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PEASANT VALUES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT:  
AN UNRESOLVED CONTROVERSY

Jonathan Lieberman

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### Abstract

The transformation of peasant societies into "post-traditional" societies is a matter of urgent practical concern for development planners, especially in the world's poorest countries. But peasant societies, and their values, beliefs, and motives of peasants themselves, the reasons that lie behind their response to political and economic change, remain obscure topics on which little agreement has been reached. In particular, debates about the peasant are often vague amalgams of views not only concerning matters of historical and theoretical substance, but also methodological research programs, patterns of inference and analysis, and even philosophical "models of man." To illustrate this point, a debate that has arisen in recent years is examined. It concerns peasant villages, values, in particular the contrasting approaches to peasant society employed by the political scientists James C. Scott and Samuel Popkin in their discussion of the colonial transformation of the peasant society of Vietnam. A discussion of the views of these two authors concludes that while the two approaches should not be regarded as incompatible, the evidence for either of their detailed views is insufficient, and that at bottom the debate between them seems to be best interpreted as a philosophical conflict between opposing models of human nature.

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Jonathan Lieberson is Bernard Borelson Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Policy Studies, The Population Council.

The "modernization" of peasant societies is a celebrated theme of contemporary history, no longer an acute issue in Europe perhaps, but one of urgent pertinence in Asia and Africa and Latin America, where politically subordinate, self-supporting land laborers and cultivators living in small village communities make up the majority of the population in the world's poorest countries. The impact on peasants of economic and political change is not adequately understood, despite the outpouring of scholarly studies of peasant cultures that has been stimulated by the demand among rural development planners and policymakers for more accurate information. Certainly peasants have frequently resisted economic change and other innovations, sometimes with violence. The goals of "development" and the proposed policies whereby they might be realized have been sharply criticized by a number of gifted Third World intellectuals speaking on behalf of the peasantry, but these are spokesmen for a largely silent class: what do the peasants themselves believe and value or deplore, and what reasons lie behind their reactions to economic and political change? Why have rural development programs failed so often, and how best might peasant resistance to innovation be peacefully absorbed in the process of social change? The answers to these questions are much disputed; all that is certain is that peasants have throughout history been a potent political force for both progress and reaction, and that their actions have not always met with the approval of either liberal reformers or the revolutionary elites who have led them into battle, in the 16th century German peasant wars, in the Vendée, or in the more recent revolutions in Russia and China, Mexico and Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam. Perhaps a central reason for the existence of so much sustained disagreement on such important topics lies in the nature of the questions themselves and the assumptions and hypotheses that

are advanced in order to address these questions. In recent years a debate has arisen over the impact of economic and political change on the peasant population of Vietnam under colonial rule; the issues raised by the debate are, in the minds of its protagonists, quite general, in particular the role and importance of peasant morality in rural development, and more broadly still, the relative merits of two contrasting approaches to the study of peasant institutions. It offers the reader an opportunity to examine the kind of unresolved--and perhaps irresolvable--dispute that may be ingredient in the analysis and appraisal of the process whereby peasant societies are transformed into "post-traditional" ones.

## I

In 1930 peasant insurgencies of exceptional violence and ferocity erupted in several parts of the French colony of Vietnam. The immediate background for the rebellion has been told many times:<sup>1</sup> the agrarian order had deteriorated: rice production had fallen throughout the region; terms of tenancy had stiffened; landlord corruption was widespread; seeking to stabilize its revenue, the colonial bureaucracy had increased highly regressive tax claims on a peasantry that could scarcely afford to pay, with the result that local officials and mandarins resorted to beatings and jailings and to compulsory auctions of peasant possessions. The same year also witnessed the double calamity of the world wide depression and the worst famines in memory. In the North, which, as contrasted with the relatively

benign climate of the South, was always the scene of droughts and floods, plagues, epidemics, invasions of grasshoppers and other pests, a drought destroyed both crops in 1930, sharecroppers were left with no rice at all and sold any land, animals, houses, they had in order to raise money for subsistence. Everywhere peasants reverted to the techniques of primitive food gatherers, sometimes tearing up wild roots and eating the bark of trees. A French physician visiting the Northern Annamite province of Nghe-An wrote that he "had never seen such a sight as that at the soupes populaires; thousands of walking skeletons with absolutely nothing to eat, true cadavers whose ribs jut out under the skin"<sup>2</sup>; people died fighting each other for food; bands of starving refugees roamed the countryside; the dead were to be found scattered along the roads. In April there were reports of theft and banditry. In May, small crowds of peasants, generally armed with only amulets and sticks, were to be seen petitioning for tax remissions in the submissive and deferential style that typified the Sinicized culture of Vietnam; meanwhile French officials began to note that a "mystique de non-paiement" was gaining among the peasantry. Gradually there followed incidents of overt violence: government officials were assassinated, post offices and schools destroyed, administrative buildings and mandarin residences were pillaged, grain shipments seized and their contents distributed to the poor, tax rolls burned. In Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh provinces the insurgency assumed a more ominous form: aided by trained organizers--some, perhaps, from the celebrated Toilers of the East University in Moscow -- a massive popular rebellion was in progress by mid-summer; the crowds of lightly armed protestors at times numbered as many as 20,000 and were, on occasion, even air bombed by the French; by September the government had lost control of Northern Annam entirely. The victorious

rebels created autonomous village "soviets" and withstood the disciplined armies of the colonial militia until they were finally crushed in 1931.

This was the course of the "Terreur Rouge" as it came to be called, by no means the only sizeable peasant rebellion in Vietnamese history, and one of the many augurs of the August Revolution of 1945. But why did such rebellions occur, what were their causes, what cogent system of reasons can be offered for them beyond informal accounts? The most comprehensive and familiar explanation -- indeed it has become something of an orthodoxy--derives from a general theory of peasant society and the impact upon it of capitalism, markets and centralized states; it is a theory that yields in the hands of its adherents an associated account of why peasants rebel, a theory that has been applied, with admittedly differing degree of success, not only to the Red Terror in Vietnam but to the famous peasant revolts of earlier times. Amidst the vexing questions that continue to be asked about peasant participants in revolutions -- whether they form a genuine economic and political class, whether it is the poorest or the middle or upper peasantry that plays the more decisive role in such upheavals, whether the peasantry is the leader or the led among the revolutionary masses; amidst the diversity of theoretical constructions that have been used in explaining the sources of revolutionary activity -- "structural," "political-conflictual," "outside agitator," "relative deprivationist" -- this view continues to be firmly and widely espoused.

It is this theory which is elaborated by James C. Scott in his "moral economy" perspective on peasant institutions<sup>3</sup> and attacked by Samuel Popkin on behalf of his contrasting "political economy" approach.<sup>4</sup> Scott and

Popkin are both Southeast Asia scholars who look to the past in order to support views about what peasants, and their distinctive goals and attitudes, are like in general, and who wish to speak to current problems of peasant politics and rural development. Both of them deal with Vietnam, not directly with recent events there, but with the impact on the Vietnamese peasantry of the centralized bureaucracy and capitalist economy introduced by the French colonial regime--an historical transformation, they would both claim, that contained the seeds of the revolution of 1945 and the ensuing war of "national liberation." Their common enterprise is a doubly risky one: the peasants of a half-century ago may not be very similar to those existing in our era of "transitional societies" straddling the old and the new. More than this, the available information on the particular aspects of precolonial Vietnam with which they are both most concerned is sparse and unreliable, so that the reader is not sure how, or on what basis, their views are to be appraised.

