

## Culture



# Marilyn GATES, *In Default: Peasants, the Debt Crisis, and the Agricultural Challenge in Mexico*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1993, 274 pages

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[See table of contents](#)

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counts of e.g. gender and power or the (ir)relevancy of social science research in the making of public policy. And if you do, don't fail to take in those 14 pages: David Howes's anthropologically-minded — and yes, fragile [read: delicate, darling] — inquiry into "what is [possibly] distinctive about the *kinds of relations* that inform the life of the mind in Canada (as distinct from the U.S.)" (p. 159; original emphasis).

Marilyn GATES, *In Default: Peasants, the Debt Crisis, and the Agricultural Challenge in Mexico*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1993, 274 pages.

By Frans J. Schryer

University of Guelph

This is a timely book which provides useful insights into the dynamics of social change in rural Mexico. Professor Gates' case study of the state of Campeche traces the disastrous results of increasing state intervention in peasant agriculture, starting in the early seventies. Her research also focuses on the impact of the new policies introduced under president Salinas during the more recent period of economic restructuring. His government's neoliberal policies have opened up both new problems and new opportunities.

The book consists of seven chapters. An introductory chapter reviews recent literature dealing with the peasantry and its relationship with the Mexican state, and introduces the author and her research. The second chapter presents a more general appraisal of agrarian policy on the national level. This, plus a background chapter on the economic and political history of Campeche, set the backdrop to a more detailed examination of four planned agricultural projects. Each of these projects involved the introduction of credit and new forms of technology — irrigation, chemical inputs, and agricultural machinery — into a region hitherto characterized by slash-and-burn *milpa* cultivation and some extensive cattle production.

The four agricultural projects described differ not only in terms of type and mix of crops and technology, but also in regard to the kind of people involved in them: Mayan people who have been farming in this region for centuries, Mestizo peasants from Northern Mexico who were persuaded to migrate to the tropical rainforests in the south, and

Mennonite settlers of European extraction whose parents set up farms in the northern state of Durango in the 1920s. The four last chapters discuss the effects of state planning on these different types of rural inhabitants, and the subsequent adaptation of peasants to the debt crisis starting in 1982. The author touches on a wide range of issues, ranging from environmental concerns, economic dependency, public policy, social justice and appropriate technology.

*In Default* provides a balanced account of changing peasant agriculture. Like many contemporary anthropological researchers, she combines national and village-level analysis. Her case study also narrows the gap between the research done by anthropologists, agronomists and public policy specialists. Her work thus complements studies conducted by scholars such as Yvan Breton, Gerardo Otero and Frank Cancian, to mention some others currently looking at contemporary Mexican agriculture and fishing. Like other recent publications, Gates' book reflects the uncertainties associated with Mexican agricultural policies introduced under Salinas. Like the peasants she quotes, Gates is ambivalent about whether or not this program (as part of the broader policy of privatization) is going to result in both increasing economic productivity and long term equitable development. It becomes clear that this new policy, emphasizing decentralization of decision-making and increasing self-reliance, enabled a small number of peasants to break a vicious circle of dependency on the state, marginalization, and paternalism. At the same time, she wonders about the long-term redistributive effects of neoliberal policies.

I concur with most of the analysis, but found gaps and disagree on several points. In my opinion, the author puts too much emphasis on the misguided nature of state planning in the seventies. Some of the projects associated with past policy, especially those initiated under Echeverria — the building of feeder roads with hand-labour, improvement in rural housing, and credit to small coffee producers — did revitalize the rural economy in many regions. Surely such low-tech projects cannot be equated with the wasteful and inefficient mega projects directed by technocrats? Chapter two could say more about how all agrarian programs in Mexico have been the result of internal struggles among rival political groups. A sub-theme in the book which cries out for further elaboration, is intercultural dynamics. The comparative study of neighbouring communities with

contrasting ethnic identities or the analysis of any region which has a mixture of different cultural traditions can illuminate the complex interrelationship between the economic system and culture. I received little new inspiration on this topic.

Overall, Professor Gates' book makes a valuable contribution to the literature dealing with Mexico, rural agricultural systems and the relationship between peasants and government agencies that intervene in rural affairs. I strongly recommend this book to both academic readers and reflexive practitioners working in international development or community projects in rural Mexico. Both types of readers will be left with some troubled thoughts about the uncertain future of rural Mexico, especially after the NAFTA agreement is fully implemented. In the words of a peasant cited by Gates "what will happen to Mexican peasants after the free trade tornado?" (p.60).

Frans J. SCHRYER, *Ethnicity and Class Conflict in Rural Mexico*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 325 pages.

By Marilyn Gates

Simon Fraser University

Agrarian struggles and popular mobilization have long been central concerns in the debate about the evolutionary direction of Latin American peasantries. Little consensus has emerged, however, regarding the factors that stimulate and shape overt conflict or more subtle forms of resistance as a result of the variety of theoretical perspectives employed, levels of analysis pursued, types of variables examined, and the range in breadth and depth of empirical investigation, together with the increasingly differentiated character of rural populations. In Mexico, this problem is compounded by the extreme degree of regional and local diversity, the unusually dominant role of the state in peasant agriculture, and the complexities added by a large "ethnic factor" in many rural areas.

Frans Schryer's case study of a recent peasant uprising in Huejutla in the Huasteca of Hidalgo, an ethnically diverse region on the fringes of the northern Mexican Gulf Lowlands, goes a long way toward

overcoming these obstacles to the explanation of agrarian conflicts. He begins with a precise statement of the major themes addressed (the relations between ethnicity and class conflict), the general theoretical framework employed (a "dialectical, interactive approach" [p. 9] derived from the Marxist historicist school and dialectical anthropology), and the methodological procedures followed (ethnographic, ethnohistoric and archival). A tightly organized theoretical discussion and literature review is followed by a profile of Huejutla and its peoples today (Nahuatl-speaking Indians and Spanish-speaking Mestizos) and a careful historical analysis of the origins of local variations in ethnic relations. Subsequent sections provide detailed accounts of some two decades of peasant militancy, ranging from widespread political violence including direct-action land invasions throughout the 1970s to largely contrived land invasions and increasing peasant factionalism within a context of land reform and community development in the 1980s. A case study of political factionalism in the *municipio* of Jalcotan (pp. 303-315) is particularly effective in conveying the complex currents of intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic opposition, specifically the use of ethnic labels and historical memory in disguising class differentiation.

The multiple strands of evidence provided in Schryer's longitudinal study dispute the equation of class with ethnicity by outside observers who portrayed the Huejutla revolt "as one in which Indians were pitted against feudal-style landowners to reclaim hereditary rights" (p. 4). In the Huasteca, struggles over land have cut across ethnic and linguistic boundaries as conflicts emerged between poor and rich Indian peasants as well as between Indians and mestizos. Schryer demonstrates that many Nahua peasants were well aware of their exploitation both by mestizo and local Indian elites. However, class differentiation within Nahua communities tended to be legitimated or masked through the ideology of communalism. Thus, the Nahua remained quiescent until 1960, when population pressure and loss of economic security as a result of the rapid expansion of modern cattle ranching prompted the transition to militancy and the massive invasions of the next decade involving landholdings of both mestizos and Indians.

Overall, Schryer has drawn a remarkable portrait of the relation between class and ethnicity in agrarian struggle that underscores the critical importance of culture as well as economic and political factors. The level of empirical detail, both historical