Marxism has dug a deeper gulf between town and country than any other social event or current before it” (Mitrany 1927, 376).

In 1929 Mitrany was awarded a doctorate for a thesis on the peasantry in Romania focussed on the 1921 land reforms when more than a third of the country’s land was redistributed to small farmers; this was also the subject of a book published the following year (Mitrany 1930; for a contemporary interpretation see Cartwright 2001).

In 1933 he was one of the first scholars to be appointed a Permanent Member of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton – a professorial post which did not commit him to teaching or regular attendance.[[6]](#footnote-6) Just before the Second World War he accepted a Foreign Office sponsored position at Balliol College Oxford, and after the War he became an adviser on foreign affairs to the Unilever company, which enabled him to live near Oxford while spending several months a year at Princeton. He is best known for his work on the functional theory of international affairs – the structures of governance needed in a world of independent states - which influenced the creation of institutions that work across political boundaries such as FAO, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies created during and after the Second World War.

At the end of and immediately after the War, the Soviet-directed communist parties in the countries in Eastern and Central Europe controlled by the Red Army again encouraged rural populations to take over vacant or abandoned land. But only three years later, starting in 1948, they attempted to force through processes of collectivisation. When Mitrany realised that policies strikingly similar to those which had failed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s were being imposed on the largely-rural states of Eastern and Central Europe, he channelled his anger into the book *Marx Against the Peasant: A Study of Social Dogmatism* (Mitrany 1951), published when he was 63. It showed how the political leaders and intellectuals in Eastern and Central Europe between the two World Wars, who struggled to promote socialism and democracy in situations where most or many of the votes were in rural areas, were unable to escape from the rigid formulations laid down by Marx and Engels and extended by Lenin. As a result socialism, as implemented by Stalin in Russia and under his influence in most parts of Central and Eastern Europe was intrinsically undemocratic.

The next sections of this paper comprise a précis of Mitrany’s arguments. This is followed by an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, and a brief discussion of their relevance today.

**The Creation of the Marxist Orthodoxy**

Part One of the 1951 book contains the kernel of his argument. It incorporates and updates much of the text of the 1927 article. It is a study of Marxist thought on rural development from the *Communist Manifesto* drafted by Marx and Engels in 1848 through to the Russian Revolution of 1917. By 1848 it was clear that the industrial revolution, with textile factories powered at first by water, and then steam, and with improved techniques of metalworking that enabled factories to produce almost every kind of consumer good, would leave little future for small scale or craft industries.[[7]](#footnote-7) In England peasants had been driven from the land through the enclosures of the previous century, and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 made the country an importer of grain, largely from America where it was grown on large farms – even before the invention of the moving agricultural tractor. Handloom weavers were doomed, and so, they argued, were small wheat farmers who would not be able to compete with large-scale “scientific” farms. If small farmers survived they would be poverty-stricken and destitute, as in Ireland. Marx and Engels reinforced this position in 1867 in Volume 1 of *Das Kapital*. It was subsequently developed by writers in the Marxist mainstream – notably Kautsky (1899), Lenin (1899), Preobrazhensky (1926), Trotsky (1932), right through to Bernstein (2010).

