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Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Volume 24, Number 1, April 2009, pp. 18-31 (Review)

Published by ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute

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Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia.
By Clifford Geertz. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University
of California Press, 1963.

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

Keywords: Peasants, agrarian societies, agricultural involution, moral economy, colonialism, ethnicity.

To consider both Clifford Geertz' *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* and James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* in the same review essay is intuitive — since both provide incisive commentary on agrarian societies and have been influential in what is broadly known as peasant studies in Southeast Asia. At the same time, these books are widely read, not just beyond specific area studies boundaries, but across conventional academic disciplines as well. One can easily find both books on the reading lists of courses in anthropology, sociology, political science, history and other disciplines, and most academics in the humanities and social sciences will profess some familiarity with the concepts made popular by these books.

In any case, both books have inspired accolades, debates and eventually, critiques, sometimes so unrelenting and discrediting that we wonder how they still make it to the classics list. Yet, to have left such an academic trail, both books must have propounded ideas that are useful, not only to think with, but also to think against. More

importantly, I think their relevance lies not only with the concepts that the authors have trained our eyes on, but also with the very question(s) they have sought to address. And the main question that I think occupied both Geertz and Scott, as well as many other scholars that have engaged their work, is how modernity, in the form of global capital working through the agents of colonialism, has transformed traditional peasant society in Asia. The question, as I have framed it, is admittedly put rather crudely; but it is an important question, and a variant of what Marx, Weber and Durkheim were trying to address in the context of industrial Europe.

But to return to a more conventional way of reviewing, I will examine, in turn, the arguments and ideas put forth by both books, as well as the debates surrounding them. I hope, in the end, to be able to make a case for why these books are still considered relevant today, beyond the scope of peasant studies.

Agricultural Involution

It is only on p. 80, more than half-way through the book, after he has provided ideal typical characterizations of *swidden* and *sawah* (wet rice) agriculture (Geertz 1963, pp. 36–37), that Geertz begins to introduce and explain the central concept of “agricultural involution”. But the nature of these different ecosystems is fundamental to Geertz’ argument; in particular, *sawah’s* responsiveness to every incremental bit of labour input (*ibid.*, p. 35), and how in turn this labour intensification is symbiotic with the higher population densities of predominantly Javanese “Inner Indonesia”, as compared with “Outer Indonesia” which he associates with *swidden* agriculture.¹

The concept of “involution” is borrowed from the anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser, for whom involution describes culture patterns that in reaching a definitive form, do not evolve into new patterns, but continue to develop only in the direction of internal complexities, leading to “progressive complication, a variety within uniformity, virtuosity within monotony” (Goldenweiser 1936; quoted in Geertz 1963, p. 81).

Sawah, then, in being able to yield incrementally to more intensive labour, became the breeding ground for over-elaborate land tenure systems and relationships, especially when farmers had to divide their farmland between the cultivation of subsistence crops and cash crops with the onset of the Culture System in 1830 (Geertz 1963, p. 82). This pattern of agricultural involution, consolidated by the middle of the nineteenth century under the auspices of Dutch colonialism, entrenched the Javanese in a state of economic underdevelopment. Embedded within the ecosystem of *sawah*, agricultural involution sustained a dual economy whereby Dutch colonial capitalism merely exploited the indigenous Javanese capacity for production.² It did not lead to the emergence of the Javanese yeomanry nor subsequently, substantial indigenous capital. The Javanese peasant thus remained in a state of shared poverty. Here, the critique is not just simply of colonial exploitation of indigenous resources and labour, but also of how the isolation sustained by involution buffered the effects of Western influence that could have launched the Javanese onto the path of modernization. In other words, involution serves as a form of redundant change that inoculates the Javanese against the need for any form of substantive change. Involution, then, encapsulates the irony, and to Geertz, the tragedy, of change without change, that is, change that is inconsequential. In a few elegant strokes, Geertz has painted for us the problematic of modern Indonesia.

