

Peasant Society and Redfield's Fields

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Robert Redfield. *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago: University Press, 1961 (Phoenix Paperback P53). 265 pp., \$2.25.

We can call a work a classic without any qualms if authors who stand on radically opposed ends of an ideological continuum, or who operate from either highly ideologized or totally nonideologized perspectives refer to the work positively and axiomatically. Thus, P. L. Vidyarthi, a conservative Indian anthropologist, said, "[Redfield] . . . provided theoretical and methodological direction toward understanding the folk and peasant communities in India as dimensions of Indian civilization" (Vidyarthi 1978:19); toward the other end of the ideological continuum, Eric R. Wolf referred to Redfield's *Peasant Society and Culture* (PSC from here on) as "the best general introduction, in English, to the topic of peasant studies" (Wolf 1966:110). PSC is the first entry in the "selected references" in Wolf's classic; he does not mention Redfield in the text itself, which, I think, indicated his attribution of a merely ritualistic status to Redfield's work.

In an uncharacteristically mellow mood, Marvin Harris classified Redfield's folk-urban continuum as an innocuous transformation of the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* dichotomy; his only complaint was that Redfield did not mention Lewis Henry Morgan whom Harris regards as his thematic coauthor (Harris 1968:192-193). Harris was there referring to Redfield's 1947 "Folk Society" article. Redfield did mention Morgan later on in his *Little Community* (eternally bound together in paperback with *Peasant Society and Culture*) (Redfield 1961:141), so we may presume that Harris would now accept Redfield's work as important and seminal, even though he does not list

are pages in PSC which the historians of our discipline should take to heart. He shows in the first chapter (pp. 14-16) how European, particularly German-writing, social scientists distinguish between *Volkskunde* and *Voelkerkunde* from the very beginning—they never needed to rely on, or to assume a single underlying model. I would add that *Volkskunde* and *Voelkerkunde* are not even taught in the same academic departments in central Europe; *Volkskunde*, as folklore, is either part of the history unit at a university, or else it is a part of *Germanistik*, i.e., German language and literature; whereas *Voelkerkunde* is ethnology in the American sense. When American anthropology began to operate, he reminds us, it had the North American Indians as pivotal research objects—they were separate people, they were the ideal primitive isolates, and any transition to, or connection with, the other America scorned and scoffed at by early American anthropologists, was classed under “acculturation.” When American anthropologists moved into Latin America, however, they had to jettison the North American Indian research model. The economic, cultural, and stratificational links of the South American indigenes to the dominant society were so pervasive and, emically seen, so ineluctable, that they simply could not be studied like the North American Indians who, in fact, or in the anthropological perception of the day, did not form part of the total stratification of North American society. Now Redfield had not himself been bothered by these assumptions of his erstwhile teachers and peers. When he began his field work in 1929 in a rural South American community, it impressed him as a society “intermediate between the tribe and the modern city” (PSC 16). Horace Miner's work on a French Canadian parish, another “intermediate” community, confirmed his impression. Since then, and at least in part under Redfield's inspiration, American anthropologists working on Latin America—he mentions Gillin, Wolf, Wagley and Marvin Harris—have taken it for granted that the small community is to be understood as part of the state and the encompassing civilization. Unlike in and for North America, “anthropology has moved from tribe to peasantry” (PSC 17).

There is a snag, however, when Redfield extends his gradual-transition-model to India. Here, the parallels to the Latin American situation are, in fact, too weak to warrant the sort of direct analogy Redfield seems to suggest. Whereas the middle peasant in Latin America does, indeed, connect and relate at all times to the tribal neighbor as well as to the industrial city, the Hindu or Muslim

But if all inclusions are permitted—Firth's small scale producers, Hopi Indians, coastal Malay fishermen, and Sioux Indians—how useful a term does "peasant" remain? Redfield did exclude "hunters, fishers, and herders" (PSC 18) and this was a wise decision in the light of today's taxonomies. With some hesitation, he also set aside pastoral peoples, since the criterion of attachment to the land overrode that of rural-town relationships. When all this had been said, Redfield reverted to common, i.e. nonanthropological parlance: peasants are people who make a living from the land.

