

THE MORAL ECONOMY AS AN ARGUMENT AND AS A FIGHT

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This article was written for a festschrift to celebrate the 20th anniversary of publication of the British historian E.P. Thompson's article, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" (Past and Present, 50, February, 1971). Very few articles have made such a great impact on historians and social scientists as Thompson's. In his article Scott explains both the extent to which he has borrowed Thompson's idea of the "Moral Economy" and his own application of it in his research and writings on Vietnam, Burma and Malaysia. However, he stresses there are significant differences in what he was explaining and what E.P. Thompson was explaining. We wish to acknowledge with thanks the kind permission of the writer to reproduce this article in our tenth anniversary number. Scott is the author of several books, including the highly - acclaimed Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance, (1985), which deals with the "Moral Economy" of the Malay peasantry in the state of Kedah.

Artikel Scott ini ditulis untuk sebuah festschrift (kumpulan esei) untuk memuliakan ulang tahun yang ke-20 penerbitan sebuah artikel ahli sejarah Inggeris, E.P. Thompson, yang bertajuk, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" (Past and Present, 50, Februari, 1971). Tidak banyak artikel yang mendapat impak yang terbesar sepertimana tercapai oleh artikel Thompson dikalangan para ahli-ahli sejarah dan sains sosial. Dalam artikelnya, Scott menerangkan sejauh mana ia telah meminjam idea "Moral Economy" daripada Thompson dan cara bagaimana ia sendiri menggunakannya di dalam penyelidikan dan penulisannya tentang Vietnam, Burma dan Malaysia. Bagaimanapun, ia menekankan ada wujudnya perbezaan-perbezaan yang ketara di antara apa yang hendak dijelaskan oleh beliau sendiri dan apa yang hendak dijelaskan oleh E.P. Thompson. Kami ingin mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Scott kerana bermurah hati membenarkan artikelnya diterbitkan semula di dalam keluaran khas sempena ulang tahun yang ke-10 Kajian Malaysia ini. Scott telah mengarang beberapa buku, termasuk Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance, (1985), yang telah mendapat banyak pujian dan membincangkan "Moral Economy" kaum petani Melayu di negeri Kedah.

This is the first time I've been invited to a birthday party for an article. Lacking any guide from custom and experience, I'm not sure what I should bring or how I should dress. One voice tells me that the absence of common law covering this occasion represents an opportunity to do just as I please. Another voice

tells me that some arcane tribal ritual, with which I am wholly unfamiliar, is being enacted here and the chances of a misstep are numerous. Two considerations impel me to ignore the risks and venture something. The first is that, despite Maggie Thatcher's best efforts, flogging was not, it appears, reintroduced as a punishment for heresy. The second is that "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" is one of a handful of articles which actually merits a birthday celebration after twenty years. Unlike the vast majority of its peers which sank without a trace to a richly deserved obscurity, Edward Thompson's article has grown to a handsome and fertile maturity spawning hundreds of offspring who may never have heard of their patriarch. It also follows, of course, that the better part of these offspring, if they were in fact brought to his notice, would be disowned as unrecognizable mutations.

As one instance of this motley progeny, I should probably begin by specifying what my own relationship to the article is. In 1973 and 1974, I was minding my own business at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, trying to understand the wellsprings of two major rebellions in Burma and Vietnam during the 1930s. I had written the first draft of a book manuscript on the subject and had two tentative titles "The Political Economy of the Subsistence Ethic: Peasant Rebellions in Southeast Asia" or "Exploitation: A Victim's Perspective" (same subtitle). Although I was by no means completely innocent of E.P. Thompson's work, being a great admirer of *The Making of the English Working Class*, in which the phrase, "the old paternalist moral economy" - first? - appeared, I had not yet read "The Moral Economy of the Crowd..." The major theoretical and conceptual influences on my manuscript at that point came from Marc Bloch, A.V. Chayanov (the great Russian agronomist), game theory, and Richard Cobb's book, particularly Part Two, titled "Popular Attitudes and the Politics of Dearth" with its analysis of "*le droit a la subsistance*" and of the claims and action of the *petit peuple* to enforce these rights, bears a family resemblance to the argument of "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd..." The enactment of the Jacobin Maximum, in fact, looks very much like an attempt to embody in positive law many of the "price-setting" measures found in the "eroded body of Statute law" (ME, p. 83) to which the English crowd appealed.

Early in the process of revisions, I read ME. It was enormously important in that it both clinched and extended the (much less elegant) argument I had been making with respect to Southeast Asian peasants. Above all, it captured the sense of right and entitlement that suffused precapitalist practices and which alone could account for the sense of justified outrage and indignation so plainly evident in the rebellions I was examining. There were, to be sure, significant differences in what I was explaining and what E.P. Thompson was explaining. (I specify the most important of those differences below). Nevertheless, the term "moral economy" seemed quite apt, and I appropriated it forthwith for my

new title: *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976).

