

CRITICAL ESSAYS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

# RECONCEPTUALIZING the PEASANTRY

ANTHROPOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE



*M*ICHAEL KEARNEY

*Reconceptualizing  
the Peasantry*



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# CRITICAL ESSAYS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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# Reconceptualizing the Peasantry

*Anthropology in Global Perspective*

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*For my mother,  
Ellen Kearney*

*Critical Essays in Anthropology*

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## Preface

When I was invited by the editors of the series *Critical Essays in Anthropology* to undertake this project, I initially thought that it would entail little more than a summation of the state of peasant studies in anthropology that would serve as a platform from which to nudge the concept out of the discipline and into history. I saw 'the peasant' as a concept whose time had come and gone. But then a greater challenge presented itself: If the peasant concept indeed no longer accords with contemporary identities and ethnography, then what replaces it?

In presenting an answer to that question I have benefited from the assistance, inspiration, and listening of many colleagues and friends. For close and critical readings and discussions of a recent version of the manuscript I am grateful to John Comaroff, George Marcus, Bill Mitchell, Jay O'Brien, Bill Roseberry, Jonathan Turner, Angus Wright, and Carole Nagengast. In addition to providing fundamental intellectual support, Carole Nagengast moved this project to closure by her frequent encouragements to "just get it done."

And thanks also, for reading and discussing parts of or entire copies of earlier versions, to Gene Anderson, Federico Besserer, Howard Campbell, Ron Chilcote, Matt Gutmann, Dottie Holland, Jean Lave, Michael Peter Smith, and Gayatri Spivak. And thanks also to Paul Willis for convincing me that *polybian* is not a horrendous neologism.

In writing this book I also benefited from being able to talk out my ideas with Bonnie Bade, Les Field, Paul Gelles, Josef Lapid, Daniel Mato, Juan Vicente Palerm, Dave Runsten, Nina Glick Schiller, Rob Smith, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Connie Sutton, Stefano Varese, Carlos Vélez Ibáñez, and Carole Zabin. And among students who have contributed to various stages of this project are Diana Carr, Michael Hogan, Andrew Mouat, and Ramona Pérez.

This book is also very much the result of almost daily contact with members and leaders of the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional and the Organización Regional Oaxaqueña, with whom I have the privilege of working in numerous contexts in Mexico and in the Californias, and most especially with Arturo Pimentel and with Gaspar Rivera who in typically post-peasant fashion confounds identities such as informant-collaborator and student-teacher.

I am also indebted to innumerable other Mixtec and Zapotec friends who have given me the opportunity to discover and explore some of the ideas that are presented in this book. Also, this book would be less than it is were it not for the

stimulation and knowledge that I constantly receive from my comrades in the *Latin American Perspectives* collective.

The staff at Westview Press has been a joy to work with. Dean Birkenkamp and Kellie Masterson, who were nominally my editors, are indeed valuable colleagues. Cheryl Carnahan's copyediting of the final version was superb, and I am indebted to Scott Horst for keeping production on the fast track.

Much of the research and preparation has been supported by the U.C.-Riverside Academic Senate Research Committee and UC MEXUS. I have also benefited from opportunities to present parts of this project in fora supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the School for American Research, The New York Academy of Science, the Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts, the University of Zurich, and the Center for Ideas and Society at U.C.-Riverside.

Finally I am grateful to Juana Alicia for permission to reprint her *La Ponkalavera Güera* on the cover. I first saw La Ponkalavera when this book was taking shape, and I was struck with how she represents its basic themes. First of all the image has a direct connection with Mexico and California. La Ponkalavera is a Mexican *calavera* from San Francisco. Calaveras are the dead who rise up from their graves once a year on the Day of the Dead to come back and visit their relatives and friends. The peasant concept is rather like a calavera—dead, but not buried, and living on in skeletal form. Calaveras are typically depicted as *campesinos*, as peasants. La Ponkalavera has traces of a peasant background, but just as she is no ordinary punk, she is also not much of a peasant. Her skateboard is a cosmopolitan artifact, hardly appropriate for the unpaved streets and trails of a peasant community. And unlike most dead peasants, she is a transnational skateboarder who has come back to life to cross boundaries and blur categories and identities into more complex forms.

*Michael Kearney*

# Introduction

This book is based on the proposition that the category *peasant*, whatever validity it may once have had, has been outdistanced by contemporary history. Within anthropology and within peasant studies generally, ‘*the peasant*’ was constructed from residual images of preindustrial European and colonial rural society. Informed by romantic sensibilities and modern nationalist imaginations, these images are anachronisms, but nevertheless they remain robust anachronisms even at the end of the twentieth century. As such, they are appropriate targets for a housecleaning that clears space for alternative theoretical views.

