

Peasants and Globalization in Latin America: A Survey of Recent Literature

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Resumo: O ensaio trata-se de uma resenha coletiva da literatura publicada entre 1990 e 2001 sobre o tema do campesinato e globalização na América Latina. A lista de obras é limitada ao catálogo construído pela Biblioteca do Congresso dos Estados Unidos. A discussão dos livros é organizada por países com perspectiva teórica. O ensaio mostra que são várias os paradigmas sobre o futuro do campesinato frente ao processo de globalização que guiaram os autores durante o período que argumentam que uma visão de resiliência senão fortalecimento dos camponeses predominou nas obras.

Palavras-chave: movimentos sociais no campo, proletarização, sobrevivência de cultura, luta pela terra, resumo da literatura.

Campesinado y Globalización en América Latina: Una revisión de la Literatura Reciente

Resumen: El artículo trata de una reseña colectiva de la literatura publicada entre 1990 y 2001 sobre el tema del campesinado y la globalización en América Latina. La lista de obras analizadas se limita al catálogo de la Biblioteca del Congreso de los Estados Unidos. La discusión de los libros fue organizada por país y perspectiva teórica. El ensayo muestra varios paradigmas que guiaron a los autores, durante el período analizado, sobre el futuro del campesinado en el contexto del proceso de globalización y argumenta que una visión de resiliencia y, a veces, de fortalecimiento de los campesinos predominó en las obras.

Palabras-clave: movimientos sociales en el campo, proletarización, sobrevivencia de la cultura, lucha por la tierra, resumen de literatura.

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Abstract: This review essay examines trends in the multinational literature of books published on the theme of peasants and globalization in Latin America between 1990 and 2001 and cataloged by the Library of Congress. It organizes the literature by countries covered as well as by theoretical approaches. It demonstrates the influence of contending paradigms regarding the future of peasantries and argues that most books defend the notion that globalization has not eliminated but actually helped strengthen peasant survival.

Keywords: rural social movements, depeasantization, cultural survival, land struggle, literature survey.

In 1978, Ernest Feder described the peasant as a “species” made nearly “extinct” by globalization. With great vigor and wit he argued that agribusiness would soon “eliminate” the Latin American peasantry and denounced the complicity of all those academics who refused to write about this certainty and the very real survival problems faced by peasants as a consequence (Feder 1978). More than two decades later, we see that most scholars of the 1990s had trouble wholeheartedly supporting Feder’s dismal conclusion. During the 1990s, when globalization predominated so thoroughly that this awkward word practically went household, scholars reported a resurgence of peasant political activity and looked back in time to note the resilience of peasants during other epochs of profound socio-economic change. A multi-disciplinary literature survey reveals that, at least for analysts, the peasant has persisted, though somewhat abused and transformed, despite altered economic and political structures. The process of *depeasantization* which Feder emphasized has merit for these analysts; it’s just that they have chosen to emphasize how the process has been stopped—paused, perhaps—by the peasant’s refusal to wither away.

They agree that the number of pure peasants—stable subsistence farmers marginalized from the central market—has dramatically declined and yet they report on the strength and growth of a hybrid semi-peasant no one can satisfactorily name. While globalization has threatened to eliminate traditional peasants, it has done much to revive peasant studies in Latin America.

Few terms are as difficult to pin down as “peasant.” In 1968, the anthropologist Eric Wolf was careful to exclude “landless laborers” yet include tenants in the category when he emphasized control in defining peasants as “populations that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the processes of cultivation” (Wolf 1973: xiv). In the 1970s and 1980s, analysts referred to “peasant-workers,” noting how capitalist pressure on production and land tenure had forced many peasants to supplement their farm livelihoods with wage labor, sometimes migrating long distances to harvest cash crops like sugar cane or mine resources subject to fluctuating demand (Meillassoux 1977, Szelenyi 1987). In 1996, Michael Kearney, another anthropologist, had “reconceptualized” the peasant as a “polybian,” an individual that supplements cultivation with wage labor, handicraft production, and other service and sales activities (Kearney 1996). In 1999, sociologist Gerardo Otero stated a preference for describing peasants as “semiproletarians” because most traditional peasants in Mexico were no longer able to persevere on the land without working for others as wage laborers and their likelihood of returning to peasant status or becoming full-fledged proletarians depended on a variety of factors, from regional culture to global markets (Otero 1999: 60-62). João Pedro Stédile, a leader of Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra (MST), brought the argument full circle later that year when he described the whole peasant terminology debate as elitist and noted that his “peasant movement” sought to restore to the land as viable family farmers the very landless laborers Wolf had earlier dismissed (Stédile and Fernandes 1999: 31-32). What we see in practice as well as in scholarship is a struggle against the elimination of peasants as both a category and a reality.

