The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant: Calculation and Community.

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Theories of peasant politics have been notably deficient in their treatment of collective nonviolent forms of peasant political action. For the most part, the field of peasant studies has ignored these activities, even though they are far more common than rebellion or revolution and far less costly for the peasantry. In the past, theories of peasant political action have focused heavily on violence and quiescence. The implication of such scholarly focus is that peasants are either rebellious or quiescent and that they are not capable of or interested in participatory political action. The assumption, it would seem, is that peasants seek either to destroy the current system or to withdraw from it entirely, but never to adapt to it and integrate with it in a realistic and modern fashion. This either/or theoretical approach flies in the face of numerous descriptive studies of the peasantry that find peasants to be an aware and involved sector of the population that wishes to integrate into modern society. Peasant political action results from peasant desires to maximize individual gain, protect community, and generally get a fair shake from society. It is more realistic, therefore, to view collective political action as part of the general repertoire of tactics that peasants use in their struggle for survival. In fact, in a modern and increasingly integrated world, political action that addresses and deals with the modern society seems, in most circumstances, far more likely to enhance peasant survival than either quiescence or rebellion.

The theory of political ecology is unique among theories of peasant political action in that it helps to explain collective nonviolence. It uncovers a peasant perspective on society in which peasants perceive themselves as participants, having both rights and responsibilities in the wider society. Since the theory recognizes peasants as participants in society, as opposed to the traditional view of them as outside of society, the theory of political ecology logically addresses participatory and reformist collective nonviolence that is neither withdrawn (as quiescence is) nor destructive (as rebellion is). The peasant perspective on interdependence extends beyond the village to include wider society and is both adaptable and flexible in the context of a changing,
modern world. As a result, peasants willingly draw on both traditional and new forms of action in their effort to maximize survival chances. Collective nonviolent political action is particularly relevant to peasant survival today, at a time when the state and national economy increasingly touch the peasant world and peasant agriculture is integrated into society. Because it explains the choice of collective nonviolence as well as quiescence and rebellion, the theory of political ecology offers a more updated and realistic understanding of peasant politics than was previously available.

This next case study of nonviolent protest shows how the peasant ecological understanding of interdependence led the villagers of San Luis, Costa Rica, to see a need for collective nonviolent action of a certain kind. The theory of political ecology shows how these villagers perceived interdependence among themselves, their village, and their society. They became convinced that that interdependence was endangered and with it their own survival as a community and as individuals. At the same time, they saw collective nonviolence as more conducive to their own well-being than rejection or overthrow of the society as a whole. They sought to improve their position in Costa Rican society and thereby to improve the nation rather than to destroy it in a revolutionary sense. They wanted to reform the status quo in a constructive fashion rather than to reject it entirely.

The action they undertook, both as individuals and as a community, was motivated by both individualistic and communitarian concerns. Like the villagers in Pedregal, San Luis villagers did not act purely out of self-interest nor purely from altruism. The nature of the action and the reward in this story are both of the type that are most vulnerable to sabotage by free-riders in traditional rational-actor theory. In fact, free-ridership was not much of a problem in San Luis. Instead, peasants adopted a responsible rational approach because they perceived the value of helping to preserve community. Their calculations were based on foreseeable consequences as well as on considerations of immediate personal gain. Moreover, far from exemplifying adherence to tradition or a moral economy, their actions illustrate the capacity of an adaptable village successfully keeping pace with the modern world while also maintaining interdependence among villagers and maximizing the chances of survival. Although anger and moral outrage were clearly a part of the motivating force in San Luis, these peasants acted long before subsistence became threatened. In an integrated society, there was no need to wait until matters reached such a dire point. Instead, villagers acted as modern members of contemporary society.

With the San Luis story, this study moves away from quiescence and into the realm of organized political action; this chapter directly addresses the question of nonviolent protest action such as petitions, demonstrations, and strikes. The experience of San Luis, an activist peasant community, exemplifies the use of these tactics in an arena of democratic politics where certain rules and expectations define the limits and patterns of political action. Ques-
tions about nonviolent protest include what kind of community experience would elicit collective protest that was also carefully nonviolent? What kind of world view would cause peasants to deliberately place themselves in the middle of the political spectrum, between quiescence and collective violence?

Community Context

Although the concept of a “typical” Costa Rican village is nebulous and imprecise, San Luis comes about as close to that stereotype as is possible. Historically, it has been a village of family farmers growing Costa Rica’s oldest national crop, coffee.1 San Luis lay within the southern tip of Alajuela province, nestled among the mountains that surround the Central Valley. This is coffee country, and villagers had at least three generations of local experience as coffee-producing smallholders. Because staple crops (beans, corn, and rice) did not grow well at the village altitude, the profit from coffee went to purchase subsistence foods.

Public services in San Luis were indicative of the political, economic, and geographic centrality of the region and of the extent to which the village had been included in the process of national development. A paved two-lane road wound up the mountainside, crossed several cement bridges, and reached to the far end of the village. In the center of the community stood a church, a primary school (grades one through six), a canteen and local store, and a public telephone. Frequent bus service connected the village with the city of Grecia, which was seven miles away and had a health center, hospital, and secondary school (grades seven through eleven). Older children could use the bus to commute to secondary school. From Grecia, buses connected daily with all parts of Costa Rica. When the main Pan-American highway was only a winding mountain road, it cut directly through Grecia. Now a superhighway passes eight kilometers from the center of Grecia. Villagers traveled frequently between San Luis and either Grecia or the capital, San José. A few villagers had even sent children to live with relatives in San José while attending school.

The village was thoroughly integrated into the market economy. Although soil fertility was even greater in the past, land in San Luis was still highly productive for coffee. The elevation produced rich coffee beans, although the plants themselves took slightly longer to mature than they would at lower altitudes. Peasants sold their coffee to local cooperatives, from which it went to the national market or to national export houses. The living afforded by selling coffee and buying food was better than that enjoyed by staple crop producers elsewhere in Costa Rica. Peasants depended on the village store for groceries and on shops in Grecia for clothing. They purchased tools in San José or through local cooperatives.

More than one hundred families lived in San Luis. All but two family heads earned their living in agriculture working either their own land or that of others. I interviewed thirty heads of household, twenty-eight men and two
women. The majority were long-term residents; the most recent arrivals had been there more than ten years. Most respondents were members of families who had owned land in the village for several generations, and many community residents were related either by blood or marriage. Sixty-three percent of respondents owned their own land.

One threat to coffee farming came from the nearby volcano, Poás. In the early 1950s Poás spewed out clouds of ashes that spread over the mountaintops for miles around. In San Luís that was a time of hardship, unemployment, and forced emigration. After a few years, however, the peasants who stayed had revived the local coffee industry. In 1988, Poás again emitted a steady stream of gas and later ash although the quantity was less than in the 1950s. The gas killed the coffee tree leaves and caused substantial financial loss among some of the coffee farmers, primarily those located farthest up the mountain and directly downwind from the volcano.

