

relationship that is a marker of peasant societies up until the present. The subsistence ethic resulted in extended households and agricultural villages developing technical arrangements around farm production processes and social arrangements around food distribution mechanisms that ensured that all households within a community were able to obtain their basic food needs regardless of the success or failure of their food production processes or their social status within their communities. However, the social mechanisms of reciprocity that underwrote the subsistence ethic was not egalitarian. Those who had private wealth in the form of land and the control of surplus food production could ensure access to food for those that they deemed to be socially subordinate. Thus, “patron-client relationships” could emerge; peasant communities were and are hierarchical social structures that nonetheless produce cultural forms and norms that are linked to specifically rural ways of peasant life.

There are challenges involved in estimating the role of peasant farming in world agriculture. One common approximation is to equate peasant farming with holdings of land of 2 hectares or less. Using a sub-sample drawn from 111 countries and territories and almost 460 million farms and extrapolating from the 84 per cent of farms worldwide that are 2 hectares or smaller would suggest that 475 of the world's 500 million “family farmers” operate 2 hectares or less, and these are the farms that can be thought of as the world's peasant smallholders (Lowder, Scoet and Raney, 2016). However, while family farmers altogether cultivate 75 per cent of the world's agricultural land and are responsible for 53 per cent of all agricultural production (Graeub, Chappell, Wittman, Ledermann, Bezner Kerr and Gemmill-Herren, 2016), peasant smallholder farms only cultivate 12 per cent of the world's agricultural land (Lowder, Scoet and Raney, 2016). It is not definitively known how much of the world's agricultural output they produce, although it has been estimated that in non-industrialized countries up to 80 per cent of the food that is produced comes from smallholder farmers (GRAIN 2014).

Having lived in both the past and the present, peasants transcend historical periodization. This means that understanding contemporary peasants requires knowing what makes peasant social organization fundamentally different from that of the broader capitalist system within which they are now embedded. Capitalism is a system that is characterized by the production of goods and services for market sales rather than own use. In capitalism products are produced by waged labour that does not possess significant amounts of assets and who therefore work for capitalists, who do possess significant amounts of assets. Moreover, as a consequence of their control of assets, capitalists receive the profits that arise out of the production process. This characterization does not depict contemporary peasant production processes. Peasant households control both land and other assets and labour, and so allocate small stocks of both assets and labour. In this sense, then, contemporary peasants are ‘petty commodity producers’, operating as both a petty capitalist of little consequence and as a worker with little power over the terms and conditions of their employment (Bernstein 1991, Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985). Moreover, in capitalism processes of production and reproduction are formally and effectively separated, with the purpose of production ultimately about realizing surplus-value as profit and profits and wages being the basis of the social reproduction of the household. However, in peasant farming processes of production and reproduction are effectively combined, with the purpose of production being the social reproduction of the household. At the same time, the input and output markets within which peasants operate are different from those facing capitalist enterprises. For their farm production peasants are only partially engaged in market relations because while they fall under the sway of commodity relations peasants do not wholly rely on markets for commodified subsistence; rather, they grow a significant fraction of their food needs. Indeed, those markets within which peasants are enmeshed are often imperfect or incomplete, being characterized by a high degree of personalized transactions between relatively wealthier ‘patrons’ who are able to shape transactions for their own benefit and subordinate ‘clients’ – peasants -- for whom transactions are shaped by the relatively wealthier.