What are these postpeasant perspectives? In the most general sense they move from a narrow circumscription of what are held to be peasants per se to, first, a re-examination of rural society in general and then to a consideration of the problematic distinction between rural and urban.

Evaluation of the peasant concept in anthropology—its inception, growth, and demise—is inseparable from an evaluation of the broader intellectual context of social anthropology in which it is found. Although this book is not a comprehensive assessment of social anthropology, it does sketch the general features of different phases of the discipline’s history, each of which predisposed anthropology to construct its objects of study in distinct, characteristic ways. Moreover, this outline of social anthropology’s history is an effort to extend anthropology’s holistic purview to encompass the discipline itself. Whereas most intellectual histories establish ideas within the context of their own genealogies and the intellectual pedigrees of their authors, this historical sketch seeks to extend the framing context to recent global history. What is called for in a fully anthropological history of anthropology is not just a situating of ideas within the context of the discipline but also a situating of the discipline within the global context.

In brief, then, the thesis is that as the world changes, rather distinct periods can be discerned, each of which conditions anthropology to construct itself and its subjects in ways distinctive of each such moment. This being so, a fully anthropological assessment of an anthropological category such as the peasant requires reference to this broader historical context. Such a fully anthropological history of the discipline has yet to be written, but this present effort points in that direction and suggests that the present shape of the global context is predisposing anthropologists toward such a comprehensive reflexivity.

In my estimation the single most incisive statement of the political economy and ideology of ‘peasants’ is Eric Wolf’s (1966) book of that title. This small book, whose size belies its comprehensive review and synthesis of the ethnography and theory of peasant society, provides an important benchmark for subsequent reference. Thus, if we take Wolf’s book as state of the art in 1966, we can assess what developments have occurred in the intervening thirty years along the road to the dissolution of the category.<sup>1</sup>

In *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, Wolf (1969:xiv) portrays peasants as populations that are existentially involved in and making autonomous decisions about cultivation. The initial formulation of this definition is his landmark “Types of Latin American Peasantry,” which establishes three basic criteria of peasants as a social type: (1) primary involvement in agricultural production, (2) “effective control of land,” and (3) a primary orientation toward subsistence rather than reinvestment (1955:453–454).<sup>2</sup> Invoking these and other criteria, numerous anthropologists reify a social category that more often than not has no singular objective ethnographic or class basis. For in reality, the great majority of the world’s so-called peasants reproduce themselves within complex economic and social relationships of which autonomous cultivation of a nonfarmer type is relatively unimportant—and increasingly so. Indeed, a glance at rural peoples reveals a plethora of forms not only in the material constitution of their relationships but also in their self-perceived identities and consciousness. Such manifold identities are most evident in ‘peasant migrant workers’ or ‘land-owning proletarians’ and other such contradictory categories, which call into question any theory that reifies the peasantry. Nevertheless, it is within this multiplicity, this broad and dynamic spectrum, that ‘the peasantry’ is bracketed and given a privileged identity as the theoretical and historical center of gravity in the countryside.<sup>3</sup>

In 1966 Wolf wrote that *feudal* is “a term fraught with so many implications that it had better be avoided” (1966:50). Neither then nor in subsequent writing has Wolf revealed a comparable concern with the usefulness of ‘peasant.’ I, however, will argue that ‘peasant,’ like ‘feudal,’ also belongs to discourses that are being superseded and that the emergent discourses articulate a consciousness of history, society, and self that is not well conveyed by ‘peasant.’<sup>4</sup>

In my approach to rural society, the central issues are structure and history. Inexorable forces of social differentiation constantly churn local rural populations but seldom transform them qualitatively. Such transitions, when they do occur in the modern era, appear to be linked to and dependent on the fate of the nation-state within which any local population is located. This necessitates that any genuinely anthropological approach to rural communities must theoretically situate them within global contexts and must attend to the history of the nation-state and its position within global society. As Wolf has shown in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), rural types (such as tribal peoples, pastoralists, fishermen, and so on) were often as not brought into being historically—along with

slaves, proletarians, and peasants—by diverse mercantile relationships and other processes of subsumption. It is these usually transitory and interpenetrating categories that anthropology has objectified ethnographically and assigned primordial ontologies. This propensity toward reification invites a shifting of attention from the presumed objects of peasant literature to the literature that objectifies them.

Accordingly, in this book I elaborate a critique of representation itself. In this subproject I regard ethnography as literature while simultaneously elaborating an alternative form of representation of the other. A basic proposition here is that the production and consumption of conventional ethnography are largely, in Fredric Jameson's terms, "strategies of containment" (Jameson 1981; Horne 1989). I suggest that we are in a position to apply such a critique to ways in which 'the peasant' is constantly reinvented. For such a critique to be anthropologically reflexive it must situate the production and consumption of representations of the peasantry within the relationships that join the anthropological self to the 'peasant' other it presumes to represent. In other words, it is not sufficient to situate only 'the peasantry' within a global setting; the conventions—the texts—whereby it is represented must also be so contextualized.

