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Peasants Against Globalization: Rural Social Movements in Costa Rica

Marc Edelman

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This book tells the story of how small farmers responded to a free-market onslaught that devastated one of the Western Hemisphere's most advanced social-democratic welfare states. In the early 1980s, the Latin American debt crisis struck Costa Rica, leading to major cutbacks in the social programs that had permitted the rural poor to attain an acceptable standard of living and a modicum of dignity.

Peasants were in the forefront of movements against these cutbacks, marching, blocking highways, and occupying government buildings. In the struggle to preserve their livelihood, the rural poor also formed alliances with wealthy farmers, negotiated with politicians, and embraced and then repudiated charismatic outsiders who came to live among them and to speak in their name. These rural activists combined class-bound politics with concerns about threatened peasant identities, practical analysis with sentimentality, grassroots democracy with conspiratorial secrecy, and selfless sacrifice with opportunism.

The small farmers portrayed in this book are worldly, outspoken, exuberant, future-oriented, and fiercely proud. They could hardly be less like the unsophisticated and stoic rustics so prominent in the development literature or those contemporary peasants whose imminent disappearance is endlessly predicted by both right- and left-wing social scientists.

The author argues that the experience of rural activism in Costa Rica in the 1980s and 1990s calls into question much current theory about collective action, peasantries, development, and ethnographic research. The book invites the reader to rethink debates about old and new social movements and to grapple with the ethical and methodological dilemmas of engaged ethnography.

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