

The
Moral Economy
of the **Peasant**

REBELLION AND SUBSISTENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



James C. Scott

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For Mia, Aaron, and Noah

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Preface

This study of the basis of peasant politics and rebellion begins with Tawney's metaphor describing "the position of the rural population" as "that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple might drown him." It places the critical problem of the peasant family—a secure subsistence—at the center of the study of peasant politics, where I believe it belongs. I try to show how the fear of dearth explains many otherwise anomalous technical, social, and moral arrangements in peasant society.

The fact that subsistence-oriented peasants typically prefer to avoid economic disaster rather than take risks to maximize their average income has enormous implications for the problem of exploitation. On the basis of this principle, it is possible to deduce those systems of tenancy and taxation that are likely to have the most crushing impact on peasant life. The critical problem is not the average surplus extracted by elites and the state, but rather whose income is stabilized at the expense of whom. The theory is examined in the light of the historical development of agrarian society in Lower Burma and Vietnam. Both the commercialization of agriculture and the growth of bureaucratic states produced systems of tenancy and taxation that increasingly undermined the stability of peasant income and provoked fierce resistance. Two notable episodes of such resistance, the Saya San Rebellion in Burma and the Nghe-Tinh Soviets in Vietnam, are analyzed in some detail.

Throughout the volume, I have taken pains to emphasize the *moral* content of the subsistence ethic. The problem of exploitation and rebellion is thus not just a problem of calories and income but is a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity.

Since proofreading the final version of this manuscript I have come across a good many economic studies of Third World agriculture as well as archival material on rebellion which might have strengthened the argument and added a few nuances. In particular, I regret that Keith Griffin's *The Political Economy of Agrarian Change* and Jeffrey Paige's *Agrarian Revolution* were not available to me in the course of writing.

Readers will note that the study of the moral economy of the peasantry, while it begins in the domain of economics, must end in the study of peasant culture and religion. I have tried to indicate, especially when discussing the problem of false consciousness, the lines along which such an inquiry might proceed but I have only scratched the surface here. In

subsequent work I hope to explore more fully the cultural basis, within the peasantry's "little tradition," of moral dissent and resistance.

The contents of this book were drafted in 1973-74 when I had the good luck to land a National Science Foundation Grant and to accompany Louise Scott to Paris where she settled in to study nineteenth-century art. I took advantage of the year in Paris to read more widely the work of what is loosely known as the *Annales* school of historiography, particularly Marc Bloch and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, as well as that of Robert Mandrou and R. C. Cobb on *mentalités populaires*. Something of the spirit of these works has found its way into this volume, although I would not want to tarnish their schools of thought by claiming membership in their fraternity. My appreciation of Marxist thought was considerably enhanced by occasional visits to the stimulating seminars of Nicos Poulantzas and Alain Touraine of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Georges Condominas also welcomed me to his exciting weekly seminars for Southeast Asian specialists. Like many scholars before me, I profited from the facilities and atmosphere of the library of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme to whose staff I am very grateful. The intellectual companionship I found there from scholars like Serafina Salkoff, Ezra Suleiman, and Yanne Barbé provided a welcome diversion from the essentially lonely task of writing. The Archives d'Outre Mer in Paris and the India Office Library in London, whose staff I should like to thank, were the sources for the case studies of Vietnam and Burma in this volume.

I would not have been in a position to write had it not been for a semester grant from the Southeast Asian Development Advisory Group of the Asia Society in the spring of 1973 which allowed me to organize thoughts that had been brewing for some time.

The intellectual debts I have amassed in thinking through this argument defy accounting and, for all I know, many of my silent partners would prefer to remain anonymous. Nevertheless I would like to thank James Roumasset, Barrington Moore, and Sydel Silverman, whose work was formative in structuring my own thought. Without the criticism and help of Gail Paradise Kelly, Sam Popkin, Ben Kerkvliet, and Alex Woodside I would undoubtedly have fallen into more errors of fact and analysis than I have. On the subject of deference and false consciousness, a treacherous ground under any circumstances, I have chosen to resist many of the criticisms of Ronald Herring, Thomas Bossert, Charles Whitmore, and Michael Leiserson. Their assaults on my argument have served to sharpen it considerably, though they may well regret that I went seeking reinforcements rather than abandon the position altogether. Some of that reinforcement came from the work of the bril-

liant Dutch scholar W. F. Wertheim, many of whose values and perspectives I have come to share.

Of all my prepublication critics, none were so searching as Clifford Geertz, Michael Adas, and an anonymous reader for Yale Press. Many arguments were rethought and reformulated as a consequence of their careful reading and although I have certainly not laid all the problems they raised to rest, whatever quality the final product has is due to their detailed comments. The Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin, which is largely responsible for my education in peasant studies, was kind enough to provide summer support so that I might redraft the manuscript in line with the many helpful criticisms I had received.

My colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, particularly Don Emerson, Murray Edelman, and Fred Hayward have stimulated me in ways too diverse to pin down precisely. Above all, Edward Friedman, with whom I have given courses on peasant politics and revolution, has taught me more about demystifying scholarship, about Marx, and about the peasantry than I can ever repay. I only hope this volume does justice to his friendship and instruction.

Jenny Mitnacht did more than just type the manuscript; she repaired much of the damage caused by my early inattention to grammar and spelling bees.

At this point in the standard preface it is customary for the author to claim total responsibility for error and wrongheadedness and to absolve others of blame. I am not so sure I want to do that. While I am happy to stand or fall with what I have written, it is also clear that I have learned so much from so many scholars that a great many of us are implicated in this enterprise. If it should turn out that I am on the wrong track, I suspect that many of them are on the same errant train with me!

I wish also to report that my wife and children, who have their own scholarly and other concerns, had virtually nothing to do with this volume. They were not particularly understanding or helpful when it came to research and writing but called me away as often as possible to the many pleasures of a life in common. May it always remain so.

Madison, Wisconsin
May 26, 1976

J.C.S.