Engendering everyday resistance: Gender, patronage and production politics in rural Malaysia

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Labour relations, forms of resistance, and class consciousness in the Muda region of Malaysia have become increasingly differentiated along gender lines: women have come to define and prosecute their interests as workers, whereas men continue to adopt a far more deferential stance vis-à-vis their employers. To explain these patterns, this article shows how struggles within the labour process intersect with those in the local community and the household, and how gender meanings shape the struggles on these interconnected sites. This gendered analysis of class formation calls for a major rethinking of James Scott's notion of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance'.
Although Scott's analysis is ungendered, his richly detailed ethnographic evidence reveals striking differences between women and men in both the organisation of labour arrangements and forms of resistance. While men were hired as individuals, women workers organised and sold their labour collectively in spite of efforts by large landowners to disband female labour gangs. More generally, male agricultural labour relations were marked by at least outward signs of deference, whereas women adopted a far more defiant stance towards their employers. My own and several other studies from the same region confirm this gender-differentiated pattern. In addition, they suggest that changes over time in the organisation of men's and women's labour have followed increasingly divergent trajectories.

Why were women more capable than men of asserting their identities and interests as workers? These patterns cannot be explained simply in terms of location in production relations, since both men and women were engaged in work on their own tiny farms as well as wage labour. I will suggest that part of the reason for women's greater capacity to organise collectively and challenge openly the interests of large landowners lies in their marginal relationship to official politics: poor men were enmeshed in subservient political patronage relations with rural party bosses who wielded political and economic power at the local level, whereas women were largely excluded from these relations. Such exclusion from the formal political process, together with the difficult material circumstances which poor women confront, enabled them to develop—and put into practice—a more direct and open critique of key elements of the 'master narrative'. This critique was reflected not only in their relationships with their employers, but also with their husbands. In short, the struggles within the labour process (or the politics of production [Burawoy, 1985]) intersect with those in the domestic arena and with formal politics in the local community.

To explain why class consciousness has differentiated along gender-specific lines, we also have to understand the operation of gender meanings in these interconnected sites of struggle. In the Malaysian case, capitalist accumulation in the national economy has provoked intense material and ideological struggles. These struggles—in which gender, together with ethnicity and religion, has figured prominently—have in turn helped to structure the terms and terrain of agrarian conflict and class processes.

Questions of agency, resistance, and the social construction of meaning have assumed growing importance in recent feminist analyses of the interconnections among gender, class, and race-ethnicity [e.g. Bookman and Morgen, 1988; Carney and Watts, 1990; Fraser, 1989; Ong, 1987,
This focus on agency and struggle reflects a growing consensus around the need to move beyond earlier dual-systems theories which posited capitalism and patriarchy as separate but interacting systems of oppression: 'having begun by supposing the fundamental distinctiveness of capitalism and patriarchy, class and gender, it was never clear how to put them back together again' [Fraser, 1989: 8].

One major step has been to return to the central insight of feminist theory – namely the need to extend the definition of politics. Instead of referring simply to electoral politics and/or actions focused specifically on the state, politics has increasingly come to be used in a broader sense to refer to the processes by which struggles over resources and labour are simultaneously struggles over socially-constructed meanings, definitions, and identities. By using an extended definition of politics, recent feminist analyses have shown how working class women’s struggles in the workplace ‘reverberate’ or intersect with struggles in the household and the local community [Bookman and Morgen, 1988]. Accordingly, women’s capacity to identify and organise as workers cannot be understood solely through an orthodox focus on the point of production. Even such powerful formulations as Burawoy’s [1985] Politics of Production are limited in important ways by an exclusive focus on the politics of the workplace. Indeed, I will try to show how reverberations among workplace, household, and community politics are just as important for men as they are for women.

A second, crucially important contribution of recent feminist analysis has been to clarify the operation of gender meanings on these multiple and interconnected sites of struggle. Gender refers not simply to the social roles of men and women and the sexual division of labour, but also to the ways that abstract qualities (strong/weak, rational/expressive, etc.) are defined as masculine/feminine. Precisely because of their reference to biology and nature, gender representations are often used to naturalise inequality and to obviate dissent within as well as beyond the household. In other words, gender operates in political struggles (broadly defined) to consign potentially contestable issues to the realm of what Bourdieu [1977] calls ‘doxa’ – that which is taken for granted. Accordingly, gender representations and idioms often play a key role in mediating class struggle [Joan Scott, 1988: 53–67].

The key features of gender ideology and political economy in the Malaysian context form the focus of Section II. Section III traces the evolution of gender differences in labour relations in the Muda region of Malaysia. In Section IV I will show how the gender-differentiated ‘politics of production’ connects with political patronage and domestic
politics, and how these struggles are conditioned by the interplay of gender ideology and larger political-economic structures and processes.

In the final section, I suggest that this gendered analysis of class formation in Muda calls for a major rethinking of Scott's notion of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance'.

GENDER IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Social Constructions of Gender

In Malay society, there are two apparently quite contradictory sets of representations of women, men, and relations between them. Within each of these culturally available sets of symbols, there are also multiple layers of ambiguities and possibilities for contestation. In one set of representations – that some scholars associate with vestiges of a pre-colonial, more egalitarian past [e.g. Couillard, 1982] – women are depicted as more practical and financially astute than men, and the relationship between them is represented as one of complementarity. In the past, representations along these lines appear to have been an element in the elevation of women to positions of prominence in the 'public sphere'. Reid, for example, notes that 'men were expected to be concerned to defend a high sense of status and honour on the battlefield but to be profligate with their wealth. It was women's business to understand market forces, to drive hard bargains and to conserve their capital' [1988: 641-2]. In the contemporary world, such representations are often invoked to explain women's control over household finances. These 'female' characteristics of being calculating, instrumental, and direct are precisely those that are ideologically devalued.

The second set of gender representations is associated with Islamic practices which began to take hold in the Malay peninsula in the fourteenth century. In this set of constructions, 'human beings are believed to be endowed with the human essences of akal (reason and self-control) and hawa nafsu (disruptive emotions/animalistic passions), although more akal inhere in man and hawa nafsu in woman' [Ong, 1983:3]. Since men are presumed to be more endowed with akal than women, they are obliged to assume responsibility for protecting women's honour and socio-economic security. In other words, women are seen as 'naturally' more shrewd and calculating than men and, at the same time, as emotionally unstable and in need of male protection.