Despite the threat of Poás, San Luís had led a relatively charmed existence. Atypical in Central America, San Luís had avoided elite land concentration and peasant landlessness. Yeoman peasant farmers settled in the village in the early years of this century, and this tradition has continued into the present. Over time the peasants had been able to collect a larger percentage of the profit from their crop. Four decades ago peasants sold their freshly picked coffee to merchants who transported it to processing houses. This buyers’ market allowed the merchants to dictate very low prices and to sell the beans for prices far above those offered to the peasant producers. During the progressive administrations of José Figueres in the 1950s and 1960s, the state helped the peasants form processing cooperatives owned and managed collectively by villagers from San Luís and elsewhere. Subsequently, the peasants sold their coffee to the cooperatives and processed it locally, eliminating the merchant middlemen and improving peasant profits. The co-ops, however, were economic institutions and were constitutionally prohibited from participation in national politics.

Land plot size illustrated the extent to which small-holders prevailed in this village. Respondents owned an average of 11.5 manzanas. Thirty-seven percent of the interviewees owned a land plot too small to support them. They supplemented farming with agricultural labor. Pressure on the land had increased gradually with immigration and population growth. Village landlessness went back less than a generation, and most landless villagers had migrated to San Luís from other areas of Costa Rica. Respondents’ fathers had owned an average of 13.26 manzanas.

Rich soil quality and a profitable cash crop meant that the carrying capacity of the land was much higher than in Pedregal. Respondents estimated that a family needed 5.75 manzanas of village land to support itself. This small amount would only be adequate, they qualified, if the peasant family used the land to grow and sell coffee and utilized appropriate levels of technology, particularly fertilizer. Even so, the low figure is excellent testimony to the fertility
Table 4.1. San Luis: Surplus/Deficit of Community Land Ownership (in manzanas)

| Land needed to support average peasant family | 5.75  |
| Average village land ownership               | 11.5  |
| Average surplus                              | 5.75  |

of San Luis land. Comparing the average amount of land owned in the village (11.5 manzanas) with the minimum considered necessary to sustain a family (5.75 manzanas) we can see that those who owned land had no trouble making a living and could afford to share the product of their land with others. (See Table 4.1.)

Moving from Pedregal to San Luis affords quite a contrast, as San Luis was the most well-to-do village in this study. Although older respondents remembered that life in the past had been harder, San Luis residents had always fared well by peasant standards. Many houses were cement and the wood houses were solid and painted. Everyone wore shoes and most children had school uniforms. Forty-three percent of respondents owned at least one car or jeep, and 6 percent owned tractors. Thirteen percent had telephones in their homes, and 93 percent owned at least one TV. Only one respondent ever remembered going hungry. In the living memory of the village, the community had always had a school. All families can afford to keep boys as well as girls in school for six years, and social pressure had helped keep most peasant children in primary school. In addition, the Costa Rican school system takes its annual break during the three-month coffee harvest so that studies do not compete with that intensive labor period. As a result, only one respondent was illiterate and the average schooling was 4.5 years among all respondents. Forty-three percent of interviewees had completed six years of primary school. Medical care had improved in most respondents’ lifetimes. Although 23 percent had lost siblings to preventable childhood diseases, only 10 percent had similarly lost children. Thanks to the national health plan established after 1948, all respondents received medical care at the hospital in Grecia. A comparison of socioeconomic indicators from childhood and adulthood revealed that some of those who had been among the community’s poorest children were among the village “haves.” The village was not rigidly divided along class lines and upward social movement was possible.

Ecological Interdependence

Unlike Pedregal, San Luis is thoroughly integrated into the national political, economic, and social system. For San Luis, national integration is extensive, desirable, and advantageous. Villagers pay taxes, vote, and participate in municipal and national politics. They sell their crops outside the village, have a stake in economic policy, and purchase most of what they need to survive. Social policies provide them with health care and education and maintain com-
mendable public services in the village. Although a desire to maintain community caused most Pedregal peasants to choose quiescence, a similar concern for community has drawn villagers of San Luis into collective protest.

Life in San Luis is much less insecure than in Pedregal. Natural disaster could strike and the Poás volcano could erupt again, but villagers do not live on the brink of economic crisis. Unlike villagers of Pedregal, San Luis residents lived comfortably above the subsistence line. Their standard of living was high even among Costa Rican peasants, all of whom live better than peasants elsewhere in Central America. Each family individually and the village as a whole had more economic leeway than villagers in Pedregal. In addition public services reduced the cost of individual crisis. The road was good, and medical help was a twenty-minute drive away. The telephone usually works.

Despite relatively less threatening circumstances, residents of San Luis have still needed to maintain a cohesive, interdependent community in which residents support and depend upon each other. The fact that San Luis villagers have been able to maintain ecological interdependence in the context of extensive market integration and reduced insecurity is testimony to the depth of peasant commitment to an ecological system, and to the strength of rural understanding that individual well-being still depends on a vibrant, healthy community.

Landlessness and Interdependence within the Coffee Economy

Ecological interdependence in San Luis is complex and multifaceted. To maintain community in a changing world that has brought relative prosperity and full market integration, the village system must be adaptable, not wedded to inflexible traditional norms. Some aspects of ecological interdependence are built on age-old concerns for subsistence and relative egalitarianism, issues clearly addressed by the land management system in Pedregal. San Luis benefits from a somewhat similar scheme. Other aspects of community interdependence in San Luis address modern-day concerns arising from involvement in a market economy. In confronting these latter issues, village interdependence in San Luis has been creative and adaptable. Ecological interdependence has ultimately granted San Luis a resilience and durability that allows it to survive as a modern peasant community.

One potential problem for the tranquillity of San Luis and the region is landlessness and the economic situation of those 30 to 40 percent of families who own little or no land and work primarily as laborers. This problem has resulted from population growth and in part from migration. Respondents whose families have been in the village for two or more generations usually own land. Those whose families arrived within the past twenty years are more likely to be landless villagers with a limited number of employment options. The primary employment opportunities occurred during the coffee harvest from December to February and the cane cutting season, which starts shortly after the coffee harvest begins and also lasts approximately three months. The
landless may also find temporary or permanent work on the farms of their neighbors, either in the village or in nearby communities. A fortunate few hold permanent jobs on one of the larger village farms. A final option for the landless is to seek work on the one large hacienda in the local area. Most landless villagers spend some part of each year unemployed.

In response to the plight of landlessness, village landowners share with less fortunate villagers by loaning land, offering wage employment, and providing payment to workers above and beyond wages. Some landowners loan out small land plots free of rent, although plots are smaller and the practice less extensive than in Pedregal. Others provide temporary or permanent work for landless villagers, who are paid the national minimum wage. Most also receive a number of extras from their employers in addition to wages: firewood for cooking, milk from farm cows, or interest-free loans. Permanent workers sometimes receive a rent-free house on the farm property which becomes theirs for as long as they work for the peasant landowner. One other non-wage payment that is extremely important to landless workers is social security benefits, or the payments that allow participation in the national health plan. Many employers make the monthly payments that include workers and their families in the national health plan and thus entitle them to free medical care which is available in Grecia. In return for work, wages, and non-wage extras, landless villagers feel a strong sense of obligation toward their peasant employers. The best patrons benefit from hard-working and devoted employees who stay with them over long periods of time and provide reliable labor during the critical harvest months.

