

Introduction

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1 Why Global Agricultural Workers?*

Agriculture has historically been the largest economic sector, in terms of output volume and numbers of workers employed. Even today, about one billion people of working age (or, 26.7 per cent of the global labour force) are employed in agriculture, although they are extremely unevenly distributed over the globe.¹ Nevertheless, agricultural workers have long been underrepresented in the “old” as well as the “new” labour history.² This scholarly neglect of agriculture might be a result of what some have perceived as the slow death of agricultural work or a process of de-peasantisation – due to the effects of industrialisation and the rising productivity in agricultural production. However, for a long time, the decreasing importance of the agricultural sector has, in fact, been limited to a few highly industrialised nations. Everywhere else, agriculture is still a major economic sector and a source of income for a large part of the population. Although the share of people employed in the agricultural sector has been declining worldwide, and constitutes (far) below 5 per cent of the total working population in most high-income countries, their share is still considerable in most mid- and low-income countries, where the majority of the world population currently lives.³ Besides their *quantitative* importance, there are several other *qualitative* considerations motivating the study of agricultural labourers. For this volume, we have identified three

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1 “Employment in Agriculture (% of total employment) (modelled ILO estimate,” International Labour Organization (via the World Bank), accessed 29 March 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>. The figure refers to the year 2019.

2 For an excellent overview of “old” and “new” labour historiography, see Marcel van der Linden, “Labor History: The Old, the New and the Global,” *African Studies* 66 (2007): 169–80.

3 To take some examples of countries represented in this volume: in 2010, the percentage of people working in agriculture was 16.7 in Brazil, 37.7 in Indonesia, 38.9 in Ghana, and 54.7 in India: “Share of Agriculture in Total Employment, 1961 to 2011,” Our World in Data, accessed 23 November 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-agriculture-in-total-employment>.

topical issues, which are very urgent in the present day and age but which call for more in-depth historical contextualisation.

First of all, in the context of worldwide population growth, rising food prices and environmental change, the issue of *food security* has appeared high on the political agenda over the past few decades. It was extensively discussed at the first World Food Summit (Rome, 1996) and has been one of the main concerns of the United Nations' "Millennium Development Goals" and "Sustainable Development Goals."⁴ Food security is intrinsically – yet also ambivalently – related to the concept of *food sovereignty*, which can be defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."⁵

Over the past decades, food sovereignty has become a major concern because small-scale farming has increasingly made way for large agro-industrial companies controlling the production of food in the name of guaranteeing "food security," particularly in the Global South. This monopolisation of food production by large companies creates pressing anxieties about the quality and quantity of food, the circumstances of its production and the ecological consequences of this system.⁶ Food sovereignty has become a key concept of scholarly and political discourses and "now constitutes a powerful anti-capitalist vision for food system transformation."⁷ Peasants not only play a central role in the political movement advocating food sovereignty. They are also seen as a possible solution to the many problems that the "corporate food regime" (see next section) has caused so far: political, economic and ecological. Small-scale, family-based agriculture is a specific form of agricultural engagement

4 Food and Agricultural Organization, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: The Multiple Dimensions of Food Security* (Rome, 2013), 4, accessed 21 March 2022, <https://www.fao.org/3/i3434e/i3434e.pdf>.

5 Declaration of Nyéléni (2007), 1, accessed 21 March 2022, <https://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>.

6 At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, the transnational agrarian movement *La Via Campesina* (established 1993), coined the term "food sovereignty" for a broad audience. For a detailed account on the evolution of the term, see Philip McMichael, "Historicizing Food Sovereignty," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 6 (2014): 933–57. For more about the historical development of agro-business, see the next section.

7 Priscilla Clayes, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Jasber Singh, "Food Sovereignty, Food Security and the Right to Food," in *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*, ed. A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi et al. (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 238.

and differs substantially from entrepreneurial farming. Strengthening small-scale peasant farming would not only guarantee sovereignty over food production but would make agricultural production ecologically more sustainable.⁸ This perspective has been further developed by agroecology, sometimes also referred to as eco-agriculture.⁹ Despite the upscaling of agriculture and the rise of “agribusiness,” more than 95 percent of all those still employed in agriculture today are in fact smallholders in the Global South.¹⁰ It is worthwhile investigating the resilience of smallholder and peasant producers in a long-term historical perspective in order to understand how and why, regardless of continuous upscaling and increasing capitalist relations of production, they have managed to survive.

A second highly urgent theme is coerced labour in the primary sector. Recent ILO estimates suggest that, in 2016, two million people worldwide were working under bonded or slave labour conditions in the private agricultural sector – thus excluding state-coerced programmes.¹¹ Apart from direct coercion, millions of other workers in the agricultural sector are working under shady contracts, through which they receive advances that grant labour contractors immense power over them to employ them whenever it suits them, under very poor living and working conditions.¹² For example, Oliver Pye quotes three different estimations that range from a few hundred thousand to ten million migrant plantation workers in the Malaysia-Indonesian region. Because many of them are undocumented labourers, their numbers are obscured, and they

8 As was already argued in the early 1980s: Harriet Friedmann, “Household Production and the National Economy: Concepts for the Analysis of Agrarian Formations,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 7, no. 2 (1980): 159.

9 The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) lists nineteen different definitions of agroecology on its website. One definition that incorporates the main characteristics of agroecology was published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA): “Loosely defined, agroecology often incorporates ideas about a more environmentally and socially sensitive approach to agriculture, one that focuses not only on production, but also on the ecological sustainability of the productive system.” Quoted on the FAO website, accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/knowledge/definitions/en/>.

10 Eric Vanhaute, *Peasants in World History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 3.

11 International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva, 2017), 32, accessed 21 March 2022, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf.

12 ILO, “Decent Work in Agriculture” (paper, International Workers’ Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture, Geneva, 2003), 23, accessed 22 March 2022, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_161567.pdf.

are vulnerable to exploitation due to their often illegal status.¹³ Likewise, the fruit and vegetable industries in Southern Europe rely heavily on migrant contract workers. According to CREA, a research organisation dedicated to the agri-food supply chains, the number of migrant workers in Italy's agricultural sector was recently estimated at over four hundred thousand: almost 50 per cent of the total labour force in Italy's primary sector.¹⁴ The labourers come predominantly from Eastern Europe, the Maghreb, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom are undocumented migrants. Particularly in Southern Italy, where migrant workers are employed only temporarily – for the harvest of tomatoes, for instance – living conditions are abysmal, with workers frequently living in informal slums in isolated rural areas.¹⁵ After abolition, contract labour was often framed as a voluntary alternative to slave labour.¹⁶ Just like other recent historical studies, however, many of the contributions in this volume show that slavery and other forms of labour under (semi-)coerced conditions were omnipresent in the global countryside throughout the period under investigation. In this sense, there seem to be clear continuities with the past. This raises questions about why coerced labour in the agricultural sector has been so persistent, and how its appearance has changed over time under the influence of major economic, political and societal change.

