

INTRODUCTION

Fifty Years of Peasant Wars in Latin America

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In 1969, Eric Wolf published his seminal *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* during the US war in Vietnam. Its publication coincided with a powerful anti-war movement and urban insurrections in the United States, anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa, and the beginning of a revolutionary wave that washed over Latin America in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* rubbed against the grain of US anthropology, long mired in an embrace of cultural particularity and rooted in micro-studies of specific localities, by pushing the field to conceptualize peasants and their villages within broader fields of capitalist and state power. It addressed a general public at a moment of intense political and intellectual unrest.

Dispensing with the jargon-filled posturing of detached scholarship, *Peasant Wars* emerged from Wolf's passions and commitments as a young, anti-war professor at the University of Michigan, where he helped organize the first "teach-in" against the Vietnam War (Gamson 1991). Wolf was less concerned with peasant movements that flickered for a time and burned out, or that were absorbed by the state or repressed, than revolutions that qualitatively reconfigured the social order. The book was unabashed in its concern for who was most likely to engage in revolutionary activity and what kinds of alliances led to transformative social change in different historical cases. It arrived at a moment when revolution, and particularly revolution in which peasants were among the central protagonists, was more than something that had happened in the past, or in theory. A sense that revolution was possible—even likely—infused progressive intellectuals, activists, and popular struggles with both intense optimism and deep despair, as popular challenges to the established order

drove states' capacities for terror. *Peasant Wars* conveyed a belief that knowledge can serve the cause of social justice and that working people can make history.

Yet the promise of revolution and of Wolf's innovative approach remained unrealized. A series of events, including the decline of (and disillusionment with) anti-colonial struggles, a Cold War counterinsurgency that decimated revolutionary actors, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, all served to diminish the hope for radical change. Revolution seemed neither possible nor desirable, and by the 1980s, a new generation of scholars turned away from structural critiques of capitalism that explored how working people were (or were not) able to forge the kinds of political alliances necessary for challenging the power of state and capital in meaningful ways. This shift was particularly apparent in anthropology, where many scholars rejected the very "metanarratives" required to understand a changing global order and embraced questions of culture and identity formation. Peasants (and the study of them), along with workers, increasingly faded from view or were understood in more cultural and less political terms. By the end of the twentieth century, the retreat from revolution, both coerced and acquiesced, had erased memories of its emancipatory possibilities.¹

We contend that, following decades of counterinsurgency, neoliberal restructuring, displacement, the upward redistribution of wealth, and the retreat of revolution, Wolf offers a way to rethink the meaning of revolutionary social change in the twenty-first century and to reestablish continuity with the emancipatory, albeit mostly forgotten, consequences of past revolutions and the analytic projects that sought to understand and advance them. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* remains relevant for several reasons: it situates peasants and peasant politics within complex histories and interconnected fields of power; reminds us of the continuing importance of states and other centralized forms of rule at different levels; and outlines an explanatory framework that links singular, historical struggles to the caustic social, economic, and political pressures of capitalism. Wolf encourages us to make connections, to explore how social relations are organized and regulated, and to contemplate how these relations might be challenged and transformed by rural actors as they attempt to not only negotiate local relations but also advance political projects on regional and national levels.

Optimism of the Intellectuals

Richard Lee and Karen Brodtkin Sacks characterized the “long 1960s decade” as “a time of infinite possibility when it seemed that global democracy might prevail if we all put our shoulders to the wheel” (1993: 181). *Peasant Wars* articulated this 1960s-era hopefulness. Wolf wrote: “Everywhere ancient monopolies of power and received wisdom are yielding to human effort to widen participation and knowledge. In such efforts—however uncertain . . . there lies the prospect for increased life, for increased humanity” (1969: 301–302). The book was a synthetic, comparative history of six successful or nominally successful revolutions—Cuba, Algeria, Russia, China, Mexico, and Vietnam—that took place from 1910 to 1975, a period whose core decades were defined by exceptional capitalist reformism and national developmentalism. Beginning with the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and ending with the Vietnamese Revolution of 1975, various forms of socialist and anticolonial nationalist movements that involved peasants pushed back economic liberalism and European imperialism.² This resulted in the broader recognition of the nationalist and developmentalist aspirations of formerly colonized peoples, and the recognition of the political power of peasantries, which prompted a flurry of US initiatives to press Latin American and other governments to implement agrarian reforms to stave off more revolutionary demands. This “long” period of socialist and nonsocialist national developmentalism (1910–1975) contrasts with the free-market fundamentalism and anti-welfare mania that characterized earlier nineteenth-century colonial liberalism and later post–Cold War neoliberalism (Araghi 2009: 122–130). Wolf’s book spoke to the struggles of peasants and others who shaped an exceptional historical period.

Peasant Wars also tried to nudge anthropology into a greater engagement with power. It formed part of Wolf’s developing analytic approach, which had been taking shape since his dissertation fieldwork in Puerto Rico, under the supervision of Julian Steward, and later in his first book, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1959), which explored the long history of Mexico and its different regions, including the insurgencies of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa. In *Peasant Wars*, he rejected anthropological approaches that envisioned rural dwellers as inherently conservative and that remained fixated on the cultural distinctiveness of individual villages or indigenous groups. And unlike some social scientists who assessed various peasant movements in terms of vague “modernizing influences” such as teachers, radios, and road construction (e.g., Huizer 1973; Landsberger 1969),

Wolf rejected a hydra-like modernity and focused instead on how capitalism eroded the subsistence practices of peasants. He identified the “tactically mobile peasantry” (i.e., landowning “middle peasants” with secure access to land or who lived in remote frontier areas) as most likely to engage in defensive revolts and argued that middle peasants’ efforts to resist the destructive force of capitalism, or, in other words, their desire to remain “traditional,” made them revolutionary.