The coffee economy, however, provides the most important way for landless villagers to be included in interdependence. Village dependence on coffee as the principal crop gives the landless three assets critical to ecological interdependence: income, power, and a stake in community. These assets mean that the poor are seen as central actors in village interdependence: they make an essential contribution to the economy, they can inhibit the enterprise if they are not included, and they treasure the coffee economy just as the landed do. Their involvement in the coffee economy, therefore, is based upon individual concerns and interests as well as upon knowledge of themselves as members of a community whose welfare is intertwined with others. The centrality of the poor is most obvious at harvest time. The labor shortage that has always been a problem in Costa Rica becomes acute during the coffee harvest. Women and children who do not normally farm join the men in the fields during the harvest and work long hours to bring in the crop. Even then, completing the harvest successfully is difficult under adverse weather conditions. During these crucial weeks, the conscientious labor of the village poor spells the difference between a successful crop and a disaster. Moreover, the quality of the contribution made by landless pickers reverberates into the following year, since only the trees picked with the utmost care will produce at an optimal level then.
This description illustrates that San Luis is not a utopian village where everyone shares, cooperates, and mutually supports out of the goodness of their hearts. Rather, they have a combined interest in cooperation. Although voluntarism, mutual concern, and a sense of community are clearly present, there are also rational, individual incentives to participate in village mutuality as well as traditional norms that encourage employers to treat employees in a decent fashion. The interdependence of coffee production results from a mixture of individual incentives, traditional norms, and the peasants’ ecological perspective. In fact, the villagers do not separate these factors out as disparate aspects of village life. Opportunities to sustain community and the village economy through wage labor are also sources of income necessary for survival and points of leverage that can encourage landed producers to participate in community. Support of the landless translates into an available cooperative labor supply which will maximize profits. Thus participation in village interdependence sustains community and is economically profitable. Mean-spirited or exploitive employers defy traditional norms and undermine community but may also have a lower yield in next year’s harvest as a result of careless picking this year or worker preferences to pick for better employers.

The profitability of participation in community is reinforced by the tools that the poor can wield to encourage the landed to participate in village interdependence. The most powerful such tool is the refusal to work during the crucial coffee harvest. Even a work slowdown can be an effective tactic when timing is critical. Carelessness during picking damages the trees and can substantially reduce yield next year and even in years thereafter. As in any village, the poor also have recourse to malicious gossip and character assassination. Even these mild sanctions are serious penalties in a small community where everyone knows everyone and word travels like wildfire. A good reputation will be indispensable when the next harvest season rolls around and competition for scarce labor is again fierce.

Village interdependence is thus integrated into and supported by the market-oriented coffee economy. Although only the landowners produce their own coffee, they cannot do so without the labor input of their landless neighbors. Coffee is a labor intensive crop, and the mechanization of coffee production has proceeded slowly. Throughout the year, landowners are dependent on the careful, conscientious labor of their landless neighbors who work deep in the coffee groves and are almost impossible to supervise. During the harvest, coffee producers are entirely dependent on the landless labor supply and would be economically ruined without the cooperation and support of the poor. Similarly, of course, the landless are dependent on the landed coffee producers for extensive employment during the harvest, for periodic employment during the year, and for non-wage extras that do a great deal to sustain life and health.

The peasants’ sense of ecological interdependence that goes beyond a simple moral economy or bilateral reciprocity has adapted the village to the de-
mands of a coffee-producing, market-oriented economy. Ecological interdependence includes land sharing and the redistribution of other basic goods. It rests on a coffee economy that depends on both the landed and landless for its viability and in return supports the entire village. It is sustained by both individual incentives and a concern for community. There are powerful economic reasons to be a good village citizen. It is equally true that the village economy is a community economy that is sustained by group effort.

The Social Safety Net

Reciprocal relationships of land/labor exchange contribute to and reinforce norms of ecological interdependence. The result of a huge network of exchange relationships through the coffee economy is a generalized sense of community and an awareness of individual dependence on others. As a result, ecological community extends beyond land/labor arrangements and the production of coffee into aspects of village life that are not directly related to the coffee economy. Villagers in San Luis subscribe to norms of ecological interdependence that protect life for all, within village means and short of generalized catastrophe. Medium landholders expressed concern for the living condition of their poorer neighbors, even when they themselves lived comfortably. This concern generalized to the community level manifests itself in a social safety net that protects all villagers so that no one is allowed to become destitute. This informal net provides minimum necessities to those in the worst circumstances without attempting to ensure that all live equally well. Thus relative equity prevails. No one enjoys extravagant wealth, and even the landless do not drop below a certain level of poverty. Subsistence needs are not a problem for anyone in the village.

Ely is one of the more affluent villagers in San Luis. His farm management exemplifies ecological exchange relationships typical of San Luis. He owns sixteen manzanas of choice coffee-growing land. He hires pickers during the harvest and runs the farm with two permanent workers during the rest of the year. His permanent workers, Carlos and Juan, live in rent-free homes on Ely's property. In addition to minimum wage, he pays their social security benefits, offers them free milk and cooking fuel, periodically makes them small interest-free loans, and allows them to till a corner of land for their family's use. Ely's workers labor long hours for him. When I visited his home, I often found them working long after most workers had quit for the day. Ely was one of the favored employers during harvest time. He always had pickers lined up long before the harvest season began. Ely spoke thoughtfully about his treatment of his workers: "They are good men; they work hard. I can depend on them to get a job done. Since I give them a house and other things, they feel an obligation to me. People know how I treat Carlos and Juan, and that's important. I guess I'm sort of a leader here so other people do what I do. That way the workers get treated well, and we can all live better here."

Neither individualist nor communitarian motives fully explain Ely's atti-
tudes toward worker and social relations. Individualist concerns include the short-term loss to Ely of providing a house and other non-wage payments to his workers. Traditional rational-actor theory would expect Ely to press every advantage with his workers and offer nothing extra. Ely, however, has foresight that extends beyond the short term into the foreseeable future. There is an economic incentive for him to be generous, as his behavior pays off during the harvest and year-round. The moral economy theory, on the other hand, accurately grasps the nature of reciprocal exchange between Ely and his workers and is able to anticipate each behaving as they do. Yet it doesn’t account for or even take into consideration Ely’s additional focus outward, beyond his own farm to the maintenance of village community. His awareness of the consequences of his actions—the effect of a good example—is ecological and is expressed toward the end of the above passage. He himself lives better if other landed peasants on village farms also treat their workers well.

Miguel, an older respondent, could remember two occasions in which families had been held above the subsistence line by community action. One of these families was his own.

When I was a boy, we were very poor. We had some very hard years. Sometimes we were hungry. I remember two years like that. There was a patron, my father’s patron, who gave us milk and some other [food]. What he gave us was all we had for nine people. We were very poor. I always remember that because we probably would have died [otherwise]. Other families also gave us a little food and helped us when we were sick. . . . I remember one case of a mother and daughter who asked [the community] for a house and land. The mother was very old, and she had no husband. A group collected a lot of money to build a house. Then we all built the house together. It was very nice.

