

Chronicle of a Death Foretold: Some Thoughts on Peasants and the Agrarian Question

The category peasant has outlived the conditions that brought it into being. And what are those conditions? First (...) are the changing realities of rural life, that are refracted through the lenses of social theory. And second social theory itself (...) is also undergoing transformations characteristic to this particular historic moment (...).

*Michael Kearney*¹

The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of the twentieth century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry. (...) The strange thing about this massive and silent exodus from the land (...) is that it was only partly due to agricultural progress, at least in the former peasant areas.

*Eric Hobsbawm*²

The great Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado has recently completed his latest visual monument to the world's poor and excluded. *Migrations*³ can be read as a photographic ›communist manifesto‹ for our times, a searing indictment of globalization and the making of a world proletariat. Its central figure is the deracinated subject: the Vietnamese migrant, the Rwandan refugee, the displaced Kurd. Salgado's images capture something of the phenomenology of the homeless, the impoverished millions buffeted in the high seas of contemporary capitalism, propelled one place to another by the great, crashing waves of war, free market, and civil strife. Mobility, which is so often seen as a source of freedom and emancipation, is in Salgado's eyes a form of coercion and victimization, both of which mark a world-wide exodus from the countryside.

In its attention to the lethal intersection of globalization and dispossession, Salgado's documentation of a contemporary global enclosure movement echoes the sentiments of another powerful new book, Mike Davis' *Late Victorian Holocausts*.⁴ Davis is concerned with a prior moment of global proletarianization and dispossession - the last quarter of the nineteenth century - marked by the confluence of worldwide drought and a string of massive famines and subsistence cri-

ses. The El Niño droughts, and more precisely the warm phase of the active ocean component of a vast Pacific-basin wide oscillation in air mass and ocean temperature (ENSO), devastated China, Brazil, India and parts of Africa. It proved to be one in a series of synchronous climatic perturbations between 1876 and 1902 which in turn set the environmental stage for a serial trio of global subsistence crises in 1876-79, 1889-91 and 1896-1902. It is the burden of *Late Victorian Holocausts* to show that the fate of tropical humanity (principally peasants) between 1870 and 1914 was harnessed not to natural disasters or to the specter of Malthusian grain shortage, but rather, as Alfred Russell Wallace put it, »to the most terrible failures of the century.« In Davis's hands, this failure, the unnecessary deaths of millions of peasants and landless, must be located at the ground zero of the late imperial order, namely a London-centered world economy. Subsistence crises have social origins, he argues, best grasped through a sort of causal triangulation encompassing the depletion or loss of ecological entitlements, a radical deepening of household poverty, and state decapacitation, each the precipitate of a lethal suturing of market utopianism to the neo-Darwinism of a new imperial order. The famine holocausts were no accident of climatic history. Rather they were over-determined artifacts of the workshop of nineteenth century liberal capitalism, forged by profit, primitive accumulation, and state extraction. In stitching together economic long waves, ENSO and the new imperialism, Davis argues that famines and subsistence crises were forcing houses of dispossession and impoverishment: one part colonial enclosure, one part incubator of a colonial proletariat.

Both Salgado and Davis provide compelling accounts of, to use an unfashionable term, primitive accumulation in its colonial and post-colonial forms. In this way, the commodification of labor and the severing of proprietary rights to land – the »freeing« of labor in the Marxian sense – serves to highlight the centrality of the peasantry in both moments of globalization. One way to read *Migrations* and *Late Victorian Holocausts*, then, is to see each as a memorial to the pain and suffering – the fire and blood as Marx put it – associated with the demise of the peasantry. And in this way both works recapitulate a much deeper history of posing the peasantry as »modernity's victims⁵, and it is for this reason that I began my remarks by quoting two contemporary commentators who, like many before them, seek to mark an act of historical erasure: the disappearance of the peasant. For Hobsbawm this twentieth century death sentence is signaled by rural exodus (and the proliferation of vast third World cities) and correlatively the loss of access to land. For Kearney, death is discursive and material. On the one hand rural life has been transformed by globalization, principally through transnational movement, and the genesis of what he refers to as networks and reticula. And on the other, the end of »developmentalism« in the 1960s and 1970s (by which he means the failure of post-colonial modernization) and the termination of left and right wing Cold War modernization, decisively removed the historical conditions from which the peasant category was »invented«. As a response to the crisis of development and modernity, the

1980s and 1990s witnessed in Kearney's account, a romantic, populist peasant revivalism, marked by calls for peasant persistence and smallholder development – that is to say a reappearance of what Tom Brass calls the »agrarian myth«. ⁶ For Kearney the conditions of transnational globalization and the »death of modernism« are no longer congruent with the category of peasant – typified by essentialist notions of subsistence, autonomy, and land ownership. In its place he substitutes a »postpeasant«, ⁷ a condition of »postdevelopmentalism«, ⁸ and an intellectual-academic shift from the »external differentiations of types of peasants (which are but reified objects) to the internal differentiations of subjects (...) [that is] from unitary subjects to complex subjects« ⁹.

Contemporary narratives on the death of the peasantry, what the critic John Berger calls an act of historical elimination, appear a century after the publication of the foundational text in peasant studies, namely Karl Kautsky's *Die Agrarfrage* ¹⁰, in which the same question was posed, and rather dramatically disconfirmed. Drafted amidst European social democratic and Left debates on the democratic question and the consequences of the extension of the parliamentary franchise – and it needs to be said at a moment of quite fundamental technological and financial innovations of the extension of the parliamentary – Kautsky's orthodox Marxism precisely anticipated the displacement of European peasantries at the hands of large scale capitalist as capital took hold of production. In a striking description, with obvious echoes in the present, he put it this way:

»What [agriculture] is spared from overseas competition [it] is threatened by industrial development at home. The transformation of agricultural production into industrial production is still in its infancy. [But] bold prophets, namely those chemists gifted with an imagination, already are dreaming of the day when bread will be made from stones and when all the requirements of the human diet will be assembled in chemical factories. (...) But one thing is certain. Agricultural production has already been transformed into industrial production in a large number of fields. (...) This does not mean that the time has arrived when one can reasonably speak of the imminent demise of agriculture.(...) [But] economic life even in the open countryside, once trapped in such eternally rigid routines, is now caught up in the constant revolution which is the hallmark of the capitalist mode of production. (...) The revolutionizing of agriculture is setting in train a remorseless chase. Its participants are whipped on and until they collapse exhausted – aside from a small number of aggressive and thrusting types who manage to clamber over the bodies of the fallen and join the ranks of the chief whippers, the big capitalists.« ¹¹

The originality of Kautsky resided in the fact that he discovered not the disappearance of the peasantry as classical Marxism anticipated (that is to say proletarianization and the growth of capitalist enterprises) but the consolidation of at least a segment of the middle peasantry, and the dogged persistence of what Lenin called »propertied proletarians«. At any rate, European peasants were not in any simple sense »disappearing«.

Kautsky's book is, as I shall argue, as salient for the contemporary moment of globalization as it was for the classic phase of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, but more relevant for my purposes his text must offer a note of ne-

cessary caution for the sorts of apocalyptic and grandiose claims made by Hobsbawm and Kearney. It is curious that Hobsbawm, for example, after pronouncing the death of the peasantry ignores the extraordinary events of the early eighties in China – when decollectivization ›produced‹ over 100 million new peasant households¹² – and the »revolutions« of 1989 (and the epochal events thereafter) when the collapse of actually existing socialisms in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union also created, admittedly in an uneven and often chaotic fashion, millions of small-scale agrarian property owners as much as capitalist estates *pur et dur*.¹³ One can legitimately argue about the complexities of agrarian post-socialist transitions (see below) but to claim that the death of socialism = the death of the peasantry is nonsense, and in statistical terms has perhaps added half a billion persons to the ranks of the global peasantry. The same might be said of the South Asia. The empirical evidence suggests that the Green Revolution may have done little to improve the lot of the landless and the ›footloose labor‹ of the Indian agrarian economy, but it has not heralded a mass dispossession. Quite the contrary, if Harriss-White's work¹⁴ is any indication, under conditions of mercantile dominance the productivity increases have been associated with a reinforcement and consolidation of poor and middle peasants¹⁵ and the continuance of forms of »unfree labor«. ¹⁶ None of this is to suggest that the dispossession of the world's peasantry is somehow permanently on hold, or that the global forces of accumulation and market deepening are not reshaping peasant relations of production, community structure and cultural identifications. But it is to suggest that there is good reason to investigate »the constitution and reproduction of peasantries through the social relations, dynamics of accumulation and divisions of labor of capitalism/imperialism, without any assumption of either anachronism or ›backwardness‹«, ¹⁷ or indeed of extinction.