Third, and closely related to the former point, the comparatively unprotected status of agricultural workers by governments and states stands out. Although many of the exploitative practices described above take place in the private sphere of agri-business, small-scale commercial agriculture or even in the household, many states turn a blind eye to these practices. In some cases, such as the Dominican Republic, the ILO found that the state has even explicitly facilitated forced labour in plantations since the 1980s.¹⁷ Moreover, millions of waged agricultural workers – both men and women – do not receive crucial social benefits in their host countries, simply because current legislation often excludes (seasonal) migrants from social security schemes.¹⁸ More

13 Oliver Pye, "Agrarian Marxism and the Proletariat: A Palm Oil Manifesto," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 4 (June 2021): 815.

14 Alessandra Corrado, "Migrant Crop Pickers in Italy and Spain" (E-paper, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2017), 4–5, accessed 21 March 2022, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/e-paper_migrant-crop-pickers-in-italy-and-spain_1.pdf.

15 Corrado, "Migrant Crop Pickers," 4–5.

16 Alessandro Stanziani, "Introduction: Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, Seventeenth – Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, 17th–20th Centuries*, ed. Alessandro Stanziani (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 3.

17 ILO, "Decent Work in Agriculture," 23–24.

18 ILO, "Decent Work in Agriculture," 53.

in general, migration policies in many states keep a large part of the workforce in a highly vulnerable status, enabling employers to over-exploit the labourers and creating labour relations that some scholars refer to as “modern slavery.”¹⁹ Thus, apart from peasants, who are numerically over-represented in the global agricultural workforce, a huge landless agro-proletariat has come into existence in recent decades. This proletariat, partly consisting of illegal migrants, has not only been neglected and even exploited by states, but it has also been notoriously underrepresented in recent scholarship.²⁰ An important historical question arising in the context of this volume is to what extent we can discern continuities and changes in states’ interferences with labour conditions in the agricultural sector, and how we might explain these.

This volume aims to highlight these three trends in agricultural labour: the resilience of the peasantry; coerced labour in agriculture; and the particular state (non-)intervention from a *historical* perspective. It tries to increase our understanding of the roots of these developments by bringing together studies on agricultural labour relations from all over the globe. The three sections in this book follow logically from the three questions posed in the previous paragraphs. However, before we contextualise the contributions in this volume further, we will first discuss some of the most recent insights about, as well as concepts surrounding, agricultural labour.

2 Labour Relations in Agriculture

The category of “agricultural worker” is fairly broad, and includes small peasant producers, those employed on family farms, and workers on plantations and other agro-industrial complexes. Furthermore, their labour relations are highly varied. They range from self-employment and wage labour to various forms of coerced labour relationships, such as slavery or indentured labour. Most of these different types of labour relations are represented in this volume: whether peasants under Eastern European serfdom, contract workers on colonial plantations in British India, or wage labourers in the nineteenth-century industrialising United States. In their introduction to the *Handbook Global History of Work* (2018), Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden provide a very useful definition of labour relations: “Labour relations define for

19 See, for example, Thomas Chesney et al., “Understanding Labour Exploitation in the Spanish Agricultural Sector Using an Agent Based Approach,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 214 (2019): 696.

20 Pye, “Agrarian Marxism,” 816.

whom or with whom one works, and under what rules. Those rules, implicit or explicit, written or unwritten, determine the type of work, type and amount of remuneration, working hours, degrees of physical and psychological strain, and the degree of freedom and autonomy associated with the work.”²¹

Over the past fifteen years, the International Institute of Social History (IISH) has brought together scholars in the context of the project “Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500–2000,” who have jointly developed a taxonomy of labour relations based on the above-mentioned definition.²² Arriving at such a shared classification was an important step in the global history of labour relations. It allows scholars to use a common framework and language when analysing the labour relations of a specific population at a particular moment in time, or to determine how particular social, economic or political shifts impacted labour. Moreover, comparing various labour relations across space and time was thus made easier – enabling scholars to identify both regional differences and change over time.

When it comes to labour relations, it is complicated to categorise agricultural workers, as they typically pursue a livelihood by combining various income strategies: a worker might cultivate millet for household consumption, wheat for cash and sell her labour on a daily basis to a large landowner – all at the same time. The rules that determine the type of work, the amount of work, the remuneration or the degree of freedom differ in each case. Given the complexity of labour relations in agriculture, it may be useful to think in terms of labour *regimes*. A labour regime consists of various labour relations and can combine subsistence with commodity production and everything from so-called free wage labour to forced labour services.²³

The following concepts and analytical tools have been fundamental in studying the spatial and temporal shifts in labour regimes. Immanuel Wallerstein’s

21 Karin Hofmeester and Marcel Van der Linden, “Introduction,” in *Handbook Global History of Work*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 4.

22 The project was an initiative of IISH staff member Jan Lucassen and includes key researchers such as Karin Hofmeester (coordinator), Christine Moll-Murata and, later, Rombert Stapel. For the project, its publications and its databases on labour relations, see the “Global Collaboratory” Dataverse, accessed 29 March 2022, <https://datasets.iisg.amsterdam/dataverse/labourrelations>.

23 In an essay on labour regimes in Northeast India, Willem van Schendel identified a colonial labour regime that included household self-employment, cash crop production, servile labour and communal labour: Willem Van Schendel, “Beyond Labor History’s Comfort Zone?” in *The Life Work of a Labor Historian*, ed. Ulbe Bosma, and Karin Hofmeester (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 195.

