



FIELDWORK



*The Correspondence
of Robert Redfield
& Sol Tax*



edited with an Introduction by
Robert A. Rubinstein

*with a Foreword by
Lisa Redfield Peattie*



FIELDWORK:

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FIELDWORK:

*The Correspondence of
Robert Redfield & Sol Tax*

*To my father, Samuel B. Rubinstein,
and in memory of my mother and my aunt,
Frieda L. Rubinstein and Helen Lokshin*

Foreword

Letters, often a delight to write and to read, are nevertheless, as we all know when we think of it, an inherently unsatisfying means of communication. The reader has no way of grounding what he reads by a sharp look at the writer's expression or the atmosphere of the room in which the sentences were written. Even more bothersome is the time lapse, which makes the respondent always turn out to be answering the question I had *last* week. These letters work best as communication as the two correspondents, Sol Tax and Robert Redfield, get closer to each other, sharing a common context, seeing each other frequently, connected via their respective family members as well as directly; letters then become part of a continuing conversation and a literal keeping in touch.

So one thing we might learn from this interchange has to do with fieldwork supervision: as with many other activities which involve a great deal of intuitive response to situations which are complex and imperfectly predictable, advice from afar does not help very much. Redfield seems to know this and, in the early stages when he is advising from afar, largely confines himself to reassuring comments along the lines of, "You seem to be doing fine."

But for us the main interest of the correspondence is in what it tells us about the practice of anthropology. There is a lot to look at here, for the correspondence stretches over six field seasons in which each practitioner is individually evolving his thinking, and in which the relationship itself is evolving and thus becoming part of the intellectual life of each. There is a myriad of events which are part of these processes: trips are taken, housing arranged, horses rented, informants located, illnesses contracted and surmounted. Research strategies and ideas evolve: Sol Tax learns the limitations of survey when he finds that he cannot collect kinship terminology without doing genealogies; data on the economy of Panajachel, first an ethnographic category, become a full-fledged study published as *Penny Capitalism*. Since the task of the editor of this volume is to place all this in the context of anthropology and the evolution of its professional practice, I will myself simply make a few brief, rather irregular comments.

In making these comments, I must begin by acknowledging that I am in these letters too—Lisa, daughter of Robert Redfield, a member of the field party in Agua Escondida. I appear there to myself as one sees oneself in a faded group photograph: That must be James. . . . And can that be me? Did I really look like that?

I certainly remember what it felt like being there as that particular member of the field party. I have the sharpest memories of Guatemala. I was an adolescent, bookish, and a loner at the best of times, whose brother had recently died in a sledding accident back in Illinois, so I lived in the presence of death in a space made for a bookish adolescent to spin in: high above Lake Atitlán with its shifting blue-black water, incoming clouds, and a small volcano. Indians came and went with sharp defended eyes and neck muscles set to pull the weight of the tumpline. My father worked with informants; I learned to make tortillas. A few times I walked to market with giggling girls my own age, but with whom I had almost nothing in common. Mostly I endured the solitude of adolescence in the high space above the Lake, read history, and taught myself to type, conscientiously following the exercises in the book.

Because I was so marginal to the fieldwork enterprise, the Redfield-Tax correspondence provides me now almost as fresh a look at the enterprise as it would for any outsider.

I am struck, first, in these letters by the dominance of *arrangements*. For a good part of one season, Tax had much of his time taken up with arranging the building of a house for the Redfields; but even when it was a question of renting space, the issues of where and how absorb a great deal of energy; when Sol and Gertrude Tax were trying to get started in Chichicastenango, it was a central problem. There is also transportation: if the Institute provides a vehicle, there is either a paid driver (who turns out to drink heavily) or the bureaucratic hassles of getting a driver's license. Sharing the vehicles, getting the errands done, then becomes another issue of coordination and communication. Food is also a concern: Tax reports that "Marcelino arrived last evening with the eggs and crackers, for which many thanks," and Redfield thanks Tax for a gift of vegetables from the Lake-irrigated plots; shortly thereafter, Redfield writes to Tax: "I have mislaid our grocery list. Did we order canned peas? I cannot find any. Perhaps we neglected to order them. On the other hand, we have 18 cans of sardines in tomato sauce which I do not think we ordered. Do you want these? Also a montòn of salted crackers. Want some?" A young romantic might react with the feeling that these middle-aged professors are making entirely too much of their creature comforts, but the issue is more complex. There are very funny accounts, by Tax, of attempts

to work in the middle of a continuing marimba concert and an Indian family's central living quarters when the strategy was to use borrowed space, and a field trip which had to be cut short when the Taxes could not figure out how to get themselves fed. Arrangements have to be made; the intellectual enterprise has its material base.

