

## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### JAPANESE PEASANT PROTESTS AND REVOLTS IN COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE\*

BIX, HERBERT P. *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884*. Yale University Press, New Haven, London 1986. xxxix, 296 pp. Maps. \$ 45.00.

KELLY, WILLIAM W. *Deference and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (N.J.) 1985. xvi, 322 pp. Ill. Maps. \$ 33.50.

VLASTOS, STEPHEN. *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1986. xii, 184 pp. Maps. \$ 25.00; £ 17.35.

WALTHALL, ANNE. *Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan*. Publ. for the Association for Asian Studies by The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1986. xviii, 268 pp. \$ 19.95.

The central contribution of the above recent books is both very negative and very important. They dispel any lingering notion about the Japanese peasants' willing and peaceable acceptance of authority and hierarchy under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) and on into the early years of the Meiji Restoration. It is important because it entails a sharp revision of a widespread image of Japanese society that has influenced social theories and political judgments held in the West for many years. Whatever harmonious acceptance of authority may exist in Japan today obviously has behind it, in many areas, a bloody past.

Now that these four studies and a few others<sup>1</sup> are available, it seems rather odd that intensive studies of Japanese peasant protests did not

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<sup>1</sup> Most notably Roger W. Bowen, *Rebellion and Democracy in Meiji Japan: A Study of Commoners in the Popular Rights Movement* (Berkeley, 1980).

appear at least a generation ago. After all, Hugh Borton's book first appeared in 1938.<sup>2</sup> As a preliminary collection of the evidence, it stands up rather well on a recent re-reading, but his brief, sensible interpretations are certainly superseded by those in the new monographs under review here. There are, however, several thought-provoking passages on Japanese rural life and peasant uprisings worth re-reading in Sir George Sansom's deservedly celebrated *A History of Japan 1615-1867*, of which the third and final volume appeared in 1963.<sup>3</sup> The same year saw the appearance of W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, in which there are several if brief references to peasant revolts.<sup>4</sup> From these older writings it is clear that Western scholars knew about peasant revolts and were not totally unaware of the oppressive aspects of both the Tokugawa regime and its replacement, the Meiji Imperial restoration. What then is the reason for the scholarly silence that lasted almost half a century since the appearance of Borton's little book? The answers to this question are worth exploring briefly since they have a considerable impact on the way one perceives and evaluates the new studies reviewed here.

Some of our authors point out that Japanese scholars could not and did not investigate peasant revolt for political reasons until 1945, after which they apparently went to work with more enthusiasm than judgment, at least at first. For the absence of Western studies on Japanese rural revolts these authors are inclined to stress the preoccupation of Western intellectuals with social harmony, not conflict. This judgment seems to me reasonably true but quite insufficient. Down to the latter sixties leftist scholarship concentrated on urban working-class movements, after which period peasant revolutions became a bit of a fad. But Japanese peasants, however, never even considered the mouth-filling task of making a national, let alone a "world-historical" revolution. Nobody did in Japan. For that reason it may be that Western studies have focused on the way a traditional elite managed to flout the hopes and wishes of large segments of its citizens and for patriotic-military reasons bring Japan into the world of modern industry. That is an exciting story, which, I submit, reveals more about Japan than any number of monographs on peasant protests. At any rate the elite's behavior had much greater political consequences. But it is important to emphasize that we need both, for otherwise we would succumb to the delusions of victors' history.

These four books present of course histories of the defeated. They also

<sup>2</sup> *Peasant Uprisings in Japan of the Tokugawa Period*, Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, 2nd Series, Vol. 16 (1938). Reprinted by Paragon Book Reprint Corp. (New York, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> *A History of Japan 1615-1867*, Vol. 3 (Stanford, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan* (London, 1963), pp. 20, 25-27, 32, 34, 125.

belong to the genre of “history from the bottom up”. All four authors display the engaging enthusiasm of researchers in a new and little trodden field. With some differences of course their histories converge into a single account whose main features I shall now try to present in a somewhat summary fashion. Having this material before us should make comprehensible the relatively brief comments on individual authors that follow this account. It is also intended as a basis for the discussion of the general meaning and relevance of these studies, not only for Japanese social history but also, albeit briefly, for other forms of inquiry.