But subsequent history proved it to be an over-simplification. Small farmers survived, and in some countries increased in number. Louis Napoleon, elected President of France in 1848, gave land to the peasants, who continued to form the bedrock of French rural society, despite Marx’s polemics in *the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1851). Russia liberated its serfs in 1861 – a reform that left many of them worse off because they had to take out loans to purchase their land, but nevertheless meant the end of the power of many large land-owners, and led to increased agricultural production from small plots.[[8]](#footnote-8) Prussia largely followed the British model of enclosures, but Bavaria kept its small farms; 1895 and 1907 population censuses in Germany showed increasing numbers of small farms, and increasing areas cultivated (Mitrany 1951, 25). And the reports of the *zemstvo* statisticians and agricultural economists who from the 1870s onwards gave detailed pictures of the state of agriculture in the European parts of Tsarist Russia showed that often the yields on small farms were greater than those on large estates.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The First International, between its foundation in 1864 and 1873, was heavily influenced by Marx and Engels. It attempted to formulate programmes that would unite socialists in England, France, Germany and elsewhere. But to get agreement on rural strategy proved beyond them, and the 1869 Congress could only agree on the need for communal ownership, while asking “all sections to study the practical means to carry it out” (Mitrany 1951, 32-3). Marx and Engels’ position around 1870, that socialism could only be brought about by an industrial proletariat, was restated in the Erfurt Programme, approved by the Second International in 1891, two years after its foundation (for later detailed study see Hussain and Tribe 1981a, 1984 97-101). So in 1892 French, German, Danish, Belgian and Italian socialists proposed policies that would accept a continuing role for the small scale private farmer (Mitrany, 35), and in 1894 amendments were drafted to include policies that would appeal both to exploited workers and to peasants in rural areas. There followed an impassioned debate in in the newspaper of the German Social Democrat Party, *Die Neue Zeit*, with the German academic and later politician Eduard David[[10]](#footnote-10) making the case that with appropriate organisation small farmers could compete with large, while the editor of the newspaper, Karl Kautsky, adamantly opposed him (Mitrany 36-7, cp. Hussain and Tribe 1981a Ch.1, Hussain and Tribe 1984 for key documents). But when these amendments came up for confirmation the following year at Breslau they were roundly defeated, in votes orchestrated by Kautsky.[[11]](#footnote-11) The uncompromising positions of the Communist Manifesto were reaffirmed. Kautsky subsequently wrote up his position as *Die* *Agrarfrage (*or *The Agrarian Question*) in 1899 and Lenin developed them in his first major work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (also 1899. For extensive discussion see Hussain and Tribe 1981a, Ch.4.). This commitment to large-scale state-owned farms and mechanised agriculture remained the central tenet of Marxist and Communist rural policy through to the 1950s (Mitrany 1961, 7-15).

Marx and Engels themselves, however, were more open-minded. In the early period they were influenced by what they witnessed (and in Engels’ case participated in) in England, but their positions became more flexible when they studied the literature available to them that described agricultural systems around the world - the forces of production as well as the class structures and relations of production. Their interpretations of the class histories of these countries and their political economies was not rigidly stagist or deterministic.[[12]](#footnote-12) Marx and Engels corresponded with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who argued for the rights of individuals to own the land they cultivated, collaborating voluntarily to achieve economies of scale, and although Marx had criticised him in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) he also drew on his ideas. Mitrany points to the discussion of Russia in Volume 3 of *Das Kapital*, edited by Engels and published shortly after Marx’ death in 1883, where ”they conceded that historical or local conditions might to some extent modify the evolutionary process” (Mitrany 1951, 47; see also Ramirez 2011, 12-16).[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14)

Their thinking about Russia forced them to consider whether a predominantly agricultural state could reach socialism without first going through a period of capitalist industrialisation. This was the fundamental “agrarian question”. Socialists, social democrats and “populists” in countries with significant rural populations, e.g. Bavaria (Bernstein 1899, David 1903), Romania (Dobrogeanu-Gherea 1908) and France (influenced by Proudhon), reached similar conclusions: that it would not be possible to wait for an industrial proletariat to be formed, and that they should therefore campaign for changes that would improve the living conditions of their rural populations while industrialisation was happening. Russia was of particular interest, because it had preserved the institution of the village commune (or *mir*) as a means of providing basic public administration. The *mir* also had powers to redistribute land in accordance with need, though how effectively they did this was questionable.[[15]](#footnote-15) Cooperative organisation could, at least in theory, provide a means of enabling small farmers to gain the economies of scale in marketing or processing that were available to large farms. In 1882, in a jointly-signed preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels conceded that the *mir* could be reformed: “If the Russian revolution should become the signal for a workers’ revolution in the West, so that the two would complement each other, then the present Russian system of communal ownership could serve as the starting-point for a Communist development” (quoted by Mitrany 1951: 47). Their openness to this kind of thinking can be seen in Marx’s attempts to find a satisfactory reply to Vera Zasulich, who in 1878 had achieved notoriety by attempting to assassinate Theodore Trepov, the Governor of St Petersburg. In 1881 from exile in Switzerland she wrote to Marx asking him if communists should work with the *miry* or work to get rid of them. His published reply was to the effect that the *miry* were a key feature of regeneration in Russia, but with no future unless they could be reformed. However, extensive drafts not sent by Marx show that he was struggling to theorise how Russia with only a small industrial proletariat could have a communist revolution, and he recognised that one way forward would be for the *miry* to transform themselves voluntarily into cooperative units of individual producers, able to farm on a large scale and to compete with capitalist agriculture (Mitrany 48-9, Hussain and Tribe 1981b: 22-4; for the text see McLellan 2000: 624-8). This was close to the thinking of Proudhon, and to the positions of populists in Russia such as Plekhanov (Hussain and Tribe 1981b, passim), Nicholas Danielson (Hussain and Tribe 1981b, 13-4) and strongly opposed at that time by Kautsky and Lenin (Mitrany 40ff., Hussain and Tribe 1981a Ch.4).