This move turned out to be intellectually appropriate but strategically disastrous. If I had covered one flank with the arsenal of a famous British historian, I inadvertently exposed another flank to those of my American colleagues working diligently to reduce the study of politics to a few deductive principles on the order of neo-classical economics. For them, most of politics can be understood as the interaction effects of individual actors striving to maximize their expected "profit" or "utility" or "power". They generally call themselves "public choice" or "rational choice" theorists. Within four years, one of them (Samuel Popkin) flattered me by writing an entire book attacking my argument (E.P. Thompson will appreciate such instincts). It was modestly titled *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1980) as if I had been writing about weepy, irrational, altruistic, sentimental peasants. Seizing on the seeming pedagogic potential of a debate over distinct models of human action, many social scientists assigned both books to their students and watched the feathers fly. The result, aside from selling more books, was to generate a considerable secondary debate evaluating both positions and rarely, alas, returning to the original article we have assembled to celebrate.

Lest my readers grow apprehensive, I hasten to assure them that the last thing I intend here is to provide a partisan account of "The Adventures of 'Moral Economy' in North American Social Science and in Southeast Asia."

I can be perhaps more provocative by setting myself three specific and limited tasks. First, it might be helpful to explain briefly how the problems I addressed in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (MEP) differed from Thompson's objectives. The second task is to shift the focus slightly from "riot" and "the threat of riot," which represent the means of popular enforcement for Thompson's 18th century crowd, to the social sanctions which operate at the community level to reinforce the claims of the poor to some measure of social insurance from their better off neighbors. Although such activities seldom make headlines, they constitute a vital realm of collective political action that has yet to be adequately mapped and understood. "Everyday forms of peasant resistance" in this sense also represent the elementary building blocks (in the Durkheimian sense) of political life upon which more elaborate forms - for example, the riot - are typically based. Here I want to make the case for the analysis of the micro-politics of class relations (a field that Thompson has also pioneered, in, among others, *Whigs and Hunters*, and "The Crime of Anonymity"), a politics which often stops short of full-fledged public acts. Finally I want to emphasize the constant argument between classes over the "moral economy" and the rights and obligations of the various classes toward one another that follow from this assumption. This debate over the meaning of "paternalism" is, of course, intimately connected with the above-and below-ground struggle over material

appropriation. The public dialogue, however, frequently provides the poor with rhetorical advantages that derive from the very history of hegemonic claims by their opponents. It is perhaps not so surprising that the poor are likely to do better in the debate than they do when the grain is divided.

I. SUBSISTENCE AND SOCIAL INSURANCE

The argument of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* began with a key material fact about most peasant households in colonial Burma and Vietnam: namely that they lived perilously close to the subsistence minimum. I found Tawney's metaphor characterizing the position of the rural population in China as "that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple might drown him" useful for much of Southeast Asia as well.¹ The search for a secure subsistence explained, I argued, many otherwise anomalous and apparently unrelated technical, social, and moral arrangements in peasant society. To condense mightily, I argued that cultivation practices such as the sowing of many seed varieties, the preference for planting several fields with varying soils and micro-climates, and the avoidance of non-edible cash crops when they conflict with subsistence cultivation reflected a rational aversion to risk by peasants who were less concerned with maximizing their crop than with avoiding a disaster. Given a choice, in other words, many peasant households would forego profitable but risky strategies when, and if, they had a more reliable -if less profitable-alternative. The same subsistence concerns could be detected behind village customs that periodically redistributed cultivation rights, made small provisions for the maintenance of widows, orphans, and dependents of conscripts, and for the social pressure impelling richer peasants to be more charitable, to take on more dependents, to be lenient about land rents in hard times, to sponsor more lavish celebrations, to help out temporarily indigent neighbors and relatives, and to give more to local shrines and temples. Personal dependency, in the form of patron-client links, represented a characteristic, if onerous, solution to the fear of hunger, not to mention physical protection. It is all too easy, and a serious mistake as well, to romanticize these social values and practices. They are not radically egalitarian. Rather, they imply only that all villagers are entitled to a living out of the resources of the community, and that living is often attained at the cost of a loss of status and autonomy. They work, moreover, in large measure through the abrasive force of gossip, envy, and the knowledge that the abandoned poor are likely to be a real and present danger to the better-off villagers.

