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Reviewed Work(s):

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Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan by Stephen Vlastos

Agricultural Development and Tenancy Disputes in Japan by Richard J. Smethurst

Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan by Anne Walthall

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The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 47, No. 4. (Nov., 1988), pp. 821-832.

Stable URL:

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Japanese Peasants: Moral? Rational? Revolutionary? Duped?—A Review Article

ROGER BOWEN

A FULL DECADE has passed since Frederic Wakeman, Jr., published his influential "Rebellion and Revolution: The Study of Popular Movements in Chinese History" (1977). He opened his article with the observation, "During the past twenty-five years, hundreds of studies of Chinese peasant rebellions have appeared in print." He added that most of these studies had been published in the People's Republic, but in his bibliography he listed dozens of entries by Western scholars on the topic. Significantly, while noting that Western studies of peasant resistance in China "drew upon Chinese scholarship to write histories of their own," Wakeman emphasized that Western historians were divided on the issue of whether the "Maoist depiction of Chinese history as perennial class struggle" was accurate.¹ He summed up the controversy in these words:

Was an immiserated peasantry ruthlessly exploited by a venal landlord class through the sweep of pre-modern Chinese history? Or would it be more accurate to say that, while the population suffered in times of epidemic or famine, there were long periods of plenty when relatively affluent farmers benefited from rising agricultural prices, and negotiated rental contracts to their own liking with accommodating landlords?
(Wakeman 1977:202)

Historiography repeats itself. With only minor qualifications, it seems fair to say that Wakeman's observations of ten years earlier apply today to Japanologists' belated

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Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590–1884. By HERBERT P. BIX. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. xxxviii, 296 pp. \$30.00.

Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan. By STEPHEN VLASTOS. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. xii, 184 pp. \$20.00.

Agricultural Development and Tenancy Disputes in Japan, 1870–1940. By RICHARD J. SMETHURST. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. xii, 472 pp. \$52.50.

Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan. By ANNE WALTHALL. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986. xviii, 268 pp. \$19.50.

¹Although Wakeman himself may be guilty of an anti-Marxian ideological bias in his characterization of the division, I take from his use of the term "Maoist" a suggestion that not all conflict in China's past was class-based, nor was all structural change a result of class struggle. I adopt a similar convention herein, differentiating between empirically falsifiable "Marxian" interpretations of peasant behavior and nonempirical, ideologically colored, and non-falsifiable "Marxist" claims about how peasants ought to behave.

The Journal of Asian Studies 47, no. 4 (November 1988):821–832.

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attempts to explain peasant resistance in Japanese history. Clear divisions exist among Western Japanologists, who draw heavily from the works of Japanese scholars, most of whom are either Marxian or *minshū* historians (as in *minshūshi*, or people's history), over the largely ideological issue of peasant exploitation by landlord and/or state, over the issue of whether exploitation was a constant or was moderated at times, and whether it was exploitation, however defined, that prompted peasants to rebel. Different historians of Japan address these issues differently, according to their ideological or theoretical bias, as a review of these four recent books makes clear.

But first a prior issue. Why are Japanologists a decade behind their counterparts in Chinese studies? One answer, aside from the obvious—China had a peasant revolution, Japan did not—appeared in the same issue of *JAS* as the Wakeman article. In the correspondence section, Gary Allinson reacted to a negative review of his *Japanese Urbanism* by Henry Smith (1976:690–92), lamenting Smith's "elitist orientation" to the study of Japanese social history, one that, in Allinson's words, says "people at the bottom of society do not really influence history." Allinson argued, in contrast, for giving equal attention to "everyone from power holders at the center to the poorest village peasant" (1977:401). In short, Japanologists were arguing among themselves over whether the study of Japanese peasants was even worthwhile at the same time that sinologists were cataloguing work already completed and outlining work yet to be done.

Today clearly it is no longer necessary to debate whether attention should be accorded, in Allinson's words, to "the inarticulate, the underprivileged, the powerless" of Japan's past. Why Japanese peasants have finally been "discovered" is, as James Scott put it in his article "Peasant Revolution: A Dismal Science," "a puzzle for the sociology of knowledge," but as he also says, "Mao Tse-tung, the Viet Cong, the 'green revolution,' and AID undoubtedly have had something to do with it" (1977:232). But no less relevant are the several major theoretical and empirical comparative studies about peasants by such scholars as Scott himself and Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966), Eric Wolf (1969), Samuel Popkin (1979), and Theda Skocpol (1979). And in the case of Japanese peasants, there seems to be a greater willingness among Western scholars to take seriously the work done by Japanese Marxian and *minshū* historians.

