How Culture Shapes Rationality: A Study of Mayan and Miskito Communities in Guatemala and Nicaragua

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HOW CULTURE SHAPES RATIONALITY:
A STUDY OF MAYAN AND MISKITO COMMUNITIES IN
GUATEMALA AND NICARAGUA

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Tracy Lynne Devine

Approved, May 1994

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Department of Modern Languages
DEDICATION

To my grandparents with much love:

Thelma and James Devine
Concetta and Joseph Perico
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This paper seeks to reconcile culture with a theory of rational choice. First, an examination of Mayan and Miskito Indian cultures is given with reference to Craig Jackson Calhoun’s argument that traditional communities are more readily mobilized into collective action than non-traditional communities. Second, an overview of the "political" and "moral" economy approaches to rationality illustrates why these frameworks are incapable of explaining the Miskito and Mayan Indian behaviors examined in part one. Finally, the evaluation exposes the need to develop a third, "culturally inclusive" explanation of rational behavior that is capable of accounting for distinctive sociocultural factors functioning within a given community. A cross-cultural and transnational model of rational choice should not consider rationality as static or monomorphic, but instead, as relative to the social system at hand. The paper concludes by offering the foundation for a theoretical approach to rational choice that avoids the pitfall of cultural universalism, instead considering rationality as relative.
HOW CULTURE SHAPES RATIONALITY:
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IN GUATEMALA AND NICARAGUA
Introduction

Peasants make up almost 35 percent of the world's population and live in nearly all of the world's nations. It would seem, therefore, that peasant behavior -- social, economic and political -- should be considered a meaningful and influential area of investigation for all fields of social science, academic and policy-oriented alike. The many attempts and failures at "democratization" during the past fifteen years have demonstrated the importance of addressing the ambitions and rationalities of the peoples and communities that constitute a substantial and vital portion of the world's inhabits -- the peasants.

North American involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars brought about unprecedented interest among social


3 Anthropologists and other social scientists interested in "peasant studies" have manufactured quite an extensive debate on the meaning of the word "peasant" and who qualifies to be labeled as such. This paper does not tap into that polemic. For the purpose of arguments here, I define peasants as individuals with little or no formal education, who participate in subsistence agriculture, primarily as laborers and occasionally as petty landowners.
scientists in addressing peasant behavior in order to better understand the "enemy" and his motivation in opposing U.S. Democracy. Within political science, this interest developed into a debate over the explanatory power of "political" and "moral" economists, perhaps best represented by authors Samuel Popkin and James Scott, respectively.

In his influential book, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, Scott has argued that peasants plan their lives to be "risk free" by striving only to maintain rudimentary subsistence levels rather than to raise their incomes and improve living standards. Conversely, in The Political Economy of the Peasant, Samuel Popkin has asserted that peasants indeed do take risks, venturing to improve living standards and raise subsistence levels through both long- and short-term investments.

In this thesis paper I have chosen not to take the tempting "middle ground" between the two theorists by attempting to converge their ideas into a single, more comprehensive view of peasant behavior. Instead, I propose using the authors' debate -- and specifically Popkin's intervention -- as a point of departure into an area I find both crucial to understanding peasant motivation in collective action and relatively unexplored by political scientists: the role of culture in determining political behavior within peasant communities.

Whereas Popkin has argued that economic factors are the force driving peasant behavior, I will argue that commitment
to traditional culture within certain peasant communities is equally important -- and in fact more influential -- in determining both individual and collective behavior. It is not my intention to oppose Popkin's theory entirely, because I believe that peasants are indeed rational actors. I argue, however, that understanding peasant behavior is not an easily generalizable task, as Popkin implies, but a complex one which must account for specific cultural influences functioning within individual communities. I attempt to show, then, that rationality is not "given for all time, but endogenous to the social system at hand."  

This paper is an attempt to reconcile cultural and traditional influences with a model of rational behavior determined at the individual level. I argue that by eliminating cultural influences and relying solely on "economic rationality" or economic self-interest, as Popkin has done, we cannot provide an adequate explanation of traditional peasant behavior. Only by accepting that rationality is influenced and constrained by sociocultural determinants, in addition to economic ones, can we begin to develop a cross-cultural model of rational behavior.

In his article, "The Radicalism of Tradition and the Question of Class Struggle," Craig Jackson Calhoun argues

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in support of theoretical stance that I believe makes room for the analysis of sociocultural factors in doctrines of rational choice. Calhoun closely follows the earlier work of Ian Lustik, who asserted: "there is a pre-existing sense of community among participants in collective revolutionary action that makes it possible for organizers [both insiders and outsiders] to appeal to the rationality of their constituents as a basis for participation."6 "[A] strongly knit social network," Calhoun adds, is "characteristic of traditional communities and helps to explain their ability to mobilize directly, instead of through the formal organizations so important to the modern working class."7

In Chapter I of this paper, I discuss the four reasons why -- in Calhoun's view -- direct mobilization is easier for traditional than for non-traditional communities. For Calhoun, (1) the ability to identify common enemies, (2) a tendency to be easily disrupted by outside intervention (3) communal control of social life, and (4) "ideological unity" serve to facilitate collective action within peasant communities. I proceed by examining a variety of empirical evidence (from Indian testimonials, anthropological case studies, and social science fieldwork) in order to demonstrate how Calhoun's framework might be

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In Chapter II, I give an overview of the moral economist-political economist debate and demonstrate why Samuel Popkin's "economic" explanation of peasant behavior and peasant rationality cannot explain the significance of Calhoun's view or its implications on the broader question of collective action and mobilization. I offer evidence of peasant behavior that does not and cannot fit into existing moral or political economy frameworks. The validity of the testimonial evidence and field studies I present is clearly not a question to be answered, or even addressed, in this paper. I want instead to illustrate that we must consider a third possibility -- one which accounts for cultural influences -- and to test it empirically in future studies.

Finally, in Section IV, I explain why Popkin's theory falls short on explanatory power and return to the task of reconciling culture with rational behavior. Here I lay the groundwork for a conception of rationality that does consider specific cultural and traditional influences on peasant behavior and conclude with an explanation of why such a view is necessary to understand traditional peasants and their actions.
Chapter I:

What factors facilitate collective action within the traditional community?

In his article dealing with the significance of tradition in the popular mobilization of social, peasant communities, Craig Calhoun points to four ways in which traditional social foundations can facilitate and expedite mobilization or other collective action of community members.

First, Calhoun argues, members of traditional communities find it "relatively easy" to identify collective enemies. Elites or other community members who choose to set themselves apart from traditional communities thereby label themselves as outsiders and become potential enemies to the greater community. On the other hand, elites who integrate themselves into local communities decrease the likelihood that they will becomes victims of violent insurrection.⁸

Second, Calhoun asserts, because traditional communities are largely self-regulating, they are also easily agitated by outside intervention. Even the well intentioned efforts of "do-gooders" trying to "improve" the

lives of peasant community members are viewed with mistrust, hostility and as threats to communal interests and welfare.\textsuperscript{9} Traditional communities resent outsiders and constantly strive to defend their autonomy and function without interference from external influences.

Third, to the extent that a traditional community is autonomous, with significant power and ability to control the "labor process" of its members (e.g. maintaining crops, selling food or crafts, or raising animals for market) it can also control a considerable amount of members' social lives. Because they have enormous control over the social, political and economic lives of their members, traditional communities perceive themselves as being justly unchecked from interference and exploitation by elites. Elite intervention only disrupts the normal functions and customs of the community and its members.

Fourth, traditional communities have the foundation for "mobilization outside the purview of the intended targets of collective action, a free 'social space.'"\textsuperscript{10} By extension, .

\textsuperscript{9}Catholic intervention into Central American peasant communities is a perfect example. While such intervention has at times been well accepted by these communities, they were more often met with (sometimes violent) rejection and refusal. Even communities which have adopted all or part of Catholicism did so only after much conflict and controversy. See: Robert M. Carmack, \textit{The Quiche Mayas of Utatlán, The Evolution of a Highland Kingdom}, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), pp. 305-20, 332, 335-41, 360, 364-365, 375. Or: James D. Sexton, ed., \textit{Son of Tecún Umán, A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981), pp. 15, 25, 88, 139-40, 168, 213-14.

\textsuperscript{10}Calhoun, "Radicalism of Tradition," p. 154.
I believe Calhoun is arguing that there is at least a foundation of ideological uniformity existing within traditional communities that liberates them from "the need to work through formal, non-communal organizations [in which social] movements must always be exposed to ideological counter attacks." A powerful and controlling sense of common identity shared by members of traditional, peasant communities has both pragmatic and intangible implications. In other words, the shared identity provides community members with specific roles to play or functions to fulfill as well as a sense of belonging a distinct ethnic/religious/linguistic group and knowing one's place within the community. The following segment will elucidate these four assertions with illustrations of traditional peasant behavior and attitudes.

