

## POLITICAL CONFLICT POTENTIAL, POLITICIZATION, AND THE PEASANTRY IN THE UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES

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THE INTENT OF THIS PAPER IS TWOFOLD: TO EXAMINE THE FACTORS which give rise to political conflict potential in peasant societies in the underdeveloped countries; and to explore the nature of the politicization process as it affects the peasants in those countries.

The term "peasant" is used broadly to signify a person who derives a substantial part of his livelihood from his own work in the cultivation of crops, and who uses primitive or relatively primitive techniques in that cultivation. Such a definition encompasses a majority of the population of Latin America, a sizeable majority of the population of Asia, and a very high percentage of the rural population of both continents.<sup>1</sup> The peasantry, as the term is used here, excludes large landlords, plantation owners and full-time plantation workers, farmers employing modern techniques, traders, artisans, teachers, government officials, and the like.

The peasants, as a group, share a common political characteristic: they have been largely, one might almost say totally, excluded from the decision-making process of the governments of the states in which they have resided or reside. The peasants have been, and largely still are, a source of taxes, goods, and labor for the state; they are the basis on which urban life and state organization are built. But in their parochial rural communities, each with at best limited contact with a few adjacent communities, the peasants have been excluded from political power. Only in the present century and especially in recent years, has the peasantry been pulled and pushed into the politicization process.

Although it is true that all peasants have been traditionally excluded from government at the supra-village level, peasant communities, and even individual peasants, are highly differentiated in terms of those factors which give rise to political conflict potential

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the author's limited knowledge of Africa, that continent is excluded from consideration in this paper.

and to the particular form taken by the politicization process. To illustrate the first point: the Indonesian Communists have devoted considerable effort to the investigation of the sources of conflict and political behavior in the villages of Java. As Marxist-Leninists, they envision the peasant as behaving politically in accordance with their relationship to land owning; and they have found four distinct peasant groups: the rich peasants, who themselves work on the land but also gain much of their income from moneylending and the exploitation of tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers; the middle peasants, who work their own land and generally neither work for others nor exploit the labor of others; the poor peasants, who own little or no land are forced to lease land or work as seasonal laborers; and the landless laborers.<sup>2</sup> This four-fold categorization may, in fact, only mislead the investigator by its oversimplification. A peasant may own no land but rent a large area which he works in part and sub-leases in part. Another peasant may, for example, be at the same time a poor peasant, a sharecropper, an agricultural laborer, a seasonal plantation worker, and a part-time artisan; the possible combinations are numerous. The degree of exploitation of the land-poor peasant may, and does, vary between landlords, regions, and countries. Furthermore, the squatter, one who simply occupies and works a piece of land without payment of rent or establishment of legal ownership, fits into none of the above categories although he is numerically significant in parts of many countries. Likewise, the widely spread *colono* of Latin America is not included in this categorization.

It might be possible to construct a complex classification that would include all peasants in terms of their relationship to land owning. Even so, this would be no more than a start, and an often misleading one, towards understanding peasant perception of and attitudes to both village and national society: the peasant's economic position is not necessarily the product of only his relationship to land owning; and, far more important, the peasant, like other men, is not merely an economic animal. The perceptions, attitudes, and actions of each peasant in the political sphere are produced by a complex interplay of geographical, economic, socio-cultural, and political factors that are part of his total environment. It is

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<sup>2</sup> D. N. Aidit: *Indonesian Society and the Indonesian Revolution*; Djakarta, 1958, pp. 60-61. For an example of detailed investigation of village conditions, see D.N. Aidit: *Kaum Tani Mengganjang Setan-Setan Desa*; Djakarta, 1964, 104 p.

the task of the political research worker to ascertain which elements of the total environment are of political significance.

### POLITICAL CONFLICT POTENTIAL

Peasant society is not a simple phenomenon. The society of any one village is often highly complex, and the form and content of peasant society vary widely between different villages, regions, and countries. But all peasant communities contain within themselves political conflict potential, for in no community are all men (and women) equal in social status, material possessions, rights and obligations, and culture. That is, all peasant societies contain political conflict potential over the distribution of those things that men (and women) consider important. Further, as the peasantry as a whole are usually inferior to other parts of national society in terms of rights, obligations, and material rewards, there is potential conflict between the peasants (or segments of the peasantry) and other groups in the state. The level or degree of conflict potential is a product of the interplay between tension producers and tension reducers to be found in the geographical, socio-cultural and political characteristics of peasant society.

