THE PEASANT CONCEPT: ITS APPLICABILITY TO RURAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

Stephen M. Childs
State University of New York
Potsdam
It is axiomatic that as social scientists accumulate insights relating to a particular phenomenon it becomes possible to define said phenomenon with greater specificity. Sooner or later this increased awareness of a phenomenon's previously obscure aspects forces the social scientist into making a choice with respect to the original conceptualization. On the one hand he may elect to amend the original concept with qualifying statements or, on the other, he may decide that in light of an expanding body of empirical knowledge it is necessary to totally reconceptualize the phenomenon under study and redefine its meaning. Needless to say, seldom will there be a consensus of opinion as to which choice is the proper one, and it is frequently the case that the ensuing controversy obfuscates the issue even further.

The essay which follows appraises the "peasant" concept in light of a growing body of ethnographic data relevant to those societies heretofore categorized as "peasant", and, following this, makes a few observations of a general sort with respect to the study of traditional rural society in developing areas. The ethnographic focus is on Southeast Asian rural society; however, it is felt that in its essential form the thesis presented here is applicable to African and Latin American rural society as well.

For the past half century the attention of anthropologists has been increasingly drawn to rural societies of the so-called "peasant" type, and a recent estimate notes that over one-half of current anthropological research activities deal with such
societies (Gamst 1974). Concurrent with this interest in peasant societies there has emerged a growing body of theoretical literature regarding the efficacy of the term "peasant".

Thirty years ago Alfred Kroeber made a rather cursory reference to "peasants", noting that

Peasants are definitely rural -- yet live in relation to market towns; they form a class segment of a larger population which usually contains urban centers, sometimes metropolitan capitals. They constitute part-societies with part-cultures (Kroeber 1948:234).

With the issuance of this now classic definition of peasant, there has ensued a growing controversy, and more than a little confusion, about what type of society is to be labeled "peasant", and what types are to be understood as being something other than peasant. Accordingly, the last quarter century has witnessed a number of attempts to define the concept more precisely.

(Peasants are) rural people in old civilizations, rural people who control and cultivate their land for subsistence and as a part of a traditional way of life and who look to and are influenced by gentry or townspeople whose way of life is like theirs but in a more civilized form (Redfield 1956:45-46).

The definition of a peasant is a countryman -- a man engaged in rural pursuits, primarily agriculture, with a comparatively simple technology and a simple interest in the land he works (Firth 1950:503).

(Peasants) represent the rural expression of large, class-structured, economically complex, pre-industrial civilization, in which money is commonly used, and in which market disposition is the goal for a part of the producer's efforts (Foster 1965:311).

I would add (to Foster's definition) the cultivation of the soil as another crucial criterion because it is the man-land relation which orders so much of what is distinctive of peasant life (Lewis 1962:179).

Populations that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the processes of cultivation (are peasant). This
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 fisherman or landless laborers (Wolf 1969:xiv).

The above definitions are among those most frequently cited, and are indicative of the broad range of empirical diversity which confronts, and confounds, attempts at neat classification of rural society. A review of these and other definitions of peasantry reveals two ways by which this diversity has been reckoned with. On the one hand, one encounters definitions constructed so broadly as to embrace a wide span of occupational types. Opposed to this "general" approach is the "specific" approach, characterized by explicitly stated criteria which must be satisfied if societies are to be considered "peasant". The above definitions of Kroeber, Redfield and Firth, for example, stand in contrast to those of Lewis and Wolf in this respect, the latter two individuals preferring to specify their criteria more closely (Wolf 1955:503).

Both approaches, the general and the specific, present problems. The general approach could conceivably result in all societies other than industrial or those in a relatively pristine state of primitiveness being collected under the label "peasant", with the result that the comparative value of the term is reduced to nothingness (Helms 1969). On the other hand, a rigid specification of definitional criteria, while perhaps enhancing comparative utility, would result in such an array of "extra-peasant" classifications that the original problem, that of "drawing the line" between different societal types, would be multiplied accordingly.
The problem facing the generalist and the purist alike is the existence of those types which, though possessing peasant characteristics, fail to conform to what is referred to variously as the "classic" (Kaplan and Saler 1966:203), or "hard-core" (Shanin 1973:5), or "model" type (Wolf 1955:520) peasant. Redfield referred to the marginal groups as the "edges" of peasantry (1956:20). The primary distinction between the generalist and the purist, or specificist, position, it would therefore seem, has to do with whether these groups are to be viewed as "inside" or "outside" edges!

