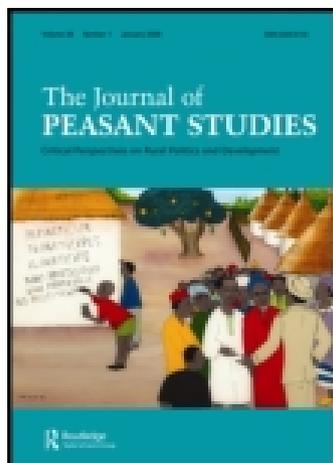


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### Everyday resistance, socialist revolution and rural development: The Vietnamese case

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# *Everyday Resistance, Socialist Revolution and Rural Development: The Vietnamese Case*

Christine Pelzer White\*

This article takes up two major themes which were discussed in the conference on 'Everyday forms of peasant resistance in South-east Asia' and further elaborated upon in the article by James Scott in this volume. The first is balancing the 'inordinate attention to large-scale peasant insurrection' with an examination of the role of everyday forms of peasant resistance in transforming social reality; the second is an examination of the relationship between the peasantry and the state in the post-revolutionary, post-colonial context.

The greatest merit of this approach is the focus it accords to the actions of peasants who are so often portrayed as led or determined by outside political and economic forces in the form of party leadership, state development programmes and capitalist or socialist transformation. As Scott argues:

Any history or theory of peasant politics which attempts to do justice to the peasantry as an 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 to bring some conceptual order to this seeming welter of human activity.

It is, of course, the task of social scientists to discover the hidden logic or 'laws of motion' which can impart sense to the miscellaneous acts and facts of everyday life. For Marxist political economists, class struggle is this basic organising principle; for neo-classical economists the fundamental dynamic is to be found in rational choices by economically motivated individuals. Scott's approach has the interesting originality of combining these two most influential contemporary paradigms: when peasants react in a utilitarian and individualistic fashion against the powerful forces destroying their lives they are also engaging in class struggle. In acting to marginally increase their chance for survival against devastating odds, they are also carrying out acts of resistance. Yes . . . but when a peasant severs the fingers of his right hand in order to avoid conscription – a graphic example of individual peasant resistance which Scott cites from French history – he avoids death as a soldier, but at the cost of both his bodily integrity and his ability to produce for his own livelihood. Are acts of resistance which add up to self-sabotage

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of the peasant's own creative energies and way of life – footdragging, self-mutilation, abandoning ancestral home and village to flee taxes and conscription – the best alternative open to peasants? Scott seems to answer this in the affirmative: he appears to hold no hope for a modern system which might operate to the peasants' *advantage*, for a system where the peasant might be an active citizen, not a protesting victim.

This is a sign of the times. In the 1960s and early 1970s there was a certain consensus on the left in the West that peasant revolution and national liberation struggle would open the way for a radically improved system for the rural population which constituted a viable alternative to capitalist transformation. It was argued that collectivisation in China and Vietnam improved peasant welfare in an egalitarian developmental context and demonstrated that a socialist state did not necessarily follow the Stalinist model of coercion *vis-à-vis* the peasantry.

To my mind, this still holds. But after the distressing spectacle in early 1979 of the Chinese People's Liberation Army destroying Vietnamese towns and villages in the northern border region so soon after American troops had done the same further south, and now that Vietnamese and Chinese peasant conscripts continue to fight and die on the frontier, some of the hope we had invested in peasant revolution has necessarily dimmed. Peasant revolution and successful national liberation does not usher in peace between socialist states; neither does it lead to the withering away of the state. However, this does not necessarily mean that the peasants have not achieved advantages as a result of revolutions and post-revolutionary agrarian reforms.

#### EVERDAY RESISTANCE OR CAPITALIST V. SOCIALIST RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The primary weakness of the 'everyday resistance' approach is its focus on negative manifestations of power rather than the question of how peasants can exercise positive political power. There are two successive ways of achieving the latter: first, overthrowing the exploitative system (and historically the power to do this has tended to come from a combination of armed struggle and political organisation rather than from low-key everyday resistance) and, second, peasant participation in the elaboration of a new system. There is no question that it is far more difficult to create a democratic, socialist system than to defeat colonialists and landlords, and in the absence of effective political means for the peasantry to express their own interests, the passive power of non-compliance with certain government policies may be the peasants' most effective method for forcing modifications in the new system (an insight derived from the 'everyday resistance' approach).