1. *Geographical Characteristics.*—Conflict potential is affected by the degree of natural bounty available to the peasant's society. At one extreme would be a tropical area with rich soils, ample rainfall and irrigation possibilities for the production of two or three crops per annum, and wide expanses of virgin forest for peasant colonization. At the other extreme would be an eroded area of infertile soils and low, unreliable rainfall (subject to drought and flood), with no reserves of cultivable land to siphon off a burgeoning population. The first example, other things being equal, would clearly have a lower level of potential conflict over land use and ownership, and would reduce the potential for landlord exploitation of the poorer peasants.

2. *Economic Characteristics.*—The land system is the basic phenomenon in the peasant economy that produces conflict potential.

The distribution of land ownership is at the center of the land system. It varies in the underdeveloped countries from near-egalitarianism to ultra-concentration in which only a miniscule part of the agricultural population owns land. In the former situation, intra-community conflict potential is obviously lower. A widespread, and complicating, characteristic of many peasant societies in Latin

America and Asia is the presence of communal lands. The proportion of land owned communally varies from the totality in some Andean Indian examples, through a small percentage in some villages of Central Vietnam and Central Java, to none at all. Similarly, the disposition of the communal lands varies: the entire amount may be worked communally with the harvest being shared equally by the participant families; it may be distributed periodically or with lifetime tenure for individual working; it may be used by village officials in lieu of salaries; or it may be distributed to as many of the poorer peasants as is feasible. The amount, the quality, and the use of communal land affects the degree of potential conflict over land ownership.

Related to, but in many respects separate from, the distribution of land ownership is the exploitation suffered by those who work the land of others. The form of exploitation includes rents, crop shares, personal services, and labor on the landlord's land; the intensity of exploitation likewise varies, though care must be exercised in measuring it. For example, one landowner may lease his land in return for only one-third of the harvest while another may obtain one-half, making it appear that the sharecroppers of the former are less exploited. It may be, however, that the first landlord insists that he be given the choice of which third of the harvest he receives, that the sharecroppers grow a single cash crop (which is sold to the landowner), and that the sharecroppers transport the landlord's share gratis to his storing shed. The second landlord, by contrast, may provide the sharecroppers with seeds, housing, draft animals, and tools, allow them to grow what they want, and permit them to pasture a few animals and collect firewood in a woodland area. There would be less exploitation and therefore less political conflict potential between the second landowner and his sharecroppers.

Exploitation may extend far beyond the landless and poor peasants to at least the middle peasant in the form of interest rates and village services. In the capital-scarce villages, interest rates for loans are usually very high, and loans are needed not only to tide the poor peasant over until the next harvest or the next season of labor, or to acquire what might be deemed luxury goods, but also to pay for religious or secular ritual and festivities. The form of the loans varies from simple cash to be repaid in cash, to cash or goods to be repaid in crops. The end result may be the virtual enslavement of a peasant and his family and the loss of his land.

While loans and debts are almost universal in peasant societies the practice of village services is found only in certain regions. Where it exists, the members of given communities perform tasks deemed of benefit to the community as a whole, such as night patrols, cleaning out irrigation ditches, and repairing roads and bridges. And yet such tasks are of greater benefit to the wealthy peasants and the traders than to the poorer peasants. That is, the peasants may perform equal shares of the tasks but benefit unequally.

A final important aspect of the land system is the degree of security in ownership, land boundaries and tenure—with greater security signifying less conflict potential. In many regions of Latin America, for example, legal title to land is vague, overlapping, or non-existent, and the demarcation of holdings is rudimentary. It is common throughout the underdeveloped countries for tenants, sharecroppers, and *colonos* to have only the most insecure tenure—that is, the landlord has the right to evict them more or less at will. This situation clearly gives rise to potential conflict; at the same time and in the absence of alternative sources of livelihood, it may increase peasants' fear of externalizing the conflict, for to do so could lead to starvation.

