

Introduction

Peasants in the Neoliberal Age, Theories and Research Questions

Family-based farming has been gaining global attention. The United Nations (UN) proclaimed 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming to recognize family farms' critical role in enhancing food security and later developed a platform that identified the urgent actions required by governments to support especially small farmers. In addition, new research continues to reconfirm small farming's significant contribution to fighting hunger and starvation: five of six farms worldwide are small family farms of less than two hectares, producing one-third (33 percent) of the world's food.¹ Unfortunately, however, neoliberal economics is upending family-based peasant economies. The latest plight of peasants in India opposing the removal of state subsidies and new laws favoring agribusiness is a good example.² Thousands have taken to the streets, bringing their grievances to New Delhi and the international community, demonstrating a fault line accentuated by ending the state-supported model of the 1960s Green Revolution.³

What is the status of small, peasant family farming in the Colombian context? How do Colombia's small farmers, that is, subsistence peasants, Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, compare to their counterparts elsewhere in the world? At a glance, we see that Colombia mirrors the global scenario: 32 percent of its fifty million people live and depend on the rural economy.⁴ But, most significantly, it is estimated that the family peasant economy produces more than 51 percent of the food in Colombia.⁵ So they are equally successful, but their challenges run deeper and are quite formidable. This research describes the Colombian peasants' reality, their

success in farming while in constant resistance and mobilization to claim their rights and fight the state's economic policies, large landowners' violence, forced displacement, and land grabbing. It focuses on three specific questions: (1) How did the Colombian peasants survive under adverse conditions? (2) What are the sources of their resilience and adaptability in the face of the onslaught of neoliberal war rentierism? (3) What distinguishes the responses and strategies employed by the Indigenous groups, Afro-descendants, and the peasant reserves in dealing with the state and managing the threats they face.

This research analyzes the processes and mechanisms of the subsistence peasant economy practiced in the peasant reserves, Indigenous *resguardos*, and the communal councils of Afro-Colombia. The analysis explores two factors that explain peasant groups' ability to survive and might determine their future: one is the capacity to adapt to the changing mechanisms and dynamics of capital subsumption of the neoliberal rentier economy, and two, the degree of success in resisting the increased encroachment on their lands, livelihood, and way of life. Subsumption occurs when rentier capitalists and agribusiness resort to grabbing land and hiring labor from peasant communities without totally dismantling their economy. The book presents the historical, socioeconomic, political, and security conditions experienced by the three peasant communities. It examines their adaptability strategies and resistance to subsumption processes and the prospects for the sustainability of their modes of production, culture, and livelihood. In addition, it explores the communities' level of agency that has allowed them to respond to the encroachments of rentier economy by devising adapting strategies and building collaborative networks, forging new partners at the national, regional, and global levels. This analysis is essential since the process of capitalist subsumption not only threatens a mode of production, given the massive environmental degradation associated with it, but also threatens the sources of life security: food, water, and land.

A key aspect of this study is recasting the political economy of the twenty-first-century peasantry as a function of the peasants' expanding capacity to resist subsumption literally under the guns of war rentierism. It focuses on seven case studies: two peasant reserves (Cimitarra and Pato-Balsillas), three Indigenous *resguardos* (in Meta and Cauca), and two Afro-Colombian communal councils in Cauca. Though limited, the research sheds light on the dynamics of the broader peasants' struggle against war rentierism waged to grab their communal lands. The area

at risk represents about 26.8 percent of the country's rural territory that the state has distributed to the Indigenous reservations, African Colombian descendants' communal councils, and peasant reserves. Currently, the Indigenous population holds 23 percent of the 26.8 percent, the Afro-descendants 3 percent, and the peasant reserves have 0.8 percent.⁶ Depending on their location and mining potential, these are strategic areas in high demand by various local and international actors. At the heart of this research is the impact of the aggressive pursuit of these lands by the different actors seeking to secure concessions for mining (gold, coltan, coal, among others), oil extraction, agribusiness, and speculation. For example, the "solicited" mining concession spiked to 59 percent of the country's 114 million hectares between 2000 and 2010.⁷ At the end of 2012, 9,400 mining titles were granted that covered 5.13 million hectares, almost the size of the country's area dedicated to agriculture.

Review of Relevant Theories on Peasantry and Peasant Economy

This study's conceptual framework draws upon three main theories that address capitalist subsumption, development, and the peasant economy: (1) the Marxist tradition, (2) the modernization approach, and (3) hybrid theories that draw on these two. These are elaborated on in the following sections of this chapter.

This section has four subsections. The first presents a brief panoramic critical analysis of some vital aspects of the peasant studies literature relevant to this book's purpose. The second subsection discusses the long-lasting effects of the "modernization theory," which underpinned the foreign policy of the United States and its Agency for International Development (AID) alongside the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for several decades. This approach has contributed to severe economic distortions in the Global South countries, including Colombia. The third subsection sheds light on Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg's theoretical contributions, and others pertinent to this book's conceptual edifice. The fourth subsection analyzes the transformations of the peasant economy resulting from the introduction of capitalism and market economics in postsocialist Poland. This subsection's relevance stems from the argument of the prominent sociologist Halmaska. Her theory intersects with Bernstein and his "vanishing peasant" thesis. Yet,

she presents an empirical case showing that today's peasants in Poland are not "entrepreneurs," nor are they succumbing or subsumed to the logic of the capitalist market, which is an argument most instructive to the cases explored in the coming chapters.

