

From Peasants to Lords: The Intellectual Evolution of Grant Evans

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Abstract

This paper reviews Grant Evans' writings on peasants, focusing on the theoretical frameworks within which he operated. Evans' career is marked by a turn away from the ideological beliefs of his youth and early academic career, and in tandem with this, his work shifted from the socio-economic anthropology of rural Laos to a broader concern with Lao society, religion, culture and history. Evans became increasingly concerned that Lao history should be written outside the framework of post-1975 communist nationalism, and the logical culmination of this was his project to document the modern history of the Lao monarchy. His critique of central planning and social engineering was extended to the assumptions of (many) aid interventions, especially those that brought a prepackaged ideological agenda to the complex social, economic and moral economy of rural Laos. While by the end of the 1990s peasants were no longer the main focus of his work, he continued to insist on the continuing relevance of the category and the importance of a proper, anthropologically informed understanding of the rural economy and of Lao peasant society.

Introduction

In his early and mid-career, Grant Evans' most important anthropological writing concerned peasants. He published a series of articles on this topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Evans 1986, 1987, 1988b,c, 1990a), and two books *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988a) and *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990b). For Evans, the events of 1989, in particular the collapse of the Soviet Union, marked an intellectual watershed, after which an entire field of academic enquiry with its common points of reference and framework of assumptions, almost instantly came to a halt. While Evans was intensely critical of the political systems he found in Southeast Asia (and by extension in other communist societies), he had been very much formed by the surrounding intellectual and ideological debates. While he continued to publish on peasants, his primary focus gradually shifted to more general historical and cultural themes, notably the abiding significance and pervasive social presence of Lao Buddhism. This led him ultimately to research on the Lao royal family (Evans 2009).

Simplistically, one might say Evans moved from fieldwork with peasants to studying aristocrats. These are, perhaps not coincidentally, the two categories that appear in the subtitle of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966), a work that Evans greatly admired. In this paper we present a brief survey of Grant Evans' writing on peasants and agrarian policy, and then move on to a discussion of the continuities and discontinuities in his thinking, taking into account the overall trajectory of his work.

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