



*Vincent C. Peloso*

# Peasants on Plantations

*Subaltern Strategies of Labor and Resistance*

*in the Pisco Valley, Peru*

## *Peasants on Plantations*

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## **PEASANTS ON PLANTATIONS**

*Subaltern Strategies of Labor and Resistance*

*in the Pisco Valley, Peru*

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*For Matteo Calzanera and*

*Antonio Núñez Pazos,*

*in memoriam*

*lo zio e lo zio politico*

*tutto due dedicati a la lotta del popolo,*

*eroi da giovane*



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## PREFACE

A single two-lane road meanders through the Pisco valley along a river that flows from the Andes to the port of Pisco, about 220 kilometers south of Lima, Peru. The river's alluvial fan tilts northward, as if resisting its rush to the sea, and makes a broad arc twenty kilometers north and south of the main channel. Within these alluvial soils lie a series of vineyards and cotton and sugar plantations that in the century after independence were among the most important locales in the formation of Peruvian culture. Cotton plantations dominated the valley, and within their borders thousands of peasants annually cultivated and harvested cotton crops that returned large profits to the powerful landowners while the peasants remained destitute and powerless.<sup>1</sup>

Through the generosity of the office of the Tribunal of Agrarian Reform I had an opportunity in 1975 to visit some of the Pisco valley plantations. Two officers of the Fifth Agrarian Reform Zone office accompanied me in a Volkswagen Beetle, and on our approach to Hacienda Palto they summarized recent local events. Earlier that day agricultural workers had seized control of the plantation and notified the local agrarian reform office of their action. Now the workers were awaiting directions. Would they be paid if they went to work in the fields? How much, and who would pay them? The agrarian reform officers and I were visiting Hacienda Palto coincidentally with the takeover; we could not provide answers to those anxious queries.

The plantation house and the broad fields sweeping down toward the river below it caught my eye. With its long, low, pastel green ranch-style structure, red-tiled roof, lead-lined windows, porticoed patio, and pool, the mansion, both the color and style of it, appeared similar to the architecture commonly seen in the suburban southwestern United States. But the illusion of familiarity quickly ended. The roadside facade of the house contrasted sharply with its riverward side. Three floors deep, the plantation house featured a wide

veranda along the entire second floor and dominated the landscape before it. This grandiloquent deteriorated plantation house once served as an idyllic *palmar*, as a nineteenth-century observer expressed it, an oasis in the country for its owners, the Aspíllaga family, one of the two or three dozen richest families in mid-twentieth-century Peru.

Deterioration was a visible testament to the end of the rule of great landowners—or so it seemed. Although the agrarian reform had ushered in a new stage in the modern history of Peru, the reform was bothersome in that it had been announced and executed not by a democratic reform government but rather by an authoritarian military regime. It was an unusual military dictatorship, pledged to carry out social reforms that weak democratic governments had not cared—much less dared—to support. But its agrarian reform was foundering on an authoritarian handling of land distribution. Few peasant leaders and organizations had been consulted prior to the pronouncement of the agrarian reform, and peasants were divided on its worth. Some were said to broadly support the plan spelled out by the military populist government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado; others claimed that it left much to be desired.<sup>2</sup>

By seizing control of the plantation, then waiting for the government's imprimatur, the Pisco farmworkers evinced a deep-seated ambivalence toward authority. The sources of this social tradition have not been well studied by Peruvianists. Notably, the peasants had not mounted a serious challenge on the land question until some time after the planters had begun to lose their grip on power. Now alternately revealing defiance and humility, the fieldworkers displayed considerable ambivalence about their own actions.

Ambivalence and uncertainty were in keeping with the long history of struggle by peasants with plantations in the coastal valleys of the country. Indeed, the negotiation of power in the countryside of Peru seemed to have been a key to the successful growth of plantations. To explain this paradox, I had first to pass through a number of intervening hoops. It seemed important that I turn my attention less to the export orientation of commercial plantations than to the social order that had evolved within them. I found it puzzling that scholars had readily designated the field hands on the plantations—especially the cotton plantations—generally as labor. I suspected that this generalization missed the mark, and I speculated that a large literature thus

had been overlooked, a literature that would characterize this social order as something more complex and subtle than a massive wage gang. As I studied it further, plantation society appeared to be made up of a number of different social segments whose association with cotton growing varied from one group to another. Rather than speak of wage labor, I would have to study the means available to peasants for coaxing a livelihood from plantation fields. But this led to further confusion. It appeared as I read that wage laborers and peasants shared the same tasks and worked the same fields. Yet there seemed to be differences between them. Were these distinctions important? Were there further segmentations within rural society, even within the peasantry? If different interest groups existed within the peasantry, what were the sources of those interests? What social dynamics propelled this world?

