

THE CONCEPT OF PEASANT REVOLT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Although James C. Scott may well be right in asserting that "the peasantry, not the proletariat, has constituted the decisive social base of most, if not all, successful twentieth-century revolutions",¹ it is still not clear what relevance the concept or the practice of "revolution" has to the history of the still largely peasant societies of Southeast Asia. Vietnam offers the only example of what Scott or more recently E.J. Hobsbawm would call a 'revolution'. In every other place and event in Southeast Asian history, notwithstanding the implicit claims put forth by book titles such as Iletto's *Pasyon and Revolution* or Anderson's *Java in a Time of Revolution*, some other term, such as 'revolt', 'insurgency', or 'nationalist movement', seems adequate to describe what in one respect or another is a failure of 'revolution' to occur. The failure of subordinate groups to change definitively the political and social structure of society in Java in the late 1940s or in the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century, marks these episodes as having been less than fully 'revolutionary'. Hobsbawm's comment that 'great revolutions' involve the emergence of "state power devoted to creating a 'new framework' and orientation for its society"² can only be applied ironically to the authoritarian, modernizing, neo-colonial states of Southeast Asia today. But the historical problem may not simply be that revolutions fail to occur in Southeast Asia. The term 'revolution' itself may fail to represent adequately the nature of significant change in the region.

In this paper we briefly examine two cases of peasant 'rebellion' in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century as a way of testing the appropriateness of the terminology used in writing a history of Southeast Asia in which peasants take part. Unlike Scott or Michael Adas we are not interested in highlighting peasants and their role in history; the relative absence of 'revolution' in Southeast Asia is not explained away in terms of 'ongoing 'everyday resistance' ".³ Nor are we able at this point to move into the subjective regions of the "peasant-rebel's awareness of his own world",⁴ even though we believe that this perspective is crucial when assessing the significance of peasant 'revolt' or 'revolution'. Our point of departure, rather, is an interest in the 'state' and its historical development in Southeast Asia. Our attention was initially drawn to the subject of peasant rebellion in the nineteenth century because of the apparent expression of older, pre-colonial state forms in the ideologies and structures of peasant movements.

Ranajit Guha's point of departure in his study of peasant insurgency, in which he decisively parts company with Hobsbawm's theory of pre-political and primitive nature of peasant revolts, derives from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's concept of hegemony, at least in its vulgar Marxist formulation ("the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas," *The German Ideology*) is well enough known to be left unexamined here. Like Gramsci, Guha, and the Subaltern Studies group, we are interested in the role of ideas in history. The most important question in peasant history is: in what ways is it significant whose ideas peasants think and act upon? In positioning ourselves to engage this question for peasant movements in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia, we follow the Subaltern Studies group in its reading of what Gramsci meant by hegemony, a reading in which hegemony does not imply unquestioning subaltern submission to a set of elite ideas or ideology that "dominates." As Gramsci himself explained in many, if scattered, places in his writings, dominance produces both *submission* and *resistance*.. "To put it another way," writes David Arnold, "subaltern society (is) engaged in a continuing dialectical tussle within itself, between its active and its passive voice, between acceptance and resistance, between isolation and collectivity, between disunity and cohesion".⁵ Prior to questions of the possibly 'revolutionary'

character of peasant thought is this point about the "duality," as Arnold puts it, or ambivalence within subalternity. That Gramsci himself stressed the inchoate and "elementary" nature of peasant resistance to hegemony will not deter us from attempting to examine peasant thought in its own right.