The flurry of books about Japanese peasant rebellion by Western scholars gives credence to the claim by Japanese historians that peasants have, in some way, helped to shape history. But what remains the subject of considerable debate is the role of peasant resistance in influencing socioeconomic change and the state as well as the more basic question of why peasants rebel.

For those writers who emphasize that an active, rebellious, even class-conscious peasantry helped shape historical change, the principal problem they confront is why peasants rebel. In their own respective ways, the authors of the books reviewed here smooth out this nettlesome issue by coarse ideological sanding of prickly peasant behavior, defacing as it were multifaceted peasant motivation in the process. Peasants are frequently made to appear as either moral, rational, revolutionary, or stupidly complacent—usually one or the other, seldom all or even one or the other at different historical moments, or one after the other as socioeconomic conditions change. The tendency seems to be to characterize peasants as deferent or defiant, feudal or antifeudal, politically (class) conscious or unconscious (mindful or mindless), violent or passive, rational/pragmatic or moral, communal or individualist, conventional or unconventional, reformist or revolutionary, law-abiding or lawbreaking, responsible or irresponsible, peasant or farmer. They echo Dostoevski: "Yes, man's heart is wide, too wide indeed. I'd have it narrower."

In some cases, the narrowing of peasant motivation appears as a series of still photos over time and space, devoid of continuity or physical context. Even in the work of those writers who adopt a dynamic approach, such as the Marxians that Bix and, to a much lesser extent, Vlastos rely on, the prescribed teleology forces a picture of unilinear political movement culminating in an epiphany of revolution, however much this is at variance with the facts. In the background, the agrarians' erstwhile class foes—landlords writ small, the state writ large—powerfully stand in defense of time-honored class privilege, giving way only because history dictates. The peasants' other enemy, whimsical nature, is nearly forgotten.

Out of the conflict, these studies would have us believe, comes consciousness (this is Hegel's master-slave parable) and motivation: peasants rebel in the name of freedom and equality because the state/aristocracy/landlord is exploitative; because peasants, willy-nilly, have existentially learned the meaning of justice and hence know when justice is denied; because they rationally calculate where they stand in relationship to the perilously thin line separating fluidity from bankruptcy and starvation. Take your pick—it must be one or the other. Similarly, lords/the state must be benevolent or unjust; if the latter, then peasants in rebellion must be behaving honorably because an implied compact says so.

Japanologists, nearly without exception bourgeois novices in understanding Al-linson's inarticulate, underprivileged, and powerless, wince before the temptation to make the Japanese agrarian narrow and hence comprehensible, one-dimensional and hence describable. One-dimensional characters invite theses: ideational rather than phenomenological peasants, please. Hence Bix's peasants are revolutionary; Vlastos's are motivated by the inequality symbolized in their dependence on the lord's benevolence; Walthall's peasants are "practical-minded people" (p. 81); and Smethurst's are not peasants at all—they are entrepreneurial farmers, law-abiding, self-interested maximizers, and thoroughly establishmentarian.

For Bix, "revolts had to occur," uprisings were "unavoidable," and "feudal society was an inherently and profoundly unjust society" (p. 29). Such generalities are commonplace in his doctrinaire Marxist, not scientific Marxian, analysis. His analysis faithfully leaps from particularities, such as early eighteenth-century Tsuyama peasants wanting to replace tax-hungry officials with "honest" ones, to an unqualified conclusion of "peasant hatred of rural officials" (p. 22) with an ease that is as disarming as it is empirically unsupportable. Bix infers peasant hatred from acts of rebellion, but this begs the question why hate-filled peasants did not rebel more often and with greater effectiveness in reforming or overthrowing the feudal system. The answer, curiously, rests with Marx's own writings about the peasantry.