Only with such anthropological reflexivity can we ask and answer such questions as why peasant studies within conventional anthropology continue to dwell on issues of peasant rationality, decisionmaking, personality, and economic differentiation. To note, for example, that theoretically these studies are situated within developmentalist visions of the 'peasant community' and that such research is consistent with the methodological individualism that informs it only elaborates variations on the original question. I hope to develop a more comprehensive, incisive critique that opens the way for alternative views. Likewise, a similar critique must also be mounted of radical peasantology. Classic Marxist studies of 'the peasantry,' as compared to neoclassical and cultural anthropological approaches, have attended to the social issues of class and history but with class defined categorically such that until recently the Marxist anthropologist had to adopt either a peasant (e.g., Maoist) or a proletarian (e.g., Leninist) line of one kind or another. This peasant-proletarian debate has now been largely superseded, but much intellectual housecleaning is still needed to prepare for postpeasant studies.

Some people may point to the presence of contemporary peasants, and I would agree that some pockets of them might remain in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere. But the point of this book is that peasants are mostly gone and that global conditions do not favor the perpetuation of those who remain. My examples are drawn mainly from Mexico, long the site of peasant studies in anthropology. Today an adequate ethnography of seemingly rural Mexican communities must situate them within transnational and global contexts that effectively dissolve old intellectual oppositions such as rural-urban, modern-traditional, and peasant-

nonpeasant. As the argument goes, if current conditions do not support peasants as a type in Mexico, then perhaps we should also reevaluate their status elsewhere. But more than this, the ethnography of contemporary Mexico suggests that we must also reconceptualize the concepts with which we define identities and communities.

## The Death of Dualism

At its inception anthropology was distinct from the other Western social sciences in that it was predicated on the *difference* between the Western anthropological self and the alien ethnographic other epitomized by ‘the primitive.’ This difference was constructed on several bases, one of which was the geographic separation between self and other such that the self was in ‘the West’ and the other was located in ‘non-Western’ areas. The other bases of difference were sociocultural and temporal: ‘Primitive’ others were different kinds of peoples because they had technologies and ways of life that were comparable to previous phases in the social evolutionary past of Western society that had ‘advanced’ beyond these ‘simpler’ forms to become *modern*. Implicit in the definition of the modern is this contrast with the primitive that it has transcended. Just as the modern represents a structural opposition to the primitive, so is it also a historical antithesis that exits at the end point of history, far removed from the distant past of human beginnings.

This oppositional difference between modern and primitive was the axis upon which anthropology was initially constructed and practiced. No wonder, then, that the disappearance of the primitive implied a crisis for anthropology insofar as it was a kind of natural history based on field research. But the crisis was averted by the discovery of another type—‘the peasant.’ The peasant, as we will see, has been a problematic type for anthropology, problematic not only in a theoretical sense but also with respect to the constitution of the discipline itself.

The initial anthropological construction of an oppositional and evolutionary difference between ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ was itself the practice of a distinctly modern sensibility and worldview. This style of thought tends to make the continuous discrete and to cast difference into binary oppositions. In this sense such thought is manifest in digital programming and logical positivism, which are both thus structurally consistent with empiricist epistemology, based as it is on a categorical distinction between self and other. The more general argument here is that this style of binary but nondialectical thought is predicated upon and leads to social practices that perpetuate social differentiation, both locally and globally.

Chapter 2 lays out the basic thesis, which is that ‘the peasant’ is associated with a major development in the history of anthropology—a crisis of sorts—of which the peasant is both symptom and cause. The argument is that the basic structure of classic anthropology was put into place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This structure is a dualist worldview comparable to that of classic worldviews, hence its name. But it differs from them in that it is reconstructed

within the context of young nation-states, colonialism, and imperialism, and assumes forms, such as social evolutionism and positivism, that explain and justify devaluation of non-Western others. An early classic phase culminates in Frazerian anthropology, whereas late classic anthropology is associated with the Malinowskian revolution. Whereas the former, typified by Frazer's encyclopedic *The Golden Bough*, eclectically assembled bits of ethnographic data from around the world in efforts to reconstruct the broad outline of human social evolution, Malinowski pioneered the study of entire communities in which cultural traits could be examined in their living social context. Already in the late classic phase this dualism has started to unravel, occasioned in large part by the Malinowskian revolution (see, e.g., Jarvie 1964).

