The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant

Anderson, Leslie E.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Anderson, Leslie E.
The Political Ecology of the Modern Peasant: Calculation and Community.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/102642

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3275232
An old man, partially blind in one eye, sat crouched over his coffee cup; his jaw set in anger, he glared at me across his kitchen table: “They are always stealing my tomatoes!” he growled. “I get so sick of it, I never even get to eat my own tomatoes. And they steal my sheep too! Cut the fence and let them out. Afterwards there is always one missing. But no one ever knows anything, and I can never find out who did it. If I ever catch the thief, I'm going to give him the beating of his life!” These were common complaints by Pedro in the Nicaraguan village of Pedregal, Boaco. When I lived there and interviewed him, these thefts formed an important part of his concerns about village life. He made the same complaints every time I passed his house or saw him in the street, and he gave the impression that he was suffering substantial loss. Although most villagers lived with large families, Pedro lived with only his wife and an adult daughter in a cement-walled house at one end of the village. Once the house had been affluent compared to many of the other village homes, but when I was there it was run-down and badly in need of repair. Pedro was getting old: his strength and eyesight had begun to fail, and he was no longer strong enough to properly maintain the house alone. He had no one to help him.

Pedro struck a pathetic figure whenever I saw him in the village street. His pace was slow, and he walked with a limp. His back was hunched over by age, hard work, and poverty. Yet it was always difficult to feel sympathetic with Pedro because of his harsh and bitter attitude toward the world and the hardness in his eyes. I sensed that if I got into trouble and needed help, it would be better not to ask Pedro for aid.

I visited Pedro's tomato patch with him several times. He had indeed lost many tomatoes. On another occasion he showed me where his barbed wire fence had been cut. His neighbors confirmed that he had lost both sheep and tomatoes many times, but theirs was not an empathetic, concerned confirmation. No one said, “It's really too bad, the poor old man.” Instead they spoke of
Pedro’s financial losses with a nod of satisfaction and a faint, barely audible note of glee in their voices. According to the neighbors and other villagers, Pedro could have avoided these losses, and he was substantially responsible for his own plight. Pedro had always systematically refused to participate in the ecological support system in Pedregal village. A social system of interdependence and mutual support, where individuals depend on the community and the community depends on everyone’s participation to survive, Pedregal’s political ecology protects and sustains both individual and village life. The system has allowed the village to adapt and survive dictatorship and repression, revolution and political controversy, all the while protecting life and responding to the interdependent needs of villagers, the community, and the world around the village. However, those who do not support the system receive little support from it; most villagers understand their own dependence on and vulnerability to the community better than Pedro does. They prefer to support the system, and in turn, it supports them. They live with some margin of safety around them and are more likely to survive tragedy.

Pedro, on the other hand, struggled to survive outside that system. Increasingly incapacitated, bitter, and resentful, he needs his neighbors even if he doesn’t realize it. His self-destructive anger endangered him and his family. He was vulnerable to poverty and disaster as all peasants are, and now he was even more vulnerable than most because of his increasing age and growing infirmity. Pedro held on from one day to the next, barring tragedy. I wondered what he would do if he could no longer round up his stray sheep or repair his fences for himself. How would he manage if a hailstorm caved in the sagging roof on his front porch? What would he do if he needed immediate medical assistance? The village is twenty miles from the nearest hospital, and he doesn’t have access to modern transportation.

Villagers who participate in the community emergency medical support network help each other when someone falls ill or needs urgent medical care. The network is an excellent example of the function of Pedregal’s interdependent ecological system, the purpose of which is to protect and sustain peasant life. Consider the story of Maria’s little boy Panchito, who was bitten by a poisonous snake. Panchito’s father had been away for some time. Maria said he was working in Managua, but no one knew exactly where he was or when he would return. With six children to care for, Maria made do by washing clothes, selling homemade items at the market on Saturdays, and raising a few pigs and chickens. Her husband had built the family a house before he left, and she had a brother in Pedregal, who stopped by and did heavy work for her from time to time.

Yet Maria was not prepared to deal with the emergency caused by Panchito’s encounter with the black viper. The boy was playing alone near the abandoned outhouses when she heard him scream. When she got to him the snake was gone, but Maria immediately recognized the telltale bite marks. She
screamed the news to her nearest neighbor, Concepción, who ran to get her husband, Marcelo. Marcelo ran for Juan, who owned the quickest and most sure-footed mule in the village. Juan was at María’s house within minutes. He gathered the boy into his arms and turned his mule toward the steep, rocky trail that led eight miles down the mountainside to the nearest town below. As Juan hurried down the mountain, María’s neighbors also came to her assistance. Several women arrived to take charge of María’s five other children. Carlos arrived to lend her his own mule, and Eduardo came on another animal to escort her down the mountain. Only minutes behind Juan, Eduardo and María started down the mountainside. In the hours after María left to follow her son and Juan down the mountain trail, Lilía and others took up a collection among the villagers. The sum they gathered was sufficient to cover the cost of the doctor’s visit, medicines, and even partially compensate Juan for the use of his mule. María stayed in town overnight, confident that her other children and her household were in good hands back in Pedregal. Panchito did not die but grew up quite proud of his encounter with the snake. When his father next returned to the village, the boy told him every minute detail and finished by showing off the scars on his leg. Alone, financially strapped, responsible for five other small children, without transportation, and eight miles from the nearest doctor, María would have been helpless to save her boy without the village medical support system.