The victory of one contestant in a long period of internal wars led to the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate, bringing peace and order based on a strictly enforced social hierarchy which in practice kept the peasants in their place at the bottom (though official theory put “productive” peasants above supposedly unproductive merchants and traders). The closing of Japan to outside influences was an important part of the policy of social stability. All this happened quite rapidly, and, by the early years of the seventeenth century, the Shogunate had established itself firmly, leaving the Emperor with an innocuous ceremonial role.

Some specialists on Japan, including Bix and Vlastos, describe the Shogunate as feudal. The label is misleading, I believe. The Shogunate was really a form of royal absolutism that existed not only in Europe but also at about the same time in India and China, where it began much earlier and lasted longer. Indeed, one parallel between French royal absolutism and the Tokugawa Shoguns is quite striking and important. Louis XIV forced an important segment of the French nobility to reside at Versailles where he could keep an eye on them, as they lived in enforced idleness mitigated by a conspicuous consumption that drained the country’s resources. Similarly the Shoguns compelled the lords of the fiefs to spend a large part of each year in attendance at his court in his capital, Edo. Attendance required expensive magnificence, whose cost the lords extracted from their peasants in the form of tribute. There was, however, one important difference. The French king’s policy of magnificence included wars, which were very expensive and not very victorious. As already mentioned, the Shoguns had at the start adopted a policy of seclusion and avoidance of contact with foreign countries, so war was precluded. By so doing they found themselves with an unemployed warrior class, the samurai. This unemployment, however, does not appear to have created serious social disruption as the samurai were given other tasks and duties, as minor administrators, farmers, sword fashioners, etc. Thus it seems within the realm of possibilities that the longer “shelf-life” of the Japanese variant of royal absolutism may have been due to its policy of peace and seclusion.

With these preliminary remarks on the Shogunate I will say no more about the label “feudalism”. As Pareto has remarked, the label on the

bottle is far less important than the contents. All the authors discussed here present a great deal of information about the structure of Japanese society and how its institutions worked. The labels attached to these facts are of limited importance.

The main point to notice is that in Japan peace and order, maintained over three centuries with a substantial dose of oppression, slowly undermined this form of royal absolutism by the creation of conditions favorable to trade and industry at the level of the artisan's shop. Increasing affluence is generally troubling to an aristocracy based on military honor or sacerdotal virtue, because sooner or later money will generally buy the perquisites of aristocracy, to the dismay and demoralization of those upper-class individuals who feel that cash has come to undercut and replace their ethical claim to distinction.

In the Japanese case there is some debate about the importance and dating of the undermining of military virtue by trade and artisanal production. In explicit reaction against earlier interpretations William W. Kelly denies any necessary contradictions between merchant and overlord. He characterizes the Shogunate of the mid-17th century with the vivid expression of "this nexus of the sword and the abacus" and Tokugawa society through the mid-1800s as an "interlocking mercantile economy and tributary polity".<sup>5</sup> Kelly is certainly correct in drawing attention to the attempts of both groups – military rulers and merchants – to reach an accommodation, attempts that were also prominent in West European absolutism. But in Japan as in Europe a very large number of individuals in the dominant classes and certainly in the central government found themselves painfully in debt and chronically short of funds, whether rice or cash. In Japan, a closed society, the main way for the dominant classes to meet this situation was to tighten the squeeze on the peasantry.

Peasant grievances and armed resistance to authority existed before the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate. During the sixteenth century Anne Walthall tells us, the peasants in many parts of Japan were "aggressively hostile to authority". Winning control over them was no light task. After the Sword Hunting Edict of 1588 it took the rulers over thirty years to disarm most of the peasants.<sup>6</sup> It was only after an especially militant peasant rebellion in 1637-38 (led by a Christian convert) that the government broke off all foreign relations except with China and Korea, as Stephen Vlastos indicates.<sup>7</sup> Such evidence suggests that the establishment of the Shogunate was rather more than an end to feuding within the aristocracy. It was also a way to control a turbulent and dangerous peasantry.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, *Deference and Defiance*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Walthall, pp. xiii-xiv; Bix, *Peasant Protest*, p. xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Vlastos, p. 8.

