

## 2 • Normal Exploitation, Normal Resistance

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Almost invariably doomed to defeat and eventual massacre, the great insurrections were altogether too disorganized to achieve any lasting result. The patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried on by rural communities over the years would accomplish more than these flashes in the pan.

Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*

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As the editor of *Field and Garden* once wrote, great men are always unpopular with the common people. The masses don't understand them, they think all those things are unnecessary, even heroism. The little man doesn't give a shit about a great era. All he wants is to drop into a bar now and then and eat goulash for supper. Naturally a statesman gets riled at bums like that, when it's his job to get his people into the schoolbooks, the poor bastard. To a great man the common people are a ball and chain. It's like offering Baloun here, with his appetite, a small Hungarian sausage for supper, what good is that. I wouldn't want to listen in when the big shots get together and start griping about us.

Schweyk, in Bertolt Brecht, *Schweyk in the Second World War*, Scene I

### THE UNWRITTEN HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

The idea for this study, its concerns and its methods, originated in a growing dissatisfaction with much recent work—my own as well as that of others—on the subject of peasant rebellions and revolution.<sup>1</sup> It is only too apparent that the inordinate attention accorded to large-scale peasant insurrection was, in North America at least, stimulated by the Vietnam war and something of a left-wing academic romance with wars of national liberation. In this case interest and source material were mutually reinforcing. For the historical and archival records were richest at precisely those moments when the peasantry came to pose a threat to the state and to the existing international order. At other times, which is to

1. See, for example, Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Jeffrey M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1975); Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979).

say most of the time, the peasantry appeared in the historical record not so much as historical actors but as more or less anonymous contributors to statistics on conscription, taxes, labor migration, land holdings, and crop production.

The fact is that, for all their importance when they do occur, peasant rebellions, let alone peasant "revolutions," are few and far between. Not only are the circumstances that favor large-scale peasant uprisings comparatively rare, but when they do appear the revolts that develop are nearly always crushed unceremoniously. To be sure, even a failed revolt may achieve something: a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief respite from new and painful relations of production<sup>2</sup> and, not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future. Such gains, however, are uncertain, while the carnage, the repression, and the demoralization of defeat are all too certain and real. It is worth recalling as well that even at those extraordinary historical moments when a peasant-backed revolution actually succeeds in taking power, the results are, at the very best, a mixed blessing for the peasantry. Whatever else the revolution may achieve, it almost always creates a more coercive and hegemonic state apparatus—one that is often able to batten itself on the rural population like no other before it. All too frequently the peasantry finds itself in the ironic position of having helped to power a ruling group whose plans for industrialization, taxation, and collectivization are very much at odds with the goals for which peasants had imagined they were fighting.<sup>3</sup>

For all these reasons it occurred to me that the emphasis on peasant rebellion was misplaced. Instead, it seemed far more important to understand what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance—the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does "between revolts" to defend its interests as best it can.

It would be a grave mistake, as it is with peasant rebellions, to overly romanticize the "weapons of the weak." They are unlikely to do more than mar-

2. For an example of such temporary gains, see the fine study by E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 281–99.

3. Some of these issues are examined in James C. Scott, "Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars," *Theory and Society* 7, nos. 1–2 (1979): 97–134.

ginally affect the various forms of exploitation that peasants confront. Furthermore, the peasantry has no monopoly on these weapons, as anyone can easily attest who has observed officials and landlords resisting and disrupting state policies that are to their disadvantage.

On the other hand, such Brechtian modes of resistance are not trivial. Desertion and evasion of conscription and of corvée labor have undoubtedly limited the imperial aspirations of many a monarch in Southeast Asia<sup>4</sup> or, for that matter, in Europe. The process and its potential impact are nowhere better captured than in R. C. Cobb's account of draft resistance and desertion in postrevolutionary France and under the early Empire:

From the year V to the year VII, there are increasingly frequent reports, from a variety of Departments . . . of every conscript from a given canton having returned home and living there unmolested. Better still, many of them did not return home; they had never left it in the first place. . . . In the year VII too the severed fingers of right hands—the commonest form of self-mutilation—begin to witness statistically to the strength of what might be described as a vast movement of collective complicity, involving the family, the parish, the local authorities, whole cantons.

Even the Empire, with a vastly more numerous and reliable rural police, did not succeed in more than temporarily slowing down the speed of the hemorrhage which . . . from 1812, once more reached catastrophic proportions. There could have been no more eloquent referendum on the universal unpopularity of an oppressive regime; and there is no more encouraging spectacle for a historian than a people that has decided it will no longer fight and that, without fuss, returns home . . . the common people, at least, in this respect, had their fair share in bringing down France's most appalling regime.<sup>5</sup>

The collapse of the Confederate army and economy in the course of the Civil War in the United States is a further example of the decisive role of silent and undeclared defections. Nearly 250,000 eligible whites are estimated to have deserted or to have avoided conscription altogether.<sup>6</sup> The reasons appear to have

4. See the fine account and analysis by Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 2 (April 1981): 217–47.

5. R. C. Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 96–97. For a gripping account of self-mutilation to avoid conscription, see Emile Zola, *The Earth*, trans. Douglas Parmee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

6. See the excellent study by Armstead L. Robinson, "Bitter Fruits of Bondage: Slavery's Demise and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861–65" (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, forthcoming), chaps. 5, 6.

been both moral and material, as one might expect. Poor whites, especially those from the nonslaveholding hill country, were deeply resentful of fighting for an institution whose principal beneficiaries were often excluded from service by law.<sup>7</sup> Military reverses and what was called the "subsistence crisis of 1862" prompted many to desert and return to their hard-pressed families. On the plantations themselves, the shortage of white overseers and the slaves' natural affinity with the North's objective, gave rise to shirking and flight on a massive scale. As in France, one could claim here too that the Confederacy was undone by a social avalanche of petty acts of insubordination carried out by an unlikely coalition of slaves and yeomen—a coalition with no name, no organization, no leadership, and certainly no Leninist conspiracy behind it.