Lenin, however, moved in a different direction. From about 1905 onwards, and in the context of the wave of strikes, mutinies and rural unrest which led to a new Constitution in 1906, he was explicit in offering support to exploited peasants. His single-minded interest was to create a coalition that could take power in Russia, and it was apparent that the communists could not achieve this without support from the peasantry (Lenin 1908, 227-8). In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) he had reworked the *zemstvo* statistics on Russian agricultural production, to divide peasants into three groups. Rich peasants (*kulaks*) were commercial farmers who employed labour. Poor peasants did not have the wherewithal to survive without hiring their labour out to rich peasants or others. Middle peasants were broadly self-sufficient. The rich peasants would grow ever richer, and employ labour, and were therefore categorised with other exploiters. The middle and poor peasants had no long term future. But he now concluded that poor peasants and landless labourers should not be obstructed in campaigns to take over the land of feudal estates. The resulting farms would not be viable so that ultimately, he argued, the small farmers would be persuaded to pool their lands and farm co-operatively. Or they would surrender their land to the state, which would farm it on a large scale, employing the former peasants as wage labourers.[[16]](#footnote-16) This two-stage strategy was added to the Marxist mainstream. It was implemented, in somewhat different forms, and with different levels of enthusiasm and success, in every country in Europe where communists took power, and in China.

**The Green Risings and Collectivization in Russia and Eastern Europe**

The second part of Mitrany’s 1951 book is a study of the thinking that lay behind the agrarian policies in Russia between 1917 and the mid-1930s. Following the 1917 October Revolution, with civil war in Russia continuing, one of Lenin’s first actions was to take the rural land into state ownership and to mobilise the peasants to divide it, broadly equally, into small plots. This left the rural poor better off, as they no longer had to pay rent or give unpaid service to feudal landowners. It brought the civil war to an end, as soldiers deserted to claim their plots of land. It was the end of feudalism in Russia (Mitrany 1951, 77-8, drawing on Trotsky 1930).[[17]](#footnote-17) The countries of Central and Eastern Europe followed suit: “Politically the effect was to release a vast Peasant movement, a ‘green rising’ quite unique in social history; and on the economic side the effect was an increase in that class of small peasant proprietors which a hundred years earlier Marx had pronounced to be moribund” (Mitrany 1951, 228). The first stage of Lenin’s strategy had been achieved.

The land reforms implemented between 1917 and 1921 did not solve the problems of production, or how to feed the urban population. Farm machinery, draught animals, and transport were in very short supply. The government chose to use requisitions (compulsory sales by farmers, for minimal prices) which provided no incentive for farmers to increase production beyond what they were allowed to keep for home consumption. This culminated in the great famine of 1921-2 Mitrany has only a little to say about this period (on p.84). He says more about the years of the New Economic Policy between 1922 and 1928, when the contributions of small farmers were recognised.[[18]](#footnote-19) The NEP was criticised by (among others) Trotsky, Zinoniev and Kamenev (to the effect that it would entrench rich peasants and undermine the proletarian revolution in the cities) and this led to its demise (pp. 85-90). Lenin was ill from 1922 and incapacitated from 1923; he died in 1924. Collectivization started in 1929. It realised the second stage of Lenin’s strategy, but it was far from spontaneous: the state organised the creation of collective farms and “the elimination of the kulaks”, even though Stalin argued at the time that compulsion should not be used (pp.90-2).[[19]](#footnote-20) The effective peasant resistance to this, involved, for example selling or eating their livestock, and any recovery was bound to be slow. But by 1932 new tractor factories had opened, and by 1935 increasing production from the collective farms meant that it was possible to end the rationing of bread (pp.93-4). Russian industry, and infrastructure such as railways, enabled Russia to survive the invasion by Hitler in 1941, and to emerge on the victorious side in the Second World War.