A further problem with Scott's approach is that the effectiveness of resistance is not considered of primary importance nor is it clearly specified what is being resisted (landlords? capitalism? the state?). As a result,

dissimilar phenomena are grouped under the same rubric (for example, non-compliance with state development policies and a labour boycott against local landlords in protest against a deterioration in labour conditions). The conceptual slide from resistance to landlords to resistance to 'state policies' obscures the crucial question of the class content of state policies, that is, the differential impact of state policies on different rural classes and strata. Finally, Scott's use of the concept 'peasant' as a single, undifferentiated collective actor *vis-à-vis* landlords, the state, etc. ignores the crucial question of socio-economic differentiation between peasant households as well as differences in interest within peasant households which are especially acute in patriarchal systems. The concept 'peasants' applied to rural societies in both capitalist and socialist systems obscures the major differences between the two: capitalist development tends to increase the differentiation between peasant households in terms of landownership and access to labour, credit and inputs, while socialist development policies generally work to decrease differentiation, equalise access to the means of production and food and create a relatively homogeneous new class, 'the collective peasantry'.

Scott argues that revolution creates a more powerful state, to the detriment of the peasantry. Revolution, he claims:

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 industrialisation, taxation and collectivisation are very much at odds with the goals for which peasants had imagined they were fighting.

In fact, socialist states are often *weaker* in relationship to the peasantry than their capitalist counterparts because they have abolished powerful tools of economic coercion which operate in capitalist systems to drain the peasantry of the fruits of its labours: private ownership of land and uncontrolled markets in labour and food. While Stalin replaced economic coercion with the coercion of administrative pressure and violence, the Vietnamese state has not used the route of physical coercion. Many of Vietnam's present development problems stem from the fact that structural reforms – land reform and co-operativisation – have increased the power and standard of living of the peasantry to the extent that national accumulation from agriculture is severely curtailed.

Far from 'battering' on the rural population, during the food crisis of the late 1970s in Vietnam it was state officials who did not have enough to eat and got thinner and thinner while peasants grew enough to feed themselves, but not enough for the non-agricultural population. Furthermore, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is not more coercive *vis-à-vis* the peasantry than its predecessors, the French colonial state and the American-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The economic and political violence of the colonial system has been well documented (for example, in Ngo Vinh

Long's *Before the Revolution*); the same applies for the use of military force as an instrument of state coercion by the Saigon government and its American allies. That the post-revolutionary Vietnamese state is more hegemonic than its predecessors means, among other things, that its authority has greater acceptance as legitimate, which is an essential precondition for a *less* coercive state.

It is by no means self-evident that industrialisation, taxation and collectivisation are at odds with the goals Vietnamese peasants fought for. The plans of the 'ruling group' helped to power by Vietnamese peasant revolutionaries include providing peasants with improved agricultural inputs and consumer goods through industrialisation, providing the peasant population with improved health and education and a national defence system, and creating a relatively economically undifferentiated peasant social structure with relatively equitable distribution of food and welfare through collectivisation. The egalitarian social and economic context created by Vietnamese co-operatives seems to me perfectly compatible with Scott's own definition of primary peasant concern for 'moral economy' (a priority to subsistence and the survival of the peasant way of life). If peasants reject profit maximising, economic differentiation, and rapid economic growth and accumulation at the price of a declining food and welfare entitlement for a sizeable portion of the population, as Scott argues in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), then what Vietnamese peasants were fighting for shares many of the crucial elements of the Vietnamese state's aims and achievements in collectivisation.