The importance of subsistence security to the rural poor in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Burma and Vietnam led me to reexamine indigenous concepts of "exploitation." Whether it was a question of the taxes collected by the state or the rents in grain and cash collected by the landowners, the absolute amount appropriated mattered less than what was left. Those claims on peasant resources that were adjustable, or varied according to the peasant family's crop

yields and capacity to pay, were, other things equal, more tolerable (not necessarily just) than claims which were fixed and invariable and which thereby were more likely to aggravate a subsistence crisis. With this perspective, which I tried to demonstrate was in keeping with folk understandings, the colonial history of commercialization and state-making could be reexamined in terms of how it exacerbated or eased the basic existential dilemmas of the peasant household. Forms of tenancy, for example, could be compared in terms of the degree of subsistence security they offered rather than the average income they afforded. Descending levels of subsistence security in tenancy patterns: from share-cropping tenancy with leniency in bad years, to rigid share tenancy, to fixed cash rents, were feared in proportion to the risk they carried despite the fact that the average income of the riskier forms might be higher. And, of course, the smallholder feared losing his land and becoming a tenant while the tenant feared losing his tenancy and becoming a landless laborer (especially one hired by the hour or day rather than by the year). While the average income loss might be negligible from one step down to the next, the decline in subsistence security was potentially threatening. Actual shifts in land tenure in colonial Burma and Vietnam tended to follow this step-wise progression, exposing the peasantry to increasingly more devastating subsistence risks. As Southeast Asia was more thoroughly integrated into the world economy, these shifts became more collective and hence politically more explosive, as could be seen in the aftermath of the 1907 world credit crisis and, most notably, the Crash of 1930.

A parallel analysis of the claim of the greatest landlord of them all, the colonial state, can specify those forms of taxation which were more or less deadly. The precolonial state, in addition to conscription and corvée, collected a host of taxes in specie and kind that were potentially deadly. If they were far less deadly in practice than in theory, this was due to the fact that the ambitions of kingly courts far exceeded their grasp. Their subjects often fled to the hills or the open frontier, their intelligence was limited, their "bureaucracy" was porous to say the least, and their sanctions against the population, while draconian, were sporadic. It was a state with powerful thumbs but no fingers.

The colonial state, by contrast, gradually pinned down its subjects with nets of finer and finer official weave: cadastral surveys, population rolls, land tenure records, identity cards, court records, etc. Even with the same fiscal system, the colonial state would have been able to impose itself with greater rigor than its predecessor. The amount-or percentage- of a peasant household's income that a fiscal claim might represent, while important in its own right, was often a less reliable guide to its political impact than the timing, inflexibility, and nature of its collection. Thus a land tax at least varied with the size of the landholding even if it did not vary with the crop yield. A head tax, on the other hand, was typically a fixed cash claim that remained constant no matter the "head" being taxed was rich or poor, an infant or a producer, and no matter how well the crops had fared. Here the fiscal logic of the colonial state ran directly counter to the

subsistence logic of the peasant household. The head tax, though it might represent a small amount of total revenue, was the "darling" of collectors of revenue for its yield was predictable and steady year in and year out.² For the peasantry, the colonial head tax was the worst possible levy in a bad year for it might mean the difference between starvation and survival. The only rival of the head tax in arousing dread and anger was the salt tax inasmuch as it raised the price of a popular commodity essential for preserving food and for preparing the fermented condiments (*nuoc-mam* in Vietnam, *ngapi* in Burma) that were staples in the local diets.

Under colonial rule, then, both the land tenure system and the fiscal system posed an increasing threat to the subsistence security of the poorer rural populace. Of the two, the fiscal system, and particularly the head tax, were politically more volatile. Land tenure, as always, produced regional disparities and conflicting interests. The circumstances of large landowners, smallholders, laborers, tenants, rice planters, rubber growers, etc. led them in divergent directions and, occasionally, into conflict with one another. Opposition to the head tax, on the other hand (especially during an economic crisis like the Great Depression), produced nearly unanimous and militant opposition. Broadly considered, the threat to subsistence security emanated from many quarters including the closing of the frontier, the growth of colonial bureaucracy and military power in the countryside, the restrictions on the use of forests and wasteland, new disparities in landownership, cash cropping of non-edibles, commercial debt among others. The colonial fiscal system was the flashpoint, however, largely because the French and British authorities insisted on pressing their claims in the midst of the economic calamity and because the forms it took were so deeply resented.

II. FROM MATERIAL NEEDS TO MORAL ENTITLEMENTS

Thus far, a reader might reasonably conclude that the argument is entirely materialist and, for that matter, mechanical. Were we to leave it at that, these historical actors would be not much more than robots whose politics was directly "wired" to their stomachs. This is precisely the one-dimensional view against which so much of Edward Thompson's scholarship and wit - have been directed. This one-dimensional view comes in two quite different forms, I believe. The first is the bare-bones materialism I have just described. The second is an equally bare-bones emotionalism perhaps most graphically captured not by Gustave Le Bon but rather by Zola:

He had centuries of fear and submission behind him, his shoulders had become hardened to blows, his soul so crushed that he did not recognize 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.³

In this version, the "wiring" is not quite the same but it most certainly does not pass through the "reasoning" part of the brain.

