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# A Note on the Definition of Peasantries

by

Sidney W. Mintz\*

*More important than an abstract definition of 'the peasantry' is the development of typologies of rural socio-economic groupings. Such typologies should facilitate controlled comparisons between societies whose rural sociology reveals broadly similar structures. They might include the following features: the internal composition of the so-called peasant sector; the relationships of different parts of that sector to other, non-peasant rural groups; the social-relational uses made of traditional cultural forms in rural community life, for handling linkages between different parts of the peasantry and between peasants and non-peasants; and the historical development of the peasant sector.*

A frustrating aspect of the growing vogue for the study of peasant societies has been a persisting lack of consensus among scholars about the definition of the peasantry<sup>1</sup>. In a recent paper, Shanin [1971a] has sought to summarize briefly some of the main intellectual traditions within which the study of peasantries has advanced, and to offer a general definition, based on four principal characteristics of such groups. To this discussion he adds an enumeration of seven (or better, eight) 'analytically marginal groups', such as agricultural labourers, tribesmen, frontier squatters, etc., whom he sees as sharing some of the characteristics of the peasantry, though not all [cf. Wolf, 1955]. Finally, he proposes a list of sources or forms of change—the spread of market relations, professional specialization, etc.—which are intended to help the scholar understand the peasantry as process, rather than as type, and thus to avoid the tendency of typological systems to become static.

Shanin's contribution is a helpful addition to previous attempts at definition and description, among which may be mentioned those of Redfield [1956], Thorner [1962], Foster [1967], Geertz [1962] and particularly Wolf [1955; 1966; 1969]. While he may go too far in attributing anthropology's interest in peasantries to the specter of technological unemployment—the disappearance of 'primitive' societies—Shanin is justified in noting that anthropologists turned to the study of peasantries for the most part *faute de mieux*. It can be added, furthermore, that the invisible ladder of ethnographic prestige continues to rise from the depths of the peasantry to the heights of what one anthropological colleague has

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dubbed 'the uncontaminated McCoy.' Be that as it may, anthropological studies of the peasantry — however we may eventually choose to define peasants—are here to stay, and date from at least as early as Robert Redfield's *Tepoztlán* [1930]. In fact, it is not anthropology, so much as political science and sociology, that have lagged behind in 'discovering' the peasantry, particularly if we have in mind the agricultural sociology of world areas outside the European heartland. Historical, sociological and economic contributions to the study of European peasantries are, of course, of extremely long standing, as Shanin points out. But anthropology's recent role has been useful precisely because its practitioners concerned themselves with what is now fashionably referred to as the Third World, and were perhaps the first to notice that in that world, as in Europe itself, political convulsions did not always originate with either the rulers or the bourgeoisie.

Debates about who peasants are, or how best to define peasantries, like certain other debates in the social sciences—the controversy between 'formalists' and 'substantivists' in the study of primitive economies, for instance—promise to be unending.<sup>2</sup> It would serve no useful purpose to recapitulate again the major differences among definitions of the peasantry. Hence this contribution will concern itself with several aspects only of the definitional problem, as follows:

- 1) the internal composition of the peasant sector, and its significance both for definitions of the peasantry and for further analysis of peasant societies;
- 2) the relationships of the peasantry, or of specifiable sub-groups within the peasantry, to other, non-peasant rural sectors;
- 3) the use of the concepts of 'traditional culture' and 'small community' in defining the peasantry [Shanin, 1971a: 295-296];
- 4) the significance of history for the development of a typology of peasant societies, and more operational definitions of the peasantry.

It will be immediately apparent that a thorough treatment of any of these points would exceed the limits of this paper — not to mention the competence of its author. But some discussion of each of them in turn may clarify the need for middle-range definitions of peasantries and of peasant societies: definitions that fall somewhere between real peasant societies 'on the ground,' so to speak, and the widest-ranging level of definitional statement, adequate to describe all of them. Hence there is no intention here to qualify the genuine need for definition, but to make a step toward bridging the gap between the realities of the daily life of peasant people on the one hand, and the highest level of definitional abstraction on the other. Shanin is right in finding it 'amusing, if not grotesque' [1971: 294] that scholars have so far failed to agree on whether the peasantry exists. But the continuing discussion has certainly illuminated our understanding of the problems of definition and of the complexity of peasant societies — however they may be ultimately defined. The aim here, then, is simply to raise some

general questions about definitional features, employing substantive data, in the hope that a critical response to such questions may reveal issues that still remain relatively unclear.