A central assumption of Scott's peasant populism seems to be that the state is always and everywhere the enemy of the peasant, with no potential positive role to play. The most interesting process to study then becomes peasant resistance to what is generally conceptualised as 'development': mechanisation, capitalisation, the generation of marketable surplus, accumulation, etc. While this is in my view overly negative, it is a refreshing alternative to the vision of the growing field of 'rural development', which assumes that the state orchestrates rural change in an enlightened manner [*Lea and Chaudhri*, 1983]. State plans are often unrealistic and peasant non-compliance a valuable corrective. Here again there are significant differences between the policies of capitalist and socialist states. One potential outcome of the process of capitalist transformation of the agrarian sector in the Third World would be the emergence of a politically significant farmer class capable of obtaining significant advantages from the state, including high prices and price support systems for agricultural commodities and subsidised access to agricultural inputs in some variant of the North American and Western European model. Meanwhile, the bulk of the former peasant population becomes economically marginalised, forced into the desperate survival strategies of the rural poor or driven to find an alternative urbanised way of life as workers or urban slum dwellers.

Is there a democratic and socialist alternative to this dominant development pattern? Is it possible for peasants to enter the modern world as

citizens rather than as passive subjects and victims? Can they enjoy benefits from nationally organised industrialisation and socio-economic transformation rather than suffer a deterioration of their previous standard of living and way of life? I believe that this is what the Vietnamese revolution has attempted to achieve, and although it has not succeeded there are insufficient grounds to bring out the familiar argument, 'revolution betrayed'.

#### APPLYING THE 'EVERDAY RESISTANCE' APPROACH TO VIETNAM

Many examples in modern Vietnamese history from colonial times to the present day could be fitted into the general rubric of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance'. Some are trivial but others have been of such importance as to rival the transformations brought about by armed rebellion and political revolution. This focus has much to offer in filling out the picture of peasant actions in their own class interest which were not limited, under colonial rule, to overpowered armed resistance or passive but increasingly resentful compliance – and which did not come to an end with the victory of a revolutionary party espousing the interests of the Vietnamese peasants and workers.

In the remainder of this article I will discuss a number of examples of such resistance and the insights to be gained. However, while focusing on the concept of 'everyday resistance' does help illuminate some important neglected aspects of rural socio-political dynamics, it does not advance us very far in the analysis of the power relationship between peasants and local and national power structures; in fact, it may obscure and mystify as much as it illuminates. The structure of power relations which determine the effectiveness or futility of resistance seems far more crucial than whether 'resistance' can be identified.

#### COLONIAL VIETNAM: EVERYDAY RESISTANCE AND EVERYDAY COLLABORATION

The agrarian pattern in French Indo-China is well known: in Cochin-China, huge tracts of tenant-farmed riceland owned by French and collaborating Vietnamese beneficiaries of colonial land grants ('concessions'); in Tonkin and Annam, a complex situation characterised initially by tiny, fragmented holdings owned in part by peasant cultivators, in part by corporate villages in the form of communal land, and in part by relatively small landlords, but with a steady rise of land concentration under the impact of French colonial tax and land policies. An impression given by much of the literature is that this pattern was the outcome of the action of French colonial policy on pre-existing traditional rural life (the recent and relatively sparse Vietnamese settlement in the Mekong Delta; longer established 'closed' corporate landowning villages in the densely populated deltas of Annam and Tonkin). The colonial government or in some versions, the capitalism which it

introduced, was the active agent; Vietnamese peasants, when not in active revolt, were passively embedded in the clay of nature, history and demography.

The main tendency in studies of the period of conquest and colonial rule has been to concentrate on elite response and on armed or overtly violent forms of struggle (for example, the excellent studies by Truong Buu Lam [1967] and David Marr [1971]). Mandarins surrendered, resisted or committed suicide; patriotic mavericks such as the strongman De Tham fought the good fight for years but were finally defeated; Annamese peasant demonstrators besieged administrators in crisis years (1908; 1930). The story seems to be that peasants charge into the fray of armed resistance when there is a crisis and a 'leader' or 'movement' to follow, but in between these heroic, if often futile, movements they keep their heads down and sullenly plough their furrows, harvest their rice and pay more and more of it in rent and/or taxes until the next 'precipitating crisis' (harvest failure, depression, war) and/or 'charismatic leader' comes along. This is not just the picture which emerges from studies published in the West; Vietnamese revolutionary historiography puts a great deal of emphasis on the role of the leader, the 'vanguard party', and the 'opportune moment'.

