

Handbook of World-Systems Analysis

Peasants and depeasantization

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The survival and persistence of peasantries in a globalizing and ever more commodified world have been puzzling social scientists for a long time now. Time and again, the demise of the peasant was announced by capitalists, by intellectuals, by national and development planners, “indeed, by virtually everyone but the peasants themselves.” (Desmarais 2007: 195). However, as Wallerstein has reminded us: “What is surprising is not that there has been so much proletarianization, but there has been so little. Four hundred years at least into the existence of a historical system, the amount of fully proletarianized labour in the capitalist world-economy today cannot be said to total even fifty percent.” (Wallerstein 2003, 23). The very notion of peasants and peasantries confronts us more than anything else with the flaws of traditional/mainstream economic development theory. The understanding of old and new ‘agrarian questions’ asks for new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within the long-term transformations in the capitalist world-system. The mainstream image of the peasant and of peasantries is still deformed by a twofold myopia. First, the much praised English Road to capitalist agriculture, built on rapid depeasantization, seems not to have been the standard road to development. The quasi permanent transformation of peasantries and small scale agriculture within the expansion of the modern world-economy is much more the ‘normal’ journey of the peasants of the world. Secondly, the inevitability of the European Experience, the dissolution of the peasant societies within industrial and post-industrial economies, is not and cannot be the example for most of the non-Western world. Being at the top of the modern world-system, nineteenth and twentieth century Europe could rather easily and cheaply dismantle its rural economies, by importing the basic products it needed from and exporting the surplus labour to its old and new colonies. For most of the world, this is a very different story today.

Looking beyond the old premises of westernized development we can see a different picture. This is a picture of family based agricultural societies that have always been and still are highly productive systems, and that combine diversified production chains and multiple strategies of risk minimalization with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems. These include performant, but controlled markets, secured access to land and guaranteed rights of use of common goods such as water and natural resources (Altieri and Nicholls 2005; McMichael 2006; Vanhaute 2008). This essay tries to understand the survival of the peasantry as a social process within historical capitalism.

1. Peasants as a social category

Social categories shape and reshape our social knowledge. They are constructs, ever redefined within changing social contexts. Social categories can also shape and reshape reality. When institutionalized, social categories become ‘bounded’, they create boundaries and categorical differences. As these differences become durable, as Charles Tilly has argued, they create categorical inequality (Tilly 1998). Because of local, historical, and

organizational contingencies, different sorts of categorical pairs referring to gender, class, race occupy distinct positions in social life (Tilly 1998: 240). Stressing the exclusive character leads to essentialism that can create unilinear, often teleological and mostly biased explanatory stories. In social sciences many of these categories became framed and institutionalized, a topic of intense academic discussions ever since. This process of framing and eventual deconstruction is closely linked with the everyday struggle over social reality. "Since all groups are socially created, they are socially created for some purpose. And the purpose is to advance the rights (and privileges) of the group. (...) How local, regional, or transregional we wish to define the location of a group... is function of the political alliances we are creating and recreating constantly." (Wallerstein 2007: 5- 6). This applies also to the story of the peasant as a social category. The search into the 'essence' of the peasant becomes already clear in its most basic definition as "a countryman working on the land" and "a member of the class of farm laborers and small farmers" (Oxford Advanced Learned Dictionary). The dualistic view on the rural versus non-rural world, mostly with a negative connotation, can also be found in the French equivalent *paysan/paysanne*. Disdain toward the 'louts and oafs' has been part of the discourse of the wealthy, the powerful and the literate in Europe for a long time (Freedman 1999). Anette Desmarais has often repeated that the Anglosaxon concept of peasant still keeps its narrow meaning, basically related to the European era of feudalism. The words *paysan* or *campesino* have *in se* a broader meaning but they still refer to a social group from the (far away) past (Desmarais 2007, 2008).

