

Barrington Moore Jr.

It always rankled me that aristocratic, independently wealthy academics lived comfortably on their own incomes, driving down the plebeian wages received by the rest of us as we sought one extra assignment or another to keep our households going. My dissertation co-directors George C. Homans and Barrington Moore Jr., however, made the case that wealth could underwrite independence of mind. Of course Homans the conservative analyst of organizational processes and Moore the radical student of history and politics made the case in very different ways. (Homans once said to me, “Barry’s got some funny ideas. But he must be OK: his grandfather was Commodore of the New York Yacht Club.”)

Except for active duty in the U.S. Navy during World War II and a few visiting appointments, Homans spent his entire career at Harvard, playing an active part in the formation and transformation of Harvard’s Social Relations program before helping recreate the university’s department of sociology. Homans often sailed around Massachusetts Bay, and once published a book of memoirs called *Sailing With Uncle Charlie* — Charlie being no less than Charles Francis Adams, onetime Secretary of the Navy. Moore graduated from Williams, went on to a Yale Ph.D. and service in the wartime Office of Strategic Services, then taught at Chicago for two years before taking up a post as research associate at Harvard’s Russian Research Center. At Harvard, Moore was reluctant to take on the routine administration and petty politics of university departments; only late in his career did he move from lecturer to professor. Meanwhile he spent most of most summers on his yacht, sailing out of Bar Harbor, and significant parts of his winters skiing near his lodge in Alta, Utah.

Despite this life of relative ease, Moore maintained a fierce commitment to democracy, a contempt for intolerance and injustice, a hatred for tyrannies of all persuasions, and a conviction that changing material conditions shape human political action. His closest friends (and most frequent guests on his yacht) were typically intellectual radicals such as Herbert Marcuse and Robert Paul Wolff. When Moore worked, he went at it with ferocious energy, never publishing until he had gotten the argument more or less right. For his students, he became a model of intellectual commitment and rigor.

After earlier books on Russia, totalitarianism, and contemporary politics, Moore turned to an even larger polemical task: an effort to discredit the tracing of 20th century forms of politics, especially totalitarianism, to the effects of industrial capitalism. He proposed instead to demonstrate the agrarian origins of contrasting 20th century political systems, especially what happened to landlords and peasants as agriculture commercialized. As Edward Friedman and James C. Scott say in their foreword to a 1993 reissue of Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (first published in 1966), the resulting book shaped the thinking of an entire generation.

Of course Marxist analyses of the transition from feudalism to capitalism provided an intellectual context for Moore’s effort. But Moore spurned Marxist reductionism, or any other reductionism. Speaking of the French nobility’s drive to regain autonomy during the later 18th century, for example, he remarked that French aristocrats had employed state-backed political means to extract income from peasants, and in that regard differed from the hands-on economic management and local political power of their English counterparts. “It is also at this point,” he remarked:

that any simplified version of Marxism, any notion that the economic substructure somehow automatically determines the political superstructure, can lead one astray. The political mechanism was decisive, and the peasants at the time of the Revolution revealed sound political instinct when they sought to smash these gears and levers (*Social Origins*, 64).

This line of analysis set many of Moore's students and admirers off on the search for "political mechanisms" that interacted with economic transformation and affected its outcomes.

Social Origins revived a comparative-historical sociology that had languished as social scientists turned away from grand schemes of human evolution. It did so not by legitimating new forms of cosmic speculation, but by demonstrating the value of close, critical, comparative syntheses using material drawn from other people's historical research. The book completed, Moore displayed intellectual self-abnegation few others would have managed: he suppressed chapters on Germany and Russia that had circulated for years in dittoed, repeatedly rewritten, drafts. He explained that the chapters were no longer essential to his argument, since other scholars had recently published excellent syntheses concerning the two countries. Such a man towered above ordinary scholars. We who knew him mourn his passing.

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<http://www.cjsonline.ca/soceye/moore.html>
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