A change of focus to 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' allows a different picture to form in which, at first glance at least, peasant action is more central. Pierre Gourou's work on the Tonkin delta provides one example: peasants, hostile to the break in local custom involved when an outsider acquired some land in the village, made sure that the 'usurped' field would be barren of rice by surreptitiously drawing a string across the field in spring. [Gourou, 1955]. However, although such sabotage may have slowed down the process of peasant land loss in the Tonkin delta, it did not ultimately prevent steady peasant pauperisation and the rise of landlordism during the course of the colonial period. Like many other instances of literal and figurative footdragging, much low-key resistance seems to have actually functioned primarily as delaying tactics in an inexorable process of peasant loss of land.

However, at least one effective but ignored instance of peasant resistance radically transformed French colonial land policy in Tonkin. During the period of conquest, the widespread form of peasant non-violent resistance was flight to the foothills, deserting fields and villages to the advancing French. The colonial response was to sell or give away these 'empty' lands as huge concessions to French colons [Thompson, 1937: 145-6]. There were grandiose plans to turn Tonkin into a settler colony along the lines of Quebec; one French writer even wrote that 'Tonkin will doubtless be able to furnish us wheat as cheaply as North America'! [cited in *Robequain*, 1944: 191]. In 1900, the threshold between the decades of 'conquest' and the period of 'colonial development', *two-thirds* of the land in Vietnam which had been given or sold as concessions to French colons was in Tonkin; only one-fourth was in Cochinchina [Nguyen Khac Dam, 1957: 74]. The policy of turning Tonkin into a settler colony or setting up the kind of large

absentee landlord system which later emerged in Cochin-China foundered on the reef of peasant resistance in Tonkin; in the words of a leading historian of the colonial period: 'there was a shortage of labour since the ousted Annamites naturally refused to work the land of those whom they regarded as usurpers' [Thompson, 1937: 145–6]. The colonial government faced pressure from colons demanding that the government buy back the land they could not put into cultivation for lack of willing labourers, while in other cases peasant resistance to the colons erupted into violent struggle, which made the government find it politic to restore the peace by returning the land to the villagers who felt so strongly that it was theirs by right. By the early 1930s the remaining pockets of concessions in Tonkin were historical relics – Pierre Gourou, in his survey of the Tonkin delta, described one concentration of huge concessions of as much as 700 hectares each as 'evidence of an unfortunate policy which has now been definitely abandoned' [Gourou, 1955: 254].

In Cochin-China, however, the same policy was neither pronounced 'unfortunate' nor abandoned. In other words, Tonkin peasant resistance had a decisive influence on the course of colonial policy and the emerging agrarian pattern of French-ruled Vietnam at the beginning of this century.

Peasants resisted, peasants guided the hand of history, peasants defeated government policy; but this is only part of the story. When we turn to the question of how to conceptualise this resistance, it is not possible to describe it as straightforward anti-colonial resistance. For example, many of the peasants who refused to farm for colons on what had been their own land found alternative employment – building the roads, railroads and administrative buildings which went up in the early colonial years. French settler farmers were competing for labour with the colonial public works programme. Tonkin peasants may have effectively resisted French pipe-dreams of turning Tonkin into a settler colony by refusing to be their tenants, but as construction workers they helped transform Governor-General Paul Doumer's visionary blueprint for French Indo-China into reality.

We find a similar situation when the local population near fledgling rubber plantations in Cochin-China proved unusable as estate workers. The montagnards were not accustomed to an intensive work schedule, could easily flee, and resented French land occupation on what had been part of their territory for slash-and-burn agriculture. Tonkinese peasants, however, broken into the discipline of long work hours by the intensive rice cultivation of the most densely populated provinces of the Red River delta, and duped by the enticements of labour recruiters, were brought in as the plantation labour force [Boserup, 1965].

