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978-0-521-38745-3 - Conversations in Colombia: The Domestic Economy in Life and Text
Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*

CONVERSATIONS

Good conversations have no ending, and often no beginning. They have participants and listeners but belong to no one, nor to history. Inscriptions of them broaden the community of conversationalists but close the discussion to those without access to the written word. The conversations about which we write began in the mid-1980s and in 1976, and earlier than that. They took place in the Andes of Colombia and other parts of the Americas. But the full discussion – which has shifted continuously between voice and text, practice and inscription – began 2,000 years ago in Europe. Neither we and the reader nor we and the Colombian folk make up a bounded community of conversationalists, for all of us hear voices “in the air”; and many of us, including theoreticians, are inscribers of discussions “on the ground,” even when we suppose otherwise. Our text is about all these conversations, but it centers upon the voices and practices of the rural Colombians who talked about and showed us their model of a house economy.

In recent years there has been much talk about “rational” peasants and “moral” peasants, “decisive” peasants and “fetishized” peasants, “exploited” peasants and “rebellious” peasants, as if some writers were using ethnographic data to verify processes of human history and a face of human experience that they felt were already known to them.¹ Our project is different. In the marginal areas of Colombia and much of Latin America, the house is the principal grouping for carrying out the practices of livelihood. We think that an examination of the domestic economy as a model – how it works, where it came from, the ways its practices have been inscribed by theorists of the center – has important implications for understanding the processes of the periphery as well as theory at the core.

We also think that we have made unusual discoveries about the house model.² The ethnography comes from the eastern Andes of Colombia, an area stretching from the Department of Nariño in the south through Cundinamarca and Boyacá to the southern end of Santander in the north. Locally, this area is known as Andean Culture.

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Judging from our experiences elsewhere, we surmise that similar models are found from the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico right through Central America and the Isthmus to many parts of South America. We propose that this model of the domestic economy dates to late medieval and early modern Europe and that it was brought to the Americas at the Iberian conquest. Because it has mostly disappeared from its place of origin, a brief summary of the Colombian example may be useful.

The rural folk or *campesinos* claim that the earth – and only the earth – provides the “strength” for life. This strength, given by the “might” of God, is contained in crops and transmitted in food to humans, who “use it up” in “work” to “gather” more. All material practices are organized through the house, and the lexicon for them comes from the vocabulary for the physical dwelling: the house as shelter is a metaphor for the house as economy. Within the house, returns from the crops and animals are used up in an ordered sequence of named expenditures. Good management ensures that after these expenditures there will be leftovers for other uses. The relation between expenditure and leftover is expressed by the repeated admonition to “be thrifty” or to “make savings.” This model of domestic management differs in important ways from the profit-and-loss calculations of a business. As the rural folk say, the house is not designed to “make money” like a business. Of course, they also “trade” on the market for “necessities” which the earth does not give, but they complain about “unjust prices” and the power of traders who possess large holdings. In the rural folk’s view, the monetary power of outsiders explains why they are “poor.” But the market and exchange also mark the boundary of the house model, for here it reaches the limits of its power to make a world. In the larger arena, the house comes into contact with the profit-seeking corporation. The corporation – a different model, a different means of grouping – is hegemonic in all markets and through its financial control persistently consigns the house to the margin of profit making. To understand the domestic economy, therefore, we shall also consider the articulation of the house and corporate models “at the margin,” and argue that this connection has much to do with persistent underdevelopment in rural areas as well as with the historical development of theory in the center. These latter topics – the contrapuntal relation of house and corporation, the impact of the margin on both, and the connection of practice and text within a long conversation – are leitmotifs of the book.