Peasant villagers are always vulnerable to the hardships of rural poverty, as María and her family were. They live in a world of scarcity and danger. As farmers, they are as vulnerable to the ravages of natural disaster as they are to accidents such as Panchito’s. R. H. Tawney described the peasant as standing up to his neck in water such that even the smallest wave will drown him. Living life on the edge of disaster makes peasants constantly aware of their own vulnerability and of the extent to which they depend on community support for survival. This reality makes individual and community interests blend and become one and the same. The individual depends on the community for protection from disaster, but the community support system depends equally on individual input in order to survive. Pedregal’s medical support system is dependent on numerous small contributions made by individual villagers, and without these inputs it would fail. Villagers know that they themselves may need the medical support system someday, and they know that without their support the system would die. So they contribute, both for Panchito and María but also for their own individual well-being and security. Theirs is a participant perspective. They do not control the community, but neither does it control them. Rather they are participants in an interactive system. The extent of the participation ethos is illustrated by Juan’s membership in the medical support network. Juan is single and consequently has no family who might come to need medical assistance someday. I asked him why he didn’t leave the work to those with families who were more likely to depend on the support system. I even reminded him how much money he had lost by
taking a day away from his farm to help save Panchito’s life. “One never
knows,” he told me, “I could break a leg and need help getting down the
mountain. I couldn’t ride. Look at Jorge, laid up after a hernia operation. His
neighbors have done all his planting for him. When Marta went into a bad la-
bor it took six men and a stretcher to get her down the mountain. I must be at
least as heavy as she is. It’s true that I may use the system less often than other
families, but we have to keep it going because it’s good for everyone and be-
because someday I might need it too.”
Juan did not view Panchito’s accident from the calculating perspective of a
traditional rational actor. If he had, he would have focused only on short-term
gains for himself, and he would have stayed home farming on the day of the
accident. In fact, in the interview, I presented reasoning based on such calcula-
tions of individual, short-term benefit; Juan rejected that reasoning. Such be-
behavior characterized Pedro, but Juan calculated differently. Juan saw his wel-
fare as intertwined with Panchito’s and Maria’s. What was good for them
might also be good for him some day. Thus Juan is not a hero or a saintly al-
truist who places the welfare of others ahead of his own well-being. Nor was
he merely serving self-interest. In the end, then, Juan’s action was both self-in-
terested and community-oriented; it helped both Panchito and Juan.
In fact, even in good health, Juan was dependent on the support and good-
will of his neighbors. Pedro, who was always losing his tomatoes, did not have
that support and paid a heavy financial price in repeated small losses. The fi-
nancial contribution Pedro might have made to help Panchito and others is
actually much smaller than the financial loss he sustained each year in lost
tomatoes and sheep. Juan had figured out that it was wise and foresightful to
contribute to the community system, and ultimately, it was impossible to sepa-
rate Juan’s self-interested motives from his communitarian concerns. Indeed,
to try to do so is to impose an unusual and self-defeating understanding on
Juan’s world that he would find incomprehensible. Juan, like most of his
neighbors, did not make a rigid distinction between individual and group in-
terest, and he was confused when I kept asking him to do so.
Pedro, on the other hand, did distinguish between individual and commu-
nity interest. He had followed what political scientists call a traditional rato-
nal-actor model in his relations with other villagers. “I don’t help anyone
around here. They [his neighbors] are just thieves, all of them. All they want
to do is take and take, as much as they can. I don’t need any of them. Getting
together with them you just get more poor.” Pedro defined his own well-being
as individual. He saw his own interests as confined to direct gain and imme-
diate profit. He owned more land than some of his neighbors, and for him, it
made sense to seek to preserve that relative affluence by sharing nothing with
others. His understanding of rationality was immediate and short-sighted. In
the peasant context, it was irrational.
It was Juan’s belief in long-term self-interest that was rational in the peasant
world of Pedregal. It was not that Juan didn’t make calculations of self-inter-
est. He was aware of the short-term financial loss he sustained by spending a
day taking Panchito to the doctor instead of farming, but for him, it was far
more rational to invest in the community, and to receive its protection when
he needed it than it was to focus on immediate profits and discount future
risk. Moreover, by investing in the community, Juan, unlike Pedro, didn’t in-
cur immediate financial losses to disgruntled neighbors who saw him as self-
ish and therefore fair game. The effect of Juan’s action thus moved outward
through the village and then back again toward himself.