PEASANT STUDIES LITERATURE

This book builds upon the contributions of various traditions, including the different stripes in peasant studies such as (Ploeg 2018; Bryceson et al. 2000; Scott 1998, 1985, 2020; Shanin 1990; Popkin 1979; Bernstein and Byre 2001; Wolf 1966; Wolf 1969) to name just a few.⁸ The contributions of peasant studies are impressive and helped answer core questions about the development of rural economies in the Global South. Yet, there are many more to address, precipitated by the changing global political economy and its interplay with local peasants' responses to the change, thereby emphasizing the agency of resistance and adaptability.

Shanin (1971; 1984)⁹ identified four attributes distinguishing peasants from other social classes or groups: (1) the peasant family farm, which constitutes the primary unit of social organization, production, and consumption; (2) land cultivation as their means of livelihood; (3) specific cultural norms stemming from their lifestyle in small communities and villages; and (4) peasants' resistance to outside domination or subordination.¹⁰ Shanin's peasants' attributes need amendments in light of this study's findings. Peasant economies depend on multiple sources of income to sustain their existence. Therefore, they do not only depend on land cultivation. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate that the peasants are much more than that, and their economies are more diverse, so they depend on producing their food to subsist. They also engage the capitalist market by selling products such as milk, cheese, wood, meat, and coca.

Scott shifted his attention to the norms and values underplaying the economic factors. Scott's (1976) book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* drew on Chayanov's thesis that norms, values, and traditions carry more weight than economic considerations in the peasant communities' decision making and relations with the market.¹¹ In his study of lower Myanmar (former Burma) and Vietnam, he concluded that peasants' fear of "food shortages" undercut any drive for innovation alongside an aversion to taking economic risks due to their precarious food security. Scott defined "moral economy" as the peasants' notion of economic justice and exploitation. In contrast with Scott's moral argument, Popkin posited that

peasants are rational economic actors following a profit-driven logic. In *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, he argued that what is rational for the individual may not be rational for the community or village. As Meillassoux (1972) put it, “both Scott and Popkin drew different conclusions from their studies of Southeast Asia’s rural societies.”¹² Meillassoux continued that Scott claimed that peasants used violence and rebellion against capitalism that threatened their moral system. In contrast, Popkin thought that rebellion occurs when peasants solve their collective action problem since their motivation is individual self-interest.¹³

Popkin embraced the economists’ rational choice model in which collective group behavior is the sum total of rational individual preferences, interests, and choices.¹⁴ In my early study of Colombia’s civil war, I argued that the peasants in Colombia, since the 1920s, have established defense leagues to protect their lands and way of life against the state and the landowners. The tipping point came in 1964 when they were dislodged from core areas in Tolima and Meta, forcing them to form a guerrilla movement.¹⁵ My findings do not support Scott’s thesis that peasants rebel when their “moral system” is threatened. Instead, peasants rebelled when their source of livelihood, upon which their moral system was based, was threatened; in this case, it was land.¹⁶ This finding is in tune with Popkin’s argument. However, Scott’s argument that the invisible hands of the markets constitute a security threat to the peasants’ subsistence economy is more in tune with this book’s findings, with one caveat.¹⁷ The Colombia case represents a peculiar one in which the peasant population faces the “invisible hand of the local-international market nexus” and the “visible violent hands” exercised by violent actors working at the behest of local and foreign capital. Since the 1950s, those violent actors, including state agents and paramilitaries, had committed most of the massacres, forceful displacement, land grabbing, intimidation, and other illegal methods complementing the working of the “market’s invisible hands.” Today, the interplay between those two characterizes several rural areas of Colombia, such as Cauca, Choco, North Santander, Narino, and Caqueta.

Henry Bernstein (1979) argued that simple commodity production designates a form of production, the logic of which is subsistence in the broad sense of the simple reproduction of the household and the unit of production (the household).¹⁸ What distinguishes the simple mode of production from the capitalist one is its logic of subsistence as opposed to appropriation, accumulation of capital, and realization of surplus value.

Bernstein claimed that the peasants in the subsistence economy are not a proletariat because they retain some control over the production process (land, tools, and other means of production) and are not subject to a rigid division of labor like workers in a factory. Nonetheless, he stressed, peasants are “wage-labor equivalents” producing surplus value for the capitalist. Years later, Bernstein (2003,4), tackling the peasant mode of production, contended that the actors in this mode are both “capitalist and workers” at the same time because they own or command their means of production and employ their labor. He concluded that peasants become commodity producers when they cannot reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production.¹⁹ In this manner, Bernstein thought that such an outcome of peasants becoming entrepreneurs brings their end.