Subsequent world events associated with World War II and its aftermath coincide with the emergence of modern anthropology, which is distinguishable from classic anthropology by a more pronounced decay of its dualist structure and also by the appearance of a new prototypic ethnographic other—'the peasant'—which was subsequently essentialized in ways comparable to the way in which 'the primitive' was previously constructed out of its difference with 'the modern.' But 'the peasant' brought with it into anthropology implications for the structure of the discipline that were not implied by 'the primitive.' For unlike the categorical absoluteness of the primitive, which is the primary conceptual antipode of the modern, the peasant is located on the margin—geographic, historical, classificatory—between them. Because it is marginal it is conceptually ambiguous, and because of this ambiguity the peasant is the most problematic social type within the social typology of anthropology.

The peasant opens new horizons for modern anthropology but as a type is powerfully disruptive of its classic structure, threatening its epistemological and political bases. Anthropology responds to the opportunities and threats presented by the peasant with strategies of containment. The first and most basic of these strategies is indeed the invention of 'the peasant,' which occurs within the structure of modern anthropology. The invention of the peasant is thus an attempt not only to contain troublesome new types of others that have come into the purview of anthropology at mid-century but also to preserve the basic structure of classic anthropology in a historic period that is inexorably dissolving it.

Turning attention from primitives to peasants saved anthropology as a field-based discipline, but it was an imperfect solution to the degree that the peasant is—categorically—an imperfect social type for modern sensibilities, which think in terms of discontinuous, absolute categories such as subject and object, self and other. Because the peasant relocates anthropological practice and thought to the margins of the modern and the primitive, its appearance within anthropology contributes to the deconstruction of the primary oppositional metaphysical categories out of which anthropology invented not only its others but also itself. Further intentional critical work such as this book is but the conscious articulation of this general historical trend.

The peasant as an anthropological type is still robust, as is indicated by the continued frequent references to it in the literature. The main thesis of Chapter 3 is, however, that ever since its invention the peasant as an anthropological category has become evermore out of alignment with ‘reality’ and thus has become a disruptive category. Therefore, anthropology, which has staked so much of its future on this type, must continue to contain the peasant, and to do so certain strategies of containment are mobilized by both right-wing and left-wing anthropologies, strategies that coincide with the postwar foreign policies for the ‘containment of communism.’ Both the anthropological peasant and the strategies for its containment were invented during the Cold War, which was a historic moment that elevated the dualistic “us-versus-them” structure of the classic worldview to levels of hysteria that appear within the context of the nation-state. It was within these specific cultural dynamics of the Cold War nation-state that anthropological essentialization of the peasant occurred, thus enabling its containment in time and space.

But containment is necessary only because counter forces are at work. Chapter 4 therefore further explores global tendencies that have been promoting the deconstruction of the temporal and spatial dualisms that underlie the essentialization of ‘the peasant’ in the modernist mode. The preliminary conscious awareness of these trends, contrary to the modernizationist interpretation of history, has its own sociology and ideological loadings, which can be summed up as romantic reactions. Although these currents also reified social types, they were nevertheless important phases in the reconceptualization of the peasantry.

Whereas Chapters 1 through 4 deal with the peasant as an anthropological category, Chapter 5 examines global conditions that are shaping postpeasant identities and anthropological representations of them. Chapter 6 then turns from the categories of anthropology to the sociology and consciousness of ethnographic subjects, to those peoples designated as ‘peasants.’ To carry forward the analysis of how anthropology has essentialized the peasant I turn here to a rethinking of the most debated and controversial issue in peasant studies—namely, social differentiation—and recast it in light of the emergent multipolar social field discussed in Chapter 5 by introducing the concept of ‘internal differentiation,’ as compared with the more common notion of external differentiation whereby ‘individuals’ are differentiated into classes and class fractions. The theory of internal differentiation is not offered as an alternative to external differentiation, as is the case with most postmodernist critics of Marxist theory and most analysts of new social movements, but as an addition to it. This reconceptualization thus presents an analysis of class as more complexly structured than is the case with dualist models that posit unitary class strata and identities.

Such a view should not be seen as wrong (indeed, in many nineteenth-century situations it was an adequate representation of class structure) but instead as a first approximation of the link between relations of production and consciousness. Thus, rather than rejecting class analysis, it should be taken for what it is—

the still most powerful theoretical perspective for understanding the differentiation of identities in complex societies.

The basic argument advanced here is that postpeasant theory and research must turn from an obsessive concern with the external differentiation of ‘types of peasants’ (which are but reified objects) to the internal differentiation of subjects. The shift from an anthropology of peasants as unitary objects to peasants as complex subjects marks a maturation of peasant studies whereby the very idea of peasant is transcended such that its continued invocation serves only to constrain the anthropology of communities formerly known as rural and peasant. However, such a full realization of class theory entails its application in association with that equally basic concept of its author, namely, the theory of value, but a theory of value that also benefits from contemporary understanding of the differential distribution of value in the formation of complex identities and relationships that is the theme of Chapter 7.