The Peasant Political Ecology

This community approach to individual and group well-being is, however, far
more than a medical alert system capable of saving a little boy’s life. The fact
that peasants can organize to help each other in time of need also means that
they can organize to deal with threats that are much larger and more dan-
gerous than, for example, Panchito’s snake. The understanding of interdepen-
dence and need for mutual support demonstrated by Juan and others has sig-
nificant political consequences when turned toward the outside world. It
provides strength among the powerless; it is a protective shield for those who
would otherwise be defenseless; and it can be a dangerous weapon, when
turned toward political purpose.

This understanding of interdependence and need for mutual support is at
the heart of a theory that I developed during the eighteen months that I spent
studying politics and political action in peasant villages in Costa Rica and
Nicaragua.¹ The theory is described in the phrase political ecology; the pea-
sant’s political ecology is this ecological understanding and an ecological per-
spective or world view which influences peasant actions. Such terms are of
course not part of the peasants’ conscious vocabulary. Though peasants don’t
think in conscious terms of maintaining a political ecology, they do think in
terms of interdependence, mutually supportive interaction, and need, and
they work to maintain and protect these.²

The peasant political ecology embraces virtually all elements of peasant
life—self, community and community institutions (e.g., Pedregal’s medical
support system), the natural environment, and the nation. The peasants’ un-
derstanding of interdependence causes them to see these elements in interac-
tion with each other and with the national society beyond the village. I found
this political ecology and its political results present in similar and recogniz-
able form in village after village even when the political action taken varied
greatly in form and context. The peasants’ political ecology caused them to
consider political action vis-à-vis the external world; helped them determine
whether or not political action was necessary; and assisted them in choosing
specific political tactics. The political ecology theory I present here explains
peasant political action along a wide spectrum, from quiescence to rebellion
and including collective nonviolent tactics in between these two.
I came to describe the peasant perspective on the world as an ecological one because the peasants perceived the world as interdependent. They saw themselves, each other, their communities, their surrounding natural world, and their wider society as part of an interacting, interdependent whole. By describing the peasant perspective on interdependence as ecological, I broaden the term to include the social and political interactions in which peasants are involved as well as an awareness of the natural environment. Yet the new usage of the word retains the basic conceptual power of environmental ecology, which argues that a complex interdependence, interaction, and balance exist among such components of the natural world as soil, air, and water. In nature, energy flows back and forth among these elements. A chemical introduced into the system at one point will diffuse and reappear in all the elements in the system. Thus events in one sphere will eventually indirectly affect other elements in the system and the condition of other spheres. I came to learn that the peasant world operates in a similar way: individual and community interests overlap, and action moves outward to affect others and then returns to touch the original actor, Juan, Panchito, and the others understand this. Just as environmental ecology refers to interaction and interdependence among soil, air, and water, the peasants’ political ecology also refers to interactive interdependence among spheres—the individual, the community, the natural world, and the national society. Accordingly, activities by one individual affect the wider community and vice versa, in positive or negative ways. In such an ecological relationship, the survival of the peasant depends on an awareness of and attentiveness to interdependence with the broader social and agrarian environment. In such an interdependent system, events affecting one component eventually indirectly influence many other elements in the same system. Nothing occurs in a vacuum. Every action or choice is felt at many points throughout the system. Energy and the results of actions flow back and forth constantly.

This new theory of peasant political action stands in contrast to previous theories of peasant political action. Previous theories have focused primarily on rebellion, and some have been quite useful in understanding certain aspects of peasant revolution. Yet none has been able to fully explain the combination of individual and group interests that are evident in the community action surrounding Panchito’s accident and that also exist in peasant politics. None has offered a theory of peasant quiescence and collective nonviolence as well as of rebellion.

However, in the development of the theory of political ecology offered in this book two previous schools of theory have been particularly useful, because, taken together, they focus on both the individual and group interests involved in political action. These two schools of theory are best represented by Samuel Popkin’s *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rebellion in Southeast Asia* and James Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia*. These two theoretical paradigms have domi-
nated the study of peasant politics and particularly of peasant rebellion. They are also known respectively as the political economy or rational actor paradigm and the moral economy paradigm. In this book I have labeled the two explanations the individualist and communitarian schools of thought because of their respective focus on individual and community concerns in the theories they offer. Thus the individualist school presents peasants as individuals whose primary concern in political action is the benefit of self and the maximization of individual gain. The communitarian school, by contrast, sees peasant political actors as primarily members of a community who are concerned with the preservation of long-standing community traditions. Although each of these explanations is partly right, each is incomplete. The individualist theory places too much emphasis on individual self-interest and uses a limited and unrealistic definition of “rational.” The communitarian school, by contrast, places too little emphasis on individual interests and stresses group concerns too much. This is also unrealistic and implies that peasants are altruists who place their own individual interests below the interests of the community.  