World-Systems Analysis (WSA) is still a very powerful approach to understanding the links between emerging capitalism, an increasing demand for cash crops and shifting agricultural labour relations. WSA stresses the interlinkages between the emergence of global trade and merchant capitalism, inducing the extraction of minerals and agricultural products from the “periphery” in order to serve growing consumer and producer markets in the “core.” Backed up by their merchant capitalist states in the seventeenth (Holland) and eighteenth (Britain) centuries, a new global division of labour came into being, in which African slave labour was employed to produce sugar and other cash crops on plantations in the Americas.²⁴ As the collaborative initiative SlaveVoyages has shown, the peak of the slave trade occurred in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of the 10.64 million enslaved people recorded in the transatlantic slave trade database, 9.35 million embarked on the voyage to the plantations in the Caribbean, South and North America in the period 1700–1866.²⁵ After the slow abolition of the slave trade over the nineteenth century, a new source of cheap and exploitable labour was found, most notably in the agricultural workers of South and Southeast Asia. Two types of labour relations dominated the expanding cash crop markets: first of all, the self-exploiting peasant family cultivating produce on their own fields with their own means of production or in forms of sharecropping and, second, the indentured labourers who were shipped to plantations all over the globe.

WSA was an important step in understanding the global division of labour. It shifted our attention to periods when new zones were incorporated into the European-dominated world economy. These processes of incorporation were accompanied by the increasing coercion of the labour force in the peripheries.²⁶ That includes the obvious example of plantation slavery in the Caribbean but also peasant producers who were coerced to cultivate cash crops. A prime example which clearly depicts the mechanics of coercion many peasant producers in colonies faced is India's colonial opium industry. At the height of the industry, about 1.5 million peasant households cultivated poppy, the plant from which opium is extracted, for the British Indian government's Opium Department. While opium filled the government's treasuries, it impoverished

24 Charles Lemert, “Wallerstein and the Uncertain Worlds,” in *Uncertain Worlds: World-Systems Analysis in Changing Times*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein, Carlos Aguirre Rojas, and Charles C. Lemert (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 158.

25 “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Database,” accessed 20 November 2021, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

26 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989), 137.

the peasantry, since the prices, dictated by the Opium Department were too low to even cover the costs of cultivation. North India's peasants clearly produced opium at a loss and they were forced to do so by the mechanics of a triangle of debt, power and dependency relations.²⁷ WSA enables us to view this form of coercion faced by peasants as well as indentured labour and enslaved labour as features of the same process: the incorporation of new zones into the global division of labour. Interestingly, this all occurred at a time when labour relations in the capitalist "core," northwestern Europe, became increasingly free and market-oriented.²⁸

In the wake of WSA, a group of scholars has recently stressed the importance of studying "commodity frontiers." The global history of capitalism, Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Mindi Schneider and Eric Vanhaute argue, is a history of the expansion of commodity frontiers.²⁹ These frontier zones are characterised by the commodification of land and labour. What this approach adds to the WSA concept of incorporation is its emphasis on the ecological transformations that have accompanied the commodification of land and labour. While heavily influenced by the concept of the commodity chain, the commodity frontier approach starts the analysis in the countryside rather than in the industrial "cores" of the world economy. It has thus encouraged economic and social historians to study the history of capitalism by shifting their focus away from the urban industrial centres to the global countryside and, as a consequence, to labour relations in agriculture.³⁰

Another important analytical device for studying shifts in agricultural labour relations, especially in the more recent period, is the concept of the "food regime," developed by Harriet Friedmann and Philipp McMichael. This concept allows us to analyse agricultural and food systems from a world-systems perspective and identify major hegemonic shifts. McMichael distinguishes "three phases of geo-political ordering of international food production and circulation": the British-centred imperial food regime, from the 1870s to the 1930s, the US-centred food regime from the 1940s to the 1970s and finally

27 For a detailed analysis of the peasant production of opium in nineteenth-century India, see Rolf Bauer, *The Peasant Production of Opium in Nineteenth-Century India* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019).

28 Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 194.

29 Sven Beckert et al., "Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside," *Journal of Global History* 16, no. 3 (2021): 435–50.

30 For an introduction to the concept of the "commodity chain," see Immanuel Wallerstein and Terence K. Hopkins, "Commodity Chains in the World-Economy Prior to 1800," in *The Essential Wallerstein*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: The New Press, 2000), 221–33.

the corporate food regime, centred around the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has dominated global agriculture and food since the 1970s.³¹ The major difference between the corporate food regime and the two former food regimes is the changing role of the state. While states dominated the agricultural and food markets during the British- and US-centred regimes, they became mere servants of global markets in the most recent regime. The WTO has represented the interests of transnational corporations in the liberalisation of global trading. In the name of “food security,” countries in the Global South were pushed to open up their agricultural markets, leading to an expansion of agrarian exports and a penetration of large-scale enterprises at the cost of the displacement of small-scale farming. “Southern lands in particular,” according to McMichael, “have been increasingly converted from local food provisioning to contract farming and agro-industrial estates.”³² In a similar vein, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg introduces the concept of “food empires” to analyse “the global and oligopolistic networks that control increasingly large parts of the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food.”³³ Food empires, van der Ploeg argues, seek to control the linkages in agricultural and food systems and thus enable agribusiness to appropriate and centralise value.

3 Part 1: The Agrarian Question and the Resilience of Peasant Family Farms

In his recently published *Peasants in World History* (2021), Eric Vanhaute calls peasants the “single most important social group in world history since the advent of agriculture.” He continues to argue that “[a]ll successful cultures and civilizations were based on extensive peasant economies comprising 90 per cent or more of the population.”³⁴ Besides the sheer magnitude of this group, there is another reason that the peasantry deserves scholarly attention: as mentioned above, the peasant mode of agricultural production could be a hopeful alternative to the current “corporate food regime.”³⁵ Undoubtedly, peasants have been the most dominant group of agricultural workers in history. In

31 Philip McMichael, “Food Regimes,” in Akram-Lodhi et al., *Handbook*, 218.

32 McMichael, “Food Regimes,” 219.

33 Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries: Rural Development in Times of Globalization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 245.