Early reception of this thesis was positive; it was appreciated in reviews by notable Indonesianists such as John Smail (1965), Harry Benda (1966) and Willem F. Wertheim (1964), and so captured the imagination of the academic community for more than a decade. But perhaps it was the thesis' popularity that led many scholars to take it seriously and subsequently measure it against the empirical evidence. Contrarian evidence and views were certainly mounting by the 1970s, and twenty years after the book's first publication, White (1983), in reviewing the available evidence surfaced by critics, declared the "Geertzian view of Javanese agrarian change" empirically unfounded. There were doubts as to whether cash crops such as sugar cane really had a seamless symbiotic relationship with paddy

in the ecological environment of *sawah* (Alexander & Alexander 1978); whether population increase did fuel labour intensification and a concomitant increase in the production of rice (Elson 1978); and whether the notion of “shared poverty” was sustainable with the emergence of large landholders and a differentiated agrarian society (White 1983, pp. 26–28). There is a stronger basis for the involution thesis, White (1983, p. 25) argues, in the field of culture rather than agriculture, in the “superstructure” rather than the “base”.³ And if involution and shared poverty are to be considered and conceded as defining features of modern Indonesian society, their probable genesis are to be traced back to the 1930s Depression rather than the Culture System of the nineteenth century (White 1983, p. 28; Elson 1984, p. 248).

Geertz’ critics were to receive a strong rebuttal when he delivered the Huxley Memorial Lecture in 1983. In the text of the lecture, Geertz describes his critics as being caught up in “economism” — “the notion that a determinate picture of social change can be obtained in the absence of an understanding of the passions and imaginings that provoke and inform it” (1983, p. 523). The counter-critique is that economism, in re-externalizing culture (*ibid.*, p. 516), misses the nuanced character of what Geertz calls the “general atmosphere”, that is, the involutionary character that still defined Indonesia even as he wrote (*ibid.*, p. 521). The crux, for Geertz, is to capture “the moral substance of a sort of existence” (*ibid.*, p. 524), rather than to be lulled into pursuing a “history without temper, sociology without tone” (*ibid.*, p. 513) — the Weberian echo here is unmistakable.

This, of course, will not appease the empiricists. How, indeed, can a theory founded on dubious empirical roots continue to be taken seriously? Yet, we also have to note that the critics are more adamant in arguing that agricultural involution cannot be traced back to the Culture System of the nineteenth century, than in arguing that involution does not exist at all in modern Indonesia. In fact, Geertz is ready to argue that involution permeates not just the productive process of Javanese agriculture, but “rural family life,

social stratification, political organization, religious practice, as well as ... the 'folk culture' value system" (1963, p. 101).

Perhaps scholars are not yet ready to totally disavow the involution thesis because it remains useful in depicting the "general atmosphere" of Indonesia. But the attraction of Geertz' thesis, if we care to speculate, is, I suspect, also in the question he was addressing: why was post-colonial independent Indonesia not living up to its national aspirations? Why was Indonesia, even after being freed from the fetters of colonialism, "at its base ... an anthology of missed opportunities, a conservatory of squandered possibilities" (ibid., p. 130). In the wave of optimism that accompanied decolonization, this was a question that occupied the energies of many scholars of that period, such as George Kahin and Benedict Anderson in the case of Indonesia.⁴

But Geertz, in locating his answer, erroneously or not, in the character of the colonial regime of the nineteenth century, addresses the further question of the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies. In this case, Geertz offers the interpretation that the impact was one of non-impact. The bifurcation of the Dutch East Indies into a dual economy that instills agricultural involution suggests a lack of dialectical engagement between the Dutch capitalist economy and the indigenous agrarian economy. When Geertz declared that "the real tragedy of colonial history in Java after 1830 is not that the peasantry suffered ... (but that) it suffered for nothing" (ibid., p. 143), this was a Hegelian lament. It was a lament that the Javanese did not recuperate some form of capital out of the excesses of colonial exploitation; it was a lament that one could not ascribe to the Javanese a history of dialectical progress.

The Moral Economy of the Peasant

While *Agricultural Involution* is concerned with explaining why the Javanese peasantry was entrenched in involution, that is, the semblance of change without any substantive change, *Moral Economy* was concerned with defining the threshold of suffering that serves

as an impetus towards revolution, in other words, radical change. In a nutshell, peasants resist the claims of outsiders (landlords, moneylenders, the state) on their resources when such claims encroach on their subsistence needs.