Elements in the Political-Ecological Mentality

The theory of political ecology is a blend of these two theories but also moves beyond them. Unlike them, it explores the presence of both individual and group interests. Also unlike them, it addresses quiescence and collective non-violence as well as peasant rebellion. Finally, the theory of political ecology incorporates crucial elements of the peasant world other than the individual and the village. Let us now explore the elements of the peasant mentality that result from their ecological view of the world.

The most basic component of the peasant world is the individual, who survives in interaction with other elements. Just as the quality of the soil affects the quality of the water and in turn is affected by the quality of the air and rainfall, so the peasant influences the character of the surrounding community and natural environment and in turn is affected by them. The second critical component is the village, which interacts both with the individual and with the natural and national world. Again, just as the water helps determine the nature of rain, so the village influences the quality of the natural environment, and in conjunction with other communities, impacts the wider society.

The third element in the peasant world is the natural environment, which influences peasant life and in turn is affected by peasant behavior. The final element in that world is the national society; like the air in nature, the national society influences all aspects of individual, community, and natural life, and in turn, is influenced by each of these. In this complex system of interdependent elements peasants develop a political-ecological mentality with which they evaluate politics and choose whether or not to take certain kinds of political action.
The purpose of this book is to explore the peasant political ecology and resultant mentality in a variety of different contexts and to understand how and why this perspective leads peasants to different kinds of political action in different places and times. In the section that follows, we will consider the four elements of the peasant world—the individual, the community, the environment, and the national society—and examine how each, in interaction with the others, shapes the peasants’ political ecology. By understanding their own interdependence peasants are influenced politically in two ways. First, they see the need for collective action. Second, they see the appropriateness, indeed the inescapability, of political goals that serve both the individual and the group.

**The Individual: The Responsible, Rational Peasant**

Although obviously motivated by self-interest, the peasant is not just an individual calculator of short-term maximized interest. He or she is also aware of the long-term foreseeable consequences of decisions. For example, faced with Panchito’s accident, Juan calculated the financial costs of a day spent away from his farm and balanced these costs against the possibility that he would need medical help in the future. The communitarian school of theory sees peasants as social beings captured and constrained by unchanging community traditions and norms, as people doomed always to harken backward. But this is not so; the peasant is a conscious, efficacious actor capable of assessing and reassessing community norms and traditions. Individual peasants understand that such norms have an impact on their survival and consider how norms might be altered to assure survival in a changing world. For example, Pedregal’s medical system has changed with the modern world. Once it might have resorted only to herbal and natural remedies; now it has modernized to bring access to scientific medicine.

The essence of the political ecology theory is that the individual peasant is a complex, responsible political actor, who assesses and acts in several different dimensions rather than solely within an individualistic or communitarian one. Furthermore, the dimensions along which the peasant acts mesh and overlap to create a whole perspective that is more than the sum of its parts. The individual has both immediate interests and foreseeable interests, both an individual self and a community self. The rational actor gives attention to both and understands the way in which they reinforce and protect each other. The individual is politically more powerful when acting as part of a group, and interdependent, responsible rationality is political power.

**The Community: Interdependence and Egalitarianism**

An interdependent view of the individual within the community prevails in peasant society because of the nature of peasant life. The peasant lives at the edge of existence and is always peering over the brink. Survival is never guaranteed either by the state or by economic cushioning and is always at stake, always threatened. The support of community often provides the only barrier
between life and death in case of catastrophe. To ensure the survival of both individual and community, the community must be structured to provide group life insurance that includes each individual. A group insurance system that includes each individual addresses the insecurity of each poverty-stricken life and offers each peasant an incentive to join in and protect community, yet such a system can only survive within a normative order that prescribes relative human equality. Notions of egalitarianism and of a group system that protects individual life are common in popular culture where survival is precarious. Poverty causes the belief system that gives rise to and sustains a political ecology. In his study of injustice and revolt, Barrington Moore writes, “Equality, ideas and practices are likely to flourish in situations where supply is precarious and any given individual is liable to face an unpredictable shortage.” In the context of insecurity in the rural world, equality acts as a kind of group life insurance. The belief in egalitarianism offers peasants a normative standard against which to compare the wider social and political world. When that normative expectation is compromised, peasants know that their own survival is or will be threatened. Egalitarian ideas help keep peasants alert and aware of what is happening around them. At the same time, ideals are tempered by pragmatism. Absolute equality is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Yet rural communities have frequently been able to develop a relative equity among members that provides the insurance needed in the face of insecurity. Thus community norms must respect basic human needs and not permit a minority to become wealthy if the majority suffer dire want. Relative egalitarianism recognizes the legitimacy of some differences and does not demand absolute equality. E. P. Thompson has argued that egalitarian rural norms constitute a “moral economy of the poor” that predated the modern market economy and demanded a respect for consumption needs over individual profit. Egalitarianism and respect for minimal subsistence needs would preclude severe subordination, including subordination to individual profit or the desire for individual wealth at the expense of the many. The popular culture described here includes elements of resistance to subordination and of relative egalitarianism. Egalitarianism and resistance to subordination are crucial in maintaining community and the social insurance that community provides. Community insurance requires that individuals be interdependent, that is, dependent on one another. That interdependence would be destroyed if individuals did not maintain the community and, with it, group insurance. The loss of community would threaten each individual within that community as well as the village as a whole. Thus voluntary actions that result in harm to others violate community norms, threaten group and therefore individual survival, and are defined as wrong, no matter how well vindicated by the laws of government or of market economics. Community norms take precedence over state laws and market economics because the latter may override individual or community needs.
Peasants resist policies, for example, of land concentration or high levels of taxation that violate the norms of their political ecology, first because such policies allow one human being to injure others with impunity, and second because they fail to respect the rule of human need. Such policies do not recognize interdependence or the rights and responsibilities of all. Moore has called popular opposition to the concentration of unused wealth “the taboo of the dog in the manger.” “The essence of the taboo is the belief that personal and private retention without use of resources that are in short supply and needed by others is somehow immoral and a violation of the morally superior rights of the community.”