Shanin appears to follow Wolf in making the 'underdog' position of the peasantry one of the critical diagnostic features of peasant status: 'The political economy of peasant society has been, generally speaking, based on expropriation of its 'surpluses' by powerful outsiders, through corvée, tax, rent, interest and terms of trade' [Shanin, 1971a: 296]. Again, in his discussion of 'peasantry as a process,' he notes that '... [structural] changes in peasantry have been determined (or at least triggered off) by the impact of non-peasant sections of society, a situation which can be explained both by the character of the peasant social structure ... and by the very fact of peasant domination by powerful outsiders' [Shanin, 1971a: 298]. This emphasis is well taken, and represents a step forward from earlier descriptions of the content of peasant society that dealt too little with structural relationships of peasants to nonpeasants. In Wolf's treatment, the central defining characteristic is taken to be the exactions of agricultural productivity by outside forces:

The peasant ... does not operate an enterprise in the economic sense; he runs a household, not a business concern [Wolf, 1966: 2]. ... In primitive society, surpluses are exchanged directly among groups; peasants, however, are rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers [1966: 3-4]. ... A peasantry always exists within a larger system [1966: 8]. ... there exist in more complex societies social relations which are not symmetrical, but are based, in some form, upon the exercise of power. ... Where someone exercises an effective superior power ... over a cultivator, the cultivator must produce a fund of rent. *It is this production of a fund of rent which critically distinguishes the peasant from the primitive cultivator.* ... So far, then, the term 'peasant' denotes no more than an asymmetrical relationship between producers of surplus and controllers [1966: 9-10].

But it is nonetheless insufficient to characterize the peasantry as a 'part society' [Kroeber, 1948: 284], and to describe it in terms of its asymmetrical relationships to external power. The fact is that peasantries nowhere form a homogeneous mass or agglomerate, but are always and everywhere typified themselves by internal differentiation along many lines. Neither Shanin nor Wolf is, of course, unaware of this, and Shanin's full-length study of the Russian peasantry [Shanin, 1972a] and the results of Wolf's early fieldwork in Puerto Rico [Wolf, 1956] make it entirely clear. Peasantries commonly function within systems where certain activities are exchanged for payment in goods, in kind, in labor or in cash; where such exchange may (and often does) involve a status differential, although the activity itself is connected to the land; and where the worker engages in such labor, at least in part, because his own access to land is dependent upon it, or because he has too little land of his own. Those involved in such

relationships may all be justifiably defined as peasants, in some cases; but as in an egalitarian society in which some are more equal than others, there are many peasant societies where some peasants are more 'peasant-like' than others.

No serious attempt to describe or define a peasantry anywhere is likely to be ideally effective without recognition that the very devices that may ensure the viability of the peasant sector as a totality also reveal its limitations in terms of the trajectories of particular groups within that sector. Thus, unless 'the peasants' can be understood in terms of their internal differentiation along economic and other lines, it may appear that they consist entirely of the prey; in fact, some are commonly among the predators. What is more, it cannot be assumed that the more powerful segments of the peasantry are necessarily changing the situation by the use they make of those peasants less powerful than they; often, the thoroughgoing 'peasant' and 'traditional' qualities of the small community or the peasant society depend on just such practices. Part of the difficulty, then, is that in observing how external groups may profit by controlling the peasantry, one may overlook how members of different sectors of the peasantry profit—and, often, remain culturally conservative—by controlling each other. Wolf's study of a 'traditional' coffee-producing municipality in Puerto Rico [*Wolf, 1956*] reveals how poorer peasants must intensify their own and their families' labor input to maintain culturally-defined norms of consumption and behaviour, often selling their labor to wealthier peasants in order to survive. In effect, poor peasants permit themselves to be exploited so that they can remain peasants; and in so doing, they provide viability to the economic adaptations of those peasants richer and more secure than they.

