

Editorial Foreword

HOW PEASANTS REBEL. In much of the modern world, efficient administrators have seen their policies eroded by peasant recalcitrance. Revolutionaries, dictators, and liberals have thus had similar disappointments to explain; and they have similarly leaned heavily on (and thus amplified) the available lore that knows peasants to be stubborn, stingy, and short-sighted. Current scholarship, as the authors here note, is more inclined to credit peasants with making conscious choices and to focus on how they take the positions they do, why they take them, and the means by which peasants are mobilized. James Scott argues that the very conception of peasant resistance must be expanded to include such purposeful and seemingly individual acts as desertion and consistent law-breaking. It is, he recognizes, a delicate point; but he shows its force by comparing resistance in modern Malaysia and Old-Regime France to the taxes-in-kind sanctioned by religion. Their very differences make the critical similarities in these cases striking, for Scott argues that what at first seems merely individual fraud is in fact systematic, socially supported, rooted in concepts of justice—and so effective that it must be seen not simply as peasant penuriousness but as a form of resistance that affects the society around it and alters the political system (compare Azarya and Chazan on the concept of withdrawal in *CSSH* 29:1, and Wasserstrom on nonrevolutionary peasants, in 17:4). Marjorie Becker makes a related point in a quite different instance. The revolutionary reformers of Mexico in the 1930s, amazed by the opposition of the peasants in whose interests they claimed to be acting, sought to strike at the reactionary influences they believed to be responsible. Instead, they pushed those peasants to a statement that becomes the core of Becker's sensitive discussion. It reveals, she says, an explicit ideology (something Taussig also discovered, 19:1) and a sense of tactics that led the Cardenistas to retreat once they realized the campesinos were not such a threat to the national political system after all. The result was one of the critical compromises of Mexican politics (and one supported by a long tradition, see Tardanico, 24:3, and Van Young, 28:3).

Underlying all such arguments is the conception of a peasant community, and that is the issue (discussed by Rambo, 19:2, and Skinner, 13:3) on which Douglas Kincaid structures his study of three peasant rebellions in El Salvador (note Smith, 26:2, and Wasserstrom, 17:4, on Guatemala; Eckstein on Bolivia, 25:1, and on Cuba, 28:3; Winson on capitalist agriculture in Latin America, 25:1). Somewhere between violent revolt and steadfast resistance stands the grain riot, the classic peasant rebellion of European historiography, and one which historians often use as a critical test of theories of preindustrial popular political action. This European literature provides a comparative framework for John Rogers' study of grain riots in Sri Lanka, which he finds

to be distinct from both those of Europe and of China. Despite different traditions of state intervention and different ties to changing markets, the riots of Sri Lanka nevertheless do involve familiar beliefs in a just price and social responsibility. Whether the crucial crop was European wheat, Sri Lankan rice, or Guatemalan indigo, coffee, or cotton, the mobilized peasants (on how peasants are mobilized, see Adas, 23:2; Freitag, 22:4; Traugott, 21:3; Singelmann, 17:4; and Waterbury, 17:4) have responded to crisis by invoking communal values.

LAND AND LAW. The use of feudalism as a category for comparative study has a tortured history, but Michael Saltman's deft avoidance of common pitfalls can serve as a useful model. He does not seek to establish an ideal type (accompanied by inevitable apologies that somehow always sound the same). Rather, he compares the relationship between historical practice and legal reasoning during a major transition in modern Uganda and in medieval England. The daring comparison unfolds through an argument as careful as a legal brief. While narrowing what must be established as comparable, it opens broad questions about how legal systems embody traditional cultures yet stimulate change (questions also addressed by Dirks, 28:2; Kumar, 27:2; and Herring, 21:4). Wealth may be ephemeral, as all moralists insist, but land is not. There is thus an urge to see the rules for its possession as permanent, a tendency raised to principle in English law. In another Anglo-Saxon colony, on the other side of the world, the rule of law and the desire to protect native culture combined to make tradition a legal fiction. Henry Rutz observes, however, that when ethnic conflicts and market relations became important in the Fiji Islands, the result was a series of those ironies so appealing to historians and so painful for participants. In this instance, they produced not so much the resistance Scott writes about as a pattern of complaint expressing the local sense of reciprocity.

THINKING ABOUT HISTORY. Discussions of history cannot escape the implanted double meaning: History refers to the grand significance of events and people marching through time, and history is the name for the study of any part of the past. That double meaning, which often befogs discussions of the modern discipline, is used by Nancy Farriss to unlock a part of Mayan thought in a finely wrought exposition. A culture's understanding of time determines much of how it uses history (compare Movahedi, 27:3; Rigby, 25:3; Wylie, 24:3; Marcus, 3:2), and the review essays in this section reflect on that use by considering competing histories of European expansion, historically conditioned philosophies of history, the contributions of sociology, and some loudly fought current British controversies. One could also wonder why the authors of the most important works on historical thinking are so frequently not historians.