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PEASANT WARS  
of the  
TWENTIETH  
CENTURY



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## PREFACE

With the embers of destruction barely cooling after the conclusion of World War II, the United States became involved in Viet Nam—through a series of commissions and omissions—in what may well become one of the economically and morally costliest wars in history. First through military aid to the embattled French, then through its military missions, and finally—since 1962—by the ever expanding commitment of its own troops, the United States sought military and political victory in a war fought for control over the hearts and minds of a peasant people. During these years, “the raggedy little bastards in black pajamas”—as United States military officers referred to their new enemies—have not only fought to a standstill the mightiest military machine in history, but caused many an American to wonder, silently or aloud, why “our” Vietnamese do not fight like “their” Vietnamese, why ever new recruits replenish the ranks of an army destroyed many times over in our dispatches and news communiqués. Specially insulated from other continents and their tribulations by virtue of her geographic position and by her extraordinary prosperity, America finds herself ill prepared in the twentieth century to understand the upheavals which are now shaking the poor nations of the world. Yet ignorance courts disaster. Viet Nam has become a graveyard because Americans did not know enough or care enough about a little-known part of Southeast Asia. The roads to the Mekong delta, to Tay Ninh, to Khe San are strewn with the wreckage of false premises, perceptions, and evaluations. Therefore it is important to America that she bend all her available knowledge—and her considerable power of passion and compassion—to the task of comprehending the world in which she has become such a stranger. Four years ago, on March 17 and 18, some of us at the University of Michigan initiated the “teach-in” movement on the Viet Nam war; from here the great

debate spread to more than a hundred campuses and into the national capitol at Washington. But that was only a beginning, and a small beginning at that. Viet Nam constitutes the overriding issue of the moment, but there have already been other "Viet Nams" in Cuba, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic, and there will be other "Viet Nams" in the future, unless America reverses her present course. If we must know more in order to live in a changed world, if we must know more so we can act with clear reason rather than with prejudice, with humanity rather than with inhumanity, with wisdom rather than with folly, all of us must undertake the task of understanding in order to learn and of learning in order to understand. This is no longer an undertaking only for the academic specialist, if indeed it has ever been; it is an obligation of citizenship. This book is the outcome of this conviction. I have been, by profession, an anthropologist interested in peasant studies, and in this book I have attempted to review—as an anthropologist—the evidence of six cases of rebellion and revolution in our time in which peasants have been the principal actors.

Why should an anthropologist undertake to write on this subject? What can he contribute, as an anthropologist, to an understanding of a topic already familiar to economists, sociologists, and political scientists? Obviously they have skills which they bring to bear on the topic which an anthropologist cannot duplicate. There is, for example, the intriguing question of how inflation and deflation affect social cohesion in the village, a question to which economists could appropriately address themselves. There are serious questions to be asked about the psychology of deprivation or authority which are better answered by social psychologists or sociologists. Similarly, the political scientist is better fitted than the anthropologist to analyze the interplay of power groups on the level of the nation or in the relationships between nations. Yet the anthropologist reading the accounts of his peers misses dimensions which he has been taught to consider decisive. It is to an understanding of these dimensions that he may properly address himself.

He will interest himself, for example, in trying to spell out, as precisely as possible, just what kinds of peasants we refer to when

we speak of peasant involvement in political upheaval. To the layman and even to many specialists the distinctions between different kinds of peasants are unimportant; they are content to speak of an all-encompassing "peasantry" without further qualification. But the anthropologist, with field experience in small-scale communities, knows that there are differences in behavior and outlook between tenants and proprietors, between poor and rich peasants, between cultivators who are also craftsmen and those who only plow and harvest, between men who are responsible for all agricultural operations on a holding they rent or own and wage laborers who do their work under supervision of others in return for money. He also knows that one must distinguish between peasants who live close to towns and are involved in town markets and urban affairs and those living in more remote villages; between peasants who are beginning to send their sons and daughters to the factories and those who continue to labor within the boundaries of their parochial little worlds. Distinctions of property and involvement in property, in relation to markets, in relation to systems of communication, all seem important to him when he observes real populations "on the ground." Therefore he will look for such distinctions and differential involvements in accounts of peasant involvement in revolution, because he suspects that such differentials have an important bearing on the genesis and course of a revolutionary movement.

Secondly, he brings to the problem a concern with microsociology, born of an understanding gained in the field that the transcendental ideological issues appear only in very prosaic guise in the villages. For example, peasants may join in a national movement in order to settle scores which are age-old in their village or region. Here too he will be aware of the importance of regional differences between peasants. He will stress the concatenation of particular circumstances in particular regions in shaping peasant dissatisfaction or satisfaction, in the knowledge that mobilization of the peasant "vanguard" is less an outcome of nationwide circumstances than of particular local features. In this respect, then, as in trying to break down the category "peasant" into finer categories, he

seeks to approach the problem of peasant involvement with a more finely grained understanding of the variety of peasantry in their variable local and regional ecologies.

Thirdly—and this is perhaps one of the main burdens of the accounts to be presented here—the anthropologist is greatly aware of the importance of groups which mediate between the peasant and the larger society of which he forms a part. The landlord, the merchant, the political boss, the priest stand at the junctures in social, economic, and political relations which connect the village to wider-ranging elites in markets or political networks. In his study of peasant villages he has learned to recognize their crucial role in peasant life, and he is persuaded that they must play a significant role in peasant involvement in political upheaval. To describe such groups, and to locate them in the social field in which they must maneuver, it is useful to speak of them as “classes.” Classes are for me quite real clusters of people whose development or decline is predicated on particular historical circumstances, and who act together or against each other in pursuit of particular interests prompted by these circumstances. In this perspective, we may ask—in quite concrete terms—how members of such classes make contact with the peasantry. In our accounts, therefore, we must transcend the usual anthropological account of peasants, and seek information also about the larger society and its constituent class groupings, for the peasant acts in an arena which also contains allies as well as enemies. This arena is characteristically a field of political battle. As an anthropologist the writer is perhaps less schooled in problems of political organization and competition than his reader might have reason to expect of him. This is due primarily to the fact that his master discipline, anthropology, has in the past paid only marginal attention to the realities of power. The writing of this book has thus itself proved to be a major learning experience. The writer hopes that, in focusing on peasant involvement in politics, he may contribute also to broadening the framework of peasant studies as these have been carried on in the past.