David Mitrany's important but forgotten study, *Marx Against the Peasant* (1951), makes the relevant argument that Marx was contemptuous toward the "petty bourgeois" peasants for their conservatism, economic dependence, and unprogressive "idiocy of rural life." Peasants mistrusted the towns, they constituted a "sack of potatoes" that lacked social interconnections and class consciousness, they enjoyed "no unity, no national union, and no political organization, and [hence] they do not form a class. . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (Marx [1855] 1969:479).

Bix forgets this Marxian insight in his Marxist attempt to idealize the peasantry as agents of progress who engage in "struggles for social justice" (p. 51) and, in anti-Marxian fashion, miraculously somehow "come to feel their exploitation unjust" (p. xviii). "Exploitation" is by Bix's own borrowed definition "unjust," hence the reader is left searching for the meaning of the term "unjust" as the peasants themselves defined it. What we find, contrary to Marxian postulates, is an Irwin Scheiner-like notion

of a Confucian “heaven” as, in Bix’s own words, “a synonym for justice” (p. 43). Heaven’s justice is, of course, what the ruling ideology says it is, that is, as it is defined by benevolent lords who are culturally expected to fulfill their moral, patronizing feudal obligations toward an obedient (“honorable”) peasantry. So much for making the peasantry into a revolutionary vanguard. Marx’s characterization of the peasantry under Bonapartist rule applies to the Tokugawa peasant: “not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant that strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the small holding, but rather the peasant who wants to consolidate it; not the country folk who want to overthrow the old order . . . but on the contrary those who, in stupified bondage to this old order, want to see their small holding saved and favoured by the ghost of the empire” (Marx [1853] 1969:492).

Bix does not willingly suffer Marx’s actual characterization of the peasantry, even though his evidence of the early eighteenth-century Tsuyama revolts can offer no other conclusion. Instead, in order to make the peasantry into the heroic class he wants it to be, he tries to strengthen his Maoist interpretation by shifting his focus to peasant protests of many different regions of Japan that seemingly accord with his abstract, ideological vision of appropriate antifeudal peasant behavior, leaving Tsuyama for Ueda, then to Yamanashi and then to Shinshū, forever in search of the “right” case study that supports his arguments. The reader is left wondering, for example, how Tsuyama peasants behaved after the eighteenth century.

Bix looks for a revolutionary peasantry whereas in fact his evidence only shows peasants in scattered revolt, hither and thither, at varying times over the two hundred-year period. How or even whether the different instances of Tokugawa revolts were connected, he never shows; rather, he avers that by the end of the period (what he calls the “revolutionary present”) Japanese peasants were somehow part of a world historical change that was induced by imperialism and signified by “peasant disturbances and revolutionary movements throughout Asia” (p. 190).

Maoist rhetoric obscures the better Marxian insights he offers. He notes “the growth of rural commerce, the differentiation of the peasantry . . . and the growth of de facto landlord-tenant relations” (pp. 190–91), but Bix’s Maoist sympathies with the rural underclass blind him to the more important, Marxian, and progressive development, namely the rise of the rural bourgeoisie. We may liken that class’s actions to the role of the British in India. “England,” Marx said, was “actuated only by the vilest social interests” but nonetheless served to cause “a social revolution,” “unconscious tool of history” though it was, “by blowing up their [the peasants’] economical basis, and thus produced the greatest, and to speak the truth, the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia” (Marx [1853] 1969:493). *Pares paribus*, the “speculative rice merchants, moneylenders, and landlords” (p. 191), the targets of Bix’s heroic peasants’ enmity, were the real agents of progressive social change in Tokugawa Japan. It is they, not the peasantry, who should be the subject of focus in studying class conflict in that era; their economy, not the peasants’, replaced “the historically obsolete bakuhan state” (p. 226).

Vlastos’s work, although far from offering a Marxian analysis—his claims notwithstanding—is truer to Marxian premises than Bix’s. Bix claims to explain peasant rebellion “within the Marxist tradition of historiography” (p. xvi) and succeeds within the moral message of the Marxist ideology while doing damage to Marxian analysis. Vlastos claims to rest his analysis on the “generally Marxist assumption” that “disruptive action by socially subordinate groups such as peasants are important, but not abnormal, events in states where property, power, rights, and privileges are distributed unequally among the principal social classes” (p. 1). Such a characterization, couched in non-Marxian, strange language (“not abnormal”; “socially subordinate groups”),