Prevailing conventions about the peasantry spanned a number of issues. Debt was one of them. Debt had been seen as an instrument of landowner power, a means for holding peasants in bondage. But how debt worked its ways within a segmented peasantry was not clear. Did some peasants feel the weight of debt less drastically, for example, and if so what mitigated the effects? The scant evidence suggested that little was known about how the peasants viewed debt. But mid-nineteenth-century social relations led me to assume that a modest pyramid of wealth and power had already existed in the countryside, permitting some peasants to avoid debt while leaving others mired in its intricacies and social stigmata.

Which peasants avoided debt and how they made such calculations were not clear. At first, shortly after the abolition of slavery (1854) and then of indenture (1874) in Peru, they apparently refused tenant contracts that might have meant their reconfinement within the intolerable plantations. After the War of the Pacific (1879–83) the peasants became more self-confident, their attitudes toward debt changed, and many now sought out contracts to rent land. There was more to the history of peasants on plantations than first met the eye.

In order to improve my grasp of peasant economic behavior on the cotton plantations, it was necessary to learn why contracts looked attractive. Peasants who rented land had taken a great risk in subordinating themselves to the landowners, but by this point it had become clear that subordination to the landowners did not mean re-

enslavement. Tenants began to realize that tenantry was a flexible condition and, more important, that it would allow them to make many of their own farming decisions. Ironically, the plantations may have provided the peasants with choices not previously available.<sup>3</sup> Joseph D. Reid Jr. and José María Caballero have suggested that in these circumstances peasants almost always were faced with a range of farming choices, and that choice was fundamental to successful tenantry.<sup>4</sup> But it seemed that the landowners also deliberately left many decisions to be made by those who worked the land. Thus a critical part of my task would be to explain the context in which peasants took up the challenge of farming. If I linked context and choice I might illuminate the formative role of the plantations in the evolution of Peruvian culture.

Another problem I faced was the question of violence and repression. Was it not obvious that the planters dictated and the peasants obeyed? It disturbed me to learn that the answer to this question was not easy to come by. For the most part, peasants stepped warily through social life on the plantations. They engaged the owners and managers in dialogue through the well-known conventions of countryside social behavior. Such conventions, often small rituals, eased the tensions that arose periodically on the plantations and provided outlets for the worn tempers, deep hatreds, and resentments that otherwise might disrupt the pursuit of commercial farming.

Polite public exchanges and the rites of *compadrazgo*—informal kinship—were two of the rural institutions that accompanied plantation growth, limiting its worst excesses and lending an air of dignity to a process that otherwise generated great social traumas.<sup>5</sup> Whether in casual conversation, contract negotiations, or haggling over rent, correct manners ruled over the discourse of plantation life. Most of the time this was true of the correspondence between owners and managers, and it even appeared to hold for the rare conversations that occurred between owners and the subordinate peasant population. Managers for the most part (save when they lost their composure) also addressed the peasants with respectful language and heard the same in return.

Tension between the need to control labor and its nearly constant scarcity could become unbearable. Sometimes managers used physical violence to enforce the cotton plantation rules. Although owners tried to hold such incidents to a minimum, the palpable contempt in

which managers held the tenants led, unsurprisingly, to abuses of authority. What forms did these abuses take? Was it simple physical force? Or were more subtle measures involved? If they took verbal forms, might they also involve deception, exaggeration, and falsification, as some prominent studies suggest, and if so how did the peasants respond? Did they act “rationally” on false information, or did they respond in kind?<sup>6</sup>

What we have learned about landowners is that they preferred to rule with courtesy and benevolence rather than with force; to reward as much as they punished; to instill the idea in the daily routine of the fieldworker that the landowner was aware of his burden and sympathized with his plight. Many planters sought to project the image that a good landowner was like a good father, kind but stern; predictably insistent that the rules of production be enforced but willing to be lenient in exceptional circumstances. Planters cultivated the aura of fatherhood as an appropriate metaphor; it fit with the idea that peasants were like children: unruly, petulant, unpredictable, easily distracted, and slothful if the planter did not constantly remind them of their duties. Students of plantation society will recognize immediately that this description is longhand for conventional “patron-client relations.” Although I do not deny the usefulness of the patron-client trope for understanding planter attitudes, I found during research that the literature’s identification of it did little to reveal the daily negotiations of power that coursed through plantation society.