It is also obvious that the particular class compositions of any peasant society will vary in space and time. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the historical formation of peasant sectors and societies, it remains clear that the peasant classes of, say, Haiti will be differentiated internally very differently from those of Burma, or even Mexico. But the obviousness of the assertion should not conceal the need to weigh the extent to which definitions or typologies of peasantries will have to deal with different 'mixes' of peasant classes, or of ethnic groups, in different societies. It will be possible to return to this assertion at a later point, in the hope of further clarification.

While the structural subordination of the peasantry to external forces is an essential aspect of its definition, peasantries always function in conjunctive association with other rural groupings. However total a peasant society may appear to be, its members rarely—if ever—may be said to compose the entire fabric of rural life. Various modes of share-tenure, sharecropping, squatting, etc., all of which both throw light upon, and complicate, the definitional

problem, are typical of peasant societies. But in addition, peasantries commonly live in close association with landless, wage-earning agricultural workers whose economic relations incline us to define them more as rural proletariats than as peasantries [*Mintz, 1951a; 1953*]. The extent to which a rural proletariat justifiably may be segregated analytically from a peasantry will, of course, depend on many enviroing factors. For that part of the world with which the writer is most familiar—the Caribbean region—it is difficult to specify the characteristics of either such 'type' without reference to the other [*Norton and Cumper, 1966*]. Moreover, alternating simultaneous participation of large groups of people in activities associated with each 'type' raises genuine questions about the typology itself [*Handler 1965: 1966; Frucht, 1967*].<sup>3</sup> Thus the question is not one merely of enumerating the different 'types' which make up the rural sector of a society containing peasants, but also of probing the relationships among such groups, so as better to understand what those relationships impart to the specific definition of each 'type.'

In his treatment of the peasantry, Shanin [*1971a*] has erected a classification in which at least seven categories of rural dwellers are classified as 'analytically marginal' — that is to say, their members share some of the basic diagnostic features of the peasantry, but not all [*Shanin, 1971a: 297-298*]. But the term 'analytically marginal' tends to conceal the existence of important structural relationships between the peasant sectors and other non-peasant rural groups. Hence Shanin's orderly presentation, while useful, circumvents the extent to which the peasantry as such achieves or maintains its viability through the existence of these other groups—and vice-versa. To some extent, the problem here parallels that raised by the assertion that peasantries are never homogeneous, and that their internal differentiation plays a critical role in the ways they are (and became, and may remain) peasants. Similarly, the linkages among different sectors of the peasantry and other rural non-peasant sectors affect the strength of the peasantry, its utimate resources and its capacity to reproduce itself culturally and economically. Once again, we face the problem of peasant societies with different 'mixes,' not here in terms of the internal structure of the peasant sector or the relationships of those inside sectors to each other, but rather in terms of the relationship of such sectors to other, non-peasant, rural groupings.

In order further to clarify some of the preceding, it may be useful to examine Shanin's use of the term 'culture,' and his stress upon the small-community way of life as a definitional aspect of the peasantry. The term 'culture' itself raises serious problems; should it be any consolation to students struggling to define the peasantry, let it be remarked that anthropologists have apparently been unable to reach agreement on what culture is, in spite of more time to achieve consensus, and a relevant corpus of literature that would

daunt even the most dedicated reader. Shanin refers often to 'culture,' quoting C. Wright Mills [1962] as his source, as 'the lens . . . through which men see; the medium by which they report what they see' [Shanin, 1971a: 295; 1971b: 18; 1972a: 2, 40, 208]. Such a cognitive view of the concept of culture is indeed helpful; but surely it must go farther than this. If we conceive of culture simply as a way of looking at or perceiving reality, and of the peasantry as a homogeneous and ever-bounded aggregate or group, then the static quality of any typological exercise aimed at defining the peasantry will be marked, no matter how many *post-hoc* provisos about process and change one chooses to add. Surely social and economic differences among those who make up a peasantry cannot be fully reconciled to such a view, because what men see is at least to some degree a function of their stakes within a structure of power, wealth, status and authority. Even identical behaviours cannot be supposed always to represent identical perceptions, or to carry the same symbolic load for those who engage in them. Admittedly, the term 'traditional culture' may include within it a learned and conventionalized understanding, if not necessarily acceptance, of status differences; but it does not follow that those of different status necessarily perceive in the same way, or according to identical values.