The social safety net provided real benefits to poorer villagers and extended a supportive hand to those who would otherwise be destitute. It rested in part on traditional norms of reciprocity, a village moral economy, and the peasant sense of justice that respects each individual life and subscribes to relative egalitarianism. Nonetheless, San Luis is not a village of altruistic souls morally superior to others. They simply saw their own interests as intertwined with others’ interests. Villagers readily admitted that there was a rational self-interested purpose to the social safety net. When medium landholders expressed concern about the unemployment of their neighbors, their concern exhibited a prudent sense of self-interest as well as an altruistic concern for poorer neighbors:

We have to help the poor. If not, they are dissatisfied and become a danger to us.

We have to make sure the poor can live well, not that we’re all equal, but that he lives well, something basic.
Thus village “haves” participate in village interdependence as much out of a sense of self-preservation as out of concern for others. In fact, they do not see a distinction between the two.

This combination of self-interested and communitarian motives illustrates the ecological awareness of the peasant and peasant understanding of individual/community interdependence. The respondent who is concerned about potential danger from destitute villagers is as much aware of his own dependence on community as is the poor family in need of a house. The village “have” who is concerned about community tranquillity because he wants to maximize profits from coffee production is no less important a preserver of community, because his concern for group life is, in part, a reflection of profit orientation. He has simply understood the rational economic incentives for preserving community. His support for community is much stronger than any support based solely on altruism or village tradition.

Excellent testimony to the successful function of the safety net is the acceptability of life among the landless. Many are unwilling to leave the village and the Central Valley even if given an opportunity to own land in a more isolated and less developed part of the country. One man who had been given the task of finding landless peasants from the region to settle on land in a distant part of Costa Rica could only find three takers. Even for the landless, the insecurity of landlessness and temporary unemployment do not outweigh the benefits of wages earned during employment, the receipt of paternalistic “extras,” the convenience of living in a central region, and the informal insurance of village interdependence.

Ecology beyond the Village

Peasant awareness of ecological interdependence extended beyond San Luis to both the natural and social world of which the village is only a part. The peasants were keenly aware of their own dependence on factors external to and bigger than the village. Their discussions of agriculture and farming revealed close attention to the condition of the natural environment and awareness of the need to sustain the ecosystem, so that it could sustain them. Their choices about political action reflected their perception of themselves as members of a wider national community entitled to certain rights within that community. They saw themselves as contributors to and sustainers of their society and they expect the society, in turn, to sustain them.

Ecological Interdependence with Nature

As in Pedregal, the peasant awareness of ecological interdependence included the natural ecosystem. In San Luis, that awareness manifests itself first in attentiveness to the quality of the soil and second in attention to the behavior of the nearby Poás volcano. Their behavior and interviews reveal their awareness of their dependence on the soil and their willingness to take measures to
maintain the soil at a high level of productivity. Their attention to the Poás volcano exhibits itself in their repeated mentioning of it and in their ongoing activity to combat the ill effects of it.

San Luis villagers are more fortunate than their counterparts in Pedregal in that the environmental difficulties they face are less severe, and they themselves have more power to combat the problems they do face. Not only does San Luis enjoy fertile soil that produces some of Costa Rica’s finest and richest coffee, San Luis villagers have the financial wherewithal to afford fertilizer. They spend a large proportion of their profits on fertilizer and make every effort to use the best fertilizer available. Several respondents expressed concern that, despite these efforts, the soil is less productive today than it was one generation earlier. Many villagers try to improve soil quality through fertilizer rather than simply maintaining it at its present level. As economic problems have confronted these villagers, some of their fiercest political battles have been waged over access to fertilizer and their need to provide the soil with the best possible fertilizer blends. In the past the Costa Rican government has tried to restrict or eliminate the importation of expensive and high-quality fertilizer from Europe in order to force peasant producers to use the brand made domestically. San Luis villagers and other peasants nationwide opposed this effort and demanded access to the best fertilizer available on the world market. Their political battle with the government was thus heavily influenced by environmental concerns.

The peasants were largely successful. The government agreed to fertilizer imports for a period of time during which the domestic fertilizer producer, Fertica, was required to substantially raise its quality. After that grace period imports would decline if peasant producers were satisfied with Fertica’s improved product. San Luis villagers informed me that Fertica had indeed raised its quality and that they were now sufficiently satisfied with it to substitute Fertica’s brand for imported fertilizer.

Needless to say, San Luis villagers did not single-handedly engage in or win this struggle with the government. Rather, they were part of an organized, nationwide effort that will be discussed in more detail below. Yet villagers interviewed were very much involved in the struggle and remain committed to it.

Yes, we won that one and now Fertica’s product is pretty good. We have to keep an eye on them, though, because there is a lot of corruption in government enterprises like Fertica. If their fertilizer starts to deteriorate again we have a right to resume importation and to do it through the union so we get lower prices. Personally I most prefer the Dutch fertilizer, it’s the best in the world, but for now Fertica is OK. You know we actually have our own people in there [in the factory] analyzing Fertica’s product. That was part of what we demanded.

Respondents referred repeatedly to the issue of soil fertilization and protection and the need to remain vigilant about fertilizer quality. They made it clear that soil protection was a top priority for them and that the issue could
again become a political battleground if the quality of Fertica’s product declined in the future. They had made no binding promises on this score and had secured the political right to again purchase foreign fertilizer if soil protection required it. The peasant position on soil protection reveals the greater level of power enjoyed by San Luis residents as compared with the relative powerlessness of Pedregal villagers viv-à-vis the Somoza state. In San Luis villagers had parlayed their power into environmental protection.

The favored position of San Luis villagers relative to their counterparts in Pedregal is also illustrated with the issue of cooking fuel. Whereas Pedregal residents only have access to wood, San Luis villagers cook with gas, which is regularly delivered to the village in cylinders, trucked in over the paved road. Most residents can afford gas and have no need to cut wood. In addition, their houses are superior to those in Pedregal and keep them relatively warm, even in the chilly rainy season.

The peasants’ awareness of their dependence on nature is not confined to the soil. The proximity of an active volcano is a constant reminder of human vulnerability and dependence on nature. It is also an incentive for village cohesion and mutual support. At the same time, villagers did not view Poás as an enemy but appeared proud to live so close to a famous national landmark. The volcano is a part of their natural surroundings, like the rain, sun, and soil. They saw it as something that offered problems to be dealt with but that also had advantages. The very altitude of the village that brings it so close to Poás also allows the production of rich coffee that commands excellent prices. Villagers boasted that they produced the best coffee in Costa Rica, thanks to the altitude. Even ash emissions from Poás have their advantages. Peasants who remembered the ash eruption of the 1950s also recalled that the soil quality had improved markedly thereafter, and the village had survived.

