

**Local Politics and Class Conflict**  
**Theories of Peasant Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century China**

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Abstract

A central feature of nineteenth-century Chinese history is the occurrence of a series of major peasant rebellions. This paper analyzes several of the theoretical models that have been advanced to explain these rural rebellions. My approach to these problems may be described as applied philosophy of social science; through consideration of this debate I aim to raise questions concerning historical methodology and explanation. The paper focuses on the issue of political rationality: to what extent is it possible to explain the main characteristics of rural collective violence in traditional China on the basis of the assumption of rational political behavior? The paper examines two important models: a neo-Marxist model which attempts to understand peasant rebellion as a manifestation of class conflict, and a local-politics model which analyzes peasant rebellion as a manifestation of local strategies of survival. The paper concludes with the judgment that these models are complementary rather than inconsistent. Each illuminates problems that are given insufficient attention by the others. The problem before China historians, then, is not to determine which of these various frameworks is the sole truth, but rather to appreciate and absorb the important insights each provides into the multi-stranded fabric of rural collective violence.

Local Politics and Class Conflict  
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Underclass collective actions--riots, strikes, jacqueries, protests, and rebellions--are a recurring thread in human history. French farmers of the Vendée rise up in rebellion against the Revolutionary government in Paris; Chinese peasants support millenarian Buddhist revolts against the Qing state; Vietnamese rural poor support violent mass demonstrations against the French colonial government. These are all instances of *popular politics*: collective actions supported by large numbers of ordinary people in pursuit of some shared goal. The dynamics of popular politics are critically important in the process of historical change: regimes rise and fall, national political movements find support or wither, wars are won or lost, and colonial powers survive or retreat, depending (in part) on the political behavior of the masses.

Popular politics took center stage in late-Qing China in the form of a series of major peasant rebellions. The White Lotus rebellions, the Nian rebellion, the Moslem uprising, the Taiping rebellion, and the Boxer rebellion span the century and represent the resort to organized violence of tens of millions of Chinese peasants. These uprisings resulted in the destruction of vast numbers of villages, market towns, and cities. These periods of unrest severely tested the military and bureaucratic resources of the Qing state, and arguably laid the stage for the nationalist and communist revolutions of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

My purpose here is to identify and analyze some of the theoretical models that have been advanced to explain nineteenth-century peasant rebellions, and to pose several questions concerning historical methodology and explanation. I will focus on the issue of political rationality: to what extent is it possible to explain the main characteristics of rural collective violence in traditional China, including particularly the major rebellions, on the basis of the assumption of rational political behavior? To what extent, that is, is it possible to analyze the political behavior of peasant rebels and leaders in terms of calculated efforts to advance individual goals and purposes? I will concentrate on two important models: a neo-Marxist model which attempts to understand

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1. Besides the books cited below, see Albert Feuerwerker, *Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century China* (1975) and Jean Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China 1840-1949* (1973) for an overview of the main contours of this aspect of Chinese history. For accounts of the development of the Communist movement in China see Lucien Bianco, Chalmers Johnson, Mark Selden, and Yung-fa Chen.

peasant rebellion as a manifestation of class conflict and a local-politics model which analyzes peasant rebellion as a manifestation of local strategies of survival.<sup>2</sup> Class-conflict theories consider rebellions as political responses to exploitation and conflicts of class interests between tenants and landlords, debtors and creditors, taxpayers and the state, and the like: rebellions are more or less rational strategies of collective self-defense on the part of subordinate classes. Local-politics theories look at rebellion from the point of view of the motives of individual rebels and leaders: what factors lead peasants to decide to support a budding rebellion, and what determines the level of support which they give? These theories are largely premised on the assumption of individual rationality at the level of the local decision maker, and give primary attention to the local environment of choice: the institutional arrangements at the local level which condition the opportunities and risks constraining individual choice.

My approach to these problems may be described as applied philosophy of social science. The book from which this paper derives is a study of several theoretical debates in current agrarian studies. By examining contemporary debates in detail I hope to provide philosophers with a more accurate and concrete understanding of the logic of social explanation, and I hope to engage methodological and theoretical problems of interest to working historians and social scientists.

### **Class conflict theory**

Consider first the class-conflict model of peasant rebellion.<sup>3</sup> This model

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2. An important alternative that I will not consider is the millenarian theory. Millenarian theories (Naquin 1976, 1981) consider these rebellions as manifestations of religious ideologies and movements through which members of sects are transformed into rebels. Here the central problem is to identify the features of sect beliefs, organization, and practices which made certain groups in rural China particularly prone to rebellion.

3. Eric Wolf's writings provide an important example of this approach to peasant rebellions. See *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) for an ambitious effort to analyze rebellions and revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, Mexico, Algeria, and Vietnam. A useful collection on this subject is John Wilson Lewis, ed., *Peasant Rebellion & Communist Revolution in Asia* (1974). Jeffrey Paige's *Agrarian Revolution* (1975), Jean Chesneaux's *Peasant Revolts*

has loomed large in analysis of twentieth-century peasant politics; peasant movements in China, Central America, the Philippines, and elsewhere have been analyzed as expressions of the conflict of material interests between peasants and a set of rural property arrangements that exploit them. Schematically, the class-conflict model holds that rural property arrangements define an objective set of class relations among landlords, tenants, laborers, and the state. The property relations establish a surplus-extraction relation between the elite and the producers, permitting the elite to exploit the producers through rent, interest, corvée labor, taxation, or tribute; they thus constitute a coercive system of exploitation. Members of the exploited segment of rural society have an implicit capacity to perceive the exploitative nature of their situation and are disposed to alter that system--that is, they are capable of arriving at a state of class consciousness. When a revolutionary party arrives on the scene with sufficient organization and power to be a plausible political force, peasants are disposed to adhere to it. Thus rebellions occur when the mass of producers acquire both the political resources and the advantageous circumstances needed to mount a potentially successful rebellion. There is a straightforward connection between the objective conflicts of interest embodied in the property system, and the political behavior of the various participants. Rebellions and popular collective action are rational strategies of collective self-defense on the part of subordinate classes.<sup>4</sup>

Central to this program of explanation is analysis of (1) the property relations which define objective material interests for affected groups; (2) the political and social arrangements which shape the political consciousness and

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*in China 1840-1949* (1973), and Joel Migdal's *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution* (1974) are also relevant contributions from this point of view.

4. This model has been applied to processes of social change in a variety of historical contexts. Thus Geoffrey de Ste. Croix argues that the categories of class and exploitation are critical in understanding the dynamics of ancient society (Ste. Croix 1981:45). Rodney Hilton analyzes some of the peasant rebellions of the European middle ages in similar terms: "I aim to demonstrate that peasant society in medieval Europe, from the Dark Ages to the end of the fifteenth century, like peasant societies at all times and in all places, contained social tensions which had their outcome in social movements, some on a small and some on a large scale, some peaceful and some violent" (Hilton 1973:19). And Asian agrarian change has been analyzed in similar terms by Chesneaux (1973), Vlastos (1986), Marks (1984), Selden (1971), and Paige (1975).

motivations of participants; and (3) the political resources which are available for deployment in collective political action.<sup>5</sup> The class-conflict model offers a program of explanation: to explain peasant rebellions on the basis of the social tensions contained in peasant society and the class consciousness of the peasant rebels.<sup>6</sup>

In application to traditional agrarian China, this model might be filled in along these lines. The primary rural producers are rent-paying peasants engaged in farming and rural handicrafts. Peasant production gives rise to a small but real surplus over and above the subsistence needs of the peasant family; this surplus is extracted from the peasant in the form of rent, merchant profits (on handicraft products), interest, and taxation. Victor Lippit estimates that 30% of the rural product in early twentieth-century China was available as surplus, and that the vast majority of this surplus made its way into the hands of landlords, moneylenders, and the state (1987:89-91). Peasants are thus *exploited* by landlords, merchants, tax farmers, and moneylenders and are predisposed to support popular movements aimed at reducing or eliminating the power of exploiting agencies. Peasants, finally, are capable of recognizing their objective conflicts of interest with local elites and the state, and are disposed to participate in forms of collective action aimed at overturning these relations of exploitation. When rebellious organizations appear--e.g., the Taipings or the Nian--peasants are disposed to support these movements as a social protest against this system of exploitation.