The difficulty here, it seems to the writer, is that the view of culture as 'a way of perceiving' ignores or sidesteps the relevance of the sociological position of the perceiver, as well as of the goals of his behavior. Culture and society—or better, the cultural and the social—are in some sense two sides of the same coin. They need not be counterposed, but should be considered different perspectives from which to view the same phenomenon or event. Whether we be discussing a marriage, a husking-bee, the initiation of a ritual kinship relation, or the installation of a village council, each such event—together with all of the minor but patterned behavioral trivia of daily life—has both its cultural and its social aspect. Culture, then, is not only a way of perceiving; it is also an assemblage of historically-derived patterns of behaviour and sets of values, according to which perception occurs.

But communities, like the peasant sector *in toto*, are not homogeneous, and those within them differ in status, wealth and otherwise. It has already been suggested that while peasants are, from one point of view, the underside of a society, from another they include both exploiters and exploited, and cannot be fully understood, if we take for granted that they are economically (and culturally) homogeneous. The social aspect of the peasant sector informs its culture—its historically-derived patterns of behaviour and its sets of values—with the element of manoeuvre, with the means to affect and effect the changing power and economic relationships among individuals, and between sub-classes of the peasantry. Wolf [1959: 142] writes:



By culture I mean the historically developed forms through which the members of a given society relate to each other. By society I mean the element of action, of human manoeuver [*sic*] within the field provided by cultural forms, human manoeuver which aims either at preserving a given balance of life-chances and life risks or at changing it. Most 'cultural' anthropologists have seen cultural forms as so limiting that they have tended to neglect entirely the element of human manoeuver which flows through these forms or around them, presses against their limits or plays several sets of forms against the middle. . . . Dynamic analysis should not omit note of *the different uses to which the form is put by different individuals, or of the ways in which people explore the possibilities of a form, or of the ways in which they circumvent it* [italics added].

So described, the conceptions of 'traditional culture' and of the 'small-community way of life' change character radically. The social-relational (manoeuvring) aspect of behavior makes of 'the traditional' no longer something 'surviving' or 'conserved' from the past, but rather a pattern of and for behavior that remains viable, though its symbolic meanings and its actual utility may have become quite different. And since different members of the peasantry, or of different sub-groups of the peasantry, may be expected to engage in highly variable employment of cultural content to achieve desired goals, the ways such materials are employed is a function of the sociology of those who 'carry' the culture. In peasant societies, 'blind custom' is neither blind nor customary, and the differential distribution of power, wealth and status will affect the uses of patterned behavior, as well as its meanings for those who engage in it.

A brief example may be offered to illustrate the significance of the internal differentiation of the peasantry, the relationships of its different sectors to other non-peasant groups, and the analytical distinction between the 'cultural' and the 'social.' During fieldwork in Puerto Rico, Wolf and the writer discovered that Catholic ritual co-parenthood (*compadrazgo*), a general feature of Latin-American culture, was employed in different ways and to achieve different ends, in different Puerto Rican communities [Mintz and Wolf, 1950; Wolf, 1956; Mintz, 1951a; 1956]. *Compadrazgo* can serve both to bind class equals or to link those of differing status. In the highland peasant community in which Wolf worked, those of lesser wealth and status were often tied by such bonds to others higher in the class system; in the lowland rural proletarian community in which the writer worked, class equals predominantly sought each other out to establish ritual kin. The institution, abstractly conceived, is part of the 'traditional culture,' and is expressed in behavior associated with a 'small-community way of life.' But unless the distinction between the cultural and the social is clearly drawn, the view of a homogeneous group carrying a homogeneous body of conventional understandings will conceal the fluid, dynamic reality of daily life—and the possibilities both for keeping things as they are, and for making them change.