In the third part of his book Mitrany summarises the politics and political debates in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe after the First World War. Nationalist democracies or constitutional monarchies took land from feudal rulers who in most of these countries had come from different nationalities. They distributed it to peasant farmers – 15 million acres in Romania starting as early as 1918. 6 million acres was distributed in Poland between 1921 and 1937 (relatively much less given the size of the country and the number of large estates) and there were reforms in Czechoslovakia and parts of Yugoslavia, and to a small extent in Hungary.[[20]](#footnote-21) In Bulgaria there were few large estates; but under the leadership of Alexander Stamboliski and his Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union from 1919 till his assassination in 1923, landowners who cultivated their land were allowed to keep 75 acres, while landowners who did not farm were only allowed to keep 25 acres; by 1926 over 80% of all peasants owned their land.[[21]](#footnote-22) In total over 25 million acres was distributed. This was much more radical than the pre-war land reforms where the peasants had to purchase the land and often ended up more indebted to the landlords in what Mitrany, following Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1908), called “neo-serfdom”. From this came the creation of agrarian political parties “in every country of Eastern Europe, and, in one way or another, through its own achievements or through the reactions it provoked, it proved the most potent political influence in the life of that region during the inter-way period” (Mitrany 1951, 138). These parties were explicitly populist: anti-feudal and anti- large-scale capitalism, based on an ideology of smallscale producers, with economies of scale to be achieved by cooperative working (Mitrany 143-5).[[22]](#footnote-23) They successfully contested elections and held political power in Bulgaria (till 1923), Czechoslovakia (till 1938), Romania (till 1931) and Yugoslavia (till around 1931) (Mitrany 1951, 143ff., 267-270).

The peasant parties had few friends, inside or outside their countries. They found it impossible to form alliances with the communist parties, who lacked the courage or confidence to break free from the orthodox Marxist position that had no future for small farmers, and at times showed more willingness to work with urban bourgeoisie (justified on the grounds that these would bring about industrialisation, seen as a prerequisite for socialism). They were ignored by the elected government in Hungary led by the communist Béla Kun (1919), and their leaders persecuted by dictators in Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania (Mitrany 1951 106, 141, 144-165, 267-270).[[23]](#footnote-24) This part of Mitrany’s book sets out to show that their ideology was coherent, and that potentially they could have worked with socialist or communist leaders in the urban areas to bring about both industrialisation and rural development. The fact that they did not weakened both: rural interests were marginalised, and communism could only be implemented by force. [[24]](#footnote-25)

**Forced Collectivisation after the Second World War**

The final part of Mitrany’s book takes the story up to mid-1950. During the final stages of and immediately after the Second World War, where the Soviet army or Soviet influence made it possible, small plots were distributed to peasant farmers, with every indication that they would keep their rights in this land. But within three years, starting in 1948, a process of forcibly consolidating these plots into “labour cooperatives” had begun. These countries were being put through the same stages that the Russians had followed after 1917. The main difference was the accelerated time-scale. The reforms could only be achieved by force. They meant the end of the peasant parties as independent organisations: many of their leaders were killed or forced into exile. The opportunity to form alliances that would unite exploited workers with exploited peasants, around programmes that would be of benefit to both groups, had been missed.

A second (paperback) edition published in America in 1961 enabled Mitrany to update the story in a new Foreword. Stalin died in 1953 and centralised planning in its extreme forms was no longer seen as feasible by his successor Nikita Khrushchev[[25]](#footnote-26). Collective farming was not imposed in Yugoslavia after 1952, and only to a small extent in Poland, where by 1958 “only 1% of agricultural land was still farmed collectively”. It had been greatly reduced in Hungary, and was not performing well in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria (Mitrany 1961, 10-12).

In China, Mao Zedong and his followers learnt the value of peasant support during the Long March (1933-5), and did not impose collectivization when they gained power in 1948. However, in 1958 “the Party let loose like an avalanche something far beyond anything ventured by Stalin. The peasants were to be herded into ‘communes’ of up to ten thousand workers each, managed from a single center; all these people were to live communally, with the workers moved to and fro as work on the land would demand; and the process was pressed forward at such an unnatural speed that 98 per cent of the peasant households had been absorbed into ‘communes’ within the space of six months” (Mitrany 1961, 14-5). This was to lead to the most devastating famine of modern times anywhere in the world, when at least 20 million people died. Thereafter less emphasis was given to collective farming. Later, in 1978, an almost equally dramatic land reform reversed what had gone before: equal sized plots were allocated to the farmers in each village – 200 million in total. After that agricultural production grew at over 4 per cent per annum, on the basis of small scale production, supported by cooperative marketing and block farming. Although Mitrany did not live to see it, it would be hard to think of stronger support for his arguments.

