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### Illusions about the peasantry: Karl Kautsky and the agrarian question

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## Review Article

### *Illusions About the Peasantry: Karl Kautsky and the Agrarian Question*

Jairus Banaji\*

*The Agrarian Question*, by Karl Kautsky. Two volumes. Translated by Pete Burgess, with an Introduction by Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin. London: Zwan Publications, 1988. Pp. xxxix + 459. £25 per volume (hardback).

*The first English translation of the complete 1899 edition of Karl Kautsky's The Agrarian Question prompts a critical assessment of that work: as a political intervention, and as a work of theory; in its own time, and with respect to today's Third World. Kautsky, the political optimist, embraced an ineffectual political compromise: a stance no less likely today. His analysis has certain crucial limitations: including a conception of agrarian capitalism excessively moulded by the Prussian example, and an absence of any notion that wage-labour can come in different forms. The strength of The Agrarian Question, however, is its refusal to compromise with illusions about the peasantry and its opposition to 'agrarianism' and policies of general 'peasant protection'. Its continuing relevance is illustrated in the context of contemporary rural India, where the brutal offensive of landowners/peasants against the emerging self-assertion of rural labour is discussed.*

When Kautsky finally published *The Agrarian Question* in 1899,<sup>1</sup> the German Social Democratic Party's (the SPD's) practical involvement with the issue was largely a matter of the past. By endorsing the positions of Kautsky and Zetkin against the party's own agrarian commission, the Breslau Congress of 1895 irretrievably shattered the practical impulses of the earlier period when in Europe as a whole Social Democracy had confronted the problem of agriculture for the first time – and mainly due to the pressure of electoral battles.<sup>2</sup> Breslau marginalised the agrarian issue within Social Democratic politics, making it even less possible for a serious left-wing challenge to be mounted to the massive weight of

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German conservatism in the highly politicised countryside of the 1890s. Lehmann's study, the standard modern survey of the 'Agrarian Question' in German Social Democracy, concludes that the congress was a fiasco, and that Kautsky was largely to blame for this [Lehmann, 1970: 201].<sup>3</sup>

The first agricultural workers' union which was founded in Germany was established in 1909. At its pre-war peak, membership of the Deutscher Landarbeiter-Verband (DLV) numbered barely 20,000. Even more striking, the union was practically non-existent east of the Elbe [Flemming, 1974: 356]. Engels had expressed the view that winning the East Elbian agricultural workers was 'of far greater importance than winning the West German small peasantry or the middle peasants of south Germany'. 'Here, in Prussia east of the Elbe, lies our decisive battlefield' (cited in Fleming [1974: 351]). But the Prussian estates were not theatres of conflict – no battles ever occurred, and the historical process which finally shattered the power of the landowners was a completely different one.

#### 'BAUERNSCHUTZ' – ENGELS AND THE INNER CONTRADICTION OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY BEFORE THE PEASANT QUESTION

Engels' 'Die Bauernfrage in Frankreich u. Deutschland' ('The Peasant Question in France and Germany'), which appeared in December 1894, implied a sense of the agrarian question which was both more complex and more flexible than previous positions in the SPD. Having an agrarian policy, Engels felt, was crucial to the Socialists' drive to win power. 'In order to conquer political power this party must first go from the towns to the country, must become a power in the countryside' [Engels, 1970: 458]. For this, two groups were crucial. If the agricultural workers were potentially decisive, in the sense that the whole basis of Prussian supremacy was the unfettered exploitation of agricultural labour, it would also be impossible to achieve power without a policy towards the 'small peasant'. 'He is the critical case that decides the entire question' (p.459). The definition Engels proposed was purely rudimentary,<sup>4</sup> but flexible enough to identify a group whose relation to work made it imperative for a workers' party to side *with* them. 'We of course are decidedly on the side of the small peasant; we shall do everything at all permissible to make his lot more bearable, to facilitate his transition to the cooperative, should he decide to do so .... We do this not only because we consider the small peasant living by his own labour as *virtually belonging to us*, but also in the direct interest of the Party' (p.471) (emphasis mine).

'The Peasant Question' was *not* a work of theory, it was an essentially practical intervention prompted by the disquieting strength of Vollmar and the south Germans in shaping Social Democrats' perspectives on rural agitation. Engels made no attempt to explain what 'virtually belonging to us' might mean in *theoretical* terms.<sup>5</sup> When writing it, it was more important to reaffirm the conclusions which flowed from the specific understanding of capitalism which distinguished Social Democracy from

other political tendencies. 'Our small peasant ... is hopelessly doomed. He is a future proletarian', wrote Engels [*Engels*, 1970: 460]. But to 'create the impression that we intend to preserve the small holdings permanently [is] to degrade the Party to the level of rowdy anti-Semitism' (p.472). Engels was implacably opposed to any policy which traded the illusion that the 'small peasant' could be saved under and *against* capitalism, or that small-holding ownership was eventually compatible with a collectively-managed and rational order of society. 'On the contrary, it is the duty of our Party to make clear to the peasants again and again ... that it is absolutely impossible to preserve their small holdings for them as such ...' (p.472). Thus 'winning' the 'small peasantry' implied a work of re-educating this group against the hopeless illusions bound up with their 'deep-rooted sense of property' (p.460). The 'pamphlet' allowed Engels no space to say *how* Social Democrats could actually go about this task or why he thought it would necessarily yield political results.