Empirical evidence: Studies of traditional communities in Central America: The Mayan and Miskito Indians

Perhaps the most famous Indian from contemporary Guatemala is Rigoberta Menchú, a young woman who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 for her autobiographical testimony, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. In the introduction of her intimate autobiography, which includes both personal experiences and detailed descriptions

\[1^{11}\text{Ibid.}\]

of her community's cultural activities and traditions, Menchú writes, "I'd like to stress that [this is] not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people....The important thing is that what has happened to me happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people."13

Menchú illustrates both Calhoun's four points and the broader goal of this thesis: to show that rationality is not solely based on economic self-interest but also on the cultural and traditional forces functioning within each distinct community. I begin by drawing out her confirmation of Calhoun's argument and conclude with support for my own.

Calhoun's first point is that traditional communities can readily identify their common enemies. Michael Taylor confirms: "Part of the cohesion of the rural community [is]

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13 Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, p. 1. I view Rigoberta Menchú's testimony as a very powerful and representative description of Guatemalan Indian life. This view has been affirmed by anthropologists and cultural sociologists who focus their attention on the rich and extremely complex mosaic that is Guatemalan society. John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman write: "...[T]he specific structure of socioeconomic dependency in Central America...positions literature as a crucial ideological practice....[P]articularly in situations of large-scale political mobilization like revolutionary movements, the unity of a class or people is fundamentally a symbolic unity constructed in discursive practices." Given the illiteracy and lack of institutionalization of literature at both national and regional levels within Guatemala, Rigoberta has taken it upon herself (and taught herself Spanish) to become a voice of protest against the social, economic and political injustice suffered by her community and her people as a whole. See Beverley and Zimmerman, Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. x.
derived...from the shared opposition of its members toward the lords, whose depredations engender...among peasants a defensive unity that [can] overcome their internal differences." 14 By revealing the meaning of "enemy" in her community, how that meaning evolved and why it is important for her people to recognize groups and individuals hostile to her race and culture, Menchú amplifies Calhoun’s claims and illustrates the desire for communal autonomy. In the following passage, she explains the construction of the "insider versus outsider," or "us versus them" mentality:

We began to understand that the root of all our problems was exploitation. That there were rich and poor and that the rich exploited the poor — our sweat, our labor. That’s how they got richer and richer. The fact that we were always...bowing to the authorities was part of the discrimination we Indians suffered. So was the cultural oppression which tries to divide us by taking away our traditions.... 15

According to Menchú, therefore, enemies were defined as those who capitalized on the poverty, hunger and suffering of Indians and who worked to maintain their power advantage over indigenous peoples by keeping them poor and unorganized. She continues:

The moment I learned (sic) to identify our enemies was very important for me. For me now the landowner was a big enemy, an evil one. The soldier too was a criminal enemy. And so were all the rich. We began using the term "enemies" because we didn’t have the notion of enemy in our


15Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, p. 118.
culture, until those people arrived to exploit us and discriminate against us.... The ladinos\(^{16}\) behave like a superior race. Apparently there was a time when the ladinos used to think we were not people at all, but some sort of animal. All this became clear to me.\(^{17}\)

After recognizing personally that the suffering of her people was not their destiny and that they did not have to wait a lifetime to finally have a "decent" life in heaven,\(^{18}\) Menchú felt the need to share her ideas with others. It is clear from Menchú's description of her work, that identifying "enemies" was not the difficult task for her people, fighting them was. The author recounts the words of her community's elders:

Who is to blame for [Indian suffering]? The White Man who came to our country. We must not trust them, white men are all thieves. We must keep our

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\(^{16}\)In the context of Rigoberta Menchú's testimony ladino signifies: "[A]ny Guatemalan, whatever his economic position, who rejects, either individually or through his cultural heritage, Indian values of Mayan origin. It also implies mixed blood." See: Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, p. 249.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., pp. 124-25.

\(^{18}\)Menchú acknowledges that she is a Christian and that she has been influenced by Catholic Action's activities in her community, as well as by priests and nuns she encountered in other regions of Guatemala. For her, Catholicism is not so much a religion as it is a "form of expression." She emphasizes that believing in Christ is in no way a betrayal of her culture because she and her people have accepted Catholicism only to the extent that it is in harmony with traditional religious beliefs. (For example, both religions profess that there is only one God.) She therefore rejects the labeling of her community as polytheistic.

Menchú's religious beliefs and therefore, her statements, are notably influenced by "liberation theology." (For example, the notion that the destiny of her people is not to suffer indefinitely in this life.) Despite frequent references to the tenets of liberation theology, however, the author never directly acknowledges any allegiance with or belief in that school of thought.
secrets from them.\textsuperscript{19}

Therefore, in Menchú's eyes, Indians did not need to be told \textit{where} the social, political and cultural oppression originated in their country. Instead, they were interested in developing mechanisms for protecting themselves and preserving their way of life. She describes the development of her own awareness of the Indian situation in Guatemala:

\ldots[W]hen you see your own reality, a hatred grows inside you for those oppressors that make the people suffer so\ldots\ [I]t is not fate which makes us poor. It's not because we don't work, as the rich say. They say: 'Indians are poor because they're always asleep.' But I know from experience that we're outside ready for work at three in the morning. It was this that made us decide to fight. This is what motivated me and many others\ldots\ I knew that teaching others how to defend themselves against the enemy was a commitment I had to make -- a commitment to my people and my commitment as a Christian.\textsuperscript{20}

Menchú's work to improve the lives of her people, therefore, began with two primary components. First, the indigenous population recognized their "common enemy" as the exploiters and oppressors of their labor and culture. Second, as Menchú explains, Indian communities had to decide what it was, exactly, for which they wanted to fight. She concludes her story with unwavering belief in her cause:

We all contribute in different ways, but we are working for the same objective\ldots\ [I]t wasn't born out of something good, it was born out of wretchedness and bitterness. It has been radicalized by the poverty in which my people live. It has been radicalized by the malnutrition

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., pp. 133-41.
which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination which I’ve felt in the flesh. And by the oppression which prevents us performing our ceremonies, and shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are.... [M]y commitment to our struggle knows no boundaries.21

Menchú’s words make clear that the objects of her community’s struggle included not only political, social and economic rights for the impoverished indigenous population, but cultural rights as well. Recognition and respect of cultural beliefs and traditions constitute a vital part of the struggle in Rigoberta’s community and in other indigenous populations in Central America.

Menchú’s testimony also provides support for Calhoun’s second claim, that traditional communities are easily disrupted by any outside intervention, including that of “do-gooders.” During her description of communal wedding ceremonies, she comments:

[The community members] insist that they don’t desire what the rich have. We have hands to make our pottery with and we don’t want to lose the skill. They say: 'These things may be modern but we mustn’t buy the rubbish they [ladinos] have, even if we have the money. We must keep our ways of making our own.' Our village does not have a grinder for our maize. This is not because we could not get one. Many landowners would gladly install one to grind the maize for the whole village. But our people say no. The ladinos bring their machines in little by little and soon they own everything.22

Menchú insists that community members view traditional ways

21Ibid., pp. 246-47.
22Ibid., p. 72.
as superior to "modern" ways of living, simply because they are culturally significant. In her words, "Generations and generations will pass but we will always be Indians. It is our duty...to keep our secrets safe generation after generation, to prevent the ladinos from learning anything of our ancestors' ways." This example is especially important because maize (or corn) is sacred in the traditional Maya-Quiché religion, which identifies the Indians as "men of maize." Planting, tending, harvesting and grinding corn are all sacred activities within the Maya Quiché culture. To give up or alter even one step of the corn-growing process would, therefore, mean departing from ancient ways and breaking with sacred tradition.

Maintaining their antiquated farming and cooking techniques is an important aspect of Maya Quiché life, not because the traditions are efficient or economical, but because they have cultural meaning and affirm solidarity with communal ancestors.

In addition to the inherent hostility existing between unequals in a social hierarchy which may prevent cooperation among members of different classes, Menchú makes it clear

23Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, pp. 67-8.

24The Popul Vuh, Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya, explains that the first four humans were created out of a corn paste. Corn was the plant most venerated by the ancient Maya Indians. See Adrian Recinos, Popul Vuh, The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya, trans. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 62. Also see Miguel Angel Asturias, Men of Maize, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1949).
that her community refuses to "modernize" its equipment simply because it would necessitate deviation from ancestral customs and rituals. While acknowledging that resistance to modern technology can mean an often "primitive" lifestyle, the community repudiates "modernization" in the sense that it would require departure from traditional cultural practices.

In his book about the Maya-Quiché Indians living in the Utalán, Robert Carmack describes an example of Indian behavior which provides additional support for the second tenet of Calhoun's argument. He explains:

In the hands of Spanish priests who administered in the Quiché area, Catholic Action launched a direct assault on traditional Quiché religion. Every community experienced a holy war of sorts between the catequistas (progressives) and the costumbristas (traditionalists). Violence erupted often, especially in the 1950's. At Santa Cruz the priests managed to eradicate the burning of candles to the ancestors in the church, but when they tried to take the Buried Jesus Saint from the control of the cofriadas, a struggle ensued. Several converts to Catholic Action were thrown in jail and the traditionalists even tried unsuccessfully to have the priest removed from his post.... Later the priest tried to abolish the cofriada ritual and other "customs" practiced in the church. The traditionalists rose up in arms and attacked the convent. The priest barely escaped with his life and returned later with an armed guard. The traditionalists were too powerful to be blocked in Chichicastenango, and to the present day the priests do not interfere with them.26

25Carmack describes cofriadas as eight religious cults that play a significant role in Quiché-Maya religious rituals.