At one end of the spectrum of social conventions on the plantations stood daily owner and manager courtesy toward tenants; at the other end one encountered daily brutality. As a stark reminder of the limits of polite discourse, at Hacienda Palto managers and tenants discussed contract terms in the shadow of the plantation stocks, which remained in use until well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

In most studies the conviction prevails that the plantation was a trap into which peasants fell in ignorance or in the realization that they had no choice: it was either work at the planter’s rate or starve. But this view presupposes a number of conditions that will receive close scrutiny here. For one, the absence of serious choices is thought to have encouraged a fatalistic attitude toward plantation field labor. But even if the peasants were not fatalistic, the convention yet holds that they had few means to resist the authoritarian mandates of plantation owners and managers, and that, in fact, the consent of peas-



ants was irrelevant to the mode of farming on plantations. Finally, most studies assume a virtually limitless supply of cheap peasant labor.

A focus on labor alone would not provide an adequate response to these assumptions; nor would it do justice to the myriad of activities peasants might engage in while they cultivated cotton. As tenants, they would have to be flexible, playing by the rules of the market. To pursue this idea, I would have to watch for peasant risk taking, for instance, when peasants made a choice to search for credit, and also activities that signaled a careful husbandry of resources. I would have to be alert for opportunities when peasants might have saved or accumulated wealth. In short, I would be looking at tenants or sharecroppers whose actions closely resembled those of farmers.<sup>8</sup>

To demonstrate that peasants as tenants took initiatives and made choices would require careful examination of their farming behavior, especially of the context in which farming decisions were made. To argue further that such initiatives constituted resistance to the plantation regime would demand that I show how peasant activities might be at odds with the measures adopted by the plantation to reach the same end; that is, how and when they refused to consent to rules of the plantation regime. The meaning of "resistance" is an object of study here. The resistance peasants offered to the plantation regime was not always the kind to which James C. Scott called attention. Scott's view of resistance was as a counterforce to coercion. As Alan Knight aptly pointed out, however, sometimes peasants resisted in ways that were not so obvious; nor were they always struggling against open force.<sup>9</sup> At times the term "resistance" has not always fully captured the intent of peasant actions. Peasants sometimes seem to have been engaged in a twofold struggle. In one sense they sought greater power. But in another sense they also sought to secure something more tangible: a set of rights. This latter objective fit clearly within the capitalist world economy that shaped the hegemonic order governed by plantation owners. That is why a phrase employed by Ranajit Guha resonates well in the Peruvian countryside. By dubbing peasant indignation as "rightful dissent," he associated dissent with the moral posture that seeks redress of rights. Guha thus broadened the concept of dissent beyond resistance to resistance within the rules of hegemony.<sup>10</sup> Potentially more dangerous than resistance, "rightful dissent" recognizes the need of peasants to occupy the high moral

ground while they struggle for power. It also opens the door to subversion of the hegemonic position of the planters. To put the matter more clearly, by insisting that the position was morally correct, peasants were not simply challenging the rules of land leasing but were calling into question the legality of planter ownership of the land.<sup>11</sup>

Having reached this point in my thinking, many years and several detours after I first visited Hacienda Palto, I turned to writing. In the pages that follow I examine in more detail the many questions that arose while reading the records of cotton plantations. The setting was the farming economy of Hacienda San Francisco Solano de Palto and its neighbors in the south coast Pisco valley, where landowners, managers, and tenants engaged in a prolonged struggle for power.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people helped me through the various stages of this study. The staff of the former Archivo del Fuero Agrario (AFA) helped in collecting the data; Elena Calle organized a team of Lima university students who called themselves “El Equipo Palto” and read and discussed the documents with me under stimulating, seminar-like conditions. Prolonged conversations with Humberto (“Tito”) Rodríguez Pastor, erstwhile director of the AFA, deeply influenced this study. Tito became a lifelong friend and his entire family, especially his wife, Adriana, graciously has allowed me to disrupt their lives whenever I arrive in Lima. The Comunidad Atahualpa — Enrique Mayer, Martin and María Scurrah, Mike Twomey, David Gow, Susan Ramírez, Richard Smith, and Helaine Silverman — contributed profoundly to my education in *lo Peruano*. Peruvians with whom I held conversations, long and short, serious and light, on buses; in bars; in fishing villages; in private homes; in plantation houses; in government, cooperative, and commercial offices; in fields and on beaches, sometimes in great privacy and at others encircled by observers and commentators, provided me with innumerable insights into their angle of vision on Peru. Often they were served up over plates of ceviche, or *cuy*, bowls of *parihuela*, or glasses of *pisco puro*, in the Lima *galpón*, on the peaks of the Andes, and in the deserts of Ica and Sechura. The kaleidoscope of ideas I took from those conversations helped to sharpen my understanding of Peruvian cultural history.