'The Peasant Question' was a model of lucidity. But the practical problems posed by its unyielding rationalism were immense. Engels had sought to avoid both the isolationism of the Erfurt Programme and the reformist capitulations of Vollmar [*Lehmann*, 1970: 135], but in the labour movement the dilemma was never permanently resolved. Should socialists resist/combat the proletarianisation of the 'small peasantry'? Engels was emphatic that promises to save the small peasant would simply degrade the party to the level of the Anti-Semites, transforming a workers' party into an ordinary *Volkspartei*.<sup>6</sup> Kautsky (who had partly engineered Engels' intervention) was quite as worried by another consequence of any policy designed to help peasants against the onslaught of capitalism. Apart from the pure illusion that such forms of enterprise could stabilise under capitalism, against the proletarianising logic of capital (and not simply as a form of its domination), '*Bauernschutz*', protection of the peasantry, implied *Staatssozialismus*: Social Democrats could, and in fact *should*, appeal to the state to bring about the changes they desired. But if competition with the Anti-Semites was a form of political suicide, here the implications ran deeper – a state you could legitimately appeal to could not, presumably, have a purely class character, be a purely class-state.<sup>7</sup>

Following through the logic of this (unimpeachable) argument, sections of the Italian Socialist Party were even manifestly opposed to the survival or retention of smallholders. Gill [1983: 155] points out that when the Bologna Congress of 1897 decided to form sharecroppers' leagues, the idea was that the leagues would 'force the landowners to abandon sharecropping in favour of wage structure'.<sup>8</sup> They obviously saw themselves hastening the (inevitable) proletarianisation of a 'peasantry', transforming one class into another (and not, as they were in fact doing, substituting one form of wage labour by another, which was that of the *braccianti*). In fact, even when sharecropping had generated more

systematic bargaining and regional contracts were being negotiated, in the last days of this catastrophist epoch,<sup>9</sup> in 1920 the Italian Socialists persisted in analysing the *mezzadri* as a class of small producers, retained the policy of wanting the proletarianisation of such 'producers', and consequently gave the employers a free hand with evictions [Gill, 1983: 161], in the purest contrast to the demands of the Catholic-controlled leagues and their greater militancy.<sup>10</sup>

Between the disarming opportunism of *Bauernschutz* and the bizarre radicalism of the 'proletarianisers', Kautsky clearly wanted a middle course, truer to the vision Engels outlined, but the compromise was uninspiring and ineffectual.<sup>11</sup> Unable to advocate any policy which might entail demands in favour of the peasantry and its continued existence, and unwilling to support intervention in favour of its dispossession, Kautsky ended up leaving socialists with almost nothing in the way of a practical understanding of struggle in the countryside. *The Agrarian Question* passed into history mainly as a work of 'theory', its conclusions forgotten and its political vision barely remembered.

#### KAUTSKY'S TYPE OF ANALYSIS: GENERAL LIMITATIONS

Kautsky worked with a picture of the historical evolution of capitalism constructed in isolation from any conception of its international evolution prior to the nineteenth century and the growth of modern industry. That the peasantry had lived with some form of commercial capitalism for centuries would have seemed odd to him.<sup>12</sup> He ignored the previous history of agriculture (contrast Weber) and massively underestimated the extent of market relationships in the pre-industrial world. Thus, for Kautsky, the breakdown of peasant self-sufficiency reflected 'the power of capitalist industry' (p. 15), as if fiscal relationships were not a sufficient explanation of why people produced for the market, borrowed money, mortgaged land, and so on.<sup>13</sup>

'Wage-labour was scarcely developed' (p.26), yet Pach has shown recently that in Hungary, at least, 'the evolution of the demesne system also led to the more or less widespread use of ... hired labour', and that the subsequent expansion of labour services which occurred c.1580 was rooted in a drive to reduce labour costs, as redeployment converted *paid* into *unpaid* labour [Pach, 1982: 158, 163ff, 165-6]. Even in Prussia, the case Kautsky knew best, the considerable mass of landless day-workers predated the Stein-Hardenberg reforms [Neumann, 1914: 365].<sup>14</sup> Thus the idea that a sudden development of commodity production 'shook the foundations of peasant life' (p.27) is simply untenable.

The 'ruin' of the small peasantry was a constant theme of SPD propaganda, argued repeatedly in the early 1890s, a period of 'widespread and deep-rooted crisis in the countryside' [Farr, 1978: 141], and argued largely in terms of the overwhelming competitive pressure of the *Großbetriebe* [Lehmann, 1970: 21f.]. Kautsky's decision to organise the

central chapters of *The Agrarian Question* (Chs. 6–8) as an elaboration of these ideas gave the analysis an obvious political vitality, but undermined any *economic* basis for explaining why large producers and small peasants found themselves in a *common* front, welded together by protectionism<sup>15</sup> and their unifying ‘demonologies’.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the East Elbian estates which survived into the 1920s were losing concerns, no less vulnerable to competitive pressures than the *Kleinwirte*, and the stark contrast between ‘large’ and ‘small’ loses some of the absoluteness which it had for Kautsky.<sup>17</sup>

There is something strangely abstract in the refusal to confront the *political* realities of the German countryside of the 1890s. The *Bund der Landwirte* or ‘Agrarian League’, the most powerful of the agrarian interest groups, failed to penetrate the Catholic areas of the south – which were later indifferent to Nazism<sup>18</sup> – but made massive headway elsewhere, recruiting the bulk of its membership (162,000 in 1893 when it was formed and 330,000 by 1912!) from the *Kleinbauern*.<sup>19</sup> Puhle’s general argument that the German left had no support in the peasantry, and that German peasants were in fact a singularly conservative force, is incontrovertible.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after the Depression began, in 1880, Kautsky had forecast that the pressure of American grain exports would rapidly transform the peasant ‘from a defender of the established order into one of its fiercest opponents’ (cited in Salvadori [1979: 53]). But which ‘established order’? *This* opposition, as it turned out, radically bolstered the position of the Prussian Conservatives, it was the ‘self-organising’ of the countryside which gave Prussian Conservatism its ‘mass’ character.<sup>21</sup> *The Agrarian Question* studiously avoided a frontal attack. ‘The agrarian witches’ dance’, ‘agrarian tricksters and conjurors’ (p.312) was all he said directly about the Bund and the alarming consolidation of agrarian support for the Conservatives. Was it rational for peasants to extend support to organisations like the Bund? Kautsky faced an obvious conflict here. ‘Two souls inhabit the breast of the dwarf-holder: a peasant and a proletarian. The conservative parties all have cause to strengthen the peasant soul: the interest of the proletariat runs in the opposite direction ...’ (p.324). Other passages were more lucid. ‘What decides whether a farmer is ready to join the ranks of the proletariat in struggle is not whether he is starving or indebted, but whether he comes to [the] market as a seller of labour-power or as a seller of food. Hunger and indebtedness by themselves do not create a community of interests with the proletariat as a whole; in fact they can sharpen the contradiction between peasant and proletarian ...’ (p.317).