Village memory included several instances in which villagers had worked together to survive volcanic activity. The best example was in the 1950s when huge quantities of ash settled everywhere and destroyed the coffee crop for several years running. Some villagers had given up in despair, sold their land, and left. Most, however, had held on to their land and banded together to help each other through severe poverty. The village had also sent a delegation to the president to request relief for villagers. Miguel, whose story is described above, was a member of that delegation. He remembered being angry because the government did not provide enough relief quickly enough.

When I last visited San Luis in 1989, the villagers were again coming together to confront the latest volcanic activity. At that time Poás had emitted gas rather than ash. The peasants reported that the gas settled on the coffee trees and slowly burned the leaves to death. Again the peasants were working together and with the state to find ways of combatting this latest catastrophe and to obtain relief to enable them to survive a poor harvest. Villagers were disgusted with this problem, since they doubted it would have long-term beneficial effects as the ash had.
Ecological interdependence with the natural environment in San Luis illustrates both the peasants’ awareness of their interdependence with nature and their collective ability to confront and solve the problems nature presents. In the areas of soil management and volcano activity the peasants have made great strides in reducing or eliminating the problems they confront. Yet these peasants do not view nature as their enemy. They perceive and act upon their responsibility to also protect nature.

**Village/Society Interdependence**

The story of political action in San Luis is not confined to the village but takes place in the wider political and economic context of Costa Rican society. The peasants saw themselves as citizens of Costa Rica as well as residents of San Luis, and they perceived themselves as making an important contribution to society through the hard work of coffee production. They were also dependent upon society and affected by political and economic decisions made at the national level. Their political action and attitudes reveal their conviction concerning their rightful place as Costa Rican citizens and their expectation that they be treated with respect by the wider society. The following section illustrates how their perception of community led them into nonviolent collective action that asserted their rights within the national community but also strove to protect that wider community as well.

**Ecological Harmony Threatened**

The context of economic problems and political action in San Luis is best understood by temporarily stepping back to consider the economic history of the village. In doing so we can see how the peasants have acted to preserve the ecological interdependence described above, and the ecological perspective has become political. The first coffee-producing peasants arrived in the area that is now San Luis in the early part of the twentieth century. They divided the land into plots of not more than one-hundred manzanas and worked their farms with family labor. As the price of coffee rose on the international market, these small producers made enough to survive, but the large export houses and middlemen siphoned off most of their profit. When the peasants formed cooperative purchasing and processing houses in the 1960s, they reaped a larger profit for their coffee. In the early 1970s, the international price of coffee rose dramatically, and the cooperatives allowed the peasants to partake in the bonanza. Village interdependence permitted even the landless to benefit from the economic upswing. Wages paid to coffee pickers in Costa Rica became the highest in Central America.

This time of economic prosperity did not last. With the international economic crisis of the late 1970s, the price of coffee remained stable while the cost of production rose dramatically. Imported inputs such as tools, fertilizers, and insecticides became much more expensive. Products produced domestically
were unsatisfactory because of their inferior quality, which resulted in lower productivity and less profit, making credit even more difficult to repay. The amount of credit available to small and medium producers decreased markedly, and interest rates soared from 5 percent to 23 percent by 1985. Following upon the heels of economic prosperity, the crisis appeared even more serious to the peasants. Suddenly they were no longer making the high profits they had made in the early 1970s. Even more threatening was the possibility of losing land when low profits rendered them unable to make their credit payments. Knowledge that some peasants had actually lost their land increased the anxiety level among all small and medium producers. The landless felt the crunch through the decreased availability of employment. Tasks that landed peasants would have paid to have done in 1970 they did for themselves in 1980. Wages failed to keep pace with the cost of living, and for the landless the rising price of land erased all hope of ever becoming landowners.

Rising prices, falling profits, and the threat of land loss amounted to a decline in the living standard the peasants had grown to expect by virtue of their contribution to an export-dependent economy. Their sense of their place in the national economic community and the deserts they expected by right of that place all appeared violated or threatened. Their level of affluence, which villagers felt they deserved by virtue of their economic and social contribution, dropped and threatened to drop further. Society and the economic system, which they saw as represented by the state, no longer provided them the economic position they felt was their due. Dissatisfaction, fear, and anger reigned in San Luis.

In discussing the economic crisis, villagers frequently referred to the social and economic contribution they made to Costa Rica by producing high-quality coffee and bringing in badly needed foreign exchange and by paying taxes on the coffee they produced.

We are the backbone of this country. With the taxes we pay we are carrying everyone on our backs. Now [1985] we can’t even get a decent price for our coffee.

We are producing for the country. It’s a great benefit for the country. We deserve a good price for our coffee and to live in a decent manner, be able to send our children to school.

**Collective Action: Unionization**

In reaction to deteriorating circumstances and their fear that the situation might worsen still further if they didn’t act, the peasants in San Luis began to organize. The crisis, of course, affected peasants everywhere, and San Luis residents joined a unionization movement that was cropping up across the country. Peasants in poorer and more isolated regions such as Limón had felt the crisis even earlier and begun organizing in 1978. Unionization began in
Costa Rica’s Central Valley in 1981. In May of that year a peasant union was born in Cartago, historically the focal point in Costa Rica’s Central Valley. UPANacional (National Union of Small Agriculturists) quickly became the largest peasant union in Costa Rica, boasting by 1985 a total of sixteen-thousand members, which was more than twice that of any other peasant union. Although by no means national in scope, the new union represented peasants from across the Central Valley region and expanded to include branches in several other regions of the country. In the organizing stage UPANacional encountered little outward opposition.

From its inception UPANacional (hereafter UPA) focused on the problems of the small and medium landowners. Union talk in San Luis centered upon the needs of the smallholders, who had lost ground since the early 1970s. Their goal was to avoid losing any more and, if possible, to regain some of the lost profit margin. Acting through their union in conjunction with landholding peasants elsewhere, landed and landless peasants launched a campaign for economic justice. The anger and determination they exhibited leaves little doubt that they were reacting to a situation which they perceived as a violation of their rights as peasants, as community members, and as Costa Rican citizens.

Through UPA the peasants addressed the Costa Rican government. Their attitude was that the state held an obligation to soften the impact of the economic crisis on very important citizens and national contributors such as themselves. An original petition to President Carazo in August of 1981 focused on problems of credit, imports, prices, marketing, and crop insurance. Although the state had allowed the peasants to organize and publicly present their demands, it failed entirely to respond to those demands at anything other than a rhetorical level. The peasants felt forced to take stronger measures. They organized a series of increasingly challenging, but organized, nonviolent measures designed to attract the attention of the government and satisfy the demands presented in the petition. The publication of the demands in La Nación, a leading newspaper, brought no results. A demonstration march between the legislative assembly, the president’s house, and the central bank also received no response. Finally, they organized a major blockage of the nation’s highways. Peasants turned out across the central region to stand and sit on all the major highways. No agricultural produce could reach the cities. Conservative political actors condemned the blockage and the media carried accusations of communism and antidemocratic tendencies, but despite the outburst, the state did not respond with repression. Faced with a food shortage in the cities and anger from a variety of commercial and popular sectors adversely affected by the blockage, the government moved to negotiate. It met with union leaders and listened to peasant concerns and demands. The state promised to meet a reduced number of the demands originally presented, and the peasants lifted the blockage.