Prior to studying the nineteenth-century rebellions in detail, the class-conflict model looks particularly promising for several reasons. First, the property arrangements and relations of exploitation in rural China are relatively transparent; it is not difficult to discern the class structure of traditional rural China. And second, the success of the class-conflict-inspired Communist Revolution of the twentieth century makes it plausible to suppose that class-conflict politics were latent in nineteenth-century China as well. For

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5. Robert Brenner's analysis of class and local power relations in early modern France represents an important neo-Marxist application of this view to agrarian politics (Brenner 1976, 1982).

6. See Vlastos (1986) and Hilton (1973) for analysis of Japanese and European peasant movements from the class-conflict paradigm. Theda Skocpol (1979) makes use of these constructs in her analysis of French, Russian, and Chinese revolutionary movements as well.

these reasons we would expect that historians within a broadly Marxist framework would select the nineteenth-century rebellions for close research. This expectation is born out; books by Robert Marks, Mark Selden, and Jean Chesneau represent full-scale studies, and works by Eric Wolf, Theda Skocpol, and Robert Paige offer less thorough treatments. However, none of these works makes a convincing case for a class-conflict interpretation of any of these nineteenth-century rebellions. When we examine these rebellions in greater detail, non-class factors emerge which seem to play a critical role in the occurrence of the uprising; and in each case it is difficult to document peasant class consciousness.

Consider first a few examples of class-conflict analyses of nineteenth-century rebellions. Jean Chesneau writes of the Taiping rebellion, "The Taiping movement was fundamentally an agrarian one, a revolt of the peasants against their 'natural' enemies within Chinese society, against landlords, gentry and officials" (1973:25). Chesneau credits the Taipings with a social program based on a perception of class conflict (1973:27). In its early stages, Chesneau writes, "This was a real people's war, and the peasants rose in response" (1973:30). Likewise, Chesneau interprets the Nian rebellions as organized around class-struggle. "In the tradition of brigand justice they distributed goods to the poor and inscribed on their banners the words, 'Kill the officials, kill the rich, spare the poor!'" (1973:33). Applying Hobsbawm's (1965) influential construct, Chesneau interprets the Nian as "social bandits" (1973:35).

A more extensive study within the class-conflict framework is Robert Marks' *Rural Revolution in South China* (1984). Marks offers a class-conflict analysis of rebellion and revolution in Haifeng County in South China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Several features of Marks' analytical framework are characteristic of Marxist analysis more generally. First, Marks pays particular attention to the social and economic structure within the context of which collective action takes place. This refers particularly to the property arrangements, land tenancy arrangements, and instruments of taxation which exist at a given time. These arrangements fundamentally structure peasant life by defining the terms of their access to the land (and hence to subsistence). They also define the apparatus of surplus extraction: the means by which local elites and the state confiscate part of the surplus generated through peasant labor. And they define the material interests shared by peasants as a class.

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7. Robert Marks, *Rural Revolution in South China* (1984).

Marks holds that latent class consciousness is a central variable in peasant political behavior. He writes, "While the authorities may have perceived events in Haifeng as symptomatic of general disorder, those who were causing disorder simply were trying to fashion a *new* order in which the main issue was control of the land. Peasants won important victories, and it was from this position of strength that the new land tenure system was put together" (Marks 1984:19). Like Chesneaux, Marks employs Hobsbawm's concept of the social bandit in interpreting banditry and pirate activity in the eighteenth century (Marks 1984:28 ff.). He holds that there was what approached a parallel bandit society with villages organized along egalitarian lines (Marks 1984:26).

Another feature of Marks' approach is his emphasis on mass politics rather than elite leadership or party organization (xvi). Marks holds that indigenous peasant movements and political traditions are the primary factor in the occurrence of rebellion and revolution--not the presence or absence of outside political leadership and organization. "The central conclusion that emerges from this approach is that the peasants of Haifeng made their own history: they were not the passive objects of someone else's history. Peasants made the more visible history chronicled in the documentary record--the riots, uprisings, or other types of collective action evident in the 1920s; moreover, through these actions, peasants had a hand in making the very structures that patterned subsequent action as well" (Marks 1984:282). Marks describes this as a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach; but it is more distinctive than that. Local politics theories are also bottom-up; Marks adds to the emphasis on local factors a premise about the capacity of peasants to formulate and carry out a political agenda which serves their class interests.

*Criticisms of the class-conflict model.* One might challenge the class-conflict framework in two ways: first, by maintaining that traditional China did not embody classes or exploitation at all, and second, by conceding that agrarian China was a class order, but holding that class relations were a distant second to other political or cultural factors in motivating political behavior in traditional China--either because objective material interests are concealed by ideology, or because other factors are perceived by participants as being more important than objective material interests.

Ramon Myers defends the first possibility; he maintains that the peasant economy of mid- and late-Qing China was so extensively commercialized, with economic power so broadly distributed, that elites were not able to exploit peasant cultivators to a significant extent. All producers, including peasant



cultivators, derived incomes equal to the marginal product of labor.<sup>8</sup> As a general proposition, however, Myers' position is unpersuasive. On theoretical grounds John Roemer has demonstrated that exploitation and surplus-extraction is fully compatible with smoothly functioning factor markets: exploitation depends on differential ownership of land and capital, not on monopoly pricing.<sup>9</sup> Thus smoothly functioning markets are compatible with exploitation. And on empirical grounds, such diverse economic historians of traditional China as Dwight Perkins, Philip Huang, and Victor Lippit agree that a substantial rural surplus was available in the traditional economy, and was extracted from peasants through rent, interest, and taxation. Thus the "no-exploitation" view appears untenable.<sup>10</sup>

Turn now to a more serious shortcoming of the class-conflict model: the presumed political primacy of class. The Marxist account of popular politics rests most heavily on the assumption that class identity and exploitation lead to the formation of politically active groups with shared purposes and values.<sup>11</sup> This assumption amounts to the claim that members of classes so defined will come to identify themselves as such and to acquire a disposition to act in accordance with shared class interests. Class is salient to politics, then, because material interests are fundamental to individual political action, and because

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8. Myers' views are advanced in a large number of articles and books; particularly important are *The Chinese Peasant Economy* (1970) and "The Agrarian Crisis" (1986).

9. John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (1982).

10. It is true, of course, that there was extensive regional variation in the form that class relations took. In some regions of China (e.g., North China) the primary form of land tenure was private smallholding, not tenancy. In these areas there was no landlord-tenant relation, though indebtedness was a chronic feature of rural life. This form of variation implies that a class-conflict model of political behavior will have to identify different property relations in different regions; it also leaves open the possibility that natural and ecological crisis, not exploitation, is the primary cause of peasant misery--as appears to be the case in the rebellions considered by Elizabeth Perry in North China.

11. This formulation owes much to Elster's discussion of class in "Three challenges to class" (1986).

the class structure defines people's material interests. Groups will tend to coalesce around class lines (rather than ethnic or religious identity, kinship group, patron-client relations, etc.).

At the abstract level at which this thesis is formulated it is radically incomplete. As a start, we need to have an account of the processes through which individuals come to adopt a collective identity. The formulation above refers to a highly abstract group: a spatially and socially dispersed group of persons sharing an abstract characteristic (position in the property system). Members of this group do not share a set of homogeneous material interests; and they are not bound together by shared circumstances of life, patterns of everyday association, or uniform material interests. It is of course true that various subgroupings of classes are bound together in these ways. Workers in a particular factory or industrial city or miners in a complex of mines are in everyday contact with one another in ways which may plausibly lead them to identify themselves as a cohesive group. But coal miners in Pennsylvania, farm laborers in California, and industrial workers in Detroit, form a highly diverse and heterogeneous group; and yet they share the position of "wage-laborer" in the property system, and they are all exploited by ownership of the means of production. So why should we suppose that the abstract feature of class membership is likely to become politically salient for members of these groups?

The class-conflict model thus encounters problems concerning the proper level of aggregation in its description of groups, group interests, and group identity. This point involves two considerations. First, "class" interests may be specified on a variety of levels, from local to global and from specific occupation to abstract class. Second, group identity may be expected to take shape in different ways at different levels of group definition.