But what, first of all, is the "moral economy" view of peasant societies and their transformation under the forces of political and economic change? In the expositions not only of Scott, but of Eric Wolf<sup>5</sup> and Joel Migdal<sup>6</sup> and other representatives of this school of thought, it commences with an interpretation of peasant villages in preindustrial periods: in those times, it is claimed, peasants lived in "closed" villages, clearly defined and semi-autonomous communities with well-developed notions of who was, and who was not, a "citizen," in which there were common lands, "pressures to redistribute surplus in the operation of a religious system" -- in Vietnam, the redistribution being performed by head men or notables who conducted rites at the dinh, the communal meeting house where the effigy of the guardian spirit of the village was kept -- and collective responsibility for determining the

use of communal lands and the payment of tax charges assessed upon the village as a whole by outside authorities. All this served to create "collective solidarity," but there was an additional stimulus as well: the peasants who lived in these villages had common economic problems: preoccupied with securing the means of subsistence, their position was, in the words of R.H. Tawney, "like that of a man standing permanently up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple might drown him".<sup>7</sup>

What are peasants in this predicament like? On this view, they are first and foremost seekers of safety and security; they seek to minimize the risks of even the smallest disaster out of fear of being tossed over the "subsistence precipice" into starvation and misery. Consequently, they have, so the moral economists say, little room for the bourgeois calculus of profit which we learn about in economics textbooks. To be sure, we can interpret their behavior with the help of the principles of classical economics — those like the Russian economist Chayanov, who have argued that this is not so, that peasant economy is not just incipient capitalism, but a distinctive and special kind or type of economy in which resources are "uneconomically used", are wrong -- but while peasant households are economic units, productive and consumptive, they are hardly like capitalist firms which can liquidate themselves if trouble arises. Peasants struggle daily with questions of survival: it is not surprising that they are averse to taking risks in the manner in which they cultivate their fields, or invest in animals or equipment. They are hostile to markets; they are averse to innovation, even if it involves the most temporary of disruptions of their subsistence routines. They wish to be insulated from these hazards, and if possible, to transfer them onto others

who are better able to shoulder them. These attitudes are perfectly rational, they make "abstract" economic sense, in their context.

Not only this. In the moral economy view peasants come to share, as a result of common economic challenges, a certain moral outlook, an ethos whose central constituents are specific standards of justice and legitimacy, of fairness and reciprocity, and the right of every villager to subsistence, to life itself, a level of resources set by their culture below which it would be inhumane to allow him to fall. This is an ideology that peasants in precapitalist societies share, an ideology of the survival of the weakest; it shapes and influences the way village institutions are created and operate: before markets and centralized states, there were communal schemes of insurance and welfare in these villages which ensured that the truly needy would not go under. No one in communities in which the mutual-assistance ethic is strong goes under unless all do, unless the village as a whole does; The economy of the village is thus a moral one, humanized and civilized by a common set of moral standards and expectations.

The moral economy of the peasant could be seen at work in many of the precolonial villages of Vietnam: communal lands were periodically leased out to those who had suffered bad crop years, to those otherwise in trouble, the helpless and the destitute, the aged and the widowed; tax charges were constructed so that the better off took upon themselves the greater burden; similarly, landlords or patrons would adjust their claims on their tenants according to the nature of the harvest; in times of dearth they would provide food, medicine, assistance with burial and birth ceremonies, give loans at low interest; in times of prosperity they would, of course, demand much, but this was not regarded as exploitative by the peasant who valued consistency,

stability, security far more than a big killing. Those who were wealthy would give feasts, formally for purposes of ancestor worship, but which had the effect of spreading their good fortune among the villagers; if the rich did not meet such obligations, they would be pilloried by local opinion, become the object of malicious gossip and accusations of witchcraft. Insofar as the villagers were bound to external authorities -- the King, the Emperor, or their regional mandarin representatives -- by ties of obedience, similar conduct would be expected by peasants of these rulers and officials in their taxation policies. This was the New Deal society of peasants before capitalism and industrialization, and, it is claimed, remnants of it can still be seen in our time, in Java, where "a successful member of the community should share his wealth with the community and let other members of the community share in the enjoyment of his wealth,"<sup>8</sup> in Columbia, where Indians are "unwilling to exploit the opportunity to sell rood to the highest bidder" and "when questioned...explain that frequent sales are considered as morally improper behavior,"<sup>9</sup> and elsewhere around the world where peasants cling to the remains of the "little tradition" and are marked by "a restraint on individual self-seeking in favor of family and community."<sup>10</sup>

Prolonged contact with more developed societies, whether this contact is induced by colonialism or by "economic development", shatters this harmonious balance once and for all. The closed villages of peasants are pried open, penetrated by the damaging and coercive influence of new forms of administration and economic exchange, new legal systems, new models of conduct, to the inevitable detriment of peasant welfare. The process by which this occurs -- not unlike the mechanisms articulated by Weber and Tönnies, Durkheim and Spencer, whereby societies dominated by "ascription" or "status" or by

"vertical relations" are transformed into those marked by "contract", by "diffuse" and "organic" social and economic relations - takes different forms in different circumstances.

In Vietnam, colonialism, for all the bounty it brought in improved communications, disease control, transport, rationalized agricultural techniques, education and law, took away almost as much: for these same innovations transformed the provinces of Indochina, in the words of one prominent moral economist, into "capillaries of a network of financial arteries leading to the banks of London and Paris," utterly dependent on transactions in the metropole, rendering the histories of the colonies a "provincial variant of world economic history."<sup>11</sup> The effect of this change was to eliminate the "local idiosyncracies of fragmented subsistence economies," to expose the peasantry, hitherto protected from market phenomena, indeed hostile to them, to economic instabilities, flukes, and casualties; the guarantees and risk-sharing of the older order were "eroded" and stripped away; the welfare schemes, the system of feasts, were gradually replaced; the communal lands were nationalized and sold off; the enclosure of what were once free forests and fisheries providing the peasants with secondary occupations and fall-back reserves in times of crisis, together with the closing of the frontier, deprived village life of yet another dimension. The colons, with their colossal bureaucracy, introduced obstructive regulations whose rationale was not grasped by the poor, and an army of census takers, land surveyors, registrars, road overseers, vaccinators, irrigation experts, forest rangers, sub-inspectors of excise, veterinary assistants. Most onerous of all novel administrative forms, of course, was what these mass registrations best facilitated, the imposition and collection of taxes whose scope was previously

unimaginable: head taxes, land taxes, salt taxes, alcohol taxes. Local landlords and elites had acquired new habits: with the introduction of money taxation and contracts, as well as a French court enforcing such contracts (and defaults) instead of the "locally validated" consensus of earlier days, landowners were able to require of their tenants what the peasants dreaded most: fixed rents and rigid terms of tenancy indifferent to the cycles of good and bad harvests. Instead of displaying paternalism, landlords began to seek out tenants who minimized claims on them; with the increased rate of population growth resulting from lowered mortality introduced by French medicine, improved sanitation and public health measures, their bargaining power vis-à-vis the tenantry was further strengthened: if tenants could not afford to pay higher rents, they could be replaced. The balance of exchange between landlords and tenants shifted decisively in favor of the landlords, leading to the emergence of enormous inequalities in landholdings: overnight large numbers of smallholder peasants fell prey to the manipulations, the deed juggling and the fraudulence of landowners who held power over the courts; corruption increased everywhere, especially as regards the tax identification cards that were necessary for travelling or securing a job. Those smallholders who had become tenants were slowly pushed into the wage laborer class by further economic pressures, swelling the class of the dispossessed and rootless. By the late twenties the poverty in the countryside grew acute, especially in the North, where there was competition with draft animals for food, and men in harness did the harrowing to avoid use of the water buffalo. Peasants resorted to eating ant eggs, crickets, water bugs and bees;<sup>12</sup> Popkin cites the calculation of Rene Dumont (made in the same period) that

"rats, pond fish and bugs accounted for 5 percent of the calories of most peasants and cereal grains 95 percent": this was in Tonkin where "the 93 percent of the peasants who comprised the landless, the dwarf holdings and the peasants in the subsistence range owned less than one third of all land," and where landowners would sprinkle cinders into the stilt fertilizer to prevent starving day laborers from surreptitiously eating it.<sup>13</sup>

