2 Approaches to the Peasantry

The umbrella term 'peasant' is much used and abused to describe the many rural societies which, until recently, comprised about half the population of the world. It has become common in recent years to argue about what 'peasantry' actually means, but in general the term has come to denote an underclass of small rural cultivators from whom a surplus has been extracted (rent in the form of free or cheap labour or product) to underwrite the living standards of a more powerful upper class and the needs of the state.¹

The most fundamental point about peasantry is the structural relationship between it and the rest of society.² This relationship, and the prevailing economic forces that impinge upon the countryside, have stamped certain qualities on the peasants and largely determine the underdog position in which they continue to live. We need, however, to move beyond this broad structural relationship to consider more closely both peasant culture and peasant economy.

FIVE APPROACHES TO THE PEASANTRY

To do this, we shall critically employ five conceptual approaches to the study of the peasantry: (1) the ethnographic cultural tradition, (2) the Durkheimian tradition often allied to functionalist sociology, (3) the 'specific economy' approach, (4) the Marxist tradition of class analysis and the dependency approach, and (5) the ethnohistorical approach.

Despite the insights each approach reveals, the complexity of the topic requires a comprehensive, many-sided examination. As Redfield noted, peasantry is 'a whole that is both enclosed within other wholes and is also in some part permeated by them'.³ The test of the degree of validity of each approach here is its adequacy in explaining the nature of peasantry in the Southern Andes.

R. F. Watters, Poverty and Peasantry in Peru's Southern Andes, 1963–90
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The Ethnographic Cultural Tradition

This approach treats peasants as representatives of an archaic rural social order, the heirs of an earlier national tradition. Such societies, inherently conservative and traditional, are characterised by inertia and acculturate only slowly to Western and urban standards of rationality. Such an analysis often arises from developmentalists who focus on traditional obstacles to industrialisation and 'modernisation'.

A number of well-known studies of peasantry use this approach. Erasmus (1968) concluded that peasantry disappeared only because great changes occurred in infrastructure and technology, permitting a transition from a 'paleotechnic ecotype' to a neotechnic (machine age) ecotype. In this transition process, the encogido personality syndrome (the timid and withdrawn personality of the 'passive peasant' who avoids persons of higher status except those who serve as culture or power brokers) becomes less common as a prominent type among rural lower classes; and the contrasting syndrome of the entrón personality becomes more common. The entrón person is aggressive, confident, achievement-oriented, extroverted and not opposed to making contacts with higher status individuals whose friendship will be to his advantage.

Another variant of this approach was offered by Foster (1965) as an explanation for the reluctance of peasants of Tzinuntan, Western Mexico, actively to follow development-oriented strategies. In this corporate peasant community, the desirable things in life – whether land, money, livestock or women – existed only in finite quantities, and one could obtain the desired goods only at the expense of someone else. One person's gain is another's loss, and the person who appropriates more than his fair share of the 'limited good' is strongly criticised and condemned. This concept helps to explain the reluctance of peasants to innovate, to become achievement-oriented or to show more entrepreneurial spirit than their neighbours.

Rogers's model of the 'sub-culture of peasantry', derived from the work of various social scientists, also exhibits this approach. A sub-culture contains many elements of the broader culture of which it is a part, yet it is also characterised by other qualities that separate it from other sectors of the general culture. Peruvian peasants share many national characteristics with other