By 1898 it was clear that the ‘radicalism’ of the peasantry had nothing whatever to do with the aspirations of a *workers’* movement. The underlying discussion in *The Agrarian Question* moves out from the idea that the proletarianisation of the countryside is the true basis for the victory of Social Democracy in the rural areas. Kautsky was thus concerned to show that agricultural workers were fast outstripping the peasantry in purely

numerical terms (p.319), and devoted the best part of his analysis to a study of the forms in which the 'small peasant' became a supplier of labour.

#### KAUTSKY AND WEBER: TOWARDS A LOGIC OF DEPLOYMENT

The Prussian background moulded Kautsky's conceptions of agrarian capitalism in at least three ways. The East Elbian areas were a countryside of massively concentrated large, commercially-operated estates enforcing rigorous control over labour.<sup>22</sup> Hans Rosenberg described the reorganised *Gutswirtschaft* of the nineteenth century as a 'tight-knit, military-autocratic centralised factory (*Betrieb*)' where the workers were personally ruled by the managing proprietors or '*Gutsherrn*' [Rosenberg, 1978: 91].<sup>23</sup> For Kautsky, the Prussian estate was the pure model of capitalist agricultural evolution, just as (and indeed because) industry was the pure expression of large-scale, modern capitalism.

Second, the liberal agrarian reforms had left parts of Germany with a substantial and medium peasantry, preserved through primogeniture and divided from the class of agricultural workers by a 'wide social gulf', in the areas of *Grundherrschaft* west of the manorial system [Conze, 1969: 57].<sup>24</sup> But in Prussia, which Kautsky took as his starting point, the evolution was completely different, and here modernisation entailed that 'the peasantry emerged weakened and changed from the pressure of the decades after 1816 ...' [Conze, 1969: 65f.]. This is the basic reason why *The Agrarian Question* has almost nothing to say about the kind of issues which preoccupied the Agrarian Marxists (that is to say, the problem of the social character of the peasantry [Cox, 1986: Ch. 6] and of the development of purely capitalist relations *within* it).<sup>25</sup> But it also explains why Kautsky conceived the proletarianisation of the peasantry in the specific form of smallholdings perpetuated to supply the labour needs of large-scale agriculture (p.163ff., especially 'The excessive elimination of the small farm steadily reduces the profitability of the large' on p.164). In West Prussia, for example, by 1907 over half of all agricultural enterprises were holdings of less than two hectares, over two-thirds fell short of five hectares [Puhle, 1975: 44]. Clearly, the vast mass of these holdings depended on sources of income unrelated to their own cultivation, and it seems likely that a considerable part of the substantial input of seasonal labour in West Prussian estate agriculture (91,007 seasonal workers in 1907) [Puhle, 1975: 298-9, n.73] came from these groups.

Finally, the proletarianisation of the countryside was considerably more advanced in the Prussian provinces than in Bavaria or Württemberg. If *The Agrarian Question* worked with a massive optimism,<sup>26</sup> it did so largely on the experience of Prussian labour development with its now rapid predominance of purely landless day labourers.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of his political optimism, it is possible that Kautsky simply underestimated the capacity of the landowners to organise in defence of



their interests. At the economic level, he certainly curtailed their options regarding the use of labour. Given the way he chose to construct the analysis, it may seem pointless to criticise him in these terms, but the issue is a decisive one. Thus, there is no discussion of tenancy in *The Agrarian Question*, no conception that wage-labour can come in different forms, no presentiment that whole areas of the Mediterranean (or other parts of the world!) might be given over to sharecropping, no attempt to probe the logic behind the conflict between specific forms of labour use and the rationalised agriculture of the new industrial crops.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in reading Kautsky one has no sense that agricultural employers can and do face *decisions* on employment<sup>29</sup> or that these decisions can be crucial to the kind of working class which emerges in the countryside.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Weber's massive survey of 1892 and the shorter essay which summarised its results [Weber, 1892; 1894], both centrally concerned with the major changes in the pattern of labour use and the way these were modifying the composition of the labour force, Kautsky's work simply lacked any unified treatment of the deployment of labour by the large agricultural establishments.<sup>31</sup> The contrast is significant, for at a deeper level it reflects Kautsky's assumption, endemic to a whole form of historical materialism, that there is no logic of deployment, that accumulation and the use of labour are related by a tautology, and that capital engenders wage-labour as an undifferentiated use-value.

'Social Democracy is a revolutionary party but not one which makes a revolution – the revolution cannot simply be "made" by us' (cited in Lehmann [1970: 37]). The objective evolution was decisive (for example, 'The peasants no longer constitute the majority in the countryside ...', p. 319). The comparisons central to chapter 6 ('Large and small farms') were not so much a contrast between farm sizes as one between distinct types of enterprise, the former centrally coordinated and managerially supervised.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, by itself size was a less crucial consideration than the organisation and deployment of labour – what Kautsky favoured was a specific form of management of agricultural labour, the one in agriculture which most resembled the factory and, like the factory, pre-supposed careful supervision of tasks. Thus: 'The large farm is eminently capable of getting careful work out of its wage-labourers' (p. 118). And: 'As in industry, any improvement in agriculture will come from the pressures of the organised workforce' (p. 118). The socialist evolution of the countryside was clearly premised on a specific deployment of labour – the introduction of *stable* centralised workforces, capable of exerting *collective* bargaining pressure for the kind of improvements industrial workers were now taking for granted. That this pattern of deployment was inevitably bound up with the further (inevitable) evolution of agrarian capitalism was naturally assumed, but it ignored the concrete experiences of large-scale agriculture both in Prussia and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> Kautsky simply deprived agrarian employers of the ability to decide *how* labour would be used; he proceeded from the assumption that in the countryside as in the

towns, the accumulation of capital naturally predetermines the form of management and type of labour use.<sup>34</sup>

Weber, infinitely more sensitive to the organisational structure of large-scale farming (distribution of the demand for labour, types of labourers, payment systems, etc.), was thoroughly pessimistic. In the short study of changes in the labour organisation of the East Elbian estates – the increasingly massive reliance on seasonal labour<sup>35</sup> – he asked, ‘What will the result of this be? Will the struggle develop in a manner similar to that in industry?’ and responded, ‘the prospects of rural class struggle are not ... bright’ [Weber, 1979: 191].