If we concentrate our attention exclusively on the Saya San Rebellion in Burma and the Nghe-An/Ha-Tinh Soviets in Vietnam in 1930, it is clear that popular conceptions analogous to a "moral economy" are animating the crowds. Petitions and appeals point to the injustice of collecting the usual taxes in a time of such economic hardship when the very survival of the taxpayers hung in the balance. (In Annam, the crisis was compounded by a series of crop failures in the region of the rebellion.) Although observers in Saigon, Hanoi, and Hue might characterize the rebellion as a "jacquerie", those closer to the scene remarked on the "lawlike" and orderly confiscation of food supplies from the rich and officials and its meticulous distribution to the needy. As the French Inspector of Political Affairs in Ha Tinh emphasized,

Small bands have instructions to hold wealthy people for ransom ... in a way that I would not call pillaging. It is not a question of acts of piracy accompanied by violence... They thus look for stocks of paddy which excite the envy of people in need, which are then taken in an orderly fashion (*correctement*) and distributed.⁴

Popular wrath more than once proved fatal to those rare rebels who attempted to keep the food for themselves. Local officials who were the custodians of communal paddy stores, delivered them up for distribution under threat of beating or execution. The poor, pleading hunger, at first asked to have the *capitation* reduced or postponed; next, they threatened the notables who insisted on payment and, when all else failed, sacked the tax office and burned the records. In Burma, the rebellion itself began on December 22, 1930 nine days before the collection of the head tax and just one day after the cultivation of Tharrawaddy (in the Delta) had had their petition for a reduction or postponement of the tax refused by the Acting Governor.

If the appeals to a moral economy are much abbreviated and schematic in these two cases as compared with the eighteenth-century English crowd, the difference is surely due to the cultural and social distance between the petitioners and the colonial state. The opposing parties were, literally and figuratively, not speaking the same language. The Burmese and Vietnamese rural cultivators knew from long and bitter experience that their claims for tax relief in a crisis rarely gained a hearing and, if they did, were even more rarely conceded. The dialogue between the English crowd and the authorities who, even if their

interests conflicted, at least shared the same language of paternalism, was unthinkable in Burma or Vietnam. Appeals to the customary responsibilities of the authorities in time of dearth simply made little sense in the colonial context, whether that context were Southeast Asia or Ireland. Since the colonial authorities could not be summoned to observe their duties, they must be overthrown. Saya San, the Buddhist monk and would-be savior king, who led the Burmese rebellion did in fact make explicit appeals to a tradition of reducing taxes when the people were hard-pressed. The appeals, however, referred not to English common law but rather to the precolonial millenarian tradition of a conquering Buddhist monarch who would end hardship and bring justice to his people.

III. THE MICRO-POLITICS OF 'MORAL ECONOMY' IN THE VILLAGE

Thompson is surely correct when he points to the threat of riot as trump card of the crowd, the card that gained them at least a reluctant hearing. The price-setting riot is, however, by definition, an urban – or at the very least a market – phenomenon. If we wish to explain village-level 'moral economy' practices and expectations, we cannot rely on the riot in the same fashion. By village – level moral economy practices, I mean any of a large variety of customs which precluded certain market outcomes in the interest of assuring the subsistence of the poor. These might include communal practices such as giving the poor a plot to cultivate from common land, surveying and dividing grain stores in the community after a crop failure, communal support in kind, cash, or labor for the indigent or disabled, etc. More commonly, such practices were not formally communal but represented prevailing norms about how the 'honorable' rich peasant or landowner ought to conduct himself vis-a-vis his poorer neighbors and kinsmen. Such norms might include taking on more tenants and laborers than strict economic logic might dictate, providing loans to needy villagers and being liberal about the terms of repayment, sponsoring lavish feasts and celebrations at which the poor are fed, lowering land rents in a bad year, making gifts to the destitute and ill, etc.

The question is: how are these practices sustained as more than the self-interested and pious wishes of the poor if the threat of riot is not invoked? On narrow material ground, of course, the least well-off of a community have a vital – in the literal sense of that word – interest in maintaining these customs. It is not, however, immediately obvious why better-off villagers would give lip service to these claims, let alone act on them. Why would the wealthy in the village not prefer to keep their resources and relish the spectacle of the village poor reduced to a Hobbesian struggle among themselves to survive, thereby improving the bargaining position of the rich over wages, rents, and services? Of course, it is undeniable that village elites have, in fact, taken advantage of subsistence crises to grab land and reduce wages. What is noteworthy, however, is that in much of

village Southeast Asia they have been unable or unwilling to take complete advantage of their strategic control over scarce land and capital to impose draconian terms.⁵

Two years of fieldwork in a rice-growing Malaysian village, which I shall call Sedaka, exposed me to much of the micro-politics of the moral economy. As this was a period (1978-80) of mechanization, shifting tenure relations, and commercialization, there was a constant tension and debate about the reciprocal obligations of poor and wealthy villagers, with the rich attempting to renounce many practices they now found too costly. That they did not entirely succeed was due to the various pressures and stratagems brought to bear by poorer villagers.