Kearney's suggestion that the end of the peasant category is upon us is equally problematic. While he believes that globalization has transformed rural conditions in his case (Mexico), very little evidence is provided as regards the new relations of production, forms of surplus appropriation and disposition that have attended the »postpeasant« condition. Indeed, there is little to suggest in his book that the »external differentiation« question is any less apposite for the current conjuncture – indeed we are provided with no apparatuses for understanding the forms of transformation in local political economy, and the patterns of class differentiation, that are in train in Oaxaca or Chiapas. In fact a study by Geraldo Otero, entitled appropriately *Farewell to the Peasantry?*¹⁸, suggests the continuing centrality of (for Kearney) the old, and redundant, peasant economic questions. Otero seeks both to transcend the Lenin-Chayanov debates, which have stimulated much controversy in Latin America agrarian circles since the 1970s, and to distinguish himself from the multiple variants of both the *campesinismo* (focused on struggles over and access to land) and *proletarismo* (accentuating the role of wages) approaches to Mexican agricultural transformation. His treatment turns equally on a different account of

the forms and character of social differentiation in the countryside, and on an alternative model of political class formation. The general purpose, says Otero, is to question class reductionist assumptions in variants of both Marxism and populism through a comparative regional analysis of three case studies. All three regions – in Puebla, Sonora, Coahuila/Durango – have in common the fact that capitalist agriculture was installed during the 1930s which provided the original focus of agrarian struggles. Otero shows through careful historical analysis and contemporary survey data (coupled with fieldwork conducted in the 1980s and 1990s), three differing trajectories of class formation from ostensibly similar originary points. His comparative political economy approach emphasizes process rather than structure in order to accentuate how the economic location of rural producers does not determine political class formation which is, rather, mediated by the state, regional culture and leadership type. As he puts it, class formation cannot be deduced from class position alone but is over-determined by the content of demands and struggles, the character of class organizations, and the degree of autonomy of the movements. Underlying this approach is an implicit political project, namely that there is a space for what he calls »market-oriented but non-capitalist culture«¹⁹ given expression through two alternatives to proletarianization (the wage form): peasant-entrepreneurship (essentially the deepening of petty commodity production) and »postcapitalist production« (self-managed cooperatives and collective forms of organization). Yet in rural Mexico the heterogeneity of economic class positions are capable of generating a panoply of differing political outcomes depending on state, culture and leadership.

Farewell to the Peasantry? represents a challenge to Kearney in two ways. First, Otero sees post-revolutionary Mexico as the product of a land redistribution harnessed to bourgeois development and state hegemony. The reforms to the Constitution in 1992 in tandem with neo-liberal and agrarian policies represent however a major overhaul of the original agrarian reform program. He provides an analysis of social differentiation between 1930 and the 1990 and confirms the analysis of Alain de Janvry²⁰ that the middle peasantry is indeed disappearing (the »double crisis« of capitalist agriculture and the peasant economy), that the majority of direct producers are relatively stable semi-proletarians, and that uneven development has fostered marked regional heterogeneity. Second, he explores through the three case studies the idea of »depeasantization without full proletarianization«²¹ in relation to the direction and content of their class conflicts and struggles. In the case of Laguna agricultural workers struggled for »typically proletarian demands« but received land from the state, and the *ejidatarios* unleashed a program of self-management and democratic production in the newly collectivized *ejidos*. But the state and the agrarian bourgeoisie crushed these initiatives which in turn produced political fragmentation and an impoverished semiproletariat. In Atencingo the collective *ejidos* were dismantled and individual (i. e. household) production stimulated a process of internal social differentiation from which emerged »peasant entrepreneurs«

on the one side and a deeply impoverished semiproletariat (dependent on migratory income). In the Yaqui Valley, Otero sees the emergence of postcapitalist struggle in response to aggressive capitalist penetration in the region and *mestizo* in migration. New demands involved not only land but other means of production and the democratic self management of the productive process. Each of these three trajectories contained differing forms of political discourse and contrasting alliances and solidarities with »progressive and democratic forces«²² in Mexico. *Farewell to the Peasantry?* is in some regards an unfashionable sort of political economy in the light of Kearney's claims but it is a model of rigorous comparative analysis that adds precisely the complexity that Kearney invokes using the classical tools of the agrarian question to explain why class agents that started out in similar positions followed differing paths and destinies.

Kearney's second claim – the evaporation of the category of peasant – is equally questionable. His argument reflects of course a larger concern within social theory toward discursive analysis and the conditions of possibility for particular sorts of representations and practices. Poststructural analysis of a Foucauldian sort has indeed shed much light on, and can deepen, the study of the peasantry as for example Mitchell's studies of the uses and abuses of the Egyptian peasantry reveal²³ and Moore's analysis of peasant identity politics in Zimbabwe.²⁴ Kearney wishes to place the peasantry on the landscape of modernization – of development as a post-1945 invention – in which it fulfilled a function of »containment«; that is to say, the »ambiguity« of the peasant (as half developed and half underdeveloped) was contained by a form of essentialism (ties to the land driven by the logic of subsistence) peculiar to both Leninism and bourgeois forms of modernism. The containment both »made sense« of the ambiguity (i. e. stabilized the category) and »served to organize the political and military projects aimed at developing – read controlling and containing – rural populations«.²⁵ With the advent of the crises of development and modernity – both are wholly unexplained – the category of peasant is exploded even though »peasant-like« attributes till inhere among rural populations. Rather than the unitary peasant we now have new forms of »postpeasant« politics, representations and identifications constituting a complex subject.²⁶

But is this demolition of the peasant plausible? The figure of the peasant has a long and complex history in English, as Raymond Williams has noted dating back to the fifteenth century, but it began to »decline« around the 1830s against the backdrop of the consolidation of three centuries of enclosure. But the term had a number of specialist deployments as the work of Kautsky, Lenin and the multiplicity of European populisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal. Peasants indeed figured centrally in the nation-building of post-colonial states²⁷ and were interpolated in quite different ways along the multiple axes of the Cold War (one thinks of the revolutionary peasant of Fanon and Mao, the penny capitalist of Sol Tax, the risk averse peasant of the neo-Chayanovians and so on). But all of this is rendered reductive in the hands of Kearney to a functional containment at the

hands of ›the West‹. Equally questionable is the sense that the »crisis« of developmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s produced a populist romantic reaction asserting the virtues of the peasant. Populism is indeed a powerful narrative running across the histories of peasantries but is it helpful too see, as Kearney does, Alexander Chayanov and James Scott as »romantic conservatives«? Is it possible that the *Journal of Peasant Studies* – run and staffed by a motley crew of Marxists, Trotskyists and Leftists – can be grasped as a part of the peasant studies boom of the 1960s funded by the »vast resources« of »government and corporations« all »fostered by Western political interests«?²⁸ There is an important originary moment in the 1960s when the confluence of Maoist and guerilla forms of political practice, peasant revolutionary insurrection (most obviously in Vietnam), and the academic appearance of foundational works (in English) by Barrington Moore²⁹, Eric Wolf³⁰, Franz Fanon³¹ and Alexander Chayanov³² unleashed something of a peasant boom – which stood of course as a counterpoint to the backward peasant of 1950s modernization. But Kearney's mapping – and his narrow focus on Anthropology and English language studies – is woefully deficient.

Kearney wades into even deeper water in his vision of the postpeasant emerging from postdevelopment, from the ashes of the crisis of development and modernity. Here he joins hands with a body of work operating under the sign of »alternatives to development«. I shall refer to it as post-modern/post-structural, though it traces its lineage to the work in the 1960s of Ivan Illich³³, and earlier still to some of the populist and civic theory associated with Proudhon, the Owenite socialists and others. Associated with a number of public intellectuals and activists largely but not wholly from the South, it is a variegated community that has marched under the banner of »post-development« or »alternatives to development«. The intellectual field which constitutes these radical critiques of development – one thinks of the work of Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, and Wolfgang Sachs and the new *Post development reader* as its compendium – is replete with the language of crisis, failure, apocalypse and renewal, and most especially of subaltern insurgencies which are purportedly the markers of new histories, social structures and political subjectivities.³⁴ The *Delhi Center for Developing Societies* – to invoke one such important and visible cluster of erstwhile anti-development Jacobins and latterly referred to by Fred Dallmayr as a »Third World Frankfurt School«³⁵ – includes among its pantheon the likes of Ashis Nandy, Rajni Kothari and Shiv Visvanathan who in their own way represent a veritable heteroglossia of alternative voices from the South encompassing a massive swath of intellectual and political territory on which there is often precious little agreement.