Inheritance rules and practices exemplify the multiple dimensions of gender. Under Malay customary law (adat), property is in principle
divided equally between sons and daughters, whereas Islamic inheritance rules specify that sons receive twice the allotment of daughters. In practice, the division that actually prevails is often the product of prolonged debate which, if unresolved by informal means, is referred to the Land Office where Islamic rules are followed. In describing local examples of inheritance struggles, several women in the community in northern Malaysia where I worked expressed the opinion that 'nowadays men are becoming more influential' ([hal ini, laki-laki lebih kuasa]), pointing to several instances that had been referred to the Land Office. In similar conversations, men would typically invoke the burden of male responsibility to justify referrals to the Land Office.

The issue of male responsibility is a central theme in other spheres of daily life and is, as I will try to show later, a key element in understanding the dynamics of resistance and class processes in the Muda region. To understand how and why male responsibility has come to play such a central role, we must look to the larger political-economic context.

The Political–Economic Context

For purposes of this study, there are three closely related dimensions of larger political–economic structures in Malaysia that need to be made specific – although, of necessity, in outline form. First is the history of race-class conflict that propelled a major shift in state strategy in the early 1970s in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Second is the intertwining of politics and religion, which intensified during the 1970s with the implementation of the NEP. Third is the political importance of rice producers in the predominantly rural northern regions like Muda.

The NEP grew out of and has both reshaped and intensified the class-race divisions in Malaysian society that developed during the colonial period [Jomo, 1986]. British colonial strategy in Malaysia operated through the elaboration of an ideology of racial difference [Lim, 1984; Hirschman. 1986]. In return for extracting resources with cheap indentured labour from China and India, the British undertook to maintain the prestige and status of the Malays sultans and territorial chiefs – a key element of which was the preservation (if not creation) of a ‘traditional’ Malay rice peasantry. Among other things, this called for limiting the property rights of non-Malays in Malay reservation areas, discouraging Malay peasants from cultivating rubber [Lim, 1977], and instituting a system of vernacular education for rural Malays to promote a ‘vigorous and self-respecting agricultural peasantry, conscious of the dignity that attaches to the hewing of wood and the drawing of water’ [Roff, 1967]. In fact, by the late colonial period Malay reservation areas like the Muda
region were plagued by high levels of indebtedness, tenancy, and absentee ownership – partly through the acquisition of land by Malay bureaucrats who held privileged positions in the colonial state. Although the large majority of Chinese and Indians were workers in tin mines and rubber plantations, British colonial policy allowed some leeway for the emergence of a Chinese capitalist class. In these and other ways, racially-defined class divisions were clearly established by the close of the colonial period, and the stage was set for the race-class conflicts that surfaced in the late 1960s, and with which the NEP was ostensibly designed to deal.

The NEP was an effort to restructure Malaysian society by transferring a sizeable share of assets into Malay hands, and creating a Malay bourgeoisie. It signified a shift from a largely laissez-faire system to a markedly more interventionist role for the state, that was greatly facilitated by burgeoning oil revenues.

The main thrust of the NEP has been the creation of a Malay-dominated urban industrial economy. However, the coalition in control of the state has remained vitally concerned with maintaining a base of rural political support [Doshi, 1988]. The chief threat to the ruling coalition – and the structures of accumulation that it represents – comes from the northern rice-producing states in the form of PAS (Partai Islam) which formulates its critique of the ruling party (UMNO or the United Malays National Organisation) in fundamentalist Islamic and populist terms [Kessler, 1978]. Local-level politics are heavily factionalised, and many PAS leaders are wealthy farmers who are indistinguishable from their UMNO counterparts [Mansor, 1978]. None the less, PAS represents a major threat to the structures of national accumulation and privilege that UMNO represents.

The coalition in control of the state has sought to garner rural votes and contain PAS through massive subsidies that are pumped into the northern rice-growing regions. Since the early post-independence period, the state has sought to incorporate existing patronage networks in rural society, and reward the rural party bosses who came to form the main base of UMNO support in the countryside [Doshi, 1988]. Over the course of the NEP, the flow of state resources into rice-producing regions has accelerated, and political patronage relations within rural society have been restructured in important ways [Hart, 1990a]. The forms and reconstitution of these relations have, as we will see, a critically important gender dimension.

The implementation of the NEP also generated rapid and fundamental changes in the structure of urban economy and society. In addition to the export processing zones that drew large numbers of young Malay women into the industrial workforce, expanding bureaucratic employment
pulled many young Malays out of the rural economy. At the same time, increases in spending on education produced a burgeoning community of Malay university students, both male and female.

The social dislocations that accompanied these and other NEP measures were similarly massive. As Ong [1990: 266] has noted, ‘Moral confusion over the proper roles of men and women and the boundaries between public and domestic, Muslim and non-Muslim worlds produced a crisis of national identity.’ This restructuring of economy and society coincided with the worldwide Islamic resurgence, and by the mid-1970s the dakwah (Islamic revivalist) movement had become extremely influential, especially among young urban Malays. In their efforts to deal with disruptions in the conditions that had previously defined Malay identity, dakwah leaders invoked early Islamic traditions and practices, with seventh century Arabic culture often presented as the ideal [Mauzy and Milne, 1983: 633]. ‘Arabisation’ promotes rigid separation between male public roles and female private ones, a separation ‘quite contrary to indigenous arrangements’ [Ong, 1990: 269].

To the coalition in control of the state, the growing popularity of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), a large, well-financed organisation calling for an Islamic state, represented a profound threat. In particular, it was feared that ABIM would link with PAS.

The state’s response to the joint threat from ABIM and PAS has been a concerted government-sponsored Islamisation process at all levels of society. State power has increasingly come to be articulated in terms of religious rhetoric and symbolism, backed up by the allocation of substantial resources to state-sponsored Islamic institutions and the incorporation of religious functions into the state.

Gender has figured prominently in these struggles between the state and resurgent Islamic forces. Ong [1990] has discussed at some length how definitions of Malay womanhood and the family have become a central issue, with the state appropriating some of the key dakwah themes. Notions of women’s rightful position in the home runs parallel with the principle of male responsibility. As I will now try to show, these gender-informed struggles have reverberated in critically important ways with agrarian processes.
III. THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES
IN LABOUR ARRANGEMENTS AND FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Phases of Agrarian Change and Differentiation in the Muda Region

Gender differences in labour arrangements in the Muda region have evolved within a context of rapid and profound changes in rice technology and production relations. Muda has been an important locus of commercial rice production since the 18th century, but poor drainage and irrigation meant that peasants could cultivate only one uncertain rice crop a year. In 1970, the multi-million dollar Muda Irrigation Scheme came into operation. Improved irrigation and water control provided the physical conditions for double cropping and the dissemination of Green Revolution seed-fertiliser technology, that together produced huge increases in labour demand. Another massive change in technology took place in the late 1970s, when combine harvesters began moving into the Muda region. By the early 1980s mechanised harvesting and threshing were almost universal, and the authorities were promoting broadcast sowing technology that reduced labour requirements still further.

