The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant

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INTRODUCTION

Poor and seemingly powerless, apparently unorganized and unimportant, peasants living far from modern societies have long been the object of study for many scholars, policy makers, and activists. In previous generations of scholarship, the study of the peasantry was primarily the preserve of anthropologists. Over the past two decades, however, political scientists and others have joined them in their effort to understand peasants. In political science, the large number of peasant rebellions and revolutions, particularly in Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua, have generated many questions and a search for explanations of these surprising political explosions from an apparently quiet and submissive people.

Yet this interest in peasant revolution has led to some imbalance in scholarly and theoretical approaches to peasant studies. There is a plethora of literature offering different explanations for violent political action among the peasantry. Insofar as scholars have perceived peasants as political actors at all, they have seen them as participants in revolt or revolution. Less widely acknowledged and studied are the nonrevolutionary types of peasant political action, including nonviolent collective behavior. As a result, our image of the peasantry is that of normally submissive, quiescent people who suddenly rebel or revolt.

By nature, any image that portrays only two extremes is incomplete. Its simplification leaves much of the story untold. What happens among the peasantry between quiescence and rebellion? Is there a middle ground in between these two choices, and if so, what kinds of political action fall within it? Is nonviolent collective action, such as demonstrations or land invasions, part of that middle ground? What motivates peasants to remain quiescent, to rebel, or to choose collective nonviolent political action? These questions have not been addressed by previous studies of the peasantry. Theories of peasant rebellion, for instance, do not address collective nonviolent action among the peasantry. Yet, in the real world, peasants normally do not move swiftly from quiescence to rebellion. They usually move incrementally, first trying that,
now trying this, depending on whom they are addressing with such action and what they are trying to accomplish.

If we step back and ask generally about peasant politics instead of specifically about peasant revolution, the reasons behind peasant political actions become clearer. First, we begin to see that different types of peasant political action are connected to each other and are part of an overall picture. Second, we start to ask questions about why peasants choose one tactic over another and how they decide to change tactics. How do peasant goals affect choices of tactics? How does the nature of the audience determine political strategies? How do peasants speak to local, regional, or state authorities? How do they address a tolerant, receptive audience as opposed to a repressive one? Finally, we come to realize how uncommon peasant revolution really is and to grasp the reasons for its infrequency. We begin to understand that from the peasant perspective, nonviolent behavior is always preferable if it is effective, and it often is. We also comprehend why sometimes peasants do rebel.

Broad and inclusive questions, such as these, about the general nature of peasant political action lead us to ask even more basic questions about the nature of peasant society. How do peasants see themselves and their communities, and how does that vision determine their political choices? Peasant politics is increasingly moving beyond the village to address wider issues and distant authorities. How is that expansion grounded in peasant views of their world and society? How do peasants see themselves in interaction with the world beyond the village and how does that vision affect political action and choices of political tactics? How is peasant politics affected by the nature of peasant society? How can we better understand the one and, therefore, the other?

This book is a broad and inclusive study of the nature of peasant politics and society. It offers a description of peasant society that is also an explanation of peasant politics. It is a study of peasant society that focuses both on the individual and village community and on the world beyond the village—the agrarian environment and national society. The book takes a comprehensive approach to peasant politics by seeking to explain not only the extremes of quiescence and rebellion but also the activist middle ground in between and it shows how peasant society leads to particular political motives and therefore influences the choice of political tactics.

This study of peasant politics and society helps answer yet another question about the peasantry: the question of peasant survivability. How is it that peasants have survived despite all expectations and against all odds? Although many scholars and most policymakers have long foretold the disappearance of the peasantry, peasants have survived, unconvincing, if not unaffected, by predictions of their imminent demise. How have peasants devised a system that allows for adaptation and survival despite all expectations to the contrary? If peasants are so persistent and, all things considered, successful, is there anything the modern world can learn from them? Are there skills and under-
standings that the peasantry retain that might also serve and protect the modern world or modern actors such as ourselves?

The locus for this exploration of peasant society and politics is the Central American nations of Costa Rica and Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s. My approach was to investigate the experience of peasants by spending three to four months in each of six villages, immersing myself in the history and daily life of the community and conducting extensive interviews. Although these interviews explored the political and social histories of each village, they focused primarily on three areas: the types of political action in which villagers had engaged; the motivations for their actions; and the nature of the society out of which these actions grew. The interviews revealed a spectrum of political tactics that peasants may undertake and suggested a relative hierarchy of different kinds of action in each village. They also uncovered a type of society and a particular world view that explain peasant politics and the choices of political action. The political perspective that results from this world view is part of the peasant’s political ecology.

Central America is a particularly appropriate place for this study, for it offers an extraordinary opportunity to study peasant politics of several kinds. Recent history of the region includes peasant involvement in politics at many different levels. Nicaragua in particular offers an opportunity to study quiescence and rebellion. Between 1960 and 1979, Nicaragua underwent a social revolution in which peasants played an essential role. Yet peasant participation in the revolution was neither nationwide nor simultaneous. The country thus offers opportunities to study quiescence and the motivation to avoid revolutionary participation as well as the motivation to engage in revolution. The peasant experience in Costa Rica helps fill in the middle ground. In Costa Rica, unlike in the rest of Central America, the peasantry has not chosen violence as a form of political action. Nonetheless, in recent years the Costa Rican peasantry has been among the most activist in Latin America. Costa Rica thus offers an opportunity to study nonviolent collective action in a national context where it has flourished.

In seeking to understand peasant politics and society, this book joins two debates relevant to the social sciences, one theoretical, one methodological. In the first, scholars of the peasantry have described the nature of peasant society and the motivation of peasant politics as being either individualist, private and self-centered, or communitarian—shaped and restrained by community preferences, norms, and traditions. In the second debate, scholars have disputed the best and most appropriate methods for uncovering political opinions and motives. One side argues for breadth, survey research, and statistical forms of analysis. The other side argues for depth and detailed ethnographic knowledge. This book enters each debate by drawing on both sides rather than by choosing one or the other. The resulting theory of peasant political ecology underscores the strengths of each of the above theoretical positions.
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