“Globalization” is not an easy term to define either. Coined in the late 1980s, in its most benign form globalization has come to mean “a process of growing interdependence between all the people of the planet” (Bureau of Workers’ Activities, 2001). For the Marxist social scientist Samir Amin, however, globalization signifies “a third wave of devastation of the world by imperialist expansion” (Amin 2001: 9). As a “third wave,” Amin links today’s globalization with earlier waves of European and U.S. expansion from the 1400s through the 20th century. For Latin American peasants, each wave has had its disruptive and creative aspects. For indigenous peasants of the pre-Colombian Americas, the first wave was truly devastating and yet, as time passed, new classes of indigenous, mestizo and mulatto peasants arose, some fleeing and some feeding the core sectors linked to overseas markets.

The second wave, that came with industrialization's demands on the human and natural resources of the Americas, profoundly disrupted this now ancient system, enclosing peasant lands and throwing autonomous cultivators into the dependent labor market. Amin sees globalization, a third wave that took off in the 1970s, as part and parcel of this same process. The ILO does not: "a global economy is an unprecedented phenomenon," the authors write. New communications and transportation technologies have enabled the economy "to work as a unit, in real time, on a planetary scale" in a way unique to this era. Whether Amin or the ILO is correct about the continuity of globalization with the long history of the world economy matters little, for Latin American peasants have experienced a little of both theories. The changes have been devastating and yet globalization has created new means of struggle and new opportunities to stall depeasantization if not start a process of "*re-peasantization*."

These processes have not been lost on scholars of the post-Feder generation. An Internet look at Library of Congress records on books published about peasants in Latin America between 1990 and 2001 generated a list of 170 titles, most of them in Spanish (107) and English (48), with Portuguese (16) and other languages trailing far behind. I used the search engine "FirstSearch" to conduct this survey in early August, 2001. The following subjects were run using the "WorldCat" and "Agricola" databases: peasants–history; peasants–political activity; peasantry–history; and peasantry–political activity. The latter terms generated the richest results. For the analysis, I discarded books about countries other than those in Latin America and the Caribbean. An entirely different category—"Chiapas Uprising"—needed to be searched for books on the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico. This seemingly quintessential "peasant and globalization" event has not been registered as such with bibliographers. This search resulted in 290 hits, constituting a virtual cottage industry on the theme with nearly double the total number of books on peasants produced for this event alone. This literature will be surveyed separately later in the essay.

This quantification may reveal little more than the vagaries of library cataloging systems. Supposing it does indicate intellectual activity on the topic, we can conclude that Americans throughout the hemisphere are keenly interested in the peasants. An analysis of the countries studied also reveals some insights. Nearly one third of the books (51) focus on Mexico, suggesting that the well-known process of globalization there has not displaced Mexico from its long prominence as a setting for peasant studies. (This count excludes most books produced by the virtual cottage industry about the Chiapas uprising of 1994, a group of around 300 books, separately accounted for below.) The next closest single country focus is Peru, with twenty four books, and Bolivia is close behind with twenty-three. Grouping these Andean nations with Ecuador (6), Chile (3), and Colombia (3) results in the largest number (59) for a geographical sub-region. Global themes such as coca production, the drug war, and revolution inspired several of these peasant studies. A surprisingly small number of books about the Caribbean appeared: four, with three for Haiti and one for Jamaica. Given the activities of peasants in war and peace, it is less surprising that Central America attracted considerable attention, with 35 books published, most focused on Costa Rica (12), with Nicaragua next (9), and Guatemala (6) and El Salvador (5) trailing behind. The search revealed only fourteen books on Brazil, where land conflict has been fierce since the mid-1980s. Most of them were written in Portuguese by Brazilians themselves. (This number seemed too low and the list generated excluded books I knew so I also searched by using "Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra Brazil" as a subject and found another 24 books on the MST, making for a total of 30 on, by or about the organization. This literature will be discussed briefly below.) Worley, William Torre. 2001. *O Movimento dos Sem-Terra: A Viable Alternative to Brazil's Closed Polity?* MA Thesis. University of Florida, Gainesville. Other Southern Cone nations have received much less attention: Paraguay (3), Chile (3), Argentina (2), and Uruguay (1). Only one book, published in Uruguay by a French ethnographer living in Peru and working as a consultant to non-governmental organizations,

attempted to be comprehensive in discussing most contemporary movements (Pozo Vergnes 1998).