Carmack's account provides an excellent example of peasant resistance to interference into their communities. What is particularly relevant in this case is the fact that the intervention into the community was by priests, or "do-gooders" who presumably sought to better the lives (and afterlives!) of the village members.

In his book *My Car in Managua*, Forrest Colburn provides an equally powerful illustration of peasant resistance to intervention into communal life, regardless of the charitable motivations of the interfering organization. Here, Colburn describes the effect of socialist intervention into the Nicaraguan Corn Islands (home to primarily Miskito Indians) after the fall of Somoza in 1979:

The Somozas ignored the Atlantic Coast and it ignored them.... Although there was no fighting anywhere on the Atlantic side during the Sandinistas' insurrection, their 1979 victory had immediate consequences for the Corn Islands.... As the regime consolidated its power, it announced that it would seek broader-based economic growth on the Atlantic Coast, and would try to mesh the hitherto "marginalized" territory into the nation as a whole. Unhappily, in practice, both the efforts to promote equitable development and the moves toward integration have disrupted the islanders' way of life.... Perhaps the greatest potential importance in these circumstances would be a government promise to grant the entire Atlantic Coast increased autonomy. Nothing would please the inhabitants of the Corn Islands more. An articulate young woman captured the essence of the situation when she commented ironically, "The Sandinistas want to liberate us, but we are too independent to be liberated." 27

According to Colburn, the Miskito Indians provide another

example of a traditional, cultural community that resents outside intervention into its affairs, however "benevolent" the motives of the intervening party. As Calhoun has argued, maintenance of autonomy is one of the community's foremost goals.

To promote Calhoun's third point -- that traditional communities have tremendous control over the social lives and social behavior of their members -- I again draw examples from the Mayan and Miskito Indians living in Central America.28

Rigoberta Menchú reinforces Calhoun's argument with extensive descriptions of Maya-Quiche communal life and the importance of adhering to cultural norms in order to be accepted into the community at large. For example, Menchú explains her relationship with her parents by stating: "They gave me the freedom to do what I wanted with my life as long as, first and foremost, I obeyed the laws of our ancestors. That's when they taught me not to abuse my own dignity--both

28I wish here to acknowledge the limitation of available resources dealing with the Miskito Indians and their culture. While I have found various sources to support Calhoun's third and fourth points (and my own broader argument) I want to make known that the majority of literature that even mentions the Miskitos does so in reference to their political confrontations with the Sandinistas after the fall of Somoza in 1979. The few detailed accounts of Miskito communities that I have encountered appear (at least to someone who has not been there first hand) at times outdated and often culturally biased in favor of European/North American heritage. I believe, however, that while we must read this data with knowledge of its era, it can provide both interesting information and support for this thesis paper if we "read between the lines." This point will be more fully illustrated in the remaining explanation of Calhoun's argument.
as a woman and a member of our race." Menchú's comments imply that within her community, cultural laws supersede political and more general (ladino) social laws. At very least, she seeks to create a space in which her culture can be preserved against the "predatorial," dominant culture.

Because, as Menchú reveals in the remainder of her testimony, her Maya-Quiché ancestors had something to say about practically every aspect of social life, obeying their laws is no simple task, but instead, something which requires conscious effort on a daily basis. It then becomes obvious to the reader that the "freedom" which Menchú mentions, given the tremendous amount of ancestral custom that one must follow, does not really allow for social independence at all.

Menchú intentionally acknowledges the social autonomy of her community throughout her text, in my view, to draw attention to the unique quality of the Maya-Quiché culture and the importance of protecting its distinct customs, religion, dress and language. The rejection of "modern"

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30 For example, there is ancestral "law" dealing with family relations; birth, marriage and death ceremonies; work, relationship with the earth; proper treatment of elders, pregnant women, parents, siblings and spouses; religion; celebrations, and gender roles, just name a few of the topics that Ms. Menchú discusses in her testimony.

31 It is important to note that the author does not regard these laws as limitations to her social freedom, but as meaningful, sacred guidelines to help individuals and the greater community structure a honorable life in accordance with a rich and multifacetous cultural heritage.
maize-grinders in favor of ancient ways of hand-grinding principle foodstuffs is representative of a broader sense of internal (or cultural) moral superiority. In her discussion of communal marriage ceremonies, Menchú remarks: The outside world -- which we know is disgusting -- has set a bad example and has started giving us pills and gadgets.... The thing is, to us, using medicine to stop having children is like killing your own children. It's negating the laws of our ancestors...."\(^{32}\)

Later in the discussion, Menchú reiterates the importance of adhering to ancestral law: [W]hen a couple gets married in our community, they have to preserve our traditions and act as an example for their brothers and sisters and for their neighbors' children. It's a very important commitment for us."\(^{33}\) She recounts a similar penalty for breaking with communal tradition: "In our community, if a girl is seen in the street with a boy, she both loses her dignity and breaks the customs of our forefathers."\(^{34}\) In both of these examples, Menchú indicates that breaking with traditional culture is synonymous with becoming dishonorable in the eyes of the community. Preserving tradition is tantamount to preserving life itself; for the Maya-Quiché people, living without cultural

\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 60. (My emphasis.)

\(^{33}\)Ibid., p. 62.

\(^{34}\)Ibid., p. 63
practice likens to nonexistence.

More often than not, the internal focus of Menchú's community appears to be a defensive mechanism for protecting its cultural autonomy and resisting acculturation into the more politically and economically powerful ladino community. She declares: "[O]ur grandparents say of Coca-Cola: 'Never let your children drink this dreadful stuff because it is something which threatens our culture.' They say: 'These things are made by machines; our forefathers never used machines.'" And later on: "We must not mix our customs with those of the Whites. So we don't eat bread. It is not our tortilla.... Don't let our children get used to eating bread; our ancestors had no bread." It becomes obvious from Menchú's testimony that there is indeed an enormous amount of social control in her community, ranging, as we have seen, from marriage protocol and courting etiquette to the consumption of soft drinks.

An equally relevant portrayal of a traditional, cultural community's social control over its inhabitants exists among the Miskito Indians on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. As I have briefly mentioned, information about this group of people is limited and dated. In contrast, information about the Mayan Indians is plentiful. Despite these empirical shortcomings I have attempted to use the information I have found to support both Calhoun's argument and my own thesis.

The 1982 MISURASATA Charter of the United Nations for
Indigenous Unity, while clearly influenced by Sandinist rhetoric, provides insight into the goals and values of the Miskito Indians as well as the Sumu and Rama, two smaller Indian groups living in Nicaragua. The document states:

Our education should provide our children with a knowledge of their own culture, so that they can be proud of it and in this way strengthen their ethnic identity. The Sandinist State must guarantee our indigenous people their right to exist, to live in accordance with our customs and to develop our cultures, since they constitute specific ethnic identities — that is to say, the right to maintain and develop our cultures, languages and traditions. We do not want to imitate foreign forms, but to be as we are. Therefore, we strive that our Sandinist country be a truly multi-ethnic state, in which each ethnic group has the right of self-determination and a free choice of social and cultural alternatives.

These goals most obviously include protection of cultural autonomy and tradition. By extension, though, we can understand these goals as also signifying a recognizable value being placed upon the existence of enforceable social norms within the Miskito communities.

In an entirely different sort of document, the Smithsonian Institution’s 1932 Ethnographic Survey of the

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36"Lineamientos Generales: 1982 Charter of the United Nations for Indigenous Unity" National Revolution and Indigenous Identity, the conflict between Sandinistas and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast pp. 48-64.
Miskito and Sumu Indians of Honduras and Nicaragua, adherence to social norms is also evident. Despite the ethnocentric and often racist tone of the survey, readers are able to glean some notion of Miskito social life. The author's descriptions are at times condescending and clearly skewed by his subjective interpretation of Miskito lifestyle; nonetheless, he reveals that the community is ruled -- like the more "modern" example of Menchú's community -- with strict adherence to social norms. Not surprisingly, these norms deal with many of the same aspects of life which I have discussed with respect to the Mayan Indians: religion, marriage, sexuality, birth rites, childrearing and death ceremonies. The following passage illustrates these norms while also providing a sense of the content and tone of the author's work:

During the menstrual periods, "woman sickness," the woman is considered unclean and is shunned by her husband. She must not touch any food intended for other people, otherwise the latter might die.... When the Miskito woman is inconvenienced in the accustomed manner, she occupies a small temporary hut built by her husband at a few hundred yards from the settlement. She remains there a couple of days.... While in this state of impurity the woman must not be seen by a sukya, [holy man] for that would weaken the latter's connection with the spirits, and perhaps even cause his death. At the conclusion of the third day the woman bathes herself in a neighboring creek and then rejoins her family. All cooking vessels used by her during this period are broken and thrown away.37

Clearly, the social behavior of Miskito women is not only influenced by communal regulations, but dictated by them.