The issue of arrangements can be seen as part of an even more general theme: the fieldworker, although living in the midst of his or her work in a way which is practically unparalleled in another occupation, has nevertheless a private life which must be served. As I sat at my table above the Lake teaching myself to type, I was clearly very marginal to the fieldwork enterprise; but Redfield and Tax also have private lives and are also keeping track of parts of their lives which are outside the fieldwork experience. In 1938, Tax writes, "Is it news to you that the Republicans picked up some 75 or more seats in congress and maybe eight in the senate? . . . More recently, a Polish Jew . . . shot the 3rd Sec'y of the German embassy in Paris to death (meaning to get the ambassador) and touched off a real Pogrom in Germany." Personal demands on the fieldworker appear in immediate physical form: Greta Redfield advises Gertrude Tax on what to do about the baby's diarrhea; Redfield has prolonged bouts of bronchitis; and I myself got diphtheria and was carried off to the hospital in Guatemala City, carrying with me the rest of the fieldwork party.

Meanwhile, the fieldworkers are trying to participate and to observe and to keep themselves going personally via a foreign and incompletely absorbed language. Redfield works only in Spanish, but Tax writes in 1935: "As for the language, we are doing the best we can, but don't be too disappointed if, when you come, we cannot speak it. . . . It is hard for me to imagine that in six months (or maybe in five times six months) we will be able to speak it well enough to get into feelings and beliefs of the Indians in their own language. It is hard enough to do that, I suppose, when both the ethnologist (or sociologist) and the subjects have the same native language. We shall have to try, however, for the Spanish spoken here is pretty fragmentary."

But at the same time that there are barriers, to some degree impassable, to some degree self-erected, between the fieldworkers and the life which is their subject matter, that life also invades without permission. In 1939 Sol Tax reveals himself as trying to understand, and to cope with, complex recriminations involving his *compadre's* daughter and wondering, "Do you suppose that I shall be a padrino at 4 or 5 A.M. some morning, or what?" The persons with whom the fieldworker interacts are not simply subject matter but neighbors.

This is the context in which, over the years, Tax and Redfield are trying to evolve their own set of practice rules. The rules are to govern

the translation from a blur of imperfectly noted and still more imperfectly understood social events into words—which are, in the research monograph as in letters, inherently inadequate as a vehicle for information transfer. One can understand the emphasis on “informants” and the focus on traits and lists as ways of professionalizing the acquisition of information in such a way as to preadapt it for filing in the form of words. One can see Redfield’s emphasis in the correspondence on combining surveys with community studies as in part a response to the difficulties of representing complex context along with the verbal generalizations. Redfield’s argument for the combination does not state this directly: he argues, in 1936, that “it is by intimate, long-term acquaintance with culture groups that one gains insight into the nature of not only that culture, but of culture and society in general.”

I see this as an attempt to put the abstracting formulation into the context of thicker description to which it can be related intuitively, much as the fieldwork correspondence is enriched when it takes place in the context of joint and parallel activity in the fieldwork site. But what does “intimate and long-term acquaintance” mean, and how is the “insight” gained to be represented in words—those words which are the anthropologist’s letters to the world? These questions are being asked lately, but they were not being asked then.

One way in which they were avoided was by a set of conventions on the subject matter of anthropology. Tax and Redfield are experimenting with the conventions as they go along: Redfield proposed, in 1939, that “the memorandum on Spanish-Indian traits . . . confirms my feeling that these problems are less rewarding than others, and that they are not the problems most congenial to either your interests or mine.” But there are problems which it does not even occur to them to engage.

Redfield began to study quarrels within Agua Escondida, and one sees him and Tax trying to get straight the system of taxation linking local community and national government. But when I revisited Agua Escondida decades later, saw how the population had expanded on what was even in 1939 a rather constricted land base, and thought about the political history of Guatemala in the intervening decades, it struck me as interesting that Ladino-Indian relations had been for Tax and Redfield a topic of the contact of cultures, and that the role of the Lake communities in national politics would have seemed to either a quite unanthropological topic. It would not have occurred to either Redfield or Tax, I believe, to speculate on the role of anthropology within the broad context of the relationship between U.S. society and Guatemala.