The Shogunate does appear to have put an end to open peasant rebellion between 1640 and 1720, after which intermittent revolts began once more. But even during this eighty-year period grievances were common and severe enough to generate violence short of revolt, in the form of riots, forceful appeals to authority, and desertion of the village in search of a less oppressive lord. Herbert P. Bix reproduces a useful chart, worked out by Yokoyama Toshio, which shows graphically how the forms of peasant protests changed over the period 1590 to 1871.<sup>8</sup> Outbreaks increased in number and intensity during the last half of the eighteenth century and continued to intensify up to and after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. In the changed form of intermittently violent conflicts between landlord and tenants the rural struggle lasted well into the 1920s.

This brief chronology of peasant protests suggests two somewhat contradictory observations. In the first place the existence of revolts as early as the sixteenth century and until 1638 under the Shogunate shows that for Japan one has to reject the notion of an original peaceful peasant society whose social bonds between overlord and peasants dissolved under the corroding influence of commerce and the market. One wonders if there were any such bonds to corrode! On the other hand, it is quite clear from the books reviewed here that the level of discontent finding its expression in violence began to rise sharply after, say, 1765, when the level of available affluence was also rising rapidly. Some of this affluence was even available to some peasants, according to the fears of the Shogunate, which tried to restore agriculture by passing sumptuary legislation. Only an analysis of peasant grievances in their social and historical context can explain this apparent paradox.

The major grievance arose from the extraction of an economic surplus from the peasant mass of the population in the form of a tribute paid in rice, later commuted to cash. The lord of the fief collected this tribute through his agent or agents in the village. The main local agent was the headman who allocated the tribute for the village as a whole among its members. Presumably the lord passed part of the tribute to the Shogun's government in Edo.<sup>9</sup> From the peasant's point of view, "what the lord took, the peasant lost". The lord was an absentee who played no role in the agricultural cycle. Thus, as Vlastos acutely observes, there was for the peasant neither an emotional bond to the overlord in a paternalist relationship nor a depend-

<sup>8</sup> Bix, pp. xviii-xxv, esp. Table 2 on p. xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Sansom, *History of Japan*, Vol. III, p. 143, mentions that the Shogunate obtained money from taxation (which, following Bix, I have also called tribute). Borton's discussion in *Peasant Uprisings*, pp. 4-5 mentions how the tax or rice collection was conducted, mainly through salaried officials (*daikan*), who also forwarded the taxes to Edo, where the Imperial Household was entitled to about one-fifth of the entire taxes collected.

ent one as in those forms of sharecropping where the landlord makes a visibly indispensable contribution to farming with seed, fertilizer, farming implements, and the like.<sup>10</sup> When one adds the hostile and contemptuous attitude of the dominant classes toward peasants, the whole situation looks explosive, to the point where it seems strange that most peasants did not revolt most of the time. The first Shogun is often quoted as saying that the rulers should take so much rice away from the peasants in tribute that the peasants could neither live nor die.

At this point, however, we begin to glimpse one of the elements that limited the severity of the system. The rulers had no desire to exterminate the peasants even if they could. They knew perfectly well that they depended on what the peasants produced for their own way of life, including its amenities and luxuries. The peasants had to be allowed to live and produce. In a system of small peasant farms (with some rich but more poor) that meant that there must be a floor under the small peasant's economy. "Surplus exploitation" and excessive cruelty could drive the small peasant out of existence and destroy the whole system. A great deal of such thinking may have ended up as self-serving rhetoric. But on several occasions the Shogun's government intervened in a fief with agrarian unrest and a reputation for undue exploitation. The lord of such a fief might find himself transferred to a much less attractive fief or even without a post.

Even if samurai talk about preserving small-peasant property was partly rhetoric, it coincided with deep peasant aspirations. Peasant ideas about justice usually include the grant and possession of enough property to carry out the role of peasant as that role is defined in an historically determined tradition. In their petitions to overlords for reductions in the tribute, Japanese peasants frequently asserted that they needed this minimum in order to live and keep on paying tribute. For a long time this was the only form of petition permitted. (For an illegal petition one might be executed.) The emphasis on samurai self-interest hints that the Japanese peasants in their petitions, usually couched in formal deferential language, may have had their tongue toward their cheek. Most people at the bottom of the heap do, a large part of the time. That is hardly crucial. The important point is that agrarian institutions which created such a high potential for violence simultaneously created one area where material interests and ethical beliefs converged.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Vlastos, pp. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> For peasant conceptions of justice in many parts of the world see James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976), pp. 176-192. Where Scott emphasizes a right to subsistence, I prefer to emphasize a right to enough material goods to carry out a "socially necessary" task, as defined in a specific society. Since Scott stresses that the right to subsistence undergoes historical change, our difference is small. The rest of my discussion is based to a great extent on Walthall's extensive analysis of peasant

