

# ANTHROPOLOGIES AND HISTORIES



*essays in culture, history,  
and political economy*

W I L L I A M

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R O S E B E R R Y

# Anthropologies and Histories

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AND  
HISTORIES**

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*Essays in Culture, History,  
and Political Economy*

William Roseberry



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Manufactured in the United States of America

*for Nicole, in my right mind*

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P R E F A C E

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My aim in this book is to explore some of the cultural and political implications of an anthropological political economy. In my view, too few of these implications have been explored, by those authors who dismiss the very *possibility* of a political economic understanding of culture as well as by many of the political economists themselves. Our ideas about culture and history never seem to confront each other. Within too many understandings of political economy, we may have sophisticated treatments of uneven development and of the formation of centers and peripheries, but when we come to consider culture and politics, we enclose profoundly contradictory social experiences within unproblematic and simplistic class or epochal labels. Within too many understandings of cultural anthropology, history is little more than a new terrain into which to extend anthropological practice. Anthropologists seldom let what they know about history affect what they think about culture. In this book, I have tried to place culture and history in relation to each other, in the context of a reflection on the political economy of uneven development.

In pursuing my argument, I ask the reader to accompany me through a discussion of Geertz's essay on the Balinese cockfight, Marx's postulation of Germanic and Asiatic and Ancient modes of production, Wolf's exploration of the formation of

anthropological subjects in world history, Cardoso and Faletto's understanding of the "internalization of the external" in Latin America, Williams's concept of a selective tradition, and so on. I also ask the reader to consider these ideas in relation to politics and culture in contemporary Venezuela or processes of "Americanization" in Latin America. While I come to this book with large questions, my discussions are embedded within a consideration of particular texts and historical processes. The argument is carried by essays, a form that requires some preliminary discussion.

Clifford Geertz's observation that the essay has become the "natural genre" for anthropological writing (1973b: 25) finds apparent support from the number of recent books in anthropology that are based on essays. They are often more widely read than the ethnographic work that gives rise to or informs the essays, and they are generally published as part of an ongoing intellectual argument, as in Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973a) or Marshall Sahlins's *Islands of History* (1985), so that the *book* makes a statement or pursues an argument that could not be found in any of the *essays*, taken individually or in their severalty. Essays and books of essays have become our principal means of communication.

What, then, are we to make of George Marcus's contention that the advantage of the essay is that it,

opposes conventional systematic analysis, absolves the writer from having to develop the broader implications of his thought (while nonetheless indicating that there are such implications) or of having to tie loose ends together. The essayist can mystify the world, leave his subjects' actions open-ended as to their global implications, form a rhetorical posture of profound half-understanding, half-bewilderment with the world in which the ethnographic subject and the ethnographer live. This is thus a form well suited to a time such as the present, when paradigms are in disarray, problems intractable, and phenomena only partly understood. (1986: 191)

What is missing in this celebration of anthropological "play" is the very aspect of the essay that made it attractive to Geertz—the



constant and sustained engagement with ethnographic subjects and the requirement that one embed one's observations, inferences, and interpretations within that engagement. How far this is from an anthropology that sets out to "mystify the world"!

Indeed, if we look at the way most essays have been written and read in anthropology, their importance lies in their attempt to *make sense*—of ethnographic encounters, of texts, of ideas, of processes—without enclosing that sense within totalizing models. They are, or should be, the means by which we develop our ideas, interpretations, and arguments rather than mere performances or rhetorical postures, demonstrations of an author's interpretive prowess or postmodern consciousness.

In my own case, I began working five years ago on a comparative history of the emergence of "family economy" in regions of Europe and Latin America. My object was to develop a critique of the notion of "domestic modes of production," especially those modes that treated domestic modes as quintessential precapitalist forms and projected them into a primordial human past. That book remains in progress, if such a phrase be permitted to describe the actual state of notes accumulated through two leaves and three years of bureaucratic post sitting (see Roseberry 1986b; 1988). Had I not begun that book, however, I would never have written the present one. In order to work through the historical materials, I found that I had to rethink some of my understandings of capitalism, of history, of peasantries. In order to develop the larger implications of the argument, I needed to think more clearly about culture, ideology, and politics and to link my emerging understandings of culture and politics to my perspectives on history and capitalism.

Rather than dealing with Culture or History or Capitalism in the abstract, however, I looked at what Geertz or Sahlin or Williams said about culture or history, what Marx or Wolf said about capitalism, and so on. At the same time, I continued to work with historical materials. I wrote essays, usually viewed as unwelcome digressions from The Project at hand. With time, two things became clear. First, the very structure of my argument for the family economy project was changing as my understandings of capitalism, history, culture, and politics changed.