34 Vanhaute, *Peasants in World History*, 3.

35 Philip McMichael, “Global Development and the Corporate Food Regime,” *New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development* 11 (2005): 265–99.

recent decades it has been increasingly acknowledged that “peasants” do not form a homogenous group, and that they work in a variety of rural (as well as non-rural) activities in both paid and unpaid, formal and informal sectors.³⁶ What most peasants do have in common, though, is the small scale of their business, their modest income and the importance of family and/or communal relations for their existence.³⁷

The study of labour relations in agriculture arguably began with Karl Marx. While Marx paid demonstrably more attention to studying the urban working class, he nonetheless made some invaluable contributions to our understanding of rural social relations. His ideas about the proletarianisation of agricultural labour and the possible end of peasant family farms led to a long-lasting debate: the *agrarian question*. Both Marx and Lenin assumed that peasant families would eventually be swallowed by capitalism and spat out as capitalist farmers and wage workers, respectively. Unlike Marx and Lenin, Karl Kautsky believed in the survival of the self-sufficient family farm. Capitalism and the self-exploiting family farm would go well together, Kautsky argued: “a small holding cultivated on an intensive basis can constitute a larger enterprise than a bigger farm that is exploited extensively.”³⁸ Indeed, more than a century later, peasant family farms are still the largest group in the agricultural sector, even though they have less land under cultivation than large commercial farms.³⁹

The agrarian question – the issue of “whether and how agriculture provides surpluses over and above subsistence”⁴⁰ – is a longstanding debate in Marxist scholarship. It gained momentum when Karl Kautsky in his *Die Agrarfrage* (1899) questioned the idea that the transition to capitalist society would eventually rule out the model of peasant and family forms of (subsistence) agricultural production. A major contribution to this debate was Alexander Chayanov’s *Theory of Peasant Economy* (1929). Based on extensive empirical data on Russian peasant families, Chayanov showed that peasants’ economic behaviour differs from that of capitalist farmers. The goal of the former is self-reproduction while that of the latter is profit. Usually relying on the labour power of *the household unit*, the peasant will make decisions about – for

36 A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi et al., “An Introduction to the *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*,” in Akram-Lodhi et al., *Handbook*, 3.

37 Harriet Friedman, “Origins of Peasant Studies,” in Akram-Lodhi et al., *Handbook*, 15.

38 Karl Kautsky, 1899, quoted in Jairus Banaji, “Summary of Selected Parts of Kautsky’s *The Agrarian Question*,” in *The Articulation of Modes of Production*, ed. Harold Wolpe (London: Routledge, 1980), 75.

39 Eric Vanhaute, “Agriculture,” in *Handbook Global History of Work*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 230.

40 Michael Watts, “The Agrarian Question,” in Akram-Lodhi et al., *Handbook*, 53.

example – the crops he/she cultivates or the intensity of the labour, not based on external market dynamics but, rather, on internal shifts in the household.⁴¹ In Chayanov's own words, "the family's single indivisible labor product and, consequently, the prosperity of the farm family do not increase so markedly as does the return to a capitalist economic unit influenced by the same factors, for the laboring peasant, noticing the increase in labor productivity, will inevitably balance the internal economic factors of his farm earlier, i.e., with less self-exploitation of his labor power."⁴² This flexibility allowed the peasant model to continue even in increasingly monetary societies, and monetisation arguably even strengthened, rather than weakened, communal and family ties in agricultural communities.⁴³

Harriet Friedmann took up some of Chayanov's core ideas in the early 1980s. Her point of departure was that there is a wide variety of social and economic contexts in which agricultural household production has historically taken place. She sees agricultural labour relations as a continuum with "feudal relations of production at one extreme, and commercial relations of highly mechanised family farms within capitalist economies, at the other."⁴⁴ She argued that the internal composition and division of labour within productive households, and the characteristics of household members, are, to a large degree, determined by the external relations of households to each other and to other social groups. Like Chayanov, she distinguished the peasantry from other small-scale agricultural producers in the sense that peasant households have an ability to survive because they do not need to obtain an average rate of profit, unlike capitalist farmers. In some contexts, peasants even actively resist market penetration. According to Friedmann, peasant production can thus – and perhaps even needs to – continue to exist even under capitalist, highly commodified, agricultural production.⁴⁵

The articles in the first part of this volume, all in their own way, try to empirically answer the question of how and why, regardless of continuous upscaling and increasing capitalist relations of production, peasant families have managed to survive. The section demonstrates that subsistence peasant

41 Alexander V. Chayanov, "On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems," in *A. Chayanov: The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner, Basile H. Kerblay, and R. E. F. Smith (Homewood: AEA, 1966), 1–28.

42 Chayanov, "On the Theory," 6.

43 Harriet Friedmann, "Origins," 18–19.

44 Harriet Friedmann, "Household Production," 159.

45 Friedman, "Household Production," 163–67.

production did often indeed continue even under conditions of advancing commercialisation and industrialisation. Whereas, in Western Europe, commercialising agriculture resulted in peasant emancipation over the nineteenth century, peasant households in Eastern Europe, instead, faced increased coercion alongside growing production for an export market.⁴⁶ Joseph Ehmer's micro-historical study (Chapter 2) scrutinises the peasants of East-Elbia under serfdom, a highly oppressive form of bonded peasantry that persisted well into the nineteenth century. Contrary to some recent studies, in which oppressive forms of serfdom have been questioned, Ehmer reinforces the idea of the Baltic as a region marked by particularly coercive labour relations in agriculture. Under these harsh conditions, nevertheless, social mobility appears to have been more easily attainable for peasants than after the liberation of peasants, which actually solidified class relations and decreased the chances of climbing the social ladder.⁴⁷

Outside Europe, too, peasants faced coercion in the context of the vast expansion of export markets. A notorious example is the Cultivation System, introduced by the Dutch colonisers on Java in 1830, which forced peasant households to produce exports crops such as coffee, tea, indigo or sugar. Peasants received some monetary compensation – although this was far under the market price – and the increasing cultivation of export crops put severe pressure on subsistence production. As Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk shows in Chapter 1, the additional labour demand imposed on households by the Cultivation System increasingly rested on women's shoulders. Women became more involved in household agricultural production – both subsistence and cash crops – and played a major role in the marketing of their produce as well as in cottage industries, such as textile production. In this way, women's work, both in subsistence agriculture and market production, actually prevented peasant families from starvation.⁴⁸

In some cases, industrialisation and urbanisation could simultaneously lead to a return to forms of small-scale peasant production. An example is the American Northeast, where unemployment in cities led working-class families to frequently relocate between urban and rural areas, by way of a "safety valve." However, as Katherine Jellison shows in Chapter 3, this ideal of agrarian freedom existed only – and only partially – for white male landowners. Based on numerous letters written by members of a family living partly in New York City and partly in rural Massachusetts, Jellison presents the biographies of