I have chosen, however, to provide a unity to these critiques – drawn variously from post-Marxism, ecofeminism, narrative analysis, post-structuralism, postcolonial theory, and postmodernism – by emphasizing their confluences around development as a flawed, in some quarters a catastrophically failed, modernist project.³⁶ Much but by no means all of this critique draws sustenance from the idea of the

third leg of modernity – the dark side of modernity and the Enlightenment which produced the new human sciences and the disciplines – as much as by the Marxian leg of capitalist exploitation and the Weberian (and Habermasian) leg of the colonization of the lifeworld by monetization, rationalization, calculation and bureaucratization. This tale of disenchantment carries much of the tenor, and timbre of earlier critiques of development – most vividly of the 1960s but also of the 1890s and earlier as Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton have admirably demonstrated in *Doctrines of development*³⁷ – readily apportioning blame to the multinational behemoths (corporate and multilateral) of global capitalism. Running across this body of work is the notion of development as an essentially Western doctrine whose normalizing assumptions must be rejected: ›it [development] is the problem not the solution‹.³⁸ The sacred cows – for Esteva and Prakash³⁹ (1996) they are ›the myth of global thinking‹, ›the myth of the universality of human rights‹, and ›the myth of the individual self‹ – must be substituted by what two of the post-development field's key voices have called ›grassroots post-modernism‹.

Arturo Escobar's book *Encountering Development*⁴⁰ (1995) is the most developed account of postdevelopment thinking offering (like Kearney) a vision of subaltern, and indigenous social movements as vehicles for other ways of doing politics (non-party, non-mass, autopoietic and self-organizing) and doing ›post-development‹ (decentralized, community-based, participatory, indigenous and autonomous). Interestingly, this post-development movement met up with and cross-fertilized with a largely Western academic development community energized by what was dubbed the ›impasse in development‹ debate of the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ In effect this was a debate within the walls of Marxist development theory between its ›neo‹ and ›structural‹ schools over the extent to which Third World socialism suffered from many of the trappings of industrial capitalism (and many others unique to it!), and a theory captured by economic essentialism, class reductionism, and teleological thinking. One can argue whether this characterization of Marxist development theory is plausible or indeed an adequate account of Marxism itself in its panoply of guises. But the impasse debate spawned important new intersections between post-colonial and post-Marxist thinking providing a fertile ground on which development could be refigured by a careful reading of Ranajit Guha or Gyatri Spivak or Edward Said.⁴² There is little theoretical coherence in the ›impasse work‹ – actor-network approaches, a focus on identity politics and the cultural construction of class, a shift to ›responsible politics‹ – but Corbridge is nonetheless right to emphasize that it, like the postdevelopment work, reinforced the need to see ›the ways in which the West represents its non-western others‹ and forces us to ask: ›What is development? Who says that is what it is? Who aims to direct it and for whom?‹⁴³ Diversity and identity became the new watchwords.⁴⁴ At the same time the post-colonialists proper emphasis on writing history differently – signaling, as Stuart Hall says, the ›proliferation of histories and temporalities, the intrusion of difference and specificity into generalizing Eurocentric post-Enligh-

tenment grand narratives«⁴⁵ – in turn often mistook the word for the world, populist incantation for ›new politics‹, and opted for a heavy dose of wishful thinking. »In the heartlands of the West« said David Slater, »modernity is in question and the fixed horizons for development and progress [are melting away]«.⁴⁶

In reading Kearney against this related body of work there is a certain sense of 1960s *déjà vu*.⁴⁷ A number of accounts of globalized political economy in this body of work – in spite of its aversion to metanarratives and totalizing history – rests clumsily on a blunt, undifferentiated account of world capitalism, in which institutions like the World Bank have untrammelled hegemonic power, and the Third World appears as a monolithic, caricatured and often essentialized realm of, at worst, normalized subjects and at best hybridized, subaltern emancipatory potential. Has Ernest Gellner's ›Big Ditch‹ simply been replaced by the ›Big Panopticon‹?⁴⁸ There is in any case an unfortunate hyperbole in some of this work as Kearney's cavalier references to crisis and death repeatedly reveal.

What is different from the 1960's is the degree to which the state as a necessary and appropriate vehicle for national aspirations, and the universalistic (and anti-imperialistic) claims for liberation are no longer axiomatic and taken for granted. Locality, culture, authenticity are the forms of identification which stand in opposition to states, and the very fictions of the nation-state and nationalism are supplanted by what Lehmann calls »multi-national populist subcultures« in search of cultural difference⁴⁹ (»cultural difference is at the root of postdevelopment« as Escobar says⁵⁰). One might say that the practical and strategic content of this vision is rooted firmly in the soil of civil society rather than in the state or market. But it is civil society of a particular sort: of grassroots movements, of subaltern knowledge, of cultural economics, of hybrid politics, of the defense of the local, of reticula and networks, of cybercultural post-humanism. Much less is said about the civil society capable of engendering violence, genocide and fragmentation.

This post-development corpus has opened up, initially through Escobar's provocation, important new avenues for understanding development, and peasant practices. But it has left its own problematic legacy as if obvious in a close reading of Kearney's chapter on new postpeasant politics and practice. First, there is the curious, and perhaps appropriately ironic, way in which a post-modern or post-structural sensibility is attached to claims of extraordinary totalizing power, certainty and rectitude. Development, as Escobar has it, is »a historically singular experience«⁵¹; »the death of modernism spelled the death of developmentalism«⁵² says Kearney. Second, the unalloyed celebration of popular energies of grassroots movements (new social movements and multiple identities in Kearney's lexicon) is not subject to the sort of hypercritical discourse analysis which might permit an understanding of their achievements, their political strategies, the limits of their horizons and vision. Third, there is a curious confluence between elements of the neo-liberal counter revolution [the World Bank's account, for example, of Africa's post-colonial modernization failure, its anti-statism and the need to harness the energies of

the people'] and the uncritical celebration, and often naive acceptance, of post-development's new social movements. And fourth, the important critique of economic reduction and class determinism (the Marxian master narrative) – and it should be added the deconstruction of the free market myopia (the Smithian master narrative) – has produced, to quote Stuart Hall, not alternative ways of thinking about basic economic questions but instead »a massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal«⁵³.

Kearney's emphasis on the purported disappearance of the peasant and the new postpeasant condition does of course speak to important issues. Reference to peasantries within the academic and policy world has, in comparison to the 1960s, largely disappeared. Globalization and transnationalism has provided new co-ordinates for the study of the agrarian question. And there has been a growing concern with identity questions – whether of gender or ethnicity or religion – growing out of the deepening and thickening of civil society in the period since 1980. In this sense there has been, one might say, a shift from the »agrarian question« to the »indigeneity question«⁵⁴ in peasant studies. It is the figure of the indigenous movement – the Ogoni Struggle, the *Ejercito Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), Quechua confederations, the Mayan struggle – rather than the class and accumulation question which now dominates the academic landscape. To put the matter crudely one might say there has been an abandonment of one aspect of Kautsky's agrarian question (how is capital taking hold of agriculture?) and a corresponding rise of the Gramscian »Southern Question« (what might new forms of global accumulation and imperialism mean for the politics of the peasantry?).

In the remainder of this essay I want to try and reclaim something of the value of Kautsky for the contemporary agrarian question and to do so by focusing on, as Kearney does, a number of differences in the present global conjuncture. In this regard my contribution can be read as an appeal to retain what I take to be Kautsky's original concern with the relations of production, the relations of identity, and the relations of practice. This does not presuppose a particular trajectory or a particular politics for peasants but rather, as Gramsci made clear, to approach peasants through a sensitivity to historic conjunctures in which their roles as producers and consumers of commodities are linked to the production of forms of peasant difference and identity.