There is a more formal difficulty with Redfield's notion of "peasantry," however. He saw a peasant as a "man who is in effective control of a piece of land to which he has long been attached by ties of tradition and sentiment" (PSC 19), and then, in the same paragraph, he went on to say that the actor's legal title to the land does not enter in as a criterion; he therefore included sharecroppers and landless tenants under "peasants." I think this is no longer possible in today's nomenclature—definitions must be exclusive and narrow in order to be "definitions" (for that's what the Latin *definire* means and ought to mean). This cavalier inclusiveness, what some historians of anthropology might call "softhearted" as opposed to "hardheaded" anthropology, can be explained, I think, by a covertly mentalistic attitude which Redfield seemed to entertain; or else by his nonideological approach—nonideological in the political sense, or in the sense it would be understood by the radical caucus of American anthropologists today. Either way, Redfield's denotations of "peasants" is far too inclusive. Still, such width was probably essential for the establishment of the folk-urban continuum as an open model, because a "continuum" implies some fuzziness around its nodal points. With a more precise, narrow definition of "peasantry," the Redfieldian "little community" and "continuum" parlance could not have been made. So long as we benefit from this model as a whole, we might therefore soften our definitional rigor *vis-à-vis* the individual constituents of the model. South Asianists, I believe, can and do still benefit from the model, somewhat like nuclear physicists who still benefit from large chunks of the Newtonian model which they basically reject.

PCS is a small book with only four chapters. The first sets the stage for the anthropologist to emerge from the cocoon of the primitive isolate and from its previous methodological idealization. In the second chapter, this "isolate" versus "non-isolate" problematic is argued in terms of social relations, and the last two chapters deal with it in terms of tradition and/or the cultural agents' perceptions of the

The brokers, or middlemen, between the two extremes are what Redfield calls the "hinge" (PSC 27 sq.). All sorts of specialists, religious and administrative, are hinges, and this term no doubt helps us to see family resemblances between such disparate figures as the negotiating mandarin and the Austrian parish priest.

There comes a statement which raises South Asianist eyebrows. What do we do with Redfield's suggestion that "rural India is a primitive or tribal society rearranged to fit a civilization" (PSC 34)? On the face of it, this is simply wrong. Most of rural India has not been tribal for many centuries; if you insist that it must have been tribal at one time, then this holds for rural Scotland as well. I would have no squabble with a modified statement like "some parts of rural India," where this could be read to refer to areas which have been recently Hinduized or village-ized like some Santhal and Oraon groups in southern Bihar, or a part of the Reddi population of Andhra. But Redfield did not mean that in his context. "To fit a civilization" gives us more pause: to fit a civilization defined by and as "great tradition"? Hardly, since Redfield would have been the last to exclude "little traditions," his own terminological creation, from "civilization" in whatever connotation used by a self-respecting anthropologist (I am not talking about Sanskritists and straight Indologists; the late and learned Professor V. Raghavan once confided to me "actually, India's civilization means Sanskrit; everything else is for fools and women"—*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, but this is my chance to make such posthumous report). Redfield quotes Raghavan as a scion of India's "great tradition" (PSC 48). Redfield so loves little communities, face-to-face societies, that he tends to deal with any nonindustrial group in a Procrustean manner; on this same page, he says "*it is as if the characteristic social structure of the primitive self-contained community* [italics supplied] had been dissected out and its components spread about a wide area" (PSC 34). In philosophical terms, this statement is a counterfactual conditional—for, of course, the social structure of the communities intended was neither primitive nor self-contained. Networks militate against self-containment by semantic implication—and Redfield regretted this fact, which he knew. His first use of "networks" is in quotes (PSC 31) from J. A. Barnes—from a 1954 article about a Norwegian parish; one gets the feeling that Redfield wanted to keep it in quotes.