46 Chayanov, "On the Theory," 1.

47 Ehmer, this volume.

48 Van Nederveen Meerkerk, this volume.

unsuccessful urban labourers, some of whom gave up life in the city in search of a better life in the countryside. Without any landed property, they all ended up at the bottom of the agrarian socio-economic order: as agricultural wage labourers. Women had even less room for manoeuvre, as their fate depended on their relationships with men – in rural areas even more so than in urban areas.⁴⁹

Small-scale farming also persisted in the context of increasing commercialisation in agriculture in Western Europe. Although it is often held that either sharecropping or wage labour is preferred in viticulture, in Chapter 4 Juan Carmona and James Simpson show that – except in regions where top quality wines were produced – the majority of family farms in Southern Europe were, instead, tenant farms. This made sense both from the peasants' point of view and from that of most landowners. For the families, the diversification of agricultural activities, including subsistence as well as commercial activities other than viticulture were an important form of risk spreading, as grape yields were particularly volatile. Moreover, sharecropping contracts often reduced peasants' autonomy. For the landowners, due to the particularities of the vineyard crop, sharecropping could entail higher (instead of the usually assumed lower) transaction costs, making longer term tenant agreements more desirable in many regions.⁵⁰

Like in the divergent cases of colonial Java under the Cultivation System and Southern European viticulture under conditions of commercialisation, the context of war could also prompt concern about issues of food security. As Sophie Elpers shows in Chapter 5, the destruction of and damage to impressive numbers of small-scale farms in the Netherlands as a consequence of the German occupation and warfare activities of the Second World War, the safeguarding of the food supply formed an important motor behind farm reconstruction. Simultaneously, the reconstruction of post-war farmhouses offered opportunities for the “modernisation” of the farm, which facilitated a clearer separation of the living and working quarters of the house, which were construed as, respectively, the “female” and “male” domains. To be sure, the breadwinner-homemaker ideal had already been propagated since the early twentieth century, for instance by farm household management schools and associations, but it increasingly became reality only after the war. The new farm architecture symbolised the abandonment of the centuries-old tradition of farm women working together with their husbands in agriculture,

49 Jellison, this volume.

50 Carmona and Simpson, this volume.

increasingly confining them, instead, to the sphere of domestic duties. Rising rural living standards as well as changing ideologies – also advocated by farmer women's organisations – enabled this shift.⁵¹

Chapter 6 provides a more contemporary history of Indian villages in the Eastern Himalayas that practise swidden (“slash-and-burn”) agriculture, which has often been defined as traditional and “backward.” In the context of colonial as well as post-colonial development schemes, peasants were either forced or trained to give up “*jhum*” in favour of irrigated paddy rice farming. This development led to the commodification of land and interference with age-old property relations, which involved communally held land. Permanent settlement and permanent cultivation turned land from a source of livelihood to a commodity. As a result, many cultivators were alienated from their land, which led to structurally new social relations in the village.⁵² As opposed to the practice of swidden farming, which has often been framed as detrimental to the environment, the extension of agri-forestry and wet rice cultivation in these areas led to the depletion of land as well as a decreasing access to land for small-scale farmers. Thus, the demise of the peasant may well be detrimental to the environment as well as to social relations.

To the contrary, in Chapter 7 Lozaan Khumbah presents a case study of small-scale practitioners of swidden agriculture in Northeast India, who have adapted remarkably well to increasing market penetration in the region. Khumbah disrupts Esther Boserup's argument that demography is the decisive driver of change from swidden to permanent agriculture. Instead, distance to markets proved to be more decisive. While twenty-first-century Nagaland has certainly experienced population growth, it also experienced higher market integration and emigration to urban centres all over the subcontinent. The latter two developments created a market for foodstuffs produced by swidden cultivators who were able to gear their products to these new consumers, even creating niche markets for their traditionally produced foodstuffs. This allowed this seemingly outdated form of agricultural production to persist in the context of population growth and commercialisation.

To come back to the questions guiding this section, household peasant production continued all the way up to the present despite political, commercial and economic change. The main purpose of their small-scale production was subsistence food security but, whether in colonial Java, Europe or India, peasants also got involved in market production. In many instances, small-scale

51 Elpers, this volume.

52 Das, this volume.

production was also beneficial to employers or the state. Many peasant households accommodated to the altering conditions around them, which often meant combining different labour relations. Peasants supplemented subsistence household production with incidental wage labour, or marketed a share of their produce – sometimes voluntarily, in other contexts forced by authorities. A culmination of such force, by states, church institutions or individual entrepreneurs, can be found in the emergence of the large-scale cultivation of cash crops all over the Global South in the sixteenth century, particularly in the Americas. We will now turn to this specific form of labour relations, highlighting the role of slavery and other forms of coerced labour relations in agricultural production.

4 Part 2: Coerced Labour Relations in the Global Countryside

As mentioned, one of the important conundrums in the history of agricultural labour is why coercion – with slavery as its most extreme form – has been so persistent in this sector. In studying this question, the relatively novel concept of the “commodity frontier” has proven to be a useful analytical device. This concept is used to explore how capitalism in general, and the exploitation of land and labour at the frontier zones of the expanding world economy in particular, have affected labour and property relations as well as the natural environment. Commodity-centred histories have added to our understanding of the central role that coerced labour relations played in the development of capitalism.

In the early modern period, a specific group of commodities started to dominate world trade: psychoactive substances, the most important of which were coffee, tea, cacao, tobacco, opium and sugar.⁵³ Their value-to-weight ratio in addition to their addictive potential made them ideal commodities for the lucrative transoceanic commerce that was essential to empire building in the early modern period.⁵⁴ The production, trade and consumption of

53 Whether sugar can be regarded as a psychoactive substance in neurochemical terms is still debated. See, for example, Nicole M. Avena, Pedro Rada, and Bartley G. Hoebel, “Evidence for Sugar Addiction: Behavioral and Neurochemical Effects of Intermittent, Excessive Sugar Intake,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 32, no. 1 (2008): 20–39. Understood as a “stimulant,” sugar can be put in the same category as the other psychoactive substances mentioned above. See, for example, Mindi Schneider and Ulbe Bosma, “Stimulant Frontiers,” *Commodity Frontiers* 2 (2021): i – iv.

54 For an excellent overview on the role of psychoactive substances in empire building, see David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

psychoactive substances created enormous profits for traders and tax revenues for states. These profits and revenues relied first and foremost on “cheap nature and cheap labour.”⁵⁵ The political and economic realm of empires offered ample opportunities for the expansion of this form of oceangoing commerce: consumers in the core on the one hand and cheap production in the periphery through the violent appropriation of land and labour on the other.

There are a few explanations for why coercive labour relations were so persistent in agriculture. Land and labour were by far the two most important factors in preindustrial agricultural production. In colonial contexts, land was frequently available in abundance since it was acquired through violent means. The Caribbean islands were made available for sugar production by killing or expelling the indigenous population. Similarly, the rapid west- and southward expansion of cotton production in nineteenth-century North America, was only possible because indigenous people lost their land to violent frontier men. In both cases, there was thus no shortage of land. Labour was the problem. Labour was the most expensive factor in these agricultural sectors and, as a consequence, entrepreneurs had a huge incentive to keep labour costs as low as possible: the result was maximum exploitation via coercion.⁵⁶

While the expansion of the frontier zones made land available in abundance, this process often eliminated the local work force. On Caribbean sugar plantations, for example, labour was simply not available locally after the indigenous population had died. Labourers had to be recruited from distant places and then kept confined to work on plantations in remote corners of the world for long periods. This combination of mobility and immobility would not have been possible without a high degree of coercion – be it in the form of slavery or indentured labour.

However, not all kinds of agricultural production are suitable for extreme forms of coercion. Vineyards, for example, demand a high level of care and skills from the cultivators throughout the year. Employing coerced labourers with little intrinsic motivation to carefully tend the vines would result in high monitoring costs. This is why slavery was less likely to occur in wine production than, for example, in sugar, coffee or cotton. The cultivation of the latter

55 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015), 1–18.

56 The hypothesis that abundant free land will likely produce coerced labour relations is, of course, not new and was presented, for instance, by economist Evsday Domar in his paper “The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom,” *The Journal of Economic History* 30, no. 1 (1970): 18–32. Some core ideas of Domar’s paper can already be found in *Slavery as an Industrial System: Ethnological Researches*, published by Herman J. Nieboer in 1900.

crops is labour-intensive, but the actual labour of cutting cane, or picking coffee or cotton, is monotonous and easily monitored. This is particularly true for plantations where long rows of a single crop allowed overseeing large groups of workers at low costs. There is thus a certain crop-dependency in labour relations. That means that certain crops are more suitable for coerced labour than others. Most of the crops that dominated world trade in the early modern period fall into the category “very suitable for coerced labour.”

The five chapters in this section deal with coerced labour in agricultural production in a colonial context from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century – a period that covers the rise and fall of the transatlantic slave trade and other forms of coerced labour. They show, first, that there was no simple and linear development from slavery to forms of less coerced labour in colonial agriculture and, second, that local ecological, economic and political circumstances heavily influenced labour relations and vice versa.

In the Amazon, for example, colonialists relied heavily on the know-how and traditional production methods of indigenous people when extracting and cultivating so-called *drogas do sertão* (forest products), such as cacao. In this case, slavery or indentured labour were no option, since the production of cacao was dependent on locally skilled labour. However, that does not mean that these indigenous labourers were actually free. In Chapter 8, Karl Heinz Arenz analyses the role of missions which, according to the author, should be understood as “efficiently functioning outposts of the Portuguese empire in the vast hinterland.” The Jesuits built a network of farms or production centres that allowed them to exploit both the land and labour of this vast hinterland and to supply the metropole with *drogas do sertão*. An imperial law regulated the allocation of indigenous labourers, and the Jesuit missions were one of the major receiving parties. The labourers, while officially declared to be “free” people, were forced into highly exploitative and brutal labour relations. The missionaries made use of the labourers’ know-how and skills, for instance in the seasonal collection of forest products. Native production methods became an integral part of the missionary network in the Amazon and were thus incorporated into the wider imperial economy.

The coexistence of vastly different forms of labour relations within one world economy becomes particularly apparent in Leida Fernandez-Prieto’s case study of slavery on sugar plantations in Cuba (Chapter 9). Cuba, like Brazil, received enslaved people until well into the second half of the nineteenth century. Cuba’s development of slave-based plantation agriculture coincided with industrial modernisation in Europe, that is, the period from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. It is the interlinkages between Western science and industrial modernity, on the

one hand, and ancestral local knowledge and practices in tropical plantation regions, on the other, that are of central interest to Fernandez-Prieto. From breeding and fertilising techniques to food provision for the enslaved labourers: knowledge and practices circulated between industrialising Europe and tropical Cuba, displaying the connections between “traditional” and “modern” modes of production and labour relations.

The abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century led to immediate labour shortages on many colonial plantations. One way in which planters – often backed by imperial states – solved this problem was by contracting migrant labourers to work on the plantations for a specific number of years, most notably in the West Indies/Caribbean but also in other parts of the globe. Migrant indentured workers often came from Asia: from other parts of the Empire (e.g., India in the case of the British West Indies and Java in the case of the Dutch East Indies), but also from China.⁵⁷ Adam McKeown has estimated that about 2.5 million migrants travelled as indentured labourers from South and East Asia to the Americas between 1840 and 1940, and that another 2.9 million Indians moved to other British colonies in Asia to perform contract labour.⁵⁸

In Chapter 10, Rachel Kurian stresses the continuities from slavery to indentured labour. Certain methods of labour control employed on South Asia's plantations resembled those of slave plantations in the Caribbean. However, these were supplemented by “local forms of labour control,” that is, those based on caste and religion. Kurian carves out another continuity: the role of the state. The case of Malaya, for example, shows how deeply involved the colonial state was in the recruitment of indentured labourers, both in terms of the legal framework and financial resources provided. Interestingly, this form of state recruitment of migrant labourers working on plantations in Malaysia has persisted until today, as shown in Chapter 16 by Janina Puder.

The Haitian Revolution, which began in 1791, was a crucial event, not only affecting slavery in the Caribbean but agricultural labour relations in other parts of the world too. It shifted the principal destination of the transatlantic slave trade from the Caribbean to Brazil. In 1790, the year before the Haitian Revolution broke out, the Caribbean slave trade had reached a height: 69,281 people disembarked and were sold as slaves on one of the Caribbean islands.⁵⁹

57 Kay Saunders, “Introduction,” in *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834–1920*, ed. Kay Saunders (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), i–vii.

58 Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846–1940,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 (2004): 157.

59 “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Database,” accessed 14 April 2022.