Bernstein (2016) did not change his “vanishing peasant” thesis in the current global capitalist system. Instead, he insisted on his posture by lashing out at the second and third wave of peasant studies focused on the food regime and the “return of the peasant way,” or the “peasant turn.” He argued that the most salient thrust of the criticism of “the peasant turn” is not to condemn it for utopianism but rather how it short-circuits the analytical and empirical demands of advancing knowledge of the moment of world capitalism we inhabit.²⁰ The jury is still out in assessing both the historical significance of the “peasant turn” and Bernstein’s analysis of it within the context of global capitalism’s contradictions, anomalies, and complexities. In my view, a two-pronged interlinked approach is needed, one from the Global South drawing on contemporary rural societies and the other focusing on the changes of capital and the accumulation processes.

This book challenges Bernstein’s contention by presenting empirical evidence showing that the subsistence peasant economy in Colombia remains family-based and is noncapitalist. Such a finding is consistent with Ploeg (2018, 9), who argued that one of the distinctive features of peasant agriculture is the organic unity of the means of production and the labor force. In other words, those who toil on the land own the means of production. Furthermore, wage labor is absent or plays a minor role during seasons; class exploitation and accumulation are not part of this economy.

Other essential strands in the peasant literature are relevant to this book’s conceptual framework, which is a genre that tackled the bias in modernization theory embraced for several decades by USAID, the World Bank, IMF, and U.S. foreign policy. The importance of this critical genre is questioning the premise of these theories and their grave implications on

the Global South. Chapter 1 of this book illustrates the far-reaching consequences of modernization theories on Colombia's skewed and violent path.

Polanyi's seminal book *The Great Transformation* (1957) revived the discussion on understanding peasant economies in developing countries. Following Chayanov's findings in his Russian study, Polanyi confirms that peasant economies were based on subsistence logic. He, therefore, questioned the "universal rational choice utility theories" of the resource allocations and exchange of capitalism. In the same vein of critical analysis, Banerjee and Duflo observed that in many developing countries, "a part of the land (for example, the forest abutting the village) is always held as common property. As long as the land is used sparingly, it provides a resource of last resort for those villagers whose own economic plans have hit some headwinds; foraging in the forest or selling grass cut from the common land helps them survive. The intrusion of "private property into these settings, generally inspired by liberal and neoliberal economists who do not understand the logic of the context (and love private property), has been a disaster."²¹ Banerjee and Duflo based their stance on empirical evidence from the Global South showing the disappointing results of the modernization drive and its corollary, the "Washington Consensus" developed in the 1980s, which rested on the sanctity of privatization and securing private property as the springboard for development while overlooking socioeconomic inequalities.²² Banerjee and Duflo's critical stance vis-à-vis mainstream economic capitalist theory that idealized private property negates the possibility of development without it. The primary stream current assumes that these formations are backward remnants of precapitalism, or, at best primitive capitalism, which will disappear. On the contrary, as the opening paragraphs showed, family-based farmers offer much more resilience than the dominant economist thought.

McNetting (1993) brings the dimension of ecosystems. He argues that subsistence and common properties economies depend for their survival on an equilibrium similar to a "biological ecosystem" whose stability and reproduction depends on the balance between equality and hierarchy.²³ In light of Colombia's experience, it is possible to redefine this ecosystem: its balance can be disturbed or distorted when outside powers (state, multinational corporations, violent entrepreneurs, narcotraffickers, and/or global market pressures) exacerbate the tension between actors in the hierarchy, producing more inequality. This, in turn, poses a threat to the boundaries between common properties and private ones, between capitalist modes and noncapitalist ones by having the former subsume the latter.

McNetting raised a point relevant to this research: government interventions that institutionalize state or public land contribute directly to inequality and permanently prevent the more equitable outcomes of local communal control. To the degree that exclusion impoverishes community members and limits their legitimate role in decision making, it is a true “tragedy of the commoners.” That is, the people living in communal lands in noncapitalist relations.²⁴ Similarly, Kerrou (2021) and Tahri (2022) discussed the case of Jemna, Tunisia in which local peasants reclaimed their usurped farm of palm trees from two private operators in 2011, a few days before the fall of the Zein El Abedin autocratic regime, transforming the harvest of dates to the benefit of the community.²⁵ The local community and their Association for the Protection of Jemna’s Oases (APJO) gained control of 185 hectares of public land. This example is spreading, it is estimated that sixty thousand hectares are being reclaimed by communities in different rural areas of Tunisia.²⁶ My book draws on these cases, focusing on the fault line between the communal drive for autonomy and the state’s policies introduced in Colombia between the 1950s and 2021 that bear on the internal balance dynamics between “hierarchy and equality” within peasant reserves, subsistence peasant economies, and the communal mode of the Indigenous and Afro-descendants. I examine the internal dynamics within these modes and the viability of their chances to subsist.