CONVERSATIONS: HERE AND THERE, NOW AND THEN

The realization that our own research was embedded within a long and complex conversation grew slowly. Only toward the end did we see more clearly that our way of conducting field investigations, our mode of analysis, and the shape of this text itself were closely connected. But the emphasis we give to both practice and inscription as parts of longer conversations is at variance with some contemporary views in anthropology. Much attention has recently been given to the rhetorical forms that anthropologists use, for – according to one argument – ethnographers, by drawing upon their own culture’s forms of persuasion and canons of expository style, significantly control the way one culture “reads” another.³ According to this thesis, the texts that anthropologists write do not provide a window upon the “facts” of social life nor even a clear view of the theory that shapes those “facts” which ethnographers collect and report. The anthropological text is a controlled communication that the author uses to persuade or critique, invent, justify, or reaffirm a theoretical position. Considerable attention, therefore, is given to analysis of anthropological writing itself, its figures and metaphors, the historical position of the ethnographer and its impact upon the text produced, and the shifting, reflexive relation between observer and observed.

The critique is useful, but one consequence of this attempt at an epistemological shift of the discipline is to minimize and to undermine the importance of anthropological practice or fieldwork itself. To be certain, one must be very wary of adopting the view that the “facts” are “there” to be collected. But according to the recent “textualists,” the claim to have had the “experience” of “being there” is itself a rhetorical figure, a culturally and historically dated ideology used to justify the authority of the text in which it appears (Clifford 1983, 1988). Anthropologists do go “there” and bring back evidence of this experience – in photographs, recordings, journals, “verbatim reports,” and artifacts – but apparently only to legitimate, in a discipline-specific way, the texts that they write. It follows, of course, that if fieldwork is deflated as a way of human learning, text production is the more exalted as the singular moment of anthropology.

We take issue with this view that would pass over the special anthropological practice of listening to other voices and evade consideration of the many skills anthropologists have developed and learned, used and refined, in their research. Curiously, the “postmodernist” argument would deny that anthropology itself has a

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history of learning and change, for it seems to consign the imaginative and hard work of learning about others' lives to a passing moment on the way to text production, and it disregards the complex, evolving relation between practice and inscription. We think that field skills, so varying in scope, so demanding of the faculties, profoundly differentiate the texts that anthropologists produce. And perhaps we have become the more aware of these skills as our own collaboration has revealed the gains to be made by joint work and the shortcomings any single person experiences on being surrounded by the total demands of field research. Despite the obsessive grip that the Malinowskian myth still has upon our imaginations (Hayes and Hayes 1970), the anthropological project has never been the feat of a singular hero. Fieldwork itself is a perpetual discussion, and we propose the model of conversation as the practice of anthropology and as the activity of other cultures – which, incidentally, are surely not “texts.” Texts are frozen, they are conversation-stoppers that deny the continuous remaking of social life. Through our fieldwork methods we have tried to make our dependence on broader communities more explicit, to shift the conception of the anthropological project from singular to communal venture, and to expand the scope of the conversation. The anthropologist produces a text, as we do here, but only as one part of several larger conversations; and the anthropologist must certainly have a “good ear” as well as a facile pen.

Our own conversations about these and connected issues began some time ago. In 1977 we undertook an initial survey of the *llanos* or low plains to the east of Bogotá and of regions in the Department of Nariño. Further work had to wait several years, but from the outset we were aware of the torrid relation between power and knowledge in anthropology. During the 1970s, Colombia and other Latin American nations were concerned about the activities of foreign researchers who would enter the country, undertake investigations directed to questions and theories current in their First World nations, and then leave with their results. Anthropological research seemed to be a metaphor for “dependency” relations, especially the exploitation of natural resources by transnational corporations who were aiming for short-term profits to be dispersed or reinvested in the home country. In Colombia, one response to this critical awareness was the passage of a law requiring a foreign researcher to make over a part of his or her grant to the disciplinary community. But it seemed to us then, as it does now, that the issue of anthropological responsibility should be focused more on power in relation to the very production and dissemination of knowledge. This issue was central to us, for we had to come to terms

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with our own differing backgrounds – one from Colombia, one from the United States – and with what was then the potentially power-infused relationship of teacher and student.