Understanding this micro-politics has little to do with riot, though it has a great deal to do with "threat" providing we take an extremely broad view of what counts as a threat. It requires that we grasp the shape of a shadowy form of collective action that works quietly but powerfully to bring about certain ends. It reminds us just how much of the political life of subordinate groups lies between public defiance and quiescence. It implies, in fact, that the goal of the peasantry is generally to stay out of the archives and newspapers and to conduct instead low profile campaigns to which their political skills and resources are best suited. The micro-politics of the moral economy in Sedaka as described below is, to be sure, particular to its place and time. I attempt, however, to point to themes that might find echoes elsewhere.

Perhaps the most important resource of ordinary villagers might be called "the politics of reputation." Villagers can, if they have the weight of "public opinion" behind them, damage or destroy the reputation of anyone in the village through character assassination, gossip, nicknames, innuendo, and symbolic gestures. One of the richest landowners in the village was called "Haji Kadir" to his face and "Pak Ceti" behind his back. His public name recognized his pilgrimage to Mecca while his off-stage nickname removed the honorific "Haji" and added "Ceti", a reference to the infamous moneylending caste of South India, and thus to the suspect means by which he acquired the land he now owns. Rhymes are chanted offstage about his legendary cheapness: e.g. how he has built the narrowest bunds in his paddy fields (almost impossible to balance on during the wet season) so he can plant one extra row of paddy, how he charges the neighbors for fallen coconuts that others always give away, how he gave the smallest contribution of all to the funeral expenses of his neighbor and harvest laborer. Like most gossip, the attack on Haji Kadir's reputation is always a commentary on the violation of norms of conduct. Such stories would not damage his reputation unless others agreed that such behavior were blameworthy. Much of the gossip and character assassination relevant to class relations in Sedaka are an appeal by the poor to norms of tenancy, generosity, charity, employment, and feasts that were taken for granted before double

cropping. This gōssip is not disinterested; it is a partisan claim against the rich. In this respect, the use of gossip is a kind of "democratic voice" where power and possible retaliation make open acts of disrespect risky.

Why should the wealthy in the village care whether they have a good reputation or not? It is not only in Dickens' novels that one meets characters who are willing to exchange their good name for profits and interest. What is the cost of a bad name?

There are material as well as non-material costs to a bad name. Before turning to them, however, I want to insist that the non-material costs of a bad name are far from trivial. Most of these costs come in the form of subtle and not-so-subtle shunning and social boycotts. A very unpopular rich person will be passed on the village path without a greeting, as if he were invisible. His neighbors will be "seen" to whisper about him behind his back.⁶ In extreme cases the treatment will extend to his family. Villagers will be "busy" when he gives a feast. They will either not invite him to their feasts at all or else invite him so late that he often cannot come. They will not speak to him at public gatherings. The final humiliation, the coup de grace as it were, is not to come to his wake; a prospect of social death that is truly terrifying. It is a very rare and brave villager, however rich and ambitious, who is willing completely to ignore the opprobrium of most of his neighbors. The daily toll of slights and cold shoulders to oneself and one's family would be all but intolerable.

Notice that the effectiveness of social ostracism depends on the existence of a face-to-face community and on a reasonable degree of agreement in enforcing the sanctions. The more permanent and immobile the face-to-face community, the more telling its social censure. It is for this reason, I believe, that the wealthiest families - often at the point when a new generation inherits land tend in time to move to larger towns and the provincial capital. Not only do they wish to escape the material claims of neighbors and relatives, but they find it impossible to treat with impunity the public disdain that a purely market-oriented conduct would bring.

The importance of relative unanimity alerts us to the fact the pressure of social sanctions are at least as important among the less-well-off as between the less-well-off and the wealthy. Such unity, if it is ever achieved, is rarely achieved without a great deal of social friction. Any stratified society, after all, presents constant temptations to members of the underclass to break ranks and improve their situation at the expense of their fellows. If they resist this temptation it is likely to be due, in large part, to the threat of being shunned.⁷

The tenants and laborers of Sedaka generally observe a few rules that prevent them from benefitting at one another's expense. They will, for example, not offer a landowner a higher rent in order to get a tenancy another villager now

occupies; women's transplanting groups (*derau*) will not offer to replace another village group or to work for less than the established rate, individuals will not take a job that "belongs" by custom to another. When they are asked why they refrain, say, from outbidding another villager for a tenancy they reply in terms that capture both the shame and guilt it would entail. They say: "That would go against social opinion (*pandang masyarakat*)." "I would feel embarrassed before my friends." "Our friends wouldn't agree to it; it wouldn't be seemly to scramble like that!" "You can't cut (*potong*) your friends." "You wouldn't be respected." "He would be accursed (*jahanam*)." "Someone who steals land like that would be despised (*dengki*).". It is also abundantly clear that such vital matters can easily escalate beyond mere "words" and social censure. As one poor man said: "He (the displaced tenant) would be angry, he would go look for his machete (*cari golok*)."