Scott frames his argument by considering “the need for a reliable subsistence as the primordial goal of the peasant cultivator” (1976, p. 5); in fact, the right to subsistence is defined as an inviolable moral principle in peasant society (*ibid.*, pp. 6–7). The subsistence ethic, then, defines the moral economy of the peasant, that is, “their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation — their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable” (*ibid.*, p. 3). It is in following this logic that Scott arrives at the “safety first” principle (*ibid.*, p. 17), whereby for those close to the subsistence level of existence, the aversion of disaster is more important than the maximization of average returns (*ibid.*, p. 18). For such a safety net to be in place, the subsistence ethic has to be embedded within a norm of reciprocity between lord and serf (*ibid.*, p. 167). The peasantry can tolerate the expropriation of their surplus value over the good years because the elite are obliged to guarantee their subsistence over the bad years (*ibid.*, p. 182). As such, in following a phenomenological interpretation rather than the conventional Marxist understanding, the question of what constitutes exploitation for the peasant becomes one of what is left rather than what is taken (*ibid.*, p. 31).

However, in Southeast Asia, this moral economy was augmented by two major transformations — North Atlantic capitalism and the development of the modern state under the colonial aegis (*ibid.*, p. 7). In a sense, these transformations were introduced by the advent of the colonial state and the consequent integration of the colonies into the global economy. The capitalist world market introduced a new class structure, whereby the relationship between landowners and tenants lost its protective, paternalistic content, becoming instead an impersonal contractual one (*ibid.*, p. 65). The colonial state, on the other hand, wielded increasing infrastructural power,

imposing fiscal policies that stabilized state income at the expense of rural subjects, which at the same time deprived these subjects of some of their immemorial rights, such as their rights to forest products (ibid., p. 94). Under such conditions, peasants were no longer shielded from the fluctuations of global market prices, nor given the respite offered by scavenging opportunities during the lean years. This violation of the moral economy of subsistence ethics, particularly under the exceptional deprivations of the Depression, Scott argues, formed the pretext for the fierce resistance of the Saya San Rebellion in Burma and the Nghe-Tinh Soviets in Vietnam in the 1930s (ibid., p. 58).

It is particularly difficult to determine the factors that precipitate radical change, but what Scott is concerned with is “the creation of social dynamite rather than its detonation” (ibid., p. 4). In seeking to locate the genesis of radical action in the violation of moral obligations, Scott was being unconventional on at least two fronts. First, in re-embedding the rational considerations of the peasant within the parameters of normative values, Scott was transcending a narrow economic interpretation of society that places ultimate value in a straightforward maximization of returns. In fact, to emplace the subsistence ethic within the moral calculus of reciprocity was to adopt an approach that echoed the work of anthropologists such as Malinowski, Mauss and Bourdieu, for whom what is rational has to be mediated under the logic of cultural practice. Thus, one of the contributions of Scott’s conceptualization of *Moral Economy* is the counter-intuitive notion that there is a moral dimension to economic action, and that the rationality of such action has to be judged within a normative-cultural framework.

On another front, in seeking to explicate the “nature of exploitation in peasant society as its victims are likely to see it” (ibid.), Scott was imputing a modicum of subjectivity to the peasant. As such, we can count *Moral Economy* among those studies that contribute to the elaboration of a “history from below”, not only because Scott’s study highlights the peasantry, but also because the subject position of the peasant is situated as the starting point of analysis. Moreover,

Scott's further preoccupation with the world of the peasant, in terms of everyday forms of resistance and texts of defiance against the elite — already present in *Moral Economy* but given more extensive exposition in his equally celebrated later works *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) — opens up non-elite manifestations of subjectivity as a field of enquiry for academic exploration.