Kautsky Reduxe

Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* represented the first brilliant effort to formalize and apply some aspects of Marx's political economy to the question of agrarian capitalism. Alain de Janvry's book *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America*,⁵⁵ published in 1981, was an attempt, almost 100 years later, to both extend this theory and to make Kautsky speak, as it were, to the historical conjuncture of Latin America in the 1970s. I cannot provide here (and could not in any

case) the lineage of agrarian Marxisms which link Kautsky to de Janvry. Rather, I simply would say that one starting point for the question of Marxism and agrarian studies at the *fin de siècle*, is to see what has been and is being done – and by implication what was not done by de Janvry in his pathbreaking work – to deepen the sorts of questions addressed in *Agrarian Reformism* and *The Agrarian Question*. It goes without saying that the large body of work of which de Janvry's discussion of peasant differentiation and reformism was part – including the magnificent efforts of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in particular – was (and is) extraordinarily rich and vital.⁵⁶

It has often been said that de Janvry's book suffered from malignant forms of functionalism, determinism and mechanism which collectively overshadowed any sense of local dynamics, resistance or capitalist variation.⁵⁷ Whether this is the case or not, it is worth remembering that it was none other than the *déad dog* of Marxism himself, namely Lenin, who was unequivocal in his emphasis on the variety of forms of agrarian differentiation and capitalization⁵⁸ and it was none other than Marx himself who returned repeatedly to the recombinant ways in which agrarian capitalisms developed (within the »swamp« of pre-capitalist labor relations). All of which is to say, that Marx and agrarianism seem to turn, in the current epoch, on precisely the questions of the multiple trajectories of agrarian transformation at a moment, not unlike the time when Kautsky wrote, of unprecedented globalization. Within this multiplication of capitalisms and agrarian trajectories resides a more acute sensitivity to the recombinant qualities of historical change, and to the complex intersections of culture, power and place which constitute (and complement) the hard edges of agrarian political economy which Kautsky, and the long line of critics who came after, returned to so often.⁵⁹

Kautsky systematized for the agrarian sector what Marx had endeavored to do for industrial manufacture, but did not appear in an English translation until almost a century after its original publication in 1899.⁶⁰ Kautsky was of course the doyen of pre-1914 European Marxism, a key figure in the Second International and not least a central player in the Social Democratic Workers Party (the SPD) of Germany. But within a decade of its publication *The Agrarian Question* was largely forgotten and Kautsky himself was a political outcast, painted as reductionist and dogmatic materialist of the most retrograde sort. In actual fact, Kautsky's brilliant and stunningly original analysis of the structures and tendencies within European agriculture under conditions of global integration and competition has a striking saliency for rural and agrarian development theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a saliency which draws on, to employ his own terminology, both »specific situations« (which implies interesting parallels between national agricultures in the 1890s and the 1990s) and »general tendencies« (which highlights the theoretical questions he posed in regard to capitalism, agriculture and the discourse of internationalization⁶¹).

Kautsky's focus on the agrarian question in Western Europe rested on a striking

paradox: agriculture (and the rural) came to assume a political gravity precisely at a moment when its weight in the economy was waning. The curious political and strategic significance was framed by two key processes: the first was the growth and integration of a world market in agricultural commodities (especially staples) and the international competition which was its handmaiden; and the second was the birth and extension into the countryside of various forms of parliamentary democracy. Both forces originated outside of the agrarian sector but lent to agriculture its particular political and economic visibility. International competition in grains was driven not only by the extension of the agricultural frontier in the US, in Argentina, in Russia and eastern Europe (what Kautsky called the »colonies« and the »Oriental despotisms«), but also by improvements in long distance shipping, by changes in taste (for example from rye to wheat) and by the inability of domestic grain production to keep up with demand. As a consequence of massive new supplies, grain prices (and rents and profits) fell more or less steadily from the mid 1870s to 1896.⁶² It was precisely during the last quarter of the nineteenth century when a series of tariff policies in France (1885), Germany (1879) and elsewhere, were implemented to protect the farming sector.

Kautsky devoted much time to the Prussian Junkers and their efforts to bolster their farm interests. But in reality the structure of protection only biased the composition of production in favor of grains (and rye in particular) grown on the East Elbian estates. Tariffs provided limited insulation in the protectionist countries, while the likes of England, Netherlands and Denmark actually adopted free trade. Protection did not, and could not, save landlordism but was rather a limited buffer for a newly enfranchised peasant agriculture threatened by the world market. A century later during a period in which farming and transportation technologies, diet and agricultural commodity markets are all in flux, the questions of competition, shifting terms of trade for agriculture, and subsidies remain politically central in the debates over the European Union, GATT and the neo-liberal reforms currently sweeping through the Third World. Like the 1870s and 1880s, the current phase of agricultural restructuring in the periphery is also marked (sometimes exaggeratedly so) by a phase of »democratization«.⁶³

The Agrarian Question was, then, a product of a particular political economic conjuncture but was made to speak to a number of key theoretical concerns which arose from Kautsky's careful analysis of the consequences of the European farm crisis: falling prices, rents and profits coupled with global market integration and international competition. In brief he discovered that: there was no tendency for the size distribution of farms to change over time (capitalist enterprises were not simply displacing peasant farms, indeed German statistics showed that middle peasants were increasing their command of the cultivated area); technical efficiency is not a precondition for survivorship (but self-exploitation might be); and changes driven by competition and market integration did transform agriculture but largely by shaping the production mix of different enterprises, and by deepening debt-bur-

dens and patterns of out-migration rather than by radically reconfiguring the size distribution of farms. The crisis of European peasants and landlords in the late nineteenth century was »resolved« by intensification (cattle and dairying in particular in a new ecological complex) and by the appropriation of some farming functions by capital (the flow of capital from agriculture into processing and agro-industry).⁶⁴

Kautsky concluded that industry was the motor of agricultural development – or more properly agro-industrial capital was – but that the peculiarities of agriculture (its biological character and rhythms⁶⁵) coupled with the capacity for family farms to survive through self-exploitation (i. e. working longer and harder to in effect depress »wage levels«) might hinder some tendencies, namely the development of classical agrarian capitalism. Indeed agro-industry – which Kautsky saw in the increasing application of science, technology and money to the food processing, farm input and farm finance systems – might prefer a non-capitalist farm sector. In all of these respects – whether his observations on land and part-time farming, of the folly of land redistribution, his commentary on international competition and its consequences, or on the means by which industry does or does not take hold of land-based production – Kautsky's book was remarkably forward looking and prescient, relevant to the present period, and much of the exciting new work on agricultural dynamics, agro-industrial restructuring and global/local food regimes can be seen as a continuing conversation with Kautsky and his theoretical legacy.⁶⁶

New Agricultures and New Peasants?

One of the presumptions of new research focused on transnational processes and agrarian-food orders is that the old or classical international division of labor with the agro-food system has been irretrievably altered in the last twenty five years. Classical export commodities (coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, cocoa and so on) have been increasingly displaced by so-called »high value foods« (HVF) such as fruits and vegetables, poultry, dairy products, and shell fish. During the 1980s, the aggregate value of world trade in cereals, sugar and tropical beverages declined quite dramatically in some cases; conversely HVF grew by eight percent per annum. In 1989 HVF represented five percent of world commodity trade, roughly equivalent to crude petroleum.⁶⁷ Developing economies currently account for over one third of HVF production by value, roughly twice the value of Third World exports of coffee, tea, sugar, cotton, cocoa and tobacco. In 1990 there were twenty four low and middle income countries (mostly located in Latin America and Asia) which annually exported more than 500 million dollars of HVFs. But four of these countries actually account for 40 percent of total HVF exports from developing states. These countries correspond to what Friedmann refers to as »new agricultural countries« (NACs)⁶⁸ – the agro-industrial counterparts of the NICs – who occupy a central location in what she calls the durable foods, fresh fruits and vegetable and live-

stock/feed complexes. Archetypical examples of these new agro-food systems are Brazilian citrus, Mexican »non-trationals« and »exotics«, Argentinean soy, Kenyan off-season vegetables and Chinese shrimp.⁶⁹

Dietary changes, trade reform and technical changes in the food industry all contributed to the growth of the HVF sector. At the same time there are issues intrinsic to the sector – perishability, heterogeneity, seasonality, long gestation periods, externalities associated with marketing and so on – which lead many commentators to focus on the »major problems related to production and market risk, asymmetric information, logistical bottlenecks and high transaction costs«. ⁷⁰ What is striking about the NACs is the extent to which their high value foods strategy rests upon highly favorable international market conditions during the initial boom periods, in some cases precipitated by »market vacuums« as a result of trade embargoes or problems with traditional suppliers.⁷¹ The competitiveness of the HVF sectors clearly rests on the low costs of production – particularly labor costs⁷² – but also the extent to which quality can be established within heterogeneous commodities as a way of establishing dominance within niche markets. Given the concerns with quality and market niches, contract production is a fundamental way in which the division of labor of these global commodity systems are organized.⁷³ These »postfordist« qualities⁷⁴ raise important questions about the very notion of »quality« (or standards or value) in international markets when the organic heterogeneity of commodities is the distinctive feature, and places considerable weight on the point of consumption insofar as HVFs have to be culturally constituted for particular sorts of taste, diet and »vanity«.