The peasant is a relative newcomer to the historiography of Southeast Asia. Study of peasant movements was well underway by the 1960s, but in the context of nationalism, to which peasant rebellion was thought to be merely a prelude: "Millenarianism is essentially a prepolitical phenomenon," as a Japanese historian of Thailand put it, endorsing the oft-quoted Hobsbawm formulation.⁶ If the historical topic of nationalism both gave life to and delimited the significance attached to peasant movements, the recent failure of certain nationalist movements in Southeast Asia and the rise of centralized states dominated by the military continue to draw attention away from the possible significance of peasant 'revolt'. Ben Anderson in his recent book *Imagined Communities* demonstrates a preoccupation with the Western and middle-class intellectual aspects of Third-World nationalist movements and directs his polemic at the military-dominated states which have stifled nationalism defined in Western, middle-class terms.⁷ In Australia it is not a preoccupation with nationalism but an unimaginative economism which has informed recent work on Southeast Asian peasant history and blocked investigation of the intellectual structures of peasant insurgency.⁸

An alternative perspective on peasant history can be found in the writings of the American political scientist, James C. Scott. In two major books Scott has devoted much intelligent discussion to Southeast Asian peasant history within a global comparative framework. Like Gramsci, Scott challenges a certain Marxist prejudice against peasants-as-potatoes-in-a-sack, at the same time questioning a corresponding emphasis on the proletariat and its role in the revolutionary process. Scott is also unconcerned with the issue of nationalism, which sets him apart from Gramsci on that issue (cf. Gramsci's interest in the role of intellectuals in shaping new hegemonies and maintaining existing ones). Despite his strong economic leanings, Scott is interested in an "autonomous" realm of peasant thought and values. This realm, which he now describes as "the hidden transcript of subordinate groups",⁹ is by definition beyond the reach of elite hegemonies that can only compel performances of submission from subalterns.

The notion of a hidden transcript is Scott's latest attempt to represent peasant subjectivity and its relationship to peasant action or inaction without conceding anything to the concept of hegemony. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed, Scott reads hegemony as "consent (or compliance) produced by force (or compulsion) and/or 'mystification' "; the role and ideological nature of positive desire in subaltern submission to elites is left unexamined. "This 'desire' to identify with the elite," adds Chakrabarty, "arises, in part, from ideologies constitutive ... of the shared world of the oppressor and the oppressed."¹⁰

Scott is himself half-aware that such a "shared world" exists. In defining "the moral economy of the peasant"¹¹ he demonstrates that peasant ethics are based on rural values that derive from a traditional world-view shaped by the interaction of peasants with elites. In the following sentence as well, the issue of hegemony reemerges quite clearly: "If the more radical forms of peasant ideology take a religious form, that is only natural given that the classic agrarian states have claimed a religious sanction for their legitimacy".¹² Such a statement confuses the meaning of the term 'autonomy' when applied to the peasantry of Southeast Asia as a subaltern class. And when Scott writes about "far-reaching revolutionary goals" in Southeast Asian millenarian movements, in which peasants give expression to "an alternative symbolic universe" which is nothing other

than a "profanation of the existing secular order, as reversal of things as they are",¹³ he is engaging in an unconscious reformulation of Gramsci's position on hegemony, a reformulation which makes it imperative to know what peasants considered to be 'revolutionary' in specific historical contexts.

Our own interest in the issue of hegemony is in part an attempt to understand peasant ideas in a way which does not idealize and distort the nature of peasant thought or the relationship between that thought and the activity of 'revolt'. We are also interested in instances of hegemony in nineteenth-century peasant movements because of the way in which forms and values articulated by the classical Indic states of early Southeast Asia seem to survive and find expression within these movements. The resurfacing of concepts once connected to older state forms, appropriated by peasant communities and then reactivated in movements of resistance or rebellion, clearly has a bearing on what we mean by 'state' and 'revolution' in Southeast Asia and on how we conceive of the historical interrelationship between these two terms.

Both examples of revolt which we will consider briefly occur at virtually the same instant -- the very late nineteenth and very early twentieth century -- within colonial states: the Dutch colonial state in Java and the colonizing Thai state on mainland Southeast Asia, which adopted and adapted many features of European colonial state structure in an effort to protect themselves from aggrandizing European imperial powers. While the revolts in the Lower Mekong region of northeast Thailand and southern Laos were violent eruptions in the sense that they required suppression by armed force and caused great loss of life, the Samin movement in Java was more or less non-violent. This may mean that Saminism should be classed as an expression of 'resistance', but it is an open question whether Saminism, in its own context, was less 'revolutionary' for being non-violent.