Kautsky’s optimism presupposed that wage-workers would constitute a major and *increasing* proportion of the agricultural labour force. And so they did – in 1882 ‘Lohnarbeiter’ were 52 per cent of the labour force. But by 1895 that proportion had declined to 45 per cent, in 1907 it was 34 per cent, by 1925 as low as 26.5 per cent! [Puhle, 1975: 36] In short, the evolution of German agriculture brought about a drastic *decline* in the relative weight of agricultural wage-earners, partly because the major employers were reducing their dependence on permanent farm labour [Buchsteiner, 1982: p.43ff., Tables 5–7] – for the reasons analysed by Weber [1892] – mainly because the smaller and medium enterprises responded to the tight labour market of these years by the massive induction of the labour of *women* within the family, substituting family labour *for* wage-labour.<sup>36</sup>

The objective evolution is decisive, but it is itself only the ‘passive synthesis’ of innumerable concrete decisions about the use of labour, the reflection of attitudes,<sup>37</sup> of moods, and of responses to the situation in the labour market.

What agricultural employers wanted more than wage-labour in the abstract was flexibility – that is, that form of wage-labour which would leave them free to organise production for the maximum efficiency of labour use. When the commercial revolution of the last quarter of the nineteenth century was rapidly undermining the traditional structure of labour demand and sharpening the conflict between seasonal requirements and resident labour forces, there was a universal tendency for the large-scale substitution of casual labour and mass dismissal of permanent workers.<sup>38</sup> Weber witnessed the transition in Prussia, but elsewhere, in the purely capitalist zones of the Po Delta, the process had assumed an even more advanced character and resulted in the first large-scale organisation of agricultural workers in Western Europe and the outbreak of some spectacular conflicts.<sup>39</sup>

Where landowners employed sharecroppers,<sup>40</sup> the standards of efficiency depended on the degree of control which they could enforce through individual *contracts*. Thus the *contratto mezzadrile* which came to typify the Italian *fattorie* around 1900 gave employers an astonishing degree of control through a precocious and quite remarkable use of ‘management rights’ clauses.<sup>41</sup> This was the true face of agricultural

capitalism, since not the use of wage-labour but its specific subordination is what distinguishes capital.

#### INDIA: FARMERS' LOBBIES AND THE SUPPRESSION OF RURAL LABOUR

In some parts of the country these 'peasant' movements are taking up rural problems of quite a wide range and therefore appear quite democratic to observers. But if one is to go to the root of the matter, one must recognise in them ... a potential source of suppression of the rural poor.

Balagopal [1987b]

There is a lot in *The Agrarian Question* which makes it a contribution of supreme importance, but its greatest strength is the refusal to compromise with illusions about the peasantry and consistent opposition to the policy of 'Bauernschutz'. The criticism that the SPD abdicated the countryside to the right simply underestimates the rationality of the middle class in the interpretation and pursuit of their own interests. Nor is it true that the notion of a 'mass' basis for Right politics commits one to a 'manipulative' conception of the success of the right.<sup>42</sup>

The relevance of *The Agrarian Question* is certainly as great today as it was when Kautsky published his book. A recent Indian debate underlines this with peculiar clarity.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the late seventies, rural India witnessed a staggering offensive by landowners against the emerging self-assertions of rural labour – a brutal and systematic attempt by armed groups of landholders to avoid bargaining with labourers and simply terrorise them into submission. Its background was a gigantic upheaval in the *demand for labour* caused by the transition to more intensive methods of farming.<sup>44</sup> As one writer observed, 'agricultural labour was at the beck and call of the middle and rich landowners, today it has to be sought after. This has come as a psychological shock to the landowners' [*Morkhandikar*, 1978: 1461]. The crucial feature of this rural offensive was the fact that while in some areas the leadership clearly lay in the hands of powerful local *zamindars*, the driving forces of the movement were more deeply embedded in the mass of the so-called 'rich' and 'middle' peasantry. Dominant castes have figured prominently in these attacks – Rajputs and Bhumihars in the north, Kammas in Andhra Pradesh – but 'backward castes' have been crucial in much of the rural violence.<sup>45</sup> The killings at Belchchi, Bishrampur and Pipara were the work of Kurmis.<sup>46</sup>

'In this struggle almost all the big and middle peasants are united in opposition to the agricultural workers', wrote one correspondent from a village in Ludhiana where workers had been agitating for higher wages. 'CPI(M) local activists have not supported the agitation: their main concern throughout has been for "peasant unity" and "peaceful relations

among the peasants and workers" ...' [Singh, 1979: 1753–4]. In the same year, Arun Sinha wrote from Bihar, though the CPI

speaks of an alliance between agricultural labourers and small and medium peasants, the issue is not so simple in fact. Large surplus peasants have a dominant position in the Bihar CPI and the belated realisation that only a peasant-labour united front can be viable could well be taken to reflect the surplus peasants' need for the labourers' support for their own sectarian causes. The BKMU's<sup>47</sup> and the CPI's aim to get agricultural labourers to fight for the *kisans*' causes is *fraught with danger for the former* .... Before calling upon agricultural labourers to ally with the *kisans* in the struggles of the latter, the BKMU should answer the question whether the Kisan Sabha will work in the interests of agricultural labourers,

and Sinha concluded, 'this is unlikely to happen' [Sinha, 1979: 1117]. Again, in a brilliant report on the Karamchedu killings, K. Balagopal discerned the same pattern: 'The Left in coastal Andhra has generally been more popular among the propertied classes (especially in the villages), leaving the *harijans* to the Christian missionaries, and the politics of patronage perfected by the Congress. Indeed, caste-wise it is Kamma gentry and peasantry that has shown a general preference for the Left, especially the CPI(M) ...' [Balagopal, 1985: 1299]. (In July 1985, local *kammas* had killed six men and raped three women of the Madiga community.)