In a similar fashion, flight and evasion of taxes have classically curbed the ambition and reach of Third World states—whether precolonial, colonial, or independent. As we shall learn, for example, the official collection of the Islamic tithe in paddy is, in Sedaka, only a small fraction of what is legally due, thanks to a network of complicity and misrepresentation that eviscerates its impact. Small wonder that a large share of the tax receipts of Third World states is collected in the form of levies on imports and exports; the pattern is in no small measure a tribute to the tax resistance capacities of their subjects. Even a casual reading of the literature on rural "development" yields a rich harvest of unpopular government schemes and programs nibbled to extinction by the passive resistance of the peasantry. The author of a rare account detailing how peasants—in this case in East Africa—have managed over several decades to undo or evade threatening state policy concludes in the following tone:

In this situation, it is understandable if the development equation is often reduced to a zero-sum game. As this study has shown, the winners of those games are by no means always the rulers. The African peasant is hardly a hero in the light of current development thinking, but by using his deceptive skills he has often defeated the authorities.<sup>8</sup>

On some occasions this resistance has become active, even violent. More often, however, it takes the form of passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception. The persistent efforts of the colonial government in Malaya to discourage the peasantry from growing and selling rubber that would compete

7. This issue centered on the much resented "Twenty-Nigger Law," as it was known, which provided that a white man of draft age could be excused from military service if he was needed to supervise twenty or more slaves. This law, coupled with the hiring of substitutes by wealthy families, encouraged the widespread belief that this was "a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight." *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

8. Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 231.

with the plantation sector for land and markets is a case in point.<sup>9</sup> Various restriction schemes and land use laws were tried from 1922 until 1928 and again in the 1930s with only modest results because of massive peasant resistance. The efforts of peasants in self-styled socialist states to prevent and then to mitigate or even undo unpopular forms of collective agriculture represent a striking example of the defensive techniques available to a beleaguered peasantry. Again the struggle is marked less by massive and defiant confrontations than by a quiet evasion that is equally massive and often far more effective.<sup>10</sup>

The style of resistance in question is perhaps best described by contrasting, paired forms of resistance, each aimed more or less at the same objective. The first of each pair is "everyday" resistance, in our meaning of the term; the second represents the open defiance that dominates the study of peasant and working-class politics. In one sphere, for example, lies the quiet, piecemeal process by which peasant squatters have often encroached on plantation and state forest lands; in the other a public invasion of land that openly challenges property relations. In terms of actual occupation and use, the encroachments by squatting may accomplish more than an openly defiant land invasion, though the *de jure* distribution of property rights is never publicly challenged. Turning to another example, in one sphere lies a rash of military desertions that incapacitates an army and, in the other, an open mutiny aiming at eliminating or replacing officers. Desertions may, as we have noted, achieve something where mutiny may fail, precisely because it aims at self-help and withdrawal rather than institutional confrontation. And yet, the massive withdrawal of compliance is in a sense more radical in its implications for the army as an institution than the replacement of officers. As a final example, in one sphere lies the pilfering of public or private grain stores; in the other an open attack on markets or granaries aiming at an open redistribution of the food supply.

What everyday forms of resistance share with the more dramatic public confrontations is of course that they are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes or to advance claims vis-à-vis those superordinate classes. Such claims have ordinarily to do with the material nexus of class struggle—

9. The best, most complete account of this may be found in Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874–1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). See also the persuasive argument in Donald M. Nonini, Paul Diener, and Eugene E. Robkin, "Ecology and Evolution: Population, Primitive Accumulation, and the Malay Peasantry" (Typescript, 1979).

10. For a careful and fascinating account of the ways in which China's production teams and brigades could, until the changes in 1978, have some influence on the definition of "surplus" grain that had to be sold to the state, see Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Politics of Grain Procurement* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1983). Nearly all of this resistance was called "soft opposition" by those who practiced it and who made it clear that it was successful only if an "outward manifestation" of compliance was maintained. *Ibid.*, 238.

the appropriation of land, labor, taxes, rents, and so forth. Where everyday resistance most strikingly departs from other forms of resistance is in its implicit disavowal of public and symbolic goals. Where institutionalized politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, *de jure* change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, *de facto* gains.<sup>11</sup>

It is reasonably clear that the success of *de facto* resistance is often directly proportional to the symbolic conformity with which it is masked. Open insubordination in almost any context will provoke a more rapid and ferocious response than an insubordination that may be as pervasive but never ventures to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power. For most subordinate classes, which, as a matter of sheer history, have had little prospect of improving their status, this form of resistance has been the only option. What may be accomplished *within* this symbolic straitjacket is nonetheless something of a testament to human persistence and inventiveness, as this account of lower-caste resistance in India illustrates:

Lifelong indentured servants most characteristically expressed discontent about their relationship with their master by performing their work carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance, or incompetence, driving their masters to distraction. Even though the master could retaliate by refusing to give his servant the extra fringe benefits, he was still obliged to maintain him at a subsistence level if he did not want to lose his investment completely. *This method of passive resistance, provided it was not expressed as open defiance, was nearly unbeatable, it reinforced the Haviks' stereotype concerning the character of low caste persons, but gave them little recourse to action.*<sup>12</sup>

Such forms of stubborn resistance are especially well documented in the vast literature on American slavery, where open defiance was normally foolhardy. The

11. There is an interesting parallel here with some of the feminist literature on peasant society. In many, but not all, peasant societies, men are likely to dominate every formal, overt exercise of power. Women, it is occasionally argued, can exercise considerable power to the extent that they do not openly challenge the formal myth of male dominance. "Real" gains are possible, in other words, so long as the larger symbolic order is not questioned. In much the same fashion one might contend that the peasantry often finds it both tactically convenient as well as necessary to leave the formal order intact while directing its attention to political ends that may never be accorded formal recognition. For a feminist argument along those lines, see Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance," *American Ethnologist* 2, no. 4 (November 1975): 727–56.

12. Edward B. Harper, "Social Consequences of an Unsuccessful Low Caste Movement," *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. James Silverberg, Supplement No. 3, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968): 48–49, emphasis added.

history of resistance to slavery in the antebellum U.S. South is largely a history of foot dragging, false compliance, flight, feigned ignorance, sabotage, theft, and, not least, cultural resistance. These practices, which rarely if ever called into question the system of slavery *as such*, nevertheless achieved far more in their unannounced, limited, and truculent way than the few heroic and brief armed uprisings about which so much has been written. The slaves themselves appear to have realized that in most circumstances their resistance could succeed only to the extent that it hid behind the mask of public compliance. One imagines parents giving their children advice not unlike advice contemporary wage laborers on plantations in Indonesia apparently hear from their own parents:

I tell them [the youngsters] remember, you're selling your labor and the one who buys it wants to *see* that he gets something for it, so work when he's around, then you can relax when he goes away, but make sure you always *look like* you're working when the inspectors are there.<sup>13</sup>

Two specific observations emerge from this perspective. First, the nature of resistance is greatly influenced by the existing forms of labor control and by beliefs about the probability and severity of retaliation. Where the consequences of an open strike are likely to be catastrophic in terms of permanent dismissal or jail, the work force may resort to a slowdown or to shoddy work on the job. The often undeclared and anonymous nature of such action makes it particularly difficult for the antagonist to assess blame or apply sanctions. In industry, the slowdown has come to be called an "Italian" strike; it is used particularly when repression is feared, as in Poland under martial law in 1983.<sup>14</sup> Piece-work has of course often been used as a means of circumventing forms of resistance open to workers who are paid by the hour or day. Where piece-work prevails, as it did in silk and cotton weaving in nineteenth-century Germany, resistance is likely to find expression not in slowdowns, which are self-defeating, but in such forms as the "shortweighting of finished cloth, defective workmanship, and the purloining of materials."<sup>15</sup> Each form of labor control or payment is thus likely, other things equal, to generate its own distinctive forms of quiet resistance and "counterappropriation."

13. Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 184.

14. See, for example, *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1983, p. A6, "Polish Underground Backs Call for Slowdown," in which it is noted that "The tactic of a slowdown, known in Poland as an Italian Strike, has been used in the past by workers because it reduces the risk of reprisal."

15. Peter Linebaugh, "Karl Marx, the Theft of Wood, and Working-Class Composition: A Contribution to the Current Debate," *Crime and Social Justice* (Fall-Winter, 1976): 10. See also the brilliant analysis of piece-work by the Hungarian poet-worker Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State*, trans. Michael Wright (New York: Universe, 1978).

The second observation is that resistance is not necessarily directed at the immediate source of appropriation. Inasmuch as the objective of the resisters is typically to meet such pressing needs as physical safety, food, land, or income, and to do so in relative safety, they may simply follow the line of least resistance. Prussian peasants and proletarians in the 1830s, beleaguered by dwarf holdings and wages below subsistence, responded by emigration or by poaching wood, fodder, and game on a large scale. The pace of "forest crime" rose as wages declined, as provisions became more expensive, and where emigration was more difficult; in 1836 there were 207,000 prosecutions in Prussia, 150,000 of which were for forest offenses.<sup>16</sup> They were supported by a mood of popular complicity that originated in earlier traditions of free access to forests, but the poachers cared little whether the rabbits or firewood they took came from the land of their particular employer or landlord. Thus, the reaction to an appropriation in one sphere may lead its victims to exploit small openings available elsewhere that are perhaps more accessible and less dangerous.<sup>17</sup>

Such techniques of resistance are well adapted to the particular characteristics of the peasantry. Being a diverse class of "low classness," scattered across the countryside, often lacking the discipline and leadership that would encourage opposition of a more organized sort, the peasantry is best suited to extended guerrilla-style campaigns of attrition that require little or no coordination. Their individual acts of foot dragging and evasion are often reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance. Seen in the light of a supportive subculture and the knowledge that the risk to any single resister is generally reduced to the extent that the whole community is involved, it becomes plausible to speak of a social movement. Curiously, however, this is a social movement with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestoes, no dues, no name, and no banner. By virtue of their institutional invisibility, activities on anything less than a massive scale are, if they are noticed at all, rarely accorded any social significance.