In the peasant system, the preservation of interdependence and therefore of community demands relative equity of economic position. An individual who attains wealth will need the support of others less and will be less inclined to offer support to others. The achievement of independence by first one and then another peasant will slowly erode interdependence and mutual need, and ultimately it will threaten everyone. Thus a peasant who has some relative affluence, such as Juan with his sure-footed mule in Pedregal, is a protected community member because he recognizes his own dependence on the village and therefore contributes to it. He does not see himself as self-sufficient by virtue of his greater economic comfort, and indeed, he is not. Pedro, on the other hand, also has relative affluence in the form of sheep and tomatoes, but does not recognize his dependence on the community. Thinking himself self-sufficient, he does not contribute to the system and is vulnerable to it.

Norms that favor community and mutual need are especially prevalent in a small village because they are more easily made and enforced on a microscale where everyone knows everyone else. Small community size permits actors to see more clearly the full effects of their actions—to see the ripple all the way to the edge of the pond. Seeing the effect of their actions and of their dependence on the community encourages individuals to apply to their own behavior the standards used by the community in general. Community citizens are constantly aware of how their behavior appears to others and of what their neighbors might think. Relative egalitarianism helps to pragmatize ideals of equality, and resistance to subordination provides a rule of thumb for when political action becomes legitimate.

*Reciprocity and Political Ecology*

The peasants’ political ecology is much more than the system of reciprocity within villages that has been described elsewhere. Reciprocity is an exchange relationship between two persons of unequal means: a landed villager and a landless laborer. Yet it does not fully capture the multifaceted, crisscross of supportive relationships among individuals and groups. The multidimensional understanding of interdependence that includes all these elements is more accurately described as ecological interdependence because it, like the natural
environment, contains multiple patterns of interaction. Ecological interdependence is a more complex and extensive set of relationships in which participants do not necessarily return benefits or support directly to the person from whom they have received aid. Rather, they return support to a general community system and trust that system to support the person who directly aided them whenever the need arises. Moreover, peasants may contribute directly to one individual but may also proffer aid to a community system in general, such as collections in Pedregal’s medical support system.

Reciprocity does not describe a belief in mutualit y between the peasantry and society nor does it include the outward-looking nature of the village. It refers only to individual relations within a village, whereas ecological interdependence captures the extent to which peasants also look beyond the village for support. Their awareness of such interdependence alerts peasants to their place in the wider society. Ecological interdependence and the expectations it carries with it help define what peasants can legitimately expect from the outside world. These expectations help them decide when political action is needed and what kinds of demands can be made. (See Figure 1.1.)

The theory of political ecology has much more explanatory power than a theory of moral economy because the former explicitly recognizes the role of both individual and group interests in the peasant world. Peasants are self-interested actors, even though they define rationality broadly. They are not only community actors, and they are not only altruistic. They are traditional only when tradition pays off, and they are willing to change and adapt their norms and traditions if such change will preserve the community and the individual. They cannot afford to neglect calculations of self-interest. Rather, they see the protection of self and of self-interest as part and parcel of the community system, and the protection of one is also the protection of the other. Thus there is no incompatibility between individual and community interest, individual and group action. To hurt the one is to hurt the other when both are rolled into a bundle and are one and the same.

Figure 1.1. Spectrum of Political Activity
The Hostile, Fragile Environment

As farmers and people who live with and on nature, peasants are always aware of the role of the environment within their lives. The products of the natural world feed, clothe, and house them; enrich, support, and teach them; and sometimes threaten them. It is impossible to survive as a peasant without acknowledging one’s daily interaction with the natural environment. That interaction includes both an understanding of the dangers nature poses for people and for crops and a sense of the danger human carelessness can pose for the natural environment. Thus nature is part of the interactive, interdependent, or ecological, system of the peasant world and composes another element in the political ecology.