*Level of group aggregation.* Consider first the problem of identifying the description under which to characterize a group's material interests. There are several important dimensions of diversity that affect this problem, which we may characterize as geographical and occupational. The class-conflict model does not incorporate any regional specification; it treats a class as an undifferentiated whole over the full society. But it is plain that there are politically significant differences of interests within classes over space. For example, peasants of late-Qing Henan had an interest in famine relief that peasants of the Yangzi did not share (because food supplies were more stable in the latter region), whereas the latter group has a crucial interest in water works not shared by the former; these variations derive from differences in the farming systems and ecologies of the two regions. Regional differentiation thus

imposes interests on segments of a class that may be politically significant.<sup>12</sup>

Class interests may thus be viewed from a range of perspectives from the local to the global. For example, tenant farmers in a given village or marketing community share certain interests in common (e.g. water rights, access to firewood, etc.), which give them a material basis for engaging in collective action together. But class interests may be defined on a more comprehensive geographical scale as well; thus, for example, tenant farmers throughout all of north China share certain material interests--economic and political--with each other. (A concrete example of shared interests is imperial tax policy--should taxes be remitted in times of crop crisis, should taxes be assessed to land or to farmer, etc.) Once we recognize the range of levels at which group interests may be defined, however, it becomes clear that there may be fundamental *conflicts* of interest within groups defined at the higher levels. Thus a strategy of demanding tax relief for farmers in Henan may impose greater tax burdens on farmers in Sichuan. There is thus a material basis for mobilization of local politics on the basis of local interests in direct opposition to global class interests. This point makes it plausible to suppose that local material interests might mask global class interests--local elites and peasants may join together in violent action against neighboring villages in conflict over water rights, disputed land rights, etc.<sup>13</sup>

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12. G. William Skinner's analysis of the importance of geographical differentiation on a variety of economic, political, and cultural processes is an important contribution to our understanding of late imperial China, and highly pertinent in the current context (Skinner 1964-65; 1977).

13. In this connection Lucien Bianco argues that peasant political interests in pre-revolutionary China were invariably localistic in nature, often cutting across class. In his study of spontaneous peasant uprisings in Republican China he writes, "The spontaneous peasant movements analyzed above show three main characteristics. The first is the weakness of class consciousness among the peasantry, a weakness illustrated by the comparative rarity and traditional nature of the social movements directed against the wealthy. . . . The second main characteristic of spontaneous peasant movements is their parochialism. In default of class consciousness, there was a sense of belonging to a local community, which overrode distinctions of class. . . . The need to limit themselves to survival strategies, which dictated these attitudes, also explains the third characteristic of peasant agitation, namely its almost invariably defensive nature" (Bianco 1986:301-302).

Turn now to occupational diversity. The structural definition of class distinguishes among a small number of social categories, depending on position within the property relations. On this criterion, all tenant farmers belong to the same class; all industrial wage laborers belong to a single class; all owners of industrial wealth constitute a class; and so forth. However, it is obvious upon closer analysis that there are important forms of diversity within classes so defined that may produce importantly different interests for the various sub-groups. Tenant farmers in a wet-rice region, for example, have different interests with regard to the state than do tenant farmers in dry cropping areas, because they are more dependent on state-financed water works. Unskilled workers, semi-skilled workers, and skilled workers, to take a different example, have different interests concerning technological change; as a result, these different strata of the proletariat may be mobilized in support of very different economic policies and political actions.<sup>14</sup>

There is a tendency among class-conflict theories of underclass politics, however, to consider class interests on too high a level and on the basis of too homogeneous an account of the circumstances identifying material interests. But it is entirely possible that vertical local interests may loom larger in the material welfare of members of a micro-class than horizontal regional interests--thus making it difficult to secure collective action around regional class interests. A policy or strategy may be prudent at one level of interests and counterproductive at higher or lower levels. These considerations suggest that class-conflict theories confront a serious difficulty in arriving at an analytically justifiable level at which to characterize group interests and identity--which must be done if we are to speak meaningfully of class and class conflict.

*Group identity formation.* Turn now to the problem of group identity formation. What mechanisms would lead a group characterized in terms of its shared material interests to come to identify itself as a political agent? The simplest and most plausible case is that at the low end of both spectrums above: groups that are geographically compact and occupationally homogeneous. Members of groups of this type have a set of prominent material interests in

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14. For an extensive discussion of the politics of work within contemporary industrial capitalism, and the variations in material interests among these groups, see Charles Sabel's *Work and Politics* (1982). Sabel emphasizes also that different strata of the working classes of Europe and the U.S. have very different social psychologies or worldviews--differences which have profound implications for their political behavior.

common, and they have concrete opportunities for developing political activity together, through shared organizations and acquaintances and a shared life experience. But most analyses of class politics proceed at a higher level of aggregation. When Robert Marks writes that the peasants of Haifeng County began to conceive of themselves as a class in the middle and late nineteenth century, does he mean that poor peasants of a given *village* came to recognize their joint interests, or that poor peasants throughout the region came to recognize their joint interests with other peasants beyond their own acquaintance and social intercourse? At the local level it is possible to imagine the social mechanisms through which such group identity might emerge through normal social contact (though it is also possible to identify mechanisms working in the opposite direction--e.g., competition for the right to rent a piece of land or cross-class allegiances based on lineage or patron-client relations). But it is more difficult to conceive of mechanisms at work in local society that would lead to a substantially broader sense of group identity, in which poor peasants of many lineages, many villages, many market systems, and several different ethnic groups should come to regard themselves as a cohesive class, sharing important interests and disposed to engage in political activity in support of those interests.

Further, it is an important truth that much observed collective action in the non-industrial world does *not* occur along clean class cleavages; instead, much collective action involves alliances between local elites and lower classes.

In many cases non-class factors seem of primary importance: religion, inter-village conflict, vertical social organizations (kinship organizations, religious organizations, flags). Susan Naquin's analysis of the Eight Trigrams rebellion (1813), for example, shows that there was substantial class heterogeneity in the core, and that rebel motives were largely an expression of a set of White Lotus millenarian beliefs--*not* an expression of material interest or class consciousness. Thus the social composition of the rebellions themselves poses an obstacle to a class-conflict analysis of the major rebellions of the nineteenth century. This difficulty is matched by a second problem: there is little direct evidence of explicit class consciousness among followers or leaders. Neither in the form of manifestos that aim at class issues, nor in the form of movements with a rough-and-ready social program (land redistribution, tax reform, forgiveness of indebtedness), do we find unambiguous expression of class-oriented political activity.

This is true, for example, in the context of intervillage conflicts of interest: e.g., water and land rights. Prasenjit Duara describes some of the forms of organization through which North China villages and market towns mobilized cross-class support for the purpose of defending water rights (Duara

1988). Second, Chinese village self-defense and militia organizations typically had a cross-class character with elite leadership (Kuhn 1970). Third, local society was capable of providing collective goods--e.g. village water resources (flood control and irrigation); and, once again, these forms of collective action typically proceeded under elite leadership. Peter Perdue's historical treatment of the organization of waterworks in Hunan illustrates this point (Perdue 1987).

These examples suggest that class factors were often eclipsed by economic interests shared across village society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> In each of these cases we find that collective action occurs under the leadership of village elites--landlords, village headmen, local literati. But this poses a problem for the class-conflict thesis; if much traditional collective action occurs through vertical organizations and with elite leadership, then what resources are available to create horizontal organizations and leadership?

These considerations present the class-conflict theory with an unresolved but deep problem: what social mechanisms would permit a geographically dispersed class to arrive at a group identity based on its shared material interests in opposition to other, regionally-based interests that may be shared with locals from other classes? What would lead the landless peasants of the Vendée to identify their fortunes and goals with those of the Languedoc, rather than with local elites? Why should we expect textile workers in Manchester to identify their interests with metal-workers in Lancashire? The apparent answer to this question unavoidably involves reference to supra-local organizations. It would appear dubious that there is an endogenous tendency for dispersed groups to come to identify their interests as classes rather than as groups of other sorts.