Multiplied many thousandfold, such petty acts of resistance by peasants may in the end make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would-

16. *Ibid.*, 13. In 1842, for Baden, there was one such conviction for every four inhabitants. For three centuries poaching was perhaps the most common rural crime in England and the subject of much repressive legislation. See, for example, the selections by Douglas Hay and E. P. Thompson in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* by Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

17. Apparently the theft of wood in Germany in this period rarely touched communal forests. It goes without saying that, when a poor man survives by taking from others in the same situation, we can no longer speak of resistance. One central question to ask about any subordinate class is the extent to which it can, by internal sanctions, prevent the dog-eat-dog competition among themselves that can only serve the interests of appropriating classes.

be superiors in the capital. The state may respond in a variety of ways. Policies may be recast in line with more realistic expectations. They may be retained but reinforced with positive incentives aimed at encouraging voluntary compliance. And, of course, the state may simply choose to employ more coercion. Whatever the response, we must not miss the fact that the action of the peasantry has thus changed or narrowed the policy options available to the state. It is in this fashion, and not through revolts, let alone legal political pressure, that the peasantry has classically made its political presence felt. Thus any history or theory of peasant politics that attempts to do justice to the peasantry as a historical actor must necessarily come to grips with what I have chosen to call *everyday forms of resistance*. For this reason alone it is important to both document and bring some conceptual order to this seeming welter of human activity.

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines.<sup>18</sup> Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible. It is only rarely that the perpetrators of these petty acts seek to call attention to themselves. Their safety lies in their anonymity. It is also extremely rarely that officials of the state wish to publicize the insubordination. To do so would be to admit that their policy is unpopular, and, above all, to expose the tenuousness of their authority in the countryside—neither of which the sovereign state finds in its interest.<sup>19</sup> The nature of the acts themselves and the self-interested muteness of the antagonists thus conspire to create a kind of complicitous silence that all but expunges everyday forms of resistance from the historical record.

History and social science, because they are written by an intelligentsia using written records that are also created largely by literate officials, is simply not well equipped to uncover the silent and anonymous forms of class struggle that

18. As Hobsbawm and Rude point out, it is not only conservative elites who have overlooked this form of resistance, but also the urban left: "The historians of social movements seem to have reacted very much like the rest of the urban left—to which most of them have traditionally belonged—i.e. they have tended to be unaware of it unless and until it appeared in sufficiently dramatic form or on a sufficiently large scale for the city newspapers to take notice."

19. But not entirely. District-level records are likely to prove rewarding in this respect, as district officials attempt to explain the shortfall in, say, tax receipts or conscription figures to their superiors in the capital. One imagines also that the informal, oral record is abundant, for example informal cabinet or ministerial meetings called to deal with policy failures caused by rural insubordination.

typify the peasantry.<sup>20</sup> Its practitioners implicitly join the conspiracy of the participants, who are themselves, as it were, sworn to secrecy. Collectively, this unlikely cabal contributes to a stereotype of the peasantry, enshrined in both literature and in history, as a class that alternates between long periods of abject passivity and brief, violent, and futile explosions of rage.

He had centuries of fear and submission behind him, his shoulders had become hardened to blows, his soul so crushed that he did not recognise his own degradation. You could beat him and starve him and rob him of everything, year in, year out, before he would abandon his caution and stupidity, his mind filled with all sorts of muddled ideas which he could not properly understand; and this went on until a culmination of injustice and suffering flung him at his master's throat like some infuriated domestic animal who had been subjected to too many thrashings.<sup>21</sup>

There is a grain of truth in Zola's view, but only a grain. It is true that the "onstage" behavior of peasants during times of quiescence yields a picture of submission, fear, and caution. By contrast, peasant insurrections seem like visceral reactions of blind fury. What is missing from the account of "normal" passivity is the slow, grinding, quiet struggle over rents, crops, labor, and taxes in which submission and stupidity are often no more than a pose—a necessary tactic. What is missing from the picture of the periodic explosions is the underlying vision of justice that informs them and their specific goals and targets, which are often quite rational indeed.<sup>22</sup> The explosions themselves are frequently a sign that the normal and largely covert forms of class struggle are failing or have reached a crisis point. Such declarations of open war, with their mortal risks, normally come only after a protracted struggle on different terrain.

#### RESISTANCE AS THOUGHT AND SYMBOL

Thus far, I have treated everyday forms of peasant resistance as if they were not much more than a collection of individual acts or behaviors. To confine the analysis to behavior alone, however, is to miss much of the point. It reduces the

20. The partial exceptions that come to mind are anthropology, because of its insistence on close observation in the field, and the history of slavery and Soviet collectivization.