The "moral economists" find no difficulty in explaining the peasant's perception of these alterations in the agrarian order: crushed in a vise of greater tax claims designed to stabilize the income of the colonial state and a declining capacity to pay, having lost whatever economic guarantees had been provided by the humane economy of the precapitalist villages, the peasants arrived at a plain conclusion: the moral order, the "subsistence ethic", the claim on the landlord to compliance with the minimal demands of justice; all this was being abused before their eyes. Some peasants perhaps adopted the mores of their new masters; sought to adapt themselves to new morals, and came to regard those who had not as suffering from a view of the world that did not correspond to their "true" or "real" interests, as suffering from a species of "false consciousness", a collective self-deception or mystification disguised as an objective fact or law of nature. But it was the assimilated who were wrong: there was no self-deception; the peasants lived, as they had lived for centuries, in a man-made, but different, world of meaning from their conquerors, different but genuine all the same, not arising from incapacity to see lucidly but simply grounded on different values. This was another world, another "web of significance" and as viewed from within it, the agrarian order had lost its morality. There was no longer any obligation to obey the landlord or the state. Viewed from without, this reasoning may have appeared

archaic or eccentric, but its authenticity was not doubted by the great landlords and budding capitalists: most of them took up residence in the cities, installed grilles on their windows, collected rents through agents, surrounded themselves with toughs intoxicated by alcohol and opium, and pressed for a bigger police budget.

Why then, on this view, did the peasants rebel? The detailed reasons are no doubt complicated, involving a number of factors, such as the degree of peasant organization and the strength of the countervailing "repressive apparatus of the state," but from the perspective of the peasant, the reasons were not unlike those of other peasant rebels, say, the English rural laborers of the 1830s who took part in the "Captain Swing" uprisings or the sans culottes of 1793 who spoke of "taxation populaire" and the "droit de subsistance": the peasants rebelled out of moral outrage, to restore a pattern of rights and obligations they realized were being swept away and would soon disappear unless they acted: theirs was a revolt of desperation, in the words of Barrington Moore, "the dying wail of a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll."<sup>14</sup>

This is the moral economist's story. The entire approach to peasant institutions embodied in it is exposed to cauterising scepticism by Popkin in a sequence of severe questions. If the moral economist is right, the primordial peasant village untainted by contact with markets and central states is a stable and efficient, an harmonious and humane society. But if this were so, how did the ethics, the norms, operate to overcome inevitable conflicts over resources? Or is it to be seriously supposed that no such conflicts existed? If the agricultural surplus was spent on feasts and other procedures for levelling differences in wealth, in providing the worst off with subsistence,

how is that there were inequalities of wealth in the first place? How could a peasant become rich if the surplus was immediately redistributed? At the heart of the moral economy view is the claim that peasants suspicious and calculating enough to meticulously assess risks and costs in agricultural pursuits would place their hard earned surplus into the hands of village notables to be given to others less well-off or fortunate than themselves. But this strains the imagination: taking part in village-wide insurance and welfare schemes implies an exceptionally strong faith and trust in those who are supposed to redistribute (not abscond) common resources, and in the equity of the rules and criteria used in the process. Villages, too, can go bankrupt. Is it likely that cautious and rational peasants would trust the notables enough to blithely surrender their earnings in this way? Would the rich and powerful, the notables themselves, allegedly fearful of small talk or excrement piled about the base of their houses, give away their own wealth to the needy -- indeed to other peasants who might just be freeloaders taking from the social product without contributing their own labor? And if our own age of systematic public policy has failed to discover incontestable, clear, fair and equitable criteria of "need," is it not extraordinary to suppose that the preindustrial peasantry possessed them? Of course, the peasants may have had a good enough idea of some needy cases -- widows, orphans, the old and the sick--but these are transparent instances: for the rest of the vast mass of competing claims of need, is it not entirely more likely that whatever "rules" existed were "malleable and renegotiable," subject to the influence of whoever happened to be in power? And what does all this suggest? Does it not suggest that "collective welfare schemes" were, to say the very least, probably extremely limited? Does it not suggest that uncertainty about the fate of

their surplus in the hands of notables or other "wise old men" led peasants to direct their resources into private investment instead, into old age insurance, like children, or into equipment or animals which yield immediate economic returns? Is this not far more likely in view of the historical facts about precapitalist peasants which indicate a lack of cooperation and mutual trust?

The theoretical structure erected by the moral economist, with its quaint invocation of a bloodless and ghostly "subsistence ethic" somehow ensuring a minimum income, is a house of cards that collapses under the slightest breath of criticism. It rests upon "unsupported or unexamined premises"; it founders on historical facts in many different times and locations"; a "more accurate view of peasants and their institutions is required."<sup>15</sup>

The new approach which Popkin entitles the "political economy" approach is, like his rival, a comprehensive view of peasant society and the impact upon it of capitalism and centralized states. But while it too begins with the claim that peasants are rational agents, it turns the approach of the moral economist upside down. Popkin thinks that we cannot hope to adequately understand peasants, their institutions or their politics, unless we start with individuals, their decisions and their plans, and not with nebulous "group beliefs" or "group norms" spun out of hypotheses about the "peasant mind." We must ask how these individual decisions mold relations between family members; between patrons and clients, landlords and tenants, villagers and outside authorities. The peasant is like any other human being: he "maximizes expected value," seeks personal gain, just like a businessman or a politician. Karl Polanyi's claim that "the alleged propensity of man to barter, truck and exchange is almost entirely apocryphal" is just a reflection of the

wishful thinking of the anti-market intellectual; in fact, as Schumpeter wrote, "the peasant sells his calf just as cunningly and egotistically as the stock exchange member his portfolio of shares."<sup>16</sup> The peasant does not follow a "safety first" rule; he uses like any other rational agent "investment logic" and cost benefit analysis (if only implicitly); he does not wish to "maximize security" but gain and profit to himself or to what Popkin calls his "family firm"; he juggles decisions about the long and the short run; he not only insures but gambles as well, not just to attain some preassigned "subsistence level" but to raise it.

This is the abstract model of peasant attitudes and goals which Popkin proceeds to apply to precolonial Vietnam by elaborating it in such a way that it is "consistent with the Vietnamese data for both the traditional and modern periods."<sup>17</sup> His conception of village life is comparatively simple and flows from a small number of premises. Uncertainty, not only concerning the crop but also the trustworthiness of other peasants and of notables, led peasants in these villages to distrust one another and, in the absence of clear rules of distributing tax charges and communal lands, to focus on investing in themselves and not in the "public sector". The fear that some will get something for nothing, the fear of freeloaders, led to little cooperation or collective action designed to provide welfare or insurance or to raise production levels in the village: "cooperation" was an invention of the victorious Communist Party cadres in the late fifties. "Village rules in Vietnam...show no evidence that the village as a village compensated or eased the burden of individual households in a bad year"; "village welfare was limited and insurance was provided not only by the village but by small groups governed by rules of strict reciprocity"; indeed "village procedures were not progres-

sively redistributive but favored the rich"; "village power was used to control other peasants."<sup>18</sup>