It is worthy of note that the extent and level of exploitation may increase when the peasant community intensifies its production for the extra-village market. Most peasant communities traditionally have produced within their boundaries the bulk of the materials required for living (food, clothing, fuel, tools, materials for housing, and household furniture and utensils). Many have moved, or are moving, into the sphere of specialization where a given community produces one or a small number of items for which it is best endowed; these items are then traded for goods produced elsewhere but which are vital for living. Such specialization may produce a general rise in the living conditions of the community, but its common result is greater social and economic differentiation and therefore greater exploitation. To illustrate this point: a community may have produced most of the items required for living; it then changes to cotton monoculture. The total product of the community rises because the land and climate are well suited to cotton, and only indifferently so to the corn, yams, livestock, vegetables, and so on that were formerly produced. But the change to cotton requires capital to buy the new plants, finance pesticides, and above all to feed the peasant families between harvests. Even given an egalitarian society prior to monoculture, that society ra-

pidly becomes highly differentiated as certain families are less able to cope with a cash economy. Those who can best cope become wealthier, those who are least able fall into debt, lose their land, and sink to the level of tenant, sharecropper, *colono*, or laborer, with a resultant increase in conflict potential.

Although the possibilities for exploitation are often increased by economic development, they are reduced and ameliorated by the existence of opportunities for employment outside the community. If the employment opportunities are seasonal, as in plantations, they may help tide the poorer peasants over the bleak pre-harvest period and provide him with ready cash and a degree of bargaining power vis-a-vis the landlords, which reduce the extent of his exploitation. If they are permanent and lead to outward migration, as to towns, they may siphon off the surplus population and especially those poorer peasants with a high degree of personal ambition. In either case, the level of potential conflict is likely to be reduced, though, as will be seen below in the discussion of political consciousness, each may give rise to a greater intensity of consciously-felt exploitation; and each may be the source of organizational and political knowledge that could lead to political action.

Other aspects of economic conditions that may give rise to conflict potential are the economic trends in a given community, the relative trends of rural-urban economic conditions, and economic demands made upon the members of the community by the government. In general, if a community were declining in economic output per head (from population increase, erosion of the land, a decline in soil fertility, a reduction in available irrigation water, etc.), the degree of competition for available output would increase. Widespread peasant resentment may be engendered by a decline in rural living standards relative to those pertaining in urban areas—presuming awareness of that decline. Potential and general resentments may arise from demands from the regional or national government, most obvious being taxes, *corvée* labor, and military service.

3. *Socio-cultural Characteristics.*—The socio-cultural category of characteristics of political significance ranges widely. It is taken to include family patterns, the degree and nature of social status differentiation, traditions of cooperative endeavor and mutual aid, religious beliefs, practices and organization, ethnic composition, and

miscellaneous non-political sedatives and outlets for personal suffering and tension.

It seems indisputable that certain aspects of the nature and extent of family relationships affect the degree of conflict potential in a given society. Some scholars argue that authority and deference patterns in the family may be generalized to the larger society. To take one example: if there are great differences in rights, obligations and status in a family, then the members of that family are more likely to accept unquestioningly similar inequalities in the larger society—in which case conflict potential would be reduced. In a less speculative vein, the level of conflict potential is affected by the size of the perceived family and the degree of family responsibility felt by each member. Thus, political conflict potential is likely to be lower if the family is extended in nature (along blood ties or ritually formed ties, as in the case of the *compadrazco* system of Latin America), and if the better placed members conceive it as their duty to assist the less privileged. Such an extended and mutually responsible family is often the source of basic social and economic security as well as of vicarious enjoyment of higher status, while the tradition of intra-family assistance may alleviate any tendency to marked economic and social differentiation. Another aspect of the family that should be considered is that of inheritance. Primogeniture may lead to rapid socio-economic differentiation, with obvious conflict potential, while the system of equal inheritance works in the opposite direction.

A discussion of the family must include consideration of the position of women who are, after all, half the population. The condition of the peasant woman varies considerably from society to society. At one extreme may be the Arab woman who is treated as an inferior, as a possession of the male, a possession that may be readily discarded or superseded by a second, third, or fourth wife. At the other extreme may be the women in certain matriarchal societies, such as the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, or in some Negro communities of Northeast Brazil. In the latter case marriage is a mutual alliance which may be broken by either party, the woman retains her separate property, she takes an active part in public life, and she pursues her own livelihood. The families of most peasant societies are between the extremes, but in almost all the woman has far fewer rights than the man—economic, socio-cultural, and political. This inequality is another source of potential conflict but one that rarely produces overt tensions as most women

are engulfed in the problems of maintaining a household and are deeply imbued with a sense of fatalism that views existing conditions as preordained, as "natural".