These first few months of union activity established a pattern that would
continue through 1984. When faced with specific problems, the peasants acted through UPANacional and requested remedies. They presented their requests to the government in the form of direct petitions and to the public through newspaper advertisements. When no response materialized, they organized demonstrations in San José. When demands were still ignored or promises unfulfilled, union leaders would again call out the region's peasants to block the highways. This final tactic invariably brought the government to the negotiating table and led to the satisfaction of many peasant demands. Gradually, the atmosphere of suspicion and hostility that the first highway blockage engendered softened to one of acceptance and mutual respect between the government and the peasants. Union organization allowed the peasants to halt the economic decline and launch a movement to restore economic justice, as they defined it. Although they continued to have enemies among the more politically conservative elements of the government and large economic interests, the level and frequency of criticisms died down. UPANacional began to win acceptance on the national political scene, as more and more people recognized peasant demands as legitimate. Although not thrilled to be faced with highway blockages and more demands on an economy in crisis, the state accepted the need to negotiate with and make concessions to the peasants. As one San Luis respondent aptly put it, “The government recognizes the peasants as a force to be reckoned with because there are a lot of us. If they completely close the door to us, we can turn against them and they know it.”

By 1985, a new pattern in union activity had developed. The legitimacy of the peasants’ demands and the reality of their ultimate threat of a highway blockage were such that the government proved willing to negotiate before a blockage. Progress on problems such as reimbursement for crop losses and the establishment of a union import cooperative continued. Newspapers treated these peasants’ demands as legitimate, and accusations of communism diminished. Union leadership consciously maneuvered the organization into this more accepted position by adopting some of the state rhetoric about the value of Costa Rican democracy, national independence, and the importance of private property. Between 1985 and 1988, the union dealt directly with the state and got much of what it wanted through negotiations. Over time, however, members got less and less of what they expected and began questioning UPANacional’s close ties to the government. Some claimed that the leadership had been co-opted. During a mass membership general assembly, the peasants voted out Freddy Murillo as their secretary general and replaced him with Guido Vargas, who pursued a more vigorous and demanding strategy vis-à-vis the state.⁶

By 1990, the peasants of UPANacional had achieved and maintained a position as legitimate political actors on the national scene. They had reinvigorated their union and continued to make progress toward alleviating the problems of middle and small landowners in the Central Valley. High-level negotiations had replaced mass protest action. Union leadership did not fore-
see the need for another blockage within the near future for the purpose of achieving union goals.

**Union Limitations**

Perhaps the most important criticism of UPANacional is that it has neglected the interests of the landless in the Central Valley. Although it began with the expressed intention of defending the landless as well as the small and medium landowners, the interests of the former soon assumed secondary priority. Through union membership, landless peasants benefit from (reduced) social security payments and thus receive medical care which would otherwise be unavailable to them and their families. For many landless peasants, this is their only reason for belonging to UPANacional, as they receive no other direct benefits from the union. A few participate in union cooperative projects that bring in low-cost work clothes and tools.

Rhetoric to the contrary, UPANacional has made no attempt to address the problem of landlessness, either by redistributing land within the central region or by working toward shifting the landless to land in other regions of the country. Moreover, given its stated respect for private property, its defense of the position of small and medium producers, and its adoption of governmental rhetoric, it seems unlikely that the union could undertake anything as structurally transformational as land redistribution without losing its present legitimacy on the national political scene and thus compromising some of the interests of middle and small landowners.

Nonetheless, landless peasants in San Luis do support UPANacional. Many turn out for demonstrations and blockages and are openly supportive of the union: “Yes, UPA does a little something for us, the workers. They have committees that try to see how they can help us. It’s a good union. It helps the landless with membership in a cooperative... and other things. It helps [the landed] peasants and with that there is more possibility of work [for us].”

Miguel is a villager whose attitudes toward unionization and political action illustrate an awareness of individual/community interdependence that is the hallmark of the peasant ecological perspective. Barely literate, he is one of the poorest respondents from San Luis, and the only respondent who ever went hungry. On that occasion his life and the lives of his family were saved by community action. Miguel is one of UPA’s strongest supporters in the village. His commitment to the union equals that of any of the landed producers who benefit directly from their membership. Yet Miguel is not a landowner, and given his poverty, he stands little chance of ever purchasing land. Miguel sees himself first and foremost as a village member and only secondarily as landless. His perspective allows him to grasp that the union and the village community are dependent on him just as his family relied on the village to survive when he was a boy. “I am very much in favor of UPA. It helps everyone and we have to help it. The more bodies there are [during a blockage], the stronger
it is, the more power the union has. UPA benefits the whole village.”

Miguel’s attitude exemplifies the inability of individualist and communitarian theories to fully explain political attitudes in San Luis. An individualist or rational-actor theory would expect to find Miguel among the village’s first and most determined free-riders because he derives no direct benefit from the union even when he does participate. Anyone who theorizes that Miguel will act in a self-interested, short-term maximizing manner misses his sense of individual/village interdependence and perception of the need for mutual supportiveness. Like individualist theory, a communitarian or moral economy theory would predict inaction from someone like Miguel. His subsistence is not threatened, and he exhibits no strong sense of outrage over threats to life. Yet Miguel is one of the most dedicated activists in San Luis. Miguel knows that he and the village are mutually dependent, and this knowledge explains his political action. The support of the San Luis landless for the union is largely attributable to village interdependence in which landed and landless are mutually supportive. Villagers live and work together too closely and are too interdependent for one group to make headway heedless of the plight of the others. Such headway would be short-lived indeed if it excluded the village landless on whom landowners and the village coffee economy rely so heavily. Some of the benefits that accrue to the landholders through UPA eventually trickle down into the hands of the poor. Because they make an important contribution to the village coffee economy, village landless can turn some of what the landed gain to their own benefit. With union success, employment has once again become more steady and secure. “Extras” continue even if they do not increase. A lack of effective union representation has not left the landless peasants of San Luis abandoned.

Political Action in an Ecological World

The village communities of Pedregal and San Luis offer examples of ecological peasant communities in vastly different political and social contexts. In Pedregal, perceptions of community led to choices of political action, and differences among villagers’ perceptions explain differences in choices within the community. Perceptions of community also underlie choices of political action in San Luis. Unlike most people in Pedregal, however, the villagers in San Luis see themselves as citizens both of San Luis and of Costa Rican society at large. Furthermore, they see San Luis itself as a subunit of Costa Rican society, contributing to the society (in the form of coffee production), dependent on the society (on state policies on imports, exports, taxation, and credit), and ultimately vulnerable to problems in the wider society if crises develop and the state fails to handle them in ways that are favorable to smallholding coffee producers.