One sure way of finding how strongly a particular custom is adhered to, is to observe what happens when it is violated. The following case is the only instance I encountered of one tenant taking land from another in Sedaka. Until 1975, both Rokiah and Samat rented adjacent paddy fields from the same outside landowner: 4 *relong* (one *relong* = .7 acre) were rented to Rokiah and a single *relong* to Samat. On the strength of the fact that his mother-in-law had once owned all this land, Samat went to see the landlord before the 1975 irrigated season began and, by offering M\$20 more in rent, persuaded him to transfer one additional *relong* from Rokiah to him. Since that day, no one in Rokiah's family has spoken to anyone in Samat's family. Although they belong to the same political party and Samat's store is the favored one for party members, neither she nor anyone in her family has set foot in the store since then. In fact, some villagers claim, although Rokiah denies it, that she has been responsible for an informal boycott of Samat's store by others, which may explain why it failed in 1981. When Rokiah's daughter was married in 1980, Samat and his father Tok Mahmud told me that they were the only two families in the village who had not been invited.

Two poor men in the village are the butt of gossip as being toadies (*tukang suruh, hamba*) of the rich landowners in the village. As one might expect, these two are precisely the men praised as "good" (one of the explicit features of "good" workers according to the landlords was that they were not given to slandering their employers behind their backs!), "loyal", "honest" workers by the landowners in question. The stories told about them by the poorer villagers, however, are a standing warning of how not to behave if you want the respect of your peers.

Less-well-off villagers have other means of promoting a unity of perspective than "talk". They have a range of material sanctions they can bring to bear on their fellows: they can refuse to exchange labor with them; they can deny them entry into the small rotating credit groups the poor establish; they can be denied

information about wage work and, in the final analysis, they have their machetes. But the striking fact about the relative unity which the poor do achieve is the extent to which it is brought about by a powerful and unrelenting social pressure.⁸

The influence which the poorer villagers can bring to bear on the wealthy is hardly confined to "the politics of reputation". A wealthy family in the village with a bad name is in danger of finding its property and, in extreme situations, its physical well-being in jeopardy. In as much as I have devoted much space to such activities elsewhere, here I wish only to examine the pattern of paddy thefts in the village.⁹ The purpose is to relate those thefts to "the moral economy" at the village level and to emphasize the degree to which such theft is, in this case, quite precisely targeted and dependant on a high degree of social unity.

Thefts of paddy are quite common in Sedaka. Here we are not talking about the petty thefts of grain by thrashers who fill their pockets and shirts with grain before leaving the field or who leave half threshed grain beside the threshing tubs for their relatives to glean, although these "thefts" are common. Instead, we are talking of whole gunnysacks of paddy (roughly 130 pounds apiece) spirited away from the fields at night during the harvest. During the rain-fed season of 1979-80, I kept close track of such reported thefts in the village; they amounted to 14 sacks. While this represented considerably less than 1% of the total village harvest, it represents a significant addition to the food supply of the poorest families in the village who, all agree, take the grain.

Such theft, in and of itself, is unremarkable. Three considerations, however, led me to believe that this was not merely the random pilfering of the poor. The first is statistical. Of the ten landowners who lost paddy, all but one were among the first, and hence most resented, farmers in Sedaka to use the combine harvesters.¹⁰ The second reason relates to a declining tradition of Islamic charity. It was customary in the past for the larger farmers to make gifts of paddy (typically) after the harvest was concluded and to call such gifts *zakat peribadi* (private tithes). The practice, now fairly rare, was especially widespread shortly after the beginning of double-cropping when labor was short and served to ensure that the laborer would thresh for the same farmer in subsequent harvests. Laborers, naturally, came to see the gift as an anticipated part of the wage itself. In this context, it is indicative that I twice heard poor men refer smilingly to paddy thefts (*curian padi*) as "a private tithe that one takes for oneself" (*zakat padi angkat sendiri*). The thefts in question may represent a kind of forcible poor tax that replaces the wages and gifts they no longer receive. At the very least, the description indicates that such thefts are understood quite differently by the village poor. A final straw in the wind is that no such thefts from the field have ever been reported to the police. Thefts of paddy from houses, on the other hand, were reported, and one villager has spent time in prison for just such

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I suspect finally that such homely activities, as a sub-species of collective action in its own right, represent the micro-foundations of larger acts that do figure in the archives and newspapers. As Thompson has noted,