Perhaps the lesson of these cases is that resistance is stronger when peasants are asked to work the same land in worse conditions than when the place and type of work are radically different from past experience.

If the peasant majority is held to play a major role in the making of history, then established rule, however oppressive and exploitative, depends in large measure upon their collaboration or compliance with the system.

Therefore we must add an inventory of 'everyday forms of peasant *collaboration*' to balance our list of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance': both exist, both are important. I suspect, moreover, that in 'normal' periods there is more everyday collaboration than everyday resistance. Indeed, this is why new regimes seek rapid 'normalisation'.

For established rulers or elites, everyday forms of resistance constitute the major problem, for once open rebellion is repressed or kept in check the only resistance left is footdragging, absenteeism and all the other weapons of the weak and unorganised whose capacity for strong resistance has been broken. However, some such 'resistance' in fact functions often as a safety valve: for example, the harmless village play in which the permanently poor and helpless take comfort in scenes of role reversal or in mockery of their 'betters' (a term closer to 'elites' than to, for example, 'oppressors' or 'exploiters'). There are always little ways in which rent or tax-paying peasants can 'cheat' or 'trick' the landlord or government. But note the lack of legitimacy implied in these terms, unlike the mobilisation to righteous struggle which accompanies peasant or nationalist uprisings. In cases where the peasants are resigned to accepting the system, putting energy into ruses to marginally 'cheat' the system can mask the unpalatable fact that in fact it is they who are being royally exploited, that is, 'cheated'. The tricks of adding stones, straw, etc. to increase the weight of the landlord or tax collector's share of the harvest can perhaps give peasants the illusion of having more power and manoeuvrability than is actually the case – that is, these ineffective but psychologically satisfying forms of resistance could in fact contribute to false consciousness, blinding people to the painful reality of the extent of their powerlessness and exploitation.

A further problem with this concept of everyday forms of resistance is the very formulation: it is those in authority, the landlords or the government, who label such acts 'resistance'. The peasant furtively cheating on the weight of the harvest is just trying to get as much as possible out of a raw deal – I doubt that it is often thought of as a mini-rebellion. It is the established authorities, if they find it out, who treat it and punish it as such. For example, in the film about life on an Italian peasant estate, 'Tree of the Wooden Clogs', the motivation for the central dramatic act of cutting down a tree is not defiance of the landlord's authority but, rather, that a peasant boy's clog had split and in his impoverished situation his father saw no other way to obtain another clog. It was the landlord who chose to interpret this as an act of resistance to established authority and expel the hapless peasant family from his estate.

From the point of view of a revolutionary who wants to transform the system, the most salient fact, the central problem, is the degree of peasant compliance with and acceptance of the system which exploits them. For instance, in *The Peasant Question*, Communist Party organisers Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap report a conversation with a tenant:

We asked: 'The landlord collects half of the produce as rent at harvest

time: is this exploitation?' The tenant replied, 'You can't really call it exploitation. I don't own any land, so I am lucky that he rents to me. I can farm, and he owns land, so of course it is just that each of us gets half of the harvest' (p.22).

This same real or imagined symbolic tenant probably put as much straw in the landlord's half as he could get away with, and might have roared with laughter at impersonations of the landlord at village shows. He might even have made up a satirical ditty about the landlord's personal quirks and habits. But in the balance of his actions he goes along with the rules of the system and his consciousness is nowhere near conceptualising the necessity, or even possibility, of a change of system. In this sense, he collaborates in maintaining the system.