The degree and nature of social status differentiation in a peasant society play an important part in determining the degree of political conflict potential. A society that has wide status differentiation and is closed, with no mobility opportunities, has greater conflict potential than a society that is more egalitarian and more open. Social status is often based upon economic standing, though it may also be based on such factors as birth (as in an aristocratic or caste society) or the performance of actions deemed of value to the entire community. In a society where status is based largely on economic standing, the possibilities for mobility are in part related to the general buoyancy of the village economy. But it should be noted that if a village were stable in terms of its total economic output, population, and resources, then upward mobility of some would require downward mobility of others and a fresh source of conflict potential would be introduced.

Some peasant societies, regardless of their economic structure, afford the opportunity to rise in social status through either the mere acquisition of age or the performance over many years of a sequence of secular or religious duties for the community. In these societies many peasants, largely regardless of their economic standing, may slowly acquire status until they become one of the "elders". That is, their status ambitions are fulfilled and they are less likely to be deeply concerned over such questions as the distribution of economic rewards. On the other hand, the process of slow accretion of status and authority may give rise to a generational conflict between impatient younger men and more conservative, self-satisfied elders.

Many peasant societies retain traditions of mutual aid and social responsibility that often reduce conflict potential in two ways: they form bonds of neighborhood or community solidarity that transcend the boundaries of a particular social stratum, and they impede wide socio-economic differentiation. Mutual aid and social responsibility are expressed in actions ranging from the help of neighbors in times of distress (illness, pregnancy, birth, old age, death, and food shortage), to cooperative labor during periods of intense agricultural work, to a diffuse sense of the individual's responsibility for the welfare of all members of his



neighborhood or community. This last is evident, for example, in some Javanese villages where it limits the degree of exploitation by the wealthy peasants and landlords and has produced a condition closer to "shared poverty" than to the abundance-starvation dichotomy of parts of India.

The religious beliefs, practices and organization of a particular peasant society usually affect the level of conflict potential in that society. An increase in conflict potential will obviously occur when different religions exist alongside one another (as in South Vietnam and India), where different concepts of the same religion are juxtaposed (as those of the *santri* and *abangan* Moslems in Java), or where there are different strata of the same religion (as in Hindu India). More usually, however, religion reduces the possibility that an individual with an otherwise high conflict potential will convert that potential into political action: religious activity may bring social status that makes a materially difficult life fully satisfying (as among Indians of Guatemala or the cultists of Brazil); religion may provide apparent means of overcoming problems (as through prayers and offerings), and so direct problem-solving from possible political channels to religious observance; religion may persuade peasants that their lowly status is the result of past or present misdemeanors or is the fee exacted for after-life rewards—thus turning the poor away from the societal causes of their condition; and religious celebrations may provide a satisfying release for personal tension. It is well known that the leaders of certain religions, notably the Roman Catholic and Moslem, act consciously as barriers to "radical" political consciousness and organization. Less obviously, but still of importance, religion may reduce conflict potential in two other ways: it may serve as an economic leveler when its devotees are required to expend on rituals sums commensurate with their economic status, and religion may serve to weld mystically the various economic and social strata of a peasant community—as in the case of the village ancestor cults of Vietnam and Java.

Although most peasant societies are ethnically homogenous, many are not. Where they are not, different ethnic groups may live in adjacent communities (as tribals alongside Indian Hindus, or Vietnamese alongside the hill tribes of the Annamite Chain), there may be the presence within a given community of a privileged ethnic group (whose number and privilege may vary widely as can be seen by the examples of the Rajputs in Northern India and the

White minority of the northeast coastal zone of Brazil), or there may be joint membership of village society without one being a dominant status group (as in the example of the Chinese in Malay villages), etc. The first two types of ethnic contact contain great conflict potential as they imply a more powerful, and therefore exploitative, group taking advantage (tribute, landownership patterns, etc.) and often having taken advantage (pushing back the weaker from the better lands). Two factors, however, are important in these situations in reducing conflict potential. The first is the feeling of incapacity and helplessness of the members of the weak group vis-a-vis the dominant group. This feeling is engendered by past and present experience until often both groups are convinced of the inherent superiority of the dominant group in intelligence, wealth, technological skills, and sometimes sheer numbers; it is also constantly fostered by the dominant group. The effects of this deeply ingrained sense of inferiority is seen in the rather fitful way that nationalism has developed among the colonial peoples of the world and, outside the underdeveloped countries, in the hesitation of many North American Negroes to struggle for full citizenship rights. Second, the ethnic groups may merge culturally or biologically: as with those Chinese who have been established for many generations in Indonesia; or with the miscegenation and cultural assimilation that has taken place for several centuries in Brazil and Spanish America.