In truth, the food riot did not require a high degree of organization. It required a consensus of support in the community, and an inherited pattern of action with its own objectives and restraints. (ME, p. 119)

It is not so much that little organization is required but rather that, in this instance, the organization is embedded in a pattern of pre-existing practices of resistance. Here we need look no further than the ubiquitous Malay feast for a model of coordination without formal organization or hierarchy. The feast and its variations have been so often repeated that virtually anyone arriving knows just what has to be done and at what tasks their labor is required: peeling onions,

[REDACTED]

the introduction of large combines, is helpful. The Kedah rice plain was, at the turn of the century, a frontier. A combination of bureaucratic influence, money-lending, and force conspired to foster a highly inequalitarian land-tenure pattern. For substantial farmers, the key production problem was the timely and reliable mobilization of a labor force for the major operations of transplanting, reaping, and threshing. The constraints of a rain-fed production schedule produced striking peaks of labor demand which, even with the use of migrant labor from Kelantan and Thailand, required readily available local help in the inevitable rush to get the paddy planted and harvested. In the three or four years between the beginning of double-cropping and the introduction of combine harvesters, the problem of labor supply actually became more severe. Under these circumstances a set of social practices developed which was intended to tie laborers and desirable tenants to landowners.¹³ These practices included, frequent feast-giving by the wealthy, loans and advance wages, Islamic charity, a "bonus" sack of paddy after the harvest to most laborers, reduced rents for tenants after a crop-failure or illness, and, by no means trivial, social recognition and respect shown to poorer villagers.

These practices, to be sure, were underwritten by the material interests of the larger landowners who were wary of the weapons of the weak." What is for our purposes, however, is to which these practices were given a moral, "euphemized" form, that, in public at least, they sede year

public discourse, a language of paternalism and beneficence held sway.

c discourse is a double manipulation, as Edward Thompson has in another context:

And the deference was often without the last illusion; it could be seen
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paternalism just as much as deference was in turn imposed upon them.¹⁴

I can go round this important insight in a particular example from Sedaka, in which it was possible to "peek" backstage. Hamzah, a poor laborer, knows that his frequent employer, Haji Kadir, is in a position to provide him with, say, work or a loan against future wages. He also knows that Haji Kadir and others like him have typically described such action as "help" (*tolong*) or "assistance" (*bantuan*). Hamzah then uses this knowledge to pursue his concrete ends; he approaches Haji Kadir using all the appropriate linguistic forms of deference and politeness. In other words, he appeals to the self-interested description that Haji Kadir would give to his own acts to place them in the most favorable light. In the safety of friends, Hamzah complains bitterly about Haji Kadir, but he is careful not to let his anger spoil his chance of extracting a favor. When, for example, I ask him why he did not complain when Haji Kadir shortchanged him on his wages recently, he replied: "Poor people can't complain; when I'm sick or need work, I may have to ask him again." "I am angry in my heart." If Hamzah's public performance succeeds, he not only achieves his immediate objective of a loan or a job, but he contributes willy-nilly to the public legitimacy of the principle to which he strategically appealed.¹⁵

From one perspective, what the wealthy did was to transmute a portion of their disproportionate economic into forms of status, prestige, and social control by means of acts which they *passed off* as voluntary acts of generosity or charity. It is significant that they achieve this amalgam of public prestige and social control *only* by claiming that they "socialize" the profits of their property by putting it to public good. The social control they achieve was, of course, again convertible into labor services and hence again into material wealth. As a public, on-stage social discourse, this process was uncontested.

Double-cropping, mechanization, and growing state power have, in the meantime, made possible a massive shift in production relations. Large farmers and landowners have dismissed tenants, replaced wage workers with machinery, raised rents, and introduced leasehold tenancy which older tenants cannot afford. The shift in the balance of economic power has also enabled them to curtail a host of social practices that were part and parcel of earlier production relations: e.g. Islamic charity, loans and advance wages, lavish feasts, and even daily forms of social respect accorded the poor.

NOTES

1. I did not realize at the time that Tawney had taken this metaphor, without attribution, from Hippolyte Taine.
2. Head taxes were a staple of all pre-colonial revenue systems as well. The difference was that techniques of evasion meant that a substantial proportion of the rural population escaped the tax rolls altogether (on the order of

20%), there were fairly routine mechanisms for reducing or suspending the tax after a crop failure, and, in any event, the means of collecting the tax against stiff resistance and flight were quite limited.