If the appearance within anthropology of *the* peasant marked the end of its classic phase, then its departure—an event this book encourages—signals the end of anthropology’s short-lived modern phase. Chapter 8 deals with the shape of a postpeasant anthropology. The basic thesis is that such an anthropology will be increasingly situated in marginal zones comparable to the zone the peasant once occupied and that in this historic shift what was marginal will become central. I envision an anthropology so decentered as concerned with problems that are not constructed upon the armature of modern versus primitive/peasant. Just as the modern will have disappeared with the primitive, so will anthropology as a modern sensibility become transformed into a sensibility that is consistent with a world in which there are neither peasants nor a teleology of immanent modernization, of *development*.

Images of peasants and of programs for their development as conceived in the 1960s and 1970s were similar to those with which feminist theory of the 1970s theorized gender and routes to sexual equality. Both peasants and women were envisioned as marked forms that had to be assimilated into the unmarked. In the one case peasants would have to be incorporated into modern developed society; in the other women would enjoy the same rights and identities men had previously monopolized only when they became organized with sufficient political power and will to claim them. In both cases the solution to underdevelopment and inequality was the extension of the forms and values of modern liberal society to those who were not yet the full beneficiaries of that society.

In retrospect, contemporary critical feminist theory has seen this strategy of obtaining sexual equality as an unwitting acceptance and reification of an underlying dualist structuring of gender inequality.<sup>5</sup> This line of reasoning implies that the route to women’s liberation lies not in becoming the equal of men in a social and cultural universe that has been constructed largely on dualist categories that are the bases of inequality but instead by challenging the presumed ontology of this inequality. In other words, attempts to assimilate to identities that have been

constructed on structures that are the bases of inequality serve not so much to liberate as they do to reinforce the structuring of that inequality. This situation suggested that progressive movement might best be gained by displacing analysis to this level, which had been unexamined by earlier feminist theory. In such a nondualist world, possibilities thus open for multiple legitimate forms of difference, such as women of color and varieties of lesbianism, in addition to the conventional norms of male and female (see, e.g., Barrett and Phillips 1992). In a similar way I envision the emergence of multiple identities from the category *peasant*, which has been imposed on and assumed by subaltern peoples in ways not dissimilar to the way in which norms of ‘female’ have defined what it is to be woman within structured relations of sexual inequality.

Whereas the peasant was constructed within and consistent with the dualist structuring of the nation-state, the now-emerging postpeasant subject often has a transnational identity. This transnationalism is most readily apparent in the high and growing rates of transnational migration of poor rural people whereby they deconstruct the spatial and occupational dualisms that structure images of ‘the peasant.’ But transnational migration, although a major one, is but one of many contemporary global processes eroding the power of the nation-state to inform identities.

Chapter 8 examines the expressions of several of these transnational trends in consciousness and their corresponding social and political forms, forms that are emerging as conceptual vehicles for the reconceptualization of rural types formerly known as ‘peasants.’ Briefly, whereas the peasant was essentialized as having a primordial connection with land, a condition that made the agrarian issue the fundamental peasant concern, postpeasant rural politics is increasingly elaborated in terms of human rights, ecopolitics, and ethnicity. Human rights conceived as universal, ecopolitics conceived as global, and ethnicity conceived as inherently transnational are thus consistent with the postpeasant, who has moved from periphery to center, from past to present, and from object to subject and who in doing so has largely dissolved the distinctions between these oppositions. Among the new facets of postpeasant identities, I single out one for consideration—the *indígena*. This type is highly disruptive not only of the category *peasant* but of political authority in general.

## **The Context of This Book**

With respect to the interaction of biography and the historical moment within which I write, five conditions have strongly shaped my sensibilities toward and perceptions of the peasant question. First, I have had fieldwork experiences in Mexico and Poland, two nations that are important in the history of peasant studies.<sup>6</sup> The first great ‘peasant revolution’ of the twentieth century occurred in Mexico, whereas it was in Poland that serfdom was reestablished in the fifteenth century and persisted into the nineteenth century; its traces still affect agrarian

politics in the post-glasnost era. Today Poland—along with Rumania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia—is by most measures still one of the most strongly peasant nations of Europe. And in both Mexico and Poland, ‘rural’ communities demonstrate a demographic and what appears to be a cultural persistence few observers foresaw a decade ago. The degree to which these social and cultural traits are indeed peasant is a central theme of this book.

