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Nonrevolt in the Rural Context: Some Considerations

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In dealing with the problem of revolt and other forms of collective violence, there is the tendency among scholars to gravitate towards societies or communities where revolts have taken place and neglect those communities where they have not. Since, as James Scott has observed, "exploitation without rebellion seems to be a far more ordinary state of affairs than revolutionary war," there is a need to focus attention on the problem of nonrevolt.¹

Studies on revolts and other forms of political violence in the Philippines generally suffer from weak empirical support and vagueness of concepts. Repression, exploitation, injustice, rising expectations, and others: such concepts figure prominently in such studies but they are often used loosely and without adequate specification. The study of "the communities that did not revolt" should provide us with a way of testing the validity of interpretations about revolts and of specifying more closely the combination of factors that make peasants "rise up in arms."

The highly variegated, archipelagic construction of Philippine society provides one with rich ground for considering the problem. The geography of rebellion and war in the Philippines shows a complex range: pockets of resistance, regions of insurrection, flashpoints of violence, areas of quiescence. What explains such a complex pattern?

In truth, "exploitation without rebellion" has already received much direct attention. Much research has been pursued elsewhere though many points of disagreement remain as it also remains to be seen how the Philippine experience bears out conclusions of research done on countries like Vietnam, Indonesia or Burma.

1. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 4.

Let me sketch some of the ideas which have been presented on the problem of "exploitation without rebellion," and, conversely, the problem of what leads peasants to move from mere dissatisfaction with their condition to collective acts of violence as a response to that condition.²

THE PROBLEM OF EXPLOITATION

Exploitation underlies revolt but does not necessarily lead to it. The relationship between exploitation and revolt is often misjudged not only because other variables are neglected but because exploitation as an analytic tool is used with insufficient rigor.

Exploitation, therefore, requires clearer definition and a closer marking out of its *nature* as well as *degree*. What does a given society or social group consider exploitative? In answering the question, we must be sensitive to the fact that while exploitation can be measured in objective terms (focussing on matters of calories, wages, tenancy arrangements, and others), it is, to a significant extent, also subjective and culturally defined. It is thus important to investigate where the "thresholds" of exploitation lie in given communities or over a certain period and what are the peasant conceptions of social justice, rights and obligations.

THREATS TO SUBSISTENCE

Subsistence calamities (such as caused by crop failures, natural disasters, increase in taxes, and others) figure prominently in histories of revolts. Yet, as Samuel Popkin says: "There is no clear relationship between subsistence threat (or decline) and collective response."³ When minimum subsistence is threatened, revolt is only one of several courses of action that the peasant can take.

Further, it is not the mere threat to subsistence which is significant for analytical purposes but its *scope* and *suddenness*. A gradual decline in subsistence levels may dissipate the potential for

2. In this summary I have drawn from such works as Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Joel S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution: Pressures Toward Political and Social Change in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*; and Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

3. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 245.

revolt as it enables peasants to devise adaptive or "coping" strategies to meet the changing situation. At the same time, it allows the state or the ruling class time for palliative measures such as short-term employment, nutritional programs for children, food relief, and various "counter-insurgency" operations. Furthermore, subsistence shocks that affect only individuals or small groups reduce the possibilities of the wide, collective action that characterizes rebellions.

ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

The existence of alternative or adaptive strategies for an exploited and impoverished peasantry may be an obstacle to revolt. Such strategies may be individual or collective, temporary or permanent. They include migration, social banditry, criminality, drunkenness and other safety-valves for social and economic anxieties.

Faced with drops in subsistence levels, the peasant may engage in various forms of "self exploitation," intensifying labor inputs, putting all family members to work, paring down expenditures to the barest essentials, and others. He may engage in off-farm employment, adopt disguised stratagems for increasing his share of the harvest, or devise ways of "raiding the cash economy" by becoming a makeshift migrant to the city where he scavenges for cash and work. He may find a haven in such structures as local self-help societies, churches, and various other associations which provide a measure of security and sustenance that cannot be extracted either from the land or the state. To the extent that such strategies and structures are effective they demobilize an exploited peasantry.

RISK-AND-BENEFIT

The decision to revolt is not produced out of "blind anger" or "utter hopelessness" but involves calculations of risk and benefit on the part of both individuals and groups. On the side of risk, the coercive power of the state (courts, police, army) figures prominently. Many revolts take place in situations marked by a breakdown in state power. However, one cannot conclude that, in all cases, the potential for revolt increases in direct proportion to the weakening of the coercive power of the state. Peasants may mis-

judge the risk because of poor communications or the lack of information. Repression may provoke violence instead of preventing it.