Finally, there may be grounds to comment on the significance of historical events in defining peasantries convincingly. Of all the programmatic assertions in this paper, this last may be the most presumptuous; so perhaps it ought to be dealt with most briefly. To begin with, a call for historicity ought not to be considered anti-typological or anti-generalizing in nature. A description of the past, in the case of some particular peasant society, can presumably allow us to deepen our comparisons, rather than making such comparisons impossible. To seek to incorporate general features within our definition of the peasantries — or rather, of different categories of peasantry—that are derived from history should not erode our capacity to compare, so much as increase the chances that our comparisons are controlled. Granted, as E. H. Carr [1961: 79] has it:

... no two historical events are identical. But insistence on the uniqueness of historical events has the same paralysing effect as the platitude taken over by Moore from Bishop Butler and at one time especially beloved by linguistic philosophers: 'Everything is what it is and not another thing.' Embarked on this course, you soon attain a sort of philosophical *nirvana*, in which nothing that matters can be said about anything.

Shanin takes the opposite course, quoting Weber: '... sociological analysis both abstracts from reality and at the same time helps us to understand it, in that it shows with what degree of approximation a concrete historical phenomenon can be subsumed under one or more of these concepts' [Weber, 1947: 110].

But definitions of the peasantry can be attempted at varying levels of abstraction; and controlled comparisons of process may be easier to make, by virtue of being more specific, if sub-categories of peasant society can be developed to replace the comparison of any peasant society, abstractly defined, with any other. Beyond this obvious assertion, there is the real problem as to which historical features might play a part in erecting such sub-categories. The writer submits that these might well have to do with some of the points suggested earlier: the internal differentiation of the peasantry; the relationships of the peasantry to other non-peasant rural groups; and the employment of social manoeuvre in the conservation or change of cultural patterns by peasant sectors.

It will not be possible in a note of this kind to illustrate these arguments effectively. However, the writer wishes to describe briefly that world area he knows best—the Caribbean region—with an eye toward suggesting why the points already made may lead to the conclusion that we do not need a definition of the peasantry, so much as a complex typology, in which no rural groups will remain 'analytically marginal,' since the existence of each may be related significantly to the existence of all.

The Caribbean region poses some specific conditions for the peasant-definers, since its conquest and settlement by Europe was late, relative to Europe's own history, and very early, relative to the

outside world; before 1492, of course, there can be no quarrel as to whether any peasantry inhabited the region. From 1492 onward, European colonial rulers and their subject masses, both indigenous Amerindians and imported Africans, as well as other Europeans, were involved in relationships of dependence with the imperial powers, particularly the Spaniards, French and English, but also the Danes and Dutch and, for short periods, others as well. As agricultural colonies engaged in the production of staples for metropolitan markets, the post-Columbian societies of the Antilles early exhibited a dichotomy of productive forms. On the one hand, there were those enterprises established through the plantation system, given over particularly to the production of unrefined sugar, rum, indigo, coffee and a few other items. On the other, there existed a variety of arrangements by which those with access to small quantities of land—owned, rented, worked by *métayage*, etc.—produced some part of their subsistence, while also producing one or more items for sale, destined eventually for the same European markets as the plantation products. Examples may be drawn from the past of Caribbean societies, as well as from the contemporary Antillean world. Today's coffee-producing Haitian highlanders, the arrowroot-producers of St. Vincent, the banana-growers of Jamaica, are matched by yesterday's makers of shrub and fustic, and cultivators of cotton and tobacco. All such rural cultivators shared—and share—not only their agrarian mode of livelihood, their involvement in at least some cash-oriented production, their structural subordination within state-organized political systems, and their rootedness in familial productive arrangements, but also their relatively short historical careers.

Unlike the so-called peasantries of so much of the world outside, Haitian, Jamaican and other Antillean small-scale rural producers can look backward only a century or two at the most. There has been a rapid succession of different productive arrangements in most Antillean cases, owing to changes in imperial masters, variations in world market demands, war and reconquest, and new migrations, sometimes occurring during surprisingly short time-spans. With only rare exceptions, it is fair to say that agricultural production in the Caribbean region has always been promoted officially in terms of a plantation system, with capital, technology, market arrangements and all else but land and labor—often, even most of the labor—coming from elsewhere. Hence the kinds of production of interest to us here have usually been peripheral, interstitial, of short term and, at times, illegal. It is for this reason that the writer has written of these adaptations as 'a reaction to the plantation economy, a negative reflex to enslavement, mass production, monocrop dependence, and metropolitan control' [*Mintz*, 1961: 31-34; 1964a: xx]. One only needs to read the chronicle of the Morant Bay 'rebellion' in Jamaica in 1865 [*Hall*, 1959] or of the struggles of the 'rebels' predecessors there