“Peasants and globalization” appeared as an explicit theme in very few of these books. As it is not an official subject heading, it is impossible to definitively determine how many of these books speak to the theme without reviewing each book individually. But the title, contents, and subjects listed for many of the books provide enough information to exclude some and include others in the survey. Perhaps the most identifiably relevant book is Marc Edelman’s *Peasants Against Globalization: Rural Social Movements in Costa Rica*. This is one of the twelve books on Costa Rican peasants cataloged in the past ten years and it argues that far from extinguishing the peasantry, globalization caused them to adopt new forms of resistance in order to survive. “Steeling themselves to weather this onslaught [of globalization] is the stuff of everyday activity,” writes Edelman, “a process of constantly reinventing themselves in new situations, natural and human-made” (211). Costa Rica’s confrontation with globalization began in the 1980s as part of the U.S. counterrevolution in Central America. It took off in the 1990s with increased land concentration and crop specialization and decreased support for foodstuffs produced by small farmers. Since these changes brought instability and violence to this famously stable and peaceful country, scholars like Edelman were drawn to it.

Other clearly relevant books are found in the significant number of publications produced by Latin American peasant organizations. More than a fifth of the titles cataloged (36 of 170) have corporate authors such as Brazil’s Landless Laborers’ Movement (MST), Bolivia’s Movimiento Campesino de Bases, Mexico’s Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos and Confederación Nacional Campesina, Chile’s Federación Cooperativas Campesinas, Nicaragua’s Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo, Ecuador’s Centro Internacional de Cooperación para el Desarrollo Agrícola, and Guatemala’s Comité de Unidad Campesina. These books reflect the “peasants and globalization” theme in several ways. They are produced by self-proclaimed peasant organizations and, due to their cataloging on the Internet, they have entered the global marketplace of ideas. The need to explain, justify, or share their own perspective in written form is also a sign of globalization. The themes range from local history (MOURA 2000; MENCHU 1992) and testimonial (MARCOS 1995; STEDILE & FERNANDES 1999) to studies of the impact of modernization (Tongermann 1994), searches for sustainable alternatives (Centro de Investigación 1991; Centro Internacional, 1992), and institutional histories of their organizations (Confederación 1996; EZLN 1995). Each of these, it can be assumed, arises from the globalization process while reflecting peasant resistance to it by promoting alternative visions and celebrating local, cultural distinctions.

Choosing books from the remaining list relevant to the specific theme of “peasants and globalization” gets difficult at this point. A narrow interpretation of the theme would eliminate many of them. But such selectivity would leave out appropriate works and be ironically antithetical to the broadening and engulfing tendency of the globalization process itself. My criteria are inclusive, then, reflecting not only such traditional categories as commodity production, class struggle, and internationalism but also research trends that have come into vogue with globalization, such as the postmodern emphases on discourse, identity, gender, and multiculturalism; the related new populist celebrations of community, cross-class social movements, invented traditions, and “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985). We find that among scholars writing in the last decade the former set of themes was not nearly so attractive as the latter. The popularity of postmodern themes in peasant studies has been the focus of a wide ranging critique by British scholar Tom Brass. Among other provocative points, Brass argues that the categories of analysis used by postmodern academics disguise class relations and contribute to a romanticization of rural life by

revitalizing the agrarian myth of an idyllic countryside at a time when its sustainability is implausible if not impossible. The celebration of peasant movements as “new” social movements rather than new forms of old and misguided populist movements, he concludes, debilitates the development of progressive movement toward true emancipation for most peasants and the working class in general (BRASS 2000). Indeed, of the books mentioned so far, only Otero’s *Farewell to the Peasantry?* (1999) emphasizes class analysis. In looking more closely at books on Haiti, Mexico, and Brazil, the remainder of this survey considers the relevance of Brass’s critique for books on “peasants and globalization” in Latin America.