Another condition that shapes my writing is my work in both Mexico and California with highly migratory Mixtec- and Zapotec-speaking peoples from the state of Oaxaca. The ethnography of contemporary Mixtecs and Zapotecs well illustrates a basic theme of this book—the formation of persons and communities that do not conform to the classic categories of rural society, being neither peasant nor proletarian, neither farmer nor petty merchant, and neither rural nor urban. I speak here of such *types* both as anthropological categories—typologies—and as social types, as, for example, kinds of communities and identities. The central goal of this book is to establish a point of view from which we can observe the tension between these two kinds of categories—the historically given and the anthropological apprehension of these communities. By “historically given” I do not mean to imply some concrete empirical reality accessible purely by scientific means, for historical realities are, like the anthropological categories, also the products of local human practice carried out with varying degrees of consciousness of how such practice is affected by more global conditions. I thus write as an anthropologist attempting to apprehend such peasant realities, even as I reassess the vocabulary anthropology has given us to do this task.

To carry out such critical work, it has been necessary to displace my writing to a different point of view that is on the margin between the other two, such that I am in a position to comment *on* them rather than *from* them. This strategy of escaping the influence of the local is, of course, an ideal that constantly recedes as we move toward it, but it is nevertheless a necessary ideal for the kind of bifocality entailed by any critique of anthropology that itself presumes to critique the other, such as, in this case, ‘the peasant.’ I am thus, as it has become fashionable to say, writing from the margin, which gives me a vantage point on both the shape of anthropological categories and the communities they seek to represent. But I am also writing from a margin in a more literal sense, and this leads to the third circumstance informing my work.

For some time I have been residing and working in the greater U.S.-Mexican border area, surely one of the most fascinating marginal areas of the world precisely because it is evolving from its current marked status to a primary unmarked region and type such that what was marginal or peripheral becomes typical and what was ‘normal’ is reduced to a secondary, minority status. This border area is a complex region that lies between the so-called First and Third Worlds, partaking of both and yet in other ways resembling neither. It is also a region that encompasses ‘peasant’ and ‘nonpeasant,’ ‘indigenous’ and ‘nonindigenous,’ ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ ‘First’ and ‘Third World.’ I indicate these categories with sin-

gle quotation marks to signal their problematic status, which becomes all the more apparent here in this border region (see Kearney 1991; Kearney and Nagengast 1989; Nagengast and Kearney 1990).

California is noted for being on the leading edge of social and cultural change in the United States. But when we extend our purview to the Californias, our attention is directed to an international region whose seeming ambiguity is representative of global trends. Tijuana, once the butt of jokes and stereotyped as a town of bars and brothels, is now the second-largest city on the Pacific Coast of North America, second only to Nuestra Señora Reina de Los Angeles, with which it is becoming evermore culturally and economically stitched together as both cities become integrated into a transnational megalopolis. Tijuana's phenomenal growth is driven largely by immigration of low-income rural people from mainland Mexico and Central America. Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca have formed colonies in Tijuana and elsewhere throughout the greater binational border area. Consequently, fieldwork among them takes me from seemingly prototypical, indigenous, highland Mesoamerican communities—which are the cradle of so much anthropological thinking and writing about ‘the peasantry’—to the shantytowns of border cities, to the orchards, fields, and inner cities of California, and to other niches into which indigenous Oaxacan migrants and immigrants have established themselves while for the most part also maintaining their seemingly peasant way of life in the mountains of southern Mexico.

The tens of thousands of rural-origin Mixtecs and Zapotecs in urban areas of Mexico and the United States are at a first approximation another instance of “cities of peasants” (Roberts 1978; cf. Mangin 1970 and Simic 1973). But given the strong linkages between these urban residents and their rural communities and the complex identities that result, the logic of this typing could be turned around to refer with equal appropriateness to ‘urbanites in the countryside.’ And at the same time neither of these characterizations does justice to the multiform experiences and complex differentiation that exist in Mixtec and Zapotec migrant communities. As I discuss later, especially in Chapter 8, such complex persons and communities require innovative metaphors to represent their multiform identities.

I also write from another margin, which is itself within the greater border area. This is the ‘development’ that in the past five years has overrun the formerly rural area of southern California in which Carole Nagengast and I live, as hundreds of acres of chaparral and orange groves have been replaced by thousands of slick and flimsy suburban look-alike houses and mini-malls. ‘The peasant question’ is embedded within a number of prior intersecting discourses, one of which is the dualist opposition between “the country and the city,” which, as Raymond Williams (1973) has so effectively shown, is a major conceptual axis structuring much of Western literature. In California the inexorable spread of so-called suburban development obliterates rural environments at ever increasing rates, such that it seems to be only a matter of time until almost all of the “country” is gone. But in a logic that is now apparent, this suburbanization is somewhat of a contradiction in

terms, for not only does it obliterate countryside, but it is also transforming cities into new kinds of social spaces that bear less and less resemblance to the bounded metropolitan areas and sociologies depicted in modern sociology and urban anthropology. I discuss these transformations in urban ecologies in Chapter 5.