Conflict and competition for scarce resources, including the use of communal lands, was extensive: the arable land in the village was dispersed into tiny plots which the individual peasant would try to increase in any way he could, at the expense of his neighbor, if need be. For if he were successful in doing so, he would try to make his way up the ladder of the village hierarchy and become a notable. Why? Because the council of notables exercised nearly total control over the village, acting as its court, signing birth and marriage and death certificates, overseeing the assessment and distribution of tax charges and, in some cases, even choosing which villagers would be drafted, or more notoriously, sent to work in the malarial French rubber plantations in the South. Far from a parental committee doling out assistance to the needy, the council virtually ruled the village for its own enrichment: notables would participate in rigging the bidding for communal lands, in manipulating tax lists, in diverting funds intended for maintaining public works into their own hands. The system of feasts may have had a redistributive effect, but its true function was to enable the feast-giver to display the requisite wealth in order to be a candidate for the council. As for relations between tenants and landlords, clients and patrons, whatever paternalism existed was a part of a landlord strategem of divide and conquer, designed to prevent the peasantry from joining together or forming a united clientele: in general, the better off and the elites of the precolonial villages colluded to inhibit or retard literacy, collective bargaining and participation in markets, to which the peasants, as rational decision makers were not, as the moral economists say, averse or hostile. The problem of the

dispossessed and destitute was not solved by channeling common resources into the hands of the needy; the problem was dealt with by the expedient of deeming such persons "non-villagers" and banning them from the village. This was the true and most practical solution to "subsistence crises." As for taxation, "aside from tax relief for easily identifiable categories," "there was a clear pattern of opposition to progressive taxes by village leaders eager to minimize their own share of the taxes and to ensure their short run welfare at the expense of the poor"; there was "no evidence of the actual use of progressive taxes or of tax floors within capitalist villages."<sup>19</sup>

A more profound or stark contrast with the moral economist's view is scarcely imaginable. Pajin's argument, however, does not deny that there was a measure of "collective solidarity" and unity in the precolonial villages; he claims, rather, that this phenomenon was imposed from above; it resulted from the relative peace of deadlocked conflict or oligarchic control; it was imposed by those who had been most successful in securing and pressing their political and economic advantage. It merely disguised the Hobbesian struggle beneath the surface. To suppose otherwise, to suppose that it was imposed from below, by the force of norms and "moral expectations" armed with the threat of abrasive gossip, that it represented a unity of interests and frictionless social relations, is to be bamboozled by the less than candid reminiscences of landlords, or worse--because committed by historians--to the reconstructions of Paul Mus and his students<sup>20</sup>: sentimental pipe dreams which smooth over the savage conflicts that must have characterized, indeed been endemic, in precolonial Vietnamese peasant villages, and which therefore throw dust in the eyes of those who wish to understand the nature of the transition to new forms of life, colonial and post-colonial alike, that followed.

For Popkin it is erroneous to think that the commercialization of agriculture, the expansion of markets, the introduction of new legal and administrative forms associated with the French presence "damaged," "decayed" "eroded," "penetrated," or "harmed" some united and resistant anti-market "little tradition" of the peasant. For this would be to grossly underestimate the degree to which the agrarian elites were able to bend the colonists and their novel institutions to their own advantage: it was in fact the peasants themselves--the cleverer among them--who initiated alliances with the colonial regime in order to acquire superiority in disputes with other peasants or to maintain their stranglehold over them. The allegedly firm, hierarchical and submissive Confucian ethics of mutual support did not appreciably hamper rich peasants from exploiting the colonial court system to further their ends of revoking or toughening the terms of tenancy they imposed on the poorer peasantry; indeed the French intervened upon occasion in order to improve the lot of these poorer peasants and to lessen the power of rapacious notables but were unable to do much good. But in any event it was not the market or capitalism that was necessarily damaging to peasant institutions; indeed "colonialism was ugly, but the quality of the minimum subsistence floor improved in most countries" and this despite mounting population and an increased tax burden.<sup>21</sup> The problem, as Popkin claims of Cochinchina, "was not that capitalism in its economic dimensions threatened the peasants because they lacked the economic competence to handle markets, risk and entrepreneurship; rather the problem was that a colonial dual-language system with extreme inequality of access to courts and property rights provided enormous uncertainty for peasants with economic, but not sociopolitical competence."<sup>22</sup>

Sociopolitical competence: organization, access to the law and to the bureaucracy: it is here that Popkin thinks we should look for an explanation of the peasant rebellions in Vietnam, not in ideology or moral disapproval of capitalism. As an author sympathetic to Popkin's view writes: "In Vietnam it was not capitalism that led to revolution but the constrained capitalism of a landed elite that used the political advantages of colonial rule to restrict the workings of the market and protect itself against both political and economic change."<sup>23</sup>

The moral economist is egregiously wrong in claiming that peasant rebellions are "defensive" and "reactionary," seeking to recreate the past: how could the success of the Communist Party and the National Liberation Front be due to the revival of a traditional unity if no such unity existed in the first place? For an adequate explanation, Popkin tells us we must return to "peasant investment logic": "peasant investment logic applies to villages and patrons, as well as to markets...these same principles apply to political and religious transformations of society: there is a unifying investment logic that can be applied to markets, villages, relations with agrarian elites and collective action -- whether the collective action is to build villages or to rebuild them as a part of a new society."<sup>24</sup> Peasants sought to escape the political monopoly held by notables and to create rural institutions which would raise levels of production and thus their standard of living, not merely recreate the semi-feudal ways of life that had preceded.

What was needed was someone to organize them. Popkin shows that there was no dearth of what he calls "political entrepreneurs" to satisfy this demand by the end of the thirties, no lack of organizers who would deliver, in exchange for peasant support, improved institutions. He provides the reader

with an illuminating account of the insurrectionary forces that competed among one another for control of the peasantry: the Catholic Church, whose priests were "quintessential" political entrepreneurs, and who succeeded in converting many among the countryside "not only because of the appeal of the religion itself, but because of tangible, material benefits — science, cannon, European education—that the priest could offer as proof of the religion's validity"<sup>25</sup>; the Cao Dai, a syncretic sect with hundreds of thousands of adherents, many of whom were administrative employees of the French, organized upon the model of the Catholic Church — it had a Pope and a Holy See, a hierarchy of over eleven thousand offices, an armed forces and a welfare branch as well as a pantheon of saints including Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo and Charlie Chaplin, saints, Popkin says, with a "common radical-political streak" -- and which sought to revive pride in Vietnamese culture and to restore indigenous political and economic influence; the Hoa Hao, an anti-colonial and millenarian religious movement based upon the teachings of the "mad bonze" Huynh Phu So, a charismatic monk who "differed from other prophets because he knew how to 'mass merchandise' his message"<sup>26</sup> and who derided the rich, the decadent, and the 'civilized', emphasized simplicity, liberation, prayer, authenticity, family obligations — "Buddism of the Home" — and who was assassinated at the age of 28 by Communists, his body subsequently hacked into three pieces and buried in separate graves to ensure against his return to life; and, lastly, the Communist Party, on the origins and development of which the author reports much absorbing information he discovered when he conducted field research in Vietnam in the late sixties for the Simulmatics Corporation under contract to the US Department of Defense.

None of these movements -- they were really more like potential states or counter-states -- sought to restore a golden past: "when we examine these movements in detail, the ways in which they attracted peasants and raised the resources to build their organizations, we observe that all four attracted peasants by helping them to break their dependence on and control by large landowners and/or village officials" to undermine the power of the notables, whose power, as against the moral economists, had not decayed but had been strengthened by colonial policies, to offer protection "against the inequities of French courts, marauding notables and large landlords who manipulated the system to keep their tenants in a state of dependency."<sup>27</sup> They did so by providing peasants with "socio-political competence" by using "political skills and bureaucratic connections to give the peasants access to (and leverage against) the institutions that had previously kept them at a disadvantage," including markets, and especially by giving peasants "village level insurance and tax, welfare and communal land procedures that were more extensive and beneficial than those of either the pre-colonial or colonial periods."<sup>28</sup> In a sense, then, these movements created the kind of institutions the moral economists wrongly imagine to have existed in the past. They sought to extend the insurance and welfare available to the peasant, rather than restore traditional patterns. The movements competed among themselves but only the Communists were sufficiently versed in "political entrepreneurship" and in sophisticated techniques of leadership and organization to provide a blend of "selective incentives" that brought together the diverse groups--religious, ideological, ethnic, political--within Vietnam. As against the moral economist, the explanation of this fact does not lie in "moral propulsion" but in "political competence".