lacks any reference to the dynamic agent of class conflict and consequent revolution that is the locomotive of history. It also fails to account, as Marx does in *The German Ideology*, for the existential quality of the species being—namely, the desire for freedom, the attribute that lends *humanitas* to Marx's perspective and makes his analysis so appealing. Nonetheless, Vlastos's analytical approach does share with Marx's the virtue of affording perspective on the "structure and character of class relations in the Tokugawa polity" (p. 1). Too, its implied empirical grounding allows Vlastos, unlike Bix, to avoid the temptation to apotheosize the victimized peasantry, and in that respect his study is less ideological, more balanced, more scientific, and safer. "Safer" fits here because Vlastos, perhaps aware of a generally anti-Marxian bias among American Japanologists, eschews Marxian analysis in favor of a variety of other sorts, some of which, but by no means all, share the "generally Marxist assumption" that underlies his analysis.

Vlastos is in fact too eclectic in his theoretical approach, relying on Charles Tilly, Scott, Popkin, Scheiner, Skocpol, and even Crane Brinton for explaining peasant resistance. It is not evident that he regards any one of these approaches as more important than any other, since his basic thesis, what he calls his "particular analytic strategy," is that in a society based on inequality or class differences, the protests by the ruled against the rulers show (1) which rules upset the ruled; (2) the relationship between ruler and ruled; and (3) how rules constrained the ability of the ruled to realize their own interests. The social dynamic that drives peasant protest is suggested in his "Marxist assumption:" the ruled do not like the inequality (in property, power, rights, and privileges) imposed by the ruled.

There is nothing particularly Marxist about this simple approach: indeed, book 5 of Aristotle's *The Politics* reminds us that "it is the passion for equality which is thus at the root of sedition [protest, rebellion, revolution]" (Barker 1962:205).

Additional evidence that his approach is, at best, a diluted Marxian one is that there is no "class struggle," only "collective action," which may or may not be organized around classes, not to mention that it is problematic whether "oppressed people will act in terms of objective class interests" (p. 1). Vlastos implies that "objective class interests" may exist, but he never identifies what they are, and he clearly uses his evidence in Fukushima to show that a peasant "class consciousness" did not exist. All the more curious, therefore, that he postulates that the relationship between lord and peasant "promoted peasants' awareness of their class interests" and even a consequent "conflict consciousness" (p. 12). Marx, in his "Eighteenth Brumaire," suggests that "hostile opposition" to the ruling class precedes, not follows, class consciousness (Marx [1855] 1969:479).

The picture that Vlastos paints of the Fukushima peasants has them buying into the ruling ideology of aristocratic benevolence toward the peasantry, hardly a sign of class consciousness. Benevolence, in fact, was "a necessary function of fief administration" (p. 41), taking the concrete form of periodic adjustments in feudal exactions from the peasantry, a kind of homeostatic function that kept the ruling order intact. In their protests, it was benevolence that peasants demanded, not equality of classes or basic reform of the system, a far cry from Bix's "deepening class conflict between lords and peasants" (p. 221). Vlastos's peasants' ideology was "doggedly conservative" (p. 18). As such, it was not that Fukushima peasants felt exploited but rather that they were conscious of the rulers' obligation to adhere to their own rules of benevolence. This view challenges Bix's picture of "class struggle . . . against the predatory combinations of fief officials and local bourgeois" (p. 205), which he sees as a sign of "some degree of conceptual advance over time for peasants in their understanding and practical assertion of rights, as in their rational pursuit of aims" (p. 216).

Although Bix is careful not to assert "the ascent of peasant political consciousness" during Japan's "transformation from a feudal to a capitalist society" (p. 215), it is difficult not to conclude from his assertion of peasants' awareness of "rights" and of "the political, inherently fictitious nature of status ideology" (p. 219) that their political consciousness did not represent some sort of progressive advance. For Vlastos, on the other hand, peasant conservatism did not disappear over time. Even as late as early Meiji, his Fukushima peasants "appear to have assumed the same political and psychological posture toward the new state as they had toward seigneurial authority. . . . They still looked to the state for benevolence" (p. 152).