Another factor that softened the clash between peasants and rulers was also a straightforward economic one. Due to a steady and quite remarkable increase in agricultural productivity, due in no small measure to the establishment of peace and order, the proportion of the crop taken in tribute declined. This happened because the amount of the tribute was based on a cadastral survey that estimated the quantity and quality of rice each plot of land could be expected to produce. On that basis the authorities calculated a rate of tribute that would leave the peasants just enough to live on. The first cadastral surveys in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries apparently increased the government's take from the peasants, something the surveys were no doubt intended to do. That was true, although productivity had begun to rise as early as 1550. In the seventeenth century the formal rate of tribute may have been fairly close to what the peasant had to pay.

In most fiefs the rates of tribute ranged from 40 to 60 percent, while in one instance a fief got into trouble with the Shogunate for trying to extract 70 percent.<sup>12</sup> Though at first the cadastral survey probably helped to increase the rate at which tribute could be levied, under conditions of rising productivity the system has a built-in bias against the recipient and in favor of those who pay it.<sup>13</sup> Cadastral surveys inevitably get out of date as productivity rises. A peasant may pay, say, five bushels of rice for one year and find the tribute exorbitant. But in a few years five bushels may be a noticeably smaller proportion of the crop. In addition, new land may be brought under cultivation, to be assessed at a lower rate and kept at that rate for years, or escape assessment altogether.

This decline in the rate of tribute appears to be a well attested fact of Japanese history. Even Bix, who paints the life of the peasants in noticeably darker hues than the other authors, accepts it as a fact.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the changing system of tribute certainly did not affect all peasants equally and favorably all the time. In the first place, a cadastral survey helped a lord who needed rice-money to insist on the payment of tribute even when the harvest had been disastrous. There are several cases in these books of lords

petitions and their notions of justice (chapters 3 and 4) and on Vlastos's treatment of benevolence by those on top (esp. pp. 15-18), views which are very close to Scott's, which he rejects (pp. 155-156).

<sup>12</sup> Vlastos, p. 28; Bix, pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Until the end of the seventeenth century the authorities used an on-site system of assessing the tribute rate. An on-site system can be very effective in extracting a surplus, as was apparently the case in old Japan. But, if kept up to date, it is expensive to run and carries a risk of upsetting tribute payers and shaking up social stability. At the end of the seventeenth century the authorities switched to a fixed-rate system, according to Vlastos, p. 29, n. 13 and Walthall, p. 8, where she describes the introduction of the fixed-rate system as part of the *Kyōhō* reforms (1716-1736) or rather later than Vlastos.

<sup>14</sup> Bix, p. 13.

insisting on tribute or even increasing it in a period of hard times, thereby provoking the peasants. In the second place, it is not easy to ascertain which peasants gained and by how much. Since the gains went to property, it is obvious that very poor peasants would gain very little if at all. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century this segment of the population seems to have increased anyway from other causes, such as population increase and the workings of the market that forced marginal peasants into debt and even off the land. On the basis of what we know about rural modernization elsewhere it seems highly likely that the lion's share of the gains from increasing productivity went to the top stratum of well-to-do peasants.

The agrarian situation as a whole was by the 1720s developing in precisely the direction the Shogunate did not want. Well-to-do peasants were prospering, with the risk that they might become less deferential. Poor peasants were increasing, posing an obvious risk to social stability. And worst of all the rulers realized that their own revenues were falling behind.<sup>15</sup>

Another set of peasant grievances arose out of the increasing importance of the market, also a product of peace and order. Its effects were complex and contradictory. According to the doctrines of the rulers, peasants were supposed to stay peasants and not become traders. Nevertheless the books under review carry numerous accounts of peasants engaging in trade and in the work of artisans. Fine paper-making for official use was one of these. Evidently trade could provide a margin of safety for their politically enforced subsistence economy. The peasants' main grievance about trade from about the mid-eighteenth century onward was that they could not get enough of it. They objected to the government's efforts to control and bleed trade by the grant (for cash) of trading privileges and monopolies.<sup>16</sup> Peasants became free traders in a way that recalls Adam Smith. Thus the advent of the market was by no means always the corrosive solvent of rural society and the source of its impoverishment, a view which was for a long time thought to be the case, not only in Japan but almost everywhere.