The debate over the rise of the NACs – parallel in some respects to the 1980s work on the »Gang of Four« – turns on the purported successes of commodities such as Mexican tomatoes, Central American exotics, Brazilian soy and so on. What is striking in all of these cases is the prominence of peasant contract production and/or vertical integration in linking farm-level production and downstream processing and trade.⁷⁵ The rise of contracted high value produce through agribusiness has had the effect of integrating peasant juridically as much as economically into both the global market and the transnational firm. It is rarely the poorest of peasants but Lenin's middle and rich peasants who become part of mechanized and highly regimented work regimes, growing quality fresh produce to order. A number of studies focusing on this »new peasant« suggests that the household economy resembles a piece-work system in which one of the tenets of »peasantness« – the autonomy of the labor process – is radically compromised by the demands of the contract which specifies the details of work.⁷⁶ In the same way the labor demands for new sorts of contract production are »internalized« within the domestic relations of production which often produce tensions over access to labor and property. At the very least the subsumption of peasant directly into the firm as »growers« represents a distinctive (though not necessarily a totally original) way in which peasants may persist, producing low cost commodities in the midst of »advanced global ca-

pitalism«. The fact that a number of commodities in the US agricultural sector – poultry, hogs, fresh fruits – are currently produced by »family farms« (that is to say petty commodity producers of which peasants are a variant) suggests that this trajectory of agrarian change may deepen and expand as more markets open to agribusiness investment.

It needs to be said of course that the emergence of high value agriculture is highly uneven – like Third World manufacturing – and the underbelly of new agricultural countries is agricultural marginality. Much of sub Saharan Africa has returned to an agro-export model dependent largely on the classical commodities (and to date has been relatively marginal to fresh fruits, poultry and livestock) whose market future looks extremely grim.⁷⁷ In other cases, structural adjustment and deregulation has drawn investment out of agriculture all together.⁷⁸ Another variant of this global marginalization is the process described by Wood in Bangladesh where agricultural involution under conditions of capital investment has generated an »agricultural reformation« in which private service networks and associations of various sorts (rather than landholding *per se*) gain from productivity gains on the land and compromise the very idea of the family farm as the decision making unit over a range of decisions on the land formally held by the family.⁷⁹

City and Country: The Agrarian Question Comes to Town

Some of the most exciting recent Marxist-inspired work in peasant studies draws sustenance from the confluence of two related bodies of research: one focuses on the question of flexibility and networks in peasant agriculture in a way that sheds light on debates within industrial geography.⁸⁰ Another draws upon the growing body of work on rural industrialization in the Third World and related peasant non-farm work. Both of these trends point to the continued importance of Kautsky (among others) and the agrarian origins of industrialization. Chari and Cawthorne's (1995) work on the industrial districts centered on Tirupur in South India⁸¹ is especially important as a case study of Third World flexible specialization and of what they call »amoebic capitalism«. The genesis of this form of industrialization is inseparable from rural-urban linkages in a regional economy dominated by specialized towns, and specifically how the capture of textiles by an agrarian capitalist caste (the *Gounders*) brought with it the migration (and consequently refashioning) of a variety of agrarian institutions of labor control and discipline which are central to the contemporary organization of a dynamic small firm textile sector. Harriss-White has explored these rural-urban linkages as part of what she calls the »rural urbanization of agrarian economies«. ⁸² Here the economic linkages are regarded as the outcome of social relations shaped by local institutions but embedded in relations of power, trust and reputation.⁸³

These aspects of the agrarian question are central in understanding the newly

emerging rural industrial districts in a variety of social and institutional contexts. Certainly a part of the explanation of the dispersed and decentralized character of Taiwanese flexible »family capitalism« is rooted in the politics of agriculture and post war agrarian reform. The Chinese case is also relevant here because it shows how the remarkable rates of rural industrialization combine collective property rights (at the township level) with market discipline and local institutions emerging from the creation of a post-reform peasantry.⁸⁴ Hart has documented cases of what she calls »interstitial spaces« – foreign capital investing in the quite specific milieus of rural South Africa – in which local networks and institutions are central to understanding the hybrid and multiple trajectories of capitalist development.⁸⁵ These studies go beyond the old rural-urban consumption linkages debate – small farm growth produces local demand for services, equipment or local consumer goods – to an examination of both the role of agrarian investment in industry and the ways in which agriculture, either through the provision of industrial wage labor from peasant households or through local institutions of labor recruitment and discipline, is a key local ingredient in the emergence of globalized rural industrial districts in various parts of the Third World. These developments partly explain why land reform has reemerged as a central plank of current development policy debates (it is also a function of the recognition of the need to deal with the deepening problems of rural inequality in the wake of structural adjustment which has, in many cases, and in South Africa in particular,⁸⁶ undercut subsidies to large farms.⁸⁷

What Hart calls interstitial spaces, and what Marsden in describing such locations as the Sao Fernando valley in Brazil calls »agricultural districts«,⁸⁸ are both illustrations of how the hybrid and multiple peasant trajectories take place in globalized sites constituted by complex social networks, and how the agrarian question is a constituent part of the »flexible« forms of industrialization that are emerging in newly deregulated and internationalized economies.

Kautsky in Reverse: Post-Socialist Peasant Transitions

If the history of actually existing socialisms is indeed the »long« road to capitalism, the experience of post-socialist transitions should provide a compelling experiment for understanding agrarian transitions. As such, they represent a curious inversion of the second half of Kautsky's *Agrarian Question* in which he lays out the Social Democratic route to socialist agriculture (the so-called *Erfurt Programm*). Much work has already been undertaken on the macro-economic aspects of post-socialist transitions⁸⁹ – a subject of as much interest to the World Bank *apparatchiks* as academic political economists – and on the merits of »shock therapy« versus »gradualism«, and the political legacies of the past as impediments for some form of meaningful liberalization. Michael Burawoy has provided a useful typology of this

work in terms of two axes: the tempo of change (revolutionary/gradual) and the time horizon (origins/destinations).⁹⁰ This yields a fourfold matrix of transitions: the totalitarian theory (the monolithic party state) which collapses entirely at the moment of transition, the neoliberal theory which demands radical surgery to institute markets *de novo*, the evolutionary theorists who emphasize the role of institutions some of which can be made use of from the socialist past, and the legacy theory which, contra totalitarianism, sees a vibrant civil society amidst the wreckage of the socialist state which fundamentally shapes the development trajectory of capitalism. These contrasting trajectories are relevant of course to the study of de-collectivized agriculture as much as to privatized industry or the democratization of the party state, but agrarian transitions have typically received much less attention.⁹¹

It is to be expected that insofar as the practice of something called socialist agriculture was quite variegated – »many shades of red« as Meurs puts it⁹² – the forms and trajectories of de-collectivization are equally diverse (or path-dependent). One can easily contrast, for example, China (which privatized collectives gradually but early) which is typically seen as a success (in output terms), with Russia which privatized its already decrepit state farms rapidly but with chaotic and uneven consequences,⁹³ with Cuba whose reforms have had important consequences in the realm of marketing and monetary relations but have left much of the socialist productive structures largely intact.⁹⁴ One of the key questions however is whether the de-collectivization is returning agriculture to its pre-revolutionary condition, whether, as Szelenyi says, socialism simply interrupted a trajectory to which market reforms has returned post-socialist states (»re-embourgeoisement«).⁹⁵ This turns in part of course on the question of the restitution of property and land reform. In many of these cases, however, the property rights tend to be »elastic« (the language is Verdery's), either because they are hybrid or because the juridical and legal frameworks are incapable of imposing particular forms of land legislation.⁹⁶

There does seem to be a striking polarity between cases in which, to employ Kornai's language,⁹⁷ »transformational recession« produces agrarian crisis (often amidst a flurry of legislation intended to remove subsidies, abolish parastatals and institute legal reform). Here one typically sees an increase in rural unemployment, cooperative and state farms which stagger along largely because workers have no obvious alternative employment, and the tardy production of an underequipped class of peasants or family farms. Albania, Bulgaria and Russia are clearly exemplary cases.⁹⁸ In spite of the so called success of the earlier reforms in Hungary and of its purportedly efficient collectives, its agrarian sector is also lurching from one crisis to another.⁹⁹ Conversely China and Vietnam seems to be the »success stories«. The increase in output between 1978 and 1984 in China is often claimed to be the product of the rapid collapse of the collectives. In actual fact, China has maintained a two-tiered property system (private and collective), a relatively equitable redistribution of land values (if not land), and highly generative forms of non-farm em-

ployment in the rural sector.¹⁰⁰ The heart of this rural revolution has been industries set up by collectives and local governments and subsequently by private enterprises employing re-invested capital from agriculture. These reforms produced not a collapse of local government but its strengthening through its ability to tax non-farm income.¹⁰¹ Vietnam (especially the old North) has implemented a more rapid and thorough going land reform (partly as a function of the strength of the Party at the local level), producing a sort of highly egalitarian Chaynovian peasant economy but without the same unleashing of market forces.¹⁰² In both cases however, the agro-food system has been quite dynamic and in China's case a central component of its capitalist growth.¹⁰³ Neither of these cases are illustrations of what Lenin called »the American Path«, in part because property rights are hybrid and complex and because the strength of the state has been central to their productive success.¹⁰⁴ It is, one might argue, the fragile, brittle and chaotic character of the socialist state in Russia which has created the »transformational recession« in former Soviet agriculture. Not surprisingly, in these latter circumstances decollectivization often produces populist peasant parties which – in view of the numbers in the rural sector – emerge as key actors in the democratic transition (for example in Poland and Hungary¹⁰⁵). In some cases in the chaotic political environment of weak post-socialist states (Romania, Albania), peasant politics takes on a »feudal« character as new forms of parcellized sovereignty emerge at the local level.¹⁰⁶