Yet even though Wolf’s middle-peasant thesis made a major contribution to what was then known as “peasant studies” and is arguably the book’s most enduring legacy, his concern with types of peasants sits uneasily with his broader analytic approach, which is less concerned with formulating typologies than with fluid, open-ended, historical processes and shifting configurations of power-laden social relationships. *Peasant Wars* is much more than an argument about so-called middle peasants. The book is above all an examination of how crises of power, created by the spread of North Atlantic capitalism, ripped apart the integument of rural society and opened new possibilities for scale-spanning solidarities that included some peasants, as well as other groups and organizations. It is a deep dive into thinking about who are the key actors in revolutions and what sorts of alliances provide the accelerant necessary to ignite and sustain transformative social change. In the case studies, capitalism tears rural dwellers from their social worlds; transforms them into economic actors; turns land, wealth, and labor into commodities; and forces many people to migrate in search of a livelihood. Although Wolf’s analytic lens concentrates on the countryside, where most of the people in his cases lived, he is concerned with the complexity of social relations and how they are structured within and against fields of capitalist power. For example, the existence of an industrial proletariat was less important for Wolf than its relationship to village life, and one of his abiding concerns was how “rootless intellectuals” (e.g., political activists, migrants, and religious specialists) connected diverse people across uneven social landscapes. Likewise, he argues peasants are typically led by more self-consciously revolutionary groups based in urban areas. The broader point here, and one that was increasingly lost on scholars as revolutionary movements themselves declined, is the attention Wolf gives to not only how rural actors negotiate village life but also how (and with whom) they engage political worlds beyond the local level in ways that potentially advance political projects that transform the power of state and capital at regional and national levels.

In the chapter on Russia, industrial workers stage strikes, urban liberals and revolutionaries spread new ideas in rural areas, and deserting soldiers synchronize peasant uprisings with urban revolts. Similarly, in the case of Cuba, Castro's guerrillas count initially on industrial workers and an urban middle class for logistical support, because peasant recruitment is slow. In Algeria, the exposure of thousands of Algerian migrants to socialist labor unions in France gives them a model for organizing back home, where they turn to nationalism because of French settler-dominated labor unions and political parties, while reformist Islam provides the glue that binds clusters of peasants with spokespeople in the towns and cities. Finally, in Wolf's analyses of Mexico, Vietnam, and China, the role of the middle peasantry is more prominent, at least in some regions such as southern Mexico and northern Vietnam. Yet in northern Mexico, cowboys, smugglers, and middle-class merchants, clerks, and artisans are the primary supporters of the revolutionary army of Pancho Villa. The richness and diversity of the case studies overwhelms the middle-peasant argument, which is not fully laid out until the conclusion and arises perhaps from the desire of Wolf, anti-war activists, and a large swath of the US public to understand how, in Vietnam, peasants "have not only fought to a standstill the mightiest military machine in history, but caused many an American to wonder . . . why 'our' Vietnamese do not fight like 'their' Vietnamese" (Wolf 1969: ix).

Peasant Wars paid attention to how the abrasive force of global capitalism acted as a solvent of social relationships, while opening new possibilities for alliances and organizational forms to take shape. It attended to social, cultural, and political differences that defined regions historically, and it was attuned to how the combination of particular groups and circumstances could dynamite the social order. As Jane Schneider observed, Wolf was "always receptive to the possibility that new complexes might well appear . . . [and he] always expected to be surprised, to stumble on anomalies, to discover instances that do not fit into a pattern" (1995: 8, 11).

Peasant Wars was Wolf's most political book, one of a number of works written in the heat of the radical 1960s that grew out of and spoke to the debates of the time. Although in hindsight it is easy to criticize the optimism of the era and the belief that people armed with the proper knowledge will do the right thing, radical scholars were subjecting the established wisdom to withering critique, pioneering new analytic approaches, and breaking out of the intellectual prison of McCarthyism. A key feature of this period was the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and the political nature of analytic

debates (Roseberry 1995: 163). Kathleen Gough (1968), for example, published “Anthropology and Imperialism” two years before *Peasant Wars*. Gough argued anthropology was a handmaiden of colonialism and took anthropologists to task for their failure to study imperialism. She also noted how dependence on imperial powers for funding and access to research sites impoverished anthropology, producing either putatively “value-free social science” or a reformist kind of social work that avoided challenges to capitalist power, and she urged anthropologists to compare capitalist and socialist forms of development among Third World peoples.