Nevertheless there certainly is a dark side to the advent of market relationships. When the demand for a certain product – silk in the case of Japan – falls off for any reason, reduced wages or zero income can produce intense suffering. Vlastos refers to a major peasant outbreak of 1866 as a “market-induced ‘crisis of subsistence’”, which he describes vividly, with an acute account of its social background.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noticing, however, that market-induced crises of subsistence will not always and everywhere generate an uprising or even milder forms of social disorder. Such crises were widespread in some newly industrializing areas of England in the 1830s. Yet there was no social disorder. Instead, according to a contemporary account,

<sup>15</sup> Walthall, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Vlastos, p. 76; Walthall, pp. 72-75.

<sup>17</sup> Vlastos, p. 157.

the predominant response was stoic despair. A good many of the factory operatives understood that their mills produced for export and that if orders ceased to come in, there was nothing the mill owner could do about it, at least not in the short run.

In Japan, in addition to tribute or taxes, and the painful effects of the market, the third major grievance was against the arbitrary and corrupt aspects of samurai rule. The studies reviewed here give the impression that from the beginning the lords of the fiefs were often arbitrary and unfeeling, perhaps because they had very little or no direct contact with their peasant subjects but only a limited one through the village headman. He was in the unenviable position of being a middleman between the peasants and the lord, though it was a position that in time also enabled him to line his sleeves. Corruption among officials, on the other hand, did not become a serious matter for the peasantry until relatively late, appearing in official records first in 1764, after which date it became rampant as a peasant complaint.<sup>18</sup> Evidently corruption was part of the spread of market relationships which enabled a few peasants to become richer, while a great many more became poorer and increasingly resentful. One of the main responses of the poor peasants was to try to force the headman to give a public accounting of village revenues and expenses. This, however, was the mildest of their reactions, outrageous though it seemed to some Japanese. There was at times something resembling a class war within the peasantry in the later years of the Shogunate with numerous attacks on the headmen and on rich peasants, yoked together in peasant minds as partners in embezzlement. Vlastos tells us that the intensity of conflict within the peasant class was a striking feature of the Tokugawa's late years, with violent actions occurring most frequently between 1866 and 1869.<sup>19</sup>

There are indications that the traditional organization of the village had broken down by the late Tokugawa rule under the pressure of commercialization. The earlier structure of the village was a hierarchy of main and branch families, based on age and descent. The main families were the older and wealthier ones, who by and large ran village affairs. At the same time they were expected to display a patriarchal benevolence toward branch families. If the head of a branch family could not pay his share of the village's tribute to the overlord, the main family paid it for him. (Sometimes it was the village headman who paid the delinquent's share, also out of his own resources.) The branch family head could keep the land, in order to work it so that he could pay off the debt. In time high status in the village came to be based on wealth alone. Patriarchal benevolence disappeared. Peasants lost their land to members of the village elite who found that they could make more money by renting it out to tenants. What many peasants

<sup>18</sup> Bix, pp. 140-141.

<sup>19</sup> Vlastos, p. 159.

saw was a new “world of merciless rulers and avaricious village elites who would not give them the aid they needed”,<sup>20</sup>

How did the peasants see their own situation under the rule of the Shogun and lords of the fiefs? What did they regard as the causes of their misfortunes? Did they make moral judgments about these causes? What remedy did they see or try to put into effect? The literature on Japanese peasant protest is very rich in answers to such questions. My impression is that the literature on Japan is somewhat superior to that on peasant mentalities in the West, where the evidence is frequently exiguous and scholars have only recently become interested in it. Indeed the Japanese evidence is so rich that it is impossible even in a long review essay to do more than select some important themes.