Both survey data (Tables 1 and 2) and village studies point to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size Class (hectare)</th>
<th>Percentage of Farms 1955</th>
<th>Percentage of Farms 1975/76</th>
<th>Percentage of Area 1955</th>
<th>Percentage of Area 1975/76</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.01 - 0.57</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.58 - 1.15</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.16 - 1.72</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.73 - 2.30</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.31 - 2.87</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.88 and above</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL FARMS</strong></td>
<td><strong>46,547</strong></td>
<td><strong>61,164</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL AREA (hectare)</strong></td>
<td><strong>95,950</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>99,002</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lim [1989: Table 2]; based on Gibbons et al. [1981].
stabilisation of relatively small-scale owner-operators in the period following the construction of the irrigation scheme. Along with a sharp decline in pure tenancy, these data suggest a large increase in the proportion of owner-operators in the very small size group (less than 4 relong or 1.1 ha, which is officially defined as 'unviable'). The proportion of those in the largest size group fell, although less rapidly than the amount of land they cultivated.

Among the critical factors responsible for the consolidation of small-scale owner-operators have been huge state subsidies of rice production, combined with mechanisms that ensured small-scale producers' access to state-subsidised resources [Lim, 1989]. These, in turn, reflect the political imperatives discussed earlier, together with the increasing role of state agencies in controlling the conditions of production. Rising productivity and incomes enabled small-scale producers to resist indebtedness and land dispossession that had been common in earlier periods [ibid.].

Double cropping also generated massive labour intensification. Using data from a survey conducted by the FAO/IBRD in 1972/3, Goldman and Squire [1982] calculate that labour use on a per crop basis declined, but that annual agricultural labour use increased by 92 per cent. According to their estimates, the ratio of family to hired labour rose from 44:56 in 1969 to 53:47 in 1973. Other sources present a rather different picture. According to Yamashita et al [1981], for example, family labour rose from 34 per cent to 39 per cent between 1970 and 1974 in the Muda region as a whole. However, during the same period, the share of exchange labour dropped from 39 per cent to 2 per cent, while that of hired labour rose from 32 per cent to 59 per cent. Although labour categories and precise figures are debatable, it is clear that hired labour demand rose

| TABLE 2 |
| --- | --- |
| TENURIAL PATTERNS IN THE MUDA SCHEME, 1955–75 |  |
| | 1955 | 1975 |
| | % Households | % Area | % Households | % Area |
| Owner operators | 37.6 | 30.9 | 56.1 | 45.3 |
| Tenants | 42.1 | 40.0 | 24.5 | 22.7 |
| Owner-tenants | 20.3 | 29.1 | 19.4 | 32.0 |

Source: Gibbons et al. [1981: Table 78].
sharply during the early 1970s in the first phase of technological change, and that the bulk of this labour came from women and men belonging to 'sub-viable' landholding households.³

Labour intensification was accompanied by sharp increases in agricultural wages. From a base of 100 in 1970, Goldman and Squire [1982: 758] estimate that nominal planting wages increased to 245 and harvesting wages to 201 by 1976. The price index (excluding rice) rose to only 140 over the same period. As will be discussed more fully below, the 1970s was a period of intensifying struggles over the mobilisation and control of labour.

Labour-saving technology was the means by which the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA) and larger landowners sought to exercise greater control over the labour process [Hart, 1990b]. Combine harvesters, which displace female labour in harvesting and male labour in threshing, first took hold in the latter part of the 1970s, and by the early 1980s virtually the whole of the Muda region was being harvested by combines.⁴

Labour displacement has been massive. The only labour intensive task in rice production that persists to some extent is transplanting, although this too has been the target of efforts to reduce labour requirements by its replacement with broadcast sowing. The proportion of land that was broadcast rose from 20 per cent in 1982 to 65 per cent in the first season of 1986, although it has since fallen to 50 per cent [MADA, 1987: 127]. Broadcast sowing and combine harvesters together reduce average labour requirements by about 80 per cent [ibid.].

There are no data for the region as a whole on trends in landholdings in the post-mechanisation period. The only longitudinal evidence of which I am aware consists of panel data from my own study of changes between 1977 and 1987 in the village of Sungai Gajah.⁵ These data show an increase in both land concentration and landlessness between 1977 and 1987, along with remarkable stability in the distribution of land among cultivating households (defined, as in the census data, as the residential unit) (Table 3). Land concentration is evidenced by a decline of 13 per cent in the land cultivated by villagers, although total population increased slightly from 616 in 1977 to 629 in 1987. A large proportion of that land passed into the hands of a wealthy urban businessman who hired a manager. The increase in landlessness is partly a reflection of more elderly people living alone, although there was also a growing number of younger couples with no land and no prospect of inheritance. What is most striking, however, is that the number of 'non-viable' cultivating households (or, more accurately, residential units) remained identical over the ten years in which mechanisation took hold.
This apparent stability in landholdings in fact masks significant differentiation of what, on the surface, appear as small peasants. Approximately a third of these small landholding households are comprised of men with lucrative non-agricultural jobs, and women who are fully domesticated. As discussed more fully later, most of these men are brokers of resources from the state and supra-village capitalists. They are also the sons and sons-in-law of large landowners. For other smallholders, 'the household' has become a more spatially and sectorally divided sets of arrangements. Women have taken over agriculture which they organise along the lines of the labour gangs, while men moved into low-wage non-agricultural jobs. In the boom years of the early 1980s many of these men engaged in circular migration, working mainly as construction labourers in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. At the time of my study in 1987 the national economy was in a heavy recession, and many of these men had returned to the Muda region where they relied on

### TABLE 3

**SUNGAI GAHAH: DISTRIBUTION OF RICE LAND OWNERSHIP AND OPERATION, 1977-87**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm Size Group (Relong)</th>
<th>1977</th>
<th>1987</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households</td>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 - 3.99</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4 - 9.99</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operating:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households</td>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 - 3.99</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4 - 9.99</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 relong = 0.28ha
sporadic, low-wage, non-agricultural employment in the regional economy, typically arranged through brokers. In short, despite the apparent tenacity of smallholder property, Muda is in no sense a peasant economy.

**Gender Differences in Labour Arrangements**

James Scott’s field research in a Muda village in 1978–79 coincided with the early stages of mechanised harvesting and labour displacement. His richly detailed ethnographic material reveals a particularly interesting pattern of gender differentiation in both the organisation of labour and the forms of resistance: poor men were hired and paid as individuals, whereas women were organised on a collective basis into labour gangs.

The individualistic patterns of male labour organisation contrasts vividly with poor women’s active resistance to efforts by large landowners to break up female labour gangs, and replace them with individuals working for daily wages. Even in periods of relatively slack labour demand, many women refused to transplant or harvest on an individual basis: as Scott notes, ‘they understand that this is another way of reducing their wage and breaking their rudimentary organisation’ [1985: 260].

Other conflicts between workers and employers followed the same gender-differentiated pattern. For example, in the period prior to massive labour displacement by machines and broadcast sowing technology, female labour groups would strike as a unit whereas male workers tended to walk out as individuals. Scott notes that ‘pressure is brought to bear on those [men] who would remain to join in the walkout’ [1985: 260], but men were notably less inclined than women to act collectively vis-à-vis their employers.

The most dramatic manifestation of gender differences in labour relations appeared in the late 1970s when use of combine harvesters began spreading, initially among large landowners. In a number of different places, women’s work groups tried to resist displacement by refusing to transplant the land of employers who used the combine for harvesting. These boycotts typically failed because large landowners called in work gangs from other parts of the region who acted as strike breakers. In addition, Scott reminds us, this ‘incipient trade union mentality’ was not manifest in open confrontation; on the contrary, the women used quite subtle and indirect methods to convey their message of defiance. None the less, their willingness and ability to attempt collective action within the labour process contrasts vividly with the way men typically expressed their resistance to the combine – namely in individual and largely clandestine acts of sabotage.
Comparative and historical evidence from other parts of the Muda region reveals similar patterns of gender difference. In addition, this evidence suggests that, over the past 30 years or so, older systems of agricultural exchange labour in the Muda region have been modified in ways that are dramatically different for women and men. In the discussion that follows, I will draw my own and other earlier studies in the Muda region to trace the trajectories of change in women’s and men’s labour arrangements.

**Trajectories of Change in Women’s Labour Arrangements**

In the past, it appears that much of the labour in rice production was organised in labour exchange groups known as derau. In its supposedly ‘pure’ or ‘traditional’ form, derau is a system of labour exchange among a group of participants with roughly equal landholdings that does not involve any cash transaction. Since differentiation in landholdings and the use of cash are longstanding features of the Muda economy, modifications of derau have probably been taking place for some time. For example, something approximating the pure form of derau was being practiced in the village of Kangkung in the early 1960s by women with medium landholdings, but not by large landholders or those who were near-landless [Syed Husin, 1974: 93]. In their report of research in a Muda village in the early 1960s, Kuchiba and Tsubouchi [1967] note that the pure form of derau was giving way to a more mixed form because it was becoming increasingly difficult to constitute derau groups consisting of women with roughly equal landholdings. Women who did not possess the qualifying area of landholdings were being included in derau groups, and remunerated in cash. As women from larger landholding households withdrew from agricultural labour, the groups tended to evolve into groups known as kumpulan syer (literally share groups). Instead of purely reciprocal labour on one another’s farms, these groups would also contract to work on nonmembers’ farms for a piece rate that they divided among themselves. Kuchiba and Tsubouchi note that syer groups composed entirely of women from very small landholding and landless households had begun to form from scratch in the early 1950s.

Groups of poor women were far less likely to form when women from larger landholding households remained actively involved in organising agricultural labour. Available evidence suggests that arrangements between rich and poor women often took the form of individual contracts, although work was organised on a group basis. For example, when a woman needed to transplant a particular plot of land, she would invite as many women as were needed to complete the task in a morning, and
then owe each of the participants a morning's worth of work. Women with relatively small (or no) landholdings could thereby accumulate labour days owed to them, that they in turn could mobilise and 'sell' by contracting with a third party – often a large landowner – to transplant a particular plot for a lump sum payment. By this means, exchange labour can overlap with wage labour through a complex set of individual contracts. In the village of Sungai Gajah, this system prevailed through most of the 1970s. Both Wong's [1983] data and my own inquiries suggest that these contracts were often allocated to the same women, season after season. This in turn meant that labour relations retained a dyadic character, at least within the village. Some poorer women did form labour gangs, but mainly for work outside the village. Elsewhere in Muda, the co-existence of various arrangements caused one observer to note, somewhat despairingly, that 'the respective responsibilities and modes of operation of traditional-style derau groups and of salaried labour gangs is becoming increasingly complex and confused' [de Koninck, 1979: 6].

While complexity and variation were probably the norm at any particular time, the general pattern seems to have been one of an accelerated emergence of collectivised female labour gangs during the 1970s. Technological change in rice production was, no doubt, a contributing factor. In the days of single cropping, the transplanting period stretched over two months, and rice varieties with different maturation periods were grown so that the harvesting period also extended over several months. Under these circumstances, it was possible to use systems of labour exchange in which each person needed to make up a work party of the requisite size could be repaid in a fairly flexible fashion. The advent of double cropping in the late 1960s meant that the time available for each task in the cropping cycle was drastically reduced. Hence it would appear that the growing prevalence of gangs of poor women paid on a piece rate basis was, at least in part, a reflection of labour intensification.

The uneven pace at which share groups developed despite the fairly uniform spread of new technology suggests that other factors were at work. The nature and degree of involvement of wealthier women in mobilising and organising agricultural labour appears crucial. For example, a key factor responsible for the persistence of dyadic arrangements in Sungai Gajah is that a comparatively high proportion of women from large landholding households remained actively involved in mobilising and organising agricultural labour, and in allocating contracts to poorer women for transplanting and harvesting particular plots. By the early 1980s, virtually all of the women from large landholding households had relinquished their roles in organising agricultural labour. Only then
did women who remained in the agricultural workforce form relatively fixed groups.

At the time of my research in 1987, combine harvesters had replaced female labour in harvesting and male labour in threshing, and the only labour-intensive task that remained in rice production was transplanting. As mentioned earlier, in many small landholding households women had taken over not only all of the remaining physical labour in rice production, but also management of the agricultural enterprise.