The author continues his description of Miskito life with an account of a similarly restrictive and norm-based behavior dealing with the death of a spouse:

Upon the death of his wife a man generally married her sister; similarly, if a woman has lost her husband, she was taken in marriage by her brother-in-law. For that reason, the names for stepfather and father's brother are identical in most of the dialects spoken on the Mosquito Coast. On the other hand, the children of brother and sister are not considered blood relatives, and a union between such cousins is the common, and originally perhaps, the only marriage allowed. Unions of this kind are still encouraged to this day, for it is felt that family ties are strengthened thereby.\(^{38}\)

While the peculiarities of these customs may have evolved since the survey was written, the recent works of Forrest Colburn, Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider provide evidence that the substructure of communal influence on the social behavior of Miskito Indians retains a substantial amount of control over their lives.

Finally, Calhoun points to a fourth explanation of why traditional cultural communities are more readily mobilized into collective action than "modern" communities. He maintains that traditional communities have a foundation of ideological unity that confers upon them the notion of a "free social space." In other words, community members possess a common cultural identity which both results from

\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 146.
and serves to protect the cultural distinctiveness and autonomy of the group. Menchú substantiates this claim with a personal account of Indian conflicts with Guatemalan government officials and her community's attempts at political and physical self-defense. While discussing the development of the Comité Unidad Campesina (Committee for Peasant Unity, or CUC) she defines the organization's goals: "a fair wage from landowners; respect for our communities; the decent treatment we deserve as people, not animals; respect for our religion, our customs, our culture."³⁹

Along with the political objectives of fair salaries and adequate living conditions (goals not uncommon to an oppressed people living in any state) Menchú includes recognition and consideration of her community's cultural differences. Political goals and cultural goals have become inextricably fused.

By repeatedly using the terms "our" and "we," Menchú's testimony confirms Calhoun's notion of the ideological unity of traditional community. She continues:

We can select what is truly relevant for our people. Our lives show us what this is. It has guaranteed our existence. Otherwise we would not have survived. We have rejected all the aims governments have tried to impose. It wasn't only me who did this, of course. I'm saying we did it together. Those are the conclusions my whole community came to.... [W]e have hidden our identity because we needed to resist, we wanted to protect what governments have wanted to take away from us. They have tried to take our things away and impose others on us, be it through religion,

³⁹Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, p. 160. (My emphasis.)
through dividing up the land, through schools, through books, through radio, through all things modern. This is why we maintain the rites for our ceremonies. And why we don't accept Catholic Action as the only way to God, and why we don't perform only Christian ceremonies. We don't want to because we know that they are weapons to take away what is ours.\textsuperscript{40}

Similarly, in the MISURASATA Charter of the U.N. for Indigenous Unity, the authors explain:

It is thought that if the Indio is to be liberated socially, there must be an end to his being an Indio; that is to say to crush his ethnic specificity and naturally integrate him into the national society. Certainly you may sometimes hear about the need to preserve cultural values, but these are empty words for nothing is done to put them into practice. Certain dogmatic Marxists also stubbornly ignore the question of ethnicity, despite the empirical facts. The complexities of inter-ethnic friction are squeezed into the narrow mould of class struggle. What this type of Marxism does not realize is that indigenous populations are able to act from a political consciousness that stems from an ethnic consciousness.... Our fundamental right should... be guaranteed that we can advance our own means of cultural, linguistic, social, religious, economic and political expression. \"EVERY PEOPLE HAS THE RIGHT TO WORK FOR THE TRIUMPH OF THEIR OWN CULTURE.\"\textsuperscript{41}

Both of these criticisms of cultural universalism and of dominant groups' "ignorance" of distinct ethnic groups endorse the notion that the Mayan and Miskito traditional communities are, at least to some degree, united by their common culture. This is not to ignore the fact that conflicts exist both within and among Indian communities;

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., pp. 170-171.

\textsuperscript{41}"Charter of the United Nations for Indigenous Unity," pp. 60-3. (My emphasis; capitalization original.)
instead, the passages set forth evidence that Indian identity is primary for both groups. Furthermore, the "ethnic consciousness" to which the authors refer gives credence to Calhoun's belief in the traditional community's foundation of ideological solidarity.

I have illustrated in this section of the paper that substantial evidence exists to support Calhoun's four premises concerning the mobilization of traditional communities. If his thesis were accurate, the evidence points to the conclusion that traditional communities are indeed more readily mobilized into collective action than non-traditional communities. My objective here is to establish that evidence indeed exists to uphold Calhoun's proposal, and explicitly not to address the second half of his argument. I offer this paper as a theoretical critique of political economy and not an empirical critique concerning actual mobilization of traditional communities into political action.

In the following section, I provide a detailed account of Popkin's intervention into the moral economy versus political economy debate. The purpose of Chapter II is to give the reader an overview of Popkin's position and thereby reveal why his understanding of peasant rationality cannot explain the behaviors and ideas which I have examined through Calhoun's four points. In Chapter III, I propose an alternative theoretical conception of rationality to account for these behaviors and ideas. I conclude by supporting my
proposal with empirical evidence.
Chapter II:  
Moral Economy and Popkin's Counteraction

Because Popkin's reasoning in The Rational Peasant is first and foremost a response to Scott’s The Moral Economy of the Peasant, I begin this analysis with an overview of the "moral economy" approach and a summary of its principal arguments.

A. Scott's View of Moral Economy

Moral economy maintains that peasant violence is a solely defensive reaction against capitalism and an attempt to preserve the pre-capitalist structures that insure peasant welfare. In this view, resistance only perpetuates a rigid social hierarchy and the primacy of the dominant over the weak. Scott claims that colonialism, state formation and capitalism handicap peasant security by increasing the social inequality and stratification that

42 James C. Scott argues that peasants will fight to maintain or restore the pre-capitalist institutions that preserve the communal "welfare system" on which they depend for survival. This system, he claims, provides money, food, clothing, shelter and health care for peasants lacking the resources to provide for their own (or their family's) survival in economically difficult times. These institutions also provide consistent protection from starvation with collective insurance schemes--such as scattered-plot cultivation--which safeguard against the spoliation or destruction of any one family's food supply. See: Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), pp. 13-55.
force peasants into isolation, where they lack the insurance and protection of their traditional cultural or village institutions.

As a corollary to peasant distrust of unreliable sources of income, moral economy holds that security is paramount within peasant communities. Because peasants are consistently close to falling below the "danger line," or minimal subsistence level,\(^4\) even minute drops in production or income can trigger a disaster within the peasant household. Peasants strive to grow enough food for themselves and their families; that is, the "safety first" principle states that peasants are averse to financial risk and focus on avoiding losses rather than maximizing profits to improve living standards.

Scott argues that capitalist development within peasant communities thwarts the aim of their "moral economy" by turning labor, food and land into merchandise, where previously access to such commodities had been fundamental "rights" due to all village members, regardless of economic prosperity. In other words, by including land and labor in a competitive market, the substance of peasant society

\(^4\)Scott writes: "While a minimum income has solid physiological dimensions, we must not overlook its social and cultural implications. In order to be a fully functioning member of village society, a household needs a certain level of resources to discharge its necessary ceremonial and social obligations as well as to feed itself adequately and continue to cultivate. To fall below this level is not only to risk starvation, it is too suffer a profound loss of standing within the community and perhaps to fall into a permanent situation of dependence." See Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, p. 9.
becomes subordinate to the laws of that market and eliminates the tendencies toward "leveling" and "inclusiveness" that exist in the well-functioning moral economy.

Another moral economist, Eric Wolf, notes that "capitalism 'liberated' man as an economic agent, but the concrete process of liberation entailed the accumulation of human suffering against which anti-capitalist critics, conservatives and radicals alike, [have] direct[ed] their social and moral criticism." Moral economy views peasant welfare as inversely related to commercial progress in a capitalist market. Because they provide the greatest insurance of peasants' well-being, eradicating traditional institutions generates tensions which can eventually erupt into revolt and revolution.