Second, I began to see the outlines of an argument that informed the individual essays but had not been explicitly developed. My object in writing this book has been to develop that argument, first by writing new essays that would make the connections more explicit (Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8, two of which are “old” essays that have been extensively rewritten here) and second by reworking some of the others.

In writing this book, I have contracted serious intellectual debts, some of which are evident in the pages that follow. In some cases, I have thanked particular individuals so often in the past that I prefer to let my discussion of their work in these pages stand as an acknowledgment of their influence. I concentrate here on another group of colleagues. First, I thank the members of the short-lived Raymond Williams reading group at the New School for Social Research in 1981–82 (Richard Blot, Mary Fallica, Thomas Hardy, Francine Moccio, and Julie Niehaus) for helping me set out in a new direction. Second, I thank a more recent group of people who have influenced me in conversations in my office or over beers, who have asked uncomfortable questions or suggested books or articles that had to be read—Gus Carbonella, Kim Clark, Lindsay DuBois, Chandana Mathur, Mary McMechan, Patricia Musante, Nicole Polier, and Susan Suppe.

I have also benefitted from discussions and a collaboration with Jay O’Brien, who read an early version of Chapter 8 that was focused on the concept of domestic modes of production and suggested that the historical and political issues involved needed to be more broadly considered and stated. This book is one response to that suggestion; our collaborative work is another (O’Brien and Roseberry, eds., forthcoming). As the manuscript neared completion, I presented the final chapter at a session on “Confronting Capital” organized by Ashraf Ghani for the 1987 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I thank the discussants in that session—Derek Sayer, Gavin Smith, and Joan Vincent—for their criticism and encouragement. I also thank Garth Green, who took on the thankless task of serving as discussant for the book manuscript in my course on culture and political economy in the spring of 1988. My relationship with

Rutgers University Press has been thoroughly satisfying, from the initial contacts with Marlie Wasserman through the review process, the graceful copy editing of Eve Pearson, and production. I thank the Press's reviewers, especially Jane Schneider and "Reader #3," for their helpful suggestions.

Most of the essays were written during two academic leaves, during which I was supported by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1983–84) and the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Latin America and the Caribbean (1986–87). They thought I was working on the family economy project, and I promise that I was.

Above all, I thank my ally, Nicole Polier, without whom this book could not have been imagined. Any attempt to elaborate on that statement is necessarily incomplete: she helped me to see the pieces whole; she brought her enthusiasm, skepticism, and critical intelligence to our many conversations and discussions; she has consistently acted as this manuscript's first reader and best critic. With her, I once again enjoy anthropology, and much else.

# Anthropologies and Histories

The temptation is to reduce the historical variety of the forms of interpretation to what are loosely called symbols or archetypes: to abstract even these most evidently social forms and to give them a primarily psychological or metaphysical status. This reduction often happens when we find certain major forms and images and ideas persisting through periods of great change. Yet if we can see that the persistence depends on the forms and images and ideas being changed, though often subtly, internally and at times unconsciously, we can see also that the persistence indicates some permanent or effectively permanent need, to which the changing interpretations speak. I believe that there is indeed such a need, and that it is created by the processes of a particular history. But if we do not see these processes, or see them only incidentally, we fall back on modes of thought which seem able to create the permanence without the history. We may find emotional or intellectual satisfaction in this, but we have then dealt with only half the problem, for in all such major interpretations it is the coexistence of persistence and change which is really striking and interesting, and which we have to account for without reducing either fact to a form of the other.

—Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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On a June night in Tepoztlán in 1987, a brass band led a procession from the chapel of La Santísima toward the house of the *mayordomo*. Preparations for the barrio fiesta had begun the evening before with a small Mass, with fireworks, and with music from La Michoacana—a band hired especially for the festival—that lasted late into the night while women wove garlands to decorate the chapel. The next day, Sunday, would be the actual festival, with small processions from other barrios passing the busy market on the plaza to place their own barrio banners at the altar alongside the banner for La Santísima. A Mass would be held, followed by fireworks, mariachi music played by another band, as well as marches and waltzes from La Michoacana, and drunken revelry. But tonight the celebrants were leaving the chapel to drink *aguardiente* and to socialize at the home of the *mayordomo* or festival sponsor. The procession included the band, men and women who had been preparing for the fiesta, and the requisite fireworks. About a block and a half from the *mayordomo*'s house, however, the band stopped playing while the procession passed the house of a wealthy merchant, where a party was in progress celebrating the fifteenth birthday of the merchant's daughter. The gates to the merchant's courtyard were open, and all were welcome to attend and dance to the lively mixture of American rock, Caribbean

salsa, and Mexican pop being played by a Mexico City band. La Michoacana could not compete, and the crowd at the birthday party easily outnumbered the group making its way to the mayordomo's house. But the dominance of the merchant's party was not limited to the few moments when the procession passed his house: the merchant had set up a stage for his musicians in such a way that their loudspeakers pointed directly at the mayordomo's house.