The peasantry, we may insist, is an ensemble of groups who stand in no fixed or stable relation to each other.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, in agriculture, the buying and selling of labour-power has always assumed forms in which the wage relation is suppressed beneath other modes of appearance (in sharecropping, wages are paid as a share of the crop<sup>49</sup> but the labour contract takes the form of a lease;<sup>50</sup> in attached-labour contracts, labour-mortgaging, etc. landowners treat the advance payment of wages as a loan, which of course is a pure fiction)<sup>51</sup> and labourers take on the appearance of 'small peasants'.<sup>52</sup> Thus the 'peasantry' is both amorphous and profoundly divided, and stratification terminology (rich/middle/poor) is the least helpful way of trying to make sense of this shifting and ambiguous reality.

The 'alliance' between workers and peasants is thus either a tautology or a dangerous betrayal. 'The lamb in the stomach of the tiger' is how Sharad Patil characterised the idea that agricultural workers should align themselves with sections of the peasantry. Balagopal [1987b: 1546] referred to the rapes and slaughter at Karamchedu for one example of why a 'strategy' of this sort would simply subordinate rural labour to the interests of the 'provincial propertied class' which now dominates much of India's countryside. It is simply astonishing that Marxists like Gail Omvedt could respond to this with the fatuous comment, 'Are "contradictions among the people" always pleasant?' [Omvedt and Galla, 1987:

1926]. 'People'? The irony is brutal! Enraged farmers slaughter agricultural labourers, (they do so repeatedly), but the film 'in the head' tells Omvedt a different story.<sup>53</sup>

Agrarianism has achieved a far sharper definition in India today than at any stage in its past. 'Backward class' agitations, farmers' lobbies, the innumerable organisations of peasant and landed castes with such illuminating names (all self-proclaimed *peasant* organisations: *kisan* = peasant) as 'Kisan Mazdoor Sangh',<sup>54</sup> 'Kisan Sangharsh Samiti',<sup>55</sup> 'Kisan Suraksha Samiti',<sup>56</sup> and so on, and the whole attempt to theorise an 'Agrarian' view of the 'domination of urban industrial India over the rural Bharat',<sup>57</sup> all reflect the increasingly more self-conscious and articulate assertion of a rural *Mittelstandspolitik* no longer buttressed only by the 'combine of landlord gangs and paramilitary forces' [Mukherjee, 1979: 1538].<sup>58</sup>

The need for a purely working-class politics, for a 'proletarian exclusivism', could not be more self-evident than it is in India today.<sup>59</sup> It is a myth that the majority of the rural population are 'middle peasants'.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, if we are capable of rewriting *The Agrarian Question* today, as we clearly must, of discerning the social function of wage-labour behind its misleading forms of appearance, and if we are to take into account the vast mass of the purely casual labourers who are now crucial to the deployment patterns of Indian agriculture, it will become clear that not only is there a vital political need to separate the interests of agricultural workers from those of the peasantry, but that a social basis exists for doing so which is now overwhelming.<sup>61</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Page references are to the recent English translation by Pete Burgess [Kautsky, 1988] which was the impulse for this article. For some inexplicable reason, the subtitle of Kautsky's book has been omitted from the translation! The full title is: *Die Agrarfrage. Eine Uebersicht über die Tendenzen der modernen Landwirtschaft u. die Agrarpolitik der Sozialdemokratie* ('The Agrarian Question. A Survey of the Tendencies of Modern Rural Economy and the Agrarian Policy of Social Democracy'). (I'd like to express my gratitude to Valerian Rodrigues for dense lucubrations on caste, to Rohini for impeccable political advice, and to Murad for some help with typing.)
2. Marxism became involved in the 'agrarian question' purely for electoral reasons. See Kautsky's own admission on p.312: 'Social Democracy did not initially take up agrarian issues for reasons of fundamental principle, but for reasons of political practice – considerations of electoral agitation.'
3. 'Kautsky's intervention at Breslau manoeuvred agrarian policy into a cul-de-sac', says Lehmann [Lehmann, 1970: 201].
4. 'By small peasant we mean here the owner or tenant – particularly the former – of a patch of land no bigger, as a rule, than he and his family can till, and no smaller than can sustain the family' [Engels, 1970: 459].
5. Engels wrote 'Wir den selbstarbeitenden Kleinbauer als virtuell zu uns gehörend betrachten' (cited in Lehmann [1970: 132]) (that is, 'We consider the small peasant living by his own labour as virtually belonging to us').
6. See note 46. Also see Engels' letter to Sorge, 10 Nov. 1894:

the French in Nantes declare through Lafargue not only (what I have written to them) that it is not our business to hasten the ruin of the small peasant which capitalism is seeking for us, but they also add that we must directly *protect* the small peasant against taxation, usurers and landlords. But we cannot co-operate in this, first because it is stupid and second because it is impossible.

