



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Farewell to the Peasantry? Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico by Gerardo Otero
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with explicit expectations and obligations that, if not carried out, can result in life-threatening situations for animals, and ultimately the family livelihood. Standards of performance, whether they involve participation in worthwhile community or school activities or involvement in challenging work, contribute to a sense of personal mastery.

What seems to dominate the world of these young people are caring adults who play a leadership role in their lives. Regardless of education levels, income, and residential stability, these farm families are significantly more involved in civic groups, churches, and schools compared to nonfarm households. Parents who are socially engaged have children who are socially engaged. Even parents with limited time and other resources manage their children's lives so they can participate in many different types of activities. This does not go unnoticed by their children, who perceive them as efficacious adults and role models. Although parent involvement continues to be promoted as a key factor in helping children learn, here we see what it is about these networks, how they can potentially operate, and what kind of real commitments parents make to ensure their child's success both academically and socially. Religion is also important in these teenagers' lives, and they look forward to and participate in services and church-sponsored activities. Peers also share these sentiments, and they along with their parents form strong social networks where the values of the family, school, and community are constantly reinforced.

Not everything that happens in these communities is idyllic, and the authors show some of the negative consequences to children of working too closely with parents or being in small communities that encroach on personal autonomy and exercise considerable social control. Yet despite some of the constraints these youngsters face in their daily lives, the authors conclude that we have much to learn from the children and families of the land. And, clearly, that is the case. Here is a detailed comprehensive study, expertly analyzed, that presents us with new conceptual tools for examining adolescents' lives as they move through high school and beyond. Building on earlier work, the authors carefully and systematically demonstrate what helps young people cope with adversity, which has relevance not only for rural communities, but for our urban and suburban communities as well.

Farewell to the Peasantry? Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico.
By Gerardo Otero. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Pp. xiii+186.
\$60.00.

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Gerardo Otero returns to the Mexican agrarian question, arguably one of the most dramatic and important political theatres of the 20th century, which has been at the center of theoretical and political debate in Mexico

since the 1910 revolution. In its classic formulation in the late 19th century, the agrarian question had three moments: the differentiation of the peasantry, the politics of class formation in the agrarian sector, and the intersectoral political economy of capitalist industrialization. Otero focuses primarily on the first two and does not really provide a systematic treatment of the latter. He seeks both to transcend the Lenin-Chayanov debates (p. 2), which have stimulated much controversy in Latin America agrarian circles since the 1970s, and to distinguish himself from the multiple variants of both the *campesinismo* (focused on struggles over and access to land) and *proletarismo* (accentuating the role of wages) approaches to Mexican agricultural transformation.

His treatment turns equally on a different account of the forms and character of social differentiation in the countryside and on an alternative model of political class formation. The general purpose, says Otero, is to question class reductionist assumptions in variants of both Marxism and populism through a comparative regional analysis of three case studies. All three regions—Puebla, Sonora, Coahuila/Durango—have in common the fact that capitalist agriculture was installed during the 1930s, which provided the original focus of agrarian struggles (p. 5). Otero shows through careful historical analysis and contemporary survey data (coupled with fieldwork conducted in the 1980s and 1990s) three differing trajectories of class formation from ostensibly similar origination points. His comparative political economy approach emphasizes process rather than structure in order to accentuate how the economic location of rural producers does not determine political class formation that is, rather, mediated by the state, regional culture, and leadership type (p. 21). As he puts it, class formation cannot be deduced from class position alone but is overdetermined by the content of demands and struggles, the character of class organizations, and the degree of autonomy of the movements (p. 24). Underlying this approach is an implicit political project, namely that in the wake of the collapse of socialism reform within the circumference of capitalism represents the only alternative, and correspondingly that there is a space for what he calls “market-oriented but non-capitalist culture” (p. 25) given expression through two alternatives to proletarianization (the wage form): peasant-entrepreneurship (essentially the deepening of petty commodity production) and “postcapitalist production” (self-managed cooperatives and collective forms of organization). Yet in rural Mexico, the heterogeneity of economic class positions are capable of generating a panoply of differing political outcomes depending on state, culture, and leadership.

Farewell to the Peasantry? consists of two major parts. The first (chaps. 3 and 4) sees postrevolutionary Mexico as the product of a land redistribution harnessed to bourgeois development and state hegemony. The reforms to the Constitution in 1992 in tandem with neoliberal and agrarian policies represent, however, a major overhaul of the original agrarian reform program. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of social differentiation

between 1930 and 1990 and confirms the analysis of Alain de Janvry that (1) the middle peasantry are disappearing (the "double crisis" of capitalist agriculture and the peasant economy), (2) the majority of direct producers are semiproletarian, and (3) uneven development has fostered marked regional heterogeneity. "Depeasantization without full proletarianization" (p. 9) raises the question of the direction and content of their class conflicts and struggles.

Part 2 explores this question through the three case studies. In the case of Laguna, agricultural workers struggled for "typically proletarian demands" but received land from the state, and the *ejidatarios* unleashed a program of self-management and democratic production in the newly collectivized *ejidos*. But the state and the agrarian bourgeoisie crushed these initiatives, which in turn produced political fragmentation and an impoverished semiproletariat. In Atencingo, the collective *ejidos* were dismantled, and individual (i.e., household) production stimulated a process of internal social differentiation from which emerged "peasant entrepreneurs" on the one side and a deeply impoverished semiproletariat (dependent on migratory income) on the other. In the Yaqui Valley, Otero sees the emergence of postcapitalist struggle in response to aggressive capitalist penetration in the region and *mestizo* in migration; new demands involved not only land but other means of production and the democratic self-management of the productive process. Each of these three trajectories contained differing forms of political discourse and contrasting alliances and solidarities with "progressive and democratic forces" (p. 150) in Mexico.

Farewell to the Peasantry is in some regards an unfashionable sort of political economy reflecting perhaps the influence of Ivan Szelenyi and Erik Wright, with whom the author worked in the course of the dissertation on which this book is based. But it is a model of rigorous comparative analysis, and the author has provided an exceptionally rich and well-argued narrative that successfully explains why class agents that started out in similar positions followed differing paths and destinies. His sensitivity to the multiple determinants of class struggle and class formation is exemplary, even though the author is, I think, much stronger on state intervention than on either culture or leadership (the latter is quite undeveloped). One might also have wished for more on intrahousehold dynamics (self-exploitation?) and the role of gender, particularly since Otero places so much analytical weight on systems of reproduction. But this does not alter the fact that Otero has written a compelling and innovative book, attuned to the jagged rhythms, the radical displacements, and the multiple trajectories of capitalist transformation in the Mexican countryside. The recent victory of Vicente Fox, and the thickening of civil society that Otero emphasizes, makes *Farewell to the Peasantry* a prescient text. Pity about the price.