Who is it, then, that speaks to the peasant and what is it that they communicate which moves the peasant to violent political

action? Peasants often harbor a deep sense of injustice, but this sense of injustice must be given shape and expression in organization before it can become active on the political scene; and it is obvious that not every callow agitator will find a welcome hearing in village circles traditionally suspicious of outsiders, especially when they come from the city. What circumstances and what sets of people will prove propitious to the establishment of such communication? The social scientist used to viewing the peasantry from the vantage of the national level may often be tempted to forget that social or economic or political mobilization of a peasantry involves contact with many small groups not always eager to receive guidance and leadership from the outside. How this resistance is overcome, if indeed it is overcome, is not always a foregone conclusion.

Finally, the anthropologist will have to ask how much the action of a peasantry in rebellion and revolution is prompted by traditional patterns and to what extent a peasant revolution produces not only an overturning of political power holders but an overturning in the patterns of the peasantry itself. Here the anthropologist may well have to guard against a professional bias. Studies of primitives and peasant populations have tended to give him an unusual respect for the strength of tradition. Yet the persistence of tradition needs explanation as much as change. It may be that people cleave to ancestral ways through general inertia, but it is more likely that there are good and sufficient reasons behind such persistence, much as there are good and sufficient reasons for change. Of these reasons people may or may not be conscious; but then it is the task of the anthropologist to inquire into what the causes for persistence or change may be.

In seeking a more sophisticated understanding of the political involvement of peasant groups it is perhaps not amiss to indicate quite specifically how the term *peasant* is utilized in this book. Definitions are of course no absolutes, but merely aids in analysis. It is my conviction that this purpose is best served by drawing the boundaries of definition quite narrowly, rather than broadly. It has become customary to distinguish peasants from primitives by op-

posing rural populations which are subject to the dictates of a superordinate state from rural dwellers who live outside the confines of such a political structure. The first are peasants, the second are not. But the category of rural people who are subject to control by a state can include not only cultivators, but also artisans, fishermen, or itinerant merchants who supply rural markets. The category may further cover people who own and operate their farms, tenants and sharecroppers, and landless laborers. It is important, it seems to me, not to presuppose that all these people are alike in their economic, social, and political relationships or in their outlook upon the world in which they live. Important differences, for example, may distinguish cultivator from fisherman, or landless worker from landed proprietor. I therefore define peasants as populations that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the processes of cultivation. The category is thus made to cover tenants and sharecroppers as well as owner-operators, as long as they are in a position to make the relevant decisions on how their crops are grown. It does not, however, include fishermen or landless laborers.

If we distinguish peasants from primitives, we must also differentiate them from "farmers." The major aim of the peasant is subsistence and social status gained within a narrow range of social relationships. Peasants are thus unlike cultivators, who participate fully in the market and who commit themselves to a status game set within a wide social network. To ensure continuity upon the land and sustenance for his household, the peasant most often keeps the market at arm's length, for unlimited involvement in the market threatens his hold on his source of livelihood. He thus cleaves to traditional arrangements which guarantee his access to land and to the labor of kin and neighbors. Moreover, he favors production for sale only within the context of an assured production for subsistence. Put in another way, it may be said that the peasant operates in a restricted factor and product market. The factors of production—land, labor, equipment—are rendered relatively immobile by prior liens and expectations; products are sold in the market to produce the extra margin of returns with which to buy goods one

does not produce on the homestead. In contrast, the farmer enters the market fully, subjects his land and labor to open competition, explores alternative uses for the factors of production in the search for maximal returns, and favors the more profitable product over the one entailing the smaller risk. The change-over from peasant to farmer, however, is not merely a change in psychological orientation; it involves a major shift in the institutional context within which men make their choices. Perhaps it is precisely when the peasant can no longer rely on his accustomed institutional context to reduce his risks, but when alternative institutions are either too chaotic or too restrictive to guarantee a viable commitment to new ways, that the psychological, economic, social, and political tensions all mount toward peasant rebellion and involvement in revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The case studies presented here are built up on the basis of secondary materials. In only the rarest of cases were the events recorded observed by an investigator with the anthropological eye, with an interest in the questions we have just outlined. This means that the anthropologist is necessarily handicapped by the nature of material he himself has done nothing to collect. The facts which are relevant for him must be winnowed from accounts written for other audiences, with other purposes in mind. Their presentation and analysis is thus an exercise in imagination in which we arrange the material so that it can speak to us for our purposes, and so we may find the occasional telltale fact that allows us the privilege of an anthropological diagnosis. This task is of necessity incomplete: there will be accounts we have not read and telltale facts we have not recorded. Certainly, our effort will be superseded the moment it achieves formulation in book form. This is how it should be. If we can raise questions in terms of new perspectives, we will have accomplished our task.

Our minimum expectation, then, is to present an integral account of peasant involvement in six cases of rebellion and revolution; but our maximal hope is that we will be able both to point to recurrent features and to account for the strategic differences which distinguish each case from its forerunner.