Vlastos's recognition of peasant conservatism in fact brings his analysis more closely in line with Marx's, at least in that one respect, but the more important lessons that his book offers have much less to do with Marx than with objective conditions in Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan. Most important, in my judgment, is his observation that in the transition from one era to the next, peasants were ideologically schizophrenic. As their production became more and more oriented for the market, they wanted both to have their cake (to receive traditional benevolence) and to eat it too (to enjoy profits generated by the market). Their demand for periodic tax adjustments in tight times, more in tune with calls for honoring the moral economy, could be foresworn during prosperous periods when market demands put them, as suppliers, in the driver's seat. Hence, contrary to Vlastos's asserted thesis, it was not so much inequality that upset peasants as it was fundamental structural change in the economy, from feudal to capitalistic, as shifting criteria for state exactions of surplus production created greater uncertainty. Peasant rationality, in short, varied over time: sometimes it supported traditional, moral pleas for seigneurial benevolence; at others it demanded noninterference in the market economy by the state. Vlastos readily sees the first but has difficulty entertaining the latter.

Vlastos is certainly correct in finding intraclass peasant conflict, especially in the closing years of Tokugawa, more common than interclass conflict. (Bix makes a similar point on p. 166 but does not develop the evidence.) Vlastos writes: "When peasants mobilized under crisis conditions they turned inward: collective action took the form of property smashings [against wealthy peasants and merchants] and not political action against the ruling class" (p. 159). The intraclass inequality that allegedly caused the conflict, he argues, stemmed from "production for the market" (p. 168). In other words, peasants who produced only at subsistence levels attacked those farmers and landlords in the agricultural class who benefited from production for the market.

Vlastos's findings enjoy greater credibility than Bix's largely because his study is geographically focused, on Fukushima (his indebtedness to Shōji Kichinosuke's writings on Fukushima is obvious if underacknowledged). Viewed in this light, his book should be read in comparison with William Kelly's (1985) important study of peasant conflict in the Shōnai region and Neil Waters's (1983) examination of Kawasaki peasant political passivity during Bakumatsu. Together they attest to the value of performing regional/local studies as opposed to national studies like Bix's or Anne Walthall's.

Walthall admits early in her book that "given a geographical and political landscape as diverse as that of eighteenth century Japan, it seems hardly likely that peasants growing cotton and rapeseed to sell in the Osaka market would experience and discuss the same issues as those living in the isolated villages of northern Japan." That is reasonable. "Nevertheless," she adds, "they approached new problems similarly by the 1780s" (pp. xi-xii). Why, then, does she say a few pages later that "disturbances in the 1780s broke out most frequently in *fudai* domains"? Elsewhere she suggests that in the more heavily commercialized regions, such as Kinai, peasants employed more sophisticated reasoning in justifying protests than peasants did in less commercialized

regions. In short, peasant protests appear to vary according to type of domain and economic conditions. Such variations deserve elaboration and clearly belie the assertion of relative sameness nationwide.

Walthall seems to suggest that whatever differences in peasant resistance may have existed according to region can be glossed over because of the temporal focus of her study. Her concern is with the Tenmei period of the 1780s when, by her own accounting, an extraordinarily high number of instances of peasant protest, more than four hundred, took place nationwide. Methodologists might wonder why she selected such an unrepresentative period. Their wondering would not stop here.

Her book, as the title suggests, uses "songs, confessions, chronicles, and tales" to study "the political culture [which for her is synonymous with popular culture] of peasants and townspeople." More succinctly, her intention is "to draw a picture of the mind of commoners as [when?] they engaged in political action." She concludes early on that "a strong self-consciousness existed among commoners of late eighteenth century Japan, growing out of protests concerned with issues of commerce, local community organization, and governmental control mechanisms" (p. x).

As might already be clear, there is confusion in the stated aims of the book. First, is political culture identical to popular culture? Can we infer "the mind of the commoners" from their political activity? And is the commoners' "strong self-consciousness" the same as class consciousness, claims to the contrary on page 71 notwithstanding? Related issues suggesting a similar confusion of purpose include the apparent contradiction between the claim that "peasants had internalized bakufu prohibitions" (p. 38) and the claim that "peasant thought diverged from the ideology of the ruling class" (p. 60). Another is Walthall's apparent acceptance of Fukawa Kiyoshi's claim that peasants invoked a "principle of necessity" (p. 60) when challenging Bakufu rules; how is this principle different from Marxian historical necessity? or why is necessity—that is, the need to survive—a "principle" at all? Walthall takes us closer to understanding peasant thinking but gives us few clues to explain how thought affects, or does not affect, behavior and [in]action.