It will be useful to start with the most violent forms of behavior which peasants used as remedies for their plight and then work backward toward subversive ideas. Japanese historians, according to Bix, have recently arrived at a total of some 3000 outbreaks of violence against authority between 1590 and 1871, a period which includes three tumultuous years following the Meiji restoration. In Japanese these outbreaks are known as *ikki*, a term applied to petitions backed with violence, riots, and house-smashing. Originally, according to Walthall, *ikki* meant a “group united to achieve a common purpose”, such as the achievement of justice by Kamakura officials in the 12th century. It did not become a term widely used among or about peasants until the sixteenth century. Under the Shogunate it acquired among the peasants two connotations. First, the (now subversive) gathering together was by the will of gods, not of men. Thus men could in theory escape responsibility for their actions, though in practice, so far as I have noticed, they never did. Secondly, men united under the will of the gods attained a certain kind of equality. Although status distinctions in the real world continued to exist, they were unimportant in the *ikki*.<sup>21</sup>

At least some of the time the *ikki* manifested a high degree of solidarity and self-discipline, as Bix makes clear.<sup>22</sup> But on some occasions after peasants had been given *sake* by frightened individuals who wanted to be spared or after they had on their own broken into a cask or two, group solidarity and discipline evaporated. Indiscriminate looting and sometimes physical attacks on victims might ensue. Efforts to spread the solidarity of the *ikki* and compel other peasants to join the uprising are of course understandable. Modern trade unions behave in the same way during a

<sup>20</sup> Hashimoto Mitsuru, “The Social Background of Peasant Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan”, in Tetsuo Najita and J. Victor Koschmann (eds), *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: The Neglected Tradition* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 145-163; quotation on p. 145. The description by peasants of earlier times is suspiciously idyllic. But it is quite likely that later troubled peasants saw the past that way.

<sup>21</sup> Walthall, pp. 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Pp. 143-144.

strike. As an *ikki* spread, there were often fierce attacks on those who refused to join up. This form of revolutionary bullying is no more pleasant to behold than any other, even if it may be inevitable. The violence of the oppressed is not to be equated with the violence of the oppressor. Nevertheless it is still violence, with anti-social consequences.

Later there will be an opportunity to discuss the effectiveness of peasant violence and protest. Here I want to mention the lord's response to violent protest. Clearly the expectation of the government in Edo was that there should not be violence, because it could be a sign of undue and dangerous harshness toward the peasants and therefore a threat to peace and order. If there were violence, the expectation was that it be put down quickly. A few armed soldiers were often very effective against unarmed peasants. Then the lord might execute some of the leaders, after which he would make a few secondary concessions to the peasants' demands. Though *ikki* were always put down, their number steadily increased until the end of the Shogunate and on into the Meiji regime.

There was a strong moral and personal component in these outbreaks, as well as in non-violent protests. This was true on both sides. Samurai would blame the troubles on bad peasants, and the peasants would blame them on a bad lord. With the advance of commercialization the peasants did develop a new ideology called *yonaoshi* or world renewal, which appeared about 1860. *Yonaoshi* anticipated a "world cleansed of evil and renewed for further growth".<sup>23</sup> Peasant behavior seems to have been very much the same as in an *ikki*. The most noticeable difference is that in a *yonaoshi* outbreak the peasants "became obsessed with the idea of inflicting punitive justice against their immediate oppressors", destroying their property and possessions.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it was a rather violent form of utopianism. Unlike European anarchism of the nineteenth century or contemporary terrorism its ostensible main target seems to have been ill-gotten property rather than persons.

A third form of violence came from illegal petitions backed up by force. Most petitions, it appears, were illegal and carried the death penalty for their presentation. The accounts of the turmoil in the last years of the Shogunate give the impression that this rule had ceased to be enforced. All three forms of violent protest shaded into each other. They also shaded into peaceful and legal forms of protest, since these could erupt in violence at any time.

Before turning to more peaceful forms of protest it will be well to issue a warning. All the books reviewed here give the impression (which may not be intended) that Japan was seething with peasant revolt from about the

<sup>23</sup> Bix, pp. 144, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Bix, p. 147.

middle of the eighteenth century. The impression comes naturally enough from reading so many detailed accounts of peasant uprisings, which are of course the subject matter of the books, but it is distinctly a mistake. Looking carefully at the accounts of uprisings one can see that the outbreaks were usually confined to one area and that at any one moment the overwhelming majority of the peasantry did not revolt. This fact is not altogether surprising when one recollects that in the major European revolutions from the seventeenth century down through the Bolshevik Revolution the vast majority of the population just sat on their hands. Apparently local conditions determined the degree of violent peasant behavior and the kinds of peasant demands. Before the beginnings of modern communication and travel by rail in the early years of the Meiji regime there was no easy way for peasant leaders to gain the support of others beyond their local scene (nor did the idea of outside support seem essential to local relief during the Tokugawa era). To throw light on the spotty record of peasant *ikki* and *yonaoshi* we need studies in some detail of peaceable villages and farming areas, especially during the late years of the Shogunate, to see if relationships in such places between lord and peasant were generally good or not acutely hostile, and controls and demands by officials were not too severe for peasants to bear.