When the Hands are Many (SMITH 2001), a study of peasant communities in Haiti by the anthropologist Jennie M. Smith, has all the trappings of a narrowly focused village study until one reads the first paragraph, which begins: “As the twenty-first century begins we are truly becoming an intricately interconnected world....It is time for radically new ways of thinking and acting globally and locally” (1). Most of the book is devoted to exploring the consciousness, speech, and “everyday forms of resistance” and perseverance devised by Grand’Anse peasants to get by and slowly get ahead. They have produced “a series of shared convictions about what a good society would be and how it can (and cannot) be brought about” (176). Far from being Feder’s near extinct strata of humanity, Haitian peasants are seen by Smith as repositories of practical and theoretical knowledge in the struggle for a decent world. Smith conveys a sense that only when we are conscious of our links to a *gwoupman peyizan* (peasant grouping), will we be able to resolve the problems of the world. Because it avoids class analysis almost entirely, this is just the sort of book Brass loves to hate.

Smith ably shares her intimate knowledge of Haitian peasants but it is unlikely that many of the world’s people will come to feel part of a *gwoupman peyizan* any time soon. I spent a few days in Bohoc, Haiti, in 1993 and enjoyed my time with peasants there. Like Smith, I was struck by their resourcefulness and resilience. Many hands shared in the work, children and adult, extended families and neighbors. The neat rows of corn, coffee, and other crops thrived. This area and others left an impression of greater productivity than the literature had led me to expect and the cultivators themselves, most of them property holders, certainly deserved the credit. Wise they were about primitive farming techniques but their knowledge and connection to wider events, even national events such as the ouster of President Aristide, seemed limited. True cynics after so many years of disappointment, matters of state concerned them little, and they turned to religion as a refuge. Over the years I have sent money to youngsters I met who were struggling through school there and one by one they have reported their difficulties getting by and their hopes of leaving the country; one made it to the Dominican Republic where he works for a Mormon ministry. In other words, politics matter a great deal to their lives but it is something their world of isolation and survival hardly allows them to engage and my contact with them—my charity—helped very little, though I certainly learned a lot and continue to benefit from my time there.

The turn to peasants as sources of wisdom and peasant movements as sources of salvation in a West gone awry is strong in the literature of the 1990s. It reflects a sympathetic tradition in the literary treatment of peasants and family farmers that dates at least from the era of industrialization when the agrarian myth was developed to provide an escape from the evident artificial and inhumane features of the modernization process (WILLIAMS 1973; BRASS 2000). This tendency is apparent in the largest single body of books on the theme, studies of the Chiapas Uprising of 1994. Nearly 300 books appeared under a heading for the “uprising,” rather than under “peasants” or “peasantry”—in a WorldCat search. While this survey can offer only a few observations about such a high number of studies, the bibliographic information on these books suggest that they express a fascination with the Zapatistas because they speak to the agrarian myth three times over. The Zapatistas point the way to salvation through their self-sustaining autonomous agricultural communities, by

their seeming purity as Native Americans, and their skill at manipulating the latest products of industrialization—the “wired” world—which enables them to be both internationalists and anti-globalizers. In the eclectic, transgressive world of the Zapatista, you can be a pagan, borderless, anarcho-syndicalist Green with a laptop. This type of celebration of the Chiapas uprising appears in studies like Cultural Survival’s *Why Chiapas: Eight Experts Offer their Views: A Way of Change—The United Nations and Indigenous People* (1994), John Ross’s *Rebellion from the Roots* (1995), Elaine Katzenberger’s *First World, Ha! Ha! Ha!* (1995), Hugo Esteve’s *Las armas de la utopia: la tercera ola de los movimientos guerrilleros en Mexico* (1995), Raul Miranda Ocampo’s collection *Chiapas: el regreso a la utopia* (1995), Luis Condearena’s *Chiapas, el despertar de la esperanza* (1997), John Holloway and Elonina Peláez’s collection *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (1998), Marcelo Quezada G. and Maya Lorena Pérez-Ruiz’s *EZLN: la utopia armada—una visión plural del movimiento zapatista* (1998), Louis Eugene McFarland’s *A New Democracy: A Genealogy of Zapatista Autonomy* (1999), Bill Weinberg’s *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (2000), Tereza Ortiz, *Never Again a World Without Us: Voices of Mayan Women in Chiapas, Mexico* (2001), and June Nash’s *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (2001). For the Argentine analyst of Mexico Adolfo Gilly, the uprising teaches us that we will only be saved from barbarity so long as everyone benefits from globalization, and not even a few indigenous in the remote mountains of southern Mexico are left behind (GILLY 1997).