Identity Politics and Peasant Civil Society

Kautsky's agrarian question was a political question framed by the electoral significance of a still rather substantial rural constituency in turn of the century Europe. A century later the politics of agriculture has also been a theme to which analysts have returned in the context of three world systemic processes: trade liberalization and neo-liberal reforms (implying if not the end of »urban bias« at least its reform¹⁰⁷), the post-Cold War democratization movements,¹⁰⁸ and the environment-development crisis.¹⁰⁹ It is in this context that Kearney, for example, sees the emergence of forms of identification and internal differentiation that question the very category of the »peasantry« itself. In one sense of course the political question, and identity politics generally, was part and parcel of the »peasant boom« of the 1950s and 1960s that Kearney refers to. Partly driven by the political writing of Mao, Fanon and Che, and partly as a function of peasant-led wars of liberation and peasant insurgencies in Vietnam, China, Nicaragua and elsewhere, concern with peasants as revolutionary actors¹¹⁰ and subsequently, as resisters deploying the »weapons of the weak«,¹¹¹ became a defining aspect of peasant studies.

In this regard the work of the so-called »new farmer movements«, particularly well documented in the case of India, is rather instructive. They are »new« in the sense that they focus on prices not land, and in so far as they employ non-party agi-

tational tactics often encompassing women and environmental concerns. For Varsney these movements are a product of democracy preceding industrializing (and here rural empowerment represents a counterweight to urban bias) yet they suffer from an internal coherence problem expressed through cross-cutting forms of identification (ethnicity, caste, religion and so on).¹¹² Brass provides a more compelling account of these movements as conservative forms of populism; the constituency is prosperous peasants (»farmers«), largely a product of the Green Revolution, now operating under circumstances in which global trade liberalization and neo-liberal reforms undercut their gains.¹¹³ In this sense of course it is perhaps reminiscent in some respects of Kautsky's account of the prosperous German »peasants« who supported the protectionist German *Bund* when faced with foreign competition. Other work has deepened the understanding of peasant politics by linking up with debates in European social history and environmental studies. Nancy Peluso's pathbreaking political ecological study of timber and forestry in Indonesia, *Rich Forests, Poor People*,¹¹⁴ showed how local communities resisted the incursions of the state, and how the state in turn attempted to »criminalize« local customary rights over access to, and control over, local forest products.

In a similar vein, the opening of the black box of the Chayanovian peasant household in the 1980s, prompted a panoply of brilliant feminist research on gender, patriarchy and domestic production politics.¹¹⁵ The construction of gender and its relation to the labor process and the changing organization of peasant work produced a number of seminal works which linked what Nancy Fraser calls the »politics of recognition«¹¹⁶ with the »politics of distribution«¹¹⁷. Some of the most compelling work is drawn from Africa. Fiona Mackenzie's book traces both the erosion – what she calls the »silencing« – of women's environmental knowledge in central Kenya after 1890, and the ways in which women organized and struggled to resist the impact of colonial conservation on their economic liberty not least through male appropriation of property rights.¹¹⁸ Richard Schroeder's *Shady Practices*¹¹⁹ focuses on the ways in which efforts to create sustainable development projects in drought prone Gambia – local forest and fruit tree projects – precipitated struggles within the household and often over the obligations and reciprocities of conjugality. Local »traditional« women's work groups become the vehicle for local protest as resistance to male claims over property and access rights spills into a larger public domain.

Kearney is right to note, however, that the last twenty years has seen the emergence of a number of distinctively new forms of political practice, typical rooted in the intersection of globalization (including the globalization of discourse of environment, human rights, and indigeneity) and national neo-liberal reforms. One expression of this internal differentiation and forms of subjectification is the politics of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge. Much of this newer scholarship turns especially on what individuals and groups (and *de facto* communities) know and practice with respect to their local environments (so-called indigenous technical

knowledge (ITK) which harkens back to earlier studies of ethnobotany). Perhaps the best political ecological study which addresses the question of peasant experimentation and practice, and the threats which this world confronts, is Karl Zimmerer's book *Changing Fortunes*¹²⁰ which examines biodiversity and peasant livelihoods in the Peruvian Andes. ITK has been widely explored (and there are a number of international organizations devoted to its generation, propagation and use) and is now widely understood within academic and activist circles.¹²¹ Environmental knowledge is unevenly distributed within local societies, it is not necessarily right or best just because it exists (i. e. it can be often wrong or inappropriate), traditional or indigenous knowledge may often be of relatively recent invention (which is to say these knowledges are not static or stable but may be predicated on forms of experimentation). Indeed, it may not be indigenous as such but really is 'hybrid'.¹²² Farmers in India may simultaneously employ concepts from Hindu religion and modern Green Revolution technologies.¹²³

The indigeneity movements are striking because peasant identity is substituted by the invocation of indigenous or ethnic custom/tradition in which land, territory and state recognition as a basis for resource control figures centrally.¹²⁴ Chiapas and the struggle of the Zapotec peoples is a paradigmatic case¹²⁵ but it represents the most visible expression of a much longer history of indigenous struggles by Indian communities in South America and elsewhere. These movements are global in the sense that many are now linked virtually through the internet and through multilateral organizations and regulations and law (for example Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the *International Labour Organization* (ILO) and the *Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization* (UNPO)).¹²⁶ The case of Chiapas is instructive if one is to examine Kearney's postdevelopment and the post-peasant. First, Chiapas was unthinkable outside of the democratic processes unfurled by the slaughter of Mexican students in Tlateloco Square. In his massive biography of Mexico, Enrique Krauze notes that 1968 was »both the high point of authoritarian power and the beginning of its collapse«¹²⁷. Second, the genesis of the Chiapas rebellion must be traced to the maelstrom of the 1960s, throwing together the church, Indian movements and left activism. The long fuse of the Zapatista Front was ignited by Bishop Ruiz and the Catechist »Apostles« movement (liberated by the Medellin Episcopal Assembly of 1968), by Maoist insurgents in Monterrey and Chichuaha (established in the late 1960s) who helped form the *Union de Uniones/Asociacion Rural de Interes Colectivo* (ARIC) and other radical organizations, and of course by the burgeoning of Indian movements brought together in the 1974 Indian Conference. The trail from the Armed Forces of National Liberation to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) can, and must be traced, to the late sixties even if, as Krauze (1999a) rightly shows,¹²⁸ it was the period between 1983 and 1989 when the Diocese, the *Zapatistas* (EZLN), SLOP and ARIC worked together, that proved to be the revolutionary crucible in which the events of 1994 matured and ultimately combusted. And not least, Chiapas is surely unthin-

kable outside of the world market that NAFTA anointed on January 1st, 1994. That is to say, indigeneity has all manner of connection to an earlier history of political practice (including the organized Left and the Church), and is both a reaction to and product of the world market. In many cases indigeneity is striking modernist and displays many of the »essentialist« peasants deployments (land, territory, autonomy) that Kearney derides as products of a now defunct modernizing Cold War epoch. None of this is to suggest that indigenous movements simply reproduce a prior history of peasant politics but it is to radically question the grandiose claims of a new post peasant landscape. There is within the indigenous movements a local and global discursive creativity, what Tania Li calls the occupation of the »tribal slot«. ¹²⁹ Whether this stands in opposition to the material and discursive sense of being a peasant is another question entirely.

