

BOOK REVIEWS

The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia. By James C. Scott, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 246, \$15.00

Recent studies of agricultural development have re-emphasized the importance of peasant behavior in determining agricultural policy. These studies come at a time when the focus of development policy is moving from industrialization to the achievement of agricultural independence. Dr. Scott's new study is a further contribution towards better understanding the peasant's role in development by linking the peasant's economic behavior to his political morality.

Scott believes that the study of peasant politics should center on what he considers the critical problem of the peasant family: obtaining "secure subsistence." Starting from the traditional analysis of the farmer as a risk-avertter, he links the economic behavior of the peasant to his social environment through the concept of the subsistence ethic. The subsistence ethic was a combination of technical (e.g. planting techniques and seed varieties) and social arrangements (e.g. patterns of reciprocity and work sharing) which had evolved to reduce fear of food shortages. The subsistence ethic was the peasant's claim to life.

Prior to the introduction of a modern market economy, the social arrangements between the peasant and his village, the peasant and his landlord, and the landlord and the feudal state guaranteed that no one part of the social web would demand so much from another that basic subsistence needs would be threatened. These social arrangements were further enhanced by traditional methods of crop growing which minimized risk and guaranteed, at the margin, adequate annual production.

There is of course nothing unique in Scott's analysis of the peasant as a risk-avertter—this is economically rational behavior and the focus of much work on subsistence agriculture. What is unique is his coupling of the economic concept of risk aversion to a moral framework of society. From this, two main implications may be drawn: First, peasant rebellions result from a dislocation of

the peasant's "moral economy," that is "their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation;" secondly, the evaluation of land tenure systems and their impact on peasants must first start from the premise that subsistence-oriented peasants prefer to avoid economic disaster rather than take risks to maximize their average income. The question is whether a proposed land tenure system will guarantee a peasant his daily sustenance.

Through two case studies, the Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh Soviets in northern Annam and the Saya San Rebellion in Lower Burma in the 1930's, Scott first develops his concept of a subsistence ethic and then discusses its transformation under the impact of colonialism, concluding with an examination of the causes of peasant revolt.

To determine if subsistence security is the most active principle governing peasant behavior, Scott examines various aspects of village life, e.g. social stratification, village reciprocity, tenancy, and taxation. One of Scott's more interesting contributions is his analysis of class stratification in peasant society. Security against crisis determines stratification; not the highest income but rather the highest security against disaster determines status. Thus the small landowner ranks higher on the ladder of respect than the tenant farmer, despite the fact that the tenant may earn more.

One implication of this for social conflict in peasant society is that the peasant will exhibit the greatest resistance to downward mobility at that point where the threshold between security-insecurity is reached. A second implication is that control of land becomes the basis of power. The landowner not the peasant was required to take positive action to maintain security by reducing his rent demands or by providing generous credit in times of low productivity.

Thus, the failure to take care of one's dependents, not economic inequality, was the basis for peasant unrest. There is a standard by which elites can be judged and by which the legitimacy of their claims on peasant resources can be determined. Exploitation is measured from the point of view of the exploited; what matters is not inequality or poverty but that claim which threatens the central element of the peasant's subsistence arrangements. Insecure poverty, rather than poverty alone, nurtures revolt. Peasants revolt as consumers not as producers which, in part, explains the essential conservative nature of most peasant rebellions, seeking to recreate a secure past.

The introduction of colonial systems, the commercialization of agriculture, and rapid population growth instigated a period of radical change in rural society, leading to new patterns of insecurity and exploitation. Several major effects of these dislocating changes are identified: exposure of the peasant to market insecurities; erosion of village kinship groups and risk-sharing obligations; reduction or elimination of subsidiary occupations producing

additional income for the peasant farmer; collection of rent as a fixed charge, developing an impersonal and contractual relationship between the tenant and landowner; and the introduction of a system of national tax-collection unresponsive to the vagaries of life facing the peasant household.

From a diffuse, mutually supportive relationship, the status between landowner and tenant developed into an impersonal, contractual relationship. The power of the landowner over his tenant increased correspondingly while the reciprocal obligations of the owner to the tenant weakened.

Much of the impetus for these changes is seen by Scott not as evolutionary but as a series of "rude shocks" caused by fluctuations in the world market, the major shock being the 1930s Depression. Scott notes that a large scale rupture of interclass bonds is conceivable only in a market economy, the traditional societies' social bonds being more permanent and less economic. The integration of the peasant economy into the world economy made possible a large-scale failure of social guarantees.

Scott challenges the notion that hungry people are too weak to rebel or that unrest is due to frustration of rising expectations and relative deprivation. Instead, peasants revolt to protect threatened sources of subsistence. Therefore, exploitation is a necessary but not a sufficient cause for rebellion. What is needed is a threat to the peasant's perception of his subsistence level. In this situation, the peasant is a political actor standing in judgement of his society's moral structure. Scott argues against the "mystification" of these revolts; peasants do not, he notes, require outsiders to tell them they are being exploited.