[Sewell, 1861]; of the laws contrived to drive the highland agricultural squatters of Puerto Rico down on to the plantations to work alongside the slaves after 1824 [Mintz, 1951*b*]; or of the losing battle of British Guianese freedmen against plantation power after Emancipation [Adamson, 1972] to understand the crushing power of metropolitan and plantation interests in this region.

In effect, then, the adaptations we may call 'peasant' or 'peasant-like' in the Antilles and their mainland borders were usually born of struggle. Moreover, such adaptations posed serious contradictions for those who pursued them. Caribbean country folk intent upon a style of life free from the plantations have always been already assimilated in certain important ways to some measure of dependence upon the world outside. From the outset, these were peoples whose ways of life were disrupted by migration, enslavement, labor contracts and the like. Rather than 'primitives' whose homelands were conquered from afar, or 'peasants' within archaic imperial states invaded or crushed by European newcomers, Caribbean peoples were always migrants, or the recent descendants of migrants, compelled to design new patterns of life in an alien environment, and usually under rigidly coercive conditions. A peasant-like adaptation outside the plantation system for such people usually involved either a total escape from the system itself—by self-imposed isolation, as in the case of runaway slave communities [Price, 1973] — or else a permanently unbalanced oscillation between plantation or other outside labor and subsistence-producing cultivation, as in the case of many or most non-plantation rural settlements.

It will not be possible to add enough detail to these generalizations concerning the Caribbean region to flesh out adequately the four aspects of the definitional problem referred to earlier. Instead, the writer will refer to two of these aspects only: the relationship of peasant sectors to other, non-peasant rural groupings, and the role of historical analysis in developing a more operational typology. Recent writers, such as Dalton [1972], Franklin [1965; 1969; 1972], Chiñas [1972] and Powell [1971] have been moving in the direction of more elaborate typologies, while Wolf's excellent pioneering treatments [Wolf, 1955; 1966] did much to start scholars thinking about typological problems of this kind. Hence the present sketch is merely supplementary. Wolf writes of Caribbean ' . . . peasants located in a region which once formed a key area of the developing system of capitalism . . . ' where today we find ' . . . peasant holdings as "residual bits" of former large-scale organizations which have disintegrated, as in Haiti or Jamaica' [Wolf, 1955: 467]. The writer has described such groups briefly, with reference both to their history, as in Jamaica [Mintz, 1958] and to their contemporary marketing arrangements, as in Jamaica [Mintz, 1955] and Haiti [Mintz, 1960, 1964*b*]. Dalton [1972: 402-3] speaks of Latin American peasantries as 'hybrid-composite,' referring thus to their

relatively brief histories, but drawing no substantial distinctions among them, other than to refer to the role of slavery and the plantation system in the case of the Antilles.

In an early note [Mintz, 1961], the writer suggested three make-shift categories of Caribbean peasantry: those arising out of early settlement, often by indentured servants who later became small-scale landholders; the 'proto-peasantry' evolving out of slavery; and the runaway settlements of the maroons, who later became free by treaty or after emancipation. Such a tripartite scheme does little to deal with the manifold variety of peasant sectors that emerged—and in some cases, then vanished—in Caribbean history, but it was a first attempt to introduce a classificatory note into a discussion of Antillean peasantries. The point, however, is to see such groups as arising out of prior social and economic arrangements, and fitting with the rise (and decline) of other rural sectors. *The case is clearest, in the Caribbean region, for the linkage of peasant sectors to the rural proletariat, to which reference has already been made.*