The main point to note here is that the decomposition of the distinction between country and city is proceeding not as a replication of the city in the country but instead as a historical process that is also transforming the city, such that different social spaces are emerging on the margins of city and countryside that subsume the older spaces into them, transforming both of them in this suburbanization's own image. This double transformation is less a process of suburbanization than what Gottdeiner (forthcoming) refers to as "deconcentration"—partaking of both rural and urban and yet being neither. This disintegration of the distinction between country and city that is taking place in California is but one dimension in the collapse of the broader distinction between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' nations that has been central to concepts of modern history since World War II. Greater Los Angeles now spills across the U.S. border into Mexico, dissolving in its complex integrity the distinction between First and Third Worlds. This *City of Quartz*, as Mike Davis (1990:6) calls it, now stretches from the country-club homes below Ronald Reagan's ranch near Santa Barbara south to the shanty *colonias* of the West Coast Mexican port city of Ensenada.

Middle-class bedroom communities in California are one variation of this global trend; inner-city 'urban ghettos' are another, and Latin American favelas and contemporary shantytowns in general are others. I do not mean to imply that these various instances of this more general type do not fit into the global economy and society in basically different ways. The point is rather that these new social forms are reflected in nascent forms of representation that it is my task to explore and to articulate more explicitly. Presently, some of the most prescient representations of these new social forms are found in fictional literature.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, I am also writing on the constantly receding border between the present and the future. Although much of this book traces the past development of the peasant concept in anthropology, it also has the practical aim of better comprehending and advancing the politics of subaltern communities and organizations like the ones I work with in Mexico and California. I thus examine the history of the peasant concept to better innovate other constructions of identity that will better serve the political needs of such communities, which have passed from being peasant communities or are in the process of doing so.

Although in this book I explore what I see as novel trends in the social and cultural identities of people who are often called peasants, I do so to better understand that most vexing perennial issue of rural political economy, namely, social and cultural differentiation, which proceeds through a corresponding differential production and consumption of economic value so that some get rich and some become poor. I unabashedly retain a strongly classic Marxist concern with economic exploitation as it occurs within specific class systems that make such ex-

ploitation possible. My strategy here is the same as that in the various scenarios just described—that is, I position myself on the margin between two modern spheres, which in this case are spheres of theory, namely, the economic and the cultural. Simply stated, I see previous approaches to peasant differentiation as either excessively economic or too culturistic to adequately comprehend social and historical processes of such a nature. Reconceptualization of this ‘complex whole,’ I hold, cannot be achieved by wedding some cultural interpretations to economic analysis. Instead, a reconstitution of the economic and the cultural is called for.

Fortunately, the foundation for such a transdisciplinary approach is available in Bourdieu’s (1986) work on forms of capital and their transformations, transformations that when they become apparent, as Bourdieu has made them, obviate limiting the economic to economics and the cultural to cultural/symbolic analysis. Economic capital is convertible to symbolic and cultural capital and vice versa. But what is more, the production, consumption, loss, and transformation of capitals both construct and constitute social identities in the socially ordered subject positions I know as classes and class fractions. But these class identities are constituted not only by the press of relations of production but also by the consumption of signs imbued with various forms of value. Such a subject is thus, as it were, doubly internally differentiated: first by participating in multiple relations of production and indeed even in different modes of production and second by consuming a veritable smorgasbord of cultural signs and values emanating from globally diverse sources.

By pushing the theory of capitals and their transformations per Bourdieu, I think it is possible to arrive at a general theory of value. *Capital* resonates with capitalism and is thus an adequate term for Bourdieu’s sociology of capitalist society and culture. But *general value* is a term more appropriate for a general anthropology encompassing capitalist and noncapitalist social formations. My evaluation of peasant studies is that they tend to dwell too much on either economics or culture and as such are unable to move forward on the problems they have set themselves—for example, analysis of development, ritual, symbolism, resistance, and differentiation. All of these issues are at the same time economic and cultural, and their reconceptualization requires a theoretical synthesis as is enabled by the theory of generalized value, which allows us to query the unity and transformations of economic and aesthetic values and how they become inscribed as the identities of persons who produce, lose, consume, and transform them and who in doing so become constituted and, on occasions, themselves transformed.