The "half"-societies of this chapter, then, mean the peasant-half and the elite half, which together form the whole larger social system. He ends this section with a rebuke: "It will not do to describe these

"greater" traditions in one instance, PSC 43). It seems to boil down to a minimal criterion for the great-little dichotomy: wherever any nongeneral skill or knowledge is withheld by a minority from a majority, we have a great (esoteric) and a little (exoteric) tradition on hand. If one were to take a nonrevisionist Redfieldian stand in the study of South Asia, the processes of "Hinduization" (i.e., of tribals) into peasants, and that of "Sanskritization" of peasants into literature, puritanical villagers and townsmen in the manner the governments of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka now recommend, would seem to exhibit a Redfieldian sequence, i.e. "the appearance of an elite with secular and sacred power and including specialized cultivators of the intellectual life, and the conversion of tribal peoples into peasantry" (PSC 45). But unfortunately, there is no such fit in South Asia today: Hinduized tribals and Sanskritized peasants will not seek out the hieratic sacerdotal esotericist much longer, if indeed they ever did so *en masse*. Rather, all these people will be secularized—transistor radios and scooters are far more desirable status symbols than big sticks and a rifle, for the modern village Rajput. Unless, by a *tour de force*, we now include the products of General Electric and Mitsubishi under "great tradition" along with temples and scrolls and holy men, either great traditions collapse, or little traditions have no more standards whereby they can model their ways. On the other hand, if we look into the primary school textbooks now used in India, we find great tradition tales retold—there are the heroes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, together with Livingston and Lincoln. But those inclusions are travesties of what Redfield would have seen as the Indian "great tradition." The gods of the abundantly present mythological movies in India can be excused as filmically-enlarged, little-tradition deities, or as bowdlerized great tradition Sanskritic gods. But the Rama and the Sita and the Hanuman of present-day school texts are unregenerated *machos*, creations of the neo-Hindu urban style-setters, inaugurated by the defunct British *raj* (Kalia 1979). At this juncture, Redfield's great and little traditions are simplistic and mildly embarrassing.

Redfield's call for a rapprochement between humanist-historian and anthropologist was not heard by many in his day. He formulated it in terms of different subject matter (PSC 51), in terms of text and context, in Milton Singer's diction. The historian-humanist "Indologist" (Sinologist, Islamicist) studies the great; the anthropologist, ideally, the little traditions. This differential assignment of object and method could never stand but partially. There is simply too

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the alienates of the city; yet he did not extend "civilized" to a group, any group, that does not concatenate to the city or to urban ways.

Milton Singer turned anthropologist under Redfield's influence, but he remained a philosopher as well, to wit his presidential address at the AAA meetings in Los Angeles, 1978. In spite of the intensive academic symbiosis between these two scholars, Redfield remained philosophically naive, and whether or not we concede to language analysis supremacy in philosophical thinking, there is no philosophizing without sensitivity to nuances of meaning and use.

In "The Peasant View of the Good Life," the last chapter in PSC, Redfield is impressed by the panglobal similarity of the peasant ethos; from a 1945 article by E. K. L. Francis, he adopted the phrase "integrated pattern of dominant attitudes" to characterize, presumably, all peasants in the world. That was at a time when George Foster's less mentalistic, more economics-based notion of the "limited good" had not yet been formulated (Foster 1965:293-315). Voget juxtaposes these two views in his monumental *History* (1975):

Redfield traced the products of human activity to the organized mental life which members of a society more or less shared and consciously applied to their common purposes and problems; Foster, on the other hand, viewed the cognitive orientation of the peasants as an un verbalized and explicit expression of how they accommodated their actions to the necessities of their . . . situation. (Voget 1975:749)

This is a gentle way—befitting the chronicler of the profession, one might think—of stating the hardline anthropologists' main gripes with Redfield. They are justified gripes. Phenomenology may be an interesting school of philosophy, but actual speculations about, and inferences from speculations about people's intentions and motivations are anything from precarious to silly. One cannot get into other people's heads, unless one subscribes to Jungian, romantic, or psychedelic notions about "knowing other minds"; and generalizing from such attempts to unravel some people's thoughts and feelings to the thoughts and feelings of a whole class, or a whole society, is obsolete optimism. Redfield could have forestalled such latter-day criticism had he captioned this chapter "some peasant views of the good life"; but then of course that is precisely what he didn't do, since he wanted to make a case for his pan-bucolic claim. Redfield safeguards himself against the possible ire of his own audience, when he says,

to declare important similarities with no attention to differences (i.e., to peasants all over the world) . . . is not good science, but it is a good way to get a discussion going. (PSC 62)