Along with the work of other scholars, *Peasant Wars* rescued Marxism from paradigms of progress that privileged the urban working class as the protagonist of revolution³ and ignored the colonial and neocolonial experiences of people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Eric Hobsbawm (1959), for example, turned attention to “primitive rebels” and “social bandits.” E. P. Thompson’s magisterial *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) explored how rural and artisan traditions nourished working-class consciousness and, breaking with Communist Party orthodoxy, opened new ways of thinking about class that focused on process and privileged human agency. Like Wolf, he and Hobsbawm were less fixated on the particular than on integrating working-class experience into an understanding of conflictive social processes, state formation, and social transformation. In addition, Peter Worsley’s *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1957) offered an early comparative and historical study of Melanesian revitalization movements, based on a close reading of secondary sources. It placed “cargo cults” and nationalist movements within the same analytic framework, demonstrating that the former were not backward expressions of religious atavism but responses to exploitation by and resentment of European missionaries, traders, labor recruiters, and police. *The Trumpet Shall Sound* preceded Worsley’s best-known book, *The Third World* (1964), in which he examined the class structures, nationalist movements, state forms, and international alliances of postcolonial states and designated the “Third World” to refer to newly independent states and the distinct challenges they confronted in the age of the Cold War. Together, these works reenergized Marxist theory with insights about peasants, rural artisans, and anti-colonial revolts in the emergent “Third World.”

Similarly, in Latin America, the economist André Gunder Frank and the writer Eduardo Galeano undercut Eurocentric developmentalist paradigms of capitalist progress. Gunder Frank, who obtained

a degree in economics from the University of Chicago and studied with none other than Milton Friedman, published his influential *Development of Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1969) in which he argued capitalist development in the First World “produces” underdevelopment in the Third World. Although he overstated the case (see Cardoso and Faletto 1979) and the absence of class analysis was troubling, his dependency perspective represented an alternative to both modernization theory and the advocacy of import substitution industrialization associated with Raúl Prebisch and others working with the United Nations–sponsored Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA). Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America* (1971) delved into Latin America’s violent colonial history and more recent subjection to US economic exploitation, tracing a long arc of imperial and neo-imperial plunder.

Most of these scholars found ways to reach beyond the academy and speak to an educated public. For Wolf, the Vietnam War represented “the overriding issue of the moment,” and speaking out against it was “an obligation of citizenship” (1969: x). Unsurprisingly, Wolf elected to publish *Peasant Wars* with a trade press, which made it accessible to a general audience. Thompson wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* for his students in an adult education program. Gunder Frank reached a left-wing US readership through his publisher, Monthly Review Press, as well as the magazine *Monthly Review*, while a growing Latin American middle class found answers to their political questions in his approach. Gunder Frank supported the socialist regime of Salvador Allende (1970–1973), and from his position at the University of Chile, which he joined in 1967, he played an important role in *Chile Hoy*, a magazine directed to a nonacademic audience. As Aldo Marchesi writes, Gunder Frank’s “work was part of a singular moment in the relationship between academic production and political commitment in Chile, where certain actors of academia legitimized their studies by adopting certain political stances, while political actors looked to academic work as a way of legitimating their practices” (2018: 119–120). Indeed, dependency theory was particularly important, and in many ways unique in its role of informing and shaping revolutionary actors and movements in Latin America (see Edelman and Haugerud 2005: 11–14).

These radically engaged scholars often paid a high price for their commitment to progressive political change. As Chairman of the first American Anthropological Association (AAA) Ethics Committee, Wolf became embroiled in a 1970 controversy over the collaboration of anthropologists with the US government in developing

counterinsurgency strategies in Thailand. The dispute divided the association and led to Wolf's removal from the committee, although he was eventually vindicated when fellows of the association voted to reject a report of the "Mead Committee," which chose to ignore the ethical problems raised by AAA members who colluded with government counterinsurgency programs (Wakin 1992). University administrators offered little support for faculty members who criticized government policy. Kathleen Gough was told she had no future at Brandeis University following a pro-Cuban talk on the eve of the 1962 missile crisis. After relocating to the University of Oregon, she refused to grade students harshly and expose them to the draft as the Vietnam War heated up. Gough and her husband, David Aberle, left for Canada, but her advocacy of student participation in departmental affairs at Canada's Simon Fraser University led to her dismissal. Despite a stellar publication record and the respect of her colleagues, she spent the last fifteen years of her life without a university appointment (Jorgensen 1993). Intelligence agencies also had these scholars in their sights, as Peter Worsley discovered when Great Britain's national intelligence agency, MI5, denied him permission to carry out dissertation fieldwork in Africa because he was a member of the British Communist Party (Peel 2013). MI5's decision pushed Worsley to abandon anthropology for sociology and fieldwork for library research.

Third World scholars suffered the most serious consequences of Cold War repression. Gunder Frank, who spent much of his life in Latin America, fled Chile after the 1973 US-supported coup that ushered in the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990). He became a *persona non grata* in the United States, denied visas or subjected to severe restrictions on those occasions when he was invited to lecture or give a course. Similarly, US-supported military dictatorships banned Galeano's books throughout the Southern Cone, and Galeano himself was imprisoned in Uruguay following a 1973 military coup. He eventually went into exile in Argentina, but after the 1976 military takeover there, he fled to Spain. Hundreds of other scholars and activists shared similar fates—or worse.

We can appreciate how the Cold War and the repression that accompanied it undermined the development of a critical left scholarship that was challenging the status quo and reaching a nonacademic audience.⁴ Reconsidering how Wolf and other key scholars from his generation posed questions, formulated problems, and developed answers to the overriding political concerns of their time not only reconnects us to a tradition of critical scholarship but also is useful

for confronting issues arising today, because many questions and concerns from the 1960s remain relatively open and unresolved.