This is not to say that 'everyday forms of resistance' cannot be significant in peasant involvement in a revolutionary movement. One example comes from the memoirs of a man who, as a peasant youth with a smattering of education in 1930, first heard of communism through contemporary newspaper accounts of 'communist rebels' in Nghe-Tinh. Without any other information or contact, he called together a group of friends and proposed that they consider themselves 'communists' and stand up to the rich and powerful of the village. He suggested that those who work for the rich fight back against beatings and sabotage the landlords' buffaloes on the sly by beating them under the legs so as not to leave any tell-tale marks. When they worked in the landlords' kitchens they should throw leftovers to the dogs lest they be used for the meals of other agricultural labourers and when harvesting for the landlords always leave paddy in the field for poor children to glean [Chanh Thi, 1960]. After a while they were successful in putting an end to beatings at the village *dinh* previously considered a 'village custom', and this had a demonstration effect on the poor in neighbouring villages and attracted the attentions of a Communist Party organiser who recruited this group as a cell in the wider party network.

Such resistance to the rich and powerful organised in small peasant communities as well as on a regional scale existed in other colonised South-east Asian countries, and has existed periodically among poor peasants and landless labourers in post-colonial South-east Asia to this day. What are the conditions necessary for such scattered and low-key resistance to lead to a revolutionary transformation of the rural socio-economic system? In Vietnam, the route included peasant involvement in a revolutionary alliance with other social groups, most notably intellectuals but also workers, and culminated in the DRV land reform of 1953–56 [White, 1974; 1979]. The land reform campaign explicitly aimed at redistributing not only land but also power from the landlords and rural elite to the majority of the peasantry (the former landless, poor peasants, and middle peasants). Although the process of redistribution of power was more problematic than the redistribution of land, the economic and political power of the former landlord class was broken once and for all, and a significant number of peasants from

poor and landless class backgrounds (if not the class as a whole) were promoted to local positions of responsibility and gained political experience [White, 1981]. In my view, the shift of power achieved in the land reform was consolidated through the formation of co-operatives which ensured the peasants access to land and employment, both on a collective and family basis: membership in the co-operative guaranteed peasants both employment on the co-operative land and access to an inalienable family plot. While not providing prosperity, the new post-revolutionary co-operative socio-economic system provided an improved standard of living and relatively egalitarian access to employment, land and rice which had not existed under the colonial state.

#### REVOLUTION BETRAYED?

The case that socialist countries are just as anti-peasant as the others has been put most forcefully in Michael Lipton's study of 'urban bias in world development' [Lipton, 1977] while the argument that peasant interests are at odds with those of the party is a theme in James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* [Scott, 1976] as well as in his article in this volume. Are the pre- and post-revolutionary systems in Vietnam radically different, that is, has a real agrarian revolution taken place? Is the peasant always and everywhere condemned to a weak and defensive position of resistance against more powerful local elites and the state, whether that state be labelled 'capitalist' or 'socialist' and the local elites called 'landlords and rich farmers' or 'cadres'?

My short answer is that, despite some similarities, there are extremely important differences between pre- and post-revolutionary Vietnam. Of course, except in relatively industrialised countries where agricultural subsidies have been introduced, most states try to extract more surplus than agricultural producers are willing to part with. Even in the Third World there are exceptions, such as when the Republic of Vietnam's budget was provided primarily by US aid and therefore it was not necessary to squeeze the South Vietnamese peasantry fiscally. But widespread peasant reluctance to meet government tax and procurement demands seems less significant than the differences in methods employed in different states to overcome this resistance. In colonial Vietnam pressure on peasants who did not come up with the required head tax included, literally, the use of thumbscrews; the Vietnamese socialist government's methods are limited to administrative pressures, emulation campaigns and unfavourable rural-urban terms of trade embodied in official prices of agricultural and industrial commodities.

The major problems for the peasantry during the colonial period were its inability, despite the forms of 'everyday resistance' mentioned earlier, to prevent loss of their land, and growing hunger as the lion's share of rice production left the villages as a result of economic pressures backed up by the use of force where necessary. In the 1970s, on the other hand, the major problem for socialist government policy was growing *peasant* encroachment

on co-operative land and the government's inability to induce the peasants to grow and deliver enough surplus to feed the cities. To me this indicates a very considerable shift in the balance of power in the new system in the direction of the peasantry.