21. Zola, *The Earth*, 91.

22. I do not by any means wish to suggest that violence born of revenge, hatred, and fury play no role—only that they do not exhaust the subject, as Zola and others imply. It is certainly true, as Cobb (*Police and the People*, 89–90) claims, that George Rude (*The Crowd in History, 1730–1848* [New York: Wiley, 1964]) has gone too far into turning rioters into sober, domesticated, bourgeois political actors.

explanation of human action to the level one might use to explain how the water buffalo resists its driver to establish a tolerable pace of work or why the dog steals scraps from the table. But inasmuch as I seek to understand the resistance of thinking, social beings, I can hardly fail to ignore their consciousness—the meaning they give to their acts. The symbols, the norms, the ideological forms they create constitute the indispensable background to their behavior. However partial or imperfect their understanding of the situation, they are gifted with intentions and values and purposefulness that condition their acts. This is so evident that it would hardly merit restating were it not for the lamentable tendency in behavioral science to read mass behavior directly from the statistical abstracts on income, caloric intake, newspaper circulation, or radio ownership. I seek, then, not only to uncover and describe the patterns of everyday resistance as a distinctive behavior with far-reaching implications, but to ground that description in an analysis of the conflicts of meaning and value in which these patterns arise and to which they contribute.

The relationship between thought and action is, to put it very mildly, a complicated issue. Here I wish to emphasize only two fairly straightforward points. First, neither intentions nor acts are “unmoved movers.” Acts born of intentions circle back, as it were, to influence consciousness and hence subsequent intentions and acts. Thus acts of resistance and thoughts about (or the meaning of) resistance are in *constant* communication—in constant dialogue. Second, intentions and consciousness are not tied in quite the same way to the material world as behavior is. It is possible and common for human actors to conceive of a line of action that is, at the moment, either impractical or impossible. Thus a person may dream of a revenge or a millennial kingdom of justice that may never occur. On the other hand, as circumstances change, it may become possible to act on those dreams. The realm of consciousness gives us a kind of privileged access to lines of action that may—just may—become plausible at some future date. How, for example, can we give an adequate account of any peasant rebellion without some knowledge of the shared values, the “offstage” talk, the consciousness of the peasantry prior to rebellion?<sup>23</sup> How, finally, can we understand everyday forms of resistance without reference to the intentions, ideas, and language of those human beings who practice it?

The study of the social consciousness of subordinate classes is important for yet another reason. It may allow us to clarify a major debate in both the Marxist and non-Marxist literature—a debate that centers on the extent to which elites

23. Lest this seem implicitly and one-sidedly to treat consciousness as prior to and in some sense causing behavior, one could just as easily recoil one step and inquire about the construction of this consciousness. Such an inquiry would necessarily begin with the social givens of the actor's position in society. Social being conditions social consciousness.

are able to impose their own image of a just social order, not simply on the behavior of non-elites, but on their consciousness as well.

The problem can be stated simply. Let us assume that we can *establish* that a given group is exploited and that, further, this exploitation takes place in a context in which the coercive force at the disposal of the elites and/or the state makes any open expression of discontent virtually impossible. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the only behavior observable is apparently acquiescent, at least two divergent interpretations of this state of affairs are possible. One may claim that the exploited group, because of a hegemonic religious or social ideology, actually accepts its situation as a normal, even justifiable part of the social order. This explanation of passivity assumes at least a fatalistic acceptance of that social order and perhaps even an active complicity—both of which Marxists might call “mystification” or “false-consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> It typically rests on the assumption that elites dominate not only the physical means of production but the symbolic means of production as well<sup>25</sup>—and that this symbolic hegemony allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated.<sup>26</sup> As Gramsci argued, elites control the “ideological sectors” of society—culture, religion, education, and media—and can thereby engineer consent for their rule. By creating and disseminating a universe of discourse and the concepts to go with it, by defining the standards of what is true, beautiful, moral, fair, and legitimate, they build a symbolic climate that prevents subordinate classes from thinking their way free. In fact, for Gramsci, the proletariat is more enslaved at the level of ideas than at the level of behavior. The historic task of “the party” is therefore less to lead a revolution than to break the symbolic miasma that blocks revolutionary thought. Such interpretations have been invoked to account for lower-class quiescence, particularly in rural societies such as India, where a

24. See the argument along these lines by Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954): 77–78.

25. In the Marxist tradition one might cite especially Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quinten Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 123–209, and Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971). Marx, to my knowledge, *never* used the term “false-consciousness,” although “the fetishism of commodities” may be read this way. But the fetishism of commodities mystifies especially the bourgeoisie, not merely subordinate classes. For a critical view of “hegemony” as it might apply to the peasantry, see James C. Scott, “Hegemony and the Peasantry,” *Politics and Society* 7, no. 3 (1977): 267–96, and chap. 7 below.

26. For other explanations of the same phenomenon, see, for example, Frank Parkin, “Class Inequality and Meaning Systems,” in his *Class Inequality and Political Order* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 79–102, and Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970).

venerable system of rigid caste stratification is reinforced by religious sanctions. Lower castes are said to accept their fate in the Hindu hierarchy in the hope of being rewarded in the next life.<sup>27</sup>

An alternative interpretation of such quiescence might be that it is to be explained by the relationships of force in the countryside and not by peasant values and beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Agrarian peace, in this view, may well be the peace of repression (remembered and/or anticipated) rather than the peace of consent or complicity.

The issues posed by these divergent interpretations are central to the analysis of peasant politics and, beyond that, to the study of class relationships in general. Much of the debate on these issues has taken place as if the choice of interpretation were more a matter of the ideological preferences of the analyst than of actual research. Without underestimating the problems involved, I believe there are a number of ways in which the question can be empirically addressed. It is possible, in other words, to say something meaningful about the relative weight of consciousness, on the one hand, and repression (in fact, memory, or potential) on the other, in restraining acts of resistance.