Let us now glance at the peaceable and legal forms of protest open to peasants in the seventeenth century under the Shogunate. Recognizing the possibility that some lords of fiefs and lesser landholders might be treating peasants unjustly, the government gave the peasants the recourse of leaving one fief for another, but only after paying all taxes and other debts before departing. In other words, they could vote with their feet against an oppressive situation. I doubt that the peasants usually paid the taxes or tribute due, because that demand was so often the reason for their actions. It seems more likely that they just absconded and got away with it somehow. By the 1780s moving out had become a political ploy, used to compel the rulers to act on their demands. The entire male population in one area indignantly moved out temporarily while they negotiated a settlement of their demands.<sup>25</sup>

The only legal form of petition was one that asked relief from economic hardship. The hardship might come from natural disasters, bad harvests, and later on from government policies unfavorable to local peasant interests. Frequently the hardship was due to exactions of tribute that the peasants felt were unjust because they did not leave enough to exist on and continue farming. As mentioned earlier, peasants especially resented an increase in tribute or a refusal to reduce tribute during a time of hardship such as the failure of the rice crop. The peasants' emphasis on a right to

<sup>25</sup> Walthall, p. 15.

subsistence with certain obligations does not necessarily, I suggest, represent the peasants' turning official ideology against the officials.<sup>26</sup> Instead it may merely indicate the one crucial point where samurai and peasant interests coincided. At the same time the petitions and other sources do show that groups of peasants were making an effort to create their own normative tradition to defend their interests.

In a suggestive set of remarks Walthall sees certain peasants making an "effort to fabricate a normative tradition for a single locality". Anxious to lighten their own burdens, peasants did not care about problems their acts could create elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Her interpretation is a refreshing variation on the usual hagiography of the downtrodden. Furthermore it is hard to criticize Japanese peasants for selfish localism and the fabrication of socially useful traditions when so much of Western high culture displays the same traits with far more dangerous consequences.

Such is the tale of peasant disorders that these books present as a cumulative image, at least for this reviewer. Here it is appropriate to comment on each of them, omitting Hugh Borton's *Peasant Uprisings* since it has already been reviewed in its day, as indicated above.

If one has the time and inclination to read only one book about peasant disorders in Japan, Stephen Vlastos's *Peasant Protests* is clearly the one to choose. It is lucid, well written, and quite comprehensive. Often the analysis is acute, as in the discussion of the feudal lord's benevolence. On occasion Vlastos does seem more anxious to establish the uniqueness of his own intellectual product than he has to be. There are traces of this straining after originality, however, in all four books under review. But it does not distort the interpretations.

For a reader interested primarily in how Japanese peasants perceive and interpret their own situation, as well as the cultural and historical ingredients in their views, Anne Walthall's *Social Protest* is the obvious choice. She is careful to set her analysis of protests, mainly but by no means exclusively petitions, in their social and political context. She is frequently skeptical of received opinions about her sources. In reading her book it is often a pleasure to learn why an explanation that at first seems very plausible just won't hold up after more careful scrutiny. She has no visible inclination to treat all protesting peasants as heroes, even though her sympathies with their plight are plain. The materials she has found are rich and her treatment rewarding. It is a bit of a pity that Walthall's publisher produced a book that is physically unattractive in comparison with the other books under review. I am glad, however, that the text is legible enough.

William W. Kelly's *Deference and Defiance* is a study of a single coastal

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Walthall, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Walthall, pp. 82-83.

region in northeastern Japan. For this reviewer the main interest of the book lies in the opening general chapter where the author criticizes conventional views of Japanese history, mainly by stressing the mercantile influence from the beginning of the Shogunate onward. After reading an uncounted number of detailed accounts of uprisings in the other books, those in *Deference and Defiance* failed to display enough distinctive features to stand out from the great buzzing blue. The "Concluding Reflections", on the other hand, do provide a very useful historically oriented explanation of the failure of these nineteenth-century uprisings.