#### EVERYDAY FORMS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE AND SOCIALIST AGRARIAN POLICY

In post-revolutionary Vietnam what could be called peasant everyday resistance – or non-compliance with official policy – has been a major constraint on the effectiveness of state economic planning and agrarian policy. To take one example, it has been government policy to keep the price of rice low. It was felt to be a principle of socialism that the basic foodgrain should not be a commodity. There should be no free market in a basic human necessity; no cash nexus governing full and empty stomachs. It was a major policy aim to insulate this basic necessity from the 'law of value' and to relate the circulation of rice to a combination of need and work through the complicated workings of the rural co-operative, procurement and urban rationing systems. In the initial years, this system worked reasonably well, although never perfectly; it seems to have broken down under a combination of the pressures of war which caused rapid inflation in free market prices and the sudden reduction in foreign aid after the end of the war and deterioration of relations with China. Shortfalls in state rations due to procurement difficulties, and the high price of rice on the free market caused hardship for state employees and urban workers on fixed salaries.

Peasants unhappy about the procurement price of rice, and the lack of availability of consumer goods in exchange, had many ways of resisting official exhortations to increase production and deliveries to the state: for example, by reducing the amount of energy expended by restricting the acreage of co-operative rice land or refusing to harvest some of it (some land as well as much energy was transferred to the 'family economy' which was centred on the five per cent of co-operative land reserved for household use) or by transforming the low-priced commodity rice into a more profitable and more easily marketable commodity by feeding it to ducks or pigs, distilling it into alcohol, etc. Experimentation since the Sixth Plenum in 1979 with a more liberal pricing and marketing system is in part a result of peasant dissatisfaction with, and 'resistance' to the earlier system. (For a discussion of the Sixth Plenum, see Nguyen huu Dong [1981] and White [1983].)

However, it should be noted that the same phenomena could be used as illustrations for rather different theories. What I have mentioned here as an example of peasant 'resistance' to government policy could equally well be cited as an example of rational peasant economic calculation, that is, either Scott or Popkin in the terms of the 'moral economy' v. 'rational peasant' debate [Scott, 1976; Popkin, 1979]. Focus on the motivation of individual or collective peasant action, it seems to me, tends to homogenise peasant

action under *different* political economic systems: whether the system is feudal, capitalist or socialist, peasants always resist the state and the local elite; peasants always make rational economic calculations. What seems more interesting is to understand the systemic differences in the contexts in which these peasant responses (or calculations) take place which vary in very significant ways between colonial and post-colonial capitalist states as well as between the colonial capitalist system and the post-colonial transition to socialism in the case of Vietnam.

#### ANALYSING RURAL POWER RELATIONS

I would like to outline what I see as the main elements necessary for an analysis and comparative study of rural power relations and their transformations.

(1) At least four levels need to be distinguished, and the powers of each within the system defined: the state (divided into national and regional levels); the 'local elite' (village government, landlords, party cadres as the case may be); peasant households and individuals within these households. The last is crucial in order to take account of gender and generational differences among the peasantry. The field of peasant studies generally implicitly equates 'the peasant' with male household heads, which actually excludes the majority of the peasant population from the socio-economic analysis. This is important for the analysis of 'peasant resistance' as household heads and other household members do not necessarily have the same interests. This is especially true in a peasant family farming system where the household head owns the land and controls family labour. For example, in the move from a system of primarily male controlled 'family farms' to a co-operative form of agriculture there are cases in which within the same household the wife was enthusiastic about the idea of collective work but the husband was more resistant to the new co-operative policy. One case study of a Vietnamese village found that in the initial stage of co-operativisation the family land was divided in half and husbands and wives chose separately whether or not to join the co-operative [*Pham Cuong and Nguyen Van Ba*, 1976: 35; *White*, 1982]. In other words, there can be both 'resistance' and support for a government policy within a single peasant household.

(2) Following on from the previous point, one can then analyse the patterns of alliance between the various actors: the state and the peasantry against the local elite (anti-landlord in the land reform; anti-local cadre corruption in socialist reform campaigns), the peasants and the local elite against the state (for example, in either the traditional or socialist corporate village to keep payments to the state at a minimum); the state and individuals against household heads (in the case of the marriage law, and in the above-mentioned case of conflict between husbands and wives over sup-

porting the government's co-operative programme), or against corrupt or overbearing local officials.

