

## Communications to the Editor

### On Review of *Artist and Patron in Postwar Japan*

Lee E. Scanlon didn't much like what I had to say or how I said it in *Artist and Patron in Postwar Japan* (reviewed in *JAS* 42, [August 1983]:958–59). My thesis, which the review did not state, is this: Before the late 1960s, the government of Japan gave low priority to aiding the arts. Corporate and foundation patronage have been hamstrung by hostile tax laws and a weak tradition of philanthropy. No true public exists for theater, dance, music, or the visual arts. Instead leaders of the arts have cultivated private audiences, patterned after family groups, to support each genre.

The reviewer's quarrels with the substance of what I said are hollow. He complained that no source predated 1966; actually the notes list dozens of such sources. Somehow he did not discern the elites, including professionals, who dominate each genre. In fact they are all there: their numbers, schooling, incomes, and the arts organizations through which they work. The reviewer objected to reading statistics that support my conclusions, but no one can write responsibly about arts patronage without facts. (For the social history of the arts everywhere, but especially in Japan, the real problem is a dearth of reliable figures.) The reviewer chides me for minimizing the human element, but actually the book treats nearly every important patron of the arts since 1955 and draws heavily on interviews with more than a hundred artists, patrons, critics, and administrators. What I wrote was a work about social groups—artists, fan clubs, season subscribers, middle-class pupils. Everyone agrees that these have been the key patrons since the 1950s. Readers will quickly be able to tell whether it is the book or the review that concentrates, in Scanlon's words, "only superficially" on its topic.

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### On the Symposium, *Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies*

I was deeply disturbed by the symposium on peasant behavior, inspired by the controversy between James Scott and Sam Popkin, which appeared in the August 1983 *JAS* (42, no. 4:753–868). Several papers seriously misrepresented James Scott's writings, attributing to Scott ideas that he has never held, and then "refuting" the supposed errors. In particular, Charles Keyes, as editor of the symposium, attributed some remarkably simple-minded ideas to Scott.

Keyes (p. 763) attributes to Scott a claim that "the mass support that has brought revolutionary regimes to power in the postcolonial Third World has been secured by the reassertion of premodern redistributionary ideologies, of untransformed communitarian norms." One would suppose that this came from *The Moral Economy of the*

*Peasant*, the only thing Scott has written that Keyes lists in either of his bibliographies. However, *neither in this nor in any other of Scott's writings can I find even a single revolutionary regime whose rise is traced to such factors.*

Keyes claims that Scott has an extraordinarily uniform picture of peasant society. Thus he says he believes Scott's formulation to be based "on an assumption that peasant values are everywhere the same because peasants are constrained to act within the same type of political economy" (p. 865). He suggests that "Scott tended to take as general features of peasantry those that actually stemmed from the particular conditions of the Great Depression, especially as manifest in Burma and southern Vietnam where tenancy and sharecropping reached proportions unusual for Asia" (p. 757). As if it were a refutation of Scott, he presents his own view, "The rents appropriated from peasants in different Asian societies as well as from the peasants within the same society in different regions or at different periods are not *always* so burdensome as to leave them with little more than a bare subsistence" (p. 756; emphasis added).

In fact, to the extent that *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (Scott 1976) can be said to focus on any single topic, it deals with the ways peasants have reacted, in the past 100 years, to massive *changes* in the type of political economy in which they act. It is hard to see how Scott could reasonably be accused of taking the characteristics of Depression-era Burma and southern Vietnam to be typical of peasant society in general, since in regard to most of the relevant issues Scott gives an explicit discussion of the ways Depression-era Burma and southern Vietnam differed from the same societies in a previous era, or from other societies, or both. Note Scott's comments on differences in the extent of tenancy (p. 86), nature of tenancy (pp. 8, 120), nutritional levels (p. 87), and overt peasant hostility to elites and governments (chap. 5 *passim*). Numerous passages in Scott discuss peasants who do not suffer from the sort of poverty and insecurity that occurred in the Depression; some passages discuss peasants who have enough surplus capital to be able to function as "Schumpeterian entrepreneurs," investing substantial amounts in efforts to better their lives (pp. 21–24).