In his conclusion Scott draws some implications for current policy in Southeast Asia. In particular he addresses the possible effects of agrarian development via the "Green Revolution" (the development of high yield varieties of rice and improved farming methods). He concludes that the agrarian revolution is apt to displace labor and concentrate land ownership further in the hands of a few.

Migration from the agrarian sector to the urban will weaken traditional village ties and norms and drain young leadership from the village. Scott interprets the widespread use of patronage in the cities as a stop-gap measure to manage grievances, doomed to failure without the necessary structural changes. The burden of patronage is apt to grow faster than the scarce resources required to service the new obligations of the elite.

Scott's study places the peasant at the center of political and economic change. While he draws the majority of his conclusions from historical case studies, their implications are obvious for current policies and tensions in developing countries. For instance, does a subsistence ethic exist over food in India or over petrol price increases in the Phillippines? By reminding us that development contains a normative element which can only be properly

evaluated from the vantage point of the individual upon which social change has its greatest impact, Dr. Scott has challenged us all.

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National Security Memorandum 39: The Kissinger Study of Southern Africa. Edited and introduced by M.A. El-Khawas and B. Cohen. Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1976, pp. 189, \$3.95 (paper), \$6.95 (cloth).

A National Security Council Interdepartmental Group for Africa, consisting among others, of the CIA, AID, and the Departments of Defense and State, was set up in 1969 in response to National Security Memorandum No. 39 issued by Kissinger. The memo demanded a comprehensive study outlining various policy choices open to the United States with respect to the then Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, and to the racist regimes of South Africa, Rhodesia, and occupied Namibia. The bold conclusions of the study—classified as secret but leaked to newspapers in Britain and the US—included definitive statements that:

. . . [US] interests in the region are important but not vital . . . The US does not have vital security interests in the region . . . None of the interests are vital to our security, but they have political and material importance . . .

In spite of these informed opinions, the study reproduced in this book is disturbing to read as it ignores any discussion of the human element in these areas; this alone ought to form the basis of judging what price the US pays, when it chooses to actively strengthen the governments in this region. Even the editors have not seen this fundamental weakness of the study.

The study offers the US options ranging from disassociation with the white racist regimes to complete disassociation with the rest of Africa in support of the former. In between are choices — often contradictory — such as that which attempts to maintain relations with the rest of Africa as well as with the racist regimes in the South.

El-Khawas and Cohen, in a short but substantial work, have provided a survey of the trend in US policy between 1969 and 1976 which shows that

“Option Two” — the contradictory option — was the one chosen by Kissinger for the US. In fact, these authors demonstrate how the US Government in pursuit of “Option Two” spent money to buy support elsewhere in Africa so that the State Department could voice disapproval of apartheid; meanwhile, the Defense Department and the business and military industrial complex expanded their roles in South Africa. Even NATO was, and is still being used to strengthen South Africa.

Kissinger’s choice was based on what the two editors correctly identify as a false belief that liberation movements are incapable of success. Mozambique and Angola enlightened Kissinger, and the 1976 US proposal for a compromise solution to Rhodesia resulted. The book does not deal with recent developments such as the emergence of the Frontline States which are unlikely to be bought off with dollars. The Democratic Administration is nearly one year old, but there has been no noticeable departure from the Kissinger design. Andrew Young has not yet realized what the option means to the African leaders genuinely interested in liberation. Perhaps the material commitments of the US that were encouraged by the past administration are too intricate to un-rangle without serious vibrations in domestic politics.

As a result, the US is likely to continue its support for the military-industrial infrastructure of Africa, especially since laws governing foreign military sales were amended in 1974 to favour “commercial” rather than state training of foreign military personnel or production of military goods.

The book is a brief but stimulating exposure for those interested in the study of decision making in a complex government, especially in the area of foreign policy, and also for those with expressed pretensions of support for human rights. Southern Africa is not yet solved — more reason why the book is useful as providing a focus within which to try to influence the behavior of the US.

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The Lessons of Vietnam, edited by W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Fizzell, (1976) *Published by Crane Russak and Company, Inc.*

The Other Arms Race, edited by Geoffrey Kemp, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., Uri Ra'anana, (1975) *Published by Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company*

The Superpowers in a Multinuclear World, edited by Geoffrey Kemp, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., Uri Ra'anana, (1974) *Published by Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company*

European Security and the Nixon Doctrine, report of ISSP Conference 1972. International Security series, number 1. (1973). *Published by Tufts University.*

FORTHCOMING

The Military Buildup in Non-Industrial States, edited by Uri Ra'anana, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., Geoffrey Kemp, (1978) *Published by Westview Press*