Under conditions of joint membership of village society without there being a dominant ethnic group, there is tension potential because the competition from material rewards (including landownership) may be viewed not as competition between individuals but as a conflict between groups that are identifiable by racial and cultural characteristics. In this condition of joint and fairly equal village membership, the existence or degree of tension potential is related to such factors as the extent of cultural and biological assimilation and the degree of competition for material rewards, the latter being in turn related to the availability of livelihood possibilities (land, non-agricultural employment opportunities in or outside the village, etc).

In some societies peasants make use of certain non-political sedatives and outlets for personal suffering and tension that reduce the overall conflict potential. Mention has been made already of the impact of certain directly religious practices in this context. Within the more secular realm are fiestas and drunkenness. In both,

the peasant escapes from his under-privileged position, thereby directing his attention from his deprivation and reducing the possibility that he will do anything about it other than seek forgetfulness. The Andean Indians deaden the cold, hunger and exhaustion in wads of coca.

4. *Political Characteristic*.—The nature of village government varies widely as to its selection and its responsiveness to the general village population. Village political leadership may be elected by all or a portion of the adult members, it may be hereditary, or it may be appointed by agencies outside the village. An elected village government would suggest a lower degree of conflict potential as the government should then be more responsive to the felt needs of the people. This suggestion is often proved wrong in practice: elections at the village are rarely democratic but rather the ritualistic confirmation of a situation reached by heredity, the pressure of wealthier persons, or the decision of higher levels of government; elections may lead to group competition and so increase actual conflict; an elected government need not be responsive to the welfare of the entire community, but only to one segment, thereby exacerbating conflict; and personal participation in government, even of a restricted nature, presupposes and encourages a degree of political consciousness that may lead the peasant to more readily conceive of playing a political role of wider scope.

A non-elected village political leadership may, in fact, produce a lower level of conflict potential than an elected one. In one extreme case, a non-elected leadership might be responsive to the felt needs of the population and it might have considerable resources at its disposal for the promotion of the community's welfare. Furthermore, by its very nature, non-elected village government might prevent the emergence of the political pursuit of individual or group interests, and might even exclude the peasant, through his inexperience and ignorance, from the notion of rudimentary participation. That is, with a long-standing tradition of non-participation in village government the peasant is likely to conceive of himself as more than an occasional supplicant for favors from a powerful, unquestioned, and often incomprehensible authority. But whatever the method of selecting the village government, an alteration in the degree of responsiveness of that government might affect conflict potential: a reduction in responsiveness could increase dissatisfaction, with the dissatisfaction aimed at a political entity; while an increase in responsiveness could well encourage the peasants to

expect more and more — that is, to increase their demands on village and supra-village government.

Just as the method of selection and the degree responsiveness of the village government have an effect on the level of conflict potential in peasant society, so too do those of the national government—and both levels of government are often closely interwoven. In recent years it has been seen that national governments may, by their action and inaction, alienate the entire peasant population or a major part of it, thereby creating a fundamental source of conflict. A glaring example is to be found in South Vietnam after 1954, where government action in certain fields and inaction in others effectively raised the conflict potential between a major segment of the peasantry and the national government.

### THE POLITICIZATION PROCESS

While it is true that all peasant societies contain political conflict potential, it is also true that only in a small minority has that potential been converted into actual conflict. Furthermore, many peasant groups with a very high degree of conflict potential are still politically inactive—as the lower castes and untouchables of India, the semi-serfs of Iran and the *colonos* of Ecuador and Peru. Conversely, some peasant groups are engaged in sustained, and at times militant, political action despite the relatively low degree of conflict potential that affects them—as the peasants of Central Vietnam and Central Java. To be specific: the *colono* of Peru is in a far worse position than the Central Vietnamese peasant in terms of living standards, opportunities for status and economic mobility, brutal exploitation by landlords, and so on. And yet the *colono* continues to live and be treated like an animal, while the Vietnamese is in rebellion. Or, to take an example of contrast within a single community: in many Indian villages the middle peasants are now the dominant political force, whereas the intensely exploited lower castes and untouchables still acquiesce in their own brutalization.

Politicization is the process that converts political conflict potential into actual conflict. As a process it may be conceived as a continuum having three main stages: political nescience, political consciousness, and political action. An individual, group, community or people tend to advance along the continuum; that is, they

tend to be drawn deeper into the political process. Retreat is, however, not uncommon, at least from action back to consciousness when action is shown to be futile or costly or when action produces a desired result. Many peasants, as other people too, may stop at political consciousness if action is deemed futile or too costly in terms of the goals desired.

