

Peasant resistance

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- **Peasant**
 - small-scale farmer who personally works the land
- Peasants cannot easily move
 - they don't *want* to move because they are often
 - raised on family land, expecting to inherit it
 - poorly educated, with few other skills to sell in the labor market
 - tied into extensive local kinship networks
 - their culture and self-sufficient farming are part of their identity
 - they are not *able* to move because
 - immigration laws make it difficult for them to cross borders
 - countries grant access to capitalists, consumers, and sometimes laborers
 - but not self-sufficient peasants
 - or landless ex-peasants with few skills
 - almost all of their wealth is in their land (if they have title at all)
 - with little to add to the sale price, they can't buy anything better
 - if landless, vagrancy laws, identity checks, etc. limit movement
- But globalization has made capital highly mobile
 - capital controllers are not bound by local obligations
 - capital controllers not responsible for local consequences
 - they can just pull out and go elsewhere
 - unless responsibility is enforced by law
 - but that would reduce a country's competitiveness
 - so responsibility usually isn't enforced except in egregious cases
- So peasants and ex-peasants are stuck
 - have to take the impacts of what outside investors do
 - whether they have land to work
 - but face increasingly bad conditions
 - or have lost their land and are
 - stuck in the countryside, forced to take low-paying farm labor
 - stuck in a city, forced to seek other low-paying wage labor
- Peasants also have to deal with encroachment by more wealthy and mobile others
 - loggers
 - small-scale farmers from elsewhere who are supported by government programs granting title, subsidies, etc.
 - large-scale farmers
 - ranchers
 - miners
 - resulting in “contested spaces”

- So peasants (and ex-peasants) tend to resist
 - loss of their land
 - breakdown of their social relations and culture
 - untenable restrictions often placed on them
 - pressure to take low-paid wage labor
 - bad conditions of wage labor if they get it
 - forcible coercion that often goes with these
- Resistance
 - usually non-confrontational resistance
 - “weapons of the weak”
 - failure to work consistently: “laziness”, slowdowns, etc.
 - lying, slander, gossip
 - theft, sabotage, arson
 - flouting the rules of the oppressive force
 - informal (illegal) economic activity
 - illegal immigration
 - if things get bad enough, rebellion or terrorism
- Terrorism
 - Just another technique of resistance
 - can be used by any ideology or cause
 - not a “thing” that can be defeated
 - used by the weak against states or corporations
 - that they could not defeat in direct confrontation
 - in some cases, initially supported by states
 - US supported terrorism against Russians in Afghanistan
 - one man’s “freedom fighter” is another man’s “terrorist”
 - generally for political ends: to change behavior
 - theatrical quality to maximize political effect
 - motivated by feelings of
 - envy, grievance, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation
 - often stirred up by a demagogue
- Malaysian example
 - Green Revolution Mudra dam and rice project
 - on the Kedah plain
 - success
 - much higher production with two crops per year
 - reduced unemployment
 - high return on investments
 - even small plots can feed a family
 - reduced infant mortality
 - few peasants now losing their land
 - higher consumption of goods

- yet as the (relatively) rich got richer, the poor got poorer
 - and non-confrontational resistance picked up
- The problem: breakdown of traditional relationships between land-rich and land-poor peasants
- Past arrangements
 - land owners rented extra land to the land-poor to farm
 - for a share of the crop
 - negotiated after the harvest, so ability to pay was guaranteed
 - land owners hired the land-poor for some farming tasks
 - transplanting young rice, harvesting, threshing
 - so land-poor peasants could count on some wage labor
 - land owners were obliged to provide charity
 - private charity to poor required by Islam
 - traditional sharing to relieve envy and resentment by the poor
 - traditional gifts and feasts that the poor repaid with their loyalty
 - land owners superiority was legitimized by these services
- The Mudra dam and rice project broke this system
 - by eliminating land owners' need for the land-poor
 - land became more productive
 - so outsiders would pay more to rent it than land-poor could
 - or the land-rich just farmed it themselves or through relatives
 - value of land allowed owners to demand negotiation of rent before planting, so renter bore the risk ruin by a bad harvest
 - income allowed owners to rent or buy machines
 - for sowing and harvesting
 - reducing wage labor for the land-poor
 - land owners reduced charity to the poor
 - since they no longer needed them to work
 - superior social position of landowners lost legitimacy in the eyes of the land-poor
 - since the land-rich were no longer fulfilling their obligations
- So the land-poor began to resist
 - to “[work] the system to their minimum disadvantage”
 - gossip assaulting the character of land-rich individuals
 - as not living up to Islamic or traditional obligations
 - theft from the wealthy
 - viewed as a substitute for the denied obligatory charity
 - no one would report thefts for fear of being victimized by more
 - killing livestock of the wealthy for minor transgressions
 - sabotage and destruction of harvesters
 - excuses not to work when needed, even threatened boycott
 - countered by threats by landowners to bring in outside labor
- Resistance had some limited success
 - some landowners hired laborers rather than using machines

- some landowners rented land to local land-poor peasants
- some landowners continued to give traditional feasts
- in all cases, bowing to pressure to maintain traditions, rather than maximizing profit as capitalists should
- Why was resistance so non-confrontational?
 - landowners had the power
 - confrontation would risk losing even more
 - change was slow
 - so there was not a sharp trigger
 - that affected all the land-poor at once
 - to anger and unite them for confrontation
 - change was mostly not active exploitation, it was just lack of an expected relationship
 - not renting land
 - not hiring labor
 - not giving charity
 - local government could arrest trouble-makers
- Peasant resistance is conservative, not radical
 - typically seeks to maintain or restore the old status quo
- it is capitalism that is radical
 - causing changes that make life worse for people
 - capitalism has done this over and over:
 - enclosure
 - factory system of production
 - mechanization
 - steam power
 - assembly line system
 - computers and automation
 - telecommuting, virtual offices, remote services
 - temporary contract model of labor
- People resist changes to how they are exploited!
 - Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know...