Chapter 5 examines the decline of ‘traditional’ culture as it is replaced by elements of mass and popular culture in the construction of ‘peasants.’ But in an ironic affront to the assumptions of modernization theory, consumption of mass culture promotes difference even as in some way it homogenizes. We are thus brought back to the perennial issue of peasant differentiation but with two notable new twists. One is that to the degree that it is influenced by production and consumption of forms of general value beyond the local ‘rural peasant’ sphere, the

scope of investigation must be extended beyond the ‘peasant community’ to include, for example, transnational contexts. The second innovation regarding the analysis of differentiation (Chapter 6) is to define it not just with respect either to the subject’s location in the relations of production or to consumption of economic value and cultural signs but to explore the internal differentiation that results within the subject who so produces and consumes. This strategy is not a capitulation to recent pronouncements that the postmodern subject is dead but instead is an insistence on recognizing that ‘peasant’ subjects are more complexly constituted than imagined by theories of external differentiation per, for example, Lenin and Chayanov. Historically, internal differentiation seems to be increasing along with increased transnational production and consumption of economic and symbolic values and signs. These more complexly constituted subjects are predisposed to and, one might even say, need social organizations whose own collective forms and political objectives, ideologies, and tactics correspond to the social identities of their members and advance their political interests. The examination of human rights, ecopolitics, and ethnicity in Chapter 8 is thus built on this discussion of internal differentiation.

Earlier I called attention to new milieus of difference, only to note that I am writing from within one that profoundly conditions our understanding of ‘the peasant question’ and demands reconceptualization of conventional categories of peasantology. For were I to attempt to comprehend the reality within which I write in conventional terms, I would be snared in immobilizing contradictions. How, for example, in terms of the conventional categories of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern,’ of ‘Mexican’ and ‘North American,’ and indeed of ‘peasant’ and ‘non-peasant’ are Carole Nagengast and I to comprehend the way in which the tidal wave of deconcentration that has swept over us has been effected in part by Mixtec peasant lives?

Looking down from where we live on a hill we see spread before us a sea of new roofs. And turning our gaze to the field and trees below we see where two Mixtec ‘peasant’ families have borrowed some land from us to live on for awhile. The arrangement is reciprocal; they put us up when we go to their town in Oaxaca. The men of these seemingly very traditional peasant people from highland Mesoamerica are away at the moment working as roofers, constructing in a very literal sense the new social space that is engulfing us. The musical tonality of Mixtec language comes up to where we, the ethnographers, stand. The children of these roofers are playing, and their wives are working at handicrafts, which they sell in the parking lots of local shopping malls. In the afternoon the men will come home in their truck with wild edible greens they have collected along the road, and they will cultivate their corn and other plants they have planted with some seeds bought in a local supermarket and with others carried from Oaxaca. And in the evening they and their families will rest in the shade of a eucalyptus, in the boughs of which some years ago another Mixtec ‘peasant’ tied his son’s placenta after his wife gave birth to their child nearby.

Clearly, we and our visitors/neighbors—more confounded categories—share a historical moment that defies conventional anthropological categories.<sup>8</sup> But it is not the case that we and they are marginal but that all of us, albeit in different ways, are assuming complex and interpenetrating identities. It is to be expected that these contemporary identities and the conditions that shape them should be reflected in anthropological thought. This book is intended as such a reflection.

## Notes

1. I make these comments on Wolf's *Peasants* having the benefit of more than a quarter of a century in time since its appearance. Although I call for discarding the idea of the social category it set out to explain, I do embrace the broad outlines of Wolfian historical-structural theory and method.

2. Wolf also locates peasants in a global, historical context and establishes an alternative paradigm to the prevalent synchronic anthropological studies focused on cultural content of peasant communities.

3. Indeed, the enduring persistence of this concept has been recently reaffirmed by the appearance of the second edition of Shanin's *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, which seeks to define the "qualitative particularity underlying the use of the term peasantry as a valid generalization and a theoretical concept" (1987:2).

4. When Wolf first formulated the working definition of peasants used herein, he also anticipated their decline in the twentieth century as a result of displacement by industry, trade, and large-scale agriculture, which has produced a crisis "related to the increasingly marginal role of the peasantry within the prevalent economic system" (1955:453). Part of my effort in this book is a continued exploration of this observation.

5. This situation is comparable to the dilemma faced by colonized authors attempting to resist colonial hegemony. They can oppose it by writing about it in their own words; but if by writing they reinforce European genres and forms, then perhaps they have collaborated in the reproduction of colonial culture.

6. I have worked regularly in Mexico since the mid-1960s and have gone to rural Poland with Carole Nagengast and learned most of what I know of it from her (e.g., Nagengast 1991).

7. Fictional writing in general is more sensitive to such social change than is nonfiction; see, for example, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Monalisa Overdrive* (1988) and other cyberpunk writing, as well as Tama Janowitz's *A Cannibal in Manhattan* (1987) and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). And to the degree that the present work is situated on borders between nations and anthropological categories, I am sympathetic to the blurring of forms and assertion of new identities in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Ana Castillo's *The Mixquihuala Letters* (1986) and *So Far from God* (1993).

8. At this point I stop the constant use of single quotes to signal the categorical nature of terms for basic social types and trust that the reader will continue to give them the double readings I intend—first as artifacts of anthropological thought and then and only then as labels for presumed social types.

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