In a paper dealing with the rural proletariat and rural proletarian consciousness [Mintz, 1974], the writer uses the term 'concealment' to refer to the ways prevailingly proletarian adaptations may be embedded within what appear to be peasant communities, particularly where kin ties between the landed and the landless, or between the land-rich and the land-poor, affect the quality of economic relationships. Shanin [1972a] has touched upon this problem in his monograph on Russian rural society, 1910-1925; Wolf [1956] deals with it in ethnographic detail, in treating the Puerto Rican community in which he worked. The Puerto Rican case is additionally revealing because one can perceive not only the interdependence of landed and landless, but also the 'balances' the peasant sector achieves *by virtue of* the presence of landless laborers, and land-poor peasants. The definition of the peasant sector ought to take account of agrosocial categories that are composed either of non-peasants, or of peasants who differ significantly from those who employ them. In the Caribbean cases, the 'concealment' referred to above is probably a chronic or invariant characteristic of peasantries, which necessarily contain within them reversible potentialities to become more or less 'peasant-like.' In sum, the activities in which poorer peasants or landless laborers engage within a 'peasant society' in order to survive—which allow them to eke out an existence in ways supplementary to the applications of their own labor and that of their families to the small quantities of land they own, rent, sharecrop, or otherwise have access to—are linked both to the perpetuation of the peasant sector and to its potential transformation into something else.<sup>4</sup>

Wolf's monograph provides a depiction of the internal social differentiation of the countryside, where—at the time of his study (1948-1949)—the *major* landholding unit was the coffee hacienda,

with its resident landless laborers (Shanin's 'peones' [*Shanin, 1971a: 297*]). But Wolf also defines a peasant sector, consisting of those who own thirty *cuerdas* or less (a *cuerda* is slightly less than an acre); those peasants who had less than ten *cuerdas* normally relied upon their own labor and that of their families to work their land, and often sold their labor as well. That such a grouping changes shape over time is made clear by the fact that thirteen of eighteen landless workers in a *barrio* Wolf studied came from landowning families [*Wolf, 1956: 202*]. Equally interesting is the finding in another *barrio* that nine of 29 heads of landowning families came from parents who had been landless [*ibid.*]. The 'peasants' in this community are, hence, a grouping whose destinies are clearly linked to events, both within and outside of the community, over which they have expectably limited control. While working in a Puerto Rican coastal community of rural proletarians at the same time [*Mintz, 1956*], the writer identified a number of cane workers descended from erstwhile peasant families, 'shaken loose' from their peasant adaptations by hurricanes on the one hand, and proletarianized by the expansion of plantation sugarcane production under the North Americans on the other.

It can, of course, be contended that no general definition of 'the peasantry' could be expected to account for the manifold inter-relationships between segments of the peasant group and other rural sectors. This is unarguable, and the writer is not claiming that a general definition can or must do so. On a purely preliminary level, and in terms of major common features such as cash-oriented agricultural production, structural subordination to the state and other external forces, small-community settlement, and a familial basis for economic activity—Antillean peasantries clearly resemble each other and peasantries elsewhere. But each such peasantry—Haitian, Jamaican, etc.—is the product of specific historical events; each functions within state systems that are different in character, and in the sorts of pressures they impose upon rural citizens; each faces a markedly different future.

Definitions and typologies marked by both parsimony and adequacy are required to facilitate controlled comparisons of peasantries in time and space. Such comparisons cannot ignore local differences; only by the examination of such differences will it be possible both to refine the classifications and to analyze regularities of relationship among the definitional features. But those regularities can profitably embrace the issue of how peasant sectors fit within societies, substantial parts of which are *not* made up of peasants, to give rise to a typology promising both greater breadth and greater specificity. Antillean societies composed in part of peasantries appear to form a class or sub-class, largely because their peasantries are *reconstituted* out of earlier economic forms, in the relatively recent past [*Mintz, 1958*], and because such peasantries have always remained in some kind

of fluid equilibrium with other rural sectors. In this instance, one might go further: the peasant sector and the plantation or hacienda sectors are not only coexistent, but also and in important ways both interdependent and conflictful [Mintz, 1967].<sup>5</sup> Though the contest has always been an unequal one, these different modes of agricultural organization may compete for land, capital and, commonly and most of all, labor. In a general way, of course, this is doubtless true of many other regions and societies. The question, however, is whether it is true of all so-called peasant societies, or whether it might be possible to examine, in a much more systematic way, the kind and degree of this competition in different sub-classes of the peasantry.