When in 1984 we began fieldwork in earnest, these issues were unresolved, but our conversation had begun. In July of that year we traveled from Bogotá north to Boyacá with the intention of locating separate field sites so that we might carry out a comparative study. Within a day we cast this approach aside and began collaborative work. Over time, our field discussions often concerned this relationship itself. To our surprise, control over an instrument of transport – the automobile – played a role in the conceptualization of our study, for a car became not only our means of transport but a mode of inquiry and a marker of “conversational communities.” The use of an automobile, of course, permitted us to see rather fully the physical environment, its degradation, and the marginal conditions in which most of the rural folk live. It allowed us to make a truly regional study and to experience rapid ecological shifts; in some areas one can descend in less than an hour from a high plain at 11,000 feet where only sheep can graze to a semitropical environment filled with lush fruits. The roads are not always in fine condition nor so wide as one might wish, and we grew accustomed to changing tires several times a day as well as relying upon the more experienced of us for the driving. One evening in Boyacá, on meeting up with two Colombian social scientists, we were reminded of the power of the automobile as an instrument for gaining entry to many conversations. At that point in our research, we were engaging in twelve or more discussions per day; the two other researchers talked about their difficulties of travel and of feeling successful when completing one interview in a day.

From the outset, the car became a place for our discussions and facilitated the making of our own conversational community. After a field conversation, in which we both participated and took notes, we returned to the car (or a path or house) to discuss what we thought we had just heard or observed. Our talks were in Spanish and English and both; sometimes they simply concerned issues of translation, for we found that working in two languages helped us understand rural usage better. For example, part-way through the research one of us insisted that “*las utilidades*” (useful things) had an important place in the rural lexicon. He argued that it was applied to material things “used” in the house and that the question to be explored was how this domestic usage in a remote part of Colombia was linked to its textual usage by nineteenth-century “utilitarians” and to its later incorporation into utility theory as developed by neoclassical economists. The other

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pointed out that rural use of “*las utilidades*” might be evidence of the contemporary impress of the market world, where it is used for “profit,” what a corporation retains after its costs of operation. As in other instances, we were both right and both wrong, but the discussion led us toward a better understanding. We found that for the people “*las utilidades*” refers to the usable returns that a house takes in from the land or from trade and then expends. If this usage is viewed historically – as one still preserved in Colombia but taken over and transformed by the corporate world and textual theoreticians some time ago – the several contemporary applications of the term can be seen to be interlinked. Incidentally, in modern North American usage, “utilities” refers exactly to the electricity, gas, and water that a house receives from outside and uses up inside.

But translation was only one of several tasks we undertook within our conversational community. More often than we would like to admit, each of us had missed something the other had heard, or heard the “same thing” differently. This was disorienting and humiliating, because it meant that “facts” were not external pillars of knowledge but partly constructed through our success in persuading one another, and our ability to listen, too. For example, one rainy afternoon we had a long conversation with an old man in a marketplace; each of us made notes, and we recorded the discussion as well. His oral history about haciendas centered on the differing rates of pay during the week, the “obligation” each tenant owed for use of hacienda land, and the way haciendas “enslaved” people. Afterwards, we found that our notes did not match, and our discussion about the “facts” became heated; this alone was disturbing, but the telling moment came when we listened to the tape and discovered that the man seemed to have said something different from what each of us claimed to have heard, and even the recording was not definitive. We never assumed that the “facts” we were collecting had an unimpeachable sturdiness, but moments such as this emphasized that we were listening to an unfinished discussion about which we might talk without end. So our continuous “review” in the car and elsewhere had for us an “interpretive” as well as a “verification” function, in some sense of those terms.

The car accelerated the fieldwork not only because it shortened the time between discussions but also because we could digest larger amounts of information communally than alone. And as we learned to manage conversational shifts between field and car, our conversations with the people became more probing. Frequently, we finished a conversation “on the ground” and began one in the car only to find that new questions were raised or that important ones had not been

asked, so we would turn the wheel and return, sometimes more than once. The car allowed us to discuss immediately in “longhand” or to explicate to ourselves what had been “shorthand” or elliptical field discussions.