CASE STUDY: SAMIN MOVEMENT

"It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the movement founded by Surontiko Samin, a Javanese peasant, is one of the longest-living social phenomena in modern Javanese history".¹⁴ The "history" of Saminism extends from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The very longevity of the movement makes it unusual; Saminism has lasted too long to be classed as a 'revolution', even if it could be made to fit into this category in some other way.

The association between Samin and the movement named after him was relatively brief and possibly tenuous. At some time prior to about 1890 Samin, a land-holding peasant, objected to the interference of a local, state-appointed Muslim official in his marital affairs. Although Samin has been called a non-Muslim in studies of Saminism, it is difficult to know exactly how to interpret such a label -- if it applies -- in the highly variegated context of Islamicised Java with its extremes of heterodox and orthodox adherence to the faith at all levels of society. Saminists after Samin, in any case, were opposed to Islamic officialdom rather than to Islamic theology, opposed, that is, to the Islamic arm of the state and to the threat posed by the colonial state in various ways to Saminist territorial and cultural identity. From about 1905, in the Saminist heartland of north-central Java, Samin and his now several hundreds of followers began withdrawing from ordinary village life, "refusing to contribute to rice banks or to keep their animals with the common herds".¹⁵ The movement reached its peak in 1914, a moment that coincided with an increase in head-tax. Saminist doctrine, to use Benda and Castles's term, involved refusal to accede to the colonial state's demands for tax and corvée and refusal to use deferential language to higher authority. Without saying more about Saminist history in this brief summary, we can make some general points:

1 One of the distinctive features of Saminist life was a non-violent rejection of all links with ordinary village life and with state authority. While negating the colonial state by their refusal to cooperate with it as well as negating hegemonic values imbedded in Javanese speech, Samins nonetheless submitted to the punishment such negation elicited as in the following exchange between a Javanese official (*patih*) questioning a Saminist:

"You still owe the state 90 cents."
 "I have not borrowed anything from the state."
 "You have to pay taxes though?"
 "Wong Sikep (i.e., the Saminist) knows no taxes."

"This answer the *patih* found rather too bold, and he told the policeman sitting next to the Saminist to slap him in the face. But the Samin-disciple remained calm, and when he had received the blow, said: "naturally the *prijaji* is offended, and finds me vexing. The state orders him to collect taxes and I don't want to pay them. Naturally he becomes annoyed."¹⁶ Samins, in other words, both resisted *and* submitted.

2. Another distinctive feature was a form of community in which equality, honesty, generosity, forbearance and industriousness were valued and observed. The social values of Saminist life have much in common with those found in Javanese millenarian movements. The differences between Saminism and millenarianism lie in the relative unimportance of charismatic leadership and in the temporal and territorial 'localness' of Saminism. The movement was misinterpreted by colonial authorities who assimilated it to a category they already knew: Islamic millenarian movements. Yet it was not a millenarian movement at all. Samin was seized by the Dutch in 1907 and exiled to Sumatra, on the pretext that he was the prophetic leader of a millenarian movement which would die out once it had been deprived of its leader. Saminism was utopian, but the utopia was enacted in the colonial 'now' rather than imagined in some post-colonial future.