We may draw several tentative conclusions on the salience of class. Most importantly, an adequate theory of popular politics must provide an account of the local processes through which group identity is formed and through which members of groups come to identify themselves as political actors. Agents act deliberately, on the basis of their own understandings of their interests, allegiances, rights, and the like; consequently, in order to explain the political

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15. "Peasant collective action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had led to a considerable amount of rural social violence in Haifeng, but these disruptions could hardly be described as class conflict. Most of the conflict for which we have documentation occurred between lineages or the Red and Black Flags, vertically aligned social groupings, or between state and society, as in the food riots" (Marks 1984:96).

behavior of a group it is necessary to give some account of the processes through which this particular group identity and set of collective goals have been formed. It is essential to analyze the processes of political identity-formation through which a group is transformed into a political agent with shared goals, beliefs, values, commitments, and plans. And these processes are typically *local* if spontaneous, and dependent on competent organizations and leadership if supra-local. For spontaneous group identity, it would seem, emerges from contiguity and shared perceptions of the social world; it requires a common history of struggles, demands, successes, and failures. If a geographically and socially dispersed group is to acquire such a self-conscious identity, it is difficult to see how this could occur without the deliberate efforts of a competent regional or national organization. It is necessary to formulate a diagnosis of the social world and a political program that will permit dispersed members of such a group to come to regard themselves as part of a meaningful political agent; and this vision must be communicated to members of the group through competent local cadres. All of this requires organization, however; and without such, it is unlikely in the extreme that class consciousness on a national scale would emerge spontaneously.

Second, it emerges from this discussion that class is at best a latent factor in political behavior on any but the local level. It is *possible* to mobilize members of classes around their class interests, and to cultivate a class identity among members of classes. Class membership constitutes a *possible* basis for mobilization because it does in fact identify a set of interests that are shared by members of the group; and these interests are, as Marxism postulates, particularly fundamental. But there is no reason to expect that either group identity or political action will emerge spontaneously around class position. The prominence of purely local interests and issues threatens to swamp the emergence of more global concerns and identity. Thus latent class interests can only be converted into effective political motivations for a dispersed group through skillful organization and mobilization on a regional or national level.

### **Local politics theory**

I turn now to a family of theories which pay close attention to the local processes of collective action rather than to general factors. The guiding thread of these theories is that rebellion is a form of deliberate collective action which originates in the local interests of the individuals who participate and is facilitated by the local political resources (organizational forms, militias, kinship organizations, etc.) available to potential rebels. These theories thus take the form of an application of rational-choice analysis to popular politics.

A distinctive feature of these theories is the observation that largescale rebellions are often only unintended, unforeseen consequences of essentially local processes.

Elizabeth Perry's *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China 1845-1945* (1980) is an important recent example of this sort of approach. Perry analyzes the Nian Rebellion (1851-63) and the Red Spear uprisings (1911-49), both in the Huaibei region on the North China plain. The Nian Rebellion represented the gradual transformation of local bandit gangs into loosely-coordinated regional forces capable of defeating regular Qing armies. By 1856 small Nian groups had been brought together into a loose confederation of five "banners" under the nominal leadership of a bandit, Chang Lo-hsing; in fact, however, leadership and power within the Nian remained at the community level rather than the regional level. Nian groups were generally adept at cavalry warfare, and practiced mobile strategies which were difficult for the more static Qing military forces to counter. The Nian groups retained close connections with their local communities, which often took the form of walled villages and towns; these villages provided both an economic base and a defensible retreat for Nian groups. At its peak the Nian may have had as many as 100,000 men under arms, and held sway over large parts of Huaibei. Regular Qing forces were supplemented and finally replaced by Manchu and Mongol cavalry, and after years of inconclusive fighting the Nian armies were destroyed in 1868.<sup>16</sup>

Perry puts the problem of survival at the center of peasant behavior in this region and time; and she explains the extensive rebellions which occurred during the period as the results of several different types of survival strategies by peasant actors. She argues that peasant actors sought out a variety of means of survival, some individual and some collective, through which to ensure their continuing welfare and security. She distinguishes broadly between predatory strategies and protective strategies. Predatory strategies include smuggling, robbery, and banditry, while examples of protective strategies include crop-watching societies, local militia, fortification, and tax resistance (58-95). She holds that each strategy gave rise to distinctive forms of collective action. Further, the forms of collective action inspired by each strategy influenced the subsequent development of the forms of collective action inspired by the other. The Nian rebellion grew out of the formation of more and more powerful bandit gangs (predatory strategy), while the Red Spears period reflected the

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16. This account is derived from Feuerwerker's description of the Nian rebellion in *Rebellion in the Nineteenth-Century*, pp. 38-42.



autonomous power of local militias directed by local notables (protective strategy).

Several points should be emphasized here. First, it is Perry's contention that the Nian rebellion reflected rational choices by participants; it was the result of rational strategies of survival, not mere jacquerie (or outburst of uncontrolled emotion or resentment).<sup>17</sup> Second, though, Perry argues that this rebellion needs to be understood in terms of its local circumstances and the local aims and opportunities of participants--not national or regional goals and politics. Unlike the mobilization efforts of the CCP in the twentieth century, which possessed a national program and a set of revolutionary goals, Nian leaders did not set out to overthrow the Qing state; rather, they were brought into opposition to state power inadvertently in the course of pursuing their more local concerns. It was local interests and opportunities which led to these rebellions, not a shared revolutionary ideology or program.<sup>18</sup> Third, and related to the localism of these rebellions, Perry emphasizes the individual opportunism which these periods of uprisings represent.<sup>19</sup> Thus Perry urges that we analyze these processes of collective action in terms of the fairly narrow

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17. "This book takes issue with such a view of rural rebellion [as anomic irrational protest] and proposes an alternative interpretation of traditional peasant insurrection as a sustained, structured, and sensible form of collective action. The analysis focuses upon the rural inhabitants themselves, emphasizing the adaptive value of peasant violence for coping with the local environment they inhabit" (Perry 1980:2).

18. "Without denying the importance of evaluating the Nien's place in history, it would seem that there is room for a more microscopic approach to the rebellion as well. Although national events had major significance for the timing and evolution of the rebellion, the contention here is that the origins and activities of the Nien are inextricably linked to ongoing processes of adaptive competition within the Huai-pei region" (Perry 1980:97).

19. "For most participants, the Nien presented a concrete opportunity to garner one's livelihood in a situation of extreme insecurity. The movement began as a series of familiar efforts by impoverished peasants to seize scarce resources from others. The later Nien reflected these origins: plundering forays followed the routes of salt smugglers, community feuds continued to be conducted along previous lines" (Perry 1980:148).

interests of the participants (noting, of course, that different Nian chieftains and followers may have had significantly different interests).

Perry's analysis is thus distinguished from the class-conflict model on the grounds of its localism. Perry doubts the importance of class consciousness (since this concept implies a broader horizon than the village) and she doubts the existence of a larger revolutionary program in these rebellions. Her account rather locates these rebellions as the aggregate and largely unintended consequence of a number of interlocking, local strategies of survival which, in the context of the political and economic environment of Huaibei, erupted into major regional rebellion.

*Grounds of the rational-choice approach.* Perry's treatment of the Nian rebellion falls broadly within the rational-choice approach to the study of popular politics. She attempts to understand this rebellion as the aggregate result of large numbers of calculating political decisions made by rational participants. The rational-choice paradigm has been attractive to many area specialists in their efforts to arrive at explanations of social and political behavior in various parts of the world. This model of explanation is simple yet powerful: we attempt to explain a pattern of social behavior or an enduring social arrangement as the aggregate outcome of the goal-directed choices of large numbers of rational agents. The rational-choice approach has much to recommend it in terms of scope and parsimony; it provides a basis for social explanation in a wide variety of cultural contexts, and may support significant cross-cultural generalizations.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, much valuable recent work in Asian studies reflects this paradigm.<sup>21</sup> However, the rational-choice model has encountered vigorous opposition from some social scientists on several grounds; various arguments have been advanced to show that the rational-choice approach to non-western cultures is fundamentally flawed. Three principal positions have emerged in the social science literature on this topic: formalism, substantivism, and interpretive social science. Formalists--whether economic historians, anthropologists, development theorists, or sociologists--hold that the assumption of individual rationality is relevant to understanding social phenomena in a wide range of cultural and historical circumstances, and

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There are a number of good introductions to the rational-choice framework as a basis for social explanation. Elster, ed. (1986) contains a number of useful essays; and the reader is directed as well to Hardin (1982), M. Taylor (1987), Axelrod (1984), Rapoport (1966), and Schelling (1978).