Peasants watch the natural world for dangers and prepare contingency plans that may help shield them from natural disasters. If a village stands on the slopes of an active volcano, peasants may respond by dividing landownership at the base and the top of the mountain, so that no person owns only the safest land and the danger is spread out. By being aware of their own vulnerability to natural disasters, peasants can use community interdependence to minimize environmental danger. Threats of natural disaster also encourage peasants to include society when they think about interdependence with nature. If a natural disaster strikes an entire community equally (hail, a hurricane) and intravillage support is inadequate, peasants may look outward to the state and society for support, pointing out the interdependence between the village and society. In requesting disaster aid, they will emphasize society’s dependence on them for food. Yet peasants also know that in the interdependent relationship with nature, danger flows both ways. People, including peasants, can harm the ecosystem if they do not take care to protect it. Knowing that they depend on nature for subsistence and survival, peasants watch their natural environment and protect it insofar as they can.19

This understanding of how vulnerable the environment is helps frame the issues around which peasants act politically. They may become environmental activists, making demands that directly protect the environment. Alternatively they may request better economic circumstances for themselves, enabling them to deplete natural resources more slowly and protect the environment indirectly.20 It is important to note that I am not arguing that peasants are perfect environmental ecologists in all ways and at all times. No one is such an unflawed environmentalist. I am simply saying that peasants have a keen awareness of the natural world around them, and that this awareness forms one part of their ecological perspective in which the individual, the community, and the wider society are all equally important elements. Peasant environmental awareness grows out of the proximity of peasant life to nature, but it does not necessarily mean that peasants always act in a protective way toward their environment. Frequently, however, their environmental consciousness leads them to incorporate environmental concerns in their political demands.
and to do so more often than most other actors in political movements. Sometimes, peasants are trapped into a situation where their own well-being and that of the environment are partly or directly at odds. If possible, they will use their political clout to avoid or modify such a zero-sum situation. Even where they are powerless to modify an environmentally destructive system, their political perspective still retains an environmental awareness.

**National Society: Peasant Change and Adaptation**

The willingness to change and adapt is one of the most obvious sources of peasant power and ability to survive in today’s world. The belief system of the peasant community subscribes to rationality, responsibility, and relative egalitarianism, all with an eye to maintaining interdependence and survival. Within that belief system, there is room for tradition as well as for change and adaptation. Between tradition and change, the choice is always for facilitating survival, both that of the group and that of the individual. Where tradition best protects survival, traditional claims, such as on landlord reciprocity, will prevail. Where change best protects survival, new norms, such as an appeal to national and international agencies, will become the order of the day. The peasants’ political ecology is thus adaptable and pragmatic. Peasants will use all available tools in the struggle for survival, now touting tradition, now moving beyond it, and making new demands in accordance with a changing society. Such flexibility and adaptability explain how peasants in one village may enforce the norms of a traditional moral economy whereas elsewhere villagers take a struggle for environmental preservation to the international stage. In each case, the struggle is for survival. In each instance, the peasants perceive an interdependent world. Whether through traditional norms or new demands and tactics, the ecological perspective helps peasants see how they can maximize their chances for survival. This approach helps explain modern peasants in a contemporary world.

Change and adaptation result from peasants seeing themselves and their communities in interdependence with a society that is always modernizing. Interdependence between village and society creates obligations and rights or opportunities just as does the interdependence between individual and village. As interdependent members of a modernizing society, peasants have an obligation to change and adapt, to move with that society if they expect to survive. Such modernization may, for example, include trying new crops or new farming techniques. Also, as interdependent members of modern society, peasants feel that they have the right to expect support from society, including supportive agricultural policies and even aid in times of crisis.

Many contemporary movements, including the examples in this book, contain rhetoric and action that addresses peasant obligations and rights as they adapt to the modern world. Movements may underscore the peasant contribution to society and demand more land, better fertilizers, or improved transport, all to enhance production. Other movements may emphasize the
need for the contribution to flow in the opposite direction—from society to the peasant. Such actions may demand higher prices, better price supports, or even crop-failure insurance and disaster compensation. Thus the political ecology includes not only the local region but also the national society. Peasants see themselves as contributing to and supporting society. They expect society to also support them.

Political Ecology and Political Action

Peasant understanding of ecological interdependence empowers them to protect themselves and promote their own interests in ways that would be impossible if they only acted individually and were unaware of the protective strength found in community. As farmers and citizens of underdeveloped, modernizing countries, peasants are exposed to numerous threats and dangers, both to themselves and to their communities, throughout their lives. Their crops and livelihood may be destroyed by hail, a hurricane, an erupting volcano, or disease and pests. Peasants may be exposed to economic policies that drain away their meager profits through high taxes or that destroy their profits entirely through low prices or overproduction. They may be victims of a social reality that condones land concentration and crowds larger and larger numbers of them onto a steadily dwindling land base. Or they may be exposed to political dangers, such as a nonsupportive ministry of agriculture, oppression of peasant organizations, state repression and terror, and even revolution.