3. The structure of authority within Samin families has yet to be clarified. Some of the norm reversals and punning expressed by the Samins to their colonial interrogators makes it difficult to know what their concept of authority actually was. Authority seems to have been masculine-marked and patriarchal. "When called upon to perform the village duty of nightwatching, the Saminists used to point to their sexual organs and say that they had a duty to their wives at night".¹⁷ Some evidence indicates that the Samins advocated free love, yet treated their women as chattels, possessions that could be sold.¹⁸ And when the colonial authorities heard that a Saminist was going to set up a state with himself as king, they were assured that by state (*negara*) he meant himself, the king (*raja*) of his wife.¹⁹ The mystical and sexual beliefs held by the Samins hark back to the phallic/linga cults of the classical Indic state in Java. What we mean to suggest here is that this hierarchical, masculine structure of authority in the family with its heavy residues of an earlier hegemonic order undercuts the claim that the Saminist thought-world was entirely anti-state and anti-hegemonic.

4. Some of the answers Samins gave to their interrogators (e.g., "The Saminist knows no taxes") point to peasant volition and agency. Was this individualism typical of peasant culture or was it provoked or caused by the negation of state intrusion at a particular historical moment?

5. Various pieces of evidence indicate that the colonial authorities were confronted by a certain mentality--a "state of mind." as Benda and Castles refer to it--rather than merely simple economic motivation that stemmed from the Saminist inability to meet tax

demands. Even Dutch officials at the time remarked that the official report on Saminism had placed excessive emphasis on economic motivation; one Dutch memorandum of 1919 noted the "peculiar mental attitude" of the movement's adherents.²⁰

6. Another of the general issues requiring comment is the longevity of the movement, which had something to do with a concept of territory, but we will defer comment on this point to our conclusion.

CASE STUDY: LOWER MEKONG REGION

The author of the most thorough study of the revolts in the lower Mekong in 1901-1902 thinks that they began not in the peasantry but in another subaltern class, the Kha tribespeople in southern Laos who had been commodities in the slave traffic now threatened by the reforms of the centralizing and colonizing Thai government. The area affected by the revolt included what is today part of Laos, particularly the Bolovens Plateau, and large parts of northeastern Thailand. According to numerous historical studies of the insurgency, the predisposing factors were economic and political. The Bangkok government abolished payment of tribute in 1899 and established a head-tax in its place; political reforms undermined the economic position of both Lao and Kha leaders.²¹ On the French side of the river head-taxes trebled from what they had been under the Siamese; the French interdicted the slave trade and suppressed 'banditry'.²² The leader of the largest revolt performed rituals on a mountain in southern Laos, claiming for himself supernatural powers and prophesying rule by a just king. As the revolt spread among the Lao peoples, another of the leaders claimed to be descended from the kings of Vientiane. Within twelve months parts of northeastern Thailand were also in revolt, and when the Thai commissioner in the largely Lao northeast sent an under-manned force to suppress the uprising and was defeated, the movement grew with this news of the Thai reversal. Thai troops did finally bring the rebellion to a close on the Thai side of the Mekong river, with the millenarian army "totally silenced by four rounds of cannon fire. Three hundred of [the leader's] followers were killed, another four hundred taken captive".²³ On the Lao side, the leader claiming supernatural powers was betrayed, lured into negotiations by a French official who pulled a pistol from under his hat and shot the rebel leader. The Frenchman knew the rebels would not search under his hat as they prepared for a peace council, because the head is sacred, the seat of consciousness at the apex of the human body, and can be touched only by an intimate or close family member. Revolt continued in French Laos at least until 1936, and its legacy was still visible in the pro- and anti-communist alignments in Laos after World War II. Some general points:

1. As with Saminism, the "plurality" of revolt needs to be stressed.
2. These revolts conformed to the paradigm of charismatic authority well-established by the ruling culture. The signs of authority in the revolts were drawn from the pool of signs of monarchical authority. The name for the millennial leaders of the revolts in the Lower Mekong region is *phu mi bun*, literally "men of merit," a common noun that condenses in only three syllables what the Pali and Sanskrit terms for monarch in Thai express in polysyllabic profusion, namely, that the monarch is a man of immense, possibly infinite, merit. An anthropologist who has studied the religious dimensions of the revolt refers to the leader as a "proto-Bodhisattva," the Bodhisattva being a paragon for monarchical authority in Buddhist kingdoms.