Examples of work that reflect this approach in China studies (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) include Skinner (1964-65), Myers (1972, 1978), Perdue (1987), Chao (1986), Chen (1986), Huang (1985), Rowe (1984), and Perry (1980).

that peasant societies may be analyzed in terms of the aggregate consequences of individually rational choices.<sup>22</sup> Substantivists have maintained, against the formalists, that the concept of private self-interest is overly narrow, neglecting the powerful influence of norms and values in social action. This fact is taken to imply that study of the culturally specific norms, values, and worldviews is needed for each society.<sup>23</sup> And interpretive social science goes a step further and holds that the notion of means-end rationality itself is culturally specific.<sup>24</sup> The springs of social behavior are always culturally unique, and the notion of individual rationality is inapplicable to much of the history of human social life.

The rational-choice paradigm of explanation rests on one central premise and a large set of analytical techniques. The premise is that individual behavior is goal-directed and calculating. Individuals are assumed to have a set of interests in terms of which they evaluate alternative courses of action; they assign costs and benefits to various possible choices and choose an action after surveying the costs and benefits of each. Rational-choice explanations thus depend upon the "means-end" theory of rational action. An action is rational just in case it is an appropriate means of accomplishing a given end, given one's beliefs about the circumstances of choice.<sup>25</sup> On this account, to explain an individual's action is to identify his or her background beliefs and goals, and to show how the action chosen is a reasonable way to achieve those goals given those beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Formalists include Samuel Popkin, Manning Nash, Theodore Schultz, Ramon Myers, and Kang Chao. Applications of this paradigm to probal development may be found in Bates (1988).

<sup>23</sup>I do not sharply distinguish here between substantivism and the moral economy approach. Examples of this perspective include James Scott, E. P. Thompson, Barrington Moore, Karl Polanyi, George Dalton, and Marshall Sahlins.

<sup>24</sup>Examples of the interpretive approach include Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Charles Taylor. I would characterize Susan Naquin's treatise on White Lotus rebellions as falling within this perspective (1976, 1981); and Arthur Wolf's studies of popular Chinese religious practices in this approach as well (1978).

<sup>25</sup>Jon Elster describes this model of rationality in these terms: "Explaining behaviour intentionally is equivalent to showing that it is intentional behaviour, i.e. behaviour conducted in order to bring about some goal. We explain an action intentionally . . . when we are able to specify the function it was intended to bring about. . . . Intentional explanation essentially involves *a triadic relation between action, desire and belief*" (Elster 1983:70).

<sup>26</sup>For a brief but clear discussion of this type of theory of rationality see Philip Pettit, "Rational Man Theory" in Hookway and Pettit, eds. (1992).

This account of rationality may be described as a "thin" theory of human action.<sup>27</sup> It depends on an abstract description of goals in terms of interests, utilities, or preferences, and postulates a simple mode of reasoning--utility maximization, for example. On the basis of these simplifying assumptions the means-end theory hopes to be able to explain a variety of forms of human behavior. The advantage of this approach is explanatory parsimony and power; to the extent that these assumptions bear some relation to human behavior, they provide the basis for explaining a wide range of social phenomena in a variety of cultural settings. However, a primary source of criticism of rational-choice analysis arises at this point. For interpretive social scientists postulate the need for "thick" descriptions of human action--detailed accounts of norms and values, cultural assumptions, metaphors, religious beliefs and practices--in order to account for human behavior; and it denies that more abstract descriptions of human action are of much explanatory value.

So far we have examined the concept of individual rationality. How does this concept give rise to explanations of *social* phenomena--the occurrence of collective action, enduring social institutions, or processes of social and economic change? The rational-choice approach attempts to explain social outcomes as the aggregate result of large numbers of individuals acting on the basis of rational calculations. Thus Malthus's predictions about the relation between economic trends and population curves depends on this assumption, as do Marx's analysis of the capitalist economic system and contemporary "political economy" approaches to politics in peasant societies as well. What these theories have in common is an explanatory strategy: to explain a social pattern as the aggregate consequence of the rational actions of a large number of participants, given the circumstances of the social and natural environment within the context of which agents deliberate. Why do strikes often collapse before they gain their objectives? Because of the advantages of defection for individual strikers. Why do prices tend to oscillate around the cost of production plus an average rate of profit? Because rational entrepreneurs enter and exit industries according to the rate of profit in the industry. Why do arms agreements tend to break down? Because participants fear unilateral defection

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Wright (1971) provides a more extensive analysis of rational-intentional explanations. My *Understanding Peasant China* (1989a) explores application of this model to China studies.

<sup>27</sup>For a useful discussion of "thin" and "thick" theories of rationality in area studies, see Michael Taylor's useful essay, "Rationality and revolutionary action" in Michael Taylor, ed. (1988). This collection provides a number of strong examples of the rational-choice approach in application to area studies.

by their opponents.

It is at this point that the analytical tools of rational choice theory become an explanatory resource. The tools of microeconomics, game theory, collective action theory, decision theory, and Marxist economic and political theory are now available as models that may be applied to particular social phenomena. Each represents an analytical technique that works out some of the implications of rational decision making within stylized contexts of choice. If we assume, for example, as Theodore Schultz does (1964), that peasants make cropping decisions on the basis of profitability, we can predict that the portfolio of crops sown will be responsive to relative prices. If we assume that individuals engaged in non-zero-sum competitive activities make choices based solely on their own interests, we may infer that prisoners' dilemmas will occur. And so on for an open-ended range of analytical techniques. These techniques permit us both to make predictions about individual behavior, and more importantly, to derive the aggregate consequences of individual behavior.

These efforts may be described as *aggregative explanations*. The goal of aggregative explanation is to explain largescale social, economic, and political phenomena as the aggregate and often unintended outcome of rational decision-making at the individual level. It is at this point that the formal tools of rational choice theory are of value; for they offer a variety of analytical techniques for deriving the aggregate effects of the actions of a large number of rational decision-makers. Game theory, collective action theory, and marginalist economic theory each provide aggregation techniques for a range of situations within which rational decision-makers act: strategic conflict and cooperation, public goods problems, and markets. (Numerous such examples can be found in Schelling 1978.) Thus Philip Huang (1985:108) explains cropping portfolios mixing cotton and sorghum chosen by North China peasants as the result of a rational appraisal of risks and benefits; Samuel Popkin (1979) explains the failure of collective action in village societies as the effect of freerider choices; and Robert Brenner (1976) explains the stagnation of French agriculture as the absence of incentives and opportunities towards technological innovation on the part of landlords and peasants. In each case the author identifies a pattern of rational individual behavior responding to a particular set of incentives and constraints, and then attempts to show how this pattern of individual behavior aggregates into the observed macro-pattern.

The rational-choice approach, then, rests upon a simple explanatory strategy. To explain a given historical circumstance, it is necessary and sufficient to provide an account of:

- \* the circumstances of choice that constitute the environment of action;

- \* the strategies that rational, prudent persons would pursue in those circumstances;
- \* the aggregate effects of those strategies.

When the tools of rational choice theory are applied to traditional social life, very specific and surprising consequences emerge. The field of public choice theory is concerned with deriving these specific consequences; and a number of paradoxes of group rationality have been developed in this field which appear to be relevant to empirical social science.

*Replies to criticisms of the rational-choice approach.* There is a common objection to the rational-choice approach: that the central assumption of this approach--that individuals have interests that they seek to further--cannot be employed without detailed ethnographic information about the particulars of those interests. The rational-choice approach tacitly assumes that we can uncontroversially reconstruct goals and beliefs in terms of material interests and causal beliefs; but instead there is radical diversity across cultures in the definition of both goals and beliefs.

This criticism allows that the model of means-end rationality is universally applicable, but holds that it is not possible to reconstruct the goals and beliefs of rational persons in other cultures without extensive ethnological investigation--with the result that we cannot readily reconstruct their behavior on a rational-choice model. Clifford Geertz, for example, argues that the concept of need is itself a cultural particular; there is no culture-independent way of characterizing the needs that persons are postulated to seek to satisfy. This claim may be put in the following terms:

- \* Needs and interests are always culturally defined, so to apply the rational-choice framework to a particular society we must engage in the hermeneutic project in order to discover what local standards of need are.