Disarming, yes; convincing, no.

once they had to do the work themselves. There is no such merit in the Indian peasant's emicrepresentation of the good life. Redfield quotes Georg Sturt—whom anthropologists do not know—who said that although there is no formal expression of religion-in-agriculture, there remains "the faint sense of something venerable" in agricultural activity (PSC 64). In India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the sense is so faint that it can be sensed only by armchair admirers from a distance.

On the next two pages, Redfield reports with regret—that some agricultural societies hate their work. What Redfield apparently did not know—perhaps due to the fact that his knowledge of South Asian peasant life was exiguous—was that even where the earth is regarded as sacred, work on it is not. Where there is an option between any physical work and no such work, no work ranks higher. In South India, Brahmins who work as ritualists and priests in the temples are invariably of lower status than Brahmins who don't; i.e., *purohitas* rank lower than *sastris*, and they don't intermarry. Talking and thinking and criticizing ritual, ranks higher than performing it. Also, temple work pollutes because it means mixing with all sorts of people, which is potentially polluting. Similarly, though the earth may be holy due to a number of doctrinal reasons (indwelling earth deities, its identification with *prithivi*, the earth goddess, etc.), manual administrations to it pollute.

Redfield then proceeds to extol pragmatism, rationality, and stricture on sensuous impetuosity as characteristic of peasant societies as contrasted to sexually relaxed societies as like certain Polynesian groups and modern western societies (PSC 71). This is painful romanticizing again. In South Asia, in the Arab countries, and certainly in large chunks of industrialized societies in Japan and the West, such attitudes of restraint are more typical of non-peasant elements—industrialists, ranking administrators, etc. Peasant societies neither did nor do have any exclusive claim to these forms of sexual sobriety. In wide sectors of South Asia, the opposite is the case: the villagers in the Panjab and in the mountains have a far more relaxed attitude about sex (not as relaxed, of course, as the non-Hinduized tribals)—than have the petty merchants in the adjacent cities. Here, Redfield simply erred.

Peasants never *liked* the slick city dweller—neither the Hesiodian peasants nor the modern Indian peasant. But that does not mean they wouldn't imitate their ways if they could, even as their priests and leaders tell them not to.

Admirers of Antonio Vivaldi boast that he wrote six hundred

Lacking the strong degree of isolation typical of folk-systems, peasants exist in symbiosis with urban economic systems (Honigmann 1976:348). . . . Although Redfield defined the peasant community as part of the larger society with which peasants maintain contact, he recognized basic differences between rural and urban ideas, especially in the area of religion . . . to those various types of civilization, he applied the terms "little tradition" and "great tradition." In rural communities, the unlettered folk work out the small tradition, while scholars in schools and temples cultivate the greater one (Honigmann 1976:362-63) The malcontents thought, as Kroeber had, and as R. Redfield did, too, that something valuable would be lost if anthropology persisted in a strictly scientific approach. Oddly, the Americans who advocated a stronger humanistic approach showed little awareness of the philosophical anthropology being pursued, mainly abroad; the ideas around which it revolved might have suited their pleas for greater social relevance. (Honigmann 1976:394)

What Honigmann did not know, however, was that "philosophical anthropology" in central Europe is neither philosophy nor anthropology, or *either* very badly done, if Michael Landmann, Ernst Jünger, and Teilhard du Chardin are seen as its scions.

Strangely, eight entries on Redfield notwithstanding, Honigmann never mentions PSC expressly. Yet the fact that all he says emerges without abridgement from a reading of PSC alone goes a long way to show that Redfield's thought was of a piece from beginning to end—or cynically, it was a set of variations of one idea, and a rather simple one in the light of more recent anthropological models and paradigms.