In 1999, I spent a week in Unión Progreso, a Zapatista autonomous peasant community in Chiapas that was threatened with extinction by death squads, the Mexican army, and inertia. Along with a few other foreign and Mexican observers we were on hand to help the community ward off attack and we even lent a hand with the coffee harvest. The latter help they could have done without—they knew how to cultivate coffee—but perhaps we did some good in keeping the bad guys away for awhile. As with my earlier peasant-reality-excursion to Haiti, this one to Chiapas benefitted me greatly. The knowledge I gained there has direct bearing on my work as a researcher and teacher and I exploit it regularly. On the other hand, I doubt if the folks in Bohoc and Unión Progreso even remember me. After getting over the initial wave of awe I felt upon entering the Lacandon forest, what struck me about the village was the contrast between its links to the world and its isolation from the world. Other than partial electrification, battery powered radios, and a dirt road, only a basketball court reminded one that Unión Progreso belonged to a wider world. Behind scenes, these connections were clear: army helicopters passing overhead, coffee harvested for sale, Zapatista tunes sung around evening fires, and a squad of observers there to try to prevent the kind of military occupation that had taken place only a month before, resulting in much theft and the brutal massacre of five village sons. Deeper signs were found in the people of the village, few of whom were native to it. Our immediate neighbor was not even from Chiapas, but a migrant from another state. The village itself was actually the former labor colony of a now decrepit hacienda; a failed *ejido* and failed co-op. Moreover, few of these basketball playing Zapatistas were any more Indian than the average mestizo Mexican. They epitomized the rural working class, though these folks were luckier perhaps, as they had found places to live and land to till. But they were hardly the wired indigenous peasant ecologists the literature celebrates; Unión Progreso was idyllic but far from utopian.

My experience with Brazil’s peasant movements is more extensive than that with others due to my specialization in this area of study. The literature on the MST is not nearly so vast or multinational as that on the Zapatistas, despite the Brazilian movement’s superior size, scope and sophistication. Only thirty books, most of them written by Brazilians, came up in a varied Internet search. This comparative dearth of studies verses the abundance on Mexico reflects a persistent trend favoring Mexico and placing Brazil in a third tier that has to do with proximity to the United States, language accessibility, and problems of interpretation.

As mentioned above, the MST is primarily—although not exclusively—a movement of landless laborers seeking to become peasants, rather than one of peasants defending their rights. To be more accurate in class terms, the literature describes a movement largely initiated and led by rich and middle peasants seeking to protect their land and production by mobilizing the vast Brazilian underclass into a mass movement in support of family farming (STÉDILE & FERNANDES 1999). This is exactly the sort of analysis Brass appreciates but claims is lacking in contemporary studies. While the MST started this way in the late 1970s, its participatory structure and emphasis on local leadership (FERNANDES 1996 & 2000), popular education (HADDAD 1994; CALDART 1997 & 2000), and direct action has turned it from its neo-populist origins into a self-consciously socialist organization. As the photographer Sebastião Salgado has written, the MST's “ação é toda centrada em uma só preocupação, um só eixo: promover a real e justa divisão de renda no país que tem o sistema de distribuição mais injusto do mundo” (STÉDILE & FERNANDES 1999, BACKCOVER). While it shares some of the Zapatista's “green perspective” (sustainable, organic agricultural development, for example) and feminism (women are cultivated as leaders), it is in no way an indigenous movement or one predicated on the cultural survival of an ethnic group. In these ways, it seems a “modern” social movement rather than a “new” social movement and perhaps as a consequence it has not attracted the attention of international scholars inspired by postmodern thought and hostile to class analysis.

