



Review: [Untitled]

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Ikki: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early Modern Japan by James W. White
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The unstated premise of *Tokugawa Village Practice*—the enthymeme of Tokugawa village life, its tensions and conflicts—is economic change. We can understand the struggles described by Ooms among lineage groups for the status confirmed by titles only when we also accept the view that wealth was being created rather than merely transferred. Not only that. What Ooms describes makes sense when we accept the idea that land had become as much a requisite of status as a source of wealth. As the story of the land-acquiring sake brewer (pp. 161–62) shows, those who created wealth in manufacturing, commerce, and trade sought land for status and influence. The village conflicts that Ooms documents so well thus can be best understood in terms of economic change and the challenges of lineages with new wealth to those in decline attempting to hold on to office, title, and influence. The dynamics and influence of economic change had, by the end of the Tokugawa rule, severed the triad of status, wealth, and land.

Ikki: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early Modern Japan. By James W. White. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995. xii, 348 pages. \$39.95.

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Popular rebellion is an important theme for social scientists and historians who work on Japan. In the past two decades, Japan scholars have produced a considerable literature dedicated to some aspect of popular or peasant protest. Peasant rebellions belong to the preindustrial world, and they are of particular interest to social historians who seek the causes of change in the interactions of social groups rather than in the actions of individuals. European historians regard the great peasant rebellions of Europe as spontaneous events that lacked organization, long-term goals, and a motivating ideology. They are unlike modern revolutions which require the participation of informed, articulate, and ideologically motivated groups such as artisans, industrial workers, and intellectuals. The peasant rebellions of preindustrial Europe are attributed to social and economic changes that affected peasants adversely, to political or social injustices, or to fundamental disagreements based on conflicting religious beliefs. While popular rebellions against constituted authority could cause serious destruction of property and loss of life, in the end they achieved few long-term gains. Early modern European states could and did use their resources to put such rebellions down. The European peasant did not lead but followed others along the path to modernity.

James W. White's *Ikki: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early*

Modern Japan is a book about peasant protest, but it tells of a different kind of peasant and a different kind of protest. White depicts early modern Japanese peasants as rational actors who carefully calculated the risks of protest. They had very specific goals which their protests often secured, at least in part, and they followed predictable, ritualized procedures to obtain these goals. Moreover, these peasants had an ideology—the required benevolence of the Confucian ruler—which they shared with the ruling class but used to their own advantage. In Japan, conflicting ideologies or religious beliefs were not a motivating factor in peasant protests.

This view of Japanese peasants and peasant conflict places the author squarely in the “early modern economic development school” of Tokugawa scholars. These scholars (including people such as Susan B. Hanley, William B. Hauser, Hayami Akira, Thomas C. Smith, and Kozo Yamamura) see the Japanese peasant as a rational actor who knew quite well what was in his best interest and how to act upon that knowledge. They regard early modern Japan as a period of significant economic advances based on dramatic urbanization and a concomitant increase in demand for products from the countryside; rising agricultural productivity and the commercialization of agriculture; the development of by-employments and proto-industries that diversified the rural economy; and the emergence of a national market that encouraged regional specialization and inter-regional trade. This economic expansion benefited peasants who were able to take advantage of new opportunities and the merchant class which profited from the increasing value and volume of trade in goods and services. The rise in the standard of living among commoners was accompanied by a parallel decline in the fortunes of the ruling samurai class.

Why then did peasants protest? White claims that sources of conflict proliferated, that the incidence and magnitude of protests increased, and that the underlying causes and consequences of conflict were national in origin and scope. He attributes this accelerating trend of political and social conflict to the fundamental shift in relative economic status just described. The political, social, economic, and ideological constraints built into Japan's hierarchical social system prevented the samurai class from taking advantage of these new opportunities. And attempts to extract more revenues and labor services from the peasantry failed, in part, because peasant protests against these measures, while harshly punished, often accomplished their objectives. Even partial success encouraged more protest, and the government's need to deal with increasingly severe protests further weakened the effectiveness of Tokugawa rule. Japanese peasants did not succeed in changing the political system, and it is not clear that they wanted to, but their protests sapped the resources of the Tokugawa state and altered the context in which the political regime operated. As a result, peasant protests did make a difference over the long term.

What is the support for this argument? The first third of *Ikki* is devoted

to establishing the historical context—or rather four historical contexts—in which conflict and protest took place. Political, economic, social, and ideological contexts are considered in separate chapters, an approach that segregates these inextricably entwined aspects of Tokugawa history and requires much repetition of the same points. White's purpose, however, is to prepare the reader for the analysis that follows: the author classifies, by type and magnitude, 7,310 disputes recorded in Tokugawa records and compiled by Aoki Kōji in *Hyakushō ikki sōgō nenpyō* (Sanichi, 1981). White categorizes these incidents according to the stated cause of the dispute, or the type of action—petition, protest, village dispute, or riot—specified in the record. The author distinguishes 69 different types of dispute and classifies each as a political or societal conflict.