A review of the literature dealing with Southeast Asian rural society reveals that of the two major definitional approaches, the generalist definition of peasantry is the type most often relied upon. Perhaps most notable is the definition offered by Firth (1946, 1950), which characterizes peasantry as rural subsistence oriented producers who, though most often agriculturalists, need not necessarily be so in order to qualify as a peasant.

Geertz's study of Javanese society employs a model of peasantry distinctively Redfieldian in flavor, identifying Javanese aristocracy and Javanese peasantry as repositories of the Great and Little Traditions respectively (1960:227-8). In a similar manner, the broadly constructed Redfieldian model has been adopted by Halpern in his analysis of rural Laotian society (1967:37-8), and by Phillips for Thai society (1965:40-41).

Swift, in his study of Malay society, also adopts a generalist position regarding the delimitation of peasantry. While not denying the significance of subsistence agriculture for the peasant economic system, he points out that the chief concern
of the Malay peasant may well be the larger market economy;

The peasant concentrates on cash production, and
the higher his money income the less he will find
for himself in the village and the jungle... The
variable which determines the amount of subsistence
production is the price of rubber. When this is
buoyant the peasant abandons the plots for domestic
consumption he made during a period of depressed
prices (Swift 1965:27).

If, as has been noted, the general type of definition is
limited in comparative usefulness, how might we explain the
apparent preference for this approach in rural Southeast Asian
ethnography? A partial answer would seem to lie in the hetero-
geneity of the Southeast Asian socioeconomic spectrum. For
example, fieldwork in rural Malay society instills in the investi-
gator an intuitive awareness that he is indeed dealing with
"peasants". Yet, when he attempts to lend conceptual refinement
to this awareness he is bedeviled with the padi farmer who taps
rubber on an estate in his spare time, the coconut grower who
fishes part-time, and the aborigine who tends permanent rice
fields throughout the week and travels by bus on weekends to the
city where he sells medicinal herbs he has gathered. It is there-
fore hardly surprising to find this "peasantry" being defined in
a general and open-ended manner, as does Firth when he speaks of
"countrymen engaged in rural pursuits".

An excellent example of the difficulty facing the Southeast
Asian ethnologist who would grapple with the peasant concept is
presented by Hollensteiner in her study of Philippine rural society:

Wolf would eliminate fisherman altogether from the ranks
of peasantry. Firth, however, includes fisherman and
rural craftsmen along with agriculturalists as peasants.
Nevertheless, in terms of social relationships, which is
Foster's criteria for defining peasantry, Hulo residents
as a whole would seem to qualify. They may be included
in Redfield's broad definition of peasantry...(1963:6-7).
After these gymnastics in which she attempts to touch all the bases, Hollensteiner concludes that Redfield never intended his definition to be rigid, and on the basis of Redfield's definition finally adjudges her society (Hulo) to be "basically peasant".

Attempts to utilize specific type definitional criteria in the study of Southeast Asian rural society have proven, in the main, rather futile. Indeed, attempts in this direction have served to point up the rather atypical character of Southeast Asian "peasantry". Foster, who favors a specific type definition of peasantry and thus criticizes Firth's definition on the basis of "its simplicity and consequent wide application", is forced to make the following admission on the following page of the same publication:

As a consequence of comments from the floor...and from subsequent discussions with a number of people, including my colleague, Clifford Geertz, I see that the Southeast Asian peasant community, as found in such countries as Indonesia and Thailand, may be sufficiently different from the peasants here described as to limit in those areas the validity of some of the generalizations that follows (1962:175).

In a similar manner, Goldschmidt and Kunkel found themselves "not able to fully account for the distinctive character of peasants of Southeast Asia" (1971:1069). Indeed, owing to the specific nature of their initial criteria, they found few Southeast Asian societies could qualify as "peasant".

The above statements of Goldschmidt and Kunkel, and Foster, and the tendency of Southeast Asian ethnologists to employ generalist definitions when dealing with Southeast Asian "peasants", point to the fact that we are dealing with something other than the "classic" peasant. An exhaustive inquiry into the precise nature of the above-mentioned "distinctive character of peasants
in Southeast Asia" is well beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, it is worthwhile to consider briefly a few relevant political, historical and ecological factors, the effects of which when taken together throw considerable light on the above-mentioned distinctiveness.

If we assume, as does Wolf, that

it is only when a cultivator is integrated into a society with a state -- that is, when the cultivator becomes subject to the demands and sanctions of power holders outside his social stratum -- that we can appropriately speak of peasantry (1966:11),

we are afforded a valuable clue as to the nature of the peculiarities of present-day Southeast Asian rural society. For, prior to European contact, minimal conditions for the existence of state level society; i.e. population concentration and the caloric requirement with which to sustain it, were largely absent in Southeast Asia. This dearth of state-level nuclei was in large part due to prevailing ecological circumstances.