Two common assumptions are particularly suspect: that the agent's *goals* centrally include material well-being and that his *beliefs* are grounded on factual-scientific procedures of inquiry. Against the first point it is sometimes maintained that the agent's goals depend on a culturally unique set of values; and against the second, that magical, "irrational" beliefs play a crucial role in determining action.<sup>28</sup> Therefore we cannot apply a rational-choice model to

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Robin Horton makes arguments to this effect in "African Thought and Western Science" (1970). Peter Winch takes a particularly radical position on the relativism of factual belief in "Understanding a Primitive Society" (1970).

Chinese peasant rebellions unless we undertake detailed ethnographic investigation of the worldview of the Chinese peasant--what his culturally specific values and beliefs are. This also entails that we will not be able to produce cross-cultural theories of rebellion based on the assumption of rational political behavior, because a critical component of such an explanation varies radically across cultures. This position thus expresses fundamental skepticism about the project of explaining social phenomena on the basis of an abstract theory of means-end rationality and an abstract, materialistic account of goals and beliefs.

How compelling is this objection? This much can be said in its support: it is plainly true that there are cross-cultural variations in both goals and beliefs. The question is, however, whether variation is the rule; or whether, on the contrary, there is a core set of *human* interests and beliefs that constitute the basis for much behavior, around which cultural variations rotate. And in fact it is possible to motivate a materialistic assumption about goals in a cross-cultural sense. This position consists in the following points: that all persons have the cognitive capacity to acquire true beliefs about their material environment; that they have a set of objective material needs (subsistence and security); and that they act deliberately in relation to their material and social environments so as to satisfy those needs. These beliefs and interests constitute a core, upon which culture, meanings, values, religious experience, etc., are added on in various settings. Finally, it is stipulated that culture and significance have interactive effects on the core. We may use the term "welfare" to refer to the individual's means of satisfying basic subsistence and consumption needs--food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care--and the conditions of security that permit him to rely on his ability to continue to satisfy those needs.

Why should we suppose that there is such a core of cognitive capacities and goals underlying behavior in all cultures? Begin with causal beliefs. Anyone who has observed the finely-tuned relationships between agricultural techniques and local ecological variation cannot but be impressed with the capacity of peasants and pastoralists to observe their natural environment and determine the properties of various plants, fertilizers, and water resources. Likewise, the impressive ability of ordinary rural people to identify and exploit the blindspots of the extractive mechanisms embodied in their social and economic environment (taxation, rent, corvée labor systems) suggests that a capacity for learning the workings of the social environment is equally well developed. It appears inescapable that it is a feature of human nature (shaped by the evolutionary history of the species) that human beings are able to learn about their environment and exploit the opportunities the environment affords. Modern scientific reasoning develops this capacity to a highly sophisticated

level; but the discovery of the causal properties of ordinary elements of the environment is a common feature of human life across cultures and historical periods.

Turn now to the notion that the material requirements of everyday life--*needs*, in short--define a set of goals with substantial cross-cultural relevance. All human beings require food, shelter, and clothing; they therefore require access to the social instruments, whatever they are, through which such goods are acquired. We may expand this list fairly quickly; health care, education, and old-age security are goods that all human beings are likely to care about. These concerns are not culturally specific (though the ways in which they are pursued are); rather, they are *species*-specific. Given the natural characteristics of the human organism and the cognitive and motivational resources that we have acquired through our evolutionary history, we may infer that human beings are motivated by the pursuit of goals defined by basic human needs. In short, Aristotle and Marx were right: human beings are rational, goal-directed beings whose goals include the satisfaction of material needs.

In many social contexts these basic material needs can only be pursued through a small number of instruments: income, political power, access to land, patron-client relations, and the like. This circumstance permits us to hypothesize, then, that individuals will act in such a way as to pursue income, power, and security. The following, then, is a tolerable generalization about human motivation:

- \* Persons are concerned about their material welfare; they are aware of the factors in their environment that influence their welfare; and they are disposed to act in such a way as to protect and, if possible, enhance their welfare in the future.

If this fairly innocuous assumption is accepted, then there is a good theoretical justification for applying rational-choice analysis to important aspects of social life. In particular, given the close connection between the institutions defining traditional agriculture, rural politics, and the material needs of peasants, this thesis would lead us to expect that peasants will act in a calculated and rational way in the context of those institutions. Likewise, given the proximity of surplus-extraction systems--taxation, credit, rent, *corvée* labor--to the material needs of peasants, this hypothesis would lead us to expect that peasant behavior in relation to these institutions will be calculated and prudent.

These points suggest that it *is* legitimate to apply the concept of individual rationality cross-culturally, and that it is reasonable for social scientists to postulate that a great deal of social phenomena may be understood as the



aggregate consequence of individuals acting out of a prudent regard for self- or family-welfare. This rational-choice framework is not suited for every topic of social inquiry, to be sure; but for many problems in social research-- technological change, rebellion, social cooperation, and economic decision-making--the rational-choice framework is a defensible one. If this is conceded, it follows that these constitute important areas of social science where the central problem is *not* to discover culturally specific meanings and values, but rather to discover the specific social arrangements and institutions that constrain individual activity into certain channels, and that have the result in the aggregate of producing a given pattern of social life.

At the same time, these criticisms and others make it evident that the model of narrow economic rationality is too restrictive to be very useful in application to area studies. I maintain that a less confining specification of rationality serves area studies better, which I will refer to as *broadened practical rationality*. This conception is further developed elsewhere; but as a start, we may suppose that individuals have a list of goods that they value--e.g. current income, job security, family welfare, old-age security, leisure time, without making the stronger assumption that they can make exhaustive tradeoffs among them (as is required by the assumption that goods are measured by utilities or complete preference rankings). And we may assume that individuals are capable of making rough and ready calculations about the relative goodness and badness of outcomes of various possible lines of action without assuming precise or quantifiable estimates of probabilities. The advantage of this approach is that it makes less strenuous assumptions about the individual's ability to compare utilities; it does not presume strict utility maximization; and it does not stipulate that decision-making reflects only self-interest. At the same time, however, it preserves the central idea that decisions are made on the basis of a calculation of the costs and benefits of various possible actions. Second, the assumption of broadened practical rationality requires that we provide concrete information about the natural and social environment of choice within the context of which the agent deliberates. Social institutions define the interests that guide various actors within society and they define the prohibitions and incentives that influence deliberation. They thus represent a highly structured system within which individuals act, and they impose a pattern of development and organization on society as a whole. Finally, the decision-rule incorporated within broadened practical rationality should be specified in such a way as to permit the reasoner to take account of normative commitments.

### **Political culture**

Much of the discussion to this point has adopted a fairly narrow vision of the explanation of collective behavior in terms of the material interests of participants and their calculations about the effects of various possible collective actions. However, a variety of authors cast doubt on the adequacy of an explanation of underclass collective action based on narrow calculation of costs and benefits. In her treatment of the White Lotus rebellions of nineteenth-century North China, Susan Naquin (1976, 1981) shows the relevance of cultural and religious beliefs in the occurrence of political behavior, so that it is not possible to analyze peasant behavior solely in terms of material interests. Likewise, in his important study of the depression rebellions in Vietnam and Burma James Scott (1976) shows that political behavior is mediated by a culturally specific moral system defining just and unjust social arrangements--once again implying that a narrow analysis of material interests will not suffice to explain political behavior. In the context of popular politics, the point may be put in these terms: most political action involves a normative component that cannot be reduced to narrow self-interest *or* to the class structure within which it functions. So it is necessary to extend the conception of political motivation to include such factors as solidarity, class consciousness, or communal values. This is an empirical point; it represents the assertion that the causes of individual political behavior are more varied than the class-conflict or rational-choice paradigms assert, and that it is necessary to give some account of the moral values and worldview through which agents deliberate. This does not lead to the conclusion that political behavior is not rational; rather, it insists only that rational, deliberative political choice always occurs within the context of a normative worldview that affects the outcome.