In time, we saw other advantages in having our own conversational community. Certainly, it quickened our energies – for as one might fail, the other carried on – and enhanced field conversations by giving each of us a few more moments for the taking of notes; and we could both facilitate the discussion by approaching complicated issues in different ways. We found also that joint work better drew out our different skills. One might know more about ecological processes and geography, the other about market goods. But there was a more intriguing way in which our community affected the work. One of us knew “Colombian culture” from growing up in it; yet this knowledge often came to be voiced only when the other did not fully understand a word usage or a practice in the field. The relevant “longhand” or implicit context might be a Colombian commonplace or a remembrance of what a grandparent or great-grandparent had said decades ago; so hearing the shorthand and discovering the longhand became a communal practice of our own. Eventually, we turned this process about and conversed in longhand about shorthand practices in the United States such as the transformed appearance of the “house model” in contemporary television programs. This dialectical drawing out and use of personal knowledge led us to wonder whether anthropology might not be nearly impossible for the single foreign researcher, who, lacking a lifetime of personal knowledge, could never fill out, make the cultural connections, or turn into longhand what we increasingly understood to be elliptical field encounters; and also whether it might not be impossible for the “native,” for whom every verb and noun, every phrase and explanation, was too familiar to require conscious explication – or was an atavism, unconnected to anything else.

Still, in these uses of the car to make conversational communities, we were segregating the two discussions; the rural folk comprised one community of conversants and we another. In other ways, however, the automobile dissolved these boundaries. From the first day, we carried people in the car, and it was forever filled with produce and small animals; but the car in movement was not a useful context for “field” discussions. It did, however, allow us to juxtapose voices from different areas, for we frequently related to one group what another had said. There is much linguistic variation throughout the Andean region, and the people were interested and amused to hear of it, offering their commentary upon it. We became interlocutors between

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and among their conversations, which in other ways had been going on for hundreds of years. But we were also conversation makers in the sense that our presence and voices always made a new and enlarged community of discussants. With rare exceptions, the people welcomed us; and we explained our presence – in which they were always interested – as an attempt to expand our knowledge so that we could tell our home communities about practices existent elsewhere. This expansion of conversations and forming of new communities enabled us to carry out various functions. In the conversational community that we helped make, it was appropriate to frame the apt, the unexpected, and the infelicitous question, for we were interlocutors between conversations at home and in the field. This participation in a newly made community was also a way of “verifying” or “validating” our developing stock of information. Upon hearing our commentary, people agreed and explained, replicated what others said, or disagreed. Almost everything we describe was put to the “test” of conversation by the rural folk. As our experience developed, we also used our car conversation to predict responses that we thought a field conversation would bring. In the later stages of the research, the relation between car and field conversation became thicker, taking place in both at once. One time, high above an old hacienda, we sat in the car, with the doors open, surrounded by a dozen people only some of whom we could see and be seen by. We heard voices from in front and back, and they may only have heard a voice from inside. But the conversation, which captured everybody’s attention, lasted nearly two hours and was outlined by a series of predictions we had previously made and continued to discuss as the larger conversation proceeded. One after another the connections of land, crops, and economic theory came to light, and our enthusiasm must have been enjoyed by the people, who stayed on and on. The physical context, with its merging of car and field, reproduced the merged content of the conversing community. Our attempt to converse, to understand, and to listen, as the rural folk often said, was a compliment to them; perhaps the interest from a more powerful context was a form of “validation” for their own way of life, which in so many other contexts is denigrated. One afternoon, as we were driving an older man to his fields and trying out a range of voices upon him, these aspects of merging and diverging conversations, the power to control and to listen, validation for one and for the other, came together in his parting words: “It is so nice to talk to intellectuals like yourselves who understand.”