7. See Salvadori [1979: 54] 'The advocates of the idea that Social Democracy should agitate for state intervention in support of peasant property had lost sight of the central point that it was absurd to expect the German state to furnish the means for putting an end to exploitation by the capitalists and Junkers and that it was "equally absurd for us to increase the power of this state over the exploited"' (citing Kautsky [*Neue Zeit*, xiii, 1894–95: 586]).
8. See Preti [1955: 249] characterising the Socialist attitude as '*abolizione della mezzadria*' ('abolition of sharecropping'). Mori [1955: 499] notes that the Socialists accepted the employers' view of sharecropping as the great vaccine against socialism, and Gill adds, 'This explains to a large extent [their] lack of success in the Tuscan countryside in the 1890s'.
9. Salvadori [1979: 32] citing Kautsky, 'Capitalist society has failed. Its dissolution is now only a matter of time ...'.
10. Over 60 per cent of the Catholic rural base consisted of '*mezzadri e piccoli affittuari*' [Preti, 1955: 357].
11. Kautsky did speak of 'neutralising' the peasantry (p.438) but never explained why peasants would prefer to be 'neutralised'. For Kautsky's programme, see pp.345ff.
12. Surviving sources make it difficult to see this, but (to take an example) the production and processing of Egyptian flax is a pure case of pre-industrial commercial capitalism, see Goitein [1967], Stillmann [1973], Frantz-Murphy [1981]. Of course, even in Kautsky's day, papyrologists were under no illusions about '*Naturawirtschaft*', for example, Wilcken [1899: 679ff.], Waszynski [1905: 100].
13. Among numerous local studies, see MacCoul [1987]; Casson [1938]; Cahen [1954]; Siddiqi [1973: 132]; Whitcombe [1972: Ch.4].
14. '... schon zur Zeit der vorreformatorischen Agrarverfassung ... eine ... im ganzem nicht unerhebliche Zahl berufsmäßiger, nicht gutsuntertäniger Arbeiter existiert hat', wrote Anna Neumann in a *précis* of her major work on wages. That is, 'By and large, a not inconsiderable number of purely landless agricultural workers already existed in the agrarian set-up of the pre-Reform period, who were distinct from the serf-like labour of the estate'.
15. Protectionism thwarted the modernisation of Prussian agriculture: for the argument see Hans Rosenberg's superb essays on the *Rittergutsbesitzer* (especially [1978: 102–17] and [1978: 83–101]).
16. For the Bund's rabid anti-semitism, see Puhle [1966b: 111ff.].
17. The emphasis on 'large' and 'small' holdings had less to do with surface areas than with scales of operation. This much Kautsky conceded to Sering (see p.149ff.), yet he offered no systematic discussion of the issue of the relationship between size and scale. For Sering, their movements were inversely proportional, with a tendency for the contraction of surface areas as enterprises increased their rate of capital investment: see Weber [1894 = 1979: 181] who saw this movement undermining the owner's traditional form of authority. Kautsky, on the other hand, seems to work with something like a law of the relative proportionality of size and scale, acknowledging limits (p.147 *diseconomies of scale in the supervision of labour, etc.*) but basically wedded to the notion that physical extension of holdings (at the expense of other holdings) was the primary form of accumulation in agriculture.
18. Farr [1978: 139, 144] referring to its 'hostile reception in the predominantly Catholic regions'. 'The hostility towards the BdL in southern Bavaria was in considerable contrast to attitudes elsewhere in the country.' Also, on p.155, 'the Catholic peasantry was, in contrast to the urban *Mittelstand*, to prove relatively immune to the appeals of Nazism in Bavaria ... In the Protestant parts of Franconia, the peasantry voted in much

- greater numbers for the Nazi party'.
19. The majority of the Bund membership lay west of the Elbe, among the peasantry, though its leadership was controlled from the East Elbian provinces, see Puhle [1966: 38ff., 69] on size and regional control. At any rate, it is difficult to understand Kautsky's assertion (p. 173) that 'only one quarter of all agricultural enterprises have an interest in the existence of grain duties'.
  20. Puhle [1975: 33-4]. 'Even in war time the embittered German peasant was never a Social Democrat,' wrote Arthur Rosenberg [1962: 93].
  21. See Puhle [1966: 274] 'Der BdL hat die Konservative Partei verformt' ('The Agrarian League refurbished the Conservative Party'), followed by an analysis of its impact on the Conservatives. Eley [1980: 10] has to admit, '... the Conservatives eventually absorbed much of this popular material through the agency of the Agrarian League'.
  22. In the 1860s 1.5 per cent of holdings controlled 60 per cent of the Prussian land area, Schissler [1978: 162] citing Meitzen. Despite the considerable authority they retained, Prussian landowners continued to press for ever-greater powers to control and discipline workforces. Wilful insubordination and refusal to comply with orders were punished by deductions from pay or unlawful dismissal. The 'Gesindcordnungen' which held farm servants in subjection were finally abolished only in 1918.
  23. 'Die reorganisierte Gutswirtschaft war ein straff monarchisch-soldatisch zentralisierter Betrieb, dessen Arbeiter vom Gutsherrn persönlich beherrscht wurden.'
  24. Conze's essay, which he published in 1951, is by far the best overall survey of local trajectories in Central Europe.
  25. Cox [1986] is a lucid summary of their work.
  26. For the optimism, see p.319f.
  27. In the country as a whole, the number of landless day workers increased by almost 31 per cent in 1882-1907. Buchsteiner [1982: 45] notes that 'day labourers without land were employed chiefly in the provinces where the large estates predominated.'
  28. For example, on p.161 the conflict is noted but not discussed..
  29. See the brilliant work of Juan Martínez-Alier [1971].
  30. Contrast Max Weber - summarising the work he did for the Verein für Sozialpolitik with this fundamental proposition: 'The changes in labour relations thrown up by the reorganisation of businesses affects both the composition of the labour force as a whole as well as the character of the individual groups of workers' ('die Zusammensetzung der Arbeiterschaft als Ganzes, wie den Typus jeder Kategorie für sich') [1894 = 1924: 478].
  31. Descriptions recur at various points of the text: p.161ff. (permanent labour), 193f. (seasonal work), 353ff. (child labour), 370f. (women workers), 372ff. (migrant labour).
  32. Moreover, some of the features which recommended this sort of enterprise to Kautsky - notably the task specialisation which it was possible to achieve in large enterprises (p.101) - were precisely those which Columella had prescribed as the rational objectives of the slave-run estate, see especially Col., *RR* xi.i. 7ff. which starts 'In supervising such an estate the crucial thing is to know and be able to judge what sort of task or job to assign to each individual', see Forster and Heffner [1955: 52] for the passage and Columella's discussion of job characteristics.
  33. Above all, one notes the later predominance of casual labour forces. See the highly profitable rice farms of the *pianura lombarda* with their massive deployment of women casual labourers on piece-rates (except that weeding was paid by time) and the bulk of the labour force supplied by *contractors*, see Preti [1955: 39-45]. For work relationships in the '*grande capitalismo agrario*' of the *bonifica ferrarese*, see Roveri [1972: 25-41] and his reference to the work of Teresa Isenburg. In Ferrara 54 per cent of the agricultural labour force were casuals ('*avventizi*') by 1901.
  34. For a remarkable study which shows the opposite of any such 'predetermination', see Jaynes [1986].
  35. There is a special study of the seasonal workers, Nichtweiß [1959], who quotes an estimate that in 1917 the number of Polish workers making for Germany was 600,000 (p.20).