Moral economists maintain that peasants' traditional distaste for buying and selling in a market atmosphere develops because of their subsistence lifestyle, which in most cases, provides only enough food for an individual or family's subsistence. No food typically remains to be marketed from peasants' harvest, and on the rare occasion that it does, surplus is likely to be shared with needy extended family members or the village poor, as religious

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and cultural obligations dictate.\textsuperscript{45} Because surplus is rare,\textsuperscript{46} preserving the "right to subsistence" through cultural institutions like these is generally the peasant's primary interest. Such village organizations, moral economist argue, are organized to insure subsistence for the poorest villagers by making demands on "wealthier" ones when it becomes economically necessary to do so. In contrast to this relative security of village institutions and communal insurance schemes, capitalist markets provide only an unpredictable, inconsistent means to satisfy subsistence needs. Therefore, according to moral economy, peasants turn to organized, capitalist markets only when unable to satisfy their subsistence needs and cultural obligations through

\textsuperscript{45} James C. Scott explains such behavior in a Malaysian village in which he lived and studied: "Razak's family [example of an extremely poor villager's family] received enough gifts of paddy and rice to feed them for perhaps three months. At the end of Ramadan it is the duty of each Moslem to make a religious gift of rice, called fitrah. In addition to the customary gifts to the mosque, the iman, and the village prayer house, rice is often given, one gallon at a time, to poor relatives and neighbors, particularly those who have worked for the farmer making the gift. Razak was given nearly tens gallons of rice as fitrah...and smaller gifts on the second major Islamic feast day a month later. [On the third occasion for religious gifts] Razak received a gunny sack of paddy from his eldest brother...and four or five gallons from the village.... See Scott, \textit{Weapons of the Weak} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 1-13, 86-91.

\textsuperscript{46} In \textit{The Moral Economy of the Peasant}, \textit{Weapons of the Weak} and \textit{Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia}, James Scott and Rigoberta Menchú detail the vulnerable and erratic lifestyle found in subsistence-farming communities. The authors demonstrate not only the rarity of surplus for the subsistence farmer, but also the infrequency of a peasant family to even have enough to feed themselves and/or carry out their cultural or religious obligations.
local organizations.47

Moral economists believe that stable social relationships are necessary for maintaining village security, giving each individual a stake in protecting the community as a whole and forcing him or her to internalize the need for social stability. This internalization, manifests itself in peasants' deliberate efforts to adhere to the traditional roles that have historically provided them with security. The economic goal of the peasant household is to provide itself with sustenance and to fulfill necessary social, religious and moral obligations. These goals lead moral economists to insist that peasants' needs are defined by their culture. In other words, the peasant's production must account for cultural as well as physiological needs.

Because social stability performs an important function within peasant communities, social unity is crucial to peasant villages. Systematic participation in village activities helps promote collective interests and distinct village identity. Moral economists claim that this solid communal identity helps to foster collective, consensual decision-making, control internal conflicts and preclude the individualistic focus on material gain that is fostered and even encouraged within capitalist societies.

Though many of the tenets of moral economy appear to

47Wolf, Peasants, pp. 44-55.
romanticize peasant behavior, proponents of the doctrine generally acknowledge that mistrust, antipathy and individual frictions indeed exist within peasant societies. Notwithstanding the conflict existing within the communities, moral economists assert that the village institutions and organizations assist in surmounting these conflicts and enable the communities to provide minimal subsistence and welfare for all their members. Calhoun observes: "[B]inding relationships may be full of conflict. As the Arab proverb has it, 'I against my brothers; I and my brothers against my cousins; I, my brothers and my cousins against the world.'" Moral economists recognize that communal solidarity does not necessarily indicate a high level of communal harmony. While the two entities are surely related, they can also exist in isolation from one another.

B. Popkin's Answer to Moral Economy

Like other critics of James Scott and the moral economy view, Samuel Popkin criticizes the moral economy analysis.

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48 For example, Popkin argues against the notion that patron-client associations among peasants are comparable to extended family relationships. Popkin believes patron-client relations are strictly business ventures organized so that each party benefits from participating in the contract.


of peasant societies for being overly confident in the virtue of traditional communities and their members. Contrary to Scott's arguments, Samuel Popkin believes the majority of moral economy's central claims are unsupported and unexamined. He has developed in contrast a "political economy" view of peasants' individual and collective decision-making processes, which he claims is a more accurate account of peasant behavior and institutions. Despite Popkin's unyielding objection to the basic premises of moral economy, there are a few components of the view which he does find compelling. For example, political and moral economists agree that peasants are controlled by the constant threat and fear of falling below subsistence level and jeopardizing their personal and familial safety. To summarize Popkin's view, I detail his primary opposition and response to moral economy and then review the subsidiary components of his argument. Through the careful breakdown of political economy, the reader will see that Popkin's view remains limited by its incapacity to reckon with the behaviors and ideas examined in the previous chapter.

The first and primary conflict between moral and political economy arises over diverging concepts of the production, consumption and exchange of material goods.

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For example, Popkin argues against moral economy's treatment of investments and gambles made by peasants, community "norms," the free-rider problem within peasant communities, patron-client relations and peasant goals and rationality. These topics will be addressed in detail later in this paper.
within peasant societies. Popkin disagrees with what he terms moral economy's "idealistic" notion of peasant motivation for communal rather than individual gain. That is, unlike moral economists, Popkin believes that peasants seek not only to maintain their current living standards but also to raise their subsistence levels through both short- and long-term investments and gambles. He asserts (in contrast with the information which Rigoberta Menchú has contributed to the investigation) that peasants rely on family investments to provide long-term security (having many children, for example) and village-wide initiatives or communal investments to provide shorter-term gains.\textsuperscript{52} Assuming many of these investments are unpredictable, Popkin believes moral economy's "safety first" assumptions about subsistence floors are often misleading and at times, entirely wrong.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52}For example, the peasant couple will have many children to insure that someone will provide for them and care for their land when they are too old to do it themselves. In the short term, peasants may contribute to village food cooperatives to insure themselves against failed or ruined crops during a particularly risky (hot, rainy, cold) season.

\textsuperscript{53}For example, according to James C. Scott, the "safety first" principle holds that peasants will overlook opportunities to increase their earnings dramatically through risky investments by instead seeking to maintain their current (often minimal) earnings in a risk-free manner. For example, a peasant farmer prefers to grow a cheap, easily grown and edible crop (like rice) over a more lucrative but unreliable crop such as tobacco or rubber. The former is very likely to grow at least enough rice to sustain the family until the next season, even if not enough remains to be marketed. On the other hand, although a good tobacco crop would be quite lucrative, a failed tobacco crop is likely to mean insufficient amounts of food and money to last until the following season. For a more detailed discussion of this principle, see
Specifically, Popkin disagrees with moral economy’s notion that peasant villages propagate the "safety first" system through community-wide security measures that value community welfare over individual welfare. Popkin rejects moral economy’s assumption that villages function to provide "safety first" for their members. He terms this belief "a direct leap from common interest to collective outcome," and contends that collective rationality within peasant communities is only a fallacy of moral economy. In other words, Popkin rejects the notion that peasants seek to preserve or propagate collective interests and argues instead, that like those living in capitalist societies, peasants are primarily interested in protecting their individual and familial interests.

In Popkin’s view, peasants frequently make risky investments in addition to cautious, risk-free investments consistent with moral economy. The peasant is "rational" in the Downsian sense that he has his own (or his family’s) best interest in mind at all times, and seeks to reap the

Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* pp.4-13, 15-26, 29, 35, 197-201.


55This is one of the main arguments I have with Popkin as I believe that a sense collective rationality does exist in relation to culture, as in the discussion of Calhoun’s points three and four. In fact, as we have seen, this collective rationality, or "collective consciousness" plays an important role in the mobilization and collective action of peasant communities.
most profit from the least possible about of work.\textsuperscript{56} "Moral" behavior for the good of the community, therefore, is not really perceived as a collective insurance scheme, but as a way of protecting the individual and his or her family. Because the peasant perceives commodities and wealth as limited resources within the village, all individual and familial desire for economic advancement is necessarily a zero-sum game which precipitates intra-village conflict. Again, contrary to this argument, Rigoberta Menchú and others have provided evidence in the earlier discussion that ubiquitous scarcity can actually encourage cooperation and socialization to norms of sharing and general open-handedness within the traditional community.

Popkin rejects moral economy's belief that "better-off" villagers will come to the aid of their poorer neighbors in times of economic hardship. His own analysis of Vietnamese peasant communities demonstrated that the most destitute individuals were actually excluded from their villages, even before they fell to subsistence level. Popkin found that it was not community members, but the outsiders (the Viet Minh, in his case study) who intervened into village relations to help foster stability and protect the lower economic strata from expulsion or landlessness by increasing tax revenues or

\textsuperscript{56}Anthony Downs defines a rational actor as "a man who moves toward his goals in a way which, to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output." See: An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1957), p. 5.
forcing villagers to clear soil for the landless.

Popkin concludes from these findings that the moral economists' "metaphor of corporate village as 'collectivity' should be replaced by the metaphor of the corporative village as 'corporation.'" In other words, village membership does not indicate special tax breaks, welfare or insurance, but merely the license to do business and the freedom to use the institutions and organizations within the village and the larger peasant community. Once again, Menchú, Carmack, Ráfaga and Colburn have demonstrated that at the very least, Popkin's conclusions here are far from being universal. What is "true" for Vietnamese peasants of the mid-twentieth century is not necessarily true for peasants living under different circumstances and/or in different time periods.