But as the car was bringing us more and more into contact with

voices “on the ground,” it was increasingly invaded by “voices in the air.” These voices from written history – from the several textual communities of economic theorists – began quietly enough and sporadically; but they grew more intrusive until we were forced to revoice them from memory and let them enter the conversation. This breaking of conversational limits started as we listened to the people talk, for instance, about the “force of labor,” gaining ownership of property through work, the “advance,” “making savings,” and seeking a “just price” in the market. Their carefully used words startlingly called forth the texts of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, of Aquinas and Aristotle, and of many others, so that these forced themselves upon the conversation. Eventually, for example, we were able to bring to conversations in the field various puzzles about which the Physiocrats had written and disagreed, for in certain respects the people appeared to be practicing Physiocrats. Still, what they said and practiced was never equivalent to any of the received texts. When we posed “Physiocratic questions” to them, their answers were not the same as the Physiocrats’. It was not clear to us then why the rural voice should echo texts, for clearly the country folk had not been trained in economic theory as it had developed up to the turn of this century. Yet it did seem that rural life and historical texts could illuminate one another, and so the relation of the two became a problem to be solved. This meant that the link between inscriptions of the past and practices of the present, between the Old World and the New, and between theorists of the core and practitioners of the periphery, had to be considered. We return to these several issues, but for us in the car at that time, the idea that bounded communities exist, that conversations have a completeness in themselves, had to be cast aside; and the number of participants in our discussions was vastly increased. In fact, our initial view of the car as a conversational container was exploded, and we were led to form several frameworks and hypotheses for analyzing the local situation. One of these concerns the long-term relation between the corporation in the center and the house at the margin.

HOUSE AND CORPORATION, CORE AND PERIPHERY

The house and the corporation are institutions or means of grouping, but neither is a total economic system. We focus on the house as opposed to the economy or the individual acts and decisions that are said to lead to a macrosystem, and we argue that the house economy is an institution of long standing, dating from Greek times and earlier.

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The corporate means of grouping is also an institution of long standing, but a later development associated with the expansion of the market.

Both the house and the corporation are means for accomplishing material tasks. The house, smaller, is locally based and wholly or partly produces its own means of maintenance; it produces as outputs some of the inputs it requires. The house is never fully engaged in or dependent upon the market. Often, it is organized by kinship relations. It grows by increase in number of members and material means, but its expansion has limits having to do with its internal organization, control over information and technology, and the larger economy of which the house is a part. As it grows it tends to fragment, to replicate and repeat itself, or to be transformed into a corporation.

The corporation is enmeshed in exchange; it buys to sell in order to make a profit. It produces one set of outputs and sells these to purchase a different array of inputs so that it can undertake production once again. Normally, it does not reproduce its own material necessities. By altering its internal structure, the corporation can expand almost endlessly, and its continuity is hardly contingent upon the survival of particular members. In theory and law a corporation is never extinguished; it is characterized by “perpetual succession.”

Both the corporation and the house fit various economic regimes, sometimes together. The house has flourished in slavery, city-states, empires, feudalism, seigneurial society, mercantilism, capitalism, and other political-economic contexts, while the corporation is found in capitalism, socialism, and the market. The house is known to us from Greek writings, while the Roman villa, fundus, and praedium had an impact on a broad area of Europe through the influence of Roman colonies and settlements; there were many subsequent forms of the house, such as the hide (England), the *huba* (Germany), the *mansus* (France), the monastic estate, the manor, the Great House, the great estate, and the hacienda. The corporation is a more recent creation; its growth is linked to the expansion of markets and the rise of profit making. As Braudel (1986) has shown, markets have long existed, along with trading for gain; but only in later European times, as markets expanded, technology changed, population increased, and wealth in productive equipment was accumulated, did the corporation develop as an important force in the market. According to Braudel (pp. 314–15), the first corporations were the twelfth-century guilds (*corps de métiers*) which controlled labor, production, and trade. Braudel endorses a typology that suggests a four-stage transition between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries from house to corporation: material