**Assessment**

Mitrany’s 1927 essay was written during the high noon of agrarian populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The New Economic Policy in Russia had adopted many of the ideas of Proudhon and Plekhanov. Agrarian political parties held power in Czechoslovakia, shared power in Romania and were very influential in Yugoslavia and Poland. They had, however, lost power to a coup in Bulgaria where their leader had been assassinated, had failed to influence events in Hungary, and the NEP was the subject of controversy and threatening debate in Russia. It was clear to Mitrany that this was because of the opposition of the Communist Parties to any form of collaboration or joint strategy, that much of this reluctance was shared by Social Democrats, and that it left the agrarian political parties isolated and very vulnerable to coups or intrigue. The essay showed how this opposition stemmed from what had become the orthodox Marxist position, set out by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto in 1848, spelt out by Kautsky in 1899, and further developed by Lenin in 1908. But it had not been the policy of many of the German Social Democrats, such as Eduard David or Eduard Bernstein, who argued with Kautsky in the 1880s, or of thinkers and political leaders from countries farther East such as Dobrogeanu-Gherea in Romania, or of Marx himself towards the end of his life. The essay attempted to show that populism, associated with Proudhon, Plekhanov, and later with Chayanov and his school, had the same intellectual roots as Marxism.[[26]](#footnote-27)

This thinking provided the foundation of Mitrany’s 1951 book. This is a history of ideas, not a political or economic history. There are few statistics, little discussion of constitutions, or of wars, or political leaders other than the agrarians. He drew on a wide range of sources, including Marx’s correspondence with Vera Zazulich and the work of Chayanov and the *zemstvo* statisticians (read in Russian), before these were widely available in the West. But much more is now known, especially about the 1930s – the purges, the famines – and the position of Stalin during the Second World War.

The sections on the agrarian political parties are close to primary sources, as Mitrany himself was so close to the action. They are not easy to read without an existing knowledge of the political history of the Slav countries and the Balkans. But they add an important dimension to the debates on the agrarian question, easily forgotten in the very different world today (Ashworth 2005).

The book is not an easy read. Its scope is so great that much detail has to be omitted, and the structure makes repetition difficult to avoid. The theoretical argument is developed in the first 100 pages, and what follows provides case study support, but on a grand scale. He summarised his position in a short pamphlet published anonymously in 1955:

The part of Communist doctrine which deals with agricultural policy has never been disavowed. The fundamental hostility and distrust of the peasantry still remains a legacy from Marx; Lenin’s analysis of class relations in a peasant society is still applied uncritically as the basis of class warfare in the countryside; the collective farm statutes drafted by Stalin shape the pattern of collectivised peasants throughout the Communist orbit. On their teachings the Communists must, and always will, behave in the same way in any country; and peasants anywhere are shown to be ill-advised to trust their promises or follow their lead. (Mitrany 1955, 29)[[27]](#footnote-28)

It was bad luck that the book was published when it was. Politicians were tied up with the Korean War and the developing cold war and Stalin was still a partner (e.g. in the administration of post-War Germany), and in any case there was no way that anyone in the West could prevent the forced collectivization of agriculture in the states controlled by the Soviet Union. Marxist scholars such as Maurice Dobb saw it as threatening. Development economists influenced by Keynes and Marx were more interested in state-led industrialisation, five year plans, and stages of economic growth (Rosenstein-Rodan 1943, Ragnar Nurske 1953 and Walt Rostow 1960). Arthur Lewis (1954) might be seen as an exception to this, but his model was much more about industrialisation than agriculture.

As a result, the audience for the 1951 book was unclear. Mitrany wrote it as an academic study, but it was largely promoted as of interest to diplomats or business executives working in East or Central Europe. It was not widely reviewed in academic journals. Marxists such as Maurice Dobb claimed that it neither understood Marx nor what had been achieved in the Soviet Union.[[28]](#footnote-29)

The title was misleading. The 1927 article was largely about Marx, but the 1951 book is as much about Lenin against the peasant and especially Stalin against the peasant. By 1951, as already noted, marxist scholars recognised that towards the end of their lives Marx and Engels were open-minded about peasantries in India, China, Mesopotamia under Turkish rule, etc - but struggling, like so many historians since, to understand why they did not lead to capitalism, whereas UK political economy did. (Was it to do with no longer having a peasantry? Or the freedoms from central interferences in the English cities? Water power was known almost everywhere. Did the spinning jenny and later the steam engine really make the difference?) Mitrany was aware that Marx was not always implacably against the peasant, but kept the simplistic title of his book.