Thus the narrow theory of political rationality is insufficient as an explanation of political behavior. Instead, it is necessary to give some prominence to an ensemble of factors--local religious beliefs, kinship loyalties, moral and political commitments, ideology, and the like--that may be referred to as a local *political culture*. This construct refers to a shared tradition defining the moral and social worldview within which individuals locate themselves. Such a tradition might include some or all of the following elements: a popular conception of justice in economic, political, and social matters; a popular vision of group solidarity; shared models of how popular protest should be organized (e.g., the traditional bread riot or the eat-in); shared recollections of moments of solidarity in the past (1848 for French workers, the Nghe An-Ha Tinh rebellion for Vietnamese revolutionaries); and a shared body of songs, sayings, aphorisms, folk heroes, etc., embodying various elements of shared values. (No doubt one could add other elements as well.) These factors

affect the process of individual decision-making on the part of potential participants because they constitute a set of motivational factors that may serve to bind together the members of a group--loyalty to other members of the group, solidarity with one's partners in a political struggle, and commitment to a future social order in which the interests of one's group are better served.<sup>29</sup>

Different societies--and different segments within one society--generally have very different political cultures. French workers, for example, had a shared tradition of violent popular demonstrations that English workers lacked; this difference led, on the whole, to a pattern of peaceful assembly in England and violent street fighting in France in the nineteenth century. Various authors have suggested (Marx among them) that the material conditions of life of a group--patterns of settlement, forms of cooperation involved in agriculture, and the history of shared political activity--give rise to distinctive features of social consciousness--moral commitments, an experience of solidarity, and a moral vision of the social world in which they live. Thus Marc Bloch held that the French peasantry had developed a strong political tradition and a high level of solidarity through the joint influences of communal control over agriculture and ongoing political struggles against the seigneurial system. This political tradition, Robert Brenner maintains, permitted French peasants to develop the resources necessary to defend traditional rights in land ownership at a time when English peasants were losing those rights (1976, 1982). The analytical point is, then, that groups within the same class may have rather different historical experiences and different material circumstances, and these differences may generate very different political cultures. As a result, such groups may react to changing circumstances in very different ways--rebelliousness, resignation, emigration. From this it follows that an adequate explanation of political behavior must take account of the particulars of the political culture of the group whose behavior is at issue.<sup>30</sup>

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Barrington Moore's *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (1978) places the particulars of the political culture of an oppressed group at the core of his account of the political behavior of the group. Moore's central contention is that the historically specific sense of justice possessed by an exploited group is crucial to understanding its political behavior. Charles Tilly's contributions to the theory of political behavior and collective action are also quite important in this context.

One of the contributions of the moral economy literature is its elucidation of the specifics of the moral and political cultures of various peasant societies. Here Scott (1976, 1985) and Thompson (1963) are particularly important. Scott urges quite plausibly that we cannot understand the political behavior of a group until we have some accurate understanding of the moral worldview of the members of that group--how they regard their relations to landlords, the state, the religious authorities, and the like; and how they conceive of legitimate political activity. In a related vein, Miceli (1982, 1988) has provided a rich analysis of political behavior through his treatment of the dynamics of community. Taylor argues that

Some Marxist political theorists have paid attention to these features of social movements. However, in general it is plain that both rational choice and class conflict theories must pay more attention to this variable. The class-conflict theory implicitly assumes a direct connection between material interests and collective action. However, political action unavoidably proceeds through the prism of local political culture. The concept of political culture functions as a bridge, then, between individual interests and collective interests in explaining collective behavior. The elements of a local political culture can (but need not) provide individuals with effective motivation to undertake actions and strategies that favor their group interests, and it gives them the motivational resources needed to permit them to persist in these strategies even in the face of risk and deprivation (i.e., in circumstances where the political strategy imposes extensive costs on the individual's interests). This treatment of political culture leads to a sensitivity to the point that political behavior is often driven by a set of motives that are richer than a narrow calculus of self-interest.

In order to explain the political behavior of a group, then, it is insufficient to know what the group's interests are, whether local or class. Even if we supplement a class and interest analysis with an account of organizational resources, we will still be unable to predict political behavior. Rather, it is necessary to have a fairly specific account of the moral values, religious beliefs, political traditions, community structures, and cultural worldview within the context of which material conflicts are played out.<sup>31</sup>

This line of argument underlines the centrality of the moral-economy framework in the explanation of peasant behavior. The moral-economy theory of rebellion is at least one level richer than either of the two previous models in this regard, in that it analyzes the forms of consciousness through which political behavior is mediated. The moral economists hold that political behavior occurs within the context of a set of moral beliefs and expectations, largely shaped by the requirements of traditional agriculture, in terms of which

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gements that constitute groups into *communities* deeply condition the feasibility of successful collective action by these groups (1988:67-68). Cohesive communities are more capable of mounting successful political actions; this greater effectiveness stems from such factors as shared norms of collective action, a high level of intra-community trust, a recognition that the interests of the community are durable and inseparable, and so forth.

In *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* Joseph Esherick (1987) provides an analysis of the origins of the Boxer uprising that is particularly sensitive to the salience of local political culture. His account is exemplary in this context in its attempt to incorporate features of the class conflict model and to provide a detailed analysis of the mechanics of local politics and the importance of local political culture in explaining collective action.

participants judge the legitimacy of the actions of other participants. These moral beliefs constitute a sense of justice which largely determines the way in which participants will respond to social and economic change. This approach has been most extensively applied to Southeast Asia, but Robert Marks and Ralph Thaxton have used this framework in their analyses of nineteenth-century rural politics as well.

James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) is a paradigm of this approach. Scott's analysis may be schematically represented in these terms. Peasants in a given traditional society (Annam or Burma) share a specific subsistence ethic--a vision of their rights of subsistence and of the norms which ought to govern the behavior of other agents (landlords and the state). They are led to violent protest when institutions offend the subsistence ethic in the context of a material crisis of subsistence. When subsistence shocks occur which badly effect the economic security of large numbers of peasants, *and* when parties engaged in surplus extraction (landlords, notables, and tax collectors) fail to respond in accordance to the subsistence ethic, large numbers of peasants will be disposed to engage in violent protest (194). Scott refers to several different kinds of collective shocks which can trigger subsistence crisis: ecological extremes, price-system shocks, and mono-crop crises (198-200). Tax rebellions occur, for example, not when taxes are most onerous, but when they are perceived to be the most inflexible within the circumstances of economic crisis; attacks on landlords occur, not when rents are high, but when they are collected without regard to how much is left for the peasant cultivator. Whether rebellion in fact occurs in such circumstances depends on other factors as well; particularly central is the presence of appropriate organizations and leadership.

*The role of norms and values in political behavior.* This line of thought poses a difficulty for both classical Marxism and rational-choice theory: the need to incorporate the workings of norms and values into abstract theories of political behavior. Here the criticism is that the rational-choice approach, by attending solely to calculations of self-interest, is blind to the workings of normative frameworks; but such frameworks are powerful factors underlying behavior in a most traditional contexts. This perspective finds expression in the moral economy literature. Traditional societies are *communities*: tightly cohesive groups of persons sharing a distinctive set of values in stable, continuing relations to one another (M. Taylor 1982:25 ff.). The central threats to security and welfare are well-known to such groups--excessive or deficient rainfall, attacks by bandits, predatory tax policies by the central government, etc. And village societies have evolved *schemes of shared values* and *cooperative practices and institutions* which are well-adapted to handling these problems of

risk and welfare in ways which protect the subsistence needs of all villagers adequately in all but the most extreme circumstances. The substantivists thus maintain that traditions and norms are fundamental social factors, and that individual behavior is almost always modulated through powerful traditional motivational constraints. One consequence of this modulation is that many societies do not display a sharp distinction between group interest and individual interest. Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* represents a classic statement of this position. Polanyi argues against the validity of applying the concepts of economic rationality, profit maximization, exchange relations, and the like, to premarket societies.<sup>32</sup> Instead of economic calculation, Polanyi's account requires that the analysis pay primary attention to patterns of reciprocity and redistribution, shared values, traditions, and the determining role of community and politics. Polanyi thus maintains that the concept of economic rationality is a very specific historical construct that applies to the forms of market society that emerged in Western Europe in the early modern period.

This objection has some validity but probably overstates the import of normative constraints on action. There is a substantial literature suggesting that the moral economy school overstates the effectiveness of redistributive norms within traditional societies (Popkin 1979:chapter 1). As a matter of empirical fact there appear to be strong reasons to doubt the level of communitarian redistribution that occurred in peasant Russia, traditional China, or English working class communities.