But it is not simply a question of subject matter. There is a whole set of doubts and difficulties around what it means to say something about the world out there—whether it is in the form of a letter or an anthropological monograph, each of which has its own conventions. Tax and Redfield thought a lot about the practice of fieldwork and proposed to teach about it when they got home. But they did not seem to have wrestled with a theory of practice for anthropology which engaged these deeper issues of what it is to “know” and to “say.” It must have been in many ways a happier time to work. It will be interesting for the theoretical sophisticates of our troubled age to see what they can make of this correspondence.

*Lisa Redfield Peattie
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Preface

Although I did not know Robert Redfield, who died a dozen years before I began studying anthropology, like hundreds of others preparing for fieldwork in Yucatan I read his publications. His writings about the Yucatec Maya villages of Chan Kom and Dzitas, his model of the Folk-Urban continuum, his views on peasant societies, and other aspects of his work were still subjects of lively discussion when I entered graduate school in the early 1970s. At that time, it was nearly impossible to prepare for research in Mesoamerica without seeing Robert Redfield's pervasive influence on the anthropology of the region.

Thus, in 1979, three years after returning from my own fieldwork in Yucatan and Belize, I took the opportunity of my recent residence in Chicago to read the Robert Redfield Papers in the University of Chicago Archives. For me, reading these papers was a very special experience. From them emerged a sense of the sharp intellect for which Redfield was widely respected and which is reflected in his publications. But equally compelling, there also emerged from these papers a delightful view of a committed, caring, humane, family-oriented man of great personal integrity.

Redfield's student, later friend and colleague, Sol Tax, is present in many different roles in the Robert Redfield Papers. I knew of Sol Tax as a distinguished and very senior anthropologist, mainly through his publications, but also because, in the early 1970s, Tax was internationally prominent as president of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences and founding editor of *Current Anthropology*. As a graduate student, I read his articles on world view, social relations, and social organization of the highland Maya in Guatemala, and I studied his book about the economy of the Guatemalan *municipio* of Panajachel, *Penny Capitalism*. These, like Redfield's publications about Yucatan, were then still important, nearly canonical elements in Mesoamerican anthropological training.

The correspondence between Robert Redfield and Sol Tax spans the twenty-five years from 1933 to 1958. Amounting to more than a thousand pages of typewritten text, their letters speak to a wide range of subjects, anthropological and otherwise. The entire corpus of their

correspondence is worth reading. But especially interesting to me were the letters they exchanged between 1934 and 1941, while Tax was doing ethnographic research in Guatemala under Redfield's direction. I was repeatedly awed and exhilarated as I read these early letters. Little in their publications or the folklore of anthropology that had been related to me as a student prepared me for the literateness, energy, scope, and reflexivity displayed in the letters.

The letters resonated deeply with my own anthropological interests in the nature of fieldwork, ethnographic interpretation, the development of our discipline, and the growth of personal and professional relationships in anthropology. When I finished reading the Redfield-Tax letters, I was therefore convinced that their publication would be of great value to anyone interested in anthropology or the development of social science in the United States.

Shortly after I finished reading the Robert Redfield Papers, I met Sol and Gertrude Tax. Sol and I soon discovered shared interests, and over the last decade this has become one of my most rewarding personal and professional relationships. From nearly our first meeting, I shared with Sol my enthusiasm about the material in his correspondence with Robert Redfield and urged that he prepare it for publication. In part because the entire twenty-five years of their correspondence is available as number 330 of the University of Chicago Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Cultural Anthropology (entitled *April is This Afternoon*), and in part because other interests took his attention, Sol demurred at my suggestion.

Periodically the topic of the possible publication of the Redfield-Tax letters would come up as we worked together on other projects. But it was not until late 1986 that circumstances led Sol and Gertrude to think seriously about preparing the letters for publication. At that time, it was suggested to Sol that he write a small retrospective volume surveying anthropology from his personal perspective of fifty years of professional activity. Sol thought that it might be valuable in response to publish his entire correspondence with Redfield. Together with Gertrude, he reviewed the letters with that aim in mind. They soon concluded that the correspondence was too large to publish as a whole. Moreover, the letters could naturally be divided into several sections and would, in any event, benefit from careful editing. Feeling that they were too close to the material in the letters to make the needed editorial judgments and knowing my interest in the correspondence, Sol and Gertrude asked if I would like to prepare for publication the letters relating to their Guatemalan fieldwork. This invitation I happily accepted.

I began my work on the editing of the Redfield-Tax letters by comparing the typescript from which the microfilm version of the correspondence had been prepared with the original letters. In preparing the typescript for microfilming, Sol and Gertrude had made some editorial deletions. These I reviewed, and where I felt it was important to reinstate deleted text, I did so. The result was a consolidated typescript of about 650 pages for the letters exchanged between 1934 and 1941. It was from this consolidated typescript that I prepared this book.