Popkin distinguishes between the risk-sharing mechanisms found within peasant communities which moral economists frequently lump into one category: "safety-first measures." By differentiating between mechanisms to provide insurance, welfare and subsidies, Popkin points out that all such policies are usually undermined by common-goods problems, rampant mistrust and the difficulty of forming any form of village-wide consensus. Popkin's analysis of Vietnamese peasants illustrates that favors of reciprocity lauded by moral economists as "morality" are limited to

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economic equals, and that village leaders only help the less fortunate if aid does not negatively affect their own long-term welfare. For example, Popkin believes the widely used scattered-field system is not really a collective strategy used to protect the community from starvation if floods or fires should destroy crops, but an individual-level strategy for avoiding risks. Popkin claims that the self-interested motivation behind participation in this type of farming demonstrates that "village insurance" and "safety-first" schemes extolled by moral economy as provisions for the collective good are erroneous.

A further blow to moral economy's vision of peasants' commitment to village unity and collective welfare is a constant friction that Popkin observes between individual and group rationality. By following individual "safety-first" measures (like scattered-field farming, Popkin argues) each farmer (and thus the village as a whole) is ultimately less productive in the long run than he (it) would have been if the community had followed an aggregate safety-first strategy. That is, while scattered plots reduce the chance of any one farmer losing his entire crop, they also reduce the maximum yield per farmer. Popkin maintains that village-level insurance schemes would be more productive and secure than individual-level schemes if and only if moral economy assumptions concerning peasant behavior were correct. In other words, if peasants had the confidence in the charity of their fellow community members
that moral economists claim they do, there would be no need
to participate in the scattered field system and produce
below their maximum possible crop yield. If peasants were
as altruistic as moral economists believe, they would work
on non-scattered fields and have faith that if their crops
were destroyed, the community would provide food and money
for them to manage until the following season. Popkin
claims that this was clearly not the case in the Vietnamese
peasant communities that he observed.

Contrary to Popkin’s findings, however, Menchú’s
testimony describes the farming system in her community,
where each family does farm its own plot in addition to
helping maintain a separate, communal plot of land that is
given to community members in times of need, used for
religious ceremonies or divided up among the community as
rare surplus. A strictly economic sense of individual
rationality cannot account for behaviors and beliefs that
consistently repudiate the notion that "more" is always
"better."

In contrast to the euphemisms of brotherly love,
morality and equality common to the moral economy view of
peasant behavior, Popkin claims that stratification exists
in pre-capitalist peasant societies. Evidenced by more
interest in individual than communal security, the divisions
between "rich" and "middle" peasants, or poor and landless

58 According to Popkin, these are peasants owning land and
farming equipment.
peasants exist even within the "primitive" societies which moral economists tend to label egalitarian. Popkin claims that the polarization of wealth within these communities does not result solely from capitalist intervention and competition in production for marketing purposes; in his view, colonialism and capitalism exacerbate but do not create economic competition and social stratification within peasant communities.

Popkin's second argument against moral economy's analysis of peasant societies involves the cultural norms which moral economists consider paramount to the peasant community. Contrary to moral economy, Popkin believes peasant villages are not predominately "moral" communities that adhere faithfully to social norms. He maintains that peasant villages are social organizations -- not unlike those existing in capitalist economies -- that are tainted by self-interest, social ranking disputes, desire to improve living standards at the expense of others, and the free-rider problem. Additionally, village leaders and other "elites" have a "capitalist" interest in securing exclusive profits rather than providing an egalitarian or "level" social system.  

The free-rider phenomenon occurs when an organized group seeks a collective good that will be enjoyed by all if achieved. An individual may rationalize that he or she will benefit from the good even if he or she does not work along with the rest of the group to attain it. Individuals participating in this type of behavior were referred to by Mancur Olson as "free-riders" in The Logic of Collective Action, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). For example: Ten co-workers in a real estate firm are told by
Popkin claims that if moral economy's notion of the peasant's altruistic motivation were correct, free-riderism would not exist within peasant communities because it would be overcome by socialization to communal norms esteem
ing volunteerism. In contrast to this ideal, however, Popkin found that the twentieth-century Vietnamese peasantry did not behave according to this model. In fact, the lack of adherence to communal norms in colonial Vietnam provided an influential and important opportunity for the Viet Minh both to mobilize peasants into their organization and to divide them against their fellow countrymen. In other words, by helping overcome free-riderism and providing collective incentives to peasant villages, the Viet Minh were able to co-opt peasant support. Popkin adds that the Catholic, Cao

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their supervisor that if they improve their collective sales rate by fifteen percent at the end of the year, they will each receive twice their usual Christmas bonus. The workers are anxious to earn the extra money, and in the following two weeks, seven of the ten already have at least four new sales prospects each. The other three workers calculate that even if only ten of the new leads turn into sales (which is very likely) the group will exceed the fifteen percent increase needed to earn the extra Christmas bonus. Assuming the bonus is already a "sure thing" the three workers slack off on their marketing programs in anticipation of "free-riding" on the success of their seven co-workers whose diligence and struggle increased the collective sales rate.

60 Popkin, The Rational Peasant, p. 50. Michael Taylor has argued: "It is worth noting that it is not an implication of the moral economy approach that 'there is a community orientation whereby the free-rider and leadership problems are easily overcome by proper socialization to norms.' (Popkin, The Rational Peasant, p. 25.) In fact...some villages can overcome free-rider problems, not through socialization to norms but through individual rationality, just because they are strong communities--but this argument is strangely absent from The Rational Peasant. See: M. Taylor, "Structure, Culture and Action in the Explanation of Social Change," Politics and Society Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1989): 155.
Dai and Hoa Hao religions operated in a similar fashion, but that the communists were "the only group with the sophisticated understanding of national and international politics necessary to begin the task of forging a nation by incorporating the diverse groups within Vietnam and doing battle against French colonialism."\textsuperscript{61}

Again in contrast to the Vietnamese case, we have seen that traditional Mayan Indians in Guatemala do esteem volunteerism, self-sacrifice and sharing as part of their religion and culture\textsuperscript{62}. For these reasons, Guatemalan governments have had great difficulty using non-violent means to dissolve Indian communities, recruit them into pro-government political organizations or divide the masses of peasants against themselves, as was the case in Vietnam. The fact that some Mayan Indians have left their communities to pursue more modern lifestyles does not disprove my argument. As Menchú affirms, individuals who abandon their customs or regard them shamefully are those who look unfavorably upon their own race and seek to distance themselves from it in favor of assimilation (albeit with limited possibilities) into ladino culture. Individuals who reject their own ethnicity (by refusing to identify themselves as Indians, for example) and with it, traditional

\textsuperscript{61}Popkin, \textit{The Rational Peasant} p. 185.

\textsuperscript{62}In the Guatemalan case, overcoming free-rider problems could result from such socialization and/or through individual rationality, as Michael Taylor has suggested. See: Taylor, "Structure, Culture and Action," p. 155.
culture, lie outside the scope of this argument.

A third difference between Popkin and the moral economists involves peasant behavior in a revolutionary context. Moral economy states that peasants support revolutionaries only when their subsistence (and therefore survival) is threatened, whereas Popkin believes that peasants living in feudal or subsistence conditions will support revolutionaries even without the inspiration of dramatic subsistence crises. He rejects moral economy's assumption that peasants have fixed views of suitable income, will not strive to raise their income above that level and are not interested in new forms of consumption. In his view, peasant are interested in raising and diversifying their income and may indeed look to revolutionaries to give them such opportunities.\(^6\)

Popkin states that short-term declines in peasant welfare are neither necessary nor sufficient to precipitate

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\(^6\) This point proves complicated in the context of the Guatemalan case, because in many respects, both Scott and Popkin appear partially correct in their analyses. For example, Menchú supports Scott's notion that Indians are not interested in new forms of consumption (e.g., clothes, Coca-Cola, white bread, mechanical corn grinders and contraceptives.) However, as Popkin argues, she also confirms that they are interested in improving standards of living. (For example, not having to work on fincas, not having to awaken at three in the morning for work, having adequate food and shelter and lowering the infant mortality rate, for starters.) For the purpose of this paper, the crucial point is that Popkin's assertion that peasant struggles are not to restore traditional systems (or tradition itself) is not universal. He sets the two ideas up as mutually exclusive options, when that is not necessarily the case. Menchú has illustrated that traditional communities may desire both to preserve tradition and improve living conditions.
peasant uprisings, adding that peasants constantly seek individual and collective means to improve their situations. For Popkin, therefore, peasant protests are collective actions hinging on the abilities of a group or class to organize themselves to make demands on the ruling class. These movements, he notes, are a reflection of peasants' increasing ability to organize and fight for rights and privileges to which they have historically been denied.64 Unlike the moral economists, Popkin believes peasant struggles are frequently battles to control markets and bureaucracies rather than movements to restore the "traditional" systems that provided past security.

A fourth, closely related argument which Popkin makes against moral economy involves the land owner-tenant relationship. Moral economy commonly compares this relationship to that between a "patriarch and a distant relative," which Popkin finds too positive a characterization for what he considers an often exploitative and hostile association. He points to the very existence of a landless laboring-class within peasant society as evidence of the critical weakness of moral economy.65 For Popkin, the

64Popkin, The Rational Peasant, p. 35.

