

Commentary: The Status of Geographical Research on the Aboriginal and Peasant Communities of Latin America

William V. Davidson

*Department of Geography and Anthropology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803*

It seems a little awkward to review literature reviews, and most of you have probably already formed a notion of the sum of these contributions, so my comments will be very brief, and I will mention only a few obvious points. Each of us will view these contributions through different eyes, and my appraisal admittedly is a personal one.

At the outset, I want to thank the authors for completing the time-consuming but vital and often thankless task of compiling citations that can make all our work more efficient. Their joint effort has placed at our finger tips over 600 references to recent studies on aboriginal and peasant societies in Latin America. And they have done more. They, acting individually, have identified current research trends and common strands that run through all of the reviews. I was attracted by one major focus and three collateral themes, mentioned in all presentations.

- Shining through all of the reviews is the dominant and overwhelming theme of food. How basic can you get? The single unifying topic of research is FOOD. Ask my wife where food comes from, and the answer will be: the A&P or Kroger's. But for members of aboriginal and peasant societies, by definition, where food comes from is a most obvious and an ever present focus. Food production is, for the most part, what moves them; it determines how they spend their time. Whether we study domestication, raised fields, irrigation, beekeeping, altitudinal zonation, road building, landscape ecology, soil decline, frontier settlement, Caribbean land abandonment or riparian settlement in Amazonia, our concerns are, eventually and essentially, about food.
- A second, collateral, point is that research on aboriginal and peasant societies in Latin America is INTERDISCIPLINARY, and especially involves the time-honored trilogy of Anthropology, History and Geography. Whether the intent of our authors was to mention only geographers, as Mathewson avowed, or in the case of Butzer, include work by only a few geographers, the important contributions of non-geographers burst into the reviews. Knapp could not resist; he just had to mention the "exceptionally important anthropologists, agronomists and historians." Denevan and Hiraoka, too, make the point clear and lament how geographers are often outdone by other disciplines in Amazonian research. Lighten up, guys! It's all right. They outnumber us. I think you have done very well. Maybe you all are too humble. Clarissa Kimber doesn't even cite her own recent, widely acclaimed, book, *Martinique Revisited* (Texas A&M, 1988).
- A third point is the matter of research diversity in scale, chronology and purpose. All of the cited research can be placed within one or more of these *continua*. These reviews have shown me more clearly than before that the micro-, meso-, and macro-scaled projects can be compatible and may be a virtual requirement in some instances, that basic research often finds worthwhile expression, and that prehistorical and historical perspectives can often be essential for understanding the present. Indeed, Butzer actually carries us with some detail through the process of analyzing agro-ecological projects in Mexico, using archeology, early and late archival records and present ethnography. And he gloats:

geographers can do it for less money than can the archaeologists.

- And finally there is this term ethnogeography. Not since the earliest days of this century at Berkeley have we heard so much of this term. In a sense to focus attention on minority populations one by one is a matter of scale, a matter of precision, but it is also as Knapp put it: "a basic disposition towards valorizing the means and goals of specific...peoples." It's probably always going to be that way for this group of geographers. We are drawn to conduct our projects among aboriginal and peasant societies, and we are people who like out of the way places, the rural folks, and we wish them well if they desire to retain something of their culture. We have an abiding conviction that the traditional communities of Latin America still have much to teach the modernizing societies that continue to encroach upon their lands. And I suppose we'll always value cultural diversity and promote cultural retention because we believe they have inherent value. At the moment, momentum on behalf of ethnic minorities seems to be building. There have been recent successes in several areas of Latin America **[end p. 189]** and geographers are playing critical roles in the process. And we are not alone. The upstart journal, *Cultural Survival*, dedicated to that proposition, developed during the last decade, now has a circulation of almost 20,000, and is growing rapidly. It just might be that the next decade will be the decade of applied ethnogeography.

[end p. 190]