From the peasants' standpoint, a revolt must appear as a feasible enterprise. "A rebellion cannot start from a situation of complete impotence."⁴ It follows that a certain degree of freedom (such as that afforded by geographical location, breakdown in landlord power, presence of alternative resources) is a precondition for peasant revolt. In this wise, the security afforded by numbers and alliances and the presence of both short-term and long-term incentives (provisions of food and weapons, redress of grievances against local injustices, mutual aid, visions of a better order) enter into peasant calculations of the value of revolt.

It appears that such rational calculations or risk-and-benefit increase in importance as a factor as we move from sporadic, anomic uprisings to the more sustained and institutionalized forms of armed struggle (such as a revolution). A consideration of the factors for revolt (or nonrevolt) is, therefore, also tied to a consideration of the form that collective violence takes.

POLITICAL COMPETENCE

Collective action needs to be focussed and directed. Enemies have to be identified, an ideology worked out as a guide for action, and skills for political action acquired. This underscores the importance of leaders and organizers who bring in new ideas, new options, and new skills, enhancing that "political competence" needed for peasants to mobilize and act.

Corollary to all these are such conditions as demographic changes and improved communications which occasion the greater spread of new information and ideas.

This is theoretical terrain well-trod by scholars but there are aspects of the problem which remain to be clarified, particularly in the Philippine context.

CONTEXTS OF REVOLT

Finally, one enters into a complex ground not readily subject to specification or quantification. This involves questions of culture,

4. Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. 290.

historical experience, and social structure.

A given community may have built up a tradition that encourages the "mystification" of the peasants' condition and cultivates deference and passivity before the facts of repression and exploitation. What role is played by religion, either as a cultural system or social institution, in mobilizing or demobilizing the peasantry? Such studies as the work of Iletto on the *pasyon* point to a needed direction as they go beyond the reductive interpretation of Philippine Catholicism as a conservative influence.⁵

On the other hand, there are areas of endemic rebellion which may have built up a fund of leadership and experience, of political and military skills, that has created an environment conducive to revolt. Studies in areas with a tradition of warfare should enable us to determine the weight that can be assigned to "historical experience" in assessing revolts.

Finally, what kind of social structure provides a framework conducive to revolt? In his study of a Central Luzon village,⁶ Brian Fegan indicates that the Huk rebellion was occasioned not so much by high rates of share tenancy as by demographic and economic conditions which created village unity out of exchange labor practices and internal class homogeneity. The breakdown of such unity, he argues, dissipates the potential for revolt.⁷

This coincides with Scott's view that communities with strong communal traditions and few sharp class divisions are more insurrection-prone than those with weak communal traditions and sharper class divisions inasmuch as they have a greater capacity for collective action and experience crisis in a more uniform fashion.⁸ However, Scott adds that this is not a closed equation. More atomistic, self-divided villages are usually more vulnerable to market shocks whereas communal structures are often able to "redistribute pain" in such a way as to avoid or postpone subsistence crises. He concludes: "The difference in those two structures seems, to me at least, to lie less in their explosiveness per se than in the nature of the explosion once it takes place."⁹

5. See Reynaldo C. Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

6. Brian Fegan, "Folk Capitalism: Economic Strategies of Peasants in a Philippine Wet-Rice Village" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1979), pp. 486-87.

7. For a different analysis see Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

8. Scott, *The Moral Economy*, pp. 201-2.

9. Ibid., p. 203.

CONCLUSION

The ideas cited above suggest the variables which explain why revolts do not take place in rural communities even when the potential for such radical collective action exists. In this summary presentation, we have not attempted to be either exhaustive or systematic. It is also not our purpose to survey Philippine research on the problem. We simply wish to draw attention to some of the salient points to be taken into account in studies of nonrevolt.

We are aware that there is an unpleasant side to such studies: they tend to reduce human problems into scientific equations, or recipes for insurgency or counter-insurgency. Yet our experience of immiserized communities continually confronts us with the question: Why do peasants accept conditions that, to many of us, seem intolerable? Our hope is that a general appreciation of the question, and its possible answers, will be a step in the direction of a more meaningful emancipation and empowerment, as much the peasants' as our own.