3. The transformation promised by the millennial leader was instantaneous and absolute. Such a transformation is too much like the onset of a new dynasty to escape our notice. In fact in Southeast Asian history many such transforming movements were hijacked, so to speak, and did become new dynasties. The language expressing the new order brought about by the "men of merit" is indeed inverting, but the world is not really turned upside down. Local leaders, displaced by the "reformed" administration of the central Thai state, merely slipped into the semiotic garb worn by the ruling class.

4. The tough questions about these revolts in the Lower Mekong region have yet to be asked, perhaps because the elite discourse that recorded the revolts in an effort to suppress them has not been read--"decoded" would be a better term. There are too many references in the existing historical studies to "leaders reacting with fury," "local elites being deprived of power," "dislocation of economic patterns and traditional leadership structure," and "religiously sanctioned leadership".²⁴ The questions to be asked are the following. How was the following bound to the leadership? How is their allegiance to displaced local leaders to be explained? Does the peasant side with local leadership in yearning for an older, even if oppressive, order? Is the peasantry being mesmerized by the leadership with prophecies and promises of a just king? Is displaced leadership or is peasant discontent prior to the making of revolt? It would seem from the work historians of the Lower Mekong revolts have done so far that these upheavals are not really instances of peasant-initiated response to radically altered conditions. Their form is too locked into the semiosis of leadership of the ruling culture, to the extent that peasant behavior is narrowed and peasant choice is restricted.

5. Again, the longevity of the revolt requires comment.

CONCLUSION

'Revolt' and 'revolution' are categories that point to the episodic nature of insurgency. Viewed in one way, they are also categories used by the state itself to manage insurgency. From the perspective of the Holy Men or the Samins, however, the 'state' was not exactly the same entity as it was for those who regarded them as 'insurgents'. Should we be surprised that both the peasant movements we have briefly examined had the tenacity and long life they did? In part we may be surprised because the categories 'revolt' and 'revolution' denote the episodic and deny the tenacity of peasant rejection of the state. We (academics) cannot study such movements without thinking in these categories, but if we suspended usage of these terms, what would peasant history look like? Perhaps what was involved was simply peasant insistence on living a certain way, according to certain norms given to the peasants by the antiquity of their history. To have to decide whether these movements are progressive or backward-looking, as a popular text on modern Southeast Asian history asks us to do,²⁵ is to find their place on an evolutionary chart that begins in the primitive commune and ends in the post-industrial nation-state. Such an evolution seems to be a continuity fraudulently imposed on peasant experience. A notion like that of 'every-day resistance' may also distort the significance of peasant life, implying as it does that peasants are by nature anti-'state' yet incapable of autonomous, full-scale 'revolution'. Both the Samins and the Holy Men took drastic steps to enter new 'states' of material and spiritual existence. In the specific contexts of their time and place was there not something 'revolutionary' about this?

Benda and Castles in their excellent article on the Samin movement give a name to the kind of peasant community created in response to intrusion of the Dutch colonial state.

They call it an "individualistic folk society" with anarchic tendencies. But even the individualism and anarchism must be read as a communicative act that took place within, along and athwart the lines of force structured by the hegemonic order. That the Samins survived into the mid-twentieth century must have to do in part with the limits set (by themselves?) on their resistance. If they had confronted the colonial state en masse, if they had left their peasant abode, if they had attempted what we consider to be a 'revolution', if their resistance had spread laterally in space to include other regions of Java, then surely the full weight of Dutch force would have been brought to bear on them. Our two case studies, and many other examples of peasant insurgency in Southeast Asia, suggest that Hobsbawm's call for a comparative study of "'failed' revolutions" should receive serious consideration. But the meaning of 'failure' in such a study must be carefully defined.²⁶