(3) To what extent is it possible to transform a sovereign state-subject peasant system in which the only choice open to the peasantry is compliance or resistance to policies imposed from the outside? In some political systems (multi-party electoral as in Malaysia; the Vietnamese political process of leading party, mass organisations, elections and democratic centralism) is it meaningful to describe peasants as citizens and not merely subjects, unlike colonial and post-colonial military regimes which rely heavily on the use of force *vis-à-vis* the peasantry? In terms of Vietnamese ideological aims, is it possible for peasants to become 'collective masters' of the society?

(4) Phenomena which can appear as 'individual' or 'spontaneous' and unorganised resistance are probably often rooted in structures, such as collective cultural beliefs and habits or patterns of old or new economic exchanges, which are not sufficiently recognised or understood. Some theories concerning these patterns have been advanced: Scott in *Moral Economy* analyses peasant resistance to colonial transformations in terms of well-established economic cultural norms concerning subsistence and reciprocity. Another such pattern hypothesised by Ester Boserup is that the interaction of demography and agricultural technology produces culturally enshrined patterns of work and leisure which are very resistant to change. In the case of Vietnam, I find this helpful in understanding the difficulty in implementing government programmes involving labour intensification (increasing the number of harvests per year, moving from extensive slash-and-burn agriculture to more labour-intensive sedentary agriculture in the highlands. The government campaign for introducing a third harvest per year, an early spring rice crop, places a peak labour demand right at *Tet*, the traditional long yearly holiday which used to correspond with a long agricultural slack season but which in the new more intensive agricultural calendar is already much curtailed.

These patterns need not, however, be only remnants of the past but also include new emerging forms of patterned but 'unofficial' economic exchanges. For example, much of what has appeared as 'corruption' or 'illegal activity' in Vietnam actually could be better analysed as forms of exchange between individual or collective actors dealing with each other directly rather than through official government channels. For example, an electricity station agreed to provide electricity to a co-operative in exchange for a stipulated number of pigs and chickens for the electricity station workers. Formally, such an exchange was illegal; informally, it could be seen as a more direct worker-peasant exchange than the official channel of state procurement from co-operatives and state wages and rations for the workers. It only hit the newspapers in the form of a complaint about corruption when the electricity station failed to live up to its side of the bargain. In short, rather

than calling such phenomena 'resistance' to official government policies and legal codes, they can be analysed as an emerging alternative structure of economic exchange. The economic reforms in Vietnam since 1979 could be analysed as an attempt to legalise a number of previously illegal but widespread and uncontrollable patterns of economic activity rooted in petty commodity production. The official economic system which had relied heavily on bureaucratic planning has had to be modified in light of the growing unofficial system of economic exchanges.

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, accepting 'everyday resistance' as the primary framework for analysis depends on one's definition of peasant interests, and of the desirability of petty commodity production as a way of life to be defended for its own sake, as a high moral value. However, peasants do not necessarily want to remain peasants, and do not necessarily place highest priority on preserving their status as poor petty commodity producers in a richer world. Peasants frequently have the ambition of becoming non-peasants (whether for themselves or for their children): to become members of higher income or higher status groups, whether landlords, businessmen, white-collar workers, state employees, workers, teachers, etc. Vietnamese development thinking sees petty commodity production as the root of poverty, and industrialisation and technological change as the key to a better life for the whole population. If this is defined, as Scott seems to, as inimical to a core peasant desire to resist all outside attempts to destroy the petty commodity producing traditional way of life, then 'peasant interests' and state development plans are inexorably at odds. The dilemma which the Vietnamese system is attempting to solve is how to transform an economy of poor petty commodity producers into 'collective masters' of a more productive, prosperous and technologically advanced rural economic system. The reinvigoration of the peasant household economy and collective village institutions which were the result of structural reforms in Vietnam have increased peasants' power to defend what they see as their interests in this process of socio-economic transformation.

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