In nineteenth and twentieth century modernization thinking, the peasant represented the left (starting) point on the axis of evolution, the traditional community as the opposite of modernity. In this 'stationary' society the economy was still dominated by agricultural subsistence activity, which output was consumed by the producers rather than traded. Production was labor intensive, using only limited quantities of capital, and social mobility was low. (Western-based) historiography has for a long time developed and described the 'anti-modern' model of a 'familistic', family-based society, a relatively undifferentiated economy of family farms and rural crafts and services, structured by internal agencies such as family, kinship and village. A 'peasant set of values' opposed the development of a new, open, mobile, individualistic and market-based society. Success of modernity depended on "the degree to which the prevailing ideology of social relations was predicated on familistic, or individualistic, principles." (Schofield 1989: 304). The ambivalent relationship of the peasant with the outside world is the main reason for the often schizophrenic scientific interpretation of this social group. Markets and exchange systems are the most visible, but also the most difficult relationship to grasp, see for example the famous quote of Fernand Braudel: "The peasant himself, when he regularly sells a part of his harvest and buys tools and clothing, is already a part of the market. But if he comes to the market town to sell a few items -eggs or a chicken- in order to obtain a few coins with which to pay his taxes or buy a plowshare, he is merely pressing his nose against the shopwindow of the marketplace." (Braudel 1977: 19). Market versus non-market, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, a long tradition of rural sociology is grafted upon these dichotomies.

The publication in 1966 of the English translation of two texts of the Russian agrarian economist and rural sociologist Alexander V. Chayanov (1888-1937) triggered a new wave of peasant studies, and more importantly, a new debate about the nature of peasant societies (Thorner, Kerblay, Smith 1966). The two works, 'Peasant farm organisation' and 'On the

theory of non-capitalist systems', written around 1925, compile the main ideas of Chayanov. First, to explain economic behaviour of peasants, traditional concepts as wages, rents and profits do not apply. The absence of wage labour (and a labour market) and the predominance of a separate logic of household consumption-labor balance differentiates the peasant farm from capitalistic units of production. Secondly, a peasant economy is a distinct system (mode of production) within the national economy, based on fundamentally non-capitalistic principles. Chayanov's definition of a peasant focuses therefore on the family as a production/consumption unit, or the "economic unit of a peasant family that does not employ paid workers." (Chayanov 1966: 1). The intense debates on Chayanov's work delegitimised former, ethnographical perceptions of peasant societies as indifferentiated, primitive and static. From the 1970s a long series of 'local', 'micro', 'village' studies aimed to understand the internal logics of survival within past and contemporary peasantries. Nonetheless, very often a formal demarcation line between peasant based non-capitalist and capitalist economies still constituted the macro-story.

Around the same time, the anthropologist Eric Wolf published his path-breaking booklet 'Peasants' (Wolf 1966). By framing the peasantry within an evolutionary time frame he rejected a binary, a-historical interpretation model: "This book is concerned with those large segments of mankind which stand midway between the primitive tribe and the industrial society." (Wolf 1966: VII). Moreover he stressed the necessity to analyze peasant societies not outside, but within broader societal contexts: "Neither primitive nor modern", the story of peasant villagers "cannot be explained in terms of that village alone; the explanation must include consideration both of the outside forces impinging on these villages and of the reactions of villagers to these forces." (Wolf 1966: 1). He defined peasants as "rural cultivators whose surpluses are transformed to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in return." (Wolf 1966: 3-4). As Tom Scott has argued: "Eric Wolf's *Peasants* is something of a summary of, as well as a new departure from, these debates. (...) Wolf moves the debate beyond whether peasants were naturally conservative, values-rational, safety-oriented investors of their land and labour or whether they tended to be risk-taking, market-oriented maximizers, by showing that the coordinate strategies for balancing their private familial with their communal needs they had to be both – and that they engaged in a special 'peasant rationality' only in so far as this appeared in terms of agricultural and village contingencies that could vary greatly in proportion to the manner and complexity of their internal and external articulations with both local and wider markets." (Scott 1998: 197).

The wide and rich oeuvre of the rural sociologist Teodor Shanin is a quasi permanent struggle with the difficult integration of internal and external analyses. His definition of peasants tries to reconcile the insights of Chayanov and Wolf: "Peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment, and the labour of their family, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of the holders of political and economic power." (Shanin 1990: 5; first published in 1971). Central concepts are the farm (the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood combining subsistence and commodity production), the family (internal social organization based on the family as the primary unit of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare and risk-spreading), and class (external subordination to state authorities and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and class differentiation). What is largely missing is the community, the village society. He justifies his integrated view by arguing that "measuring