Several social scientists in Lima helped to advance this study. I especially treasure my conversations with Pablo Macera, whose remarkable insights and tireless exploration of ideas were infectious. Heraclio Bonilla introduced me to families in several parts of the central highlands of Peru I might otherwise not have had the privilege to meet. Julio Cotler drew my attention to the energetic group of social scientists forming in the early 1970s at the AFA. I was privileged to gain some knowledge early in the project from the late Jorge

Basadre. Dr. Félix Denegri Luna, Peru's master bibliophile, generously placed his personal library at my disposal as he has done for so many others.

A number of colleagues made valuable suggestions as the project evolved. Herman Belz, the late Clifton Brown, Bill Albert, Rob Wright, Bill Elkins, Tom Davies, Lou Pérez, Barbara Tenenbaum, Jim Riley, and Paul Gootenberg read and dissected early versions of the opening chapters. Tom Orum provided bibliographical and archival suggestions. Murdo Macleod applied his acid wit to my cruder formulations, summing them up as "a little bit of fluff." While the project was in its critical stages, Enrique Mayer and David Gow—who carefully read the penultimate draft—lit fires in my mind while we "confessed" at "Father Eagan's," and I am forever in their intellectual debt. Valuable advice also came from Joanne Rappoport, Fiona Wilson, Denys Cuche, and Colin and Maggie Harding.

Others read all or parts of the manuscript as the work neared completion. I especially benefited from Sidney Mintz's counsel. His guidance provided me with an excellent teaching model, and I took shameless advantage of his generosity, badgering him into allowing the completed text to interrupt an incredibly demanding, unenviable workload. I do not regret it, however, for the finished product would not have been the same without his review. Tom Wright gave the work a close, carefully, reading, as did my colleague at Howard University, Joe Reidy. I suspect it could not have become a book without the gentle but unyielding criticism of John J. Tepaske, to whom I am grateful for insisting that I clarify the central meaning of the story.

Fortunately for historians of Latin America, numerous public institutions are staffed with dedicated professionals ready to aid our work. The personnel of the Biblioteca Nacional del Perú, Sala de Investigaciones, were always helpful and supportive, as was the overworked, harried staff of the Sección de Historia of the Archivo General de la Nación in Lima. The staffs of the United States National Archives, the United States National Agricultural Library, and the Library of Congress, especially the Hispanic Division, were helpful at all times. The Howard University–Sponsored Faculty Research Program in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education, then directed by Michael Winston, funded portions of the research. The American Philosophical Society contributed to the completion of the study, and I thank the Commission for the International Exchange of

Scholars (better known as the Fulbright Commission) for a research grant that permitted an extended stay in Peru. The Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Silver Spring, Maryland, office) and the staff of the Sterling Library of Yale University were also helpful. The unwavering faith shown in me by Dolores Martin and Georgette Dorn, respectively editor of the Handbook of Latin American Studies and Chief of the Hispanic Division, have proven to be invaluable. At Howard University, I drew upon the help of several graduate assistants, including Aubrey Thompson, Sally Schwartz, Keith Look-loy, and Linda Aminah Batta. Caroline, Michelle, and Andrew were patient and constantly supportive over the years as they lived with the germination of the ideas, the tiresome delays, and an unholy number of broken promises. I offer this story in partial repayment of the theft of their time.