Moreover, there are good theoretical reasons to doubt that normative systems will profoundly and permanently interfere with individual pursuit of private interests. Normative systems are inherently ambiguous and subject to revision over time. Consequently we should expect that opportunistic agents will find ways of adapting given social norms more comfortably to the pursuit of self-interest. Consider the requirement that elites should provide for the subsistence needs of the poor in times of dearth. There are some grounds for supposing that such a requirement is in the longterm interest of elites--for example, by promoting social stability and establishing bonds of reciprocity with other members of an interdependent society. But it seems reasonable to expect that elites--already by their superior economic position able to exercise

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"The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end" (Polanyi 1957:46).

political and social power as well--will find ways of limiting the effect of such norms on their behavior.

These points notwithstanding, there remains a credible line of criticism of the rational-choice paradigm based on the role of norms in behavior. For it is clear that individuals pay some attention to normative constraints within the process of rational deliberation. The model of simple maximizing goal-directedness is overly abstract; instead, we need to have a conception of rational action that permits us to incorporate some consideration of normative requirements as well as purposes and goals. A number of authors within the rational-choice paradigm have taken this point seriously. Particularly important among these is A. K. Sen. Sen criticizes the assumption of pure self-interest which is contained in the standard conception (Sen 1982:84-90). "The purely economic man is indeed close to being a social moron" (Sen 1982:99). Against the assumption of self-interested maximizing decision-making, Sen argues for a proposal for a more structured concept of practical reason: one which permits the decision maker to take account of *commitments*. This concept covers a variety of non-welfare features of reasoning, but moral principle (fairness and reciprocity) and altruistic concern for the welfare of others are central among these. Thus Sen holds that an adequate theory of rationality requires more structure than a simple utility-maximizing model would allow; in particular, it needs to take account of moral principles and commitment.

These arguments are telling; the model of narrow economic rationality makes overly restrictive assumptions about the role of norms in rational behavior. Human behavior is the resultant of several different forms of motive: self-interest and altruism; and several different types of decision-making processes: maximizing and side-constraint testing. The model of broadened practical rationality therefore needs to incorporate a decision rule that represents the workings of moral constraints and commitments as well as goal-directed calculation. This is not a small problem, however; for one of the chief merits of the paradigm of narrow economic rationality is its parsimony--the fact that it reduces rational choice to a single dimension of deliberation. Once we require that rational choice needs to take normative constraints and commitments into account as well as interests, it is much more difficult to provide formal models of rational choice.

This broadening of the conception of individual rationality has important implications. For example, consider public goods problems. Once we consider a more complex theory of practical deliberation, formal arguments concerning freeriding problems in real social groups will be indeterminate. On a more complex, and more empirically adequate, account of practical reason,

conditional altruism, cooperation, and reciprocity may be rational choices; therefore we would expect a social group consisting of rational individuals to show marks of cooperation and conditional altruism. We must be careful not to draw an overly strong conclusion, however; for it would be unreasonable to maintain that human beings are indifferent to private welfare. Indeed, generally speaking it would seem reasonable to assume that each decision-maker places high priority on personal and familial welfare; human beings generally do not behave like impartial utilitarians.

### **Relations among the approaches**

I will close by considering some of the relations among these various approaches. Both local-politics and class-conflict theories treat rebellion as the outcome of rational-deliberative choice on the part of participants. They are thus both rational-action explanations. (This distinguishes both of them from millenarian theory, for example.) The class-conflict theory picks out one set of factors within the environment of action as decisively important--property relations and exploitation--and asserts that these factors in turn determine the forms of political alliance and the goals of political action which should be expected from a peasant movement. Perry's analysis is distinguished from the class-conflict model on the grounds of its localism. Like the class-conflict model, the local-politics theory assumes that peasant political behavior is strategic. But it leaves open the question of the goals of peasant political action and concentrates on the process of collective action, and the political and institutional factors which lead the process to escalate into largescale rebellion.

Perry's account rather explains the Nian rebellion as the aggregate and largely unintended consequence of a number of interlocking, local strategies of survival which, in the context of the political and economic environment of Huaibei, erupted into major regional rebellion.

Rational-choice theories are obliged to confront the problem of collective action; for the shared interest which a group may have in a given project does not always disaggregate into individual interests in supporting such a project. Rebellion would appear to pose problems of freeriding with a vengeance, since the benefits of a successful rebellion are generally not excludable to non-contributors. Therefore rational agents ought to be expected to become freeriders and not contribute to rebellion. In order to make out a rationalist theory, then, it will be necessary to pay particular attention to the circumstances which permit peasant movements to overcome freerider problems, or else



provide an alternative model of rationality in which contributions to collective projects are directly rational.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most significant contributions of the local-politics theory is the attention it gives to local organizational resources. For rebellion generally requires the coordination of large numbers of participants--e.g., in the simultaneous attack on several towns; it requires fund raising, sometimes on a large scale; it requires some system of discipline through which lower-level leaders or generals can be induced to accept guidance or commands from higher-level leaders; and so forth. Movements which fail to construct such institutional or organizational forms may be expected to fail in the face of concerted attack by the authorities; consequently, we need to ask how different peasant movements have solved the problem of organization. What were the political and institutional arrangements which either facilitated or inhibited the occurrence of a rebellion? Were there deficiencies in Qing military or administrative arrangements which made rural rebellion substantially easier than it might otherwise have been? Did Chinese rural society possess distinctive organizational resources of its own (e.g., heterodox organizations) which could be used to facilitate rebellion?

Finally, the topic of political culture suggests the continuing importance of the moral economy approach to peasant studies: what is the role of consciousness, ideology, and values in explaining political behavior? To some extent this imperative cuts across the grain of rational-action models of politics, since it suggests that an analysis of material interests and preferences alone is insufficient to explain actual political behavior. To the extent that it is necessary to refer to specifics of peasant psychology, ideology, and culture, in order to explain peasant political behavior, a pure rational-action explanation will be insufficient. At the same time, if this approach is sustained, it implies that explanation requires highly concrete investigation of religious ideas, moral values, political ideologies, etc., before it is possible to understand a particular occurrence of rebellion. But this suggests that it will be difficult to arrive at generalizations about peasant political behavior.

My own judgment, in surveying these various accounts, is that each illuminates problems that are given insufficient attention by the others. The local-politics framework is particularly sensitive to the local processes of collective action: the institutional forms and organizational resources that are

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important discussions on the freerider problem in connection with revolution include Allen Buchanan, "Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality" (1979), William Shaw, "Marxism, Revolution, and Rationality" (1984), and Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (1979).

often available in rural society, the importance of identifying local material interests as a source of motivation, and the often unintended consequences of local politics at the regional or national level. The class-conflict model, on the other hand, possesses a substantial and significant range of analytical tools in terms of which to analyze one important feature of rural society: the relations of class and exploitation through which rural production is performed. These property relations largely constitute the material interests of all local agents--landlords, tenants, smallholders, officials, and merchants--and thereby provide substantial insight into the springs of rural political behavior as well. The class-conflict model can benefit, however, by borrowing from the local-politics framework--in particular, its sensitivity to the local processes of rural collective action. Finally, the moral-economy theory (and the millenarian theory to which I have alluded to on occasion) provides analytical resources in terms of which to describe the forms of consciousness--beliefs, norms, values, religious commitments, etc.--through which political behavior is mediated. The problem before China historians, then, is not to determine which of these various frameworks is the ultimate truth, but rather to appreciate and absorb the important insights each has provided into the multi-stranded fabric of rural collective violence.<sup>34</sup>

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Significantly, an important recent work on the Chinese Revolution reflects just such an effort to combine these various perspectives. Chen Y (1986) offers an explanation of the CCP's mobilization successes in the Base areas that depends upon a finegrained analysis of the local politics in Eastern China as a result of local social arrangements and the Japanese occupation. Methodologically, then, his approach is more similar to Perry than either millenarianism or classical Marxism. However, Chen also takes seriously the view that an essential part of the success of the CCP during the war was the class-conflict orientation of its social program: land reform, rent and tax reductions, and emphasis on peasant associations. Chen's account, then, reflects application of the most insightful elements of both the local-politics perspective and the class-conflict framework.

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