The Agrarian Question, Capitalist Triumphalism, and Shifting Intellectual Paradigms

Between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, heated debates about “reform or revolution” echoed from the halls of government to the Latin American countryside. These debates turned to a considerable degree on the “agrarian question,” which Karl Kautsky defined in the late nineteenth century as “whether and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones” (quoted in Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a: 179). Would Latin American societies, which were still primarily rural, gradually reform within the parameters of a modernized capitalism, or would they follow a revolutionary path to socialist transformation? Key to the futures imagined by these questions was the fate of the peasantry—its transformation into wage laborers or persistence as petty commodity producers—and the balance of class forces in the countryside, especially alliances between peasants and other groups. The agrarian question took on particular urgency after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which provided Latin Americans with an alternative to US-backed capitalist developmentalism. The success of the Cuban revolutionaries, shifts in Catholic Church doctrine (especially the rise of liberation theology; e.g., chap. 4), and a post-World-War II period of economic growth inspired peasants and leftist revolutionaries from Central America to the Southern Cone to demand the state provide economic justice, equality, access to social services, political inclusion, and freedom.

The eruption of the scholarly debate around Lenin and Chayanov emerged a few years after the publication of *Peasant Wars* and represented a reframing of the original discussion on the agrarian question that had strong repercussions in Latin America (the focus of this book), with its large peasant population. Although Lenin and Chayanov never actually debated, their perspectives on the peasantry exercised academics in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere, even though the two positions were not necessarily incompatible (Lehman 1980). Lenin argued the Russian peasantry was prone to an internal process of differentiation, with most “small” peasants becoming proletarians and some “large” peasants developing into rural capitalists. “Middle peasants” might go either way (Lenin 1964),

but Lenin's broader point was there is a fairly stable class divide in the countryside that defined social relations and necessarily shaped revolutionary praxis. Understanding the peasantry and developing an agrarian strategy, especially ceding to peasant demands for land confiscation, was important to Lenin, because he believed building a "worker-peasant" alliance was key to revolution in Russia. In contrast, Chayanov (1966) treated peasant production as outside capitalist processes. Against the capitalist imperative to generate profits, accumulate wealth, and reinvest in an endless drive to expand, he argued peasants eschewed capital accumulation and aimed merely to satisfy subsistence requirements, laboring more or less intensively in accord with a household's demographic circumstances, seasonal price variation, and weather patterns. The mid-twentieth-century Lenin-Chayanov controversy was inscribed within a fundamentally teleological position on the survival of the peasantry and took the nation-state as the unit of analysis. It drowned out Wolf's sensitivity to heterogeneous and contradictory social relations, regional and national variation, and historical contingency.

US and Latin American Cold War policy makers, who feared the spread of communism and "another Cuba" in the Americas, placed agrarian reform on their agendas to stave off revolution. They aimed to appease militant peasants through the creation of individual, family farms—the hoped-for pillar of a conservative social base disconnected from urban radicals and nationalist and socialist liberation movements. In addition, they combined agrarian reform with measures to support urban consumers and accommodate the urban and agricultural bourgeoisies. Following the recommendations of the Santiago-based ECLA, most Latin American governments adopted import-substitution industrialization to promote the growth of domestic industries and the development of a home market.⁵ Agrarian reform and import-substitution industrialization represented a form of market-led, national developmentalism, one that aimed to prevent socialist revolutions (Araghi 2009: 134). They arose from a range of competing views about economic development, socioeconomic rights, and revolution in Latin America and represented an accommodation to militant nationalism.⁶

Although agrarian reform initially improved rural well-being in some countries, states did not provide needed complementary resources such as credit, irrigation, and extension services, forcing peasants to abandon their lands or rely on off-farm activities for income.⁷ It was not long before the limits of agrarian reformism and the failure of import-substitution industrialization to address the

fundamental needs of the “popular” classes generated growing discontentment (e.g., chap. 2). Armed guerrillas, leftist rebellions, and revolutionary wars in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and elsewhere indexed rising demands for more sweeping social change amid an intensifying Cold War in which regional elites and US policy makers smeared critics with the innuendo of “communist subversion.” Landowning Latin American elites resented any challenge to their wealth and turned to US-trained security forces to protect their interests, while multinational corporations chafed at the limits to capital accumulation imposed by national developmentalism. Reformist and revolutionary advocates for structural change confronted opponents (e.g., militaries, police forces, death squads) who were willing to unleash relentless violence in order to foreclose any possibility of social transformation (e.g., chap. 5).

Cold War counterinsurgent violence transformed the countryside and, combined with a 1980s debt crisis, landed a one-two punch on Latin America that opened the door for neoliberalism—a more pernicious, unregulated form of capitalism. Political violence shredded the social relations that bound peasants to each other and destroyed ties between them and urban allies. It dissolved powerful collectivities, eliminated dynamic leaders, and forced people to adopt individual survival strategies such as Pentecostalism, migration, and participation in illegal narco-economies. The destruction, poverty, wartime displacement, and repression of popular movements decimated reformist and revolutionary movements from Chile to Guatemala and exposed wide swaths of the population to new vulnerabilities (e.g., Binford 2016; Gill 2016; Grandin 2004; Winn 2004). Brazil and the Dominican Republic provided early examples in the mid-1960s, but it was Chile that captured global attention and proved to be the harbinger of what lay on the horizon. Following a brutal US-backed coup d’état that ended Allende’s socialist government, the military regime of Pinochet murdered, jailed, and tortured political opponents and imposed dictatorial rule for seventeen years. In consultation with a group of Chilean economists trained by Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago and known as the “Chicago Boys,” Pinochet ushered in neoliberalism on a river of blood.

