1 Introduction: The Problem and Method

The Indian problem in Peru, it has often been said, is in large measure also the Andean problem. Indeed, to think of the Quechua and Aymará Indians apart from their eroded earth, their ancient mountains and their windswept altiplano (high plateau) is like thinking of an island society separated from the sea, the centre and source of much of its culture. With their hard jutting cheekbones, eyes like quiet lakes, thick firm lips and large hooked noses, Indian faces seem to express, in their deep sorrow, resignation and futility, their history of conquest, extirpation and exploitation, and their unending struggle against the elements.

The very meaning of life itself in these communities seems to lie in the earth and in the annual garnering of corn, wheat and potatoes. Expressing these close ties with the earth, Quechua poetry and songs are rich with allusions to nature, plants, birds and animals as well as to medicine, magic and sorcery:

I was born like a lily in the garden,
So also was I raised.
As my age came, I have grown up
And, as I had to die,
So likewise I dried up,
And I died.

Against the magnificent rock-ribbed vastness of the Andes it is possible to romanticise the condition of the Indian. But such a Redfieldian picture by itself, stressing as it does harmony and stability, is incomplete and one-sided, and needs to be complemented by a ‘Lewisian’ approach that recognises also the other, darker side of Indian peasant life.¹ Many communities are rent by factionalism and disunity; and the chronic lack of land, accompanied by growing population pressure and accelerated erosion, together with the vagaries of a harsh and unpredictable nature, have led inevitably to poverty and hardship. Andean valleys can suddenly be lashed by hailstorms, or transformed to bleak winter by blizzards, while frosts and droughts are so

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¹ R. F. Watters, Poverty and Peasantry in Peru’s Southern Andes, 1963–90
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Background

destructive that in the Cuzco region the entire crop is lost one year in seven.

Peasant villages tend to be squalid compounds of miserable mud-floored, smoke-filled adobe houses (made of sun-dried bricks), where half-naked, pot-bellied, worm-infested children scramble on dung heaps, and scavenging pigs clean up human faeces. Added to this picture is the fact that in 1960 the life expectancy at birth in the Andes averaged only 36 years, and infant mortality was four times higher than in Western countries.2

There are also scourges of disease and malnutrition. Influenza and pneumonia cause 21 per cent of the deaths of children in Peru under five years old and gastritis and enteritis kill another 12 per cent. Although conditions had improved by 1980, Peru still had the fourth lowest average life expectancy among 20 Latin American countries.3 In 1978–80, Peru was in the lowest group of Latin American countries for average daily calorie intake and below the Latin American average in total protein consumption.4 Inferior nutrition and health are merely part of the sub-standard living conditions that are experienced daily by many Peruvians and especially by the Andean peasantry. This book will present many illustrations of these sub-human living conditions and attempt to explain the perpetuation of poverty.

POVERTY AND THE PEASANTRY

When we enquire ‘Who are the poor?’ or ‘What are their characteristics?’, we find immediately that a large proportion of the poor in Peru are identified as peasant (campesino) and especially as Indian (Quechua or Aymará) peasants. To understand their poverty and their toleration of it, we need to examine Peruvian peasant culture and the accommodations that Indian peasants have made to it over time. Peasantry is as much a process of adaptation as it is a social structure.

The forging of any culture represents the selective processes by which a society gradually works out survival techniques. For peasant cultures, these processes enable them to wrest a livelihood from the reluctant earth in a peculiarly harsh and changeable environment, and to adapt to different political and social conditions. Because of their lowly socio-economic position, and