## INTRODUCTION

### *Peasants, Plantations, and Resistance*

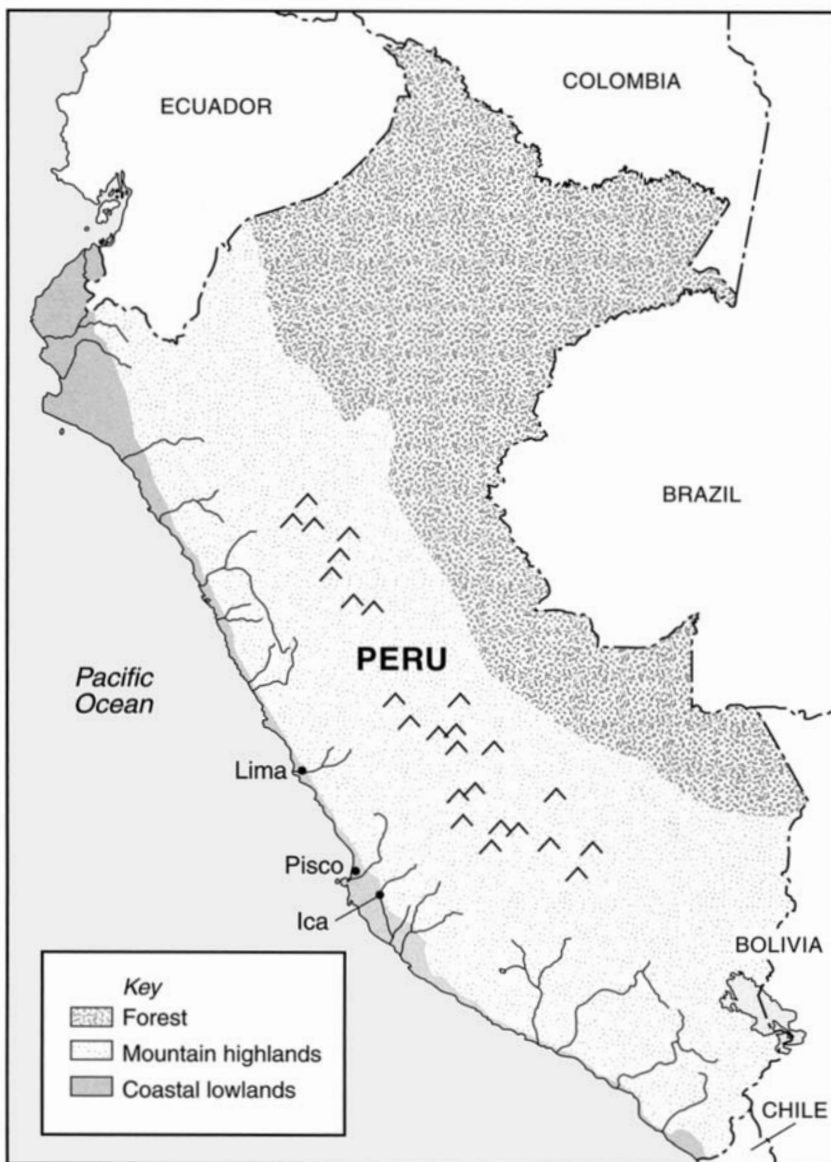
#### Plantations and Peasants

Plantations conjure up time-worn images in Latin American history: vast undulating fields of grass and scrub trees overrun with cattle herded by wild-eyed, weather-beaten ranch hands; or flat stretches of hot lands choked with sugarcane overseen by domineering landlords who force brutal, backbreaking labor on cowering canecutters under a hot sun. Thanks to the writings of Gilberto Freyre and his epigones, we associate plantations most often with slave society. After abolition, however, plantations assumed a new role in most of Latin America.

During the independence wars (1808–25) plantations underwent heavy depredations. The fields were trampled in battle, and slave labor forces were raided to fill military ranks. Ownership of plantations changed hands when aristocratic families fled or could not adjust to the new economies. Plantations fell into the hands of the state or were swooped up by eager new owners, and fresh blood meant other changes. New markets stimulated changes in crops as well as owners; the new planters were often part-time merchants who spent more time making deals in the city. Absentee ownership became a common feature of export plantations.

The new-style landowners hired managers to direct field operations on a daily basis in their absence. They expected the hired administrators to bring to the plantation a sense of continuity; they would be the voice of the owner. Despite the changes, in other words, the new owners wanted everything to remain on a smooth course without disruption. Indeed, the transition seems to have been easy. Black slaves continued to bend their backs to field labor. It is not unlikely that free peasants might be found alongside them from time to time, a curious — perhaps new — but not unusual phenomenon. On the whole, plantations and laborers abetted the perception that plantation society underwent little change with the end of Spanish colonial rule.