65Popkin is implying moral economy theorizes that landlessness among peasants will not exist for individuals but only for entire communities. That is, if an individual within a community lost his or her parcel of land, the rest of the village would compensate for the loss by sharing their own property. Popkin does not address the possibility that entire communities may lose their land, be forced to separate and attempt to assimilate into new communities that may already be short on arable land.
lack of moral solidarity among the peasantry implies that competition exists among them for land and credit from patrons. Popkin maintains that competition and discontent within peasant communities guarantees the existence of a readily available throng of peasant tenants, willing to help their landlord evict a trouble-making or indebted fellow resident in return for food, land or money.

Popkin argues that peasants can unite to overthrow landlords and increase their collective security, but only by changing modes of production, reorganizing local institutions to remove monopolies and overcoming the linguistic barriers that hinder their success at the marketplace. The central government, therefore, is not invariably threatening to the peasantry; on the contrary, Popkin argues, it can actually be an ally in the process of economic growth and transformation. Consequently, the commercialization of agriculture and development of strong central authorities are not consistently detrimental to peasant welfare even though they may initially shake-up the basic foundation of peasant society. Popkin does not suggest that capitalism and colonialism are compassionate, but simply that traditional institutions are harsher and less efficient than moral economists suggest.

In light of these arguments, it is important to recall

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^If that transformation, however, is unwanted, as in the Guatemalan Indian case, then the idea of the government being an "ally" is nothing less than a misnomer.
that in contrast to representatives from the traditional communities discussed earlier, Popkin does not consider the preservation of culture or custom as "important to peasant welfare." Only if we exclude this factor from consideration, therefore, does his conclusion ring true. That is, the commercialization of agriculture is clearly detrimental to peasant society if cultivating the land and growing maize is a crucial aspect of Maya-Quiché religion and culture. If nothing else, commercialization interferes with the goals of preserving traditional practices and adhering to ancestral religious customs.

Popkin claims that change introduced by colonialism -- especially that involving external relations and authority penetrating peasant villages -- is a dependent variable that can be explained by treating economic and political concerns of peasant villages as independent variables. He maintains that the distribution of communal resources and patterns of self-interest that prevailed in villages before the advent of colonial rule were key in determining the local response to external regulations and extractions. "Economics shapes village institutions," but should be understood to indicate the infrastructure of the economic system -- land titles, taxes, methods of conflict resolution and security provisions for people and property, not just land, labor,
Contrary to moral economy, Popkin believes that peasant revolutions and reorganizations in response to outside intervention do not indicate a breakdown in values, moral bonds or village unity. Instead, he considers these actions as typical results of the colonial influences which exacerbate existing social stratification by strengthening the political advantage of the upper classes and thereby inciting peasant protests that eventually snowball into support for revolutionary change. Clearly, the notion of social stratification within traditional peasant communities is not universal. For example, Menchú's testimony repeatedly affirms the overly nature of her community and its members.

Class benefits from revolutionary action do not necessarily mean that there are collective reasons to participate in the activity because the benefits of collective action appear only in absence of the free-rider problem. For example, many peasants chose not to participate collective action in pre-colonial Vietnam; the free-rider syndrome was rampant. Instead of working for

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67 Here, Popkin is arguing that economics shapes village institutions, meaning organizations, their rules and processes. I disagree with this concept and contend that if cultural factors are weighed into the equation, they will displace economics as the driving force (or independent variable) in explaining traditional peasant behavior, both individual and communal. See: Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 182.

communal benefit to further shared interests, Popkin claims that peasants opt to protect and advance exclusively individual concerns. Like Mancur Olson, Popkin believes "unless there is a coercion or some other special device to make individuals act for the common good, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest."70

Because he believes peasants are primarily interested in financial gain and improving their living conditions, Popkin argues that cooperation in peasant society is based on task-specific incentives rather than feelings of moral obligation or brotherly love. He argues that peasants can organize themselves without the intervention of outsiders, but that such organization is restricted to cases of exigent necessity; that is, for security or survival.71

Once again diverging from Popkin's analysis, the earlier discussion and testimony demonstrates that the traditional community's ability to organize itself lies outside political economy's narrow, crisis-situation boundaries, and in fact, often applies to strictly ideological matters. I reiterate my central argument:

69 Olson, The Logic of Collective Action.
70 Ibid.
71 Popkin notes, "caution and distrust structures the forms of cooperation but does not prevent cooperative behavior." He describes cooperation among small groups of peasants to stabilize production and provide insurance and collective goods absolutely essential to survival, like self-defense and irrigation. Please see The Rational Peasant, pp. 96-98.
Popkin's conclusions from the Vietnamese case-study are neither universal nor generalizable. The failure of Popkin's theory to account for the foretold behaviors indicates that we must at least consider another alternative, one that has the capacity to include culture into the analysis and explanation of rationality.

In sum, then, Popkin's view differs from moral economy in its emphasis on individual rather than collective decision-making and strategic rather than norm-based interaction within the peasantry. Popkin insists his position does not necessarily mean peasants are only concerned with material gain. Instead, he posits, peasants evaluate all possible outcomes associated with specific choices and then measure each potential action according to a subjective assessment of the probable outcome. In economic terms, peasants act according to what they believe will maximize their expected utility.

The "rationality" Popkin portrays is not intended to suggest that peasants are only self-interested, because he claims to believe that at times peasants are concerned about the welfare of others, though he never details when those times might be. Nevertheless, peasants' primary concerns are with self and immediate family.\(^7\) When considering the

\(^7\)Although here, it appears "immediate family" needs qualification. If one fails to disregard Popkin's discussion of frequently-practiced "infanticide," this assertion appears to conflict with his earlier argument that peasant children are largely considered expendable commodities that can be replaced when finances permit. I assume here he is referring only to "older"
consequences of specific actions with regard to broader values and objectives, Popkin concludes that peasants are more likely than not to act in a "rational and [economically] self-interested" manner.\footnote{Popkin, \textit{The Rational Peasant}, p. 31.}
Chapter III:
Complementing rationality with culture

A comprehensive examination and explanation of peasant behavior in collective action deviates from Popkin's view in two fundamental ways. First, Popkin insists "rationality" is a crucial factor in explaining peasant behavior. I agree with him on this point. However, in contrast to Popkin's argument, I claim that rationality is neither static nor monomorphic, but determined --at least in part-- by sociocultural forces functioning within a given community. If we are to judge, cross-culturally, the "rationality" of conduct or beliefs without tainting our analysis with Western prejudice, we must account for specific influences upon the formation of those behaviors and ideas. "By abstracting human beings from their social/historical condition in order to develop an account of pure rational action, the analysis implicitly takes the position that the structural conditions for the translation of rationality into action are of theoretically secondary interest to the problem of characterizing traditional action itself."\(^{74}\) In

\(^{74}\)Levine and Wright, "Rationality and Class Struggle," New Left Review 123 (1980): 60. While Popkin does not "abstract" Vietnamese peasants from their conditions, neither does he include particular cultural factors into his analysis of rationality. He treats the
other words, "pure" rationality cannot exist if we are to develop a model of rational behavior with the capacity for transcultural and global utility.

In many Latin American peasant societies traditional cultural factors help determine what constitutes "rational" or "irrational" behavior. As Craig Calhoun asserts: "Choices are still to be made, but they must take social relationships very closely into account." That is, while traditional culture does not predetermined peasant behavior, it is, as we have seen, an influential and constraining influence on individual and group activity. Levine and Wright argue:

Human beings may be generally rational...and yet may be generally thwarted from fully acting on the basis of that rationality because of social constraints, relations of domination, organizational incapacities for collective struggle and so on. The abstracted, ahistorical account of rationality may provide an essential element in the philosophical critique of those constraints, but it does not provide a basis for explaining the real determinations and contradictions of those constraints.

Second, in response to the moral economy view of peasant culture, which claims that peasants defend

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Vietnamese peasant as a generic "person type" whose behavior (or rationality) is duplicated in other, different circumstances. It is this universalization of peasant motivation and behavior to which I am reacting. When considering peasant rationality, we must account for specific social and historical factors in order to avoid the pitfall of unjustified cultural universalism.

Calhoun, "Radicalism of Tradition," p. 147.

Levine and Wright, "Rationality and Class Struggle," p. 60. (My emphasis.)
traditional institutions because they provide reliable means of subsistence, Popkin contends that peasants are constantly looking to improve their standards of living, often at the expense of fellow community members. He does not consider the possibility that a peasant community may cling to traditional institutions for the sake of tradition itself, as a means to protect and preserve its imperiled culture and autonomy. Preserving cultural traditions is synonymous with survival; theoretically, if the community's distinctive culture, traditions and institutions disappear, Menchu's people cease to exist. In other words, life without cultural identity is death. While rationality is indeed individually determined, that rational behavior can be employed to obtain and protect collective objectives that cannot be reduced to individually beneficial economic interests.

