Peasants, peasantries and (de)peasantization in the capitalist world-system

Eric Vanhoute

The survival and persistence of peasanties in a globalizing and ever more commodified world has been puzzling social scientists for a long time now. Time and again, the demise of the peasant was announced by capitalists, intellectuals, national, and development planners; "indeed, by virtually everyone but the peasants themselves" (Demurzzii 2007: 195). However, as Wallerstein reminds 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 labor in the capitalist world-economy today cannot be said to total even fifty percent" (Wallerstein 2003: 23). The very notion of peasants and peasanties confronts us with the flaws of traditional/mainstream economic development theory. Understanding old and new "agrarian questions" requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasanties within the long-term transformations in the capitalist world-system.

The mainstream image of the peasant and of peasanties is still deformed by a twofold myopia. First, the much praised English Road to capitalist agriculture, built on rapid depeasantization, has never been the standard road to development. The quasi-persistance transformation of peasanties and small-scale agriculture within the expanding modern world-economy was much more diverse. Secondly, the European Experience, the dissolution of peasant societies within industrial and post-industrial economies, is neither inevitable nor desirable for most of the non-Western world. Because it was 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 and exporting surplus labor to its old and new colonies. For most of the world, this is currently a very different story.

When we look beyond the old premises of westernized development, we see a different picture. We still see worlds of family- and village-based agricultural societies that combine diversified production chains and multiple strategies of risk minimization with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems. These include local markets, access to land and right of use of common goods such as water and natural resources (Albieri and Nichols 2005; Michael 2006; Vanhoute 2008). These worlds are under increasing stress. This may begin to understand the survival of the peasant as a social process within historical capitalism.
Peasants as a social category

Social categories shape and reshape our social knowledge. They are constructs, even redefined within changing social contexts. Social categories can also shape and reshape reality. When institutionalized, social categories become "boundless," they create boundaries and categorical differences. When these differences become durable, as Charles Tilly has argued, they create categorical inequality (Tilly 1998). Due to local, historical, and organizational contingencies, different sorts of categorical pairs refer to gender, class, and race occupy distinct positions in social life (Tilly 1998: 240). Strengthening the character leads to essentialisms that can create unities, often teleological and mostly biased explanatory stories. In social sciences, many of these categories become framed and institutionalized; a topic of interest academic discussions. This process of framing and eventual deconstruction is closely linked with the everyday struggle with social reality. Since all groups are socially created, they are socially created for some purpose. And the purpose to advance the rights (and privileges) of the group. (...) How local, regional, or transregional we wish to define the location of a group, it's function of the political distances we are creating and recreating constantly (Wallensteen 2007: 5-6). This also applies to the story of the peasant as a social category. The "essence" of the peasant is revealed 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 Learner Dictionary). The dualistic view of the rural versus non-rural worlds, mostly with a negative connotation, can also be found in the French equivalent paysan/paysanne. Dadaism toward the "louts and outlaws" has been part of the discourse of the wealthy, the powerful and the literate in Europe for a long time (Freidