The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant

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The primary goal of peasants everywhere is survival. Yet the requirements of survival differ dramatically from one community to the next. These distinct settings demand different strategies from peasants in different places even as they all engage in the common struggle for survival. In prerevolutionary Nicaragua political activism and political violence had become norms in many areas of the country. Despite such a setting, most villagers in this first case deliberately chose quiescence as the strategy most likely to ensure survival in a dangerous world. This was true even when some forms of political activism in Pedregal were relatively safe from repression, and a minority of villagers actually became activists. Why did most of these villagers choose quiescence? How did their sense of interdependence with their world cause them to remain withdrawn into political inaction, even as social revolution raged throughout their country?

Neither individual calculations of maximized self-interest nor fear of repression explains the choice of quiescence by most villagers in Pedregal. That decision was a reflection of the ecological perspective at work in the village. These peasants perceived their interdependence with society. That perception helped them understand that their interaction with the outside world was limited and would increase with political activism. They also saw that the wider society was self-destructing, and they estimated that life in Pedregal was relatively tranquil compared with life in the rest of Nicaragua. They surmised that if they could limit their interaction with the outside world they would also restrict their interdependence with it and thus improve their individual and collective chances for survival. Their sense of justice was fulfilled by the extent of ecological interdependence in the village. They did not want life in the community to change.

By explaining these peasants’ choice of quiescence with the theory of political ecology, we can incorporate both the peasants’ determination to survive and their understanding of interdependence. We can also see the full extent of flexibility that an ecological perspective allows peasant actors. Where action is
unnecessary or unwise, no action is taken. The political ecology perspective is a more comprehensive and multidimensional explanation for quiescence than any unidimensional approach. The rational actor model, for example, explains individual quiescence as being a result of free-ridership—personal calculations that the rewards of action can be gotten without political participation. Rational consideration of political action precludes it when incentives are inadequate or the risks too great. A moral economy approach, on the other hand, argues that quiescence results only when there are no threats to subsistence or when repression makes action suicidal. Each of these explanations has some relevance to the story of political quiescence in Pedregal, but neither is sufficient to fully understand individual and community decisions not to participate in the Nicaraguan revolution. In particular, the villagers didn’t decide to be free-riders, and fear of political repression was not critical in the political choices.

Any comprehensive theory of peasant political action must be able to explain quiescence as well as action. Pedregal, as a nonparticipant in the national revolution, offers an ideal opportunity to study quiescence and a chance to understand this political strategy as a function of the ecological perspective. In this chapter I will examine the political story of this village between 1970 and the Sandinista victory in 1979. What economic, political, and social factors could account for quiescence at the heart of a social revolution? What political attitudes might such villagers display? Did villagers substitute other kinds of political activity for involvement in the revolution? These were the questions that drew me to Pedregal when most researchers primarily studied the revolution.

It is logical to begin the study of peasant politics with Pedregal for two reasons. First, it lies at the left of the political action spectrum and exemplifies quiescence. Second, unique among the villages in this study, it illustrates the peasant ecological community described so far only in general terms. Pedregal is an interdependent community constructed according to peasant preferences. The experience of the village also illustrates the political implications of a situation in which the members of an ecological community are more or less satisfied with their life styles. The political ecology of Pedregal made voluntary quiescence the most logical choice of political action for most villagers, but when the political ecology of a minority of villagers was subtly altered—their perceptions of the boundary of community extended—their political ecology resulted in nonviolent political action.

Community Context

Pedregal is located in the hills of the isolated department of Boaco, ninety miles east of Managua on the eastern side of Lake Nicaragua. The land in and around Pedregal is rocky and dry. Wealthy Nicaraguans who could choose to own land anywhere would never purchase land in the region. Yet peasants
who moved to the area after losing their land elsewhere have learned to survive despite the poor soil quality. Given a sufficiently large land plot, families could subsist on staple crops. The most common staple was a coarse, large-grain wheat that was ground into flour for thick tortillas and which also served as livestock feed. The sparse vegetation made the area suitable for grazing stock, and most families owned a few sheep or cattle as well as pigs and chickens. Villagers also raised beans and a few dairy cows.

Isolation, independence, and ecological harmony rather than national integration characterized the village experience and helped determine political choices and attitudes under the Somoza regime. The trail into Pedregal was itself a political factor in the peasant experience and epitomized village isolation from mainstream politics and society in Nicaragua. The village lay eight rough, rocky kilometers (4.8 miles) up into the hills from the main paved highway to the interior city of Rama, which is situated deep in the jungle of eastern Nicaragua. Travelers heading to the Atlantic coast along that highway picked up the Escondido River where the highway ends in Rama and traveled by water to the Atlantic Ocean. The approach to Pedregal was nothing but a narrow mule trail studded with huge boulders. In the dry season the trail was barely passable by four-wheel-drive jeep or on foot, horse, or mule. By foot the trek took two hours. The trail passed through streams or rivers eight times. There are no bridges, and during the rainy season, the trail, which at some points joins the riverbed, becomes an impassable torrent of mud and water. At the height of a tropical rainstorm, swift waters could rise to chest level on a man, making pedestrian travel dangerous and jeep travel impossible. A surefooted horse or mule could still manage the trip early in the rainy season, but at the height of the rains no one traveled into or out of Pedregal. Even in the village center travel was difficult, as parts of the community nestled against steep mountainsides or rested on a cliff high above the village entrance.

The low provision of public services in Pedregal further illustrated the village’s isolation from the national center of social and economic life. In the 1970s, Pedregal had no electricity or running water. Most villagers hauled water from streams. The nearest public telephone required a six hour, round-trip, walk into Teustepe. No public transport reached Pedregal, although one could flag down a bus on reaching the main highway. Until the schoolhouse was built after 1979, classes were held in private homes. Limited schooling, grades one through four, was sometimes available, although poverty and the need to work seriously limited attendance even when classes were held. People over age fifty explained, “I didn’t go to school because there wasn’t one.” Some medical care was available during the Somoza era at little or no cost in the small town of Teustepe, eight kilometers distant, or the city of Boaco, twenty-seven kilometers from the village. Even radio usage was sporadic because both radios and the batteries to operate them used up scarce currency.

In 1986 the village of Pedregal was home to over one hundred peasant fam-
families. I interviewed thirty household heads, twenty-two men and eight women. The land owned by village families supported all the villagers. Landed peasants (47 percent) lived off their own land; the landless worked for them as agrarian laborers and tilled land lent to them by the village landed. The village operated at a subsistence level with respect to basic grains, vegetables, and milk. Each family grew enough on private or borrowed land for its own consumption and supplemented the income from farming with wages.

Different aspects of Pedregal’s isolated community context reinforced each other. Geographical seclusion reinforced the need for subsistence agriculture and limited the influence of more individualistic, market-oriented patterns prevalent elsewhere in Nicaragua. Location also encouraged particular production patterns. Trips to the market were feasible only every four to six weeks during the dry season so villagers had to be quite self-sufficient and able to make or grow most of what they needed. Limited wage-employment opportunities encouraged the community system to support all villagers on resources locally available.

The land in and around Pedregal is of such poor quality that, historically, it had attracted little or no attention. Over time, deforestation and erosion had rendered the soil even less productive. Subsistence plots needed to be much larger here than in other parts of Nicaragua. Between 1970 and 1979, the average land plot among respondents was 41.6 manzanas. Respondents estimated that an average of 33.1 manzanas was necessary to support a family. (See Table 3.1) Community mutuality assured that surplus land would be used by the landless.

Questions about the quality of life in the thirty years prior to 1979 revealed the protected nature of village existence. In describing life in past decades one respondent answered, “We lived more or less well . . . We were never hungry.” Others said, “We never went hungry because the land yielded everything”; “Some years were bad, without rain, but generally life was not bad.” Although some explained that twenty or thirty years ago they and their families had been poor, many respondents recalled that soil fertility had been higher in past decades. To the extent that a decrease in living standards occurred between approximately 1940 and 1979, peasants thought that the change was primarily due to deterioration in the land itself, and the decrease was not perceived to be sufficiently severe to threaten subsistence. “Life was better then [ten to fifteen years ago]; it was easier to produce. Fifteen years ago it rained more. Now it rains less. They say it’s because of a lack of trees.”

Answers to questions about the experience of hunger and childhood dis-

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<th>Table 3.1. Pedregal: Surplus/Deficit of Community Land Ownership (in manzanas)</th>
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<td>Land needed to support average peasant family</td>
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eases as well as socioeconomic indicators support the peasants’ testimony that poverty was endemic but not desperate. Meager family and village resources precluded any luxury but did not jeopardize life itself. As children, most respondents had worked hard and had little, but survival was never in doubt. Although 53 percent of respondents recalled having gone hungry at some point in their lives, most still stressed that food shortages had been infrequent and due to natural causes rather than to a lack of land or work. “There were shortages during the summer [the Nicaraguan dry season] for lack of rain, but we never went hungry.” In some respects life even improved between 1930 and 1979, despite the decline in the soil quality. Whereas 70 percent of respondents had lost siblings to childhood diseases, only 40 percent had lost children. Among all respondents, 17 percent had owned a television (battery-powered) and 77 percent a radio prior to 1979. Only one village resident had ever owned an automobile.

The low level of education in the village indicates the extent to which the central government neglected Pedregal. In prerevolutionary times, thirteen respondents, or 43 percent, had never attended school at all. Even those who had completed the education available in the village had only four years of primary education. Illiteracy was highest among older villagers. Among all respondents, the average level of education was only 1.8 years.

In contrast to most Nicaraguan peasants, however, villagers in Pedregal usually had access to affordable medical care, thanks to the exceptional political atmosphere of the entire Boaco region and the support of other villagers. Fifty-seven percent of respondents had visited a hospital in Boaco prior to 1979, and 53 percent had visited a private physician. The cost of medical care varied somewhat with the ability to pay, as reflected in the following responses:

When you got sick you went to the hospital. We always had that.

When you had any money you went to the hospital and when you didn’t have any money, you went to the hospital anyway to see if they would give you [medicine] for free.

When you got sick you went to a doctor in Teustepe or Boaco, where they gave you the medicine for free, or at least sometimes it was free.

Only three respondents had felt they could not visit a physician or hospital and relied solely upon herbal medicines and home remedies within the village.

**Ecological Interdependence**

The peasants’ ecological perspective in Pedregal shaped their perceptions of events around them and determined their decisions about political action. Those decisions reveal an awareness of the need for interdependence and an
assumption that the protective ecological system would perform smoothly. The political story in Pedregal shows how this awareness and assumption manifested themselves and how they shaped political action. In Pedregal, peasant expectations about the ecological system were largely fulfilled. This was true even in the late 1970s, when repression and revolution raged elsewhere in Nicaragua, because the isolation of Pedregal preserved the integrity of the peasants’ ecological system, which operated according to peasant expectations of interdependence and mutual support. Community members and even individuals from the region sustained interdependence and supportive mutuality in a way that satisfied the peasant sense of systemic, ecological coherence. For most villagers, this satisfaction eliminated any motivation for protest or participation in the revolution. We can see interdependence at work in the villagers’ use of land, their medical support system, and their understanding of the natural environment. The peasants also had an effective method of responding to individuals who threatened their ecological system.

There were a few exceptions to this general rule of satisfaction and quiescence. A handful of villagers engaged in protest action against the Somoza regime. The individual experience of these villagers led them to perceive a violation in the proper functioning of the ecological system. Yet even here, their choice of action reflected their perception of the need for interdependence and their desire to preserve it.

Land Management Patterns

Prior to 1979, poverty in Pedregal had always been endemic. Each year subsistence needs remained within income only by the slimmest of margins. The peasants lived constantly aware of the proximity of catastrophe: any individual crisis (a parent’s broken leg; the death of a horse, mule, or the only dairy cow; a child’s expensive illness) could easily push a peasant family below the subsistence minimum and threaten survival. Fortunes could shift as suddenly as the winds of the rainy season. The thin measure of economic security was ever vulnerable to the whims of chance.

This precarious existence was unprotected by immediate extra-village assistance, even in a department that was not openly hostile to the peasantry. Government authority almost never made an appearance in Pedregal and, given the nature of the regime, was better absent. Medical aid lay hours distant, and the sick could only get help by going to it. The group insurance of a mutually supportive ecological system offered the only available protection against disaster. Villagers made the supportive system as robust and inclusive as possible because they knew that their own survival might eventually depend on the community.

Village relations thus benefited from a healthy reciprocity system which functioned in Pedregal in the same way that it functioned among the peasants in Southeast Asia that James Scott studied. However, the basis for its functioning was neither the sum of individual calculations, as he implies in Weapons of
the Weak,\textsuperscript{3} nor solely the result of enforced, long-standing moral norms, as he asserts in The Moral Economy of the Peasant.\textsuperscript{4} The community system in Pedregal depended on both of these and much more. It relied on a commitment to an ecological system that included individuals, the village as a whole, and the natural system that surrounded and sustained the community.

The most important evidence of reciprocity and mutual sustenance between community and individual was found in peasant land management practices. Although all land was privately owned and more than 50 percent of villagers were landless, landlessness did not cause disproportionate poverty. Most members of the community followed an unspoken rule that village land, which was legally the private property of individuals, existed for the benefit of all and was supposed to support all villagers. This rule was so basic that respondents saw no need even to discuss it and initially neglected to describe unwritten agreements for land and labor exchange. Landed peasants described their own operations without mentioning that some of their own acreage was farmed by landless villagers. When specifically asked about such arrangements, a typical response might be, “Oh, yes, José uses [some number of] hectares on the other side of that mountain.” The interchange of land and labor was so commonplace that landless villagers also neglected to mention that the land they worked was not legally theirs. Only in response to probing questions did these peasants acknowledge that the land they tilled officially belonged to another villager. Yet they were careful to emphasize that the loaned land was their only way of making a living and that the landed, therefore, held an obligation to provide their landless neighbors with land to farm. When asked about unemployment in the village before 1979, one man responded frankly, “There was no unemployment. Those with land always gave work or land to those without land.”

As a result of this system, all landless respondents had access to land free-of-charge. Most were able to scratch subsistence from plots they borrowed. Therefore, although land supported its owners, community norms also recognized that most family land plots were more than enough to support a family. They could and should be shared among landless families.

Landed families who lent out portions of their land or shared food benefited directly from their own participation in community mutuality and had individual incentives to follow community norms. There were thus individual rational reasons as well as community reasons for land sharing. In return for land use, the landless worked on the farms of their landed benefactors. Sometimes they earned a small wage, but often the labor served as payment for the land they used. Landed members of the village usually raised cattle in addition to subsistence farming. It was important to these part-time ranchers to have village labor available because the length and condition of the trail made it impossible to import labor. Those in the cattle business sometimes had to spend time away from home while buying or selling livestock. When these rancher-peasants were away from home they could rely on one or two landless
villagers to work their farms. The landless recipients of land loans felt some
obligation and responsibility toward those who provided them with this most
necessary resource. They were willing to provide such labor as was needed on
the ranch, although they spent less time on such labor than in working the
borrowed land. One respondent explained his own arrangement this way.

Question: So if you had no land, how did you make a living?
Response: Well, of course, Juan let me use part of his land so I always had plen-
ty [of land] to live on, to support the family.
Question: You mean Juan rented you enough land to live on? However much
land you wanted?
Response: No, he let me use whatever I wanted to use for free, whatever I need-
ed, free. He didn't charge me anything.
Question: He let you use it for free? No rent?
Response: Of course. What else was he supposed to do? We have to have land to
live on. How else were we supposed to live? Everyone needs land to live on, so
he let me use enough land to live on.

This respondent also explained that in return for the land he did a certain
amount of work for Juan on Juan's land. He also felt a sense of obligation. If
Juan asked him to work on a day he had planned to do otherwise or if Juan
needed help with some task, this respondent always felt it was his duty to give
Juan a hand.

In the dialogue above, the reader will note my incredulity about the ar-
range ment the respondent is describing. The norms he describes reveal an un-
underlying awareness of interdependence between himself and Juan. This aware-
ness is part of the peasant political ecology. To someone like myself, who
belongs to a contemporary urban society, these norms seemed strange and
foreign, particularly after extensive fieldwork elsewhere in Nicaragua. Yet my
surprise seemed unnatural and ill-informed to this peasant respondent. The
underlying interdependent norms that governed his world seemed so natural
to him that he saw no need even to discuss them and was astounded at my ig-
norance. Norms are often such an inherent part of human society that people
do not even recognize that they are being governed by such underlying expec-
tations; consequently, they are surprised when others raise questions about
these societal norms and do not treat them as inherently natural and universal.

Land management in Pedregal exemplifies ecological interdependence
within the village. Although the reciprocal land/labor exchanges that existed
between individual landed villagers and one or more of their landless neigh-
bors can be partially explained by individualist and communitarian incen-
tives, a complete understanding of the full interactive system can be achieved
only when one understands the political ecology that underlies social interac-
tion. Both landed and landless participants in land/labor exchanges stood to
gain individually and economically by such participation. Yet rational calcu-
lations of immediate self-interest cannot explain the extensive prevalence of
land sharing or the fact that borrowed land was used free of monetary charge. Short-term immediate self-interest within the rational-actor model would have led landed peasants to charge rent, particularly as exorbitant rental rates were the national norm.

Traditional norms of a moral economy that strive to protect the subsistence of all villagers come closer to explaining Pedregal’s land-sharing arrangements than do individual incentives. Yet this explanation is also limited. It stresses reciprocity between two individuals rather than a generalized system that describes multiple interdependent ties. Figure 3.1 illustrates the difference between reciprocity and ecological interdependence. Reciprocity describes bilateral relationships between two people: between A and B, between B and E, etc. The ecological relationships within a peasant community, like the peasant reality, are more complex, more interdependent. A helps B but B helps E, who indirectly aids A. Relationships are more interdependent. Each participant does not necessarily receive support directly from the person to whom he or she gave support.

In the quotation above, a landless respondent explains his own access to land not in terms of patronage ties of reciprocity, as the moral economy theory would argue, but in terms of access to a general system to which all villagers belong—an ecological system. Land/labor exchange contributed to building and sustaining community and a group insurance system, both essential components of the ecological system. In Pedregal, however, interdependent support was not limited to land usage.

**Medical Support System**

Although one or two landless recipients of borrowed land might be adequate to help bring cattle to market or to work a farm during the owner’s absence, in some contexts the help of one or two other people was not sufficient. The
need for urgent medical care is one such context. The system of community action at times of sudden illness or an accident clearly shows how the village system functioned to preserve life through communal input. The trip from the village to a physician in Teustepe or a hospital in Boaco was long and expensive, especially if the patient was unable to walk. When the family of a sick person lacked the resources to provide transport, it was village custom for the entire community to pool resources, time, and energy to take the sick person to the source of medical care. This form of support was most frequently activated in response to a difficult childbirth, but it also worked for accidents and illnesses, such as Panchito’s encounter with the snake described in Chapter 1. Furthermore, if the patient anticipated medical fees and lacked the wherewithal to pay them, villagers often took up a collection to cover at least part of the fees, as they did for Panchito’s mother, Maria. Villagers and families who had benefited from such collective action were expected to pull their weight when crisis befell someone else, and usually they were eager to do so because the peasants were acutely aware that their participation in the community system was noticed and remembered by the village at large.

I have called this mutual support in times of illness a medical support system. It is part of the ecological system that sustains, indeed saves, individual life. It is a system in which individuals participate out of an awareness of the way in which their lives are dependent on the maintenance of viable, cooperative community. Individual incentives of the traditional rational-actor sort cannot account for individual participation in the medical support system in Pedregal. A rational-actor model can neither predict nor explain individual participation in the system. The supposedly rational free-rider would pay a heavy individual price for free-ridership. These peasants clearly recognize the foolishness of free-ridership and are more individually rational and foresightful than the free-rider. On the other hand, these peasants do not participate in the medical support system solely out of adherence to traditional norms or out of superior altruism and morality. Although the support system is supported by village norms, individuals also stand to gain a good deal by their participation in it. Accordingly, their support for community and the community itself are stronger and more resilient than support based on a system that relies solely upon norms and tradition, such as the traditional moral economy.

The Natural Ecosystem

Beyond immediate human interaction within the village, the peasants’ ecological awareness of interdependence between themselves and their natural environment also influenced action, choices, and attitudes. Like peasants in many places, Pedregal villagers were caught in a bind between their need for immediate survival and their long-term reliance on the natural environment for sustenance. Part of that bind consisted of the fact that their awareness of envi-
Environmental vulnerability extended beyond their actual power to fully protect the environment. Where they had the power to act in protective ways toward the ecosystem without endangering their immediate survival they tried to protect the environment. Where they lacked such power, they nevertheless remained aware of environmental interdependence. Their concern showed in their interviews.

In the area of soil/population management the peasants were not powerless and took measures to protect the land from overpopulation. Although the villagers could not rely on any official policy of population settlement, they did what they could through word of mouth to avoid unsuitable levels of immigration. Aware of the soil’s limited carrying capacity, the peasants had settled sparsely in the region, and they discouraged immigration from outside that might overtax the natural system and endanger the wider community. Outside the local area would-be migrants I interviewed had gotten the message and did not consider moving to the Pedregal area. They knew its soil was inhospitable. Essentially, Pedregal peasants had been instrumental in giving the area a reputation for difficult farming. The success of the peasant’s efforts to restrict migration explains the fact that Pedregal’s soil still supports its population.5

In the area of scientific soil protection the peasants had less power and were less effective in maintaining soil quality. Soil in the area was subject to gradual erosion and deterioration. It was becoming more arid. Villagers understood the processes of deterioration and correctly claimed that erosion was due to deforestation, which had also brought a decline in rainfall. Whereas villagers were aware of the wider ecosystem and were concerned about threats to it, there was little they could do about the problem beyond migration control, which they had already done. Wood was the only local source of fuel for cooking and heat during the rainy season. Farming and cattle, both incompatible with reforestation, were the only methods by which villagers could survive. This situation reflects the bind villagers experienced between the demands of immediate survival and what they knew to be the long-term requirements of ecosystem protection. They were powerless within this broader system to affect extra-village forces that might have helped them to relieve the pressure on the ecosystem. Such outside pressures, for example, forced them to cut trees in order to meet their own fuel needs when they would have preferred access to some other type of fuel. Under ideal circumstances they would have had access to another fuel type, but in a political climate where survival depended upon minimizing outside contact, demanding alternative fuel options would have been unrealistic and dangerous.

The peasants’ sense of interdependence between themselves and their natural environment manifested itself first in awareness and concern and second in action where possible. Most interviews that spoke of life in the past compared past and present soil and rainfall conditions in a worried fashion. Many respondents expressed concern without having solutions:
In the past the soil was better. We can still get along, but I wish there was something we could do to stop the soil deterioration.

We need more rain. It used to rain much more here, when my grandfather was farming. I think we need more trees but we also need the wood. The situation is very bad with the soil erosion. I wish they would help us to maintain the soil but Nicaragua is so poor there is no money for anything.

The interviews reflect a situation the villagers found frustrating. With their limited power they did what they could to restrain immigration and protect the soil. In the broader national context, however, they were powerless and could only worry. Their concern is itself evidence of their awareness of ecological interdependence between themselves and nature. Their willingness to take action where they could reveals their commitment to sustaining the ecological system, both natural and social. As natural environmentalists their frustration is akin to that of many environmental groups in developed and wealthy countries today. Their knowledge that current practices may endanger long-term survival increases the sense of precariousness in the village. It might even have increased their commitment to mutual support within the community.

**Ecological Equilibrium within the Village**

Within their own village, however, the peasants had more control over their own lives and the lives of their neighbors than they did over external factors. Within the village, they could and did construct an interdependent, mutually supportive system that protected individual life and community. Although they had no control over larger external forces that threatened the system, they could sanction village members who refused to support the ecological system or who tried to be independent and refused to support others. The villagers’ treatment of Pedregal’s “affluent” families illustrates clearly what form these sanctions took.

Within the village, three respondents enjoyed a level of affluence above most of their neighbors. Pedro, Carlos, and Jorge had access to luxuries, such as electricity or an automobile, that were not available to most villagers.6 Pedro had married a woman of some independent means. Carlos owned more land than many villagers and was a skilled rancher. Jorge had a level of education above the village average and used his education to learn and apply superior agricultural techniques that increased the productivity of his land. All three of these villagers lived in houses that were larger than average and were more solidly built than other village dwellings. Jorge owned a fine horse and had installed a shower of which he was immensely proud. Pedro had both a small television and an ancient phonograph. Carlos had a refrigerator on display on his front porch. Such affluence brought an illusion of independence to which Pedro and Carlos succumbed by defying community norms of mutual support. Jorge, however, continued to partake of village mutuality, contribut-
ing generously to the group insurance system.

Villagers’ perceptions and treatment of these three individuals exemplify their efforts to protect the village system. The behavior of these three individuals underscores the extent to which they understood that relative affluence did not replace individual dependence upon the community. Jorge lent land and sometimes gave away homemade milk and cheese. During one of my visits to his home, a young boy came to purchase homemade cheese but only had enough money for a small portion. Jorge’s wife insisted that the boy take a larger cake of cheese and told him not to worry about the price difference. Jorge received the gratitude, affection, and kind opinion of his neighbors. Although some villagers resented his relative wealth, many acknowledged his kindness and generosity. When he was temporarily disabled and recovering from an operation, his wife had no difficulty in finding villagers who would take over his farming and ranching duties while he recuperated. During my visits to the house there seemed to be a perpetual surplus of young neighbors hanging about, waiting to be asked to take over some small chore for Jorge or his wife.

Pedro and Carlos, on the other hand, tried to be independent of community. They defined rationality in terms of short-term gain to themselves and their families alone, but this definition was uncommon in the village and was not perceived as acceptable. The neighbors considered Pedro and Carlos stingy and arrogant, and these two men paid a high price for that perception among their neighbors. Pedro and Carlos had inspired a great deal of bitterness and resentment. Their poorer neighbors criticized them with relish. Both were frequently the victims of spiteful remarks, malicious gossip, and dirty tricks. Both lived in a state of paranoia and suspicion, cynically certain that they would soon be victimized again. They spoke with harsh bitterness about the dishonesty and laziness of their neighbors who were, they assured me, always ready to exploit an advantage. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Pedro complained vehemently, both during his interview and at every subsequent opportunity, that his sheep were always being stolen. He frequently found that his fences had been mysteriously cut and that the animals had wandered away. Sometimes the sheep were never recovered. He also declared that someone was always pilfering the vegetables from his garden. He was never able to catch the thief and none of his neighbors ever seemed to know anything about the crime. The theory of political ecology explains why the short-term calculations of Pedro and Carlos were not rational at all and in fact elicited a high price, both for the individuals and for the community. By being short-term, self-interested maximizers Pedro and Carlos ignored the negative foreseeable consequences of their behavior. Fortunately both for the individuals and for the village, Pedro and Carlos are atypical in Pedregal, and most villagers reason more like Jorge and Juan. Jorge subscribed to a more rational method of calculation and one that better served both him and the community.

Juan also made the same calculation of foreseeable consequences when he
carried Panchito to the doctor. Jorge and Juan acted in ways that did not maximize short-term gain but that yielded more in the foreseeable future and that protected against risk. At the same time, Jorge’s and Juan’s behavior is not explained by altruism or by community norms alone. Tradition alone cannot explain the extent of their generosity or of their commitment to the ecological system. Each man has real, personal gains to be made by contributing to community. Each can calculate real or potential rewards that have accrued or could accrue to them from community input. In fact, Jorge’s entire harvest and annual income the year he was disabled came through community labor. Moreover, each man perceives himself as dependent upon the entire community and not just upon one or two neighbors. Each can easily imagine real financial loss resulting from the loss of community support. Despite their relative affluence, these four villagers are dependent upon the village system. Even in good times and without a personal crisis they need the goodwill of their neighbors.

Village Contact with the Somoza Regime

The community system of Pedregal functioned with an ecological interdependence most peasants found satisfactory. This interdependence extended even beyond Pedregal to some members of service professions in nearby towns. The continued survival of any sense of ecological community was most unusual in Nicaragua under the Somozas, and it resulted from the absence of repressive and exploitive forces predominant elsewhere as well as from regional isolation. The regime’s benign neglect of the entire Boaco region also contributed to Pedregal’s unusual experience. Neglect was the best the villagers could hope for, inasmuch as regime involvement usually brought grief to the local population. The fact that the region escaped land concentration and the repressive political apparatus that enforced it and epitomized regime rule elsewhere had a crucial impact on the reality of peasant life. A good example of this impact can be seen in Pedregal’s money lending practices. In most of Nicaragua, banks were unwilling to lend to peasants, most of whom could not survive on the land and employment that were available. Instead, the peasants turned to private loan shark lawyers, who charged interest rates anywhere from 50 to 300 percent and forced bankrupt peasants to use their land as collateral. When families could not repay the loan and interest they lost their land. This pattern was critical in the gradual process of land concentration prevalent elsewhere in Nicaragua.

Pedregal was different. Peasants were usually able within the community system to make ends meet and did not need to borrow money. Even when they did borrow, their experience was benign:

There were no lawyers lending money here. I borrowed money from a friend sometimes but normally from the bank.

They [the banks] had programs of two-year loans and I borrowed money sev-
eral times after I got land. Without land they wouldn’t loan you anything. Each time they lent me 2,000 córdobas. Sometimes it was difficult to repay, but I always did. I even have a letter congratulating me on always having made my payments on time.

Interest was low and it was no problem either to get the loan or to repay it. You just had to show your [land] title, that’s all.

Interest rates were between 4 percent and 6 percent. Of those who had borrowed, all but one had been able to repay the loan. No one had lost land as a result of borrowing money.

Another hardship characteristic of Nicaraguan peasant life but absent from Pedregal was the experience of migratory labor. During the harvests large landlords needed plenty of labor, and peasants who had no alternative flocked to take advantage of the miserable wages. The labor experience during migration was cruel and frequently politicizing for migrants. Circumstances in Pedregal had made survival easier and migration unnecessary. Villagers who left did so voluntarily in search of an urban life and were not forced to travel every year.

A third component of the regime’s repressive apparatus was the National Guard. Professionally trained and equipped, the Guard acted as the dictator’s personal army. In Nicaragua the Guard’s purpose was to protect, defend, and enforce regime policies and to prevent or repress resistance. The Guard itself was extremely corrupt. Its tactics toward the general population included theft, false arrest, torture, and indiscriminate murder. In most parts of Nicaragua this paramilitary force inspired fear and hatred among the population. Pedregal was also atypical of the rest of Nicaragua in its experience with the National Guard, in large part due to the isolation of the village.

The Guard came here to take care of parties. Sometimes they hit someone but they didn’t come very frequently. It was really far and difficult for them to get here. They were too lazy to come so far.

They came here very little, and when they came, it was for some problem with a drunk or a fight.

Sometimes they came through here looking to see who was making moonshine, and they broke the bottles. If they caught you, they put you in jail for two days and then nothing. That was all.

Tolerance and matter-of-fact acceptance replaced the terror with which the rest of Nicaragua viewed the Guard.

They never came through here to mistreat us. Some of them were mean, others were not. It depended on what you had done. If I never did anything nothing happened to me. The way you saw them depended on if it was a mean one or a good one. Many people were afraid of them, but some of them were good peo-
Villagers were aware of the Guard’s reputation elsewhere but were influenced by its behavior in their immediate vicinity.

I felt afraid when I saw them because I knew they arrested people and were unjust to people and fired if you tried to run away. But they came here only to arrest those who made moonshine.

I saw them in [local cities]. They had ugly faces and I was afraid of them. But they never arrested me or anyone from my family, and they never killed anyone from my family.

They came through here, but they didn’t do anything. They seemed normal to me.

Many Pedregal respondents had had no contact whatsoever with the Guard. A few had brushed up against the law without being mistreated.

**Pedregal in the Revolution: Quiescence and Political Ecology**

While revolution raged elsewhere in Nicaragua, Pedregal remained a quiet corner where life was still fairly good and from which the ravages of the struggle were still distant. The unusual regional experience of Pedregal made the poverty of local rural life tolerable and permitted an on-going community system of protective, interdependent mutuality. These qualities of life in Pedregal resulted from and reinforced each other. To the extent that villagers knew about the revolution most surmised that it was something they wanted to avoid. They had some awareness that repression elsewhere was brutal and that revolutionary involvement increased one’s vulnerability to repression. Villagers wanted to protect their tranquil corner and to survive the repression. They hoped that uninvolvment and ignorance of the struggle would help keep them safe. Not surprisingly, eastern Nicaragua comprised the weakest link in the revolutionary offensive against Somoza. This was true both militarily and ideologically.

Isolation separated most villagers not only from the regime but also from the revolutionary struggle. Guerrilla presence was low in the region, and most villagers were only dimly aware of an ongoing struggle. Most held little sympathy for the guerrillas and had not collaborated with the FSLN. Again, the two factors reinforced each other since low village sympathy for the revolution discouraged FSLN recruitment efforts there. Villagers were not so much anti-revolutionary as absorbed by their struggle for survival and oblivious to the politics of the outside world. Peasant comments describe the local atmosphere prior to 1979:
I didn’t collaborate with the Frente. I didn’t know anything about that, and I didn’t want to know. All I did was work.