He criticised Lenin, for the dishonesty of his support for take-overs of land by small or landless farmers (which Lenin expected to be unsustainable, and therefore could be followed by the imposition of collective farming). He also highlighted the extreme dangers created by Lenin’s division of peasants into rich, middle and poor categories; this an over-simplification (detailed studies, such as those of Kritsman studied by Cox [1984], show that the majority of farm families hired labour, or were themselves hired, at peak periods); but much more serious is that it implicitly puts the small and medium in conflict with the large, creating hate and turmoil in the countryside for no clear benefit. It produced the ideology that made possible the elimination of the kulaks – the very farmers most needed to produce the food surpluses that could feed the urban working class.[[29]](#footnote-30) It distracted from the synergy and economic logic of the worker-peasant alliance – that growth can occur if farmers increase their sales of food and raw materials not for export but in order to purchase agricultural implements and inputs, and consumer goods – an expanding home market.[[30]](#footnote-31)

What would have happened if the agrarian parties had formed working alliances with the socialist (or communist) parties is one of the great counter-factual questions of modern world history. Mitrany surmises that they would have controlled the parliaments elected in these countries, and delivered policies that would have brought about industrialisation, at the same time promoting small scale agriculture, with popular support and without compulsion.

**Conclusions**

The discussion is relevant today. That is partly because Marxist writers such as Maghimbi et al (2011) in Tanzania, or Henry Bernstein (2010) still imply that small scale agriculture has no future.[[31]](#footnote-32) In contrast, for example, contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese experience shows that small-scale agriculture supported by cooperative marketing and other services, such as ploughing large areas in a single block, can produce sustained surpluses of many agricultural products. It is a paradox that the case for agricultural populism is now made by development economists such as Lipton (who over the years has shown that the green revolutions in India and elsewhere can, with appropriate support and cooperative working where appropriate, be largely scale-neutral), Chambers (who has documented the potential for increased agricultural productivity if agricultural experts work closely with small farmers), the mainstream of agricultural economics (e.g. Mellor, Binswanger-Mkhize) and many of the Western and international aid agencies.[[32]](#footnote-33)

But what all these lack is any theory or discussion of politics. The closest to this is the UCLA school of political scientists, whose seminal work by Robert Bates (1981) took the view that any involvement by the state in agricultural marketing is likely to be theft from small farmers.

Socialism in one country is not high on the agenda any more, but democracy is. The questions that should be faced in (say) Tanzania are about how to mobilise political support for small scale agricultural producers, at a time when land-grabbers and supporters of genetically modified crops are making a very determined case for large scale production of biofuels, rice, etc. The "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" in these countries may have more personal and class gain from a new form of imperialism (or an extension of an old form) - cosying up to the large agri-business companies - than in resolving the problems facing small scale agriculture or in finding technical means of increasing the prosperity of the mass of their populations. They may endeavour to introduce innovative cooperative marketing arrangements, such as Warehouse Receipt Schemes, but these risk being overwhelmed by corruption and mismanagement. But the case for small-scale rural production organised by farmers and their own elected representatives is as strong as ever. Mitrany’s book today is a challenge for the politicians and political parties in all countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America that still have large numbers of small scale farmers to organise politically and to turn that potential into votes.