After that, the importance of the Caribbean as a destination for slave ships rapidly declined. Brazil, it seems, substituted the Caribbean as a buyer of enslaved people. Its rise as a slaving country was closely connected to one crop: coffee. Here, too, Brazil filled the vacuum left by the Caribbean in general and Haiti in particular. The revolution not only ended slavery in Haiti, but also its role as a leading producer of coffee (and sugar, cotton and indigo), since coffee production was based on slave labour. Newly independent Brazil emerged as the world's major coffee producer and exporter.⁶⁰ Brazil's rise in coffee correlated with rising slave imports. In 1790, Brazil was a comparatively small market in the transatlantic slave trade, with 10,633 enslaved people disembarking. After that, this number increased, reaching a height of 71,733 in 1828.⁶¹

However, Brazil was not the only emerging coffee producer. Ceylon was another. These two coffee economies differed in many respects but, most importantly, regarding their labour relations. While Ceylon's plantations owners hired seasonal labourers from South India through the Kanganay System, Brazil's coffee was harvested by enslaved people. In Chapter 11, Rafael Marquese conducts a comparative analysis of Ceylon's and Brazil's nineteenth-century coffee economies. Marquese shows that these two different labour regimes not only had a varying impact on the design of the plantations – for instance, on how the coffee trees were planted – but also on the labour process and labour productivity. Seasonality and, accordingly, variations in labour demand – a problem that all agricultural producers have to deal with – led to different plantation types and harvesting systems. Since the enslaved labourers on Brazil's plantations could not simply be dismissed, the planters tried to postpone the harvest for as long as possible. In Ceylon, on the other hand, planters simply hired labourers for a period of a few months only. After the harvest, most labourers went back to their villages in South India, only to return for the coffee harvest in the following year.

While Chapter 11 deals with the coexistence of slavery and indentured labour, Chapter 12 sketches the transition from slavery to sharecropping arrangements – also in Brazil's coffee industry. Again, Brazil makes a particularly interesting case study, since the institution of slavery was only abolished in 1888, while the transatlantic slave trade had already been prohibited in the country since 1850. Against the backdrop of a booming coffee economy, the Brazilian planters were eager to find a new source of cheap labour: migratory labourers from Europe. Bruno Gabriel Witzel de Souza and Rogério Naques

60 Steven Topik, "Historicizing Commodity Chains," in *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, ed. Jennifer Blair (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 44–49.

61 "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Database," accessed 14 April 2022.

Faleiros begin their analysis in the 1840s, when a Brazilian firm started to offer migrant labourers sharecropping contracts. These contracts were interlinked with credits, which paid for the migrants' journey from Europe to Brazil. This system, the authors show, allowed the planters to bond the labourers to their farm until the debts were paid – a system not unlike the indentured labour system in South Asia at the time. Their analysis of these sharecropping contracts stretches until the 1930s, which allows them to delineate the continuities of this system but also the various refinements these contracts underwent during this period.

The case studies of this section are representative for agricultural production in the hinterlands of the global economy in the early modern period. They show how the frontiers of agriculture were constantly pushed, through which new land and labour were appropriated, often through the means of colonial conquest. Both cheap land and labour were crucial elements in the global desire for cash crops, and thus in the development of capitalism in this period of capital-extensive agrarian production. As land and labour were not necessarily voluntarily provided by indigenous populations, violence and force were typically used in their appropriation. In the production of sugar, coffee, cacao and many other colonial commodities, the (forced) mobility of the agricultural workers ensured that the constantly changing frontier zones were supplied with labour. The mobilisation of cheap labour under coercive relations, however, has remained a central feature of global agriculture up to the present, as becomes vividly clear when studying the role of the state in regulating agricultural workers' (im)mobility.

5 Part 3: State Intervention and Agricultural Labour Mobility

States have played a central role in the recruitment of agricultural labourers. They pass laws, provide resources and create networks to facilitate the supply of cheap labour in their agricultural sectors. Migration policies in particular have been a powerful tool that states have used to safeguard a mobile and cheap agricultural workforce. As discussed above, workers' mobility has been a key feature in agricultural production since the early modern period. This was not only because the expansion of frontier zones pushed production sites to remote corners of the world and, in the process of doing so, often decreased the availability of locally available labour. Also, seasonality – a feature that characterises agricultural work to a far greater degree than industrial production – creates a highly fluctuating labour demand. Seasonality determines when and where workers are needed. In some cases, technology has flattened

out these fluctuations in labour demand. The greenhouses in Southern Spain, for example, allow the growth of fruit and vegetables throughout the whole year. However, in most cases, seasonality still largely determines the intensity of agricultural labour demand. Migration policies can help not only to satisfy agriculture's seasonal labour demands by, for example, issuing temporal visas, but also to keep the costs for the factor labour as low as possible. The production of "illegality" via migration policies keeps workers in a highly vulnerable status and thus forces them to accept low wages, long hours and substandard living conditions.

Accordingly, a major topic that runs through all four chapters of this section is the relation between labour, mobility and citizenship, and how state intervention has influenced these. Segregating labour rights along the lines of citizenship creates a status of high vulnerability for migrant workers and thus allows employers to create forced and exploitative labour relations. The need for particular forms of labour, be it in sugar cane production in the French Empire or on contemporary Malaysian oil palm plantations, seems to be fulfilled by drawing on migrants and other labourers with inferior citizenship status, whose exploitation is not prevented but, rather, enhanced by either the lack of protection of, or even active policies targeted at, migrant workers. Moreover, in rural communities in Ghana, old colonial practices of communal labour recently seem to be directed at migrant labourers, who, based on their citizenship status, have less capacity to resist such obligations than residents.

In Chapter 13, Alessandro Stanziani asks the question why, in the French Empire, despite the abolition of slavery, the use of coercion and restricting agricultural workers' mobility continued, both in the metropole and in its colonies. In France, the situation of rural labourers changed for the better after the 1789 Revolution, in the sense that *de facto* bondage was abandoned. Nevertheless, many forms of coercion continued, and agricultural workers' rights were much less protected by government measures than those of industrial workers. Thus, Stanziani concludes that "the Revolution of 1789 brought much more 'freedom' to urban than to rural workers." The metropole formed a blueprint for suppressed worker status throughout the French Empire. After 1848, thousands of freed slaves as well as new immigrants were put under contracts of *engagement*, which was, in fact, a form of bonded labour, under which labour conditions were hardly better than formerly under slavery. Legal restrictions for immigrants and non-French residents and a consistent negation of their rights in courts of law provided the institutional underpinnings for their inferior status in the colonies.