peasant capitalism lies at the heart of the major concerns of contemporary social science. It has to do with capitalism as a process, it relates the understanding of the origins of our time to the characterization of the essential tenets of the global system we live in.” (Shanin 1980: 89). This way he criticized both classical and Marxist political economy who explained capitalism “outside peasant economies and societies” with the assumption “that capitalism equals de-peasantation.” (Shanin, 1980: 89). Peasants are no remnants of the past nor victims of the present. Ethnographical research and modernization theory chained the peasant in static, a-historical narratives. The search for ‘other’, ‘backward’, ‘non-capitalist’ characteristics and for separate modes of production has burdened peasant studies for a long time. This is especially true for its relationship with capitalism: “Ultimately peasantry is considered as a class whose significance will necessarily diminish with the further development of capitalism, as occurred in Europe a century ago.” (Owen 2005: 369-371). On the other hand the picture of the peasant as (eternal) victim, part of dependency thinking originated in the 1970s, gave birth to what Shanin has called a new essentialism, peasantism or peasantology (Shanin 1986: 6; Shanin 1990: 3).

2. Peasantry as a social process

Post-modern and globalization studies have often amplified the thesis of ‘the end of peasantries’, at the same time dismissing the concept of the peasant altogether. This deconstruction and ‘hybridization’ dispossesses history of its ability to shape contexts. The alternative, according to John Owen, is to build up ‘articulated’ social concepts: “The question is thus a matter of reintroducing a localized concept of peasantry whilst acknowledging the extent of changing capitalist relations in places of articulation.” (Owen 2005: 369, 373-379, citation 379). Owen’s peasant is a set of social relationships. The household is the basic economic unit and the gateway to the wider world. The peasant household is engaged in economic transactions for the main purpose of securing a level of subsistence, mostly within the framework of a market economy. That is why the concept of the peasant needs to be contextually redefined in order to be sensitive to local situations and not to obscure non-capitalist entities into essentialist or dualistic frameworks such as agency-structure, west-rest, self-other, capitalist-non-capitalist (Owen 2005: 382).

Starting from the observation that peasants formed the vast majority of the population in agrarian societies “thereby sustaining and reproducing both themselves and the dominant classes and institutions, which extracted rents and taxes from them”, in his manifold publications Henry Bernstein asks the question how we can perceive peasants as a social group within the contemporary deruralizing world (Bernstein 2006: 399). He questions views that peasantry constitutes a general (and generic) social ‘type’ or group, determined by a set of distinct qualities, from household subsistence over village solidarity to social/ecological harmony, and this opposed to other social groups such as rural proletarians and market-oriented farmers. This so-called ‘peasant essentialism’ is apparent in both historical (pre-capitalist remnants) as contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. This definition of a sui generis peasantry is supported by the ‘classic’ view of class formation in the countryside during transitions to capitalism, fixed on the emergence of formations of agrarian capital and wage labor. It is easily overlooked however that the ‘differentiation of the peasantry’ also involved the transition to petty commodity production, with its varying scales of entry and reproduction costs. ‘Peasants’, according to Bernstein, become petty

commodity producers “when they are unable to reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production, when those relations and processes become conditions of existence of peasant farming and are internalized in its organization and activity.” (Bernstein 2003: 4). This model of peasant differentiation supplements the binary Marx/Lenin model, not by suppressing the peasantries but incorporating them (gradually) in a polarizing capitalist world-economy as producers of export crops, of food staples for domestic markets, and of labor power via (free or indentured) migrant labor systems. This manifested a great variety of systems of land tenure and differential forms of access to markets of land, labor and credit (Bernstein 2003: 10).

Within this framework peasantry is an open concept, interacting within multiple forms and scales of conflict and interaction and leaving room for different levels of autonomy. Peasantization is an ongoing process, both of adaptation and of resistance. Even more, “like every social entity, peasantry exists in fact only as a process” (Shanin 1987: 6). Contemporary peasant studies since the 1990s have shown time and again how useless binary, static concepts are in order to understand the fate of the rural and agrarian population: “Peasantries are best understood as the historical outcome of an agrarian labour process which is constantly adjusting to surrounding conditions, be it fluctuations of climate, markets, state exactions, political regimes, as well as technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. These rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status only gradually over time.” (Bryceson, Kay, Mooij et al 2000: 2-3).