Keyes very clearly implies—in his summary of David Feeny's article "The Moral or the Rational Peasant?"—that Scott believes peasant behavior to be guided by moral principles rather than individual (or family) self-interest. "Feeny argues that the types of activities that James Scott has seen as being best understood with reference to the principles of 'safety first' and 'reciprocity' could equally well, if not better, be understood with reference to an assumption of peasants making rational economic decisions, given the circumstances in which they find themselves. . . . [Feeny] finds greater utility in the prior assumption that peasants, like all humans, are rational actors seeking to maximize their interests than in the assumption that they are moral actors bound to subordinate their interests to the collective good" (Keyes, pp. 761–62; see also lines 1–4 and 26–29 on p. 762).

In fact, Scott's writings are pervaded by the idea that peasants make rational economic decisions, given the circumstances in which they find themselves (see Scott, pp. 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, etc.). Scott argues at great length that the principles of "safety first" and "reciprocity" are widely found in peasant societies precisely because adherence to or support for these principles *is* a rational economic decision—because most individual households find these principles conducive to the welfare of the household. He makes it clear that when peasants find themselves in circumstances where adherence to the principle of "safety first" is not a rational economic decision, the principle will be dropped (pp. 25–26). Nowhere does Scott

suggest that the peasants are in the habit of subordinating their interests to the collective good.

Scott's real ideas are far too complex to present in a short letter. To do so would be gratuitous in any case; his book is easily available. However, readers of the *JAS* who have not seen the book should be aware that the ideas in it bear little resemblance to Keyes's summary of them.

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### Still More on *Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies*: A Reply to Edwin Moise

It is unfortunate that Professor Moise has chosen to attack me and my fellow contributors to the symposium on "Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies: Moral and Rational Economic Approaches" for employing a *wrong* interpretation of James Scott's book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasantry*, rather than putting forward an *alternative* reading of the book that would have furthered a discussion of the fundamental issues involved. It is highly misleading, I maintain, to see the symposium as entailing a refutation of the "errors," supposed or otherwise, contained in the work of James Scott (or of Samuel Popkin, whose book, *The Rational Peasant*, was of equal relevance to the symposium).

Moise takes me to task for ignoring the fact that Scott discusses the reactions of peasants to many different politico-economic conditions besides those of the Great Depression. Because of this fact, Moise finds it difficult to accept the conclusion, put forward by Feeny in his paper and reiterated in my introduction, that "Scott *tended* to take as general features of peasantry those that actually stemmed from the particular conditions of the Great Depression. . . ." (introduction, p. 757; emphasis added). Moise has, I suggest, confused levels of discussion. My concern, like that of my fellow contributors, lay in "the *argument* that Scott advances" (introduction, p. 756, emphasis added), not in the application that Scott made of his own theoretical approach to a number of examples. In seeking for the roots of Scott's approach, I am scarcely alone in concluding that while Scott predicates his theory upon certain assumptions about human nature, the theory has been shaped to a considerable extent by his analysis of major rebellions in Burma and Vietnam that occurred during the Depression. Michael Peletz ("Moral and Political Economies in Rural Southeast Asia: A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 4:734–35) has noted the implications of Scott's analysis of these rebellions in a paper that I read after the symposium was published:

One wonders . . . why Scott chose for his case studies two peasant movements that arose in 1930, during the Great Depression. . . . Surely the occurrence (or absence) of peasant uprisings under less catastrophic economic conditions would have provided an adequate (and perhaps a far more appropriate) testing ground for the basic components of Scott's model and for his position on villagers' uniform reluctance to engage in market activities and risk (whether economic or political). In point of fact, an examination of other cases would seem to require a partial revision of Scott's thesis.