The closest she comes to offering a thesis in this respect is that the "words and deeds" of peasants in the 1780s "reveal a sharp break with previous ideological assumptions [and deeds?]" (p. xii). (Set aside her contradictory statement on the page before: "The 1780s did not see a radical break in commoner perceptions.") The reason for the break, her contradiction notwithstanding, is the growth of capitalism or the market. Contrary to Vlastos, Walthall believes that the actual words of peasants show greater willingness to challenge authority; she characterizes these words as language ("the language of hardship") of market-oriented self-interest, language of a pragmatic bent that attempted to teach the ruling class that the interests of lord and peasant were mutual and to instruct lords that benevolence was for their own good because the failure to practice benevolence would result in peasant disrespect. In this regard, Walthall implies that Scheiner (1978) may be correct in terming the ideology of the period as benevolent lord, honorable peasant, but that he errs in not realizing that as lords became profligate and malevolent, peasants became prudent and disrespectful. And thus emerged the "conventional morality" of the peasants, a result of market relations that rendered mutual respect only when there was mutual self-interest in the exchange relationship. Peasants pragmatically learned this lesson before their tradition-bound, ideologically backward lords. Otherwise expressed, peasant morality was market morality; whereas the ruling-class morality, indifferent to or unaware of the consequential effects of the growth of the market, was mired in pious, self-serving, aristocratic pretentiousness; wedded to the status quo, rulers were incapable of recognizing

that conditions had indeed changed, in favor of the producer and against the lazy aristocrat consumer.

Hence "deference . . . became a thing of the past" (p. 205). No longer did peasants respect authority. Laws were no longer effective; producers were the realists, samurai consumers the fanciful and unproductive ideologues of a time past. The market taught market morality, and the peasants, now in the market, pedantically purveyed its teachings to an inattentive audience, lords anxious to hold onto an outdated system of government control of the economy that was fast yielding to the forces of capitalism. Yes, capitalism does indeed change thinking and the meaning of justice (fair exchange rather than aristocratic, monopolistic control) as well, and those who were its practitioners, the peasants, perforce had to inform its anachronistic opponents, the ruling class. "The peasants," she writes, "took a notion of justice developed through their participation in market exchanges and applied it critically to normal bureaucratic procedures" (p. 91). A "suitable price," in the peasants' words, or a just price, or a "fair value," these were the types of expressions finding voice in the new market morality. Justice was no longer lordly benevolence; rather it was what the impersonal market dictated.

Walthall clearly understands the issues here, but it would have helped had she explained them in terms of the ongoing debate between the moral economists and the advocates of the rational economy. (She cites the major exponents of the two positions often enough to convince me that she is familiar with their positions.) Her study, as does Vlastos's, helps to bridge the apparent conceptual gap that separates the two theories. Both Vlastos and Walthall show that as the economy changes from a subsistence, peasant economy to a profit-oriented, farmer market economy—a shift documented also by Bix—values of producers change; indeed, the meaning of rationality itself changes. In subsistence economy it was rational to accept the lord's benevolence—periodic tax adjustments in tight times—but once it was possible to generate surplus value, producers redefined the "rational" and the "just" in favor of whatever rules, customs, and authoritative bodies helped the process of capital accumulation. It became irrational not to oppose feudal exactions in economically depressed periods, just as aristocratic profligacy became unjust because it detracted from the accumulation of capital without offering any benefits in return.

But regrettably, rather than assign meaning to her many tales of peasant disobedience in terms of predominating paradigms, Walthall, who is no stranger to these paradigms, leaves the reader with the simple conclusion that the once-deferent peasants of early Tokugawa suddenly became defiant in the 1780s. Her evidence of peasant demands for free trade and greater local autonomy is compelling and important, but the absence of some sort of theoretical framework for assessing the import of these demands leaves the reader feeling about her book much the same way as one of her self-critical commoner chroniclers felt about his own narrow vision of local peasant activities: like the frog in a well who knows nothing of the ocean (p. 163).