Neoliberalism represented a counteroffensive against national developmentalism that spread throughout Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s as debt crises provided the leverage for northern institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to demand free-market reforms in exchange for the loans

necessary to repay international debts. Although the nature and impact of neoliberal policies varied from country to country, neoliberalism had become hegemonic throughout the hemisphere—and the world—by the beginning of the twenty-first century. It was essentially “a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey 2005: 19) that upended the protection of society from the market by privatizing public resources and institutions, reducing import duties, eliminating subsidies, weakening labor laws, and opening the door to foreign investment, among other provisions. Wolf’s materialist approach could not predict these developments, or the ensuing consequences, but it is of great utility in helping us understand them.

The impact of neoliberalism on the Latin American countryside was dramatic. Governments under the sway of what became known as the Washington Consensus reversed agrarian reform policies enacted during the national developmentalist era in countries as diverse as Chile, Mexico, and Honduras, while the deregulation of land markets allowed renewed penetration by foreign firms and accusations of “land grabbing” in some of the most fertile and productive regions of the continent (Borras and Franco 2012; Grajales 2011). Governmental concern for the home market vanished. The reduction or elimination of tariff barriers and the promotion of export-led development enabled the dumping of cheap (and still subsidized) US-produced grains such as wheat and corn into Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, and other countries. These policies were combined with the elimination of farm subsidies and price supports. Together, they ruined hundreds of thousands of small farmers and spurred migration to urban centers and capitalist countries in the north. Unsurprisingly, food imports increased, while domestic production for the home market declined. As export-led production became the principal means of capital accumulation, small commodity producers became more deeply integrated into global commodity chains and dependent on chemical and biotechnological inputs controlled by multinational firms.

The political implications surrounding the imposition of neoliberalism were equally profound and paved the way for the economic onslaught in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Military regimes wiped out much of the Left in South America during the 1970s and 1980s, and counterinsurgency finished the job in Central America by the early 1990s. More than this, the tentative forms of civilian-democratic rule that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s were predicated on the continued implementation of neoliberalism. Elites consolidated power under democratic rule, paving the way for structural

adjustment and the rapid redistribution of wealth upward. Such a project was made possible by, and contributed to, a severely debilitated Left. Opposition forces were in no position to shift political debate, let alone advance a more progressive agenda. Structural adjustment decimated labor unions, peasant organizations, and working-class power, continuing the destruction of leftist institutions while undermining the capacity of popular groups to forge solidarity—especially on regional and national scales.

To be sure, it is not as if labor unions, peasant organizations, and revolutionary actors disappeared completely from the Latin American scene, but traditional institutions of the Left were significantly compromised by the start of the 1990s, even in countries that escaped the worst of the violence. They, along with the hundreds of NGOs that emerged throughout the region during this period, were drawn into relatively local, largely defensive, struggles aimed at lessening the worst effects of neoliberalism. As larger numbers of Latin Americans found themselves politically and economically marginalized, these struggles would eventually lead to a broader challenge to the entire system in the form of the “pink tide.” In the short term, however, the situation was bleak. The 1989 Caracazo in Venezuela foreshadowed the anti-neoliberal backlash that was to come. Peasant-indigenous groups were beginning to contest neoliberalism with more consistency and ferocity by the early 1990s, but the prospects for a more sustained and large-scale opposition were not promising at that time.

Amid the devastation wrought by the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism, including the broader political decimation of peasant, worker, and leftist institutions, the scholarly study of social movements and agrarian transformation underwent a profound shift. New analytic frameworks influenced by postmodernism, subaltern studies, and notions of everyday forms of resistance celebrated “new social movements” and “voices from below” that were engaged in mostly individual forms of resistance based on cultural claims such as ethnicity (e.g., Álvarez et al. 1998; Escobar and Álvarez 1992). These perspectives, which consolidated in the 1990s, purported to have found new forms of agency within but not against capitalism. They found “resistance” in the smallest acts of nonconformity, a discovery that made resistance banal by finding it everywhere. They also sidestepped questions of rural class formation, which meant not only that scholarly attention shifted away from peasants in a general sense but also that their relationship to changing forms of state and capital tended to be downplayed.⁸ By so doing, they ignored how peasants and urban slum dwellers wanted the state to address their problems.

In addition, they erased earlier emancipatory objectives, showed little interest in revolutionary social change, and abandoned any notion of popular empowerment through the capture of state power,⁹ concerns that had animated Wolf and an earlier group of scholars.