In this conflict of fiestas is concentrated a conflict of anthropologies. In a sense it is fitting that our setting is Tepoztlán, since one of our most famous controversies concerns life in that highland village in Morelos. Robert Redfield saw in Tepoztlán an expression of the folk society, based in communitarian values and celebrating a fully developed calendar of village-wide and barrio festivals through which community solidarity might be expressed (1930). Oscar Lewis, on the other hand, saw a village torn by conflicts that were rooted in differential access to land as well as a history marked by profound and at times bloody political struggles (1951). The two points of view serve as central texts for two traditions in Mexican anthropology, both of which can point to a rich literature. Indeed, the literature on village politics in Mexico is so large that the conflict witnessed during the barrio fiesta in La Santísima should not surprise.

This book does not begin with a description of that conflict in order to say something new about Tepoztlán or about Mexican anthropology. The description is offered because it allows us to think through certain problems in contemporary anthropological theory.

Anthropologists are fond of presenting their most important disagreements in oppositional terms, the very statement of which implies the "correct" position—from Harris's opposition of cultural materialism vs. idealism or mentalism (1979), to Geertz's opposition of a semiotic approach vs. a predictive science (1973a), to Sahlins's opposition of a cultural account vs. vulgar materialism (1976), to, more recently, the postmodernists' opposition of a literary turn vs. a naive and unreflective realism (Clifford and Marcus 1986). At first glance, it might appear that all of these oppositions revolve around a single

disagreement, one that has been expressed most forcefully by Marshall Sahlins:

The alternatives in this venerable conflict . . . may be broadly phrased as follows: whether the cultural order is to be conceived as the codification of man's actual purposeful and pragmatic action; or whether, conversely, human action in the world is to be understood as mediated by the cultural design, which gives order at once to practical experience, customary practice, and the relationship between the two. The difference is not trivial, nor will it be resolved by the happy academic conclusion that the answer lies somewhere in between. (1976: 55)

The divide to which Sahlins points is important, and this book is offered as a commentary upon it. Nonetheless, proper understanding of the issues involved and of the work of particular authors requires that the divide itself be presented in less sharply defined and provocative terms. As I argue more fully in Chapter 2, the several oppositions that characterize anthropological discussions are not simply variations on a single antinomious theme. The differences among those who pursue a "cultural account" are significant, as are the differences among those who pursue what Sahlins would call "practical reason." The arguments used to criticize a Marvin Harris cannot be recycled to criticize an Eric Wolf; nor can the same arguments be used against Marshall Sahlins and Clifford Geertz. The many attempts to do so represent allegiance to a convenient opposition rather than engagement with actual texts.

This book offers commentaries on a number of recent anthropological texts as part of an argument for a political economic approach to history and culture. To better understand that approach and its relation to other views of history and culture, we begin by returning to the birthday celebration in the merchant's courtyard.

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To understand the competing fiestas, we would need to know something about the structural relations within and among



barrios in Tepoztlán, the place of La Santísima within those structural relations, the place of this relatively minor barrio fiesta within the round of fiestas in Tepoztlán, and so on. For this, a whole body of literature from Redfield through Lewis to Bock (1980) and Lomnitz-Adler (1982) is helpful. A number of other questions need to be asked as well, however. Such questions could begin with the mayordomo and the merchant. Who were these people, and how did their actions fit within their particular life courses? How long had the mayordomo been preparing himself for sponsorship? What had it cost him and what had he hoped to gain from it? How did he make a living? What kinds of economic, social, and political relations did he have with others in the barrio and in Tepoztlán? What materials did the merchant deal with, and what were his economic, social, and political relations with others in the barrio and beyond? Would he ever aspire to sponsorship of barrio or village-wide fiestas, or did he consider all of that beneath him? Was there a history of enmity between the mayordomo and the merchant, or between the families of the mayordomo and the merchant, or between the merchant and other residents in the barrio? What was the merchant thinking about when he scheduled the birthday party for the weekend of the barrio fiesta? Did he consider holding it another weekend? How was the merchant's party received—both in anticipation and in the event—by the mayordomo, by others preparing for the barrio fiesta, by the celebrants crowding into the merchant's courtyard? What, if anything, did people say about the two fiestas or about the merchant and the mayordomo and their relations with each other? What consequences might the competing fiestas have—over the coming weeks, the coming months, the coming years—for relations between these two men, or for relations within the barrio and within Tepoztlán?

To understand the conflicts, we need to know something about the long-term structure and meaning of this particular barrio fiesta within a cycle of fiestas, but we also need to know something about how specific individuals are acting within those structures, using a particular meaningful occasion to say something about their relationships with each other, their rela-