## II

It is, perhaps, fair to say that no class or element in society has ever received such mixed notices from anthropologists, historians, and sociologists as have the peasantry. The "peasant mind" has been depicted as "child-like" "uncontaminated," "non-linear," "presocratic," peasant social structure as "seamless" and solidly founded upon immemorial, "natural" patterns of marriage and the family, peasant attitudes toward production and exchange of goods as disdainful of acquisition, ambition, of money, buying and selling. Romantic German scholars saw the ancient peasant villages as loci of primitive communism, as did Rousseau to a degree, where in contradistinction to the wicked ways of the town, the purest and finest expression of uncomplicated human nature was exhibited, where liberty, fraternity, equality were truly exemplified -- perhaps for the last time. Many of Russian populists and slavophiles saw the Russian closed village, the mir, as the self-sustaining economic unit that would be the salvation of Russia: recalling that Marx and others had taught that there are inevitable stages of economic change in any society, they said that owing to the already existing communistic mir, a direct transition to sophisticated communism without the travails of an intermediate stage of industrialization was possible. Baron Haxthausen, the noted German observer of Russia, expressed his belief in 1847 that the immiseration involved in the European Industrial Revolution could be avoided in Russia, for the grasping individualism and "atomization" of bourgeois society could never arise in the mir.<sup>29</sup> Nineteenth century travellers to the colonies of the great British and Dutch empires or to the societies the American Indian tribes

claimed to have "observed" communities in which a man could always help himself to his neighbor's store when needy; some of them spoke of peasant villages as held together with universal bonds rooted in blood relations; and some doubted whether the concept of property could be applied to these villages at all. The father of syndicalism, Georges Sorel, wrote that "to the village not to the town, we must turn for the elucidation of the notion of association in the sense of the Socialist program" and the modern writer who quotes him claims that "one should not treat lightly the thought that the great similarity between the socialist principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' and the economic philosophy of the village is responsible for the rather puzzling fact that Marxism sold its first ticket to a peasant, not to an industrial, society"; "craft and wile alone could not have achieved this tour de force"; together with this "economic philosophy" the small size of the village imposes "an ethical temper which Hegel would have regarded as the only genuine one: the individual is actual only in the identity of all its interests with the total."<sup>30</sup> Robert Redfield described the Mexican peasant society of Tepoztlan as "a smoothly functioning and well integrated society made up of a contented and well adjusted people."<sup>31</sup> A recent author has described peasants who, despite economic hardships, cannot be restrained from discussing the philosophical problems of the self and of freedom of the will.<sup>32</sup> And so on.

Popkin's book is an addition to the numerous efforts to demolish these idealized conceptions and to present a sharply different picture: Marx and Engels bluntly spoke of the "idiocy" of rural life and of "barbarism within civilization"<sup>33</sup>--the peasants, Marx added in the Eighteenth Brumaire, could never surmount their mutual hostility to form a genuine class; peasants

were relics bound to disappear with the growth of capitalism; the peasantry's reactionary endorsement of institutions like the church, the army, the Emperor, were merely "the hallucinations of its death struggle"; Lenin and Plekhanov attacked the Narodniki with similar violence for believing in myths about the village;<sup>54</sup> Maxim Gorky asked himself "but where is the good-natured, thoughtful Russian peasant, indefatigable searcher after truth and justice, who was so convincingly and beautifully depicted in the world of 19th century Russian literature?" and answered that he could not, after much searching, find such a man, discovering instead a "tough, cunning realist, who, when it was favorable to him, knew quite well how to make himself out as a simpleton" a man "half-savage, stupid, heavy", "laxly, carelessly, incapably slumped" over the land, adding that "those who took on themselves the bitter Herculean work of cleaning the Augean stables of Russian life: I cannot consider 'torturers of the people,' from my point of view they are rather victims."<sup>55</sup> Oscar Lewis and Edward Banfield have torn to shreds many of the assumptions of Redfield and his followers and supplanted them with the grim categories of "the culture of poverty" and "amoral familism";<sup>56</sup> other field workers have come away from peasant communities with memories of peasants as filthy and fatalistic, supine and ignorant, dishonest, malicious, rancorous, sunk in apathy and meanness.

The debate between Popkin and the "moral economists" is narrower and less extreme than these earlier skirmishes. But for all the force of his criticisms against some noted peasant studies, Popkin's attack may not be as effective as he supposes, for the more discerning among the moral economists focus upon, and formulate views about, aspects of peasant life different from those he deals with. Consequently, his charges are not always relevant and

his claim to offer a "better" explanation of peasant institutions stands in need of further defense. Thus, Scott, who is singled out by Popkin for particular attention, while he does indeed attempt to describe the transition from closed to open villages as one that involves morally objectionable consequences to peasants and is "harmful" to peasant welfare: while he says these things, he is not always discussing "harm" as defined by the "objective welfare comparisons" or conventionally measured incomes that Popkin employs as a yardstick. His focus is upon the "world of meaning" he believes, correctly or not, to be characteristic of peasant communities. The examination of this interior world, he thinks, requires attention to different varieties of evidence than those used by political economists and other "methodological individualists": "we must," he writes, "confer on peasants as we confer on elite political actors as a matter of course a history, a political consciousness, and a perception of the moral structure of his society"; "the peasant as a political actor is more than a statistical abstract of available calories and outgoing rent and tax charges -- more than a mere consumer as it were, whose politics may be deduced from his daily food intake," to the contrary, "woven into the tissue of peasant behavior...whether in normal local routines or in the violence of an uprising, is the structure of a moral universe, a common notion of what is just."<sup>37</sup> Scott wishes to grasp when he calls the "phenomenology" of peasant politics, the "view from the bottom," the "inside" view of peasant institutions; he is thus principally concerned to isolate and describe peasant reasons for actions, as contrasted with the causes or functions of such actions. "If the analytical goal of a theory of exploitation is to reveal something about the perceptions of the exploited -- about their sense of exploitation, their notion of justice, their anger--it must begin not

with an abstract normative standard but with the values of the real actors. Such an approach must start phenomenologically at the bottom and ask what the peasants' or workers' definition of the situation is. When a peasant considers 20 per cent of his harvest a reasonable rent and 40 per cent an unjust rent, how does he arrive at this judgment? What criterion of fairness does he use? On this basis it should be possible to construct the operational moral economy of a subordinate class."<sup>38</sup> But this task will not be furthered by the approach of "treating the peasant purely as a kind of marketplace individual who amorally ransacks his environment so as to reach his personal goal" -- a criticism avant la lettre of Popkin -- for this would be to "miss the critical social context of peasant action."<sup>39</sup>

Scott's entire investigation is colored by this preoccupation of achieving an "inside" view of peasant society. It is true that he says that rational "subsistence oriented" peasants confronted with a risky and hostile agricultural environment will maximize security out of fear of dearth, and that these same conditions will "give rise" to a specific moral outlook.<sup>40</sup> To question whether this is so: to probe the exact content of the "safety first" principle imputed to peasants, to puncture the vague assertion that economic circumstances somehow "give rise" (in a single mind, let alone in a group) to a determinate ethic, to ask how such an ethic can possibly "mold" village institutions: all this is a useful service of Popkin's.<sup>41</sup> But when Scott says that the "subsistence ethic" shapes village institutions it is not clear that his claim can be decisively overturned by amassing instances where "redistributive mechanisms" and village-wide insurance and welfare schemes did not function smoothly or failed to get off the ground. This is because Scott seems to frequently describe, not so much actual institutions, but rather

peasant ideals and preferences, peasant perspectives on what is "legitimate" or "illegitimate" "just" or "unjust," in tenancy arrangements or patron-client relations, or the distribution of taxes and rents; he does not say that these preferences were always incarnated in concrete conditions; they were, he says, embodied only where the ethic was "strong": "the social strength of this ethic, its protective power for the village poor, varied from village to village, from region to region. It was...strongest in areas where traditional village forms were well developed and not shattered by colonialism."<sup>42</sup> And there may be additional reasons for the variation in strength of the ethic: as even Popkin's main ethnographic sources indicate<sup>43</sup> there were (and perhaps continue to be) striking dissimilarities in the social structure of the villages in North and South Vietnam; those in the North were "closed" and tightly integrated to a far greater degree than their "open," dispersed, counterparts in the South, not only because of common economic dilemmæ but also because of the fear of common enemies--the weather, wild animals, pirates, bandits, raiding parties of neighboring villages; it is plausible on Scott's view to suppose that the strength and the mode of social expression of the ethic differed as well.