Better that, however, than swimming in Smethurst's ocean of praise for the petit bourgeois entrepreneurial peasant-turned-farmer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His book is an unabashed paean to enterprising agrarians and, more important, to the political-economic system of Meiji and Taishō. The system worked, says Smethurst, because "more and more Japanese lived better and better because of rising incomes in the prewar era" (p. 71). If this sounds Reaganesque, it is because like the Great Communicator, Smethurst is not shy about pointing to the Japanese equivalents of the leading economic indicators in order to make his point that farmers never had it so good. Also like the American president, Smethurst neatly avoids the bad news about the economy and those for whom the bad news was written (albeit

seldom reported). For that one has to go to Mikiso Hane's *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (1982). (See Smethurst's comments about Hane's "polemical book" on p. 291, n. 81, where he criticizes Hane for using the word "famine" to describe both the Tenmei famine of the 1780s and the Tōhoku "famine" of 1934: "While thousands," Smethurst writes, "may have been on the 'verge of starvation' in 1934, this is distinctly different from the thousands who did starve to death in the Temmei Famine." Real famine, for Smethurst, must result in many deaths!)

If this criticism sounds extreme, read with me "the basic point of this book," which Smethurst finally introduces explicitly on page 228: "The modern Japanese farmer, whether rich or poor, was not merely a pawn to be buffeted by an unjust market system—as inequitable and onerous as that system at times might have been. Rather, the farmer was a positive actor, an 'economic animal,' a small entrepreneur, if you will, who increasingly made every effort to maximize profits by using new techniques to produce more and better cash crops." *Homo economicus*, the Japanese farmer, no different from Adam Smith's devotee of bourgeois morality whose behavior can be understood by the sole drive to amass capital, for this, and this alone, is the basis for prestige and political power. And of course, the market, Smith's "hidden hand," is necessarily "not like a gigantic octopus [that] ensnare[s] the farmer in its tentacles and squeeze[s] out his life's blood; rather, commercial agriculture and the other parts of Japan's modernization process allowed the cultivator to take greater and greater control of his own destiny." And Smethurst's epiphany of rhetorical excess: "The rural market economy did not destroy the farmer; it freed him" (p. 229).

That is, as he himself says, "the basic point of the book." The farmer, meaning all farmers, is not the complex and contentious peasant discussed by Bix, Vlastos, and Walthall. Nor is the market that Smethurst says liberated the farmers the same as the market discussed by the other authors. What distinguishes his agrarians from those discussed in the other three books is first that Smethurst's farmer is from Yamanashi Prefecture; as with Vlastos's book, the regional focus is a positive attribute of the book, but unlike Vlastos, who is reluctant to generalize about agrarians throughout the rest of Japan based on his Fukushima data, Smethurst shows no such compunction.

A second feature of Smethurst's agrarians, and correctly noted in my judgment, is his distinction between peasant and farmer. Smethurst's Taishō agrarian "was a farmer who managed his farm for profit, not a peasant who reacted to the initiatives of others" (p. 4; see also pp. 39–41). By the 1920s, he suggests, relying on Nishida Yoshiaki's Yamagata Prefecture data, all but 16 percent of that region's agriculturalists were commercial farmers (p. 17). Similarly, whether farmers owned their land or rented it from others, by the 1920s "members of the bottom stratum of society . . . were without doubt poor, but in their poverty they lived better than their late Tokugawa, early Meiji ancestors" "Poverty, after all, is relative" (p. 21), he reminds us, the point being that expansion of the economy and increasing productivity, although not eliminating poverty and by extension subsistence farming of a peasant class, nonetheless liberates more and more people to enter into and enjoy market-generated wealth. Hence, the subjects of his study, unlike those of the other authors, have made the transition to the capitalist economy.

Smethurst's market is highly developed, not competing with a feudal economy as in the other writings under review. Smethurst's market, in fact, is the great definer of rationality. Smethurst distinguishes between "enterprising men" who cultivated relatively large tracts of land and "lazy farmers" (his quotation marks) who worked small tracts (p. 292). Smethurst identifies them by name but provides no evidence regarding why one succeeded (his words: "differences of scale and success" [p. 292]) and another failed in the appropriation of property. He is certainly correct in saying

that "one cannot determine poverty in twentieth century rural Japan on the basis of landownership alone" and that tenancy by itself does not "necessarily mean that tenants became poor" (p. 291), but he is terribly wrong to judge success by land ownership alone. But in the capitalist marketplace, after all, property in land, labor and/or capital is the measure of success. And Smethurst loves success.