Redfield and Tax corresponded about a wide range of topics. Their writing on all of these is interesting, depending upon the reason these letters are consulted. In selecting the material for this book I have focused on what Redfield and Tax had to say to one another about fieldwork, ethnographic understanding, and, to a lesser degree, about anthropology in general during this period. As a result, I reduced the typescript to about 350 pages by omitting materials that did not bear on these topics. I have excluded much of the correspondence devoted to the financial arrangements of Tax's fieldwork and almost all of the fiscal bookkeeping involved. I have also excluded or reduced the amount of material devoted to other topics, for example, material about Tax's personal finances and living arrangements between field seasons. Except in the few cases where I have excluded entire letters because they do not bear on the principal subjects of this book, I have marked omitted material by ellipses. Some of the original letters in the archives are undated. Thus, some of the dates given in this text are estimates based on internal evidence in the letters and on discussions with Sol and Gertrude Tax.

As is evident from these letters, both Margaret Redfield and Gertrude Tax were full, if not formally acknowledged, partners in their husbands' fieldwork. However, the bulk of the letter writing between the Redfields and the Taxes was done by Robert and Sol. A few of Greta's and Gertrude's letters are preserved in the Robert Redfield Papers and in the Sol Tax Papers in the University of Chicago Archives. These, however, are mainly brief notes of thanks or advice and do not adequately give voice to Greta's and Gertrude's obviously large contributions. In order not to leave a misleading impression of their importance to the research, I have not included their letters here.

Historical and explanatory annotations are provided following the text of each letter where these are needed. Redfield and Tax are quite casual in their placement of diacritical marks and in some spelling. In some instances this informality is purposeful, and I therefore have not regularized their usage. A glossary of non-English words that

appear in the letters follows the text. In general, I tried to preserve the voice and flow of these letters and to keep the editorial apparatus from becoming intrusive.

While preparing these letters for publication I have had much help, for all of which I am grateful. My biggest debt is to Sol and Gertrude Tax for inviting me to edit these letters. They also responded patiently and thoughtfully to my many questions and requests for clarification about their time in Guatemala. I greatly appreciate the support for this project offered by Lisa Redfield Peattie. I am especially grateful for her eloquently reflective Foreword for this book.

The originals of the letters reproduced in this book are held in the University of Chicago Archives, Department of Special Collections, The University of Chicago Library. Daniel Meyer, university archivist, and the staff of the Department of Special Collections facilitated, in many ways, my work with the Robert Redfield Papers and with the Sol Tax Papers. I thank them for making my visits to the archives both pleasant and productive. During some of the time that I worked on these letters, Robert E. Moore was cataloging and preparing a guide to the Sol Tax Papers. Although I am sure that it interfered with his own work, he always responded carefully to my requests to track down information or materials in the papers. Especially after I left Chicago and could no longer consult the papers myself, his efforts were exceptionally helpful. Chris Winters, bibliographer for anthropology, the University of Chicago Library, was generous in helping me to find historical and biographical information necessary for my annotation of the letters. I especially appreciate his sharing with me preliminary materials from the *International Dictionary of Anthropologists*, which he is editing on behalf of the Library Anthropology Resource Group.

I have benefited from the support and guidance of Dean Birkenkamp and Kellie Masterson, editors at Westview Press. The obvious care they took with this project meant that their helpful suggestions often extended beyond "simple" editorial matters. It was a pleasure to work with them.

From the beginning of this project, Joan Ablon, George Foster, Mary LeCron Foster, Alice B. Kehoe, Charles D. Laughlin, Rik Pinxten, David Maines, Susan C.M. Scrimshaw, and George Stocking encouraged my work on it. Each responded generously to my requests for help at various times during this project. I am grateful to each of them for their constant support.

I am lucky in that my wife, Sandy Lane, has more than anyone else supported, critiqued, and cared for my work on this book. Those who know her will understand that it is an understatement to say that

I have benefited in innumerable ways from the special manner in which she combines intellectual perspicacity with a gentle and loving personality.

Though briefly interrupting my work on this book, the start of a new fieldwork project in a very personal way renewed my belief that the topics discussed by Robert Redfield and Sol Tax bear importantly on our contemporary assessment of the role of fieldwork in anthropological understanding. I hope that others will enjoy these letters and find them as instructive as have I.

Robert A. Rubinstein
Cairo, Egypt

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