As for those cases where he admits that the ethic did not "work" at all, the extent to which his work does not succumb to "romanticism" is revealed clearly enough: he fully recognizes that self-interest may have served to undermine the influence of the standards of justice and legitimacy, the right to subsistence guarantees, the principle of reciprocity; indeed, in some places he nearly goes so far as to explain the maintenance of the subsistence ethic on grounds of self-interest: "we must," he writes about the provision of the minimum income, "guard against the impulse to idealize these

arrangements. Where they worked, and they did not always work, they were not so much a product of altruism, as of necessity"; for example, "where land was abundant and labor scarce, subsistence insurance was virtually the only way to attach a labor force; where the means of coercion at the disposal of elites and the state was sharply limited, it was prudent to show some respect for the needs of the subordinate population"; in other cases, paternalism may have provided a means of preventing the splitting or desertion of the villages.<sup>44</sup> Nowhere does Scott say that the precolonial villages were egalitarian utopias: to attack him on the ground that these villages were marked by inequalities of wealth is a red herring; "levelling" of wealth, or class differences, is simply not the issue for him; his point concerns whether a "subsistence niche" was provided for the worst off. And when he goes on to describe peasant rebellions as "defensive," he is mainly describing the point of view of the peasant participants themselves: he is claiming that they saw their actions as protective of specific kinds of institutions, rights, duties. This central thesis is not inconsistent with the claim that the rebellions may have resulted in the extension of peasant rights and privileges or that they were organized and led by radical elites who thought of the uprisings as designed to achieve this outcome.<sup>45</sup>

All of this suggests that a mutual appreciation between the moral and political economy approaches is possible. To say that a given phenomenon (or some aspect of it) can be explained in one way does not imply that it cannot be explained in other ways; the subsistence ethic may have coexisted with the factors adduced by Popkin -- it may at times have been dominant, at other times dormant; collective solidarity imposed from above "may have been held in unstable check by the same phenomenon imposed from below, creating pockets of

both paternalism and self interest. The rapprochement of the two views is desirable--and not merely for the sake of the moral economists. Notwithstanding his critical powers, the lucidity of his formal arguments, the neatness of his technical categories of "collective goods," "political entrepreneurs," "selective incentives," "free riders" -- even the pale light cast upon religious movements by speaking of their "start up costs"---is it evident that Popkin's positive view "explains more" than its rivals'?

Popkin's view is an arresting mixture of abstract theory and diligent detail, but the two ingredients are not always satisfactorily fused, and the flood of detail does not always unambiguously support the theory. "Uncertainty" must have existed in the precolonial villages and thus led to self-interested "private investment" and a struggle for economic advantage: this is a deduction from an abstract model of economic behavior, but did it occur in fact? Why? How generally? This is, of course, an historical matter that to some extent may forever remain hypothetical: the literature on precolonial Vietnam is sparse on important topics, is not always reliable, and some of the authorities Popkin cites, such as the French cultural geographer Pierre Gourou, can be (and are) cited by moral economists to support their own view -- Scott, for example, singles out Gourou as one of the students of Southeast Asian villages who have remarked on the "informal social controls which act to provide for the minimal needs of the village poor."<sup>46</sup> But in any event, many of the considerations mustered by Popkin point to abuses of authority by notables, or to opportunities for mutual hostility and distrust among the peasantry, and these do not suffice to support the critical constituent of his argument that misused authority (and uncertainty about village governance) led to a chaotic power struggle.

Again, religious sects won over the populace through "selective incentives," but we wish not merely to be told that such incentives existed but to be told which incentives existed and why. This is especially important given the fact that selective incentives were, as Popkin admits, offered by a number of competing sects: he upbraids the moral economists for naively supposing that distrustful peasants joined together in village-wide insurance and welfare schemes, but why, for example did these same suspicious and crafty peasants take up the otherworldly incentives of the Hoa Hao and not, say, those of the Cao Dai, the same peasants who could not agree to create collective irrigation facilities? This question becomes especially forceful when we recall that at the outset of these movements the judgments of the "courts" and the strength of the "militia" of the religious movements were impotent in comparison with their counterparts in the colonial regime. The answer that it was "mass merchandising" or "organization" or "credibility" invites amplification; in those few places where Popkin attempts this, he generally appeals to precisely those factors--reasons of ethic, "duty," "moral codes"--stressed by the moral economists. Again, if peasants readily took up markets when they saw the opportunity for personal gain why then did they, as Scott has shown, sometimes hand back to notables and mandarins the portion of seized resources that was left over after they subtracted their subsistence needs?<sup>47</sup> Or were they not, after all, obeying certain moral constraints? Popkin's peasants are too colorless and skeletal, too predictable and standardized in their motivation; his view does not provide an explanation but merely an elaboration of the shape or setting--the categories and the concepts--in which an explanation is to be couched. There is a theatre, one might say, there are scenery and lights, there are actors, awaiting roles, an audience present, but

the play has yet to be written.

### III

When he was told (by Malraux) that Gorky had said, in front of Stalin, that "peasants are the same everywhere"—we have already heard Gorky's unflattering opinion of what they are like—Mao is said to have responded that "neither Gorky, a great vagabond poet, nor Stalin knew the slightest thing about peasants."<sup>46</sup> Mao was the leader and organizer of the most successful effort to mobilize and integrate a peasant population into a revolutionary movement in this century, and this characteristically terse and categorical judgment may as such possess more than purely passing interest, but however this may be, claims about what peasants (or peasant psychology or economics or culture or politics) are like universally—indeed even efforts to define the term "peasant" — have again and again encountered the criticism that they are but models or "ideal types" or other figments of little utility, providing small understanding of the teeming variety and diversity, the constantly altering and evolving structure and character of peasant populations in different countries, regions and continents across the world.

Nearly everyone agrees that peasants are generally politically subordinate self supporting laborers and cultivators — whether proprietor, tenant or sharecropper — who meet the majority of their consumption needs by means of land husbandry, usually with the assistance of family members, and live in comparatively small village communities. But beyond this there is little agreement: are the nomads and tribalists of Africa peasants? Are landless

peons in Latin America? What of the workers in the production brigades of China? Certainly, the peasants of contemporary Japan, equipped as they are with tractors, transistor radios, refrigerators and washing machines, are unlike the peasants of popular imagination; less extreme examples -- the peasants in many areas of South America and South Asia -- hardly belong to tightly-knit, distinctively "peasant" societies, but participate through periodic migration and a host of other ways in the wider economy and society in which they live: they are at least minimally described as living in "transitional" societies which straddle the old and the new. But some authors go further; peasants are literally disappearing, being everywhere replaced by new kinds of workers; they are hybrid entities that need to be analyzed with categories radically different from those employed in traditional peasant studies. To attempt, under these circumstances, to erect a perfectly general theory of what "peasants" -- or their values and beliefs and attitudes and motives -- are like, to try to link such generalizations to events widely dispersed in space and time: all this, some authors claim, may be an ill-posed demand, producing at best an enchanted realm of definitions and taxonomies, a realm of order unaccompanied by understanding.