Herbert P. Bix's *Peasant Protest* presents a social, economic, and political history that covers almost three centuries. He has struggled manfully and, for the most part, successfully with the almost impossible task of writing good history where results follow causes in a chronological sequence, weaving into his story an analytical approach that draws on social theory. Thus his account is quite full on the changing historical context of peasant life. With its strong historical orientation and wide coverage it is the most meaty and in its way the most satisfying of the books surveyed here. I could, however, have used more information on the ruling classes to explain their behavior. That again is true of the other books as well. One can easily accept the evidence that the Japanese ruling class was unusually oppressive and exploitative. But one still wants to know why and whether there were important historical changes. To his credit Bix does discuss changes in the situation of the upper classes from time to time. Nevertheless in these discussions the ruling classes generally seem to be getting more oppressive and exploitative all the time. (This is a long-standing tradition in much but not all Marxist historical writing.) It may or may not be true in the Japanese case. If Bix's upper classes sometimes recall cardboard figures stiffly marching toward their own destruction at the command of historical logic, that is not at all true of Bix's peasants. They are very lively human beings, capable of creative improvisation and of making their own mistakes. In the end of course they failed.

At first glance the Japanese peasants' failure to advance from revolt to revolution seems puzzling. After all, on the basis of the evidence in these books, the peasants under the Tokugawa Shogunate appear as the most oppressed and exploited in any agrarian society known to me. But the authors give good reasons for peasant failure. One was the widespread and extreme localism of these peasants and their inability to plan and mount a large-scale, concerted attack on a strategic point in the regime's military and political defenses. Nor did the peasants on their own develop an alternative conception of the state. Their political images were limited to the equality of the *ikki*, where equality was more of a means than end, and later of the utopian conception of a world cleansed and renewed that was central to *yonaoshi*. There are grounds for suspecting that like other op-

pressed groups the basic hope of the Japanese peasant was for the traditional life of the village, freed of arbitrary injustice.<sup>28</sup> There is no reason to be patronizing about peasant ideas, and all the authors avoid any such tone. Given the circumstances of peasant lives, why should we expect more? No Japanese peasant could sit in the reading-room of the British Museum, collecting materials for an indictment of modern civilization.

Whenever these authors try to uncover some political successes achieved by the peasants with peaceful or violent means, the findings seem rather strained. For example, Vlastos goes so far as to claim that “protests characterized by low levels of violence proved to be remarkable effective in realizing peasants’ collective interests”.<sup>29</sup> The other three books do not give that impression, and I cannot see the evidence for it in Vlastos’s own work. Presumably he has in mind the concept of benevolence and the lord’s self-interest in keeping the small peasant on his feet. But peasant appeals may fall on deaf ears if the lord’s expenses are rising and his income declining, as seems to have been the case a very large part of the time. The authors may be on stronger ground in their assertion that the statesmen who carried out the Meiji Restoration and consolidated the new regime had to keep one eye on a turbulent peasantry.<sup>30</sup> Yet even this claim looks like overemphasis on a minor cause. Political debates and intrigues at the time of the Meiji Restoration were about how to get rid of the foreigner and make the country strong enough to keep him out, while at the same time using both foreign technology and even some foreign political institutions. Agrarian problems were hardly salient among these concerns. For the new rulers the core of the agrarian problem was how to find a device more effective than the old tribute system for extracting a surplus from the peasants. The new surplus was to be used for the creation of heavy industry and armaments.

The main point about the political impact of Japanese peasant protests is, in my judgment, their ineffectiveness. They were unable to play any part in destroying or dismantling repressive institutions and social habits. Japanese peasants did not play an historical role similar to that of Russian or Chinese peasants. They did not try to, and I recall no indication that they even thought about it during the time period under discussion. It took the defeat of 1945 to damage and discredit reactionary chauvinism and open an opportunity for capitalist democracy. Defeat in war can be a substitute for revolutionary change, as well as a prelude thereto. To exaggerate only slightly, it was the atomic bomb and MacArthur’s occupation, not the

<sup>28</sup> This is explicitly stated by Hashimoto Mitsuru, “Social Background of Peasant Uprisings”, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Vlastos, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Bix, p. 228; Vlastos, pp. 165-166.

peasants, that broke the shackles of Japan's ancien régime. In terms of both freedom and prosperity, the results look more satisfactory in Japan than in countries where peasant revolutions or rebellions have been major factors in creating a communist regime.