This ‘feminisation’ of agriculture took place within the context of collectivised share groups which poor women organised for work both on their own tiny farms and as wage labour gangs. Many large landowners in the vicinity of Sungai Gajah hired migrant labourers from Thailand, who were paid lower wages than local women’s labour gangs. However, the demand for transplanting labour was sufficiently intense that local labour gangs could find employment for most of the transplanting season.

In 1987 there were seven share groups in Sungai Gajah, each composed of six to eight women. Three of the groups were operated primarily by ‘middle peasant’ women, primarily for work on their own land, and their membership tended to fluctuate across seasons. Groups composed of women with minimal landholdings were geared primarily to wage labour, and were far more stable. For these women the share group was not only a mechanism of labour organisation, but also an important day-to-day source of material and emotional support. Most of these women did not have kin ties in the village. In a particularly telling remark, one of them commented ‘kami semua orang luar’ (we are all outsiders). When they were not engaged in field labour or in house-bound domestic work, these women could generally be found gathered at the home of a group member and chatting while they grated coconut or chopped onions. It was also quite common for women in the groups to lend one another small amounts of money. These daily practices were both informed by and reinforced strong ideas of solidarity. Although one woman in each group was primarily responsible for organising work contracts, members of labour gangs insisted that there was no leader and that they were all the same (semua sama). They also placed considerable emphasis on their mutual compatibility (sesuai), as well as on their self-reliance vis-à-vis their husbands. As we will see later, these patterns stand in striking contrast to the way wealthier women, who had withdrawn from physical labour and who described themselves as ‘housewives’, invoked their husbands’ responsibility for them.

By 1987, the fragility of income-earning options and the presence of cheap migrant workers meant that women workers were less openly confrontational than their counterparts in other parts of the Muda region.
in the late 1970s. However, in situations where there were no larger landowners present, these women would readily launch into criticisms of the latter's use of cheaper migrant labour to undercut their position. It would undoubtedly be a mistake to overstate the degree of proletarian consciousness among these women. Nor were these women engaged in a broader critique of private property rights and capitalist exploitation. What is extremely significant, however, is that women seem far more able than men to define themselves as workers, and to articulate and prosecute their interests in opposition to their employers.

**Changing Patterns of Male Labour Arrangements**

The trajectory of change in patterns of male labour organisation was entirely different from that of women. In the case of threshing, the main task performed by men until the use of combine harvesters became widespread in the early 1980s, several authors who have studied changes in particular villages document a consistent trend towards individualised labour relations. In the past, men worked in threshing groups that were paid on a per area basis. Following the intensification of rice production, there was a shift to individual piece rate payment on a per sack basis [Mohd. Shadli, 1978; Kuchiba et al., 1979; Barnard, 1981; Wong, 1983]. In essence, this system promoted individual competition among workers, and contributed to a 'speedier completion of the job' [Barnard, 1981: 224].

Although this system strongly favoured employers, it did pose certain problems for them:

The farmer naturally wants all the rice from his field and, for that reason, prefers to have the threshers beat each bundle of cut paddy until virtually all the grains are in the tub. The thresher, in contrast, is interested in the cash he can earn for a day's work. Depending on the ripeness of the paddy, roughly 80-90 percent of the grains are dislodged in the first two or three strokes. To dislodge most of the remaining paddy may require as many as six or seven strokes. The tub fills up faster, and the thresher earns more for the day's work, if he beats each sheaf only two or three times and moves quickly to the next sheaf... [Further], a thresher can, in fact, recover the paddy he has left on the stalks if there is someone in his family who gleans. The more paddy poor men leave lying besides the threshing tubs, the more paddy women in their household can collect once the harvest is over [Scott, 1985: 256-7].

To protect their interests, employers engaged in continual monitoring of
threshers – although in practice the number of times a sheaf was beaten was a compromise between what employers wanted and what they were able to enforce [ibid.]. At the same time, however, monitoring must have been made easier by the essentially individualistic forms of worker-employer relations and competition among workers.

Why did poor men not organise collectively in order to counter this intra-worker competition and manipulation? Some might argue that the individual piece rate system favoured strong, energetic men who would be discriminated against in a group system in which weaker and lazier individuals would benefit at their expense. Accordingly, ‘superior’ workers would prefer individual piece rates, and their interests would be in accord with that of employers in resisting any shift to a group system. However, in principle it is perfectly feasible to devise mechanisms of remuneration within the group that are proportional to each worker’s contribution.

More generally, the advantages to workers of organising threshing labour along group lines would, on the face of it, seem overwhelming. In addition to enhanced bargaining power for wage negotiations, collective labour organisation would have allowed workers to deal more effectively with employers’ efforts to monitor the labour process and enforce more thorough threshing of each sheaf of paddy. By facilitating the more rapid completion of each job through less thorough threshing, the group system in principle would have allowed workers to increase both the number of jobs and the returns for a given amount of effort. In practice, of course, a group system may have promoted competition among groups, but this would have been alleviated by the very heavy demand for threshing labour concentrated in a fairly short period. That there is nothing inherent in threshing technology to prevent collective forms of organisation is evidenced by the existence of labour exchange groups for threshing among smallholders, even in the period following the intensification of rice production [Mohd. Shadli, 1978].

The spread of combine harvesters has totally displaced male labour from threshing. At the same time, a more limited set of jobs for poor men has developed as machine attendants and lorry drivers. In addition, young men with motor cycles have found employment filling sacks with mechanically-threshed rice and transporting them to the main roads. By and large, however, poor men have shifted into non-agricultural occupations, as mentioned earlier. As the sector of employment of many poor men has shifted, they have moved into reconstituted – but still individualised and heavily paternalistic – relationships of dominance and dependency with local brokers of external resources.
IV. EXPLAINING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LABOUR RELATIONS

Why were women able to confront large landowners far more directly than men – and, conversely, why did employers find male workers more malleable and easier to control than women? These gender-differentiated patterns are quite difficult to explain in terms of Scott’s framework.

According to Scott, traditional cultural practices and patronage ties were elaborated in the first phase of technological change in the early 1970s, when large landowners were acting to ensure an adequate, hard-working, and deferential agricultural workforce. Following the spread of mechanisation in the late 1970s, Scott argues, large landowners were disengaging from patronage relations while nominally upholding the norms of generosity that they had earlier used to legitimate appropriation; poor villagers sought to cope with the dramatic decline in agricultural employment by invoking and manipulating precisely those norms that had earlier been used to mobilise and control agricultural labour.