In both these cases of revolt in Southeast Asia hegemonic notions of authority operated in the rebel leadership. In Saminism it is the mystical, sexual beliefs that carry residues of an earlier state structure; in the Lower Mekong revolts, it is the religious (Buddhist) character of the charismatic leadership. The presence of these residues suggests further questions about the relationship between 'state' and 'revolution' in Southeast Asia. Were peasant movements as much anti-state as proto-state formations? Has 'nationalism' been altogether well conceived as a 'revolutionary' force in Southeast Asia, when it is arguably Westernized nationalist elites which have recreated 'colonial' types of states in Southeast Asia today?²⁷ In any event, our cases suggest that peasant insurgency in Southeast Asia should be studied, not as an antithesis to, but in the context of 'states' and 'revolutions', failed, achieved or potential. In both examples economic factors do not account for everything that occurred, and in particular, the economic factors do not explain the long-term--the *longue durée* --of the revolts. Both movements endured for so long because they expressed a fiercely held concept of region and territory. They involved peasants who belonged to *this* part of Java or *this* part of Laos or northeastern Thailand. In Java, historians tell us, there was something tenaciously independent about the region that became the Blora Regency under the Dutch, and this tenacious independence can be documented in clashes between the peasantry and the pre-modern, Indic state. In Thailand, the Lao people of the northeast had been removed there from Laos, where the Bangkok king had suppressed a rebellion in 1826. The Lao inhabitants of northeastern Thailand had "feelings of inferiority as a conquered and subjected people, of being injured and discriminated against--feelings so deeply rooted that they persist to this day".²⁸ It is the attachment of these feelings to a particular piece of the earth's surface that requires us to factor the "mental outlook" or "peculiar mental attitude" into our account. This mentality battles with hegemony in the peasant's world. This mentality and hegemony are locked in a dialectical struggle which may yet lead to new 'revolutions' or a new kind of 'state'.

¹ James C. Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry", *Politics and Society*, 7, no. 2, 1977, p.267.

² E.J. Hobsbawm, "Revolution" in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, *Revolution in History*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1986, p.21.

³ Michael Adas, "From Footdragging to Flight: The Evasive History of Peasant Avoidance Protest in South and Southeast Asia", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1986, 64-86.

⁴ R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, p.11.

⁵ David Arnold, "Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1984, p. 160.

⁶ Yoneo Ishii, "A Note on Buddhistic Millenarian Revolts in Northeastern Siam", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1975, p.126.

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- ⁷ Benedict, Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983. Cf. R. Guha, "Nationalism Reduced to Official Nationalism", *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1985, pp. 103-108.
- ⁸ R.E. Elson, *Javanese Peasants and the Colonial Sugar Industry: Impact and Change in the East Java Residency, 1830-1940*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- ⁹ James Scott, "Political Analysis and the Hidden Transcript of Subordinate groups", *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1987, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ Chakrabarty, "Hidden Transcript of Subordinate Groups", *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1987, p. 33.
- ¹¹ James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977.
- ¹² James C. Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry", *Politics and Society* 7, no. 2: 267-96.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-85.
- ¹⁴ Harry J. Benda, and Lance Castles, "The Samin Movement", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-Land-en Volkenkunde* 125 (1969), pp.207-40.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ¹⁸ Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, *Het Saminisme*, Samarang: H.A. Benjamins, 1918.
- ¹⁹ Benda and Castles, p. 226.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- ²¹ John Murdoch, "The 1901-1902 'Holy Man's Rebellion", *Journal of the Siam Society*, 62, 1, 1974, p. 54.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Yoneo Ishii, "Buddhistic Millenarian Revolts", p. 178.
- ²⁴ Murdoch, "Holy Man's Rebellion", pp. 62-64.
- ²⁵ David Joel Steinberg et al, *In Search of Southeast Asia, A Modern History*, Sydney 1987, pp. 247-48.
- ²⁶ Hobsbawm, "Revolution", p.20.
- ²⁷ Anderson, *op.cit.*
- ²⁸ Ishii, "Buddhistic Millenarian Revolts", p.182.