3. Emile Zola, *La Terre*, trans. Douglas Parmee, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 91.
4. Weekly Report to the Inspector of Political Affairs at Thanh Hoa from Inspector Lagreze, 20 April 1931.
5. The evidence for this is more than anecdotal. Akimi Fujimoto examined four paddy growing villages, each in a different area of Malaysia, to determine whether rent levels, land prices, the amount of land rented out, and the wages and volume of agricultural labor could be explained entirely by neo-classical assumptions of maximizing net return. He concluded, in each case, that actual practice did not coincide with these assumptions and that 'noneconomic' income-sharing assumptions were necessary to explain 'sub-optimizing' outcomes. A good many landowners did in fact take on more tenants, charge lower rents, hire more laborers at higher wages than was compatible with maximizing their net return. *Land Tenure, Rice Production, and Income Sharing among Malay Peasants: A Study of Four Villages*, (Ph.D. thesis, Flinders University, Australia, 1980). For Java, see Martin Ravallion and Lorraine Dearden, "The Distributional Outcomes of a 'Moral Economy'" mimeo, Department of Economics, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, no date.
6. In Andalusia, one form of social aggression is for villagers to openly cup their hands, whispering to one another and pointing at their intended victim, as he passes by. He knows they are publically gossiping about him, but he hears nothing explicit. Deployed repeatedly and widely, such gossiping has been known to drive people out of the village or even to suicide.
7. One of the best empirical studies of social pressure promoting solidarity and egalitarianism among agricultural laborers remains, Juan Martinez-Alier, *Labourers and Landowners in Southern Spain*, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, Publications No. 4 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971).
8. The nearly fatal shortcoming of this social pressure is that it is largely confined to the village: that is, to the face-to-face community where it is most powerful. Villagers will not compete with one another for tenancies or wage labor, but such competition with outsiders does take place, although it is frowned upon. When combine harvesters were first introduced into the village, thereby eliminating many harvesting and threshing jobs, one labor gang (*derau*) of women transplanters decided to deny transplanting services to the landowners who had first rented the combines. Rather than

openly refusing to transplant, they simply postponed the work claiming that they were too busy with other fields. The anxious landowners approached the three other transplanting gangs in the village but all refused to replace their neighbors. The landowners eventually broke the boycott by hiring gangs from elsewhere. At the same time, boycotting women were seeking transplanting work in other villages. At least one of the jobs they accepted was being boycotted by local residents although *derau* members claim they didn't know that at the time they accepted the work. Thus, if we take a supra-village view, transplanters who were enforcing local boycotts were, by accepting work elsewhere, almost certainly breaking each other's local strikes. Whenever, as is typically the case, the labor market is larger than the unit of peasant solidarity, the effectiveness of class action is fatally compromised.

9. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 241-303.
10. The exception may be one that proves the rule. He is Samat, (see above), who is disliked for having outbid another villager for a tenancy.
11. A related "attack" on property fitting this pattern is the murder of livestock under certain circumstances. Many of the wealthy, and virtually none of the poor, keep livestock: goats, steers, and water buffalo. Occasionally the animals, which the poor believe should be tethered, break into paddy fields and nursery beds of seedlings, trampling and grazing. When this happens, the animal is often killed. The "moral economy" aspect of such slaughter is apparent in how the poor justify it: "His meat was eating my vegetables!" (The poor eat meat only at feasts and it is virtually part of the definition of being wealthy in this context that one can eat meat without being invited to a feast.) I know of only one water buffalo killed in this fashion (after repeated transgressions) but the killing of chickens who are discovered in a poor family's compound pecking at grain through the small holes in a gunnysack is quite common. In all these cases, the animal is never taken and eaten; it is left for the owner to discover, at the site of the transgression. No "crimes" of this kind have ever been reported to the police.
12. See in this context the fine article by William M. Reddy. "The Textile Trade and the Language of the Crowd in Rouen 1725-1871," *Past and Present*, 74 (February, 1977), pp. 62-89. Reddy argues that it was precisely the lack of organization in crowd behavior that was enabling and that the crowd came to value and use spontaneity in the knowledge that it was the most effective and least costly means of protest. The cultural understandings were so well developed that any just grievance could, he claims, bring together a crowd without any planning or organization, let alone formal leadership.

13. A single family could ordinarily manage no more than 15 *relong* (4.5 hectares) by itself, even with hired labor. Thus landowners with more land were generally obliged to rent it out to tenants.
14. E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English society: Class struggle without class," *Social History* 3, No. 2 (May 1978), p. 163.
15. Compare this with the following quote from a southern black sharecropper:

I've joked with white people in a nice way. I've had to play dumb sometimes – I knowed not to go too far and let them know what I knowed, because they'd taken exception of it too quick. I had to humble down and play shut-mouthed in many cases to get along. I've done it all they didn't know what it was all about, it's just a plain fact.... And I could go to `em a heap of times for a favor and get it.... They'd give you a good name if you was obedient to `em, acted nice when you met `em and didn't question `em 'bout what they said they had against you. You begin to cry about your rights and the mistreatin' of you and they'd murder you."

Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The life of Nate Shaw*, (New York Knopf, 1974), p. 545.