Finally, Karatani (2014) and Samir Amin (2011) discuss the dismantling of communal land and other forms of property in developing countries due to capital accumulation, expansion, and the crisis of overaccumulation. Karatani contends that the commodification of land and labor is interlinked. Land privatization leads to the dissolution of the agrarian community and the destruction of the environment, whose preservation was predicated on the functioning of that community (Karatani 2014, 198). Samir Amin (2011) adds that the continuous dismantling of the peasant economy has led to increasing pauperization and proletarianization, shantytowns, and misery belts in most major cities such as Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, Medellin, Bogotá, Calcutta, Nairobi, and Cairo, to name a few, which are outcomes of the same process of dispossession, displacement, and marginalization. Finance-monopoly capital and imperialist rent shape the contours and tempo of this process through foreign direct investments and multinational corporations. Both Karatani and Amin analyzed the driving force behind capital encroaching on the rural frontiers of the Global South, an invaluable approach to framing the context. However, neither addressed

what keeps subsistence peasant and communal economies surviving in the twenty-first century, a topic explored in this book.

THE MODERNIZATION THEORIES: PEASANTS AND THE POST-WORLD WAR II LITERATURE

The modernization paradigm championed by Walt Rostow theorized a unilinear five-stage process of development: traditional peasant societies, transitional pre-takeoff, takeoff, and industrialization, drive to maturity, and finally, high mass consumption. This model proved to be a fallacy that never materialized in developing nations.²⁷ Nonetheless, his modernization myth became dominant within mainstream political science and development studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Even when Rostow's influence weakened, his views on the private sector continued to influence models that promoted solid market-friendly states and public-private partnerships, fomenting capitalist development. Rostow's ideas shaped John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, which promoted agricultural capitalism in Latin America's rural areas to spearhead development to avert the spread of Cuban-like revolutions. His ideas continue to shape the neoliberal economic policies of the World Bank and IMF until today. However, the modernization paradigm's hegemonic dominance has been challenged by several waves of new studies and theories that have questioned the unilinear assumption of development considering its uncertainties and the complexities of the cases. The effects of the modernization paradigm in Colombia were far-reaching. They were articulated by World Bank experts such as Lauchlin Currie, who in 1959 led an economic mission to help the Colombian government formulate a policy toward its rural sector, which proved disastrous. The effects of this policy are discussed in the following chapter. But here, suffice to mention that Currie also played a critical role in laying the foundation of neoliberalism and war rentierism that undermined the peasant economy and food security.

The challengers of Rostow's modernization unilinear thesis did not wait long to respond. I discuss some of these responses related to the theoretical questions explored in this book. For example, Wolf (1966; 1984)²⁸ shifted the focus of analysis to the microlevel, dispelling the premises of the modernization theory that ignored the perils of peasants suffering from underdevelopment and dependency. He recognized the subsistence peasants as a social class who produce for their own con-

sumption and whose retreat to subsistence production is threatened by capitalist encroachment. Furthermore, he identified family and kinship ties as providing an important support system that helps peasants absorb shocks of dislocation. As presented in the following chapters of this book, my research findings support Wolf's argument, particularly the behavior exhibited by the peasants in the reserves I studied alongside the Indigenous *resguardos* and Afro-Colombian community council. These three noncapitalist formations are chiefly subsistence family-based economies, yet they did not retreat but were proactive in their strategy for resisting the encroachments of war rentierism.

Moreover, the peasantry depended on monoculture cash crops such as coca, logging, and African palm oil. In other words, the peasantry reinvented their class. This type of change poses a challenge to some of the theories discussed in this chapter.

MARXIST THEORY OF THE PEASANTRY

The Marxist tradition is the second strand in the literature on which the conceptual framework draws. I found the concept of subsumption (actual and formal) elaborated by Karl Marx (*Capital*, Vol. 1, 1861) helpful 160 years later. Formal subsumption denotes a historical dialectical process where capital subjugates (i.e., subsumes) noncapitalist formations as its expansion necessitates more labor to exploit in order to accumulate surplus value. Marx may have not expected that noncapitalist peasant economies survive that long nor that capitalism in the Global South could be as deformed and heterogeneous as it has become. However, Marx's historical materialist dialectical method rejected unilinear developmentalism and Eurocentricity in his analysis of indigenous populations in the Americas, Africa, and Asia especially after the late 1850s when he became familiar with these international experiences.²⁹

Rosa Luxemburg (1913) elaborated on Marx's concept of subsumption in her attempt to shed light on the workings of colonialism and imperialism as systems of domination, making capitalism a world system. Luxemburg's seminal book *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) discussed the significance of primitive accumulation in capital expansion. She wrote: "non-capitalist organizations provide a fertile soil for capitalism; more strictly: capital feeds on the ruins of such organizations, and although this non-capitalist milieu is indispensable for accumulation, the latter proceeds at the cost of this medium nevertheless, by eating it up."³⁰ She