Individually, peasants are powerless before a flood or a land-grabbing neighbor, just as alone Maria would have been powerless to help Panchito when he was bitten by the snake. As part of a group, the opportunities for self-preservation are much greater, just as they were for Maria. Among themselves, peasants may distribute the effects of natural or social disaster so that disaster weighs less heavily on each person. They may unite in the face of discriminatory economic and social policies, creating organizations that demand better prices or that reduce landlessness. They may even support social revolution by sending new converts to join a revolutionary cause (feeding, clothing, and arming guerrillas) or providing a social camouflage into which those fleeing repression can melt and be protected. Any community that can organize so effectively to provide medical support can also turn that capacity toward political purpose with equally effective results.

The ecological perspective and understanding of interdependence and the need for mutual support thus has very real effects as the united village looks outward. Community cohesion becomes political cohesion all the more easily because peasants see the wider political world as part of the interdependent system. Just as peasants define their relationship with their environment as mutually supportive and protective, they expect their place in society to be in-
teractive and interdependent. They and their society each have certain rights, responsibilities, and obligations vis-à-vis each other.

Recognizing the political effects of the peasant understanding of ecological interdependence is the first step toward comprehending the persistence of peasantry in the modern world. Although historians have long predicted the disappearance of this class, the majority of the world’s population is still peasants. Peasants persist because of their ability to cohere socially and politically. They survive because of their capacity to translate ecological interdependence into political power. The peasant world view influences peasant decisions about whether to take action and about what kind of action to take. An understanding of the origin and components of the political ecology and its accompanying ecological mentality enables one to interpret peasant political action more precisely than does any unidimensional approach and to explain peasant choices of political tactics. Peasants transfer the ecological perspective derived from community to the wider world. Although the peasant’s ecological perspective begins with the village and may remain concentrated there, the ecological world view can also extend to the wider society. To the extent that peasants perceive the village as dependent on and contributing to national society, they devise actions that respond to perceived disequilibrium in the wider social system that threatens their own survival and that of their community. A decision to act may come through village discussion, trial and error, or through a general process of learning; the ultimate goal is to respond as effectively as possible to perceived external threats. The threat may be to peasants individually, to their communities, to their way of life, or to the peasant class as a whole. They respond with tactics carefully chosen to maximize their own chances of success. If they see the wider society as contributing something to their own survival, they will act to reform the system but not to destroy it. If they see the system as primarily dangerous to them, they will withdraw if possible or join efforts at destroying the system if withdrawal is impossible.

Peasants change the way they act depending on the circumstances; an adaptable political ecology permits this flexibility. When the community and the system of interdependence are not threatened by immediate individual-interest maximization, the peasant may behave very much like a traditional rational actor. In another instance, it may be socially rational to adhere to traditional norms, overriding short-term personal interests. If, however, community is threatened both by unlimited short-term individual-interest maximization and by blind adherence to traditional norms, the peasant is capable of recognizing both threats and acting to preserve community. Such action is both individualistic and communitarian. A complex and holistic understanding of self in the context of community leads the individual to see that community norms may have to change as the external world changes, in order to facilitate individual and group survival. Because nonviolent collective action is
reformist activism, the incremental modifications that result from it are the best way for communities to facilitate survival and participation in a changing world. The ecological perception of self within community thus encourages collective action and individual participation out of personal self-interest. If the individual pursues only short-term self-interest, acting as a free rider in the rational-actor sense, the limited rationality of this action will undermine community and endanger the individual. At the same time, if the individual adheres blindly to tradition and fails to update community norms, community will also be undermined, endangering the individual.

This ecological perspective gives peasants a responsibility to act in ways that benefit both community and individual. Peasants must balance short-term consequences with long-term interests and keep middle-range foreseeable consequences clearly in mind. At times in that process they may fail to assess the balance accurately and make mistakes. Some peasants may act irresponsibly or with limited rationality. Nonetheless, the overall perspective is one of self within community. The political calculus of the peasant is more complicated, more rational, and more thorough than previously understood. The main reason why some peasants act politically and others do not lies in how well the individual understands ecological interdependence of the world. Within a given village that understanding will vary, just as Pedro and Juan understood their own relationship to their village very differently. Awareness of ecological interdependence primarily develops within the village itself, but it may also come from travel beyond the village and experience with the loneliness and vulnerability of life without the community. It may come from religion or education which provides a similar understanding or it may derive from an experience of poverty in which a community could not or would not offer protection.