As sectors of the academy took a “cultural” turn and a chasm between social history and cultural analysis opened, there were some notable exceptions. Jeffrey Gould (1990), for example, explored the development of peasant consciousness in pre-Sandinista Nicaragua and showed how rural people forged a new, collective understanding of their social world that led to the downfall of the Somoza dynasty (see also Gould and Lauria-Santiago 2008). Similarly, William Roseberry challenged the notion that peasant consciousness evolved from an “ordered past to a disordered present,” as set forth by proponents of the so-called moral economy thesis (1991: 58). He insisted peasant political history was much more dynamic, contingent, and contradictory than generally assumed and that possibilities for revolutionary social change opened and closed as peasants and their allies contended with more powerful groups. Yet, despite the exceptions, the study of peasant politics faded, while the collapse of “actually existing” socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union fed capitalist triumphalism and “end of history” narratives. Though some mainstream academics considered class analysis passé, even as global wealth and power became concentrated to a degree not seen since the Gilded Age, other analysts identified the post-Cold War era as a time of narrowing intellectual diversity. It was a moment, they argued, when postmodernist approaches had conquered anthropology and other branches of the social sciences (e.g., Boyer 2003; Roseberry 1996) and previously central scholarly figures, like Eric Wolf, and their work fell out of the bibliographies of a new generation of anthropologists (Roseberry 1995).

The Return of the Oppressed

Despite Cold War terror and the spread of no-holds-barred capitalism, social movements managed to regroup in places like Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Mexico and demand the state play a greater role in the provision of social welfare. They waged defensive struggles against free trade deals, the privatization of public resources, declining crop prices, and the environmental degradation wrought by extractive industries such as mining and logging. In some countries, most notably Bolivia and Ecuador, rural people—often identifying and organizing as indige-

nous peoples—even led the overthrow of neoliberal regimes, once their sectorial protests became class struggles that involved both indigenous and nonindigenous people and targeted the neoliberal state (chap. 7; Hylton and Thomson 2007; Webber 2012, 2017). In fact, it was precisely the draconian and violent nature of neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s that made Latin America “revolutionary” again and propelled a “pink tide” of left-leaning governments to power. It is no coincidence that Bolivia was ground zero for “shock therapy” or that Venezuela emerged as a revolutionary epicenter against neoliberalism.

Yet, even as governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, and beyond sought alternatives to neoliberalism or softened its harshest features, they could not break out of the straitjacket of export-led development and dependence on natural resources. After riding an early twenty-first-century wave of high commodity prices until 2014, pink tide governments stumbled as commodity prices declined and along with them government revenues. With declining resources and periodic missteps, it became difficult for left-leaning governments to rebuild and sustain a developmentalist state that had been dismantled under neoliberalism—especially as the Right went on the offensive and social movements fractured. Even with more sympathetic governments in power, the central problem of peasant movements in many ways remained the same—their relation to the state, how to confront it, bypass it, use it, or accommodate it, as they sought to secure subsistence and claim a dignified life for their members against the social dislocations and environmental destruction of capitalism (Vergara and Kay 2017). Unsurprisingly, new political and intellectual challenges have arisen that were barely on the horizon in the 1960s, when *Peasant Wars* appeared in print.

The world today is more urbanized than it was fifty years ago, and a higher percentage of Latin Americans live in cities than in the countryside. Agrarian capitalism, trade policies, political violence, and climate change have displaced legions of peasants to urban peripheries, where spreading poverty moved Mike Davis (2006) to talk about a “planet of slums.” In the absence of state-enforced labor rights and other regulations, gangs, paramilitaries, and mafias dominate poor urban neighborhoods and represent a challenge for social movements and for academic analysts. Such is the case in large swaths of urban Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, and Venezuela, where drug mafias and paramilitary entities control municipal governments and popular economies and regulate social life in arbitrary ways (e.g., chap. 5). The boundaries

between legality and illegality have blurred. Under such conditions, one might reasonably ask, “What is the state?” Where is it located? Who speaks in its name? The answers are not always clear. The challenge for a revitalized Left is to organize urban peripheries and build connections between rural and urban constituencies.

Peasantries have not disappeared. The proportion they represent of national populations may have declined, but in absolute numbers there are more than at any time in history (Van der Ploeg 2008, cited in Edelman and Borras 2016: 1). For those who remain in the countryside, survival increasingly entails deeper involvement with commodity circuits: suppliers, purchasers, and traders, as well as reliance on flows of remittances sent by migrants residing in nearby cities and/or distant countries. Intensified participation in credit markets, commodity production, and the use of new technologies have exposed peasants to greater and more interconnected vulnerabilities, forcing them to confront potentially destabilizing uncertainties that Wolf could not have foreseen. Henry Bernstein argues that the concrete realities of life for increasing numbers of people have become too complicated for simple labels:

The working poor of the South have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and typically increasingly scarce wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and “informal economy” survival activity, including marginal farming. In effect, livelihoods are pursued through complex *combinations* of wage employment and self-employment. Additionally, many pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment. The social locations and identities the working poor inhabit, combine and move between make for ever more fluid boundaries and defy inherited assumptions of fixed and uniform notions of “worker,” “farmer,” “petty trader,” “urban,” “rural,” “employed” and “self-employed.” (2009: 111)

The forces uprooting peasantries have generated streams of international migrants who shoulder enormous risks as they cross borders and struggle to forge viable livelihood strategies in new, unfamiliar, and frequently hostile settings. They must contend with increasingly draconian US immigration policies that threaten their access to jobs in the United States, destroy their families through deportation and the separation of children from their parents, and endanger the transfer of remittances to those cut off from subsistence possibilities. In addition, international migration affects rural social movements in the home countries, as local political engagement may be undermined by migrants who chase after a better life elsewhere. Yet his-

tories of popular struggle may also shape the political engagements of migrants in new locations (Bacon 2015; Bardacke 2011; Buhle and Georgakas 1996; Fine 2006). Finally, some rural dwellers pressure states to ensure the social and economic conditions that would enable them to remain in their communities; they are, in other words, demanding “the right to stay home” (Bacon 2013).