The argument for false-consciousness, after all, depends on the symbolic alignment of elite and subordinate class values—that is, on the assumption that the peasantry (proletariat) actually accepts most of the elite vision of the social order. What does mystification mean, if not a group's assent to the social ideology that justifies its exploitation? To the extent that an exploited group's outlook is in substantial symbolic alignment with elite values, the case for mystification is strengthened; to the extent that it holds deviant or contradictory values, the case is weakened. A close study of the subculture of a subordinate group and its relation to dominant elite values should thus give us part of the answer we seek. The evidence will seldom be cut and dried, for any group's social outlook will contain a number of diverse and even contradictory currents. It is not the mere existence of deviant subcultural themes that is notable, for they are well-nigh universal, but rather the forms they may take, the values they embody, and the emotional attachment they inspire. Thus, even in the absence of resistance, we are not without resources to address the question of false-consciousness.

To relieve the somewhat abstract nature of the argument thus far, it may be helpful to illustrate the kind of evidence that might bear directly on this issue. Suppose, for example, that the "onstage" linguistic term for sharecropping or for tenancy is one that emphasizes its fairness and justice. Suppose, further, that the term used by tenants behind the backs of landlords to describe this rela-

27. But note the efforts of lower castes to raise their ritual status and, more recently, the tendency for *harijans* to leave Hinduism altogether and convert to Islam, which makes no caste distinctions among believers.

28. See, for example, Gerrit Huizer, *Peasant Mobilization and Land Reform in Indonesia* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1972).

tionship is quite different—cynical and mocking.<sup>29</sup> Is this not plausible evidence that the tenant's view of the relationship is largely demystified—that he does not accept the elite's definition of tenancy at face value? When Haji Ayub and Haji Kadir are called *Haji "Broom,"* *Haji Kedikut,* or *Pak Ceti* behind their backs, is it not plausible evidence that their claim to land, to interest, to rents, and to respect is at least contested at the level of consciousness, if not at the level of "onstage" acts? What are we to make of lower-class religious sects (the Quakers in seventeenth-century England, Saminists in twentieth-century Java, to name only two of many) that abandon the use of honorifics to address their social betters and insist instead on low forms of address or on using words like "friend" or "brother" to describe everyone. Is this not telling evidence that the elite's libretto for the hierarchy of nobility and respect is, at the very least, not sung word for word by its subjects?

By reference to the culture that peasants fashion from their experience—their "offstage" comments and conversation, their proverbs, folksongs, and history, legends, jokes, language, ritual, and religion—it should be possible to determine to what degree, and in what ways, peasants actually accept the social order propagated by elites. Some elements of lower-class culture are of course more relevant to this issue than others. For any agrarian system, one can identify a set of key values that justify the right of an elite to the deference, land, taxes, and rent it claims. It is, in large part, an empirical matter whether such key values find support or opposition within the subculture of subordinate classes. If bandits and poachers are made into folkheroes, we can infer that transgressions of elite codes evoke a vicarious admiration. If the forms of outward deference are privately mocked, it may suggest that peasants are hardly in the thrall of a naturally ordained social order. If those who try to curry the personal favor of elites are shunned and ostracized by others of their class, we have evidence that there is a lower-class subculture with sanctioning power. Rejection of elite values, however, is seldom an across-the-board proposition, and only a close study of peasant values can define the major points of friction and correspondence. In this sense, points of friction become diagnostic only when they center on key values in the social order, grow, and harden.

#### THE EXPERIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMAN AGENTS

It was with such issues in mind that I spent more than a year and a half in the village of Sedaka listening, asking questions, and trying to understand the issues that animated villagers during my stay among them. The result is, I hope, a close-to-the-ground, fine-grained account of class relations in a very small place (seventy families, 360 people) experiencing very large changes (the "green rev-

29. Tenancy in Central Luzon, the Philippines, is a striking case in point. Communication from Benedick Kerkvliet, University of Hawaii.

olution": in this case, the double-cropping of rice). Much of that account, though not all of it, is an account of what appears to be a losing class struggle against capitalist agricultural development and its human agents. It goes without saying that I have thought it important to listen carefully to the human agents I was studying, to their experience, to their categories, to their values, to their understanding of the situation. There are several reasons for building this kind of phenomenological approach into the study.

The first reason has to do with how social science can and ought to be conducted. It is fashionable in some of the more structuralist variants of neo-Marxism to assume that one can infer the nature of class relations in any nonsocialist Third World country directly from a few diagnostic features—the dominant mode of production, the mode and timing of insertion into the world economy, or the mode of surplus appropriation. This procedure entails a highly reductionist leap straight from one or a very few economic givens to the class situation that is presumed to follow from these givens. There are no human actors here, only mechanisms and puppets. To be sure, the economic givens are crucial; they define much, but not all, of the situation that human actors face; they place limits on the responses that are possible, imaginable. But those limits are wide and, within them, human actors fashion their own response, their own experience of class, their own history. As E. P. Thompson notes in his polemic against Althusser:

nor is it [the epistemological refusal of experience] pardonable in a Marxist, since experience is a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness: it is experience (often class experience) which gives a coloration to culture, to values, and to thought; it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities. . . . classes arise because men and women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to value in class ways: thus the process of class formation is a process of self-making, although under conditions which are given.<sup>30</sup>

How else can a mode of production affect the nature of class relations except as it is mediated by human experience and interpretation? Only by capturing that experience in something like its fullness will we be able to say anything meaningful about how a given economic system influences those who constitute it and maintain it or supersede it. And, of course, if this is true for the peasantry or the proletariat, it is surely true for the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, and even the lumpenproletariat.<sup>31</sup> To omit the experience of human agents from the analysis of class relations is to have theory swallow its own tail.

30. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 98, 106–07.

31. It is also true for the regular pattern of human activities that we call institutions. For example—note well, structuralists—the state.

A second reason for putting the experience of human agents at the center of the analysis concerns the concept of class itself. It is all very well to identify a collection of individuals who all occupy a comparable position in relation to the means of production—a class-in-itself. But what if such objective, structural determinations find little echo in the consciousness and meaningful activity of those who are thus identified?<sup>32</sup> In place of simply assuming a one-to-one correspondence between "objective" class structure and consciousness, is it not far preferable to understand how those structures are apprehended by flesh-and-blood human actors? Class, after all, does not exhaust the total explanatory space of social actions. Nowhere is this more true than within the peasant village, where class may compete with kinship, neighborhood, faction, and ritual links as foci of human identity and solidarity. Beyond the village level, it may also compete with ethnicity, language group, religion, and region as a focus of loyalty. Class may be applicable to some situations but not to others; it may be reinforced or crosscut by other ties; it may be far more important for the experience of some than of others. Those who are tempted to dismiss all principles of human action that contend with class identity as "false-consciousness" and to wait for Althusser's "determination in the last instance" are likely to wait in vain. In the meantime, the messy reality of multiple identities will continue to be the experience out of which social relations are conducted. Neither peasants nor proletarians deduce their identities directly or solely from the mode of production, and the sooner we attend to the concrete experience of class as it is lived, the sooner we will appreciate both the obstacles to, and the possibilities for, class formation.

A further justification for a close analysis of class relations is that in the village, and not only there, classes travel under strange and deceptive banners. They are not apprehended as ghostly, abstract concepts but in the all-too-human form of specific individuals and groups, specific conflicts and struggles. Piven and Cloward capture the specificity of this experience for the working class:

First, people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. Workers experience the factory, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foremen, the spies, the guards, the owner, and the pay check. *They do not experience monopoly capitalism.*<sup>33</sup>

In the same fashion the Malay peasant experiences increasing land rents, stingy

32. See the persuasive argument along these lines by James Brow, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Agrarian Classes in South Asia," *Peasant Studies* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 15–33.

33. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 20, emphasis added.



landlords, ruinous interest rates from moneylenders, combine-harvesters that replace him, and petty bureaucrats who treat him shabbily. He does not *experience* the cash nexus or the capitalist pyramid of finance that makes of those landlords, combine-harvester owners, moneylenders, and bureaucrats only the penultimate link in a complex process. Small wonder, then, that the language of class in the village should bear the birthmarks of its distinctive origin. Villagers do not call Pak Haji Kadir an agent of finance capital; they call him Kadir *Ceti* because it was through the Chettiar moneylending caste, which dominated rural credit from about 1910 until World War II, that the Malay peasant most forcibly experienced finance capital. The fact that the word *Chettiar* has similar connotations for millions of peasants in Vietnam and Burma as well is a tribute to the homogenization of experience which the capitalist penetration of Southeast Asia brought in its wake. Nor is it simply a question of recognizing a disguise and uncovering the *real* relationship that lies behind it. For the disguise, the metaphor, is part of the real relationship. The Malays historically experienced the moneylender as a moneylender *and* as a Chettiar—that is, as a foreigner and a non-Muslim. Similarly, the Malay typically experiences the shopkeeper and the rice buyer not only as a creditor and wholesaler but as a person of another race and another religion. Thus the concept of class as it is lived is nearly always an alloy containing base metals; its concrete properties, its uses, are those of the alloy and not of the pure metals it may contain. Either we take it as we find it or we abandon the empirical study of class altogether.

That the experienced concept of class should be found embedded in a particular history of social relations is hardly to be deplored. It is this rootedness of the experience that gives it its power and its meaning. When the experience is widely shared, the symbols that embody class relations can come to have an extraordinary evocative power. One can imagine, in this context, how individual grievances become collective grievances and how collective grievances may take on the character of a class-based myth tied, as always, to local experience. Thus, a particular peasant may be a tenant of a landlord whom he regards as particularly oppressive. He may grumble; he may even have fantasies about telling the landlord what he thinks of him or even darker thoughts of arson or homicide. If this is an isolated, personal grievance, the affair is likely to stop there—at fantasy. If, however, many tenants find themselves in the same boat, either because they share the same landlord or because their landlords treat them in comparable ways, there arises the basis for a collective grievance, collective fantasy, and even collective acts. Peasants are then likely to find themselves trading stories about bad landlords and, since some landlords are likely to be more notorious than others, they become the focus of elaborate stories, the repository of the collective grievances of much of the community against that kind of landlord in general. Thus, we have the legend of Haji Broom, which has become a kind of metaphorical shorthand for large-scale landlordism in the region. Thus,

we have poems about Haji Kedikut, which are not so much stories about individuals as a symbol for an entire class of Haji landlords.