A good deal has been written on social organization in tropical and subtropical environments (Pelzer 1945, Gourou 1956, Ooi Jin-Bee 1958). While not a determinant in the strict sense of the word, a tropical climate has been a weighty variable influencing Southeast Asian social organization. Heavy rainfall which leaches nutrients from the soil, as well as tropical vegetation continuously combating men's efforts to clear land, are impediments to permanent-site agriculture. In addition, many of the region's river systems issue from mountainous terrain with such force that regular flooding and excessive silting hamper efforts at large scale irrigation. Add to this the high incidence of salinity throughout many of the coastal plains, and one begins to understand the preponderance of swidden agriculture prior to
European contact, and its continued practice in vast areas of the region today. And, although the productivity of swidden may in some cases prove higher than that of sedentary agriculture (Dumond 1961), it is undeniable that sedentary agriculture is generally more conducive to high population density (Wolf 1959:60). This is borne out when the regional population density of Southeast Asia (126 persons/sq.mi.) is compared with those of the Indian subcontinent (305/sq.mi.), China proper (350/sq.mi.), and Japan (610/sq.mi.) (Fisher 1964:95).

Despite relatively low population density for the region, and Gourou's assertion that "the ladang (shifting agricultural) system is at the final analysis an inadequate economic basis on which a high civilization may achieve great political and intellectual achievements" (1956:52), there have existed numerous instances of state level organization in Southeast Asia. Funan, Champa, Khymer, Malacca, Srivijaya and Madjapahit are all examples of pre-colonial Southeast Asian states, or, as they are more often referred to, 'kingdoms'. However, a great many, if not the majority, of such 'kingdoms' owed their existence to maritime trade rather than agricultural economics. Funan, Champa, Srivijaya and Malacca, for example, while they cannot be characterized as strictly nonagricultural, owed their ascendancy to their trade route locations. As a consequence of this market orientation, the "maritime principalities were cosmopolitan in character and of necessity demonstrated a degree of social equality and tolerance that contrasted sharply with the hierarchy of land based kingdoms" (Legge 1964:29).

In addition to commercialism, there was another factor which retarded development of hierarchic social relations such as those
which saw the emergence of a "classic" peasantry in Europe, and that was religion. The spread of Islam throughout the Malay archipelago tended to erode the authority structure of many political centers such as did exist, a case in point being the early Javanese "kingdom" of Madjapahit:

In bringing man face to face with God without the necessity of a mediating priesthood or a complicated ritual, it (Islam) implied a doctrine of equality which could offer a powerful solvent for the hierarchical order of Madjapahit (Legge 1964:44).

Granting, then, that the influence of maritime commercialism and Islam retarded, if not precluded, the emergence of a "classic" peasantry, what of those inland "kingdoms" which experienced neither the levelling influence of commercialism nor of Islam? Would not those mainland states, based as they were on sedentary agriculture supportive of relatively large populations, be productive of a "classic" type of peasantry? In the majority of cases the evidence suggests not.

The historical record reveals the majority of these inland states to have been relatively short-lived political enterprises with few being able to achieve the long term stabilization of authority necessary to transform a social hinterland into a peasantry in the classic sense. Fisher notes that "the history of the mainland states seems to consist of little more than a series of ding-dong struggles between successive invaders, each contending for as much as possible of the more attractive low-lands" (1964:125,94). Even the much referred to "Hinduized States" (Coedes 1964) were usually little more than imported palace veneer cast in an otherwise pre-state setting -- "the dominant conception of kingship and authority was personal and charismatic rather than
bureaucratic and institutional" (Scott 1972:13). Furthermore, there existed such a state of political flux in the region that those polities which may have at times approximated a state level of integration often as not oscillated between tribal (or chiefdom) and primitive state levels of integration (Leach 1954). Seldom did the power center possess a sufficient monopoly over force as to allow the evolution of rigid feudal type arrangements and dependencies such as obtained in medieval Europe. This was as true for the "Hinduized kingdoms" (Burling 1965:78) as for the scattered upland valley "kingdoms" of Laos (Halpern 1964:83).