In the literature of the 1990s, the movement is seen as both an outgrowth and response to the pressures of globalization, although the specific term became prominent only toward the end of the decade. For Brazil, as for most of Latin America, the 1980s was “the lost decade” due to a debt crisis that had its origins in global finance and trade. The intense process of land concentration, inflation, and privatization that resulted gave birth to the MST at its 1986 founding convention (Fernandes 1996 & 2000). Economic forces mixed with political ones as Brazil moved from military to civilian regimes during the decade. As analysts reflected back in the 1990s, they saw the MST as offering an alternative development model that harked back to other eras in other societies, such as Jeffersonian America and post-revolutionary Cuba. A few revisionist authors have tried to link the MST to earlier rural rebellions and movements in Brazil, such as the messianic settlement of the 1890s called *Canudos*, in order to show the movement has Brazilian roots (Moura 2000). But by and large an agrarian myth never captured the Brazilian imagination. The MST has wrestled with this by working to uproot negative images of the countryside as the home of Masters and Slaves and implant positive images of family farming and farmers' co-operatives. These images as well as the actual appearance of an increasing number of farming communities (*assentamentos*) associated with the movement, began to offer Brazilians an image of a future in which the nation could reduce unemployment and dependency on food imports and thus increase food and social security. The communities also strengthened participatory democracy in the country by creating a complex structure of local, regional, state, and national governance committees and assemblies controlled by rural workers. These bodies empowered the once marginalized citizens who are the main constituency of the MST through direct action, marches, rallies, education, and collective management. Finally, by distributing profits equally among members of the co-ops, the *assentamentos* fired up local economies (GORGEN & STÉDILE 1991, STÉDILE 1994; WORLEY 2001).

When I wrote this review I had yet to undertake a rigorous study of the MST. Since the late-1980s I have interviewed national, state, regional, and local activists. I have also attended rallies and stayed overnight in *acampamentos*, the tent cities the MST establishes to occupy land, and *assentamentos*, mostly in the state of São Paulo. There is little doubt in my mind that the MST and several parallel movements associated with the rural labor union structure (CONTAG) have empowered landless rural workers and created a peasantry of sorts in Brazil. It is difficult to describe the movement in terms North Americans could

understand because it is almost as if a network of soviets were being established across the country. At the upper level, the MST sponsors scholarly conferences, produces a multi-lingual website, videos, books, and publishes a monthly magazine and newspaper. At the regional level, it runs everything from schools, radio stations, and processing plants to markets, cafeterias, and farms. All of the work and its management is handled by the once landless themselves and you will find soft-spoken but ideologically tough farm men and women taking the lead at every level. In 1996, I met the Pacheco da Silva family at an *acampamento* and I stayed in touch as their children grew with the MST and they finally settled on an *assentamento* called Boa Sorte. The father, Aylton, grew to become a regional leader and was a chief negotiator in the fight for Boa Sorte; his daughter, Janaina, grew to become a member of the state steering committee. But all was not a bed of roses. Into 2001, the Boa Sorte *assentamento* remained undeveloped and a breeding ground of internal conflicts. Factions developed and the Pacheco da Silva family fell out of favor with the majority on the local MST committee. Some of the friction had its roots in disputes over what to do with hundreds of acres of valuable eucalyptus trees; other roots could be found in personality conflicts and divided loyalties. An orthodox Marxist critique might emphasize that individualism is intensified by property-holding but it is not clear to me that the troubles had economic origins (GERALDO 2002).

These examples of contemporary literature on “peasants and globalization” offer a range of approaches, viewpoints, and reflections of diverse experiences. Feder’s expectations for the extinction of Latin American peasants did not anticipate their resilience in the face of globalization. Feder, unlike Brass, thought scholars should study “the urgent problem of *peasant survival* in a world utterly bent on their destruction” (202). The literature of the 1990s reflects this preoccupation. In the very least, scholars have demonstrated a fascination with the ability of peasants to survive and, like Jennie Smith in Haiti, they have documented their means of perseverance. As Brass argues, however, a romanticism runs through the literature. The kind of world Haitian and Chiaptacan peasants are described as fighting for seems to fly in the face of reality, anachronistic at best, impossible at worst. But the world the MST is said to be building in Brazil challenges Brass’s skepticism, and presents a model for the survival of peasants everywhere. Because this literature is written primarily by Brazilians, many of them partisans of the movement and trained in Marxist analysis, it has not entirely fallen into postmodern traps. The Brazilians have few agrarian myths to fantasize about. The crisis of globalization has presented an opportunity to create socialist peasant communities, incomplete though they may be. Terminology may be a problem here since these communities are being built by those Wolf refused to call peasants: landless laborers. On the other hand, through collective action, they have become peasants in his terms: “populations that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the processes of cultivation.” (And most certainly in Kearny’s, a post-colonial paradigm more popular today.) The literature on the MST suggests that peasants can thrive in the globalization era and that their movements can be progressive.

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