If there had ever been (and there has not) a large-scale movement of rebellion against landlords in Kedah, we can be certain that something of the spirit of those legends would have been reflected in action. The way was already symbolically prepared. But the central point to be emphasized is simply that the concept of class, if it is to be found at all, is to be found encoded in concrete, shared experience that reflects both the cultural material and historical givens of its carriers. In the West, the concept of *food* is expressed most often by *bread*. In most of Asia, it means *rice*.<sup>34</sup> The shorthand for *capitalist* in America may be *Rockefeller*, with all the historical connotations of that name; the shorthand for *bad landlord* in Sedaka is *Haji Broom*, with all the historical connotations of that name.

For all these reasons, the study of class relations in Sedaka, as elsewhere, must of necessity be as much a study of meaning and experience as it is of behavior considered narrowly. No other procedure is possible inasmuch as behavior is never self-explanatory. One need cite only the famous example of a rapid closing and opening of a single eyelid, used by Gilbert Ryle and elaborated on by Clifford Geertz, to illustrate the problem.<sup>35</sup> Is it a twitch or a wink? Mere observation of the physical act gives no clue. If it is a wink, what kind of wink is it: one of conspiracy, of ridicule, of seduction? Only a knowledge of the culture, the shared understandings, of the actor and his or her observers and confederates can begin to tell us; and even then we must allow for possible misunderstandings. It is one thing to know that landlords have raised cash rents for rice land; it is another to know what this behavior means for those affected. Perhaps, just perhaps, tenants regard the rise in rents as reasonable and long overdue. Perhaps they regard the rise as oppressive and intended to drive them off the land. Perhaps opinion is divided. Only an inquiry into the experience of tenants, the meaning they attach to the event, can offer us the possibility of an answer. I say "the possibility of an answer" because it may be in the interest of tenants

34. "Man does not live by bread alone." But "bread" may come to mean more than just food; it may mean the wherewithal for living or cash, as in "Can you loan me some bread, man?" In Malay society, the proverb *Jangan pecah periok nasi orang* (Don't break someone else's rice pot) means "don't threaten someone else's source of livelihood."

35. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 6-9. An excellent summary of this intellectual position may be found in Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 173-236. As Bernstein notes, "These intentional descriptions, meanings, and interpretations are not merely subjective states of mind which can be correlated with external behavior; they are constitutive of the activities and practices of our social and political lives" (229-30).

to misrepresent their opinion, and thus interpretation may be tricky. But without that information we are utterly at sea. A theft of grain, an apparent snub, an apparent gift—their import is inaccessible to us unless we can construct it from the meanings only human actors can provide. In this sense, we concentrate at least as much on the experience of behavior as on behavior itself, as much on history as carried in people's heads as on "the flow of events,"<sup>36</sup> as much on how class is perceived and understood as on "objective class relations."

The approach taken here certainly relies heavily on what is known as phenomenology or ethnomethodology.<sup>37</sup> But it is not confined to that approach, for it is only slightly more true that people speak for themselves than that behavior speaks for itself. Pure phenomenology has its own pitfalls. A good deal of behavior, including speech, is automatic and unreflective, based on understandings that are seldom if ever raised to the level of consciousness. A careful observer must provide an interpretation of such behavior that is more than just a repetition of the "commonsense" knowledge of participants. As an interpretation, it has to be judged by the standards of its logic, its economy, and its consistency with other known social facts. Human agents may also provide contradictory accounts of their own behavior, or they may wish to conceal their understanding from the observer or from one another. Hence, the same standards of interpretation apply, although the ground is admittedly treacherous. Beyond this, there simply are factors in any situation that shed light on the action of human agents, but of which they can scarcely be expected to be aware. An international credit crisis, changes in worldwide demand for food grains, a quiet factional struggle in the cabinet that affects agrarian policy, small changes in the genetic makeup of seed grain, for example, may each have a decided impact on local social relations whether or not they are known to the actors involved. Such knowledge is what an outside observer can often add to a description of the situation as a supplement to, *not a substitute for*, the description that human agents themselves provide. For however partial or even mistaken the experienced reality of the human agents, it is that experienced reality that provides the basis for their understanding and their action. Finally, there is no such thing as a complete account of experienced reality, no "full verbal transcript of the conscious experience."<sup>38</sup> The fullness of the transcript is limited both by the empirical and analytical interests of the transcriber—in this case, class relations broadly construed—and by the practical limits of time and space.

36. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 175.

37. See, for example, Roy Turner, ed., *Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

38. John Dunn, "Practising History and Social Science on 'Realist' Assumptions," in *Action and Interpretation: Studies in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, ed. C. Hookway and P. Pettit (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 160.

What is attempted here, then, is a plausible account of class relations in Sedaka that relies as much as possible on the evidence, experience, and descriptions of action which the participants have themselves provided. At numerous points I have supplemented that description with interpretations of my own, for I am well aware of how ideology, the rationalization of personal interest, day-to-day social tactics, or even politeness may affect a participant's account. But never, I hope, have I *replaced* their account with my own. Instead I have tried to validate my interpretation by showing how it "removes anomalies within, or adds information to, the best description which the participant is able to offer." For, as Dunn argues,

What we cannot properly do is to claim to *know* that we understand him or his action better than he does himself without access to the best description which he is able to offer. . . . The criterion of proof for the validity of a description or interpretation of an action is the economy and accuracy with which it handles the full text of the agent's description.