It is indeed possible that the paternalistic labour practices, which Scott defines as patronage, were applied more fully to male workers. The chief material expression of these relationships appears to have been sacks of rice distributed to workers after the harvest. Employers insisted on defining these as zakat or Islamic charity, whereas workers came to expect them as part of the wage. It does indeed appear that zakat went disproportionately to male workers. However, even if this was, in fact, an effective means of demobilising labour, then why was it not applied to women workers? The question therefore remains as to why labour and class relations developed differently for men and women.

To answer this question, we must first distinguish the labour process (or the site of ‘production politics’ in Burawoy’s [1985] terms) from other sites of struggle – particularly, in this case, local community (or ‘formal’) politics and the domestic politics of the household. In the discussion that follows, I will try to show (a) how the politics of production ‘reverberates’ or intersects with struggles in these other spheres in ways that are different for women and men, and (b) how class and non-class struggles have been mediated in the idiom of gender. This gender dimension can only be comprehended in terms of how larger configurations of political-economic forces – in turn the product of the history of race–class struggle – have defined the terrain of conflict at the local level.

Multiple Sites of Struggle

As mentioned in Section II, the intensification of agricultural production in the Muda region in the early 1970s coincided with the initial phases of racial restructuring of the economy under the New Economic Policy.
(NEP). The significance of this coincidence lies not only in the escalation of state resources, but also in the official and societal working and reworking of ethnic-racial, religious, and gender concepts that accompanied them.

The NEP vastly accelerated the flow of resources into rural regions like Muda, and reinforced the position of the rural party bosses who are the main bases of UMNO political support. To maintain their position and ensure continued access to state resources, these locally dominant groups in turn had to consolidate a base of political support among the poorer peasantry. Large landowners belonging to PAS were similarly concerned with ensuring a loyal following [Mansor, 1978]. During the 1970s, prior to mechanisation, large landowners’ needs for labour thus overlapped with their needs for loyal political clients. By and large, these political patronage relations operated primarily between men.

In principle, women are not excluded from formal party politics, and there are instances of women in prominent positions in UMNO (although not, to my knowledge, in PAS). In practice, women tend to play a peripheral role in formal politics. The most comprehensive discussion of women’s role in formal politics is by Manderson [1980] who analyses the Pergerakan Kaum Ibu, the women’s section of UMNO. Manderson points to the reluctance of the Kaum Ibu to press for change, even in such limited matters as the status of the women’s section vis-à-vis the party. She traces this reluctance, at least in part, to the fact that ‘any change affecting the section implied a change in the status quo, affecting those women who were leaders of the section as well as the men, men who were often also husbands or relatives of the women leaders’ [1980: 205]. Other evidence of women’s remaining on the fringes of formal political activity at the local level is provided by Laderman [1982].

My own and other research in Sungai Gajah showed that factional politics was predominantly the domain of men. The differential involvement of women and men in factional disputes was a common topic of conversation, supported by several examples. For instance, following the eruption of particularly intense conflict between PAS and UMNO in the late 1970s, a number of men insisted that their wives not cross party lines to associate with women whose husbands belonged to the opposite faction. Diana Wong [1983] who was in the village at the time describes how the complex system of contracts through which women’s labour was organised at that time was totally disrupted by these injunctions. This story was relayed to me by a number of villagers nearly eight years later. Another manifestation of this phenomenon is that men on opposite sides of the political fence typically refuse to attend each others’ ritual feasts (kenduris), whereas women are far more likely to cross party lines to participate in kenduris.
This gender-differentiated pattern of involvement is closely related to the intertwining of politics and religion, which was outlined in section II. One element of this is that the mosque – attendance at which is limited to men – has become an important locus of political struggle. Syed Husin Ali [1974] mentions that village mosques were being used for party political purposes in the early 1960s. By the 1970s and 80s, the mosque itself had become a heavily disputed issue. The situation in Sungai Gajah – where PAS and UMNO men attended different mosques – was apparently quite common.

These male factional groupings are the key mechanism through which state resources – in the form of direct grants, as well as licences and contracts for infrastructure and other ‘development’ projects – are channeled into rural society. In the early to mid-1970s, when PAS was a member of the coalition in control of the state, these resources were dispensed to both PAS and UMNO party bosses. In the late 1970s, there was an important shift in the political conditions of access to state resources that coincided with the spread of mechanisation. Shortly before the 1978 election, PAS was expelled from the national coalition for championing Islamic resurgence. Following the election, UMNO officials dismissed all PAS members from village governments throughout the country, and replaced them with UMNO supporters. These official efforts to exclude and marginalise PAS were accompanied by massive increases in government spending in areas where PAS was considered a particular threat – most notably the Muda region [Gibbons, 1985].

By 1987 there had emerged in Sungai Gajah – and no doubt in many other Muda villages – a situation in which a small group of strategically-placed men had captured control over these outside resources [Hart, 1990a]. Following the events of 1978, these aggressive, relatively well-educated younger men had been recruited by UMNO operators at the district level to village government positions which presented them with multiple opportunities for brokering state resources. Almost without exception, they are the sons and sons-in-law of elderly large landowners, who were formerly UMNO party bosses [Hart, 1990a]. Although access to resources was more limited for most PAS members, some had connections with wealthy agricultural machine-owning syndicates outside the village, and also acted as brokers of outside resources.

Although brokers generate very little employment directly, they use their contacts with state agencies, contractors, machine syndicates, and other agents outside the village to provide at least some of their male followers with non-agricultural jobs – albeit at very low wages – in return for political support. On the one hand, this means that poor men are still
caught up in relations of deference and dependence. On the other, women are almost totally excluded from these relations, and from access to the non-agricultural resources through which they operate. This exclusion is, I suggest, a key element in their capacity to organise collectively.

**Gender Ideology and the Politics of Production**

We turn now to consider some of the ways that struggles over gender meanings are deeply implicated in struggles over resources and labour. As discussed earlier, gender ideology figures prominently in struggles between the state and resurgent Islamic forces. Women’s rightful position in the home and the idea that men are responsible for women’s emotional and physical welfare have become increasingly important components of official state ideology. In daily practice, the principle of male responsibility informs not only conjugal relations between women and men, but also the exercise of power in other spheres.