The »community« looms large in this new concern with peasant identities and indigeneity. But the community turns out to be – along with its lexical affines, namely tradition, custom, and indigenous – a sort of keyword whose meanings (always unstable and contested) are wrapped up in complex ways with the problems that it is used to discuss. The community is important because it is typically seen as: a locus of knowledge, a site of regulation and management, a source of identity and a repository of »tradition«, the embodiment of various institutions (say property rights) which necessarily turn on questions of representation, power, authority, governance and accountability, an object of state control, and a theater of resistance and struggle (of social movement, and potentially of alternate visions of development). It is often invoked as a unity, as an undifferentiated entity with intrinsic powers, which speaks with a single voice to the state, to transnational NGO's or the World Court. Communities turn out to be nothing of the sort.

A claim to be a »peasant« community, then, typically involves a territorialization of history (»this is our land and resources which can be traced in relation to these founding events«), and a naturalized history (»history becomes the history of my people and not of our relations to others«). Communities fabricate, and refabricate through their unique histories, the claims which they take to be naturally and self evidently their own. This is why communities have to be understood in terms of hegemonies: not everyone participates or benefits equally in the construction and reproduction of communities, or from the claims made in the name of community interest. And this is exactly what is at stake in the current work on the infamous peasant tree-hugging *Chipko Movement* in north India. ¹³⁰ Far from the mythic community of tree hugging, unified, undifferentiated women articulating alternative subaltern knowledges for an alternative development – forest protection and conservation by women in defense of customary rights against timber extraction – there are several *Chipko's* each standing in quite different relationship to development, modernity, sustainability, the state and local management. It was a movement with a long history of market involvement, of links to other political organizing in Garhwal, and with aspirations for regional autonomy. Brosius's work in Indonesia in

two seemingly similar local communities shows how the type and fact of indigenous resistance varied dramatically between the two communities which were in many respects identical »cultural« communities, and how these differences turn on a combination of contingent but nonetheless important historical events. Brosius found that the radical differences in resistance to logging companies between two peasant (indigenous) communities turned on their histories with respect to colonial forces, their internal social structure, their autonomy and closed, corporate structure, and the role of transnational forces (environmentalists in particular).¹³¹ The point is that some communities do not resist (which disappoints the foreign or local academic) and may not have, or have any interest in, local knowledge. Similarly Zerner shows how local peasant »traditions« can be discovered (not necessarily by the community and often driven by academic work of local traditions drawn from elsewhere) and can be put to the service of the new political circumstances in which villages and states find themselves.¹³² Indeed, some peasants within communities are happy to take on board essentialism and wrong headed »local traditions« pedaled by foreign activists of investors, in order to further local struggles. Tradition or custom hardly captures what is at stake in the definition of the community.

Ben Kingsbury has shown beautifully how the contested nature of the community has its counterpoint in international environmental law over the cover term »indigenous« (and one might as well add tribe or ethnicity).¹³³ The UN, the ILO and the World Bank have, as he shows, differing approaches to the definition of indigenous peoples. The complexity of legal debate raised around the category is reflected in the vast panoply of national, international and inter-state institutional mechanisms deployed, and the ongoing debates over the three key criteria of non-dominance, special connections with land/territory, and continuity based on historical priority. These criteria obviously strike to the heart of the community debate which I have just outlined, and carry the additional problems of the normative claims which stem from them (rights of indigenous peoples, rights of individual members of such groups, and the duties and obligations of states).

Much of the work on new peasant social movements argues that they help thicken – the language is Fox's¹³⁴ – civil society in circumstances in which social capital is built up from below.¹³⁵ Fox shows in the Mexican case how this can occur from the base peasant communities but also from state-society interactions (say decentralization of service provision), and from links between civic organizations (say the Church and local community groups). The central point here is that the impact of neo-liberal reforms often compels states, in the name of fiscal restraint or market perfection, to work with civic institutions.¹³⁶ This requires of course both state capacity and public accountability and it is here that the experience of Kerala¹³⁷ is especially relevant do discussions of how models of agrarian and rural development – to return to Kautsky, particular sorts of agrarian transitions – both depend upon and help construct systems of trust, transparency and accountability without which economic growth and democracy are simply empty fanfares. In this respect Ribot's

work¹³⁸ opens up a number of important avenues for analysis. He examines state institutional arrangements which shape access and control to fuelwood in Senegal. In his view the state deploys law as a form of rural control. Local appointed authorities backed by the State create fictions in which there is no local representation among peasantries. Community participation is in fact disabled by forms of state intervention – and in his view by the continuance of the colonial model of rule through »decentralized despotism«. Ribot argues that participation without locally accountable representation is no participation at all. As he has put it: »When local structures have an iota of representativity no powers are devolved to them, and when local structures have powers they are not representative but rather centrally controlled.«¹³⁹ What passes in Mali or Niger or Senegal as community participation is circumscribed by the continuing power of chiefs backed by state powers, by the lack of open and free elections, and by the decentralized despotism of post-colonial regimes. In the case of institutions which involve state-community linkages, it is influence and prestige, coupled with authority and money which fundamentally frame the forms of governance and hence who participates and who benefits.

The question is whether these sorts of new globalized struggles, operating under the sign of indigeneity or identity or community participation or postdevelopment mark the death of the peasantry as Kearney believes. In some cases (for example the much vaunted Brazilian Landless Peoples Movement (MST)), the new social movement is about the creation of a peasantry, admitted on the backs of a new sense of land reform that marks it off from the 1960s variant.¹⁴⁰ In other cases, identity politics are inserting rural people more fully into the commodity nexus (admittedly through new forms such as ecotourism or artisanal craft production) which is surely part of the distinctively peasant process by which peasants become petty commodity producers.¹⁴¹ And in others, the very foundations of peasant essentialism or populist romanticism that Kearney sees as being displaced, are alive and well (indeed they are being unleashed with extraordinary new vitality) in the contemporary indigenous preoccupations with land, community, locality, culture and local control.

Peasant Mortality: An Exaggerated Death?

The process of dissolution which turns a mass of individuals in a nation etc., into potential free wage laborers (...), does not presuppose the disappearance of the previous sources of income or (in part) of the previous conditions of property of these individuals.

*Karl Marx*¹⁴²

My concern in this paper has been to suggest that the study of peasants has witnessed a shift away from Marxian political economy to post-structural concerns with

identity, and that this intellectual shift is mirrored by the growth of new forms of politics, and by the economic (and discursive) globalization of peasant communities. But rather than abandon the classical questions posed by Kautsky a century ago, or return to the much longer historical narrative of historical elimination (the death of the peasantry or the irrelevance of the peasant category), one should be sensitive to two rather different forces at work. The first is that capitalism continually creates (and eliminates) spaces within which peasants as petty commodity producers can thrive, and of course be immiserated.¹⁴³ The second is that new forms of political practice, and new social relations of production associated with globalization, should not be seen as signally either the eradication of the defining qualities of peasants as small scale commodity producers, nor suggest that peasants in virtue of their material circumstances were condemned to one form of politics. Indeed it was Marx himself, as the quote above suggests, who was sensitive the diversity of forms of agriculture and the variety of ways in which property could persist.

It is right, as Roseberry says, to be critical of models (and Marxist models) that are historically and sociologically empty; it is right to emphasize the need to be sensitive to the local and historical transformations of agrarian actors in locally configured fields of power; it is necessary to understand peasants in terms of »more complex and dynamic structures and relations of domination and control«. ¹⁴⁴ But the current intellectual vogue which emphasizes social construction over the dreaded essentialism, contingency over determination, and endless renegotiations of meaning and identity, loses all sight of the facts of determination, structure and essentialism in social life, and the need to reclaim them.¹⁴⁵ It was Marx, who after all pointed to the fact that not everything was negotiable or contested – or that there are quite different sorts of determinations operating within the circumference of lived realities. And that the understanding of these different structures and their differing structural properties cannot necessarily be grasped by a simplistic appeal to local voices, local identities, or local understanding. In this regard, the legacy of Kautsky remains an indispensable starting point for peasant studies. In the same way, the material conditions of possibility of the peasant category – the contradictory unity of property and labor associated with petty commodity production – are not diminished, or extinguished, by the onset of globalization or market triumphalism.

Notes

¹ Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry*, Boulder 1996, 245.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London 1994, 289, 292.

³ Sebastiao Salgado, *Migrations*, New York 2000.