36. With the increase concentrated over 1895–1907, Buchsteiner [1982: Table 8] (family labour expanded from 1,898,867 to 3,883,034, after showing a decline in the previous period; purely landless workers rose from 1,188,469 to 1,343,225). See Puhle [1975: 38].
37. See note 29.
38. But the Caribbean sugar industry faced no such dilemma, see Friginals [1985]; nor did the French enterprises which revived the large-scale cultivation of olives south of the Sahel, around Sfax, in Tunisia, Poncet [1961: 459ff.]. For the conflicts in Tamilnadu, see Baker [1984: 196ff.], dismissal of *pannaiyal* labourers; for Gujarat and a sensitive analysis, see Breman [1985], especially ch. 9; for Chile see Petras [1988: 71ff.].
39. Procacci [1970: Ch. 2] provides a general survey. See Bertolucci's *Novecento*.
40. For the differentiation of areas according to the dominant forms of deployment, see Orlando's Ch. 5 in *Medici and Orlando* [1952: 165ff.].
41. See the sample agreements reproduced by Mori [1955], and the analysis in Snowden [1979: 155ff.].
42. Eley [1980] tends to argue in these terms (against Puhle, etc.), but ignores both Arthur Rosenberg's crucial analysis of Fascism and the work of Mihaly Vajda [1976].
43. The debate was started by K. Balagopal's review of Sahasrabudhey [1986], a collection expounding 'Agrarian' views of India's reality, with claims such as 'The reason for our poverty is the domination of urban industrial India over the rural Bharat', and, 'The movement has attempted to show that underpricing the agricultural produce is the chief mechanism of exploitation of the peasantry', and is largely about the significance of movements like the Shetkari Sanghatana led by Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra. Balagopal [1987b] demolished the underlying assumption of a classless village, instead arguing that such movements were a threat to the rural poor. This provoked a rejoinder from Gail Omvedt and Chetna Galla [1987] (Omvedt totally abandoning her previous positions on the Shetkari Sanghatana, see *EPW*, 6 Dec. 1980, p.204ff. and *EPW*, 28 Nov. 1981, p.1937). Later contributions included: Balagopal's reply (which was excellent!), *EPW*, 12 Dec. 1987, p.2177ff., a critique of Omvedt by K. Ray and S.K. Jha [1987] (see note 58), a further rejoinder by Omvedt and Galla [1988], with the interesting notion that Ray and Jha were making the wage relation into the 'single defining feature of class and revolutionary strategy' (p.1394) ('Ray and Jha in fact do this by treating all landholding as a source of exploitation [but isn't it?] and taking the peasantry as such as oppressors ...'). Finally, there was a further response from Balagopal, *EPW*, 10 Sept. 1988, p.1918ff.
44. The suppression of the rural poor in the Donatist communities of North Africa (in the fourth century A.D.) might have had a similar basis (North Africa being the leading producer of olive oil and olives requiring large inputs of seasonal labour for harvesting), but the *possessores* probably faced a more organised challenge 'from below', since the Circumcellions could count on the protection of the Donatist congregations, if not always on that of the bishops who led them.
45. 'Caste is an ideal candidate for populist consolidation' [Balagopal, 1989: 66].
46. See Bhushan [1977], Arun Sinha [1978a], Srivastava [1980] with *EPW*, 9 Aug. 1980, p.1334. Arun Sinha states:

Demonstrators of the All-India Backward Classes Federation marched through the streets of Patna on March 14, demanding, along with reservation of jobs, also the release of all the accused in the Belchhi massacre case ... The major outrages against *harijan* sharecroppers and agricultural labourers since March 1977 have occurred in Kargahar, Belchhi, Pathadda, Chhaundadane, Gopalpur and Dharam-pura. Barring Dharam-pura, where the landlords were Brahmins, everywhere the attackers belonged to the so-called backward castes of Kurmis and Yadavs [1978b: 675].

One of the most astonishing aspects of the introduction to the recent English translation of Kautsky (which is by Teodor Shanin and Hamza Alavi) is that it succeeds in presenting Kautsky to his readers by endorsing positions which are the precise opposite



of those which inspired *The Agrarian Question!* In particular, this refers to the Shanin-Alavi ode to the 'militancy' of the German peasantry – indeed, to a 'whole new world of peasant militancy in Germany in the closing decades of the nineteenth century' (p.xxix) which simply disappeared from the obtuse vision of entire generations of German historiography, fixated on such minor rumblings as the Agrarian League. Of course, the anti-semitism was 'unfortunate' (p.xxx) (an aberration!), the re-consolidation of Prussian Conservatism and its overnight transformation a pure result of the SPD's 'singular inability to understand what really moved the peasantry at the grass roots' (p.xxx). But every *dalit* community which has looked an angry Jat or Kurmi in the eye knows exactly 'what really moves the peasantry!' Moreover, Shanin and Alavi surely cannot be unaware of Rudolf Heberle's classic work [1963; 1970] on the relationship between the NSDAP and the peasantry of the *Geest* ('only in rural communities did the Nazis obtain such large majorities at that time', wrote Heberle about the Reichstag elections of 1932). The nonsense about 'proletarian exclusivism' (p.xxx) would have been greeted by Engels with precisely the sort of comment he made about Vollmar – the Bavarians were, he told Sorge, 'fast schon eine ordinäre Volkspartei' ('already almost a straightforward populist party'). Certainly, one could not have a better example of why we need texts like *The Agrarian Question*. On 'middle peasant' involvement in rural pogroms, see Ghosh [1979: 184ff.], Balagopal [1987a: 1379] (a lynching at Neerukonda, where 'most of the *kammas* are just middle farmers'), and the remark of one correspondent, 'The middle and rich peasantry in the rural sector feel that the Government is pampering the Scheduled Castes and Tribes', *EPW*, 12 Dec. 1981, p.2027.