A number of observers have noted that, in practice, male protection is often inadequate, and that women resort to private strategies—most notably trying as far as possible to maintain control over their own earnings, private savings, and so forth—in order to protect themselves [Ong, 1983; Kessler 1978; Kuchiba, et al. 1979]. As I described earlier, for women workers in Sungai Gajah—and presumably elsewhere in the Muda region—the share group is itself an important source of financial (as well as emotional) support and security. In discussions of domestic economic arrangements, these women consistently underscored the need for economic self-reliance. In several cases, women told of their husbands’ having opposed their taking over the operation of the agricultural enterprise, but of their insisting on doing so. At the same time, they would emphasise their mutual dependence on women belonging to the same share group in times of economic stress. Tensions between husbands and wives over the disposition of earnings was also an issue. In the two poorest groups, there were at least three widely discussed cases of men who beat their wives for trying to withhold earnings.

When questioned about the principle of male responsibility, women were typically dismissive—and in some cases quite openly derisive—of it. These women were confronted with a sharp disjuncture between generalised notions of male responsibility, and the imperatives of having the wherewithal to prepare the next meal. Through daily practice, these women developed not only horizontal relations of solidarity with one another, but also a critique of the ideology of male responsibility.

In striking contrast, middle class women—most notably the wives of the
new class of brokers discussed above - very actively and vocally pressed claims of male responsibility. These women were not involved in any form of income generating activity, and were totally dependent on their husbands for support. Their interventions resonate with the patterns discussed by Ong [1990], who argues that middle class women in Malaysia have been far more directly caught up in the spirit of Islamic resurgence than working class women.

The husbands of these women had yet another ‘take’ on the issue of male responsibility. In public discourse, it was quite common for these men to invoke their capacity to provide for their families, and maintain domestic harmony - a capacity which they contrasted with the tension and conflict between poor couples. These men’s public claims of fulfilling their responsibilities in turn provided their spouses with an instrument of pressure – albeit a rather flimsy one.

These varying interpretations of male responsibility were evident in the everyday practice of conjugal relations - or at least those practices that were accessible to me as an outsider engaged in some rather intrusive enquiry into the intimate details of domestic life (questions which, it may be noted, were often turned back on me). On my visits to middle class households, it was quite common for a man to intrude on a conversation in which I was engaged with his wife, and send her to make tea while he took over the conversation. My discussions with women workers generally took place in a group context, often seated on the porch or steps of the houses where they would typically congregate. In these settings, if the spouse of any of these women were to wander by, he would typically be told in a joking fashion to go away.

The principle of male responsibility extends far beyond the domestic sphere, and intersects in important ways with notions of generosity and responsibility of the rich for the poor. For example, dominant men in the community drew explicit connections between male responsibility in the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres. In Sungai Gajah, several of the new class of brokers mentioned earlier were fond of drawing analogies between their capacity to provide for their wives and maintain domestic harmony on the one hand, and their role in promoting village harmony through their generosity in providing opportunities for the poor on the other.

Gender is central to understanding why male workers are far less able than women to organise collectively, and to challenge wealthy employers directly in the context of the labour process. Not only are men incorporated into political patronage relations, while women are largely excluded; in addition, they are confronted with a principle that defines them as superior to and responsible for women, simultaneously with an incapacity to put this principle into material practice in the domestic
sphere. In a setting shot through with political-religious conflict, the contradictions surrounding the construction of men as superior, more responsible beings provided economically and politically dominant men with a wider array of controls over men than over women. For male workers, it curtailed the realm of argument and made them resort to more deferent, manipulative, and indirect methods than did women in their dealings with powerful men both within and beyond the labour process. Conversely, women workers’ capacity to contest the ideology of male responsibility in the domestic sphere – the product, in part, of the burden of daily provisioning in the harsh material circumstances in which they find themselves – is, I suggest, reciprocally linked with their capacity to define themselves as workers, and to organise collectively in opposition to their employers. In other words, gender representations are an integral part of the politics of production and class processes.

**Contextualising Women’s Resistance**

The willingness and ability of women workers in the Muda region to organise collectively exemplifies the problems inherent in viewing them as the passive victims of patriarchy and/or capitalism. However, it is equally misleading to focus exclusively or primarily on agency and resistance, and lose sight of larger configurations of political and economic forces. Although working women’s peripheral relationship to formal power structures is in one sense enabling of class-based resistance, it is also deeply and increasingly constraining. In recent years, a variety of macro forces have combined to undermine women workers’ capacity to exercise pressure both within and beyond the labour process.

Agricultural mechanisation and labour displacement are partly responsible for the increasingly precarious position in which these women find themselves. During the 1970s, the very heavy demand for agricultural labour provided women workers with an important source of leverage and bargaining power. By the 1980s, not only had harvesting disappeared as a source of wage income, but transplanting jobs were under threat from a variety of sources. Further, technological change and associated patterns of commercialisation are not simply exogenous forces. As I have argued more fully elsewhere [Hart, 1990b], the introduction of labour-displacing technologies was part of an effort by the irrigation authorities and large landowners to deal with the challenge of women’s organisational capacity.

In addition to the reorganisation of agriculture, larger structures of political and economic power have been transformed in ways that render women workers increasingly marginal. In the late 1970s, the terrain of
conflict at the local level was radically transformed not only by the restructuring of production relations in agriculture, but also by political disputes at the national level. Through the new systems of brokerage described earlier, strategically-placed men have captured control over key resources – agricultural machinery and non-agricultural resources and opportunities dispensed through state institutions – from which women are almost totally excluded. Although poor women’s autonomy vis-à-vis their husbands may in some instances have increased, their position in the larger society has been significantly undermined.

If we were to focus simply or primarily on agency and resistance by women workers in Muda, we would undoubtedly emphasise – if not celebrate – their courage and tenacity even in the face of mechanisation and labour displacement. What this emphasis would obscure, however, is the increasingly precarious and difficult position in which these women find themselves.

V. RETHINKING ‘EVERYDAY FORMS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE’

Part of my purpose in this paper has been to redress the rather androcentric focus of *Weapons of the Weak* by according to women workers a more central role in the drama that is unfolding in the Muda region. But there is more to the argument than the need to incorporate women. In her essay on ‘Women’s History’, Joan Scott [1988: 25] points to the need for

‘histories that focus on women’s experiences and analyse the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of the great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organisation of most societies.

As I will now try to show, a gender-informed analysis provokes a fundamental rethinking of ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’.