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1. I would like to thank the two referees for comments, suggestions and encouragement. Any errors or misinterpretations that remain are of course my responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mitrany reflected on his life’s work in the first chapter of his final book, *The Functional Theory of Politics* (1975). For biographical information and a bibliography see also Anderson (1998). A collection of his papers at the London School of Economics includes supporting documents for his academic publications, but little from his early life and few interview records. For an assessment of Mitrany’s contributions to the theory and politics of the Balkans see Ashworth (1999 and especially 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mitrany continued to write articles and leaders for the *Manchester Guardian* almost until his death in 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mitrany never joined a political party, though he advised the Labour Party from 1918-1931 and was in the forefront of attempts to unite peasants’ and workers’ parties across Europe. If this had been achieved, the resulting alliances would have campaigned for democracy and very likely won power, and the history of Central Europe would have been very different. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An extraordinary story in his 1951 book, described as “one of my few ventures into active politics”, gives a revealing insight into his position: “It was not difficult for Arthur Henderson, then Treasurer and the strongest pillar of the Labour Party, to see that there was little prospect of consolidating democracy in the Danube region unless its Socialists and Peasants joined hands to that end; and that perhaps the British Labour Party alone … could bring the two together. … Henderson …felt this to be a task for the party’s official leader, and so it was arranged that Ramsay Macdonald should go out to meet some of the Peasant leaders. In the autumn of 1928 Dr Stjepan Radić from Yugoslavia, Dr Lupu from Rumania, and other Peasant leaders from Poland and Bulgaria gathered privately in Prague for this talk. … To avoid publicity Ramsay Macdonald was to stay with the Czechoslovak agrarian leader, Dr Milan Hodža, and I was to go alone to meet him at the station … On reaching the station, however, I found a large reception committee of Czech Socialists, conspicuous in their Sunday best and party colours. And when the Vienna express came in Macdonald was not alone, as we expected, but in a reserved compartment with Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley, and they proceeded to a private suite at Prague’s leading hotel. The Socialists filled his brief stay in Prague with receptions and meetings so that only with some difficulty could an hour be found for a talk with the Peasant leaders; and even that hour was wasted, as the tactics of the local Socialists, playing on the vanity of Ramsay Macdonald, had blasted the whole idea before it was tried.” (Mitrany 1951, 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Albert Einstein was a Member and Robert Oppenheimer Director of the Institute after the Second World War. Mitrany and Einstein were friends; see Mitrany’s obituary of Einstein in the *Manchester Guardian* of 19 April 1955, reproduced at <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/apr/19/death-of-albert-einstein-1955>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Though contemporary writers on the informal sector would disagree with this conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more recent scholarship see Pallot (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lenin used these statistics in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), and they provided the foundations for Chayanov’s path-breaking theory on the sociology and economics of small scale farming. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David, born in 1863, was a leading member of the German Social Democrat Party and a leading advocate of involving rural producers in socialist politics. His ideas were published in the party journal *Sozialdemokrat* in 1894, and expanded into a major book, *Sozialismus und Landwirtschaft* (Socialism and Agriculture) in 1903. He was elected to the Hesse State Parliament in 1896, to the *Reichstag* in 1903, and in 1919, after the First World War, was briefly President of the first democratically elected National Assembly and then held various cabinet positions. He returned to academia in 1923 and died in 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, the following quote from Kautsky’s exposition of the Erfurt Programme (1892): “So long as the small manufacturer reasons as a small manufacturer, the small farmer as a small farmer, the small merchant as a small merchant, so long as they are still possessed of a strong sense of their own class, so long will they be bound to the idea of private ownership in the means of production, so long will they instinctively resist socialism, however ill they may fare under capitalism.” Long sections of the document are about the development of the urban proletariat. Small producers should not be supported, because if they survive and prosper they will not support the revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Marx studied Turkish and Russian to read literature from those countries in their original languages (Mitrany 1951, 240; Ramirez 2011, 13). Brewer (1990) claims that when Marx wrote about institutional structures and arrangements in China and India his knowledge was, for its time, unsurpassed. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Miguel Ramirez, writing in 2011, shows how in their journalism, and in the *Grundrisse*, Marx and Engels referred to the institutions in India and China where substantial surpluses were created by small scale producers, who were taxed by, or paid levies to, despotic rulers who owned the land and used those surpluses partly to construct and manage irrigation systems - employing officials who formed a salaried elite. These countries could compete with the most advanced machine production of cloth in Europe because the labour was contributed by peasants in what would otherwise have been slack times in the year. It was not inevitable that they would be driven out of business by large scale producers (Ramirez 2011, 5-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The “Asiatic mode of production” was so threatening to the Soviet state (which might be seen as a despotic ruler) that from 1931 on it was banned from discussion in the Soviet Union. Hindess and Hirst (1975) who attempted to categorise and define modes of production found it impossible to distinguish it from forms of feudalism. But they in their turn were criticised for basing their analysis on free-standing theory and writing the details and specifics of history out of it (e.g. Corrigan and Sayer 1978, influenced by Edward Thompson). This is the key point. Marx and Engels studied social formations in Russia, India, China, Turkey, the ancient world, etc not to force them into some predefined ideal type but to understand how they worked, how surpluses were accumulated, how they were used, and, ultimately, why capitalism emerged first in Britain and not in other parts of the world. For a critique of determinist uses of theories of modes of production see Hussain and Tribe 1981b, 148-9. For the Asiatic mode see Melotti 1972, Ramirez 2011. For the “hydraulic civilizations” see Wittfogel 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a detailed description of the workings of the *miry* and their power and effectiveness, see Shanin (1983, 72-81) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This led to his break with “the renegade” Kautsky. It also went against the advice of Engels in *The* *Peasant Question in France and Germany* (1894). Engels recognised that it might be possible for Marxists to win peasant support if the Party promised “not only to protect their property ... but also to relieve it of the burdens which already now oppress it: to transform the peasant into a free owner and to pay the debts of the owner.” But he saw this as “a promise which we ourselves know we shall not be able to keep” and so cautioned against it. (See Mitrany 1955, 24-5) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In 1917 Lenin wrote about “the alliance between the workers and the working and exploited peasantry” and explicitly of “a workers’ and peasants’ government” (Lenin 1917) and he attacked Kautsky who was continuing to maintain that a revolution in Russia must be conducted by workers alone (Lenin 1918). However, in 1918 he made sure that it was the Soviet state which took over the land and redistributed it to poor and landless peasants, thereby destroying the *mir*. It also meant that the state was able to confiscate land from farmers who had acquired private plots outside the framework of the *mir*; these became the basis of many of the early collective farms. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The NEP was supported by not only by populists (including Alexander Chayanov) but also by a rival school of agricultural researchers led by L N Kritsman who had stronger links with the Communist Party (Cox and Littlejohn 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. The language and hate was vituperative. Stalin described *kulaks* as “bloodsuckers, vipers and vampires”. “To tolerate further these spiders and bloodsuckers, who are burning down collective farms, murdering the advocates of collective farming and attempting to undermine the sowing campaign, would be to go against the interests of the workers and the peasants. Hence the policy of liquidating the kulaks as a class must be pursued with all the firmness and consistency of which Bolsheviks are capable.” (Stalin *Building Collective Farms*, London 1931, 141, quoted in Mitrany 1955, 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. In Hungary the Communist Béla Kun who held power for just 133 days in 1919 nationalised land but chose not to allocate it to the peasants, hoping to move directly to agriculture based on state farms. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. These are Mitrany’s figures (1951, 109). Other writers report the same principle but with lower maximums. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. In contrast, agrarian political parties in Germany and Denmark linked with large-scale farming interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. The exception was Czechoslovakia, where the Agrarian Party stayed in a coalition government till Hitler invaded in 1938. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For an assessment of Mitrany’s contribution to the politics of the Balkan countries see Ashworth (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Khrushchev had been responsible for agriculture between 1949 and 1951 when he attempted to implement a policy of even larger state farms. But by 1957 he had reversed many of the old policies. A key change was to permit collective farms to own their own tractors, rather than depending on tractor stations – through which central control had been exerted (Mitrany 1961, 7-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. It was much more than a debate between Lenin and Chayanov. Bernstein (2009) does a disservice by simplifying it in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. This pamphlet, in the Mitrany archives, has no author. It repeats his main arguments and is written in his style. It is hard to see how anyone else could have written it. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Dobb reviewed it not in an academic journal but in the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 3 January 1952. There is a file of reviews in the LSE Mitrany archive, Box 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Littlejohn (1984b, 70ff.), drawing on the work of Kritsman and his school, shows convincingly that greater grain surpluses could have been achieved, and hence Soviet industrialisation could have proceeded faster, if the policies of the New Economic Policy had continued and the *kulak* land and assets had not been seized. In particular, if more farm implements had been supplied, then greater areas of land would have been brought back into cultivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Kritsman understood this at the time. See Littlejohn 1984a, p.47-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Bernstein concludes his short book as follows: “How plausible are the claims of agrarian ‘countermovements’ and their champions that a return to ‘low-input’ small-scale family farming … can feed a world population so many times larger, and so much more urban, than the time when ‘peasants’ were the principal producers of the world’s food?” (Bernstein 2010, 122-3) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Agencies such as the World Bank, in countries such as Tanzania, are often unclear in their strategies and end up supporting both programmes to support small farmers and large-scale agri-business. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)