

Western Philosophy of Social Science

Lecture 9. The moral economy debate

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Explaining peasant behavior and choice

- Why do peasants behave as they do? What is the range of private activity and collective activity? What motivates peasants to involve themselves in collective activities?
- Village society is a highly complex mix of activities: common labor, private farming, ceremonial activities, tiger hunts, militias, involvement in protest and rebellion.
- What explains the patterns of behavior that can be observed?

Cooperation and competition

- Forms of peasant behavior
 - Reciprocity
 - Labor sharing
 - Community and charity
 - Convention and coordination
 - Collective action
- What explains the persistence of patterns of cooperation and community in peasant society?

Collective action, protest, and rebellion

- One important kind of collective activity is resistance and rebellion: food riots, tax riots, protests, uprisings, rebellions.
- What explains the peasant's choice of supporting a collective act of resistance?
- Participation in protest and rebellion is dangerous and costly; why participate?

Two theories

- Two groups of theories about peasant behavior
 - Formalism (Schultz, Myers) and substantivism (Polanyi, Dalton)
 - Individual rationality and community values
- The first stresses economic rationality and self interest (political economy).
- The second stresses shared moral values, conceptions of justice, and conceptions of obligations held by all members of local society—elite and common people alike (moral economy).

The moral economy of the peasant

- James Scott, **Moral Economy of the Peasant**
- An analysis of the occurrence of peasant rebellions in Burma and Vietnam in 1930s
- Norms of subsistence and their role in rebellion and everyday activity
- Scott describes a peasant ethic of subsistence: everyone in the community has a right to a minimum level of subsistence, and elites have a duty to support this right (by rent or tax abatements, by charity).

Moral economy

- Scott argues that political mobilization occurs when there is widespread belief that elites or government are ignoring the duties of the subsistence ethic.
- He contrasts his view with a view of exploitation as the cause of peasant mobilization: it is not the absolute scale of surplus transfer but the responsiveness of landlords and other elites to the existential needs of peasants.
- This represents a theory of the social psychology of the peasant.

E.P. Thompson's concept

- Thompson first put forward the concept of the moral economy in “Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.”
- Thompson analyzes an important form of English contentious action – bread riots. These local actions involved coordination of many villagers attacking breadshops, grain convoys, etc.

E.P. Thompson's concept ...

- Thompson argues that these actions were not simple undirected and undisciplined forms of social violence; but rather scripted and morally regulated activities expressing popular values about prices and subsistence.
- He argues that it is possible to reconstruct the details of that ethic – that “moral economy” by the evidence of the limits and targets of food and grain riots.

The rational peasant

- Samuel Popkin, **The Rational Peasant**
- Peasants are rational agents, making calculating decisions about their interests and choices.
- So the theory of rational choice allows us to understand their behavior and the collective patterns that ensue.
- We must therefore pay close attention to collective action problems and examples of free riding and prisoners dilemmas.

The rational peasant ...

- Popkin argues against the moral economy view; he doubts the effectiveness of systems of village norms.
- “I expect to find ... that norms are malleable, renegotiated, and shifting in accord with considerations of power and strategic interaction among individuals. There are always tradeoffs between conflicting and inconsistent norms” (22).

The rational peasant ...

- Popkin argues that private self-serving quickly overwhelms the motivational efficacy of a system of subsistence norms.
- Popkin attempts to explain as much of local behavior and institutions as possible on the basis of the narrow assumption of peasant rationality.
- Popkin attempts to explain involvement in rebellion and revolution within the context of rational decision-making.

Everyday forms of resistance

- Scott makes the point that rebellion, uprising, and revolution are uncommon; but that there are everyday forms of resistance which are common threads in rural life.
- In *Weapons of the Weak* Scott offers observations of rural Malaysia in the 1970s during a period of rapid technology change in agriculture.

Everyday forms of resistance ...

- Scott documents a wide range of ways that ordinary people resisted changes in cultivation that displaced them; the introduction of machine cultivation; and the declining willingness of local elites to respect traditional obligations.
- These include – jokes, scorn, denunciation; unobserved sabotage of machines; cutting down trees to block the path to the paddy; ...

Hidden transcripts

- Scott also offers an analysis of underclass consciousness that differs from a Marxian theory of ideology. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*
- He maintains that underclass people generally have an accurate understanding of the relations of power and wealth in which they live. They express this understanding in “hidden transcripts”; whereas the public transcript expresses obeisance to existing power relations.
- Occasional moments of “speaking truth to power.”

Philosophy of social science

- How should we resolve theoretical disagreements in social science research?
- How do we analyze and define such concepts as “rationality,” “solidarity,” “community,” “value system”?

The theories are compatible

- We are not compelled to choose; the moral economy theory and the rational peasant theory are compatible with each other.
- Agents make choices within a context that features both community norms and private calculation.
- We can provide microfoundations for the ways in which norms become causally effective.
- We can provide examples of social outcomes where private rationality is primary.

The theories are compatible ...

- We can demonstrate that certain kinds of cooperation and conditional altruism (moral economy prediction) are in fact justified on grounds of rational deliberation (rational peasant prediction).
- This is true in circumstances where social relationships are predictable and extended over time.
- So the “communitarian village” may be the result of rational decision making by villagers over time who recognize the longterm benefits of cooperation.

Factors that facilitate cooperation

- Group size
- Organization and leadership
- Kinship groups

Reciprocity and cooperation

- Robert Axelrod: repeated prisoners dilemmas
- Reciprocity or conditional cooperation (A cooperates if B cooperated on previous play; does not cooperate if B failed in previous play)
- Axelrod finds that reciprocity yields the highest average payoff in repeated prisoners dilemma contests.
- Requires confidence in continuing interaction and ability to reidentify other players; these are features of village life.

My view ...

- The assumption of peasant rationality is justified.
- Rationality is broader than “self-interested utility maximization”
- We need a concept of “broadened practical rationality”
- Rational deliberation is framed by moral ideas, social commitments, and relationships of loyalty.
- We need to provide microfoundations for the ways in which values are sustained and reproduced in social agents.