James Scott’s rejection of hegemony and false consciousness rests on three related assumptions. First is a voluntarist conceptualisation of agency. Scott’s subject is a free-willed individual decision-maker, with fixed and unambiguous identity and interests. Second, this subject’s identity and interests are essentially those of a peasant who is actively engaged in ongoing covert struggle to resist the predations of ‘external’ forces in order to remain a peasant. As Brass [1991] has recently observed, Scott provides Chayanovian theory with its missing politico-ideological dimension. Third, the form and class character of the state are
irrelevant. In his preface, Scott notes that issues of peasant-state rela-
tions, ethnic conflict, religious movements, formal party politics, and the
economic origins of petty class relations have all been bracketed in his
analysis [1985: xix].

In this study I have tried to show how a gendered analysis both requires
and contributes to a reformulation of each of these elements. In the first
place, the explanation of gender-differentiated labour relations requires
a conceptualisation of agency which recognises multiple (and possibly
contradictory) sources of identity and interests. Far from being given and
fixed, identities and interests are forged through political struggle (in its
extended sense) on multiple and intersecting sites. Not only are women
and men differently positioned through social roles and the sexual
division of labour; in addition, these struggles are informed in crucially
important ways by representations of masculinity/femininity.

Second, women's capacity to act collectively and organise as workers
presented us with a distinctly non-Chayanovian view of Muda rural
society. Instead of presuming that the ‘rural poor’ are peasants [Colburn,
1989: ix], we were impelled to ask why male workers failed to define and
prosecute their class identity and interests in the same way that women
did. I have suggested that the answer lies both in their incorporation in
political patronage relations, and in the way that notions of masculinity/
femininity have limited the capacity of men to identify as workers and to
act collectively.

At a more general level, gender is central to understanding the
processes through which class identity is produced or undermined.
Consider, for example, Learning to Labour, Paul Willis's [1977] study of
working-class teenage males in Britain. To support his critique of false
consciousness, James Scott [1985: 319] cites Willis as follows: 'Social
agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who
reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation, and a
partial penetration of those structures.' In fact, Willis shows how the
capacity of these rebellious teenagers to penetrate many of the self-
serving representations of bourgeois society operates simultaneously
with the limits imposed by gender. These young men associate manual
work 'with the social superiority of masculinity, and mental labour with
the social inferiority of femininity' [1977: 148]. Their penetration into the
meaning of labour power is thus limited by a masculine logic that labour
must be tough, and the sense of masculine superiority that they derive
from it. Although this sense of unquestioned superiority enables them
to reject bourgeois values, their identification of mental work with
femininity blinds them to their own and others' domination and exploita-
tion. In other words, gender does indeed entail some degree of mystifica-
tion and false consciousness, and its deconstruction could well constitute a key element in a more progressive politics for working men as well as women.

The third, closely related point is that, rather than supposedly ‘poor peasant’ men being engaged in defensive action against a socially non-specific state, they were instead being co-opted by the coalition in control of the state and its local agents. For a more progressive, class-based politics to emerge, the ideologies of race and ethnicity through which this co-optation is perpetuated need also to be deconstructed.

NOTES

1. I am using the term ‘patronage’ to refer specifically to political practices, and as distinct from paternalistic labour practices; see note 7.

2. According to FAO/IBRD figures, women accounted for approximately 60–65 per cent of hired labour in the first phase of technological change in the 1970s.

3. The intensification of labour demand in the 1970s coincided with a decline in traditional sources of seasonal migrant labour from Kelantan and Thailand (see note 6). Estimates of the proportion of income from wage labour in Muda tend to be understated because total income is inflated by the high value imputed to subsidised inputs.

4. Even the smallest cultivators purchase combine services with the cash coupon component of the rice subsidy, which is now simply passed on to machine owners. Most of these owners are Chinese syndicates that operate at the supra-village level, although some wealthy Malays have been entering the combine business [Said, 1989]. The market for machine services is organised by Malay brokers who have emerged as extremely powerful actors on the rural scene.

5. I based my field research in Sungai Gajah (a pseudonym) to take advantage of earlier studies by Mohd. Shadli Abdullah [1978] and Diana Wong [1983]. Through the generosity of Mohd. Shadli and with the help of two very able research assistants from the village, I was able to trace a series of quantitative and qualitative changes between 1977 and 1987. More detailed quantitative data on demographic, landholding, and occupational changes are available from the author.

6. After 1970 there was an official prohibition on migrant labour from southern Thailand as part of an effort to contain a political separatist movement. In the late 1970s, this ban was lifted, although the numbers are tightly controlled. Thai migrant labour gangs are comprised of both men and women.

7. Following Bourdieu [1977], Scott goes beyond the simple ‘moral economy’ view of patronage to recognise its simultaneously exploitative dimensions: ‘The euphemization of economic power is necessary both where direct physical coercion is not possible and where the pure indirect domination of the capitalist market is not yet sufficient to ensure appropriation by itself’ [1985: 307]. A more useful approach is that of Littlewood [1980] who proposes a distinction between paternalism as characteristic of certain forms of agrarian relations of production, and patronage as a characteristic of certain forms of political practice – both of which are often present in capitalist settings as means for the reproduction of labour as well, one may add, as its control [Brass, 1990; Hart, 1986].

8. There are allusions in the village study literature to advance wages and loans, but they appear to have been less systematically used as mechanisms of labor demobilisation than those documented elsewhere in Asia [e.g. Brass, 1990]. Large landowners’ needs to ensure a political following may have something to do with this.

9. Zakat was typically distributed to ‘heads of households’ at the time of threshing, an exclusively male activity.
10. These processes resonate closely with those described by Littlewood in the Mediterranean, whereby political patronage doled out as ‘charity’ by the local landed class was superseded by welfare doled out by the state:

With the decline of the landed local ruling class we find the emergence of a petty bourgeoisie, letting patches of inherited or purchased land to peasants under a variety of often extortionate contracts, professionally servicing the requirements of the wealthy, acting as purveyors of the dominant ideology, and acting as agents of an increasingly centralised and intervening local state. In this role as agents of the state and as the local level controllers of its resources, the petty bourgeoisie came to act as gatekeepers, siphoning off the provision of state welfare for its own and its allies' interests. In other words, the state welfare which in part has replaced precapitalist charity has been usurped, particularly in marginalised agrarian areas, by the emergent petty bourgeoisie. Welfare has been transformed, at least in part, into the material base on which the contemporary system of clientilism is built' [Littlewood, 1980: 41].

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