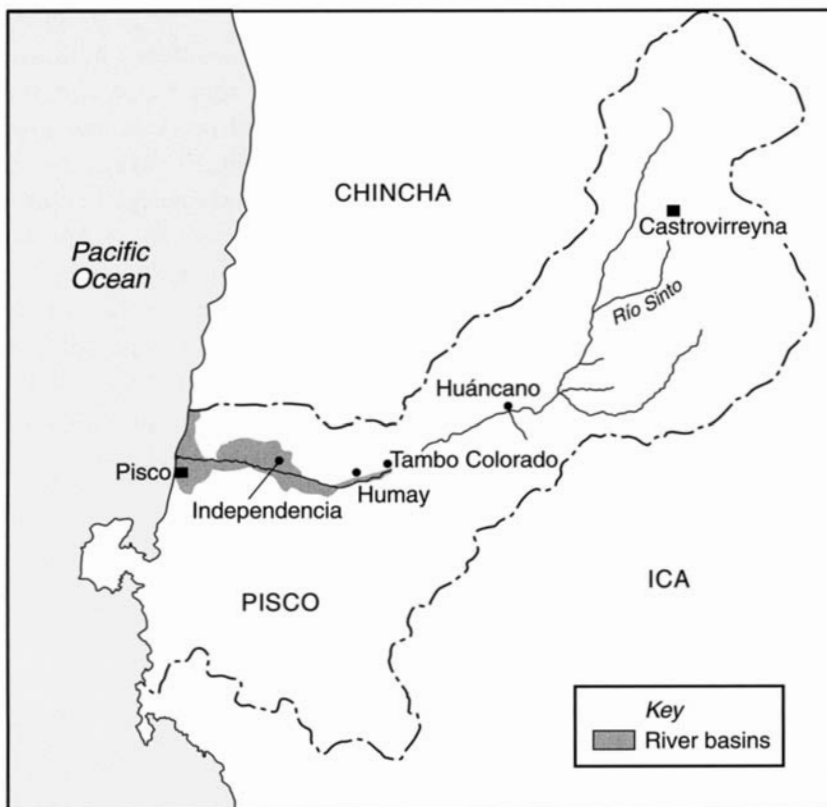




Map 1 Peru



Map 2 Department of Ica



Map 3 Pisco River Basin

A closer look reveals that in some ways the new landowners scarcely resembled the old. Among the new owners were ambitious caudillos and merchants who laid claim to fields abandoned after the wars. The revived plantations succored internal markets and provided a growing portion of Peru's export earnings in wine, sugar, wheat, cotton, and more exotic products. Highland estates, the counterparts to the plantations of the coastal valleys, served as springboards to local political power for the new landowners.<sup>1</sup>

The place of large landholdings in the formation of rural society in Peru has not been clear. Wild swings in growth and stagnation, so typical of the history of agricultural capitalism, undoubtedly made a strong impact on plantation labor. Economic fluctuations forced the landowners to focus on the best way to replace slave labor and to contemplate further technological change thereafter. Yet it is not fully clear if the cycles of capitalism alone convinced the big planters to rid themselves of an inefficient form of labor or if the slaves themselves took the lead in breaking the tie between slavery and the large, commercial plantations.<sup>2</sup>

After abolition, Peruvian planters followed one of two paths left open to them. Some sold the land to new owners. Others avoided the high cost of importing machinery by searching for alternative forms of cheap labor. One source they considered was the free population settled in coastal villages and on the edges of the great estates. Made up largely of free people of mixed ancestry — mainly Indians and free Africans, in the early nineteenth century this population presumably survived in the settlements at the fringes of the plantations.

In some cases the rural population inhabited villages whose fragile legality was soon swept away by the avaricious new planters.<sup>3</sup> Others subsisted as squatters on lands overlooked or ignored in poor economic times; still others survived, briefly, as bandits. Plantations usually hired these campesinos as harvest temporaries to supplement the slave labor force. As slavery waned, the planters hired the squatters more frequently and watched forlornly as the cost of keeping them around became prohibitive. The coastal planters quickly turned elsewhere in search of cheap, permanent field hands.<sup>4</sup>

Knowledge of this preabolition, preindenture labor force admittedly rests on some guesswork and comparisons with studies done in other locales. All indications are that the impact of commercial agriculture on Peruvian campesinos was similar to the experience of their