The transient quality of Southeast Asian civilizations, and the spasmodic nature of their respective political organizations, may be attributed in large part to the abundance of, and easy access to, unoccupied land. Even those few areas of population concentration made possible by hydraulic agriculture, such as the Red River valley, were never far from a frontier which, should demands of the power center become repressive, could provide refuge. There existed, therefore, what Wolf refers to as a high degree of "tactical mobility" (1969:291). As Scott notes:

'going to the hills' for banditry or swidden farming was a traditional alternative for discontented peasants. Control of land in traditional Southeast Asia, then, did not automatically bring in its wake -- as it did in areas where fertile land was scarce -- an abject clientele dependent on the patron for its principal means of subsistence (Scott 1973:16).

Not until the latter third of the last century did the process of rural social transformation commence in Southeast Asia in any appreciable manner. With the burgeoning colonial cash crop economy there occurred a rapid decrease in the amount of unoccupied land, as well as an unprecedented population increase for the area
as a whole. The resultant increase in land values, coupled with growing dependence on the forces of supply and demand (forces notoriously fickle in the case of cash crops) saw the emergence of credit, rent, and labor obligations in the rural sector. The ultimate result was the evolution of a wholly new structure of class relations.

Had it occurred at a different place and time, the combined impact of these economic forces may have spawned what is now referred to as a "classic" peasantry. However, such was not destined to be the case in Southeast Asia.

First, the process of rural social transformation never got under way in the region until relatively recently. Nowhere in Southeast Asia have rural class relations had the time to maturate into the "granite-like quality" and "imperturbable sameness" that characterized European peasantry (Handlin 1951:7). Instead, the transformative process has been compressed to the extent where it is common to find "primitive agriculturists" who have become transformed into "farmers" (Wolf 1966:2) or, as often, into landless proletariat, within the span of a few generations.

Secondly, it is possible to argue that once the above-mentioned economic forces made their presence felt rural social organization for the region became perhaps even more diverse than it had been formerly. Just as the various plantation crops; e. g. rubber, coffee, sugar, tapioca, require diverse soils and climatic conditions, they also demand dissimilar labor inputs. Coffee, for example, requires an intermittent labor input whereas rubber demands continuous attention. As a consequence, maintenance variables peculiar to each agricultural enterprise tended to affect different types of
dependency relationships in the rural sector which in turn affected the entire social organization of the societies concerned.

Finally, external social and cultural differences have played an important role regarding the various directions taken by socio-economic change in rural Southeast Asia. Superimposed on the socioculturally composite nature of the region have been the influence of no less than four European colonial establishments during the past century, each with its peculiar economic and socio-political policies. In each case, the rural social type which emerged was in many ways a reflection not only of prevailing ecological and cultural circumstances, but of a particular Euro-centric model as well.

In light of the ecological, sociocultural and historical diversity of Southeast Asian societies, it comes as little surprise that the processes of rural social transformation in Southeast Asia have not produced a homogeneous "classic" type peasantry. Instead, rural societies of the region are products of the interaction between those ecological, historical, and sociocultural variables which characterize particular localities. Put differently, individual societies represent localized sociocultural adaptations to specific microenvironments, each of which is comprised of its own distinctive mix of ecological, economic, and sociocultural elements. Consequently, to speak of a Southeast Asian peasantry or, for that matter, a Thai, Malaysian or Filipino peasantry, implies the grossest of abstractions.

The discussion has to this point focused upon the empirical shortcomings of the "peasant" concept. We might note in passing
that it suffers in other respects as well. In addition to being empirically unsound, the term admits to conceptual flaws in that it is both compound and categorical (see Lenski 1966:20). Just as the term "peasant" has been stretched to cover too wide a range of socioeconomic reality, so too has it come to encompass a variety of conceptual connotations. That is, we might speak of a particular society as being "peasant" in a political sense, but not in an occupational sense. As Geertz has noted, there are "cultural, occupational, and jural views of the peasant, and the relationship of these spheres, much less their relative weighting, is by no means clear (Geertz 1961:4).

In addition to being a compound concept, the "peasant" concept suffers an additional weakness in that it is categorical rather than variable. As Gerhard Lenski points out, "categorical concepts, by their very nature, force one to think in limiting 'either-or' terms" (1966:20). Thus, it would seem that the task facing the social scientist is that of substituting for categorical concepts (in this case "peasant") variable concepts amenable to structural and organizational differences of an intersocietal sort. The result is a conceptual perspective which allows the investigator to view classes of phenomena (in this case aspects of rural social organization) as points on a continuum.