Yet, as the forces of global capital displace peasants and force them to cross international borders to find work, new forms of transnational networks and coalitions between peasants and their allies have engaged policy debates about climate change, land rights, food sovereignty, human rights, intellectual property, agrarian reform, and the deleterious impact of neoliberal policies and trade rules (Borras et al. 2008). These movements have frequently arisen in areas where large-scale corporate farming failed to obliterate peasant agriculture. As Marc Edelman and Saturnino Borras observe, capital’s incomplete penetration of the countryside has left space for peasants to organize oppositional movements and illustrates the continuing relevance of the agrarian question in the twenty-first century. Yet, according to these authors, contemporary peasant activists are more educated, well-traveled, and technologically savvy than even two decades ago (2016: 3–5), and certainly since the period considered by Wolf.

As the reconfiguration of rural livelihoods and production processes both aggravate a subsistence crisis and deepen peasant integration into commodity circuits, the contemporary agrarian question must address both the social fragmentation that arises from reconfigured peasant livelihoods *and* the persistence of peasant farmers. It attends to new spatial relations that arise from the expanding commodification of land, labor, and natural resources and the implications of a deepening market imperative for both capitalist agriculture and petty-commodity-producing peasant households.¹⁰ And finally, it focuses on the political response of national and transnational peasant movements (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010b: 279).

Although Wolf could not have foreseen all the new and remade relationships of the current moment, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* remains a useful point of departure for the analysis of contemporary, rural social movements. Today, the ideologies and configurations of power that defend an ever more alarming concentration of wealth are so hostile to liberation struggles, past and present, that a first step forward is recovering the memory of a time when transformative social change seemed possible and reestablishing a link to the radical scholarship of that period. The next step is

not to mimic that scholarship but rather to learn from its strengths and weaknesses. By reconsidering the legacy of *Peasant Wars*, the chapters in this volume contribute to these goals.

Synopsis of Chapters

Although revolution was very much on the table in Latin America during the 1960s when Eric Wolf was writing *Peasant Wars*, Cold War anti-communism would ultimately destroy revolutionary movements in the region (and most of the world) for the rest of the twentieth century. With the Nicaraguan Revolution serving as the tragic exception that proves the rule, there have been no successful revolutions in Latin America since the publication of *Peasant Wars* in 1969. As a result, what this volume attempts to understand—through insights gained from Wolf’s analysis of *successful* peasant revolutions—is how peasants have not only continued to engage their political worlds but also why and how it has been so difficult to forge and advance political projects that challenge the state and capital on larger scales. Unlike Wolf, however, who analyzed the transformative role of peasants in national social formations of which he had only passing personal experience, most contributors to this volume have written about regions with which they have substantial firsthand knowledge.

In chapter 1, Aaron Kappeler discusses the *longue durée* of peasant and political life in Venezuela. He explains that though peasants have declined as a proportion of the overall population, they continue to play a key role in the United Socialist Party of Venezuela of the Bolivarian Revolution. Though rural areas have constituted the strongest bases of support for the ruling party, Kappeler views urban and rural areas in terms of a “continuum” with struggles at one pole igniting or galvanizing those at the other pole, in part because of the back-and-forth movement of people between urban and rural areas as economic circumstances dictate. Kappeler develops a case study of the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front and the Centro Técnico Productivo Socialista Florentino, both of which support the ruling party but also compete with one another for land.

Several chapters address Wolf’s theses regarding the rebellious potential of the tactically mobile middle peasantry. In chapter 2, Steve Striffler discusses the development of a middle peasantry with a modicum of tactical mobility in coastal Ecuador on the periphery of coastal banana plantations. He explains how peasants were able to work *with and through* the state to obtain land, first on the margins

of Tenguel, a United Fruit plantation near Ecuador's Pacific coast, and later through wholesale invasion of the agro-export enclave. But for a host of reasons, peasants never made the transition from reform to revolution. Striffler points to the economic and political contexts within which they operated, the fact that they worked through rather than against the state, and the absence of support from outside agents. He observes that agrarian reform in recent years has lost momentum and the land has been taken over by domestic capitalists who contract with foreign multinationals. Many peasants now form part of a dependent landless class with little tactical power.

Lesley Gill's chapter 3 examines the making of a foreign-dominated, oil-export enclave in early twentieth-century Colombia. Gill explores the rise and demise of a militant, heterogeneous working class that spanned the country and the city. Following Wolf's attention to "webs of group relations," she argues the hybrid rural-urban experiences of working people undermine simple dichotomies of peasants versus proletarians, waged versus unwaged workers, urban versus rural livelihoods. The chapter demonstrates how the struggles and compromises between differently labeled working people, dominant groups, and the Colombian state gave rise to changing forms of protest and spatial forms. During much of the twentieth century, these protests rattled the chains of institutional power, before succumbing to the combined power of counterinsurgency and neoliberalism.