added, “Historically, the accumulation of capital is a kind of metabolism between capitalist economy and those non-capitalist methods of production without which it cannot go on and which, in this light, it corrodes and assimilates.”³¹ She concludes: “Thus capital cannot accumulate without the aid of non-capitalist organizations, nor, on the other hand, can it tolerate their continued existence side by side with itself.”³² Luxemburg defined the relationship between capital and non-capitalist modes of production and their dialectical relationship. She stated that capital could not accumulate without non-capitalist modes because it provides a strategic depth for its expansion and the creation of new markets, leading to the gradual dissolution of non-capitalist relations. More important is her analysis of the relationship between imperialism and militarism. She defined imperialism as the political expression of capital accumulation in its competitive struggle for what remains of the non-capitalist areas.³³ She argued that militarism fulfills a decisive function in the history of capital, accompanying every phase of capital accumulation. It played a crucial role in the first stages of European capitalism, in the period of so-called primitive accumulation, as a means of conquering the New World and the spice-producing countries of India.³⁴ Luxemburg’s theory of the importance of noncapitalist relations to the expansion of capitalism constitutes a principal theoretical pillar for this book. It provides a way to contextualize Colombia’s integration of noncapitalist economic structures into the process of subsumption of capitalism that has been taking place since the conquest that brought mercantilism and slavery as modes of extracting surplus value. The present war rentier-capital modality extended this labor exploitation, affecting land and the environment.

A recent (2017) book by Harootunian revisited Marx’s conceptualization of formal and real subsumption and the difference between the two by studying Japan’s historical experience.³⁵ In Japan, old work associations and Shinto beliefs survived well into the Meiji period and beyond. It is reasonable to think that this kind of description might apply to other colonized and semicolonized countries where formal subsumption of capital absorbs/or subordinates noncapitalist forms to the logic of capital accumulation and surplus value based on wage labor. A formal subsumption is a form that marked the moment capitalism encountered older economic practices. In the first edition of *Capital*, Marx further explained the incompleteness of development throughout Western Europe as reflected in the passive survival of archaic and outmoded modes of production. In India, formal subsumption started in a noncapitalist mode

of production in which usury played an important role. The Indian lender gives money to the peasant for cotton-growing expenses and charges 40 to 50 percent per year in interest on the debt. In this relationship, the peasant remains a self-sufficient, independent producer who is not yet subsumed by wage labor nor dispossessed of the means of production and reproduction: land. But the usurer still appropriates the surplus labor and the surplus value that this family-based labor creates. This example dated to the late nineteenth century when India formed part of the colonial system and its main product, cotton, became tied to England's colonial imperial industrializing machine.

In formal subsumption in the peripheral areas of the global economy, past practices are subordinated to capitalist domination in a hybrid system; for example, Uno Kozo (cited in Harootunian [2017, 72]) recorded the persistence of feudal mentality and customs in capitalist Japan.³⁶ Jose Carlos Mariategui noted the Incas' land arrangements and practices in Peru that the peasants adopted in the 1920s.³⁷ The implications of having those mixes of old and current economic systems within an overarching capitalist mode are complex and multidimensional. They reveal how formal subsumption incorporates the old modes, which neither eliminates contradictions and asymmetries nor produces homogeneity. It is a continuous dialectical process. The core element in this analysis inspired by Marx's conceptualization allows us to better understand contemporary societies in the Global South with all the residues of their distant past embedded both in their present and way into their future. After laying out the broad contours of the conceptual framework, the interplay between its two main pillars, subsumption and agency, is central to the book's analysis. Finally, I will discuss other contributions that helped construct the different concepts that the framework draws on.

Two authors stand out whose contributions to peasant studies are relevant to this book framework. Kautsky described the dissolution of peasant production as a slow process whereby peasant petty commodity producers co-exist with agrarian and urban-industrial capitalism, gradually shrinking over time under the force of urban migration and the introduction of mechanized agriculture. In this process, subsistence peasants are transformed into wage laborers. In *The Agrarian Question* (1899), Kautsky wrote: "Despite conclusive evidence of inherent superiority of large farms, we also must explain the existence and sometimes proliferation of small farms beyond Germany, including those in England and France. Even bourgeois economists from Adam Smith and Sismondi

have expressed their approval of small farms over existing latifundium where tenant farmers precariously lived under duress. In England, small farms did not decline; in Germany, mid-size farms increased; in France, small farms proliferated from 1840 to 1890. The number of large farms increased only in the USA, which had a different history. These contradictory statistics indeed suggest there is no necessary link between the size of the farm and capitalist relations in agriculture. They indeed call for the need for further research. We must understand that even in industry, there is no linear decline or demise of small enterprises. There are always pockets where small enterprises survive, taking advantage of their survival abilities.³⁸ Kautsky's insights are helpful for this book in two key areas: they dismiss the notion of capitalist development as a linear process and shed light on the agency of the small commodity producers and people engaged in non-capitalist modes and in their abilities to survive. The focus of this study is the ability of these social groups involved in the subsistence peasant economy to adapt and resist capitalist subsumption.

Chayanov, an agronomist, made a significant contribution in his meticulous study of the Russian countryside, which he based on decades of detailed rural survey data.³⁹ He concluded that the peasant economy's driving force was not profit but satisfying their subsistence needs.⁴⁰ Central to Chayanov's theory is the precept of balance between labor and consumption, whereby the labor time of small peasant producers is based on the calculus of satisfying their basic needs of food, shelter, and improvement in living conditions.⁴¹ The rational calculation of poor peasants aims to balance their labor time for sustenance with surplus to improve their living conditions but not accumulation.⁴² The cases explored in this book approximate Chayanov's description of petty commodity production (subsistence peasant economy based on family labor).