3. Peasantization and depeasantization within the capitalist world-system

Historically the capitalist world-system has expanded and transformed in coexistence with frontier-zones or zones of contact (Hall 2000). These zones, where non-, semi- and full-integrated actors and structures meet, are vital for the inherent expansive drive of historical capitalism. The processes of interaction that emanate from these contacts are challenged by pressures for incorporation from the modern world-system. These pressures contribute to the homogenization of the world-system by reducing its frontiers, but simultaneously lead to heterogenization because they are answered by the (re)formulation of (new) frontiers. Throughout history peasant societies living in rural zones represent geographically dispersed frontier-zones. Consequently, rural communities are not and have never been able to escape the pressures for incorporation since they came into contact with the modern world-system. They develop strategies for survival in accordance to the social power relations (state, market, class struggle, ethno-cultural identity) with which they interact. Over the long term, the scales on which these social power relations are expressed have not only been widening and multiplying, they have also become increasingly interdependent. This is translated in the interconnected processes of de- and re-peasantization.

For more than a century the debates about the ‘peasant question’ have been dominated by two groups of protagonists (Araghi 1995: 338-343). On the one hand the ‘disappearance thesis’ defends that the inevitable expansion of capitalism will lead to the extermination of the peasantry. Following Lenin and Kautsky, the former, more or less undifferentiated class of peasants is transformed in new, distinct groups: capital owners (capitalist farmers) and wage labourers. On the other hand, the advocates of the ‘permanence thesis’ argue that, according to Chayanov’s peasant mode of production,

peasant societies have a distinct development logic that supports the survival of the peasantry within capitalism. Araghi labels the first option as teleological and the second as essentialist, both suffering from an a-historical and often functionalistic presumptions. According to Araghi “depeasantization has been neither a unilinear process, nor has been it taken the historically particular form of differentiation in the countryside within each and every nation-state.” (Araghi 1995: 359).

Over time, the combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of this once so successful economic system. From this stand, the twenty-first century seems to become the era of ‘the end of peasantries’. In 2007, the United Nations declared that for the first time in human history more than half the world’s population was living in cities and towns (*State of the World Population 2007*). Less developed regions will hit the halfway point later, but more than likely before 2020. The concept of depeasantization, one of the major indices of the process of societal ‘modernization’, is mostly defined as a multi-layered process of the erosion of an agrarian way of life. This way of life combines subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labour and village community settlement (Bryceson 1999: 175). As Heather Johnson has stressed, the biggest problem with the concept of depeasantization is its (mostly inherent and often not explicated) links with urbanization, industrialization, development and marginalization. Measuring this process is difficult, not only because of the mentioned strategies of labour and income pooling within households, but even more so because seemingly concordant processes such as urbanization and migration can become part of rural income strategies. Depeasantization includes a diversification of survival coping mechanisms on behalf of the rural poor, such as petty commodity production, rural wage labour, seasonal migration, subcontracting to (multinational) corporations, self-employment, remittances, and income transitions. Rural-urban migration patterns are often part of rural household strategies (as in the form of two-way remittances: income sent to rural areas, food sent to the urban family members) (Johnson 2004: 56, 61). What is often regarded as ‘depeasantization’ is, in essence, part of the more diversified labour and income strategies of the peasantry. Due to an increased marginalization and desperation for a growing proportion of the world’s population, these survival strategies are more important than ever. In his recent works Jan Douwe van der Ploeg coined these revived multi-level strategies of survival, autonomy and resistance a ‘recreation of a peasant strategy’ (van der Ploeg 2010: 20-23). This century would even witness a new turning point, via a re-emergence of the peasantry. One of the signs is that, according to van der Ploeg, as a response to the agrarian crisis of the last decades in many regions farming is increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way.