Like Geertz, Scott is not without either admirers or critics. One of the earliest critics of *Moral Economy* is Samuel Popkin, whose *The Rational Peasant* (1979) set out to refute the moral economy perspective by arguing that the normative institutions of the peasant has been overly romanticized and that the peasant actor, instead of being risk-averse, is very much capable of assuming risk following a materialistic cost-benefit calculus that runs against the moral and cultural fabric of the community. This critique assumes an antithetical stance to *Moral Economy* by reverting to and defending the market metaphor and logic that Scott was trying to transcend, and in fact, has been criticized in turn for romanticizing the institution of the market (Edelman 2005, p. 334).⁵

It is not surprising that, for a while, both *Moral Economy* and *The Rational Peasant* became juxtaposed as arguments that occupied two ends of a spectrum for any scholarly debate on the peasantry's encounter with modernity. One exemplary case was a symposium on "Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies", whereby the ideas advocated by Scott and Popkin were taken to represent the moral and rational economic approaches respectively in addressing the question of peasants' adaptation "to a world transformed by their incorporation into the modern state and into a global economy" in the context of several different Asian societies (Keyes 1983a, p. 754).⁶ (As this part of the essay reviews *Moral Economy*, I will focus on points raised by contributors to the symposium that relate directly to Scott's work.)

In surveying a broad sweep of Asian societies, the symposium took to task the universalizing tendencies of Scott's arguments. Contributors reject an approach based on "a universal ideology of scarcity", preferring instead to begin with "the actual values of

particular peasants” as practiced within specific contexts (ibid., p. 757). Among the many contributors, I would like to highlight Greenough’s study of Bengali Hindus, whose religious fatalism allowed them to accept the ravishes of the famines of 1770 and 1943–44. Subsistence-providers abandoned their dependents to the fate of starvation, so that those most able to restore order and prosperity after the crisis would survive (Greenough 1983, p. 847). In lieu of rage, protest and revolt, we observe a different moral economy — one that accepted famines as the withdrawal of “indulgence” from gods and patrons. It was a moral economy that did not sustain the “right to subsistence” as an inviolable moral principle for everyone.

In the first instance, Scott’s assumption that the “right to subsistence” is inalienable, is a reasonable one, and this basic nexus between nature and culture sustains the argument for subsistence-security mechanisms as key tenets of the moral economy. However, what Greenough’s case study has demonstrated is that such an ecologically-derived prescription of normative practice may prove to be inadequate when scrutinized under particular contexts, since even the notion of subsistence itself is culturally constituted (ibid., p. 848). Keyes echoes this conviction, arguing that the moral economy bears the distinctive character of “the religious worldview from which the moral premises that color actual behavior are derived” (Keyes 1983*b*, p. 855). The critique has shifted to Scott’s own grounds, since he is being accosted for constructing “notions of morality ... from an a priori model of a universalized ‘peasant’ community” (ibid.), whereas in *Moral Economy*, he has professed priority for the “peasant’s perspective”. In addition, it is also difficult to accept the language of “rights” — “right to subsistence”, “immemorial rights to the forest” — in the descriptive sense, as a universal moral discourse. Such “legalistic language of moral ‘right’”, Keyes observes, is to be found in Christian, Islamic and Jewish societies rather than Buddhist or Hindu moral discourse (1983*a*, p. 766).⁷

Nevertheless, *Moral Economy*, and Scott’s oeuvre in general, continue to be influential in generating scholarly debates, not least because he has been able to bridge the gap between political

science and anthropology (Sivaramakrishnan 2005, p. 322). More importantly, the ideas and concerns introduced in *Moral Economy* have continued to find currency in twenty-first century transnational peasant movements. Notions such as “just prices”, “‘just’ behavior by the more powerful”, “food security” and “food sovereignty” reflect the desire by peasant movements to invoke moral norms that safeguard the interests of peasants worldwide (Edelman 2005, pp. 339–41). Moreover, given the unreliability of the market in guaranteeing subsistence, the responsibilities of lords and patrons have to be transposed onto the post-colonial “moral-economy state”. The provision of adequate social insurance thus transcends the scope of “local reciprocity” and is assumed as a “right of citizenship” (Scott 2005, p. 397). With the current volatility in world markets, the need for moral governance and the message of *Moral Economy* are far from becoming *passé*.