We have examined one region only, for no better reason than that it is the one with which the writer has some familiarity. Moreover, no attempt has been made here to marshal data other than very sketchily, given the intent of this note. An expansion of the implications of high-level definitional statements, so as to take account of the internal composition of peasant sectors, their relationships to other rural groups,<sup>6</sup> the social-relationship variability in the use of 'traditional culture,' and the role of history in the rise and fall of the peasantry, may be the necessary next step.

### NOTES

- 1 Among recent contributions to this debate may be mentioned Dalton [1972] accompanied in one of its published forms by a number of criticisms, particularly Wolf [1972], Chiñas [1972], and Landsberger [1970].
- 2 Though this controversy is largely extraneous to the present discussion, it is relevant insofar as definitional and structural distinctions between peasantries and 'primitive' peoples have concerned students of peasant societies. The debate has a long history. Recent contributions of particular importance include Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson [1957], and especially Pearson [1957]; Harris [1959]; LeClair and Schneider [1968]; Dalton [1972]; Nash [1966]; and Sahlins [1972].
- 3 Several problems are connected with this assertion. Some have to do with the heuristic value of definitional statements and of typologies generally, in the social sciences. Others have to do with the relationship between characterizations of the economic structures of communities and societies, the reality of descriptions of classes, and the place of the anthropological conception of culture in a materialist approach to the study of behavior. Frucht's paper [1967] illustrates some of these problems. He argues that the Nevisian rural folk he studied fall neither in a 'peasant' nor a 'proletarian' category because the means of production are 'peasant-like,' while the relations of production are proletarian, and distinguishes two share-cropping groups, labelled 'share-tenant' and 'share-wage,' to illustrate his thesis. The difficulty with his formulation, as I understand it, is that these groups differ quite dramatically from each other, and a comparison of their attributes reveals a picture somewhat at variance with Frucht's conclusions. The 'share-wage' group consists of tenants, who own neither their land nor their tools, hire no labor, farm their plots with family labor, and are otherwise definable as agricultural laborers. The 'share-rent' group is similarly landless, but its members own their own tools, hire labor, apparently do not use family labor, and are defined by Frucht himself as 'Special People'—an upper lower class composed of millhands, carters, overseers, mechanics

and other skilled and semi-skilled individuals able to accumulate cash wages. The share-wage relationship was never engaged in by this type, but always by households of agricultural labourers' [Frucht, 1967: 297-8]. Frucht's paper helpfully clarifies the complexity of productive relationships in a Caribbean rural setting, but it does not, it seems to me, in any way challenge the distinction between peasant and proletarian adaptations. I would contend that neither group consists of peasants, while the Special People are only questionably describable as proletarians, given their managerial role in the use of the land of others. Frucht is certainly justified, however, in raising questions about gross typological categories. My treatment of the problem in this note is largely owing to the ideas of Sr. Eduardo Archetti, who clarified my thinking on this score in a number of very useful conversations.

- 4 Accordingly, of course, the rural proletariat in such societies is not a residual category, nor are all those who do not engage full time in the cultivation of their own land rural proletarians.
- 5 Shanin might contend that Antillean peasantries properly belong in his residual category of 'analytically marginal groups of peasantry,' specifically sub-categories 1 (agricultural labourers); 3 (frontier squatters, including the inhabitants of so-called 'agro-towns'); and 6 (peasant-workers). As I see it, the difficulty with a proliferation of such categories is that different rural populations in the same society stand in particular relationships to each other, and that the characteristics of any such population are determined in some substantial measure by their structural linkages to other such groups. Even Haiti, which might best wear the label of 'peasant society' in the Antillean region, is in no sense homogeneous, and contains rural proletarians and other groups in dynamic balance with the various peasant classes.
- 6 An early attempt to work typologically in this sphere is represented by Powell [1971]. Since completing the present paper, the author has come upon Powell [1972] (with critical responses from Moore [1972] and Shanin [1972b], as well as upon interesting and relevant contributions by Post [1972] and Snowden [1972].

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