Seen as a product of an ecological mentality, peasant political action is not just a response to the violation of immediate interests. Nor is it simply a protective response to the transgression of traditional norms. Both of these views imply that peasants move dramatically from quiescence to revolution, without any possibility of participatory nonviolent political action and its consequent readjustments. Peasant political action is not merely a reaction to the modern world but a means of participating in it and keeping up with it. It is a systematic attempt to readjust the community and community life so that they will continue to protect and enhance the individual. In this sense, peasant political action is both moral and economic, both communitarian and individualistic. It supports community norms and is economically rational because it promotes survival.

To create an adaptive, resilient community, peasants must be capable of many forms of political action, including quiescence that holds to the status quo or rebellion that attempts to destroy all. They must be able to choose the appropriate action, the one most likely to sustain their world, and to move from one tactic to another in pursuing their goals. They must be able to par-
terlink in a variety of ways and to change their mode of political participation as circumstances and their goals demand. In one case, they must be able to sustain and enforce relationships of a moral economy. At another point in time, their survival may dictate as little contact as possible with the wider society. In yet a third instance, they may have to master national politics and speak directly to the state. In still another scenario, they may enter a world stage and join an international cause. This deliberate readjustment explains why the peasantry has survived into the modern world. A flexible range of political action gives the peasant community a resilience that Eric Wolf failed to recognize, and it explains why the village has not necessarily crumbled under capitalism, as he anticipated it would. Nonviolent collective action enables the community to grow and change instead of stagnate and disappear.

In some cases, of course, these strategies fail and peasants are unable to protect community and survive as peasant villagers. However, peasants’ frequent success is attested to by the large number of modern rural dwellers who call themselves such today. The case study material in the chapters that follow helps clarify how peasants use political action to preserve themselves and their communities. Community survival can be pursued via collective action along a spectrum of political activity that includes quiescence and revolution. Voluntary quiescence results from the perception that there is no need for change, no immediate threat. This inaction preserves community in its appropriate current position. At the opposite extreme, revolution responds to a total crisis by destroying all and attempting to re-create everything. Nonviolent collective action recognizes smaller problems before they become revolutionary crises and responds to them by initiating incremental change. The gradual readjustment that results allows re-creation of community again and again and the readjustment of norms to fit and participate in the modern world.

This book draws upon the multiple concerns of peasants to create a model of human social interdependence and a theory of political action. It explores the power of both individual economic concerns and of communitarian concerns in numerous instances of political action. This investigation is both quantitative and qualitative. Political actors are allowed to state their reasons for political action so that the extent of each kind of consideration is evident. In addition, statistical techniques show precisely how significant each consideration is in each case of political action.

This detailed understanding of political motivation and the careful comparison of the relative importance of different considerations in specific cases required extensive fieldwork and thoughtful listening to the context of and reasons for political action. It necessitated data collection methods that are sensitive to the depth of the human experience being uncovered. Such methods cannot confine themselves to brief, preprogrammed encounters with subjects because these would never uncover beliefs, values, and moral concerns. Data collection for this study, therefore, combined social science techniques with the ethnographic practices of anthropology in a way that is both unusual
and more conducive of understanding than is either technique alone. Data analysis moves back and forth between a qualitative approach and quantitative statistical techniques. In-depth knowledge of each community informed the statistical techniques chosen for the tests made. Statistical results obtained were then reality-checked against my detailed knowledge of the villages to be certain that results “made sense” in view of what I already knew about the respondents and their story. All of this constitutes a departure from traditional methods used in studying the peasantry. I have combined surveys and anthropological techniques of gathering data with qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The results illustrate ways in which social science, including peasant studies, can benefit from combined methodologies and a broad range of analytical techniques. For the interested reader, the Appendix discusses in detail the methodology involved.

The case study data indicate the presence of both individualistic and communitarian concerns and confirm the importance of a multidimensional ecological perspective. In a broad view of political action of many kinds, across various contexts, and within two very different countries, neither individualistic nor communitarian explanations always prevail. In fact, the data show strong support for both the economic concerns of individuals and for moral communitarian considerations in a way that demonstrates the blending of individual and community interests in an interdependent manner.

The Nicaraguan cases explore peasant choices of quiescence and rebellion and the movement between the two. The Costa Rican cases offer examples of political action that was neither voluntary quiescence nor violence. All of the Costa Rican villagers chose to participate through different kinds of nonviolent collective action. These respondents make it clear that both individual economic concerns and moral considerations of community were of relatively equal importance for their choices. For them, choices among different political tactics were governed by economic goals as well as by the moral vision they held of social justice. The way in which individual and community concerns and economic and moral motivations come together indicates the need for a theory that explains the interconnection between them. An ecological view of the individual within society and of self-interest within community interest provides this explanation. The data thus support a multidimensional and holistic theory of political action that combines both individual and communitarian concerns and provides an ecological perspective on peasant political action.