White measures the magnitude and violence of disputes on a ten-point scale and finds that popular contention in early modern Japan was overwhelmingly nonviolent. Sixty-four per cent of the episodes scored a 1 (least serious) while only 12 per cent scored a 10 (most serious). The author finds this high proportion of nonviolent disputes “unsurprising” because the protest leaders and followers were usually unarmed commoners. In fact, many events included in the sample would be regarded today as legal actions for redress of grievance. Japan's Tokugawa rulers, however, deemed petitions illegal if protesters used extrainstitutional channels to make their complaints known, or if their actions were “premeditated,” meaning that they met in advance to plan a strategy. The only legal way to bring a grievance to the attention of the government was to present a petition through official channels. The most likely official channel would be the village headman, a risky choice if the complaint being lodged was against the headman himself. The large number of “illegal” petitions in the sample demonstrates the repressive nature of the Tokugawa state, which forbade peaceful assembly and failed to provide appropriate avenues for legitimate grievances. However, the high proportion of benign events in the sample suggests that the number of real peasant protests may be exaggerated.

White uses his reconstructed database to determine long-term patterns and trends, and then correlates these findings with the political, economic, social, and ideological contexts set forth in the first four chapters. If one is comfortable with his classification of thousands of events as *either* social *or* political conflicts, this exercise reveals some interesting patterns and trends. Those most likely to speak or act out against the established order were *hyakushō* (called freehold farmers in the text), tenant farmers and the rural poor, and lower- and middle-class urbanites. This too is “unsurprising” because these groups together constituted 90 per cent of the population. The most prominent targets of protest were official merchants and representatives of local, domain, and shogunal governments.

As for regional differences, the number of disturbances was greater in

western Japan and lowland properties (where agriculture was land-intensive and tenant cultivators produced cotton and rapeseed for the market), than in eastern Japan and upland districts (where the local economy was based on labor-intensive sericulture on the properties of freehold farmers). There are also differences that are not regional but political: White finds many more protests in *bakufu*-administered territories than in daimyo domains. Finally, the trend is from less to more serious disturbances. Larger, more politically motivated disturbances at the end of the Tokugawa period than at the beginning suggest either that conditions worsened or that peasants had more reason to believe they could gain concessions through protest, or both.

The Tokugawa state responded to the increasing incidence of politically motivated protests with increasingly severe repression. It was not uncommon for local or regional officials to be held responsible for failing to prevent peasant protest, and officials were often executed or severely punished along with the protest leaders. White argues that the Tokugawa state did not have the capacity to put down popular uprisings in a consistent and effective manner that would prevent further outbreaks. The Meiji government experienced many fewer protests, and White reasons that this central authority commanded greater resources which it was willing to use to convince the populace that such outbreaks would not be tolerated. However, other interpretations are possible. Better control of popular disturbance by some Tokugawa daimyo domains and by the early Meiji government suggests a possible connection. Which daimyo domains experienced fewer protests? What is the relationship between leadership of those domains and the new leadership of the Meiji government? Perhaps certain domains had fewer protests because those domains were governed better. Perhaps there is a connection between successful domain policies and successful policies of the early Meiji government. Long-term, macro-level analyses do not deal with these kinds of questions, but they do serve to bring them to our attention.

This book is very hard to read. It is written in a social science idiom that at times is impossible to decode. White attempts to build a model that connects all aspects of popular protest to all aspects of Tokugawa society. Analysis of such a broad and diverse range of phenomena over more than two centuries may produce an abstract reality of sorts and encourage social scientists to build ever more complex models; however, it does little to explain why particular social groups acted as they did in real situations and circumstances. Since many recent studies of popular protest do just that,¹ a macro approach to long-term changes in the nature of conflict in Japan is certainly justified. However, conflict implies the involvement of at least two adversaries. In *Ikki* the adversaries are the peasants and the state, and they seem caught in a mutually destructive dance from which they cannot extricate themselves. White focuses exclusively on data that refer to peasant actions and fails to present evidence that explains the changing strategies of

the state. He uses the word “unsurprising” repeatedly to refer to his findings, which suggests that he found what he set out to find. His model seems designed to demonstrate the unusual rationality of the early modern Japanese peasant and Japan’s different history of peasant protest, rather than to illuminate the changing nature of conflict within the early modern Japanese state.

Fishing Villages in Tokugawa Japan. By Arne Kalland. University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu, 1995. 355 pages. \$38.00.

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Fishing Villages in Tokugawa Japan is a classical ethnography. It is an unusual one in that the author has often visited the place of interest, fishing villages on the northern shore of Kyushu, but he has spent no time there at all. The reason is simple: the time Kalland is interested in is the early modern period. Unlike much work on this period, his topic is not history or literature or politics, but rather the everyday life of ordinary people.

Kalland’s dominant interest is the sea tenure system: how exploitation of marine resources is managed and regulated, and by whom. Within this issue he is especially interested in identifying those factors that limited fishing effort: constraints on the number of people involved, the time they spent in it, and the quality of the technology available to them. He argues that the combination of these three factors significantly limited the marine resources extracted during this period.

The number of people involved was reduced in a number of ways. Fishing rights were limited to a small number of villages on the coast, and a village legally designated “farming village” did not qualify. Within villages, only a small percentage of the population held the licenses that allowed access, with certain kinds of equipment, to certain species on certain

1. See, for example, Herbert P. Bix, *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590–1884* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Roger W. Bowen, *Rebellion and Democracy in Meiji Japan: A Study of Commoners in the Popular Rights Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); William W. Kelly, *Deference and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Richard J. Smethurst, *Agricultural Development and Tenancy Dispute in Japan, 1870–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Anne Walthall, *Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986).