

Peasant agriculture

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Peasants as an analytical category have been understood in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most classic analysis of the characteristics of peasants is that of Wolf (1966). The two editions of *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (1971, 1988), edited by Shanin, offered a number of ways of conceptualizing peasants, and Ellis (1993) offered a clear exposition of the economic characteristics of the peasantry. From these varied sources, peasants can be thought of as female and male agricultural workers whose livelihoods are primarily but not exclusively based on having access to small amounts of land that is either owned or rented, who mostly have diminutive amounts of basic tools and equipment, and who use mostly their own labour and the labour of other household members to work that land. From this it is clear that peasants are not agricultural waged labourers that rely exclusively on their wages to sustain their livelihood. Peasants engage in both ecologically-based and market-driven interactions between labour and living nature, which leads to the mutual transformation of both, in order to productively enlarge the value created per unit of labour. Peasants produce to meet the reproductive consumption needs of the household, which can be defined in a variety of ways, as well as meet their obligations to those that hold political and economic power. In this way, the peasant household and farm are multi-dimensional units of social organization that bring together decisions over production and reproduction simultaneously.

Peasant farming takes one of two forms. The first is swidden, which is also known as slash-and-burn agriculture. This is a system of farming in which the vegetation on a piece of land is cut down and then cleared, usually by burning, to create a field called a swidden that can then be farmed. Swidden lands use rain as their principal source of water and are cultivated, often using rudimentary technologies, over a series of cropping cycles that gradually denudes the soil of micronutrients. They are then left fallow for a much longer period of time, in order to restore the health of the soils. With significant amounts of land being fallowed at any one time peasants undertaking swidden require access to relatively larger amounts of land. Multiple crops for food, fibre and fuel are grown simultaneously on individual plots of land and this, along with its attention to the soil, means that swidden agriculture usually maintains high levels of biodiversity.

The second form of peasant farming is called settled agriculture. Settled agriculture farms an area permanently and continuously, which therefore requires good soils and access to reliable water that can sustain soil micronutrients. Settled peasant farming operates on a variety of technological frontiers: from hoes and dibble sticks to sophisticated farm machinery running on hydrocarbons; from local landraces to transgenic seeds; from the use of human and animal fecal matter as fertilizer to the use of purchased chemical fertilizers; and from the use of crop combinations to manage pests to the use of purchased chemical pesticides and herbicides. Settled peasant farming can grow multiple crops, intercrop two different crops, or indeed grow only a single crop on individual plots of land.

Early peasant farming developed what James C. Scott (1976) has called a subsistence ethic, a social

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.

A principal driver of conflicts over land and resources in the early 21st century is the systemic agrarian crisis facing peasants in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The global agrarian crisis has been driven by world market prices for farm products being consistently lower than the local costs of producing farm products, resulting in increased debt, as well as climate change (Akram-Lodhi 2018). The crisis has meant that for many an exclusive emphasis on farming is not an adequate survival strategy because it does not produce a rudimentarily secure livelihood (Bernstein 2009, World Bank 2007). It is now more common for rural livelihoods to be constructed from a plethora of fragmentary and insecure sources: petty commodity production in farming, to be sure; but also the sale of temporary and casualized waged labour, both on and off-farm; as well as petty commodity handicraft manufacture, petty merchant trading, and the provision of petty services. The relationship of peasants to product and labour markets has also changed: while markets continue to be structured by the operation of personalized sets of patron-client relations, and are thus bearers of power and privilege, their importance to petty commodity producer survival strategies has increased. With rural livelihoods in the 21st century being constructed on such a vulnerable terrain, there are now three dominant approaches to understanding the part of peasants in contemporary capitalism.

The first approach is that of Henry Bernstein, who says that ‘much is obscured by characterizing social formations in the South today as peasant societies, or contemporary classes of petty-commodity producing small farmers as peasants’ (Bernstein 2009, 249). For Bernstein, it is now far more useful to premise analytical work upon ‘classes of labour’, which comprise those that depend directly and indirectly on the sale of their labour power for their own reproduction; in Bernstein’s reading, petty farming should now be seen as an indirect sale of labour power to capital. The second approach is that of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, who argues that smallholder farmers around the world have the capacity to remove themselves from being “directly governed” by capitalist markets. Instead, they can use commodity and noncommodity flows and circuits (van der Ploeg 2013: 72) to establish a range of “ordering principles” that reflect a set of interacting “balances” between work and consumption, between drudgery and utility, between production and reproduction, between scale and intensity, between internal and external resources, between autonomy and dependence, and between people and living nature. The active capacity of peasant farm families to engage in the “skilful coordination” (van der Ploeg 2013: 69) of these commodity and noncommodity balances means that not only does the peasantry persist but indeed new peasantries are being created that actively resist the encroachment of capitalist social relations of production into their livelihoods (van der Ploeg 2013: Ch. 1). The third approach are those that see the continuing salience of the “agrarian question”: the terms and conditions whereby capital is or is not transforming farming and agricultural production systems. Capital transforms farming by enforcing market imperatives on peasants once their products become produced for the purpose of sale rather than own-use. Market imperatives are the need in commodity economies that commodities be sold if the enterprise is to survive, and this requires being competitive. Competitiveness gives rise to the continual need for productivity improvements, cost reductions, and to tendencies toward increases in the size and scale of the farm for those producers that are able to successfully engage in commodity production. In doing so market imperatives facilitate the emergence of capitalist relations of production, in which the means of production fall under the control of a socially-dominant hegemonic class, labour is “free” from significant shares of the means of production and free to sell its capacity to work, and the purpose of commodity production is the seeking of profit (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a). However, it is empirically clear that this picture of a capitalist agrarian transition does not reflect the exigences facing contemporary peasant production and reproduction, in which capitalist development has proceeded without the wholesale transformation of peasant social organization and created a set of “historical puzzles” that reflect

substantive diversity, rooted in globally-embedded, historically-informed and country-specific trajectories of variation, which can cumulatively assist in understanding paths of agrarian

transition and the challenge facing global peasant movements confronting global capital (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010b: 280).

Indeed, waves of de-peasantization during the 1980s have given rise to re-peasantization during the 1990s and early 21st century. In this way, then, peasants have not become an ‘historical anachronism, unable to survive the dynamics of the capitalist development of agriculture’ (Veltmeyer 2006, 445). Rather, contemporary peasants remain at the heart of conflicts over land and resources in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 21st century.

Central to these conflicts has been large-scale corporate farmland acquisition in Africa, Asia and Latin America in the 21st century, popularly known as land grabbing (Akram-Lodhi 2012). Land acquisition for farming, for resource extraction, or for the provision of environmental services has required the exclusion of peasants from the land on which they had previously been working. This exclusion has come about because, in the wake of global economic crisis of the early 21st century, capital sought new sources of accumulation. Exclusion has been a result of the forcible displacement of rural populations, often by the state, or through the routine workings of highly unequal markets, where power differentials can be used to shape transactions to consistently benefit capital at the expense of peasants. These processes are most starkly witnessed when farming systems are reconfigured in order to increase the production of farm surpluses for export. This reconfiguration simultaneously witnesses increases in the share of land under capitalist farm production systems while at the same time seeing increases in the intensity of farm production, both of which are deleterious to peasant farms and peasant farmers as well as the biophysical foundations of farming. Contemporary conflicts over land and resources represent a systemic threat to peasant livelihoods, and for this reason have engendered the emergence of widespread peasant movements of resistance.

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