1. *Political Nescience*.—Complete political ignorance is exceedingly rare among the adult sector of peasant populations. For a peasant to be politically nescient, he would have to be totally unaware of the effect control of the political power may have upon the condition of man's existence. But he is made aware that political power at the village level affects a man's authority, status and income; and because peasant communities are tied, with almost no exception, into larger political entities, he is aware, too, of the effects of political power located at the supra-village level. He is aware that political power of the supra-village level may be used to his benefit—as in the extirpation of bandits, the eradication of diseases, the construction of irrigation projects, roads, schools, etc.—, or to his detriment—as in the exaction of taxes, *corvée* labor, and military conscripts.

Although few peasants possess total political ignorance, a majority are still at the stage of unquestioning political acquiescence. This is not surprising. For some nine or ten thousand years, since the discovery of agriculture, the peasants have been excluded from political activity at the supra-village level; at the village level what activity they have been allowed has been closely circumscribed by limited resources and the control of higher authorities. Through countless generations the peasant has accepted his status as a lowly subject and, with this, his exclusion from significant political power. In most cases he has accepted the conditions of his existence as pre-ordained and largely unchangeable; where he has sought change, it has been through religious observance, flight to new lands, or wary adoption of a new crop or agricultural tool. If he has approached higher authorities it has been for special favors or the fulfillment of narrowly circumscribed rights—not for participation in the decision-making process. On rare occasions intolerable tensions have caused him to run amok as an individual or to rise in pathetic rebellion as a group. But always punishment has been swift and bloody, for he has lacked the skills and knowledge for well-organized and sustained political action. In short, the peasant traditionally is quite unable to envision

himself as playing anything other than a minor subject role in the political world; and his subject role is deeply founded on centuries of political domination by supra-village authorities of overwhelming power.

Peasant society is not static: language, religion, socio-economic structure, agricultural techniques and crops, all may change. But the traditional peasant is politically unchanging: even if he participates in government at the village level, the autonomy and resources for change possessed by the village are strictly limited; while political power at the state level is a phenomenon both awesome and incomprehensible in view of his and his village's knowledge, experience and resources.

It should be noted that many peasant societies have been rent by tensions that have at times burst into bloody action, though not *political* action because it was affected with neither political consciousness nor the aim of altering government policies. To choose two examples of such non-political peasant action: the conflicts within the villages of colonial India between Moslems, Hindus, and Sikhs, and the brief, highly localized Andean revolts against the brutalities of specific *hacendados*.

2. *Political Consciousness*.—Only a comparatively small, but now rapidly increasing, percentage of peasants have moved along the politicization continuum from unquestioning acquiescence to full political consciousness. The term "political consciousness" is used by various authors in a loose and often ambiguous way. For the purposes of this essay, a person possesses full political consciousness only when he believes that man can alter significantly the conditions of his life (in the physical, social, economic, cultural-religious, and political aspects that he considers to be of importance), and that influence in or control of government (i.e. state) power is an effective tool for carrying out such an alteration. That is, a person, and here we are dealing specifically with the peasant, must acquire both a belief in man's potential for changing his environment and his place in that environment, and a belief in the importance of political power in realizing that potential.

Numerous channels provide the peasant with the beliefs on which political consciousness is based. It is perhaps paradoxical that economic development may stimulate political consciousness where previously it was absent. Economic development, at least

in the present century, usually involves an intensification of contacts with the supra-village world, which is the source of new seeds, livestock, crops, technology, capital, consumer goods, markets for the agricultural surplus, literacy, etc. Above all, from the political standpoint, economic development, whether fostered by the villagers themselves or actively encouraged by outside agencies, breaks down the parochialism and traditionalism of the peasant. No longer is he the unquestioning prisoner of a given socio-economic and cultural order, with each person in his appropriate station. Economic development gives opportunities for social and economic mobility; it throws into question traditional mores and values; and it demonstrates at first hand that a man's place in society and even society itself are not unchangeably fixed. Once the possibility of change is accepted, the peasant will then often ponder sources of change other than the directly economic and come to realize the overriding significance of political power.