Bartra's (1975),⁴³ Taussig's (1978), and Mariategui's (2011) studies of cases in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru respectively drew on Kautsky, Chayanov, and Lenin's studies of the relationship between capitalist farming and the peasants' economies and the survival of this latter in Latin America. For example, Bartra's Mexico study conclusions were similar to Lenin's as presented in his book *Capitalism in Russia*, which argues that the survival of the peasantry in any capitalist society is not due to the "technical efficient superiority" of the peasant's subsistence economy, but is because peasants reduce their livelihood requirements far below wage workers and tax their energies more than this latter.⁴⁴ Therefore, according to the analyses of Lenin, Kautsky, and Bartra, the peasant economy sur-

vived despite its inefficiency compared to capitalist agribusiness because of the extreme sacrifice peasants incur.

Taussig (1978), in contrast with Bartra, Lenin, and Kautsky's, in his empirical study of Colombia argued that the three mentioned authors did not base their comparative studies on empirical cases where capitalist farming and peasant economies coexisted in one space and area. That is, their studies were not comparatively designed to measure efficiency. Contrary to modernization and traditional Marxist theory arguments, Taussig discovered in southern Cauca Valley that small peasant production is more efficient than capitalist agribusiness in several core areas if it was not only attributed to land monopoly.⁴⁵ He contended that big agribusiness exercising control over land accomplished two interrelated objectives. One exerts economic and political pressure to appropriate more land, thus reducing land available to the peasants' farms below the minimum level required to sustain their families' food needs and reproduce their mode. The second related objective was to create a surplus rural wage-labor force for peasants who needed to sell their labor to sustain their livelihoods. Therefore, the subsistence peasant economy can reproduce itself if the land lots are protected from further declines in size.

According to Taussig, this condition was exhibited since the beginning of 1900 in Cauca, which used the impetus of U.S. capital incentivized by the construction of railway and the prospects of the Panama Canal linking this region with the global economy.⁴⁶ Such opening up to foreign markets led to the forcible appropriation of peasant lands to expand their agribusiness, forcing peasants to become wage laborers and semiproletarians whose subsistence depended partly on their plots and the wages needed to sustain their farms.⁴⁷ For their part, agribusiness, by employing these quasi-proletarianized peasants, can extract higher rates of surplus value than would be possible if the costs of the maintenance and reproduction of the labor force had to be covered by the capitalist production alone. That is to say, the subsistence peasant economy subsidizes the creation of surplus value by reducing the costs of their own reproduction and maintenance as a quasi-proletarianized peasant force. Taussig's description captured an essential feature of the Global South-dependent capitalist development in which a rural semiproletarianized peasant and an urban informalized labor force keep wages down, enhancing capital accumulation by helping in the extraction of more surplus value. Such a contradictory and "mutually beneficial" relationship in which the subsistence/quasi-proletarianized labor in rural and urban-periphery (shantytowns) areas suppresses wages

to the level of surviving with the bare minimum. Such a description captures the underlying forces driving the historical dialectical processes of subsumption that have been taking place in Colombia and many parts of the Global South.

Taussig's insightful analysis did not consider the role of agency. Peasants' agency in organizing, coordinating activities, strategizing, and resisting—as the agencies of the CEOs of capital—helped them dodge the bullet and survive. Therefore, subsumption as a historical process is mediated by agency, which explains that peasant economies and noncapitalist formation remained a feature of the current international political economy. Agency is highlighted in this research, complementing some of the main arguments of the reviewed authors. The following section on the peasants of Poland sheds light on the experience of the subsistence peasant economy from which some insights can be drawn that are relevant to this book's purpose.

Taussig's findings and observations coincided with Mariategui's study of Peru's rural economy. Mariategui (2011), writing on Peru's rural productivity in the early decades of the twentieth century, found that large landholdings compared unfavorably with community productivity. The production of highland estates was generally the same as that of communities, and, more critically, production figures were no different.⁴⁸ In support of his argument, he summarized statistical data presented by Castro Pozo on the 1917–18 wheat harvest, which averaged between 450 and 580 kilos per hectare for communal and privately owned enterprises, respectively.⁴⁹ This was despite the fact that—as was the case in Colombia—large landowners occupied better, more fertile lands. Such occupation of the best lands in Peru was a violent process of dispossession punctuated by massacres against the Indigenous people. Mariategui, like more recent scholars such as De La Cadena (2015) and Escobar (2020), invoked the spiritual element in the communal Indigenous peasant culture, which kept them alive, adding a component for its reproduction. Mariategui concluded that if anything has been missing in Marx, it has been “an insufficient legal spirit.”⁵⁰

THE POLISH EXPERIENCE AND THE MYTH OF THE VANISHING PEASANT

The subsistence peasant economy in Poland survived not only capitalist development before its socialist experience but also the attempts of

collectivization of the 1960s and 1970s and (since 1990) adoption of the neoliberal economic model. The hybrid Polish peasant economy can help explain the built-in adaptability and resistance mechanisms of these formations in Colombia within changing local and global market environments.