Neither Popkin nor those "moral economists" he criticizes seem to be disturbed by such sceptical and deflationary reflections. They will focus in detail upon a particular case such as Vietnam, but they are all engaged in the ambitious task of mounting views about "peasant goals and values," "peasant institutions" (and the impact upon them of capitalism or bureaucracies), "peasant politics"; they draw freely upon such disparate sources of evidence as revolutionary France, Tsarist Russia, England during the enclosures, Dutch Indonesia, contemporary India and the Philippines; they seek to provide gener-

alizations about the reasons and causes of peasant rebellions which will illuminate not only the Red Terror in Vietnam, but also the uprisings in Tokugawa Japan, the Pugachev and Stenka Razin revolts, the Taiping rebellion and the 1932 peasant insurgency in El Salvador.

But what lessons do they believe their researches to yield for the contemporary world? They will probably all claim that the "peasantry," by common acceptance of the word, constitutes the majority of the rural population in the world's low income countries and as such are properly the object of intense scrutiny on the part of those who desire to assist in "developing" or ameliorating the "standard of living" or "quality of life" in these countries: if the principles and laws that govern peasant society and peasant politics can be uncovered, the process and outcome of development, the design and implementation of policy will be immeasurably aided, and the prospects of agrarian unrest -- as well as the kind of error committed by reformist and reactionary governments alike in the recent past in the Dominican Republic, in Guatemala, and of course in Vietnam--will disappear or at least diminish. Here, however, agreement ceases. "The debate between moral and political economy approaches is not simply a matter of historical revisionism, but has contemporary relevance both for the study of revolution and for rural development": the moral economists retard the elucidation of contemporary problems: "exaggerating the virtues of the precapitalist village ...results in erroneous diagnoses of the ailments of contemporary peasant societies; these diagnoses lead in turn to misguided programs to remedy the ills"; "the emphasis that moral economists place on floors and the assumption that only rich peasants will pursue innovation and gain generally lead to the expectation that private ownership of new technologies and innovations will be of no benefit to small-

holders and tenants and that only bureaucratic approaches to development can protect peasants from the hazards of markets...If it is accepted that peasants will innovate only as a last-gasp attempt to keep from going under then it is easy to overlook the many occasions when peasants will innovate, in the absence of crises, in order to raise their production floors. In the same vein, if it is assumed that peasants have a fixed view of a proper income, that they will not strive to raise their income beyond that level, and that they are not interested in new forms of consumption, then it is easy to justify forcible, coercive development policies as the only means to extract a surplus from the peasantry for industrialization."<sup>49</sup>

It is true that Scott, for instance, claims that the violation of the subsistence ethic and its dictates must be avoided if development is to be successful; the deterioration of the traditional agrarian order is regarded as exploitative by the peasant; the planning and provision of "selective incentives" for personal gain may be besides the point--such plans may turn out to be irrelevant or ineffectual or even futile; what is at issue is the hold or grip upon the peasant of a distinctive morality, a moral map marking a territory of conduct over which its dictates have jurisdiction.<sup>50</sup> On the basis with regard to "much of Southeast Asia," he concludes that self-help efforts, state-based patronage and similar "fall back" resources are unlikely to accommodate the rising population and alleviate poverty; capitalist development is likely to lead to inequalities and inadequate remuneration to primary producers, to corruption and exploitation, unless the state is able to provide means for absorbing the landless "redundant" labor (say, by guaranteed employment) the peasants will rebel and the region will irrupt into blood and flames. But this dire judgment rests upon a number of assumptions about

contemporary Southeast Asia that may be questioned; Popkin's criticisms, on the other hand, rest on a misinterpretation of the scope and content of Scott's "safety first principle" and "subsistence ethic," in particular on the mistake that these principles and standards exclude innovation on the part of their adherents or condemn a raise in income.

Popkin's positive view of these matters is simple and direct: peasants are self-interested and "not hostile to innovations from which they expect personal gain"; the difficulty is in securing sufficient cooperation and organization so that peasants will believe that "they rather than someone else will enjoy the fruits of their labor"; "when problems of organization within villages are carefully examined it becomes clear that many innovations fail (or are not adopted) not because of a positive regard for tradition or aversion to risk, but because low-quality leadership and mutual distrust preclude the requisite cost-sharing or coordination among peasants."<sup>51</sup> His views on rural development are sketchily presented, but he certainly suggests that we need not direct our efforts into teaching the profit motive to peasants deluded by an anti-market "ideology": to speak of such an inhibiting ideology may be a fairy tale; if it exists it certainly is not as significant a factor in the "cost-benefit" exercises of peasants as expected personal gain.

Perhaps what animates and sustains the controversy is, at bottom, a philosophical conflict between the different models or pictures of human nature that are presupposed by the "political economy" and "moral economy" approaches, a conflict as to which factors, personal gain or moral obligation, economic conditions or cultural traditions, are, to use a notoriously dark idiom, "more important" in analyzing and explaining human behavior, whether we discuss the agricultural decisions of a peasant or the conduct of a statesman.

On this abstract plane of contention perhaps we may say this: no decisive argument for or against a view is possible. But if Scott at times goes too far in emphasizing the role of the peasant's "moral universe," Popkin's view may just commit a companion error: his peasant "economic actors" are too skeletal and predictable; his uncomplicated creed that since peasants everywhere are latent profit maximizers, some tidy social scientific computation by development planners will bring about a proper organization of self-interest and unleash hitherto subterranean psychological forces leaves too much unsaid. Perhaps "personal gain" lies at the base of all decisions made by "rational economic actors"; to say so is well-nigh a tautology. And certainly the organizational background against which opportunities for self-advancement are provided is a critical factor in economic development. But the Guatemalan cultivator or the Indian untouchable who resists vitamins, vaccinations or contraceptives, or who does not "cooperate" with other peasants in promoting a green revolution, might not be a rational actor; even if we stipulate that he is, he has a definite set of opinions as to what are "gains" and "losses," opinions which are bound up in complicated ways with the rest of his attitudes -- say, those concerning worldly ambition or the value of contemplation or the afterlife -- and which might clash irrevocably with the opinions of other members of his community. Popkin's view does not really provide an explanation of "peasant goals and attitudes"; it is more like an elaboration of the categories and conceptual setting in which an explanation might be couched. As a result, his views and recommendations are under-developed. This is perhaps why his discussion of the acutely relevant problems he addresses is luminously clear but unconvincing -- in contrast with Scott's view, which, for all its assorted frailties and methodological pitfalls, is less clear but far more convincing.

## Notes

1. For the wider background, discussions are to be found in William J. Duiker, The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); David Marr, Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism 1885-1925 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971); John T. McAlister, Jr. Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); John T. McAlister, Jr. and Paul Mus, The Vietnamese and Their Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Jeffrey Paige, Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World (New York: The Free Press, 1975); James Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Virginia Thompson, French Indochina (New York: Macmillan, 1937).
2. Scott, op. cit., p. 138 and more generally, Chapter 5, on which the writing of this paragraph leans heavily.
3. Scott, op. cit.
4. Samuel Popkin, The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam; Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1979.
5. Eric Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, New York: Harper, 1969.
6. Joel Migdal, Peasants, Politics, and Revolution, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
7. R.H. Tawney, Land and Labor in China, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, p. 77, quoted in Scott, op. cit., p. 1.
8. Selo Soemardjan, "The Influence of Social Structure on the Javanese Peasant Economy," in Clifton R. Wharton, Jr. (ed), Subsistence Agriculture and Economic Development, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969, p. 43.
9. Sutti Ortiz, "Reflections on the Concept of 'Peasant Culture' and Peasant 'Cognitive Systems'," in Teodor Shanin, Peasants and Peasant Societies, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 327-328.
10. Robert Redfield, Peasant Society and Culture, Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 140.
11. Scott, op. cit., p. 90.
12. This information is to be found in Martin J. Murray, The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina, 1870-1940, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: The University of California Press, 1980, p. 400. Murray's book—whether or not one accepts its central theses—is the most thorough

and extensively researched account to be found in English of the misery of the peasantry during the high tide of French colonialism in Indochina.