Community Citizens as Actors
These perceptions of their community and of their individual and communal place in society have led San Luis residents into political action. Unlike their counterparts in Pedregal, they have opted to act as a single group and, as a group, have chosen unionization. This choice illustrates their understanding of the advantages of nonviolent collective action and their skill in using it. The story of UPANacional reveals the political capacity of the peasantry within a system that permits mass mobilization and political participation. It also underscores the peasant preference for nonviolence where such tactics are an option and can be effective. This preference illustrates the need for social science to also address peasant nonviolent protest. UPA has demonstrated how effective organized nonviolent action can be. Its experience also illustrates the peasant ability to skillfully select among nonviolent tactics and to move from one to another as circumstances require. On the political spectrum shown in Figure 4.1, the experience of UPA and of San Luis villagers within it falls within a subsection of that spectrum running from petitions to blockages. As political actors, the peasants started with the least confrontational tactic that might also be effective: UPA began by petitioning the government. When that tactic failed, UPA moved up the spectrum and tried marches and demonstrations. When those also failed, the union blocked the highways. Later in its political experience, UPA moved back toward demonstrations and even petitions. The story of the union reveals a keen political capacity to move back and forth along the spectrum as political goals require.

At the same time that the peasants seek their own individual economic goals, they remain cognizant of the wider society, of the needs and vulnerabilities of that society, and of their own role and responsibilities within it. Accordingly, they studiously avoid violent actions that might undermine the Costa Rican democracy. UPA pointedly rejects any actors or groups that it sees as advocating violence such as the Communist parties. Union leaders also re-
ject land invasion, again because they perceive it as a threat to the wider society and to themselves and their own interests within that society. We will see later that political opinion within San Luis is somewhat in disagreement with the union over the issue of land invasion. Nevertheless, the careful choice of tactics that are effective but that do not threaten the wider community illustrates the responsible, rational nature of these peasants. Coming from within a small community, they are trained to watch the ripple effect of their actions even as they step beyond San Luis and act politically within the broader society.

**Community Perspective and Political Choices**

For UPANacional the relevant area of political action begins with petitions and ends with blockages. These tactics are seen as acceptable, effective, and nondestructive. Most peasants thought that blockages, for example, were tense and time-consuming but necessary and productive.

It brings us together and we feel encouraged to know that there are a lot of us and that we have the same problems. It breaks us out of our isolation.

It was the first time I had been able to do something against the big people... the first time I had been able to defend myself. The peasant feels inferior next to these people [the state, national elites]. I feel satisfied to be able to fight for the interests of the people.

It's an important opportunity if only to be able to say “Here I am!”

You feel like you are defending yourself, that it's something just.

At the same time, these peasants reject quiescence and voting as ineffective in accomplishing specific gains.

You have to pressure [the state]. If you don't pressure they don't do anything. Even if they make promises they won't keep them if you don't pressure.

It doesn't matter which party you vote for. Both major parties are the same. Voting keeps us in a democracy, assures continuation of our system, but it resolves nothing for us.

It's very important to vote... Voting is a symbol of our liberty... And it's great fun, a big party. It's important to vote to preserve the democracy because it [democracy] is better, even if we have all these problems. Voting doesn't resolve anything but it makes things so we can continue the way we are. I don't have any respect for the major parties. They have no good platforms to offer. There's no hope for them. The campaign is a shameful farce.

Even if voting accomplishes nothing, at least it means we have a democracy. In a democracy we have the right to scream, to make noise.
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Just as villagers are in agreement about the futility of quiescence and voting and agree that blockages are acceptable, almost all villagers in San Luis reject violence as a form of political action.

[Revolution] is not for us. It would ruin everything. You make a revolution when you have nothing left to lose. You say to yourself, “Yes, they can kill me, but so what? I have nothing to lose.” But me, I have too much to lose. No, . . . not here, we have too much to lose.

I don’t think we would ever have a revolution here because there is dialogue and respect between the people and the government. There are limits on the actions of each one.

There is no reason to use violence now. I don’t really agree with what the government is doing, but at least we have peace and dignity, and we are living well.

Villagers in San Luis agree with the union’s evaluation of most of these tactics and trust the union to be able to choose from among the acceptable tactics those that will be most effective in a given context.

With respect to land invasion, however, San Luis villagers are not necessarily in agreement either with the union leaders or with each other. Some villagers define land invasion as acceptable because they perceive it as potentially effective but not as dangerously threatening to the wider society. Those who feel this way are often village landless, who see their own landlessness as an unfair distribution of community (village or national) resources. Land invasion, on the other hand, is rejected by others, particularly the landed, because they see it as potentially threatening to themselves as individuals and destructive of the wider community: “You have to respect private property. If we [in UPANacional] don’t respect private property, who will? Others will stop respecting ours.” This speaker rejects land invasion both on the basis of his individual self-interest (he is a landowner) and on the basis of his society at large. He sees UPA as an example that will be followed by other political activists. Thus we see that on the political spectrum the area of political relevance for San Luis is broader than that for UPANacional, as illustrated by Figure 4.2.

Individual experiences in the context of community determine attitudes toward land invasion. When an individual perceives the ecological system as malfunctioning, he or she moves toward political action. The malfunction may be perceived as an economic or socioeconomic problem or as an injustice that violates moral values. In either case, it is a deviation from the correct ordering and procedure of the peasant’s ecological system. A malfunction undercuts the contribution that any one participant makes to the system and consequently undermines the delicate balance of interdependence and mutual support between self, village, and wider society. In an effort to maintain ecological equilibrium, political action is undertaken in an attempt to remedy the situation.

In San Luis, blockages are a common political tactic designed to remedy
system malfunction. Petitions and demonstrations are also widely accepted because they have sometimes proven effective. These tactics yield results but do not endanger the national ecological system. They enjoy almost universal support among San Luis residents, and there is no variation in support along economic and socioeconomic lines or in perceptions of injustice. There is no statistically significant relationship between economic, socioeconomic, or injustice variables and support for petitions, demonstrations, and blockages or rejection of quiescence, voting, or violence. Villagers agree with each other about these tactics.

Acceptance of land invasion as an appropriate tactic varies among villagers

Table 4.2. San Luis: Acceptability of Land Invasion as Form of Political Action, by Land Ownership (N = 140*, Missing = 0)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Ownership (in manzanas)</th>
<th>Acceptability of Land Invasion (percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 18</td>
<td>N = 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 18</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 7</td>
<td>N = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 27</td>
<td>N = 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Chi-square = 14.668. Tau C = −.227. Confidence level = 99.9 percent.

*Figures on individual land ownership were available through the municipal authorities for all members of San Luis. Accordingly the N for this table is higher than for the others.
Integration and Accommodation: San Luis, Costa Rica

Table 4.3. San Luis: Acceptability of Land Invasion as Form of Political Action, by Educational Level (N = 30, Missing = 0)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Completed Grade School</th>
<th>Acceptability of Land Invasion (row percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Chi-square = .87919, Tau B = .24456. Confidence level = 91 percent.

and is related to economic and socioeconomic problems and to the perception of injustice. The data collected on economic and socioeconomic experience and on moral concerns about injustice reveal relationships between each of these variables independently and attitudes toward land invasion. These relationships are best explored through cross-tabular tests. (Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4)

In San Luis, the peasant ecological perception of community places the village and its residents within a national context. They perceive the national economic crisis as violating the proper function of the larger society in a way that injures the village and its residents. That injury undermines villagers’ capacity to support themselves and their community and also threatens the contribution they make to the national society. Ultimately, they see danger to themselves (high taxes, low productivity) as a threat to society, and a danger to society (such as communism) as simultaneously a threat to their village and to themselves.