Leading Polish sociologist Maria Halamska described the process of dismantling the peasant economy since 1989 in her home country: “Poland’s economic transformation, initiated in 1989, ushered in market economics with all the consequences thereof, including for family farms—entailing changes in the entire existing system of farms’ external relations and internal mechanisms. Farmers were subjected to a brutal adaptation process to the new conditions, felt by their owners to be a kind of ‘oppressive liberty.’”⁵¹ She raised the possibility that peasants might become a vanishing social group. “The notion of the ‘end of the peasants’ then gradually spread throughout Europe: it signifies a vanishing peasant way of farming and the gradual absorption of the peasant economy into the capitalist economy, as farm functioning and reproduction become subordinated to the mechanisms of market economics. Out of the vast numbers of farms, a smaller group of robust, strong, entrepreneurial, ‘professional’ farms emerge and end up absorbing other farms, whose users then abandon agriculture. Once there are no more peasant farms, with their specific functioning and reproduction, there are likewise no more peasants.”⁵²

Halamska described “quasi sustenance peasant economy quasi peasant,” which she thought did not function according to any familiar rationale.⁵³ She found that “the group of strong market-oriented farms now emerging (including also privatization of the state sector) is not absorbing the small farms because the latter are not succumbing to market rationale, having other, non-agricultural sources of financing.”⁵⁴ Halamska added that this “group represents a new type of peasants overlooked by Western modernization theories.” She explained that “the timing of agricultural modernization is crucial here: in the West, it occurred during times of forced industrializations that absorbed migrants abandoning agriculture, while in Poland, it has come during a post-industrial phase and a period of economic transformation involving high unemployment.” “Poland’s quasi-peasants ‘absorb’ part of that unemployment, easing social tension.”⁵⁵ Halamska describes the quasi-peasant and quasi-sustenance peasants “as (producing food solely for the family), functioning—or rather existing—thanks to a specific rationale, neither peasant nor entrepreneurial.”⁵⁶ Halamska’s analysis dismissed the rationality of the peasants in disagreement

with McNetting, Wolf, Scott, and Chayanov's theories and findings. She also disagrees with the thesis of the "vanishing peasant."

Finally, Halamska contended that the survival of four hundred thousand farms owned by 3.7 million people, with three-fifths of them comprising fewer than five hectares, was primarily due to political considerations.⁵⁷ One must wonder whether she gave sufficient weight to the agency of peasants to make decisions influencing the state's policymakers and their capacity to adjust to adversarial socioeconomic and political conditions. Peasants' rationality and agency, which she acknowledges is "different" from the one assumed by modernization theories, attempts to balance adaptability to the market's pressures and the conditions of subsumption while resisting them. It is a dynamic dialectical process in which outcomes are unpredictable and ever-changing. In my opinion, Halamska's analysis underplayed this factor. As this book demonstrates, the peasants in Colombia demonstrated extraordinary ability to organize and build their networks outside the orbit of the capital.

Peasant Economy: The Struggle between Rentier Capital and Noncapitalist Mode

This book contributes to the literature on peasant economies by focusing on the agency of the affected noncapitalist and subsistence family-based peasant communities and their capacity to adapt and resist the encroachments of neoliberal global actors and their local rentier collaborators. In addition, it focuses on how local and international capital has been reshaping the political economy of rural Colombia since the mid-twentieth century by dismantling communal land properties, which allowed the expansion of capitalism in the forms of agribusinesses and the extraction of resources such as oil, coal, gold, and emeralds. This process has led to one of the most violent periods in Colombia's turbulent history. I call this period war rentierism, leading to violent rural transformation processes. A process unleashed during the civil wars of 1899–1902, the War of a Thousand Days (*La Guerra de Mil Dias*)⁵⁸ continued throughout *La Violencia* in 1948–1958 and 1964–2016, respectively.⁵⁹ Violence with ebbs and flows happened against the backdrop of profound transformations in the country's political economy from an agrarian-based economy in the late nineteenth century to the 1950s and 1960s development of manufacturing of consumer goods, expansion of capitalist agriculture, to

deindustrialization and the enlargement of the rentier economy since the 1980s.⁶⁰ Despite the changes, two salient features remained to characterize the polity: (1) appropriation of land; and (2) the expansion of the rentier political economy.

Rentier economy was defined by David Ricardo as a margin of market price over cost value, unearned revenue that flows from land ownership, which also includes mining (see chapters 1 and 2).⁶¹ For a wider use of the rentier concept than the one suggested by Ricardo, Michael Hudson expanded the concept to incorporate the industrial economies such as the United States, where more wealth is created from financial speculation and rents than from production. Hudson defined rentier income as economic rent and interest or other financial charges, arguing that this form of capitalism is polarizing the U.S. and other economies. He added, “The bulk of this rentier income is not being spent on expanding the means of production or raising living standards. Instead, it is plowed back into the purchase of property and financial securities already in place⁶²—legal rights and claims for payment extracted from the economy at large.” This research adopts the presented theoretical contours of a rentier economy, chiefly its service–financial capital base, with a crucial qualifier. That is, the rentier transformation of Colombia has been playing out in a dependent postcolonial economy. Consequently, the rentier transformation process in rural areas has been particularly painful, creating socioeconomic and environmental dislocation, which are elaborated on in the following chapters.