It is ironic, therefore, that he attacks those who deduce tenant attitudes (as expressed in their protests) from their relationship to the owners of the means of production, while blindly attributing attitude ("enterprising") to those who own the means of production. For Smethurst, apologist for tenancy, poverty is "relative" and the victims of the system either deserved their sorry plight or, bolder yet, actually willed it. He guesses, for example, "a significant part of the growth of tenancy must have come about, not because of the tax system, commercialization, and bankruptcy, but because of the *desire* of poorer farmers to till these newly opened fields" (p. 133; emphasis added). He tries to strengthen this supposition with yet another: "The growth of tenancy in Yamanashi may be more a sign of the tenants' using their growing labor productivity to increase their income than of sinking poverty" (p. 133). Why, then, do agrarians want to be tenants? They want to work the fields and exploit their labor power.

He does not stop there. Tenants "voluntarily" tilled rented land; they "decided rationally" that tenancy entailed fewer risks; and "wise landlords" did not evict "hard-working" tenants (pp. 133-34). Smethurst's language here is what I earlier referred to as "market morality" run amok. Nearly two million tenants engaged in more than seventy thousand disputes with a half-million landlords between 1920 and 1941. In a good number of cases, poverty may not have been the issue, as he suggests, but it is just as likely that feelings of having been exploited had something to do with the large number of protests. The idea is not farfetched, even allowing for tenant rhetorical excess; we see, for instance, a Yamanashi tenant union formed "in order to secure our right to live" (p. 309). Walthall, citing Fukawa Kiyoshi, might call this the "principle of necessity." Smethurst sees it otherwise, as this ideologically loaded sentence shows: "By the time of Nichino's [Japan Farmers' Union] founding in 1922, *rational farmers* had long since outgrown this passivity-explosion syndrome and searched for *moderate, reformist ways* to improve their living standards" (p. 348; emphasis added).

Smethurst has assembled extremely valuable data and has done an earnest job of analyzing it; he has also thought seriously about alternative theoretical explanations for rural protest. But his blatant apologia for the inequalities generated by the growth of the market diverts the reader's attention from the more solid and convincing case for the liberating effect of capitalism on many, but far from all, of Japan's agrarians.

The value of these four studies of agrarian protest is considerable, if only because their relative strengths and weaknesses help to generate a series of recommendations for a future research agenda. One recommendation stems from Vlastos's approach, namely, focusing on changes in the political economy at the local or prefectural level yields conclusions that are less open to question on scientific grounds. The more modest the scope of inquiry, the more manageable the data, the greater the coherence of argumentation, and the more credible the interpretation. In contrast, as the Bix and Walthall studies reveal, generalizations about nationwide peasant behavior lead to overreliance either on ideological formulations or on anecdotal material that in its unavoidable variation results in internal contradictions or atheoretical cataloguing of events.

This does not mean that the Bix and Walthall approaches cannot be enlightening. A Marxian approach—call it perspective—if unencumbered by Maoist hagiography can reveal in stark terms the dilemma of a conservative peasantry struggling to escape

the unequal effects of a liberal (and ultimately liberating) capitalist reward system. Feudalism has historically given way to capitalism, just as subsistence production has yielded to production for the market. How some peasants make the transition, and why others cannot, is explicable by the Marxian approach.

Walthall's concern for subtle changes in peasant thinking and how their language reflected these changes in relationship to rulers seems ideally suited for the newer James Scott analysis (1986), what he calls "everyday forms of peasant resistance." Such an approach takes us away from the comparatively rare but almost always failed revolts of peasants and focuses on "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them." He cites "footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, [and] sabotage" (Scott 1986:6) as examples. Walthall shows instances where peasants twisted ruling-class language to their own benefit and in so doing tried to redefine ruling-class ideology. This, it seems, is one of the nonviolent but important forms of peasant resistance that can be interpreted according to Scott's suggestive approach.

Finally, I think that the Smethurst analysis shows that the virtue of geographical focus cannot redeem the vices of temporal expansiveness and ideological apologetics. His is a study too ambitious and too pretentious: one cannot deduce from a study that accounts for one region's events over a seventy-year period what *the* rational farmer was. The lesson his book teaches is that we need more studies like Vlastos's.

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