In spite of the above-mentioned empirical and conceptual shortcomings, the term 'peasant' continues to be the conceptual sinew for anthropological and sociological studies of rural society. While this continuing reliance on the term is to a degree understandable in light of current interest in cultural and social histories of rural European societies, for anthropologists and
sociologists to persist in their use of the concept in researching post-colonial rural society cannot help but be baffling. While a thoroughgoing critical appraisal of ethnomethodologies employed in the study of contemporary rural societies is clearly beyond the scope of the present essay, it is nonetheless worthwhile to point out a methodological weakness characteristic of many rural studies, a failing which might in itself be a partial explanation for continued reliance on the peasant concept. That weakness has to do with the relative lack of comparative rigor.

As has been pointed out by Lewis (1956), the nature of the comparative frame by which the anthropologist analyzes sociocultural behavior is highly variable. Depending on the problem at hand and the nature of the data available, the ethnologist may deal in global comparisons or, on the other hand, opt for comparisons within a single village. With respect to rural society, the data gathering phase continues to focus in many cases on the single "peasant" village. Following compilation of his ethnography, the researcher all too often pays mere lip service to the comparative phase of analysis by contrasting in a cursory fashion the behavior of "his peasants" against that of someone else's "peasants", in effect considering extraneous or otherwise not worthy of comparative scrutiny such variables as ecological relationships, colonial history, nature of articulation with the larger nation-state, and so on. The result has been a paucity of carefully conceived working hypotheses leading to middle range generalization upon which a more complete understanding of rural society can be based.

As an antidote, it is proposed here that a comparative frame encompassing a few villages located within a narrow geographical
radius is capable of yielding generalizations of higher quality and testability than have been generated by the bulk of "peasant" studies to date. The work of Robert Redfield (1941) has amply demonstrated the potential this method of closely controlled comparison holds for the understanding of subtle organizational variations in rural society. More recently, research utilizing a closely controlled comparative frame and conducted by myself in rural West Malaysia has yielded hypotheses pertaining to socio-political changes occurring in three villages differentially involved in the processes of modernization (Childs 1977). By dealing with a few villages located within the same general area it is possible to employ ethnographic and ethnohistorical methods of data collection to their fullest advantage and, in so doing, achieve a processual dimension in the study of rural society, a dimension conspicuously absent in many contemporary rural studies.

In summary, it would seem that if a narrow and/or middle range comparative study of rural society is to be fruitful, it is necessary to begin at a lower level of abstraction than that offered by the "peasant" concept. To preface a research effort with an attempted justification of a concept as ambiguous as "peasant" can only prove detrimental. In a comparative study of two or more villages, as has been proposed here, its usage implies a comparability, or similarity of features, which in fact may not exist. And, as one expands the comparative scope to regional proportions, the distortion increases accordingly. This is especially true in the case of Southeast Asia where, as has been shown, the concept is of dubious value in the first place.² This may help explain the relative lack of comparative rigor of rural studies in Southeast
Asia, as well as the discomfiture experienced by those who feel in some way obligated to use the term.

"When we try to fit a category from another theory to the situation under study, we can have much trouble finding indicators and in getting agreement among our colleagues on them. The result is that our forcing of "round data: into "square categories" is buttressed by a long justificatory explanation for the tenetative relationship between the two. Forcing data to apply to categories or properties is sure to arouse the disbelief of both colleagues and laymen from the start". (Glaser and Strauss 1967:37).

NOTES

1. A partial exception to this generalization would be the Red River valley area of Vietnam. However, as is noted in the following paragraph, ready access to a frontier was a factor which tended to inhibit the emergence of a "classic" peasantry even in this densely populated area.

2. Studies of African rural society, such as the work of Saul and Woods (1971) to cite but one example, suggest that the argument presented here is applicable to Africa as well.
REFERENCES CITED

Burling, Robbins

Childs, Stephen

Coedes, George

Dumond, D. E.

Firth, Raymond

Fisher, C. A.

Foster, George M.

Gamst, Frederick

Geertz, Clifford

Glasser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L.

Goldschmidt, Walter and Kunkel, E.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher/Press</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handlin, Oscar</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>The Uprooted.</td>
<td>Grosset and Dunlap, New York.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helms, Mary</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Peasants and Purchasers: Preliminary Thoughts of a Differentiation of Intermediate Societies.</td>
<td>University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, N. M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollensteiner, Mary R.</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>The Dynamics of Power in a Philippine Municipality.</td>
<td>Institute for Philippine Culture, Quezon City.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pelzer, Karl

Phillips, Herbert

Redfield, Robert

Saul, John S. and Woods, Roger

Scott, James

Shanin, Teodor

Swift, M. G.

Wolf, Eric