- ⁴ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London 2000.
- ⁵ The language is taken from Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Boston 1966.
- ⁶ Tom Brass, *The Agrarian Myth, the New Populism and the New Right*, in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 24/4 (1997), 201-24. Idem, *Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism*, London 2000.
- ⁷ Kearney, *Reconceptualizing*, as note 1, 115.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁰ Karl Kautsky, *Die Agrarfrage*, Stuttgart 1899. Engl. translation: *The Agrarian Question*. 2 vols., London 1988.
- ¹¹ Kautsky, *Agrarian Question*, as note 10, 297.
- ¹² See Jean Oi, *Rural China Takes Off*, Berkeley 1996.
- ¹³ See Katharyn Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, Princeton 1996. Gavin Kitching, *The concept of Sebestoimost in Russian farm accounting*. In: *Journal of Agrarian Change* 1/1 (2001), 57-80.
- ¹⁴ Barbara Harriss-White, *A Political Economy of Agricultural Markets in South India*, New Delhi 1995.
- ¹⁵ See also Terence Byres, *Political Economy, the Agrarian Question and Comparative Method*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 10 (1995), 507-513.
- ¹⁶ Brass, *Peasants*, as note 6.
- ¹⁷ Henry Bernstein, *The Peasantry in Global Capitalism*, London 2000, 26.
- ¹⁸ Geraldo Otero, *Farewell to the Peasantry?*, Boulder 1999.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²⁰ Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America*, Baltimore 1981.
- ²¹ Otero, *Farewell*, as note 18, 9.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 150.
- ²³ Tim Mitchell, *Out of Egypt*, Berkeley 2002.
- ²⁴ Donald Moore, *Subaltern Struggles and the Politics of Place*, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 13/1(1999), 34-67.
- ²⁵ Kearney, *Reconceptualizing*, as note 1, 62.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 171-186.
- ²⁷ See Akhil Gupta, *Postmodern Development*, Durham 1998.
- ²⁸ Keaney, *Reconceptualizing*, as note 1, 337.
- ²⁹ Moore, *Social Origins*, as note 5.
- ³⁰ Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the 20th Century*, New York 1969.
- ³¹ Franz Fanon, *Wretched of the earth*, London 1962.
- ³² Alexander Chayanov, *Theory of Peasant Economy*, Madison 1966.
- ³³ Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness*, London 1971.
- ³⁴ Jan Pieterse, *My paradigm or yours? Alternative development, post development, reflexive development*, The Hague 1996 (Institute of Social Studies, Working Paper 229).
- ³⁵ Fred Dallmayr, *Global Development?*, in: *Alternatives* 21 (1996), 259-282.
- ³⁶ Stuart Corbridge, *Beneath the pavement only soil*, in: *Journal of Development Studies* 24 (1998), 138-148.
- ³⁷ Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, *Doctrines of Development*, London 1996.
- ³⁸ See Gerald Rist, *The History of Development*, London 1997.
- ³⁹ Gustavo Esteva and M. Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism*, London 1998.
- ⁴⁰ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of Development*, Princeton 1995.

- ⁴¹ See David Booth, ed., *Rethinking Social Development*, London 1994.
- ⁴² See Gupta, *Postmodern Development*, as note 27.
- ⁴³ Corbridge, *Beneath the pavement*, as note 36, 95.
- ⁴⁴ See Booth, *Rethinking*, as note 41, chapter 1.
- ⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, *When was the Postcolonial?*, in: I. Chambers and L. Curti, eds., *The Post Colonial Question*, London 1995, 242-60, here 248.
- ⁴⁶ David Slater, *The Political Meanings of Development*, in: F. Schurmann, ed., *Beyond the Impasse*, London 1993, 93-112, here 106.
- ⁴⁷ See David Lehmann, *An Opportunity Lost*, in: *Journal of Development Studies* 33 (1997), 568-78.
- ⁴⁸ See Ernest Gellner, *Spectacles and Predicaments*, Cambridge 1979.
- ⁴⁹ Lehman, *An Opportunity Lost*, as note 47, 570.
- ⁵⁰ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, as note 40, 225.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁵² Kearney, *Reconceptualizing*, as note 1, 118.
- ⁵³ Hall, *When was the Postcolonial?*, as note 45, 258.
- ⁵⁴ See Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*, Princeton 1996. June Nash, *Mayan Visions*, London 2001.
- ⁵⁵ As note 20.
- ⁵⁶ See Henry Bernstein and Terence Byres, *From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change*, in: *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1/1 (2001), 1-56.
- ⁵⁷ See for example William Roseberry, *Beyond the Agrarian Question in Latin America*, in: F. Cooper et al., eds., *Confronting Historical Paradigms*, Madison 1993, 318-70.
- ⁵⁸ Wladimir I. Lenin, *Die Entwicklung des Kapitalismus in Rußland* (1899), Berlin 1978 (=Werke, Bd. 3), 167-182.
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- ⁶¹ See Attul Hussain and Keith Tribe, *Marxism and the Agrarian Question*, vol. 1, *Atlantic Highlands* 1981. Ben Fine, *Toward a Political Economy of Food*, in: *Review of International Political Economy* 1/3 (1994), 515-545.
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- ⁶³ See Attul Kohli, *Democracy Amid Economic Orthodoxy*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 14 (1993), 671-689. Jonathan Fox, *Governance and Rural Development in Mexico*, in: *Journal of Development Studies* 31 (1995), 621-44. David Goodman and Michael Watts, eds., *Globalising Food*, London 1997.
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- ⁶⁷ Steve Jaffee, *Exporting High Value Food Commodities*, Washington, D.C. (The World Bank) 1994.
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- ⁶⁹ See Michael Watts, *Life Under Contract*, in: P. Little and M. Watts, eds., *Living Under Con-*

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⁷⁰ Jaffe, *High Value Food*, as note 67, viii.

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⁷² June Collins, *Gender, Contracts and Wage Work*, in: *Development and Change* 24 (1993), 53-82.

⁷³ See Little and Watts, eds., *Living Under Contract*, as note 69. Jaffe, *High Value Food*, as note 67.

⁷⁴ Reynolds et al., *New Internationalization*, as note 71. But see Goodmann and Watts, eds., *Globalising Food*, as note 63.

⁷⁵ See Watts, *Life Under Contract*, as note 69.

⁷⁶ See Little and Watts, eds., *Living Under Contract*, as note 69. Reynolds et al., *New Internationalization*, as note 71.

⁷⁷ See: *A Continent in Transition: Sub Saharan Africa in the Mid 1990s*, Washington, D.C. (The World Bank) 1995.

⁷⁸ See Terry Marsden, *Creating Space for Food*, in: Goodmann and Watts, eds., *Globalising Food*, as note 63, 169-91, on the Caribbean.

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- ⁹⁹ David Symes, *Agrarian Reform and the Restructuring of Rural Society in Hungary*, in: *Journal of Rural Studies* 9/3 (1993), 291-298. Peter Agocs and Stephan Agocs, *Too Little, too Late*, in: *World Development* 10/2 (1994), 117-130.
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- ¹⁰³ See Jeffrey Sachs and Mark Woo, *Structural Factors in the Economic Reforms of China, Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union*. Economic Policy Panel, Brussels, Belgium October 22-23, 1993.
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- ¹⁰⁶ See Verdery, *What Was Socialism*, as note 13.
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- ¹¹⁸ Fiona Mackenzie, *Land, Ecology, Resistance*, Edinburgh 1997.
- ¹¹⁹ Richard Schroeder, *Shady Practice*, Berkeley 1999.
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- ¹²¹ See Paul Richards, 1985. *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*, London 1985.
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- ¹²³ ITK can also take on mystical and ideological forms as in Vandana Shiva's account of Indian women as »natural« peasant scientists. Insofar as peasants know a great deal about local eco-

logy and that this knowing is typically culturally »institutionalized« and »embedded« in a variety of persons, offices, rituals, and customary practices, the questions become: why has this knowledge been so difficult to legitimate, under what circumstances can such knowledge/practice be institutionalized without co-optation or subversion and how might it be systematized in some way? See Vadana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, London 1989.

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¹²⁵ Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1999.

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¹²⁷ Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: A Biography of Power*, New York 1998, 736.

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¹³¹ Peter Brosius, *Prior Transcripts, Divergent Paths*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997), 468-510.

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¹³⁶ See Alain de Janvry and Eetty Sadoulet, eds., *State, Market and Civil Society*, Ithaca 1994.

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¹⁴⁰ Petras, *Latin America*, as note 135. Krisna Ghmire, ed., *Land Reform and Peasant Livelihoods*, London 2001.

¹⁴¹ See Bernstein, *Peasantry*, as note 17.

¹⁴² Karl Marx, *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, London 1964, 105.

¹⁴³ See Bernstein, *Peasantry*, as note 17.

¹⁴⁴ Roseberry, *Beyond the Agrarian Question*, as note 57, 360.

¹⁴⁵ See Andrew Sayer, *Essentialism, Social Constructionism and Beyond*, in: *The Sociological Review* 45 (1997), 453-87.