In this vein, and to capture the nuances of the rentier political economy in the Colombian context, I introduced “war rentierism,” which is the use of violence to promote and accelerate the expansion of rentierism—altering land use from food production to agribusiness, mining, oil, coal, and gold extraction, unproductive cattle ranching, services, tourism, and speculation. War rentierism is examined as an effective instrument in the process of subsumption through which eight million hectares (circa 7 percent of the country’s surface area) of land were usurped, dispossessing in the process more than seven million peasants and killing more than 220,000 between 1948 and 2012.⁶³ The different outcomes of dismantling noncapitalist relations and subsistence peasant economies are beyond the scope of this book, which focuses on illustrative cases. It examines the core changes in the rural political economy that affected the peasants living in the two reserves of Pato-Balsillas, Cimitarra, and the Indigenous

resguardos in the departments of Meta and Cauca. This is alongside the struggle of the Afro-descendants in Cauca to establish their autonomous community councils.

In the investigated cases, capitalist and noncapitalist communal modes of production and the subsistence peasant economies coexist and dialectically interact.⁶⁴ This book explains these two salient trends—removing peasant economies in some areas and retaining an uneasy coexistence between subsistence family-based peasants and capitalist economies in other areas. Furthermore, this research attempts to answer why capitalist and noncapitalist economies interact violently in some areas and nonviolently in others, how the subsumption processes occur, and how capital extracts surplus value from noncapitalist communal and subsistence peasant economies without necessarily annihilating them. Answering these questions helps present a historical narrative as truthful as possible to the messiness of social change in which social actors have competing class interests and agencies.

The following section discusses a fundamental construct of this book: the definition of who is a “peasant” in twenty-first-century Colombia. It explains the underlying political and ideological currents behind the state’s decision to grant juridical recognition of the Indigenous and Afro-Colombians as political subjects while denying their social class as peasants alongside the mixed-race (Mestizo) peasants. Privileging identity over class is not accidental but consistent with liberal ideological dogmas. This issue is discussed in greater detail in chapter 1.

From Identity Politics to Class Identity

In mainstream social science, it has become in vogue to characterize social fault lines and conflict in terms of identity/cultural politics overlooking or ignoring class, which might inform and shape identities, including race, ethnicity, and gender. However, in the case of the peasant, it shows a feedback loop in which a class agency capitalized on the success of ethnic/gender/racial groups in gaining legal rights to claim its demand for recognition.⁶⁵ That is to say, peasant groups and organizations such as La Via Campesina, which include hundreds of groups, learned from the success of the Indigenous groups in claiming protection rights in the era of neoliberal ideological hegemony and “savage capitalism.”⁶⁶

Since the nineteenth century, land conflicts between peasants and landowners have become the main fault line of societal divisions in Colombia, defining the contours of most of its civil strife and wars. However, the Colombian state, in its two constitutions of 1886 and 1991 constitution, did not recognize the peasant as subjects. Consequently, they were left in a normative twilight zone without legal rights and protection. In sharp contrast, the 1991 Constitution granted the Indigenous and Afro-Colombians political rights. The question is why the 1991 constitution did not recognize the principal peasant character of the Indigenous, Afro-descendants, and mestizos that constitute most of the rural population while acknowledging them as ethnic groups.

One explanation is attributed to the weakness of the peasant movement after the systematic extermination of its leadership during the 1980s, which killed more than three thousand activists. Another is the crisis within the insurgent groups, which ended with the demobilization of the M-19, EPL, and Quintin Lame in 1989. This demobilization of segments of the insurgency weakened the negotiation position of the radical armed Left and the peasants alongside the working-class movement in urban centers.⁶⁷ While the large land-owning elite who historically wielded significant political influence retained their power in both the Conservative and Liberal parties, encouraged by the enhanced dominance of the neoliberal economic thinking that embraced land-market, an anti-land redistribution strategy led by the then newly elected Cesar Gaviria (1990–94) of the Liberal Party (see chapter 1) exacerbated land conflicts. Those groups became the critical mass within the Constituent Assembly that drafted the 1991 Constitution. Then it was logical that the 1991 Constitution disregarded the peasantry, denying this social group/class any legal rights, which might also have brought a measure of protection and, more importantly, opened the door for claims of land distribution. This lack of recognition remained unresolved in spite of the fact that in 1994 the state promulgated Law 160, which created peasant reserve zones, constituting a measure that did not require any redistribution of large landholdings and thus preserving the class interests of the powerful landed elite while seeking to contain the peasant organizations' pressure for land access.

The peasant as a legal subject remained unrecognized until 2018, when two events concurred. One was the UN declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which responded to the activism of Via Campesina (VC) and peasants' groups in Indonesia and elsewhere. The UN declaration was a watershed in extending protection to