This paper has examined collective consciousness and individual sacrifice for the sake of community within two Central American peasant societies -- the Mayan Indians living in the Altiplano of Guatemala and the Miskito Indians on the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast. I believe that these cases are not "exceptions to the rule" of self-interested rational behavior -- as Popkin would likely encourage us to believe -- but indications of an intrinsic sense of community and collective interest that is irreducible to the individual level. In other words, as Menchu has informed us, individual rationality is at times not exercised for
individual benefit (indeed, it can be contrary to individual interest) but to safeguard a deeply personalized collective identity. A Miskito patriot explains:

In the Indian villages on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua we have our own way of living. We like to live in freedom. The people of Awastara, the village where I was born, like to live and think independently. Since the ancient days, we Miskito Indians have possessed great strength and wisdom, which have served to preserve and protect our traditions, our lives and our dignity as a nation.... Our spiritual family embraces all Indians who have tread upon this earth and all who will make life's journey in a future time.... Now in the year 1987, I, Rafaga, am demanding the restoration of our Miskito Indian rights. The voices of all my ancestors and the voices of all future generations of Miskito come now to mingle with my own as our words ride together on a gust of wind...exploding of fiery evidence into the ears of our world.\(^7\)

Likewise, in her personal testimony, Menchú tells of several occasions of non self-interested behavior which could not be explained by Popkin's account of economic rationality. For example, she describes the birth custom within the community:

The birth of a new member is very significant for the community, as it belongs to the community not just to the parents, and that's why three couples...must be there to receive it....[After the birth] the community takes over all the household expenses for...eight days and the family spends nothing..... The tying of hands at birth symbolizes...that no one should accumulate things that the rest of the community does not have and he must know how to share, to have open hands.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Reynaldo Reyes and J.K. Wilson, Rafaga, the Life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 3.

\(^8\) Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, pp. 11, 13, 15.
Here, both the actions of the community (giving money) and the symbolism of the custom (tying of hands) give credence to the central claim of this argument: the existence of norm-enforced, non self-interested behavior.

Another illustration of non self-interested behavior within the Maya-Quiché community unfolds in Menchú's description of her childhood work life. One particular season, while living on a landowner's farm with her family, Menchú's younger brother, Nicholas, starved to death. The ladino landowner forced them to leave without compensation because they had missed a day's work to bury the child. Menchú recounts the situation:

We didn't know our whereabouts, we didn't know where we were or anything. My mother didn't even know the name of the town we were in. But we knew we had to leave so my mother began getting our things together. So our neighbors said: 'We'll go with you even though it means losing everything we worked for too.' One of them lent my mother some money to pay for the burial since she'd been at the finca about for four months and had saved a little money....We arrived back at our house in the Altiplano....My father didn't know his son had died, nor did my other brothers and sisters because they were working on other fincas. Fifteen days later, they all arrived home to be greeted by the news that the little boy had died and that we owed a lot of money. My father and brothers and sisters had been earning in other fincas and had enough money to settle with our neighbor. The neighbor also gave what he felt he should to the dead child. That's how they helped us--the community, everyone--once we'd got home.  

Both the Miskito and Maya-Quiché cases reveal that part of the collective identity which both communities strive to

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protect includes a shrinking cultural base, endangered subsistence and a disappearing way of life. These peoples are literally in danger of extinction due to both atrocious living conditions, like the malnutrition Menchú mentions repeatedly in her narration, and organized campaigns to assimilate, integrate or destroy the indigenous populations.

Recall the suggestion of Ian Lustik with which I began this essay: there is "a pre-existing sense of community among participants in collective revolutionary action that makes it possible for organizers to appeal the rationality of their constituents as basis for participation."80 In the context of this paper, I maintain that (1) common culture and (2) collective consciousness are independent variables leading to the dependent variable (3) facilitated collective action. While I seek not to "prove" Calhoun's thesis concerning mobilization, I do believe that common cultural and traditional constraints combine with a collective consciousness that transcends individual economic interests combine to give these peasant groups the "pre-existing sense of community" to which Lustik refers. I do not believe this deduction is unconditionally true, but hinges on specific cultural and traditional influences functioning within the given community. That is, as Levine and Wright have indicated, rational behavior cannot be understood or explained in abstraction from its context, but only by

taking social, historical and cultural factors into account.

Craig Calhoun's explanation of peasant rationality and mobilization has provided four specific, yet generalizable factors to explain why traditional communities are mobilized into collective action more readily than non-traditional communities. Expanding upon these points without diving into the empirical problem of confirming his thesis, I conclude that: (1) specific cultural forces and (2) a sense of collective identity or group consciousness were (and are) at work in facilitating Mayan and Miskito mobilization into rebellious and even revolutionary activity.

Calhoun sets out the following definition of a traditional community:

Community is...a central medium for transmitting tradition and a large part of what tradition is about...a complex variable measuring the extent to which people are knit together by direct social relationships...[R]elationships may be stronger or weaker, networks may be knit more or less densely and systematically together, and a population may be more or less able to run its own affairs without outside intervention. Community constrains the range of free choice of individuals by committing them to specific, long-term relationships. Such communities make it possible for members to act with considerable certainty as to what their fellows will do.... [B]ecause their activity is kept largely within the grounds of established relationships, members of communities are able constantly to reproduce a traditional

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81 Calhoun adds that these relationships include both intimate and "secondary" associations. "They do not include those constructed through the mediation of bureaucracy or those transcending communications technology. Relationships which lack personal recognition and face-to-face constitution [are indirect.]

Thus, because they engender a collective identity (or collective consciousness, as I have tried to illustrate) traditional communities such as the Mayan and Miskito Indians engender collective, often non-economic interests which cannot be fulfilled at an individual level. For example, in accordance with the testimony of Menchú, the Mayan Indians living throughout Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico have fought for the past several decades for their cultural rights. Regardless of what that term boils down to, it follows that these "cultural rights" are sought for an entire group rather than any one individual. No individual can protect, preserve -- and certainly not propagate -- an entire culture by working independently.

Conceivably, most organized groups are composed of individuals who share at least one, and often many common interests. Unlike such "interest groups" (political parties, unions, university student bodies) whose members often have differing social backgrounds and different paramount goals, the traditional community can benefit from members' prior associations or bonds as components of one socioeconomic, political, linguistic and cultural body. Not only do they share a common culture, but a common autonomous culture that is not and cannot be duplicated outside of its

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existing social boundaries.
Conclusion

By considering the Mayan and Miskito Indians of Central America, I have illustrated that Samuel Popkin's argument for "political economy" in The Rational Peasant is flawed by its failure to consider culture in the study and theorizing of rational behavior. In criticizing the overly optimistic view of moral economists advanced in James C. Scott's The Moral Economy of the Peasant, Popkin appears to overstate his case in favor of an economically oriented peasantry which relies little (or not at all) on its communal traditions, norms or culture as bases for decision-making or determining rational behavior. By omitting these crucial factors and taking no account of specific cultural forces (or even general ones, for that matter) functioning within a given peasant community, Popkin implicitly embraces a cultural universalism that is clearly unsuitable for examining the Indian communities I have addressed in this paper.

An inquiry into the beliefs, actions and attitudes of Maya-Quiché and Miskito Indians indicates that Popkin's political economy falls short of providing an appropriate analytical framework for understanding these peoples. Scott's moral economy, in fact, appears a great deal more
appropriate. It seems clear that political and moral economy are not necessarily mutually exclusive schools of thought, but instead, can be complements in the task of explaining peasant behavior. Pitting one school against the other -- or rationality against tradition -- does little to advance our appreciation and understanding of peoples unlike ourselves. Michael Taylor explains:

From reading Samuel Popkin's attack in *The Rational Peasant* on Scott's *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, one might come away believing (as Popkin seems to believe) that these two approaches are incompatible with each other, that a peasant with a "moral economy" could not also be a rational peasant. This would be mistaken. There is in fact nothing in Scott's arguments that cannot be integrated into [an]...explanatory framework [of rational behavior].

As mentioned in the outset of this investigation, however, merely converging moral and political economy is not sufficient. The evidence examined in this essay substantiates the claim that we also must contemplate the third, "culturally inclusive" alternative which I have advanced. Omitting culture from considerations of rational behavior provides tacit support for cultural universalism. Such an exclusion must be avoided if we are to develop non-biased theories of rational choice.

To recapitulate the argument, I claim the following:

Here is this evidence (Menchú's testimony et. al.): If it is valid -- a question beyond the scope of this paper -- than existing moral and political economy frameworks cannot

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handle it. Therefore, we must also consider alternative approaches to rationality which can account for culture, and test them empirically in further investigation.

While the task of reconciling culture with the concept of rationality is fundamentally more complicated than Popkin's strictly economic analysis, is not theoretically impossible. Reiterating Levine and Wright, we need simply to consider rationality as "endogenous" to a given sociocultural system. The most "narrow" conclusion, then, is that a culturally aware inquiry into peasant behaviors can ultimately be advantageous to many disciplines of social science, beginning with anthropology, sociology and political science. In a more cosmopolitan sense, we human beings could do worse than to strive for cultural sensitivity and reciprocal understanding on the ever-shrinking planet which we all call home.
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