13. Popkin, *ibid.*, p. 157. Popkin writes that the "steady population growth strongly suggests that despite the stratification, poverty, and misery generated by colonial policies, there were fewer years in which the population experienced disastrous interruptions to the food supply. Under colonial rule many persons were forced to take desperate measures -- selling children, taking the place of draft animals, foraging for food -- but under earlier, more unstable conditions many of these persons would not have survived." Popkin, p. 156.
14. Barrington Moore, Jr., The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 505, cited in Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
15. Popkin, pp. ix, 3.
16. Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation, New York: Rinehart, 1957, p. 44, cited in Popkin, p. 10; Joseph Schumpeter, The Theory of Economic Development, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1934, p. 10, cited in Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, "The Institutional Aspects of Peasant Communities: An Analytical View," in Wharton, Subsistence Agriculture and Economic Development, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
17. Popkin, pp. 95-96.
18. Popkin, pp. 41, 83, 61-62.
19. Popkin, p. 42.
20. Cf. John T. McAlister, Jr. and Paul Mus, *op. cit.*; Frances FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake, The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam, New York: Random House, 1972.
21. Popkin, p. 81.
22. Popkin, p. 197.
23. Jeffrey Paige, Agrarian Revolution, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
24. Popkin, p. 244.
25. Popkin, p. 189.
26. Popkin, p. 210.
27. Popkin, pp. 185, 186, 196.
28. Popkin, p. 187.
29. For the Populists and Slavophiles, see Franco Venturi, The Roots of Revolution, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960. For Haxthausen, see Popkin,

- p. 36-37 and more generally, Jerome Blum, Lord and Peasant in Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.
30. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, in Wharton, Subsistence Agriculture and Economic Development, op. cit., p. 82, 85.
  31. Cited in Paige, op. cit., p. 28.
  32. Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," Meaning in Anthropology, ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1976, reprinted in Interpretive Social Science: A Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979. The passage cited is to be found on p. 230 of the latter.
  33. K. Marx and F. Engels, Selected Works, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1960, vol. I, p. 159, cited in Teodor Shanin, "The Peasantry as a Political Factor," in Shanin, Peasants and Peasant Societies, op. cit., p. 239. In contradistinction to the many Marxists who have argued that not only do peasants not form a genuine class, but are not of appreciable influence in the creation of revolutions, some recent studies have emphasized the opposite, as did Bakunin and others, who saw that those on the lowest rung of society, not the rising classes, would be the first to revolt in insurrections of desperation. Compare Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1979; she claims that with the possible exception of Cuba and Yugoslavia, "peasant revolts have been the crucial insurrectionary ingredient in virtually all actual (i.e., successful) social revolutions to date" (pp. 113, 318). Her own account of the causes of such movements do not stress "exploitation"—that, she says, would be "to turn a constant feature of the peasant condition into an explanatory variable"—but "structural" factors, "objective relationships" and conflicts between groups, classes, and nations, rather than the ideologies or interests of particular historical actors.
  34. For further discussion, see Elias H. Tuma, Twenty-Six Centuries of Agrarian Reform, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965, pp. 69-98.
  35. Maxim Gorky, On The Russian Peasantry, Ladyzhnikov, 1922, reprinted in Shanin, Peasants and Peasant Societies, op. cit., p. 370-371.
  36. Oscar Lewis, Life in a Mexican Village, Tepoztlan Restudied. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951; also the same author's Tepoztlan: Village in Mexico. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1960. Edward C. Banfield, The Moral Basis of a Backward Society. New York: Free Press, 1968.
  37. Scott, op. cit., p. 189, 166-67.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
40. Scott, p. 2, 28, 55; Chapters 1 and 2 passim. Cf. p. 2: "If the Great Depression left an indelible mark on the fears, values, and habits of a whole generation of Americans, can we imagine the impact of periodic food crises on the fears, values, and habits of rice farmers in monsoon Asia?"
41. There are, however, a number of misconceived charges in Popkin's book, of which one may be briefly mentioned here. The "safety first" principle--which Popkin thinks excludes innovation except by the rich or the desperate--is in fact expressed much more cautiously by Scott than by Popkin: thus the degree to which it applies is said to vary with the precariousness of the peasant's economic condition (Scott, p. 25)--its force may be weak where subsistence is not as difficult to secure; whether it holds at all also depends upon whether subsistence routines are operating "satisfactorily" (*ibid.*, p. 26)--if not, the rationale of the principle breaks down; and most significant, it does not rule out innovation or confine it to the rich: it merely indicates a "defensive perimeter around subsistence routines within which risks are avoided as potentially catastrophic and outside of which a more bourgeois calculus of profit prevails" (*ibid.*, 24). Safety first is not safety only, in all contexts. One might argue that the principle is then uninteresting, qualified into extinction, but this is a very different charge from that made by Popkin.
42. Scott, p. 40.
43. A. Terry Rambo, A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Viet Nam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution, Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Monograph Series III, Chapter II, especially pp. 29-49.
44. In an article cited by Popkin, Vu-van-Hien speaks of the pre-French system of taxation: "les dissimulations, fraudes, et réclamations étaient nombreuses; souvent même, la levée de l'impôt avait pour effect de provoquer la dispersion de la population et la désertion des villages." ("Les institutions Annamites depuis l'arrivée des Français: L'impôt personnel et les corvées de 1862 à 1936," Revue Indochinoise Juridique et Economique, Hanoi, #13-14, 1940, p. 95.) Scott may well ask: If Popkin's explanation of "collective solidarity," which emphasizes the political monopoly of notables, is correct, why didn't such village splittings take place more often?
45. In fact, Scott has written an entire article on this problem. Cf. James C. Scott, "Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars," Theory and Society, vol. 7, #1-2, March 1979, pp. 97-134. He writes there (p. 97) that "when we call a complex and momentous historical movement a nationalist or communist revolution we thereby acquiesce in a

form of instant analysis and historiography, the implications of which are rarely appreciated. We describe, in shorthand fashion, the motivating ideology of the movement and implicitly ascribe to it both a certain unity at the level of ideas and a certain coherence at the level of organization," but "it is by no means clear that all or even most of the participants in vast popular movements share the ideas which motivate their erstwhile leaders. There is, in fact, good reason to believe that within most popular rebellions which link a radical intelligentsia to a peasantry one will find both the ideas which may justify the label 'nationalist' or 'communist' and a popular revolt with quite divergent visions of order and justice which threaten to usurp the rebellion for its parochial ends...just as often, of course, it is this radical intelligentsia which attempts to usurp a rebellion begun by peasants and put it to ends which its rustic supporters do not recognize and, indeed, might even disavow."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, this gap is based on real interests that are divergent and "while it is true that some revolutionary parties do create a cadre that does, to some extent, mediate or bridge this gap, they do not by virtue of this mediation eliminate it. The gap remains, in nearly every case, as a permanent structural feature of the revolution" (p. 137).

46. Scott, p. 41.
47. Scott, pp. 35, 191; "Revolution in the Revolution," 129.
48. Reported by Janet Flanner in Paris Journal (ed. William Shawn), vol. II, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, p. 200.
49. Popkin, pp. ix, 4, 28-29.
50. Compare this with the ruminations of Max Weber on the proposed efforts to introduce "democratic liberalism" after the Russian Revolution of 1905: "there is no doubt that the great mass of the peasants themselves could never be won over to an agrarian programme which was 'individualistic' in the West European sense. However true it may be that decisions about the allocation of land can be the product of an extremely bitter class struggle, it is certainly not only economic class interests which influence the administration of the commune, but also deeply rooted conceptions of 'natural justice'." Max Weber: Selections in Translation, ed. W.G. Runciman, trans. E. Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 269.
51. Popkin, 66, 34.

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