Schools may be a source of the beliefs, knowledge or literacy on which political consciousness is based. It must be pointed out, however, that many schools in peasant areas have a minimal effect as their teachers are semi-literate, their classes crowded, their teaching aids rudimentary, and the duration of their instruction only one or two years, after which the young peasant lapses to the vaguest hold on literacy, and, anyway, cannot afford or understand newspapers, let alone books or journals. Radios, newspapers, movies, ballad singers and puppeteers are obvious sources of political information and beliefs. Equally obvious are the efforts at political education carried out by certain governments and political parties. Information is also spread by non-political organizations, social, cultural, religious, ethnic, agricultural and recreational, many of which are in fact organized by political parties for political purposes. Important radiators of political information and beliefs are to be found in the non-peasant rural population: traders, government officials (health, agricultural, irrigation, administrative and educational), and the like, who by their nature have greater knowledge of and contact with the world outside the particular rural community in which they are living.

The belief in the effectiveness of political power is also gathered by the peasants from their own, their relatives' or their neighbours' experience of life outside the rural community. Rural people travel to markets, some migrate to towns or to other rural

areas and send back news and perceptions, and some move out of the village temporarily to perform seasonal labor. In this way many peasants gain a knowledge of the outside world, of man's potential for changing his condition, of the power of government.

As the peasant comes to believe from his own example or from the example of others that man is able to alter the conditions of his existence, he begins to seek means to effect, prevent or control change. Then, if he advances to a realization of the efficacy of political power in achieving and controlling change, he has attained full political consciousness.

3. *Political Action*.—As we have said, fairly substantial numbers of peasants have achieved political consciousness. Relatively few, however, have made what appears to be the most difficult transition in the politicization process, the transition to political action. Here it must be noted that I am referring to political action based on political consciousness, and performed in the pursuit of interests that the peasants conceive to be their own. This qualification is necessary in order to exclude peasant action which is political in nature but is the result of coercion by others. For example, peasant voting under landlord control, enforced peasant membership in warlord armies, or terror-based peasant collection of military intelligence for guerrillas or government troops may well give rise to political consciousness among the peasants involved, but they are not political *action* within the context of the politicization process as it involves the peasantry.

Peasant action is built upon political consciousness but further implies a belief that the person involved can himself have an effect on the political process. Just as there are stages of political consciousness, so are there of political action. The lower stage might be called "subject" action, the higher "participant". Subject action takes the form of requesting decisions from established political authorities—requests from an individual, a group, an entire village, or even a number of neighbouring villages. Participant action, with which this essay is more concerned, is participation in the decision-making process of the state, or efforts to achieve such participation; it may vary from simple voting, to active membership in a political party, to guerrilla warfare. Participant action implies a consciousness of belonging to a group that far transcends the boundaries of a particular community, and, at least in its higher stages, a knowledge of how to organize for political action



in the supra-village sphere. Otherwise an individual peasant who conceived of himself or his village as a discreet entity would be immobilized by the enormity of the task of gaining participation in the political process at the state level. Group feeling may exist within a given village—as consciousness of belonging to a particular ethnic or religious group or the village community— but will not be transformed into political action until the group feeling is extended to embrace a number of people sufficient to make political action seem feasible beyond the community level.

What are the sources of group consciousness and organizational knowledge that are available to the peasant? The richer peasants, with greater access to education, mass media, and the outside world in general, are likely to acquire both group consciousness and, with greater difficulty, organizational skill with little effort from outside agencies, just as they are likely to be first among the peasantry to achieve political consciousness. The poorer peasants may acquire extended group consciousness and organizational knowledge themselves, from experiences in seasonal labor, or from relatives and acquaintances in the towns but they usually require the specific help of outside agents and agencies. That is, the poorer peasants need the assistance of outside agents in order to make the transition to political action. Who are these agents? The most obvious are the political forces which seek to use the peasants as a political tool, either in order to help the peasant, or to exploit his ignorance for ulterior purposes. These external political forces may operate among the peasantry as political parties, mass organizations, politically interested individuals, ethnic and religious associations, and the controllers of mass media and rural cultural workers. They seek to provide a sense of group membership (in a class, a religious fraternity, an ethnic group, a national group, etc), and also to provide the organizational framework and the organizational training with which the individual may pursue his perceived individual interests through the promotion of the group with which the individual comes to identify.

Most national governments in the underdeveloped countries seek to instill group consciousness among their peasants, and to provide an organizational framework for peasant participation in national politics. A democratically-oriented government, of which the Indian may be an example, attempts to inculcate a feeling of nationality among its people, to extend knowledge of and participation in the political process, to allow the free competition of

a diversity of organizations fostering social, religious, economic, cultural and more directly political group consciousness, and to provide an electoral system that permits the many emergent groups to share in the formulation of government policies. A government aspiring to totalitarianism will likewise attempt to inculcate a sense of nationality, but will strive to enmesh its population in a series of organizations and electoral processes that enforce political participation, albeit of a strictly controlled and at times illusory nature. The great majority of national governments are found between the two models but almost if not all are pursuing policies that impel the peasantry toward political consciousness and political action.