Still, some of today's mainstream anthropologists preserve their debt to Redfield. Reviewing a new book on African religion and Christianity, Grace Harris writes,

While not wishing to label the rural Xhosa as "peasants" [Pauw] sees them as living midway between the little community with its face-to-face multiplex relationships, and urban mass society. . . . It is like very small-scale societies to the extent that people have intensive social relations with a few persons with whom they are mutually dependent. (Harris 1979:896)

Thus it seems that in this post-Redfieldian era, "little community" has been so strongly interiorized that it needs no quotation marks, while "peasants" does, when the two terms are in juxtaposition.

The perennial impetus of Redfield's ideas manifests itself in its use in other, non-village, non-peasant-oriented studies in today's anthropology. Thus Charles Leslie recognizes his own and medical anthropology's general debt to Redfield right at the beginning of his seminal volume, when he says,

predetermined preference for rural life and when he lived and worked in Tepoztlan, he was not able to overcome this bias. (1976:126-127)

At this time, the best-known advanced anthology for South Asia area anthropology is the large volume edited by Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (1968). In his preface, Singer says,

After 1952, South Asian social anthropology shows a sustained pattern of growth which has not yet reached its peak. Conceptually and methodologically, this growth owes much to the earlier models of Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown, but it has also gone beyond these models and shows the influence of other conceptual models, Redfield's and Lévi-Strauss' for example, as well as the distinctive features of South Asian society and culture. (Singer and Cohn 1968:viii)

In his own essay in the volume, "The Indian Joint Family in Modern Industry" (pp. 428 sq.), Singer suggests that the more recent social anthropologists have given new attention to historical change in social systems—among them Eggan, Murdock, Leach, Lévi-Strauss and Redfield. In Yucatan, Redfield

saw folk-culture and society [in its transformation] into a modern urban culture . . . the operation of such processes as acculturation to the new models diffusing outward from urban centers . . . that process, for Redfield, consisted in an intricate series of interrelated changes in social and cultural organization set in motion by the increasing contacts of a folk-culture . . . with a modern urban culture and society.

Singer emphasizes Redfield's notion of the transformation of little societies into urban type societies through

interdependent changes in the direction of increasing individualism, secularism, and cultural disorganization.

To this reviewer, this diction is quite irksome. Redfield was not aware of the work of linguistic analysis in philosophy which had, by the time his career peaked, established itself as the mainstream of all English-language professional philosophy, on both sides of the Atlantic. "Secularism" is a value-free term, and descriptive; "cultural disorganization" is a persuasive phrase, it is not descriptive hence not analytic, and it is not value-free; "individualism" may be value-free and descriptive, or it may be value-loaded and persuasive, depending on the context of the larger statement. I think Redfield's use of "individualism" belonged to the latter type—it was a term of negative evaluation for him. This is the sort of category-mixing which Popper had classified as nonscientific many years earlier (Popper 1934). When you have a statement or a chain of statements in which some terms are descriptive-analytic, and scientific (i.e., falsifiable in theory) and others are not, then the whole statement is nonscientific.

This statement is clearly one of editorial intent—the collection is hard anthropology *via* economic anthropology, which has little patience with the generalist rationalization of PSC and similar writings. The only essay in this anthology which deals with India does not even mention Redfield (Walter Neale's "Reciprocity and Redistribution in the Indian Village").

One thing seems certain at the beginning of the last quarter of the century: village studies can proceed rather well without Redfield. Thus in one of the best, Brenda E. F. Beck (1972) neither mentions Redfield nor lists any of his works in the bibliography, in spite of the fact that she is a product both of Chicago and of Oxford. In her preface, she remarks,

because of the earlier stress laid on "villages" and on small-scale studies of individual settlements in my research training, I initially chose to limit my enquiries to a very small area. Towards the end, however, I began to take more serious interest in caste and subcaste organization at higher levels." (1972:xvi)

This may be an oblique reference to Redfield, and the implication is that the village and the little community are overruled by larger territories. The days of "my village" are at an end, and good riddance.

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