Convictions about deserved standard of living among San Luis peasants differed markedly from those of the Pedregal residents. This is true both for what the two communities perceived as just and for their expectations. Because San Luis is closely integrated into the national social and economic scene, the peasants have ample opportunity to witness living standards out-

Table 4.4. San Luis: Acceptability of Land Invasion as Form of Political Action, by Perception of Injustice (N = 30, Missing = 0)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Injustice</th>
<th>Acceptability of Land Invasion (row percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Chi-square = .12560. Tau B = .20336. Confidence level = 86 percent.
side the community and to compare them with their own. Their knowledge of
the outside world and their experience a decade ago led them to place com-
community boundaries broadly and to conclude that their right to a particular
standard of living had been unjustly breached. In believing that they were en-
titled to live on a social par with non-peasants, villagers demonstrated their
own subscription to peasant justice, including relative equity. While the foun-
dations of peasant justice in Pedregal and San Luis are recognizably similar
and include subsistence and relative egalitarianism, peasant notions of justice
in San Luis have changed to keep pace with the growing affluence of national
society and village integration into the national mainstream.

Land ownership and the size of land plot owned had a significant relation-
ship to the acceptability of land invasion. Thanks to municipal tax record
(based on land ownership), landownership status is available for all 140 fam-
ilies in San Luis. Landless peasants and those with insufficient land are signifi-
cantly more inclined to find land invasion acceptable than peasants who own
enough land or more than enough land to live on.

The positive social experience of San Luis meant that there was little varia-
tion in most socioeconomic indicators and no significant relationship be-
tween most of them and attitudes toward land invasion. For example, hunger
is not a relevant experience for San Luis residents because most have never ex-
perienced it. Similarly, deaths of siblings and children to preventable child-
hood diseases were too rare to show any significant relationship to attitudes
toward land invasion. Almost all villagers have attended school and are liter-
ate, leaving no variation in literacy. Only the successful completion of grade
school, as opposed to fewer than six years of education, held any significant
relationship to attitudes about land invasion. Peasants who had successfully
completed grade school were more likely to find land invasion acceptable than
were grade school dropouts.

This relationship is particularly interesting because the significance of landownership correlates in the opposite direction. Landownership conveys a
relatively more favorable economic position that could be reflected in having
successfully completed grade school. Yet those who have completed grade
school are more likely to view land invasion favorably than those who have
dropped out. This finding would seem to indicate that education predominat-
ed over economic status and that grade school completion is related to a fa-
vorable view of land invasion regardless of landed status.

Results of statistical tests of the relationship between the perception of in-
justice and attitudes toward land invasion are surprising and do not exactly
parallel what we would expect from the predictions of the political ecology
theory. In a cross-tabular bivariate test, the perception of injustice is clearly
related to a positive attitude toward land invasion. However, the relationship
is not a statistically significant one. (See Table 4.4.)

It is, of course, difficult to achieve statistical significance with a small sam-
ple size (N = 30) and this alone may account for the low level of significance of perceptions of injustice. Because the relationship indicated in Table 4.4 is in the predicted direction but not statistically significant, a similar test on a larger sample might very well find that the relationship between perceptions of injustice and attitudes toward land invasion appears at a statistically significant level.

Conclusion

The experience of San Luis is evidence that rural dwellers and village life can survive into contemporary times and yet retain the characteristics of peasantry and the cohesive, interdependent, rural community. At the same time, national integration has required the community to change and adapt if it wishes to survive and participate in the national economy. If it had abided by only the traditional norms of the moral economy the community would have already been destroyed by modernization. But the peasants’ ecological perspective has allowed them to see changes coming and to respond to them. Integration has combined with peasant notions of ecological interdependence so that villagers now see themselves and their village within a wider national community that is the national society. This perception has produced political action and attitudes that are designed to preserve both self and community within the wider society. The unique circumstance and national integration of San Luis also illustrate peasant skill at using collective nonviolent political action. The experience of these villagers shows how crucial these tactics can be and how effective they are at accomplishing desired goals. In the San Luis story we see why peasants might choose nonviolent collective protest, and we learn how community vision can make such tactics the best possible choice.

A theory that will explain the survival of San Luis and the political action of its residents must account for the peasant understanding of ecological interdependence among themselves and between their village and the outside world. Peasant political action is not unidimensional and is neither solely self-interested nor purely communitarian and altruistic. It is, in fact, both. Political action in San Luis is indeed premised on calculations of immediate benefit, in that there are substantial economic incentives to union membership. Yet if short-term self-interested concerns were the only motives, San Luis would be plagued by free-ridership, and unified action would be impossible. Because union benefits accrue to all peasant producers and coercion is not available to force peasants to participate, the self-interested short-term perspective would lead almost all villagers to become free-riders. Free-ridership would be especially prevalent among village landless, such as Miguel.

But, as the theory of political ecology predicts, short-term personal gain is only a part of the peasant calculus. Peasants also factor in responsible rationality, foreseeable consequences, and interdependence between the group and
the individual. This perspective explains the strength of collective action and the fact that some of UPANacional’s strongest supporters are among the village landless. In San Luis rationality is more responsible than free-ridership. The truly rational peasant perceives the extent to which the individual economic position is bound up with community welfare. Free-ridership is both irresponsible and self-defeating.

At the same time, action in San Luis is hardly traditional and moves far beyond any guidance that might be obtained from traditional norms alone. Tradition offers a starting point for defining social life in the village. Tradition stresses norms of reciprocity among villagers and sanctions against those who refuse to participate in such exchanges. Tradition encourages a moral economy that protects subsistence. But tradition does not cause villagers to look increasingly outward, to become angry over injustices at the national level or to engage in collective nonviolence that addresses the state. Tradition does not explain the sophistication these peasants have attained in participating in the market economy, becoming environmentally aware soil specialists, or maneuvering through the pitfalls of political interaction with the state. Traditional norms and sanctions, such as those of a moral economy, do not account for the social interaction among villagers surrounding the production of coffee or the political demands made of the state in the context of coffee production. Traditional norms protecting subsistence do not explain peasant perceptions that they deserve a living standard substantially above subsistence. Tradition neither predicts nor explains unionized action in San Luis.

Having chosen action that protects individual and community survival together, the peasants have found that collective action itself reinforces their convictions of interdependence and their need for each other. In political action, as in economic production, the peasants need each other. Their unionized struggle for better working conditions has not been easy, and no single one of them or subgroup of them could have done it alone. Political action confirms that their individual and collective well-being is itself dependent on their ability to work together. Thus the peasant political ecology led San Luis villagers into political action and is itself reaffirmed by that action.