

## Culture



# Yvan BRETON et Marie-France LABRECQUE, *L'agriculture, la pêche et l'artisanat au Yucatan : prolétarisation de la paysannerie maya au Mexique*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981. 373 pages

Alice Littlefield

Volume 3, Number 2, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078145ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078145ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Littlefield, A. (1983). Review of [Yvan BRETON et Marie-France LABRECQUE, *L'agriculture, la pêche et l'artisanat au Yucatan : prolétarisation de la paysannerie maya au Mexique*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981. 373 pages]. *Culture*, 3(2), 85–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078145ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1983

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

the Protestant Ethic (in a village where there are no Protestants) no longer can be said to advance our understanding although they do bespeak Kottak's desire to deal with the dialectic of idea and action.

Yet, *Assault on Paradise* does succeed in painting a vivid picture of life in one Brazilian community over twenty years of rapid change and in showing how Arembepe "has met the increasingly common fate of the little community in the Third World" (p. 3). It also succeeds in conveying very well how one anthropologist grappled with the demands of doing fieldwork. Well-written and illustrated, this book will engage the interest of undergraduates while giving much substance for thought and discussion. I recommend it highly.

---

Yvan BRETON et Marie-France LABRECQUE,  
*L'agriculture, la pêche et l'artisanat au Yucatan: prolétarianisation de la paysannerie maya au Mexique*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981. 373 pages.

By Alice Littlefield  
Central Michigan University

This book is an exemplary study of peasant production in a region which has long been of considerable interest to anthropologists. It is exemplary in several ways: it analyzes three sectors of production—agriculture, fishing and crafts—rather than just one; it is a regional study which examines each of the three economic sectors in two or more communities in north central Yucatan; and it employs a methodology of coordinated team research utilizing a consistent body of theory and concepts in the analysis and comparison of the different economic activities and communities.

Breton and Labrecque give two reasons for expanding the concept of peasant production to include fishing and crafts as well as agriculture. First, the lowland Mayan peasantry ensures its socio-economic reproduction through differentiated labor involving several complementary economic activities within a single community or household. Second, in spite of the specificity of the labor process in each of the three sectors, there are many parallels in the relations of production and in their articulation with the dominant capitalist mode of production.

Ultimately, the second argument is more convincing than the first. Whereas craft production is

nearly always complementary to agriculture or fishing at the household level (partly because traditional patterns of division of labor tend to ascribe craft activities to women and children, agriculture and fishing to men), agriculture and fishing are not usually carried on within the same household or community. The reasons for this are largely ecological: the Yucatecan littoral is ill-suited for cultivation.

Nevertheless, the three sectors evidence interesting parallels in the articulation of petty commodity production with the dominant capitalist mode. Private and state enterprises exert considerable control over petty commodity production through credit relations, monopoly of inputs, and control of markets for products. Through these means they manipulate the terms of exchange in their favor, obstructing the accumulation of capital in the hands of the direct producers and facilitating its accumulation by the regional and national bourgeoisie.

One of the common problems confronted by economic anthropologists is the lack of reliable quantitative data on the kinds of productive activities we investigate, and the difficulties of collecting such data from producers who keep few written records (or from uncooperative government bureaucracies). The authors of this book utilize some innovative approaches which allow quantitative estimates of such variables as income, profit, and work effort, facilitating comparisons across localities and across economic sectors. Economic anthropologists, regardless of their geographical specializations, will want to examine their approaches to these problems.

Labrecque's sophisticated analysis of agriculture in four communities (Sinanché, Temax, Dzidzantun and Yobain) constitutes a theoretically significant contribution to the understanding of the rural Mexican economy, particularly the thorny problems posed by the widespread co-existence of wage labor and petty commodity production in the countryside, and by the simultaneous presence of these forms of production on both private and *ejido* (collective) lands in Yucatan.

The short-term credits provided to the state-controlled henequen-producing collectives take the form of weekly wages for work performed. These credits have a contradictory character: they constitute a government subsidy which buys peace in the countryside (most *ejidos* are deeply in debt to the state lending agency), but are also a source of surplus-value and capital accumulation for sectors of the bourgeoisie. Extensive state control of production, processing and marketing of raw henequen

fiber and finished products allows the administrative manipulation of both credits and prices to producers. In 1973, the *ejidos* received only some 35 percent of the value of their fiber on the world market, and a significant part of this went to pay the cost of decortication (removing the fiber from the leaves) in processing plants owned by the large-scale private planters. Labrecque argues that the agricultural producers are subject to a process of decapitalization in which the values they create are transferred to the bourgeoisie (landed, financial, and commercial) through an onerous state bureaucracy.

Small-scale production in the countryside, both for subsistence and for market, also subsidizes the henequen industry by allowing the labor force to complete its reproduction, thereby keeping wages low in the export-crop sector.

The analysis of Yucatecan coastal fishing by Breton, Blondin and Dumas provides important data on a subject which has been neglected by previous researchers. Their studies compare two coastal villages, Dzilam Bravo and Chabihau, which differ in size and in the extent of capitalist penetration in fishing. In both communities outside capitalist enterprises have established control of circulation, providing credit for the purchase of major equipment (nets and boats) and buying up production. More recently, they have also entered into production, employing some fishermen as wage laborers on company-owned boats. In general, however, the companies prefer to leave fishing to independent fishermen, who assume most of the risks, while control of circulation allows the companies to appropriate an important part of the value produced in fishing. Petty commodity production, far from representing a stage of liberation in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist economy, is the result of the adoption, by representatives of the commercial bourgeoisie, of a common strategy to control the process of circulation while minimizing investment risk. Hence the process of proletarianization is temporarily slowed in the interests of capital.

The section on artisan production by Royer is the least satisfactory part of the book, largely because it is based on very limited field research. Nevertheless, the data on hammock-weaving generally confirm previous findings. Royer's account of the development of a new industry in Chabihau, involving the production of shell objects for sale to tourists, and of the direct role of the state in encouraging this activity, is of considerable interest.

Of greatest theoretical importance in this

section is the comparison of net incomes in fishing, agriculture and hammock-weaving. As the least capitalized of the three activities, earnings from hammock-weaving lag far behind those of the other two. The new shell-object industry promises little more to its practitioners. Why, then, do these activities persist? Most of the work is performed by women and children, who would otherwise find few opportunities to earn cash. The persistence and even expansion of artisan production based on archaic production processes facilitates the socio-economic reproduction of the peasantry.

Breton and Labrecque argue that the persistence of petty commodity production among the Yucatecan peasantry serves the interests of what they refer to as Mexican "state monopoly capitalism" in its current stage of development. It slows the process of proletarianization while simultaneously facilitating accumulation of capital on the basis of non-capitalist forms of production. At the same time, the differentiation of the rural population through the permutations and combinations of wage labor and small-scale production, and through the creation of work groups with separate budgets within the collective *ejidos*, creates divisions within the labor force which operate both in terms of their objective material conditions and in terms of ideology, hence diluting the political strength and unity of rural workers.

This book is an important contribution to economic anthropology, and this short summary does not do justice to its conceptual richness and subtlety. The next step in studies of contemporary Yucatan will require linking such detailed studies of peasant production, of which we now have several, to a more comprehensive study of the Yucatecan social formation: rural-urban relationships, commercial and industrial sectors, class structure, political and ideological processes, and Yucatan's links with the nation and the world. The time is ripe for someone to take up the task begun by Redfield and to formulate a new analysis of Yucatecan society and culture: an analysis which looks not to the past, as Redfield's romantically did, but to a future adequate to the needs and potential of Yucatan's workers and peasants.