Because of these complex transformations depeasantization (the erosion of an agrarian way of life) is supplemented with the concepts of deruralization (as a synonym of urbanization, or the decline of rural areas) and deagrarianization (Bryceson 1996). Deagrarianization refers to the process of income differentiation, resulting in the long term in a decline of agrarian-based activities and a shrinking self-sufficiency. Deagrarianisation (the decline on reliance on agriculture within the diversification of livelihood) does not necessarily imply depeasantisation (the erosion of the family basis of their livelihoods) (Ellis 2006: 387). Diversification has always been part of peasant survival strategies, the process of erosion is a sign of the accelerated emergence of highly vulnerable peasant populations in the last two decades. Depeasantisation can be seen as a specific form of deagrarianisation in which peasantries lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and shrink in size. Even

more, when the loss of (an exclusive) agrarian income is supplemented by other forms of income pooled by the rural household, we can speak of a process of peasantisation (Bryceson 1999). On a global scale, processes of deagrarianisation in the core zones often created new peasantries in the periphery. For example twentieth century colonialism engendered processes of peasantization that facilitated the colonial government's agricultural commodity export aims. Spurred by colonial taxation, African agrarian producers increasingly produced agricultural commodities in conjunction with their subsistence production, or alternatively exported male labor on the basis of circular migration (Bryceson 1999b: 2). Recent forces of deagrarianisation are triggered by the enforcement of neo-liberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. This often stimulated rural producers to reallocate land and labor to smaller residential 'garden' plots whose output is oriented to domestic production and gift-giving rather than commercial sale (Bryceson 1999b: 4-7).

4/ Old and new peasantries

In a retrospect on their 1977 pamphlet 'Theses on Peasantry', Johnson, Wisner and O'Keefe list what they see as the most important research questions on the peasantry (Johnson et al 2005: 951-952). These include peasant production and knowledge systems, peasant land holding (access to land, land rights, land use), peasant food production and food systems (food security, food sovereignty), rural migration and remittances, and peasant movements and peasant forms of resistance. This includes, in their words, a mental and ideological repeasantization, the resurrection of a peasant movement. How can this look like?

The early twenty-first century has put the peasant back on the global agenda, governmental and non-governmental institutions alike. In its recent reports the World Bank has revalued smallholder farming as 'a powerful path out of poverty' (*World Development Report 2008*), however still propagating the imperial road of 'commodification'. After five centuries of capitalism, two centuries of industrialization and three decades of neo-liberal globalization, self-provisioning family farming continues to be a major mode of livelihood in the twenty-first century world. A large part of world food production remains in the hands of small-scale sustainable farmers, outside the control of large agribusiness companies or supermarket chains. Millions of small farmers in the South still produce the majority of staple crops needed to feed the planet's rural and urban populations. Small increases in yields on these small farms that produce most of the world's staple crops will have far more impact on food availability at the local and regional levels, than the doubtful increases predicted for distant and corporate-controlled large monocultures (Altieri and Nicholls 2005). In this context, a strategy of 'peasantization' can be a powerful answer to real marginalisation. Massive declines in the reliance on agriculture (deagrarianization), erosion of the family basis of peasant livelihoods (depeasantization), and an exodus from the countryside (urbanization and growing slumps) are quickly redefining the place and the nature of peasantries. Vulnerability, the link between risk and the precariousness of people's livelihood, has always been part of their existence. A diversification of income and coping strategies (individual, in the household and in the village) has been the main answer. However, a continuing erosion of the family basis of livelihoods has created new forms of vulnerability. According to Frank Ellis, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being (Ellis 2006: 393). This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification such as taking up non-farm

activities and relying on non-farm income transfers. Rural household income becomes less based on farm activities and on the exploitation of assets. This erodes former household and village security mechanisms and affects their ability to overcome short-term economic stress, such as harvest shortages or variations in income or food prices from one year to the next or even within shorter time spans (Bengtsston 2004: 33-35, Vanhaute 2010). Three decades of economic liberalization and institutional restructuring, causing multiple and intensified involvement in markets -for commodities, credit, technology, land, and services of all kinds- have created growing and interconnected vulnerabilities and new risks. New forms of organized peasant reactions such as *Via Campesina* try to formulate an answer to the predominantly neoliberal mode of food production (Patel 2006: 84-85). Food sovereignty, control over one's own food production and food markets, is put forward as an alternative for food security, a concept agnostic about food production systems. A call for localizing food power implies support for domestic food production and promotion for the return to smallholder farming (Holt-Giménez 2008: 13-14). At the same time, peasant's rights are now defined as a set of 'transgressive rights', challenging the primacy of the nation-state and calling for international (international business) and even universal (human rights) spaces (Patel 2007; Edelman 2005). This makes clear how the present material and ideological struggles for 'peasant spaces' (Mc Michael 2008) have put 'the peasantry' in the centre of the systemic crisis of the 21st century.

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