Colonialism and the Question of Ethnicity

Finally, let us return to the question of the impact of colonialism and capitalism on peasant societies. In the case of the Dutch East Indies, as developed by Geertz, the superimposition of the Dutch colonial economy had left the indigenous economy paralyzed into an involutionary pattern, such that produce was extracted without development in the structure of the local economy. For Scott, the colonial state corroded the moral structure of peasant society, imposing the facelessness of capitalism by exploiting the peasantry beyond the threshold of subsistence, in some cases creating the conditions for social upheaval. While both *Agricultural Involution* and *Moral Economy* have demonstrated how the colonial capitalist economy has impoverished peasant societies, not just materially but spiritually as well, the process has in large part been framed as dualistic — between exploiters and exploited, European colonizer and indigenous peasant. What is remiss here is another dimension of colonialism: the ethnic other that has appeared *en masse* as migrant labour and traders.

To be sure, these foreign populations are not absent from the texts of Geertz and Scott. Geertz mentioned the Chinese in passing as plantation proprietors and labourers in Java and Sumatra (1963, pp. 51, 110). What he did not highlight was their role as the economic nerve system that mediated the middle stratum between Dutch commercial enterprise and indigenous producers (Cator 1936). If indigenous enterprise was given little room for development, it was in large part because of Dutch employment of Chinese middlemen. Thus, it is not surprising that the emergence of early Indonesian nationalist sentiments was articulated in terms of economic competition between Chinese and indigenous commercial enterprise.⁸

Scott, on the other hand, gave more than mere passing attention to the Chettiar money lending class and Indian labourers. *Moral Economy* recognized how the dispossession of Burman lands by Chettiar creditors and competition for tenancy and jobs by Indian labourers often aggravated the subsistence crises of indigenous peasants, culminating in violence that bore communal overtones (1976, pp. 89, 150).⁹ Yet, the main actors remain the colonial state and the indigenous peasantry, contesting over the meaning and implications of exploitation and subsistence deprivation. Communal sentiments fade in and out, almost as a form of “false consciousness”.

But this “false consciousness” gave a face to faceless capitalism, either in the form of the Chinese middleman or Chettiar creditor. More importantly, the ethnic mosaic configured under the exigencies of colonial statehood continues to haunt post-colonial Southeast Asia today. Indeed, it is difficult to discuss the modern nation-state without encountering the idiom of ethnicity at some point. To be fair, one cannot expect a classic text to address too many issues at the same time. Its singular message would then be diluted and become too vague to capture the scholarly imagination. The question of ethnicity, then, would justly deserve the attention of other classics, some already written and others yet to be conceived.

NOTES

1. "Inner Indonesia" refers to northwest, central, and east Java, south Bali, and west Lombok; while "Outer Indonesia" refers to the rest of the Outer Islands and southwest Java (Geertz 1963, p. 14).
2. Geertz was drawing on Boeke (1953) for the concept of dualism.
3. One may recall here the elaboration of court etiquette at Surakarta as described in Pemberton (1994).
4. For Kahin, post-revolutionary Indonesia was economically crippled by the huge debt (US\$1.13 billion) fostered on her by the Dutch, which contributed to the subsequent emergence of dictatorial forms of government (2003*a*, pp. 443, 470–480; 2003*b*, p. 124). Anderson's diagnosis is that the Indonesian revolution was incomplete — it was merely a "national revolution" which achieved the recognition of sovereignty in the global system of nation-states; it did not amount to a social revolution that changed the social structures that facilitated colonial exploitation (1972, p. 407).
5. For a review essay that compares *Moral Economy* with *The Rational Peasant*, see Peletz (1983).
6. If we have been following Scott's arguments, it goes without saying that the peasant actor embedded within a moral economy as depicted by Scott also acts rationally.
7. In Christian moral discourse, one can look to what the Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria (1492–1546) calls "natural rights", that is, rights that are necessary to man's survival as a civil being (Pagden 1987, pp. 86–87).
8. The emergence of the Sarekat Islam, one of the earliest Indonesian mass organizations, was associated with Javanese businessmen organizing to protect themselves against Chinese economic expansion, with the unintended consequences of awakening Indonesian nationalism and inciting anti-Chinese riots. See The (1966) and Shiraishi (1997).
9. On the role of Indians in the Burmese colonial economy, see Adas (1974*a*; 1974*b*).

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