The highest stage of politicization is political action. But is it possible in a particular case to understand why that action pursues certain goals and not others? And can one predict what form political action will take, or understand why a certain form is being taken? Given the limit of this essay I wish only to suggest an approach to the answers.

An examination of the conflict potential in a given society indicates the potential objectives of political action: land ownership for the land hungry, reduced interest rates for the debtors, increased central government action in the realm of social welfare, emancipation of women, removal of intolerable government exactions, a peaceful life, etc. The actual choice of objectives is governed by two factors: perceptions and means. In the process of becoming politically conscious and politically active an individual acquires a way of perceiving society and his place in it, and it is the nature of this perception which helps determine the objectives of political action. To illustrate: two Punjabi landless laborers suffer equal exploitation and occupy an equally low social status; the first acquires politicization largely through the efforts of the Communist Party, the other through those of a militant Hindu party. The first is likely to seek either a complete overhaul of his society, or at least a significant reduction in the degree of economic exploitation and caste discrimination; the second may concentrate his political efforts exclusively toward the revival of Hindu values as perceived by his party's leaders.

The goals of political action are not determined exclusively, however, by the perception of interests. Goals are also influenced by the nature of the channels open to action. Again, illustrations

may make this point more clear. A peasant may consider it in his interest that land reform be effected, but he does not pursue this goal, at least directly, because the presently-entrenched power of the landlords and their allies makes such pursuit impossible or too dangerous; he therefore works for an amelioration of conditions of labor and sharecropping within the existing land structure. Another peasant, living in an atmosphere of democratic political competition and compromise, may also seek relatively limited goals in the belief that gradual change is both possible and preferable. Yet another peasant, facing the implacable opposition to change of the landlords and central government, may use favourable terrain and vegetation cover for guerrilla warfare which, once begun, encourages the pursuit of widely ranging and fundamental alterations in society.

The form of political action taken by the peasantry is determined by three main groups of factors: the sources of belief and information on which that action is based, the nature of the channels for action that are available, and the intensity with which perceived interests are held. The meaning of this statement should by now be apparent. A peasant politicized by a Communist Party will pursue his goals in ways quite different from one who has been politicized largely by, for example, the Indian Congress Party. Similarly, if an existing political system affords adequate opportunities for the pursuit of interests, then the peasant is likely to work within that system. On the other hand, where a central government refuses to adapt itself to the participation of the peasantry in the political process, then the peasant is likely to partake of "subject" actions or move into militant opposition. Finally, the form of political action is in part determined by the intensity with which perceived interests are held, which in turn is related to the objective conditions of peasant society and the nature of the peasant's perception of his society.

### CONCLUSIONS

Peasant societies embrace the great majority of the population of the underdeveloped countries. Each of these societies contains political conflict potential not only because no society is completely egalitarian in all its aspects, but also because even if there were such a society some members would be dissatisfied with it. Furthermore, as present societies are linked to larger regional, national and, ultimately, international societies, the possibility is al-

ways present for what might be termed inter-societal conflict and tension. The actual degree of conflict potential is determined by the interplay of a multiplicity of factors to be found both within and outside the peasant communities. The degree and nature of conflict potential in any community is rarely static for that would require a society completely static in terms of its economic, socio-cultural and political structure and content, its ratio of population to available production, and the nature of its contact with the world outside the community.

Despite the ubiquitousness of potential conflict, the world's peasants are strung out along the politicization continuum. A few are still politically nescient but it is now virtually impossible for a peasant to be completely unaware of the influence political power may exert upon the conditions of his life. At different rates of speed, though with an overall acceleration, the peasants' traditional, unquestioned and narrow world is being impinged upon by forces from outside. Consequently the peasantry is being impelled along the politicization continuum through unquestioning political acquiescence on to the various stages of political consciousness and finally to political action. As we have seen, there may be halts or even retreats in the process, but the general trend is forward.

Finally, an understanding of the politically relevant aspects of a given peasant society and of the nature, in the broadest sense, of the politicization process at work within that society, should make it possible to predict with at least general accuracy the speed of politicization and the direction and nature of the ultimate political action.