I just worked all the time. I don’t even know if there were others from the village collaborating [with the Frente]. That was none of my business.

I had a friend who was a combatant for the Frente. He came to my house fleeing from something. I hid him and helped him. I wasn’t afraid because no one realized it [what I was doing]. But I never did anything else to help, only that. Before the triumph the Frente never came through here.

For the most part, villagers had no reason to become involved in a risky, bloody struggle and every reason to hope that life would continue in its present form. Although they did not look kindly upon the Somoza dictatorship, they had also escaped its worst effects. Some of the peasant contacts beyond the village, particularly with the medical community, even helped sustain life and community. Even more importantly from the village perspective, the Somoza regime allowed village life to proceed according to peasant preferences without destructive interference. Many peasant villagers are most content to continue with life free of external involvement or influence. This position is understandable given the extent to which village life has been finely tuned over many generations to protect life and provide adequate survival without any pretense at utopia or perfect egalitarianism. Life in prerevolutionary Pedregal illustrates how well this system can work to ensure life even when there are tensions and uncooperative members within the village and where poverty is endemic. Most villagers were unaware of the wealth and luxury that some Nicaraguans enjoyed, so they had few aspirations for a better life style. To the extent that villagers were dimly aware of life beyond village confines, they realized that they were far better off than most rural Nicaraguans.

Exceptions to the Rule: Activism within a Broader Ecological View

Within Pedregal, a handful of villagers were exceptions to the general rule of satisfaction and voluntary quiescence. These villagers became involved in the revolutionary struggle against Somoza. They attended meetings and talked with people about the need to support the revolution. They signed official petitions to the government protesting disappearances and massacres. These petitions sometimes addressed government treatment of specific persons and sometimes generally condemned human rights violations by the Somoza regime. Their actions were mild in comparison with the guerrilla activity of many peasants in other parts of Nicaragua (see, for example, Chapter 6), yet, viewed in the repressive context of the dictatorship, their choices were both dangerous and courageous. Unlike the guerrillas, their position against the regime was public, written, and potentially traceable. In prerevolutionary Nicaragua, petitions were extremely risky. In less isolated regions, peasants
saw them as suicidal. The story of the villagers who participated in the revolu-
tionary struggle is of interest because it illustrates how an ecological under-
standing of rural society and the world beyond influences political action.

Twenty percent of Pedregal residents became actively involved with the
Catholic Church through a priest from a nearby town. During evening Bible
study, these peasants learned Liberation Theology and became Delegates of
the Word, a distinction bestowed by the Church. As one villager expressed it,
“The Church taught us that we had a right to live with more dignity, to work,
to organize. It raised our consciousness and made us want to get involved in
the [revolutionary] struggle.” Marcos, an older member of the community
and a deeply religious man, had been a delegate longer than anyone else in
the village and had risen to a position of leadership among the delegates. In 1967,
prior to becoming a delegate, he had been a member of the Conservative par-
ty and a loyal follower of the presidential candidate for that year. As a result
of Fernando Agüero’s pact with Anastasio Somoza that year, he became extreme-
ly disillusioned with party politics in Nicaragua and with the Conservative
party. This is his story:

We voted [prior to 1979] because they forced us to but also because we thought
the Conservatives were an option. But they only deceived us, because Somoza
always won. We followed Agüero, and the only thing he did was deceive us.
There was a massacre the 22nd of January, 1967, thanks to him, and my father
was killed in the gunfire. After that, we decided not to think about elections but
to think about force.

I have been a delegate since 1967, and the work that we did was to raise the
people’s consciousness. We showed the analogy between the slaves in the Bible
and the way the people lived. Everything was very clandestine in Church semin-
aries. Those seminaries included representatives from the Frente. In some of
those seminaries, there were even priests from the United States, although not
from the government of the United States. Sometimes the Guard came [to the
meetings] in civilian clothes to spy. We thought that what we were doing was
not wrong, and we trusted in the protection of the Lord. We did it because of
the poverty we lived in. We did it because others lived marginalized, and the
work was badly paid. The boss paid whatever he wanted to. If the landlord gave
money to a sick person, it was not a gift. He took it out of the sick person’s
salary. We gave all these examples to the people and explained what the land-
lords were like. We made skits to represent the government and the landlords.
But that was dangerous, those skits, because it was illegal to talk about the gov-
ernment or represent the government that way. Even a child talking innocently
about the skits could have betrayed us.

Other villagers followed Marcos’s example and became involved with the rev-
olution.

I became involved to dedicate my life to the movement for liberation. We did it
for the liberation of the people, for a change, to have something different.

Father León organized us as delegates. He called us for meetings in the Curate House. I became a delegate because I was interested in discovering things about Christ, and I liked it. I started as a delegate in 1975. I collaborated indirectly with the Frente, but I didn’t want to become involved in the guerrilla war. The Frente met with us and some of us went to fight with them, but I was more of a follower and wasn’t so involved as to go and fight. It was dangerous to become involved, to make that decision, but I did it because we had to advance. I opted for the civic struggle, for things like meetings. Once I participated in a denunciation of the disappearance of four-hundred peasants. We signed a petition denouncing that. I was not afraid because it was something just. It was more important to worry about what is just than about your own safety. If you worry too much about your own safety, you don’t live very much.

These revolutionary activists were important exceptions to the village rule of quiescence. From a purely personal point of view they had as little to complain about as did their neighbors. In discussing their revolutionary activism, they were careful to explain that they had not become involved in reaction to personal grievances:

We, here, suffered nothing. Nothing happened here; it was very quiet. We joined because of what was happening to others. After all, we are all part of Nicaragua.