In Chapter 14, Alexander Keese investigates continuities and changes in what has been termed "communal labour" in Ghana, from the late colonial period

to the very recent past. Under the label “communal labour,” the state employed mandatory work programmes for the creation and maintenance of infrastructure. Developed in the colonial period, independent Ghana also implemented these mandatory work programmes, which helped to realise public infrastructural projects in rural areas at low costs. While Keese acknowledges major differences between the colonial and the postcolonial eras in terms of the physical exploitation of the workers, he also emphasises the continuities between these eras: both the colonial and the postcolonial state framed these mandatory work programmes as voluntary contributions for the rural community. In the recent past, the main target groups for these work programmes were immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, who, threatened by being expelled from Ghana, could be more easily forced to participate in “communal labour” than Ghanaian citizens. Although – with the exception of forced cultivation in some regions in colonial sub-Saharan Africa – not strictly agricultural in nature, these communal labour obligations impacted rural communities immensely. They drew labour away from agricultural work with little compensation in return, and restricted workers’ mobility. These practices are another example of how states, instead of safeguarding agricultural labourers’ rights, actively contributed to their exploitation.

Dina Bolokan (Chapter 15) takes labour relations in twenty-first-century European agriculture as the point of departure for her dissection of “neo-colonial labour regimes of im_mobilisation.” What the vegetable and fruit industries in Italy or Spain and the meat industry in Saxony/Germany have in common is the coexistence of their workers’ hypermobility and confinement. These workers are mobile because they migrate from Africa, Latin America, Asia or Eastern Europe to the production centres in the European Union; they are mobile because they follow the demand for their labour, from factory to slaughter house and from plastic tent to field. At the same time, the migrant workers are confined to these production sites, Bolokan argues, since they are closely monitored and allow little room for movement. The author traces the historical roots of this labour regime back to the nineteenth century, by looking at state interventions to recruit and regulate (migrant) agricultural labour in Switzerland and Prussia/Germany. Historically, too, Bolokan concludes, recruitment policies as well as migration restrictions both stimulated and confined migrants’ labour mobility, in whatever way might have suited capitalists’ and state interests.

Mobility and confinement also characterise the situation of the migrant labourers in the present-day Malaysian palm oil industry. In Chapter 16, Janina Puder describes a labour migration regime which is strongly supported by the Malaysian state. Palm oil production has become a major concern of Malaysia’s

economic development strategy – a trend that Puder traces back to the country's colonial past. As is common to production sites of the frontier zones of global capitalism, Malaysia's palm oil industry not only depends on inexpensive natural resources but also on cheap labour. The latter is primarily supplied by migrants from Indonesia. The powerful actors of this particular labour regime – the state in conjunction with plantation owners – developed various mechanisms to exploit these workers, from restrictive labour permits and low minimum wages to bureaucratic barriers to workers' formal organisation and their outright isolation.

The third and final question that is central in this volume concerns the changes and continuities in state interference with regard to (migrant) agricultural labour, and how we can explain these. In combination with the seasonality and absolute or relative scarcity of labour in particular branches of commercial agriculture, states have turned a blind eye to, or even facilitated, through particular labour or migration policies, the recruitment and exploitation of particular vulnerable groups of workers. Whether they were slaves from Africa, indentured labourers from South Asia or, like today, migrant workers from non-OECD countries working in relatively rich states, such as the European Union or Malaysia, the interests of merchants, planters and, more recently, agro-business have generally prevailed. In all chapters, the relationship with colonial pasts, and the changes and continuities with respect to these histories, become evident. Colonial or neo-colonial power relations were often in place to reinforce unequal measures and policies. This is not to say that the agency of agricultural workers has been completely absent. In the nineteenth century, indentured labourers in the French Empire sometimes dragged their employers to court if their payment was stalled or their contracts were breached; African migrant workers in Italy today protest against bad working conditions in fruit and vegetable companies. Likewise, Ghanaians have tried to resist having to take on communal labour duties. However, in many cases, even more vulnerable groups, often migrant labourers, are available to take on the work that others refuse to do.

6 Final Observations

This volume makes an important contribution to the study of agrarian labour relations in long-term, global perspective. Although being far from exhaustive, the chapters in this book highlight a number of continuities and discontinuities in the history of agricultural production. First of all, many of the contributions stress the importance of small-scale peasant production, in the past and

present, for the safeguarding of food security – especially in the Global South – and highlight it as a possible solution to the further degradation of the natural environment. At the same time, this volume shows the longstanding historical trend of important currents *countering* the security and sovereignty of agricultural producers: the use of coercion as well as the lack of protection, and even the active facilitation, of agrarian labourers' precarity by state policies. Taking a long-term historical perspective is crucial because the problems of food security faced by the peasantry in the Global South today cannot be understood without analysing their colonial roots. As economist Utsa Patnaik has recently argued, the colonial past still determines “the present-day continuing thrust of Northern countries using new free trade regimes and income-deflating policies to access the products of the Global South.”⁶²

Can one indeed see the present-day “corporate food regime” as the continuation of earlier colonial power relations in the context of a globalising world economy? And does the role of the modern nation state, which, in many cases, enhances the interests of agro-business – for instance, through particular migration policies – parallel the coalition that existed between (capitalist) merchants and imperial states? Can “ensuring the viability of small-scale production ... and ensuring work and wages for rural labour”⁶³ indeed be a solution to effectively counter the pervasive exploitation of vulnerable groups in the countryside? More research is definitely desired to answer these questions. Perhaps “localisation” and small-scale production offer part of the key to solve these problems. However, additional structural solutions are likely needed and, here, globalisation, with its increasing means and speed of communication, might prove to be crucial. In fact, apart from the many similarities throughout time, there are also great contrasts with former historical periods. One important difference is that, nowadays, many NGOs, interest groups and researchers exist – ranging from the International Labour Organization and peasant interest groups to activist journalists – that are able to raise awareness, monitor and counter such abuses of agricultural workers. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, could be seen as an important step towards protecting the rights of those working the land around the globe.

62 Utsa Patnaik, “An Alternative Perspective on the Agrarian Question in Europe and in the Developing Countries,” in Akram-Lodhi et al., *Handbook*, 46.

63 Patnaik, “Alternative Perspective,” 50.

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