47. The Bihar Rajya Khet Mazdoor Union, affiliated to the CPI.
48. Kritsman rejected the notion of a 'middle peasantry', as Rudra does, see Cox [1986; 198–9] and Rudra [1978: 1000ff.].
49. In sharecropping contracts from Byzantine Egypt it is possible to perceive the true nature of the relationships, because the lessees explicitly refer to their share of the crop as 'the half share accruing to us for the work we do'. That is, they see their share as a form of wages. Dealing with such contracts, Gerstinger [1956: 245] therefore characterised sharecropping as a pure labour relation ('einen bloßen Arbeitsvertrag') ('purely a labour contract'). It is also worth noting that the Bengal landlords who responded to the questionnaire circulated by the Floud Commission in 1939 consistently took the stand that their *bargadars* were merely wage labourers [Government of Bengal: 1940].
50. So Jones [1968] described *mezzadria* as 'wage-type tenancy' with detailed regulation of work through leasehold agreements which were more like labour contracts.
51. See Adams' critique of the antichretic understanding of *paramoné* contracts, Adams [1964]. The advance payment is *not* a loan because it involves no legal obligation to restore the original sum of value but simply a factual claim to the services of the second party. See Rudra and Bardhan [1983: 53] 'the farm servant's consumption loan is just a form of wage payment in instalments ...'.
52. See Rudra [1978: 1001]:

A poor tenant working under the directions of his landlord, with means of production largely supplied or advanced by the landlord, is not very different in his functions or status from a labourer; the relation between such a landlord and such a tenant can be just as capitalistic as that between an employer and a labourer can be under Indian conditions ... We shall treat poor tenants as belonging to the class of labourers

53. The naivety of her responses is incredible. For example: 'a good many social scientists and even left activists are making the peasantry fundamentally differentiated by definition'. That certainly explains what causes differentiation! Again: 'Petty commodity production, not wage labour, is the dominant rural relationship' in India [Omvedt and Galla, 1988: 1394]. But having dissociated the two, naturally she has to ask: 'What is the character of "middle peasants," aside from being better off, that puts them on the side of the exploiters in the class struggle? Poor peasants may engage in

- some hiring out and middle and rich peasants may hire in labourers, but is this *all* that identifies their economic interests? If so, then we are by definition making the wage relation into the single defining feature of class and revolutionary strategy' (p.1394). For the hiring of labour by small farm groups, see Rudra and Mukhopadhyay [1976]; Krishnaji [1979: 519]. ('Even more striking are the data for the size class immediately below which refers to households operating between 0.5 and 1 hectare (1.25 to 2.5 acres); in about 30 per cent of these households work is done largely by wage labour ...', about Kerala), Agarwal [1984: Tables 4.1-4.3].
54. For Bhojpur landlords! *EPW*, 29 Oct. 1977, p.1832.
55. For Jat landowners who invade *dalit* fields and trample crops, Ghosh [1979: 184f.].
56. For Kurmi landholders who slaughtered 14 agricultural labourers in February 1980, *EPW*, 9 Aug. 1980, p.1335.
57. See note 43.
58. Supporting Balagopal against Omvedt and Galla, Ray and Jha [1987] emphasised the role of the 'middle peasantry' in 'unleashing violence on the oppressed at places like Belchi, Narayanpur, etc.', and went on to argue,
- the Punjab CPM's attempts to ride two horses at the same time – middle peasants and landless labourers – has ended in a disaster on both counts .... Similarly, the Malabar middle peasantry ditched the Left Front soon after the land reforms and the attempts of the left parties to organise the landless labourers .... The owner cultivators are not interested in letting the benefits of land reforms and remunerative prices 'trickle down' to the lower classes ... the contradiction between the middle peasantry (the class represented by Sharad Joshi) and the '*dalits-harijans*' is so sharp that alliances can only be forged at the expense of the oppressed.
59. For the CPM's agrarian policy in Kerala, see Krishnaji [1979].
60. Omvedt and Galla [1988] actually argue this on the grounds that most of the labour supplied is family labour, but seem to be unaware of the results of studies like Agarwal [1984].
61. Ashok Rudra is the only writer who has consistently argued from a corrent understanding of rural class relations. See the following passage with its compelling logic [1981: 63]:
- A considerable amount of labour employment is carried out by middle-sized farmers. Any attempt at raising wages by a significant amount would certainly antagonise not only the landlords but the entire bulk of the peasantry other than the poor peasants. Political parties who require to enjoy the support of all sections of the peasantry excepting the landlords in view of their electioneering strategy simply cannot afford to do any such thing. The force of this logic is so strong that even those sections of the erstwhile Marxist-Leninist party which have changed their line from election-boycotting to participation in elections have also quickly given up any slogans for wages.
- Rudra's recent work, with Bardhan [1983] takes a major step towards making sense of labour relations in Indian agriculture.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>Bauernschutz</i>	protection of the peasantry
<i>bonifica</i>	land reclamation
<i>braccianti</i>	landless agricultural labourers
<i>contratto mezzadile</i>	sharecroppers' contract
<i>Deutscher Landarbeiter-Verband</i>	German Agricultural Workers' Union
<i>fattorie</i>	centralised estates
<i>Großbetriebe</i>	large enterprises
<i>Grundherrschaft</i>	the non-manorial feudal system
<i>Gutswirtschaft</i>	manorial enterprise
<i>Kleinbauern</i>	small peasants
<i>Kleinwirte</i>	small enterprises

<i>Lohnarbeiter</i>	wage labourers
<i>mezzadri</i>	sharecroppers
<i>Mittelstand</i>	middle strata
<i>Naturalwirtschaft</i>	natural economy
<i>piccoli affittuari</i>	small tenants (other than sharecroppers)
<i>pianura</i>	plain
<i>Staatssozialismus</i>	socialism with state support
<i>Volkspartei</i>	People's Party