Leigh Binford takes up the role of the "middle peasantry" in chapter 4 on northern Morazán, El Salvador. However, he focuses on the key role that landed peasants from that marginal region played in the dissemination of liberation theology. Binford points to the role of middle peasants as early catechists who joined nascent guerrillas in the early to mid-1970s and linked northern Morazán with the urban leadership of the People's Revolutionary Army, which eventually became part of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). However, he suggests that once open warfare broke out in 1980, poor peasants and rural workers, often with minimal ideological preparation, joined the rebels in mass, forming the base of the fighting forces and civilian support personnel. Peasant mobilization and militancy declined after the war's end in 1992 as a combination of growing distaste on the part of people for direct confrontation with the state, the decline of export agriculture (and agricultural employment), the incorporation of ex-guerrillas under the umbrella of the FMLN into national political party competition, and, especially, the destabilizing effect of two decades of neoliberal policies on small-scale agriculture weakened progressive rural social movements.

In chapter 5, Casey Walsh places the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the current drug war in the context of a history of peasant struggle in Mexico. Walsh suggests it is possible, with the proper optic, to understand the drug war as “a moment in which the long-simmering peasant war of position has emerged once again into open hostilities.” Walsh argues there exist “compelling reasons to see TCOs [transnational criminal organizations] as enacting political projects of rule based in neoliberal political culture” and thus to analyze the current conflicts, which have taken somewhere between 80,000 and 150,000 victims, as a war in which peasants manifest involvement at all levels.

In chapter 6, Clifford Welsh takes up the Brazilian case through the examination of five peasant “wars” that occurred during “the long twentieth century,” beginning with the Canudos conflict in the 1890s and ending with the Landless Workers Movement (MST), founded in 1984. Welsh draws on Wolf’s concepts of “mediators” and “tradition” to explain why only the MST, among the five peasant movements examined, achieved national exposure. Four of the five movements were led by deficient mediators and were fundamentally defensive in orientation. Though the MST developed leadership from within the peasantry and achieved national (and international) recognition, it “opted for a nonviolent revolutionary strategy of gradual but dramatic change.”

Finally, in chapter 7, Forrest Hylton discusses past and recent social movements in Bolivia. He argues that both social history and cultural anthropology are necessary to understand the evolution of political power in Bolivia, particularly its class and race/ethnicity dimensions and the ways they have been intertwined during different periods and in different regional spaces. His is less an analysis of a specific region (or even country) than a demonstration of the advantages of a materially based, historically informed social/cultural anthropology, pursued by Wolf, Roseberry, and others over the Foucauldian culturalism that predominates among many anthropologists today.

In his “Reflection” on the contemporary significance of *Peasant Wars*, Gavin Smith points to the contemporary significance of Wolf’s historical method of controlled comparison and an approach that begins with the countryside “thence to inquire about connections and alliances beyond.” Smith acknowledges the current political moment is very different from the one in which Wolf wrote, yet insists contemporary leftist academics and political figures still have much to learn from him.

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Notes

1. For more on the legacy of revolution, see Palmer and Sangster (2016).
2. Wolf divided the Vietnamese revolution into three stages: the war against the Japanese; the anti-colonial war against the French (1945–1954); and the war to reunite the country, fought against the United States and US-based South Vietnamese regimes (1960–1975). *Peasant Wars* mainly treated the anti-colonial war against the French. Although Wolf wrote in the heat of the anti-Vietnam War struggle and clearly hoped to influence public opinion (and perhaps provide opponents of the war with a broader historical perspective on peasant struggles), the US withdrawal began in 1973 and Saigon fell in April of 1975, four and six years, respectively, after the publication of *Peasant Wars*.

3. Although Wolf references Marx approvingly in *Peasant Wars* and elaborates an analysis that clearly owes a debt to Marx, his publisher, Harper & Row, blurb-ed a review by *The Economist* on the back cover of the 1969 paperback edition stating, “The best thing about this book is that it represents a non-Marxist attempt at class analysis.”
4. See Price (2016) for an extensive discussion of the relationship between anthropology, the military, and the Central Intelligence Agency during the Cold War.
5. In Central America, five small countries collaborated to form a free-trade economic zone in the Central American Common Market, which functioned from 1960 to 1969.
6. See Young (2017) for an interesting discussion of the mid-twentieth-century Bolivian debate about hydrocarbon nationalism.
7. El Salvador eschewed reform until 1980, when, on the verge of revolution, the government enacted a three-phase land reform. The first phase was overseen by the army, which often treated land recipients—former estate workers—as rebel sympathizers. Phase II of the reform would have affected 30 percent of the valuable coffee land but was stalled by conservative politicians and eventually canceled. Phase III, called “Land to the Tiller,” converted renters of small parcels into owners (Diskin 1985).
8. See Edelman (1999) for an interesting example of how Costa Rican peasants combined class politics and concerns about identity to confront the Costa Rican state over neo-liberal austerity measures.
9. See Brass (1991, 2003) for a critique of these approaches.
10. See Smith (2018) for a discussion of “uneven and combined development” and the problem of scale intertwined with the agrarian question.

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