They didn’t bother us here, but we wanted a change, knowing what was happening to other people outside of here. We realized that the Guard and the Somocistas were bloody people, and we wanted them to stop persecuting the young people as they did. Besides, you never knew when they would arrive here.

The behavior of these activists is particularly useful in illustrating the inadequacy of unidimensional individualist motivation in explaining political action. These peasants had no individual incentive whatsoever for their actions, and every individual incentive to remain quiescent. There was no economic gain to signing petitions, and the secrecy of their actions precluded even the rewards of status and power. In fact, from a short-term, maximizing perspective there was no logical reason for their choices. Their ecological perspective, however, and their consideration of the foreseeable consequences of action offer a more appropriate explanation for their activism. These quotations illustrate that religious involvement broadened the visible ecological system and made individuals aware of living within a larger world than the village alone. Religion allowed them to see that the pond of village life was actually a small lake of Nicaraguan society. Religious education interacted with the peasant sense of an ecological system and caused them to define community more broadly than did their neighbors. Through the church they became aware of
system dissonance. They realized that Somoza’s assaults on systemic harmony beyond the village posed a danger for village tranquility as well as for community and individual survival. They acted to defend both the wider community and themselves within it.

The ecological understanding of these activists was not necessarily superior to that of their fellow villagers. Nor were they more intelligent. They shared the same political ecology that I am arguing belongs to the peasantry in general. The difference lies in where they placed the edges of the pond and how they defined the boundaries of community. Marcos and those who followed his example defined community as including Nicaraguans who did not live in Pedregal. They saw danger and injustice toward community members outside the village as ultimately a threat to Pedregal and to community members inside the village. At the same time pragmatism, individual concerns, and the need to preserve self by protecting community helped define their actions. In their activism these peasants took care not to place either themselves or Pedregal in any unnecessary danger. Village isolation allowed them to keep a fairly low profile while also taking some action in support of the revolution.

The Guard never realized that we were going around having meetings and raising the people’s consciousness. Father León always said we were just having religious meetings.

I never had any problems with the Guard for being a delegate because there weren’t many activities.

The Guard never realized that we were having these meetings.

We were always very careful. We always came and went with Bibles in our hands for protection and no one knew what we were doing.

Implications for Theory

An analysis of the data on political action within Pedregal and of political attitudes among the minority of activists confirms the description of the village provided thus far and illustrates how understanding the peasants’ ecological perspective helps explain political action. Pedregal as a whole falls to the left of the spectrum of political activity presented in Figure 3.2. As was characteristic in all villages, the area of dissonance fell to the more assertive end of village experience and, in Pedregal, focused on petitions. Most villagers opted for quiescence, and all rejected nonviolent action such as demonstrations, strikes, and land invasion as well as violence. Disagreement surrounded the signing of petitions; some villagers favored it and others did not.

Given what villagers saw as the satisfactory nature of life in Pedregal, it is not surprising that economic and socioeconomic factors had no significant effect on attitudes about the signing of petitions that denounced the regime.
The ownership of land and the size of land plot had no significant effect on the attitudes toward petitions. This finding is in accordance with what we would expect from a community system in which the land supports all villagers adequately and the landless have access to sufficient land for subsistence. Similarly, socioeconomic factors (experience with hunger, sibling or children’s deaths to preventable disease, level of education) had no significant relationship to attitudes toward petitions. This finding supports the existence of an egalitarian community in which socioeconomic experiences do not differ substantially and where the level of living has been roughly equal among villagers.

The only independent variable that had any significant relationship to attitudes toward political action, and determined individual position on the area of dissonance (petitions), was the perception of injustice in the world around the village. In Pedregal, this perception was related to religious experience. Most respondents (76.7 percent), perceived no violation to their sense of community and a just functioning of the world, and most (80 percent) did not consider petitions an acceptable form of political action. The repressive char-

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<th>Perception of Injustice</th>
<th>Acceptability of Petitions (row percentages)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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*Note: Chi-square = 1.40916, Tau B = .0448. Confidence level = 95 percent.*
acter of the Somoza regime and the public record of one’s name as a petition signer must have been a powerful disincentive even for those who perceived injustice around them. Among the minority who defined community boundaries more broadly and perceived injustice resulting from regime policies, the inclination toward activism in the form of petitions was decidedly stronger. Among those who perceived no injustice, only 13 percent found petitioning acceptable; among those who perceived injustice, 42 percent found petitions acceptable (see Table 3.2).

The results presented in Table 3.2 are tentative because of the relatively low number of cases, that is, villagers interviewed (N = 30). However, results at a confidence level of 95 percent even with N = 30 are noteworthy and suggest a clear relationship between perceived injustice and political action in Pedregal.

Conclusion

The case of Pedregal makes a valuable contribution to the central argument of this book. Its story provides a grass roots example of the ecological community system to which most peasants aspire and hope to create, if given an opportunity. It also illustrates the political implications of an ecological sense of community. It shows how the peasant understanding of interdependence led many villagers to prefer nonparticipation when involvement was dangerous. An understanding of the peasants’ ecological perspective helps us to see how, even within the same village, different definitions of community will lead to different choices of political action. In this case the peasants’ ecological perspective explains both quiescence and deviations from quiescence among some villagers. The story of Pedregal underscores the efficacious political capacity of the peasantry even in an isolated village secluded from mainstream political life. In doing so, it raises questions about derogatory stereotypes of politically inactive peasantry that often appear in literature about the peasant class. The residents of Pedregal have taught us that quiescence need not result from fear, ignorance, false consciousness, or an inadequate and inaccurate world view. Rather, it may be a deliberate, thoughtful choice that reflects social and political reality. It may be the most appropriate choice in satisfactory circumstances in which protest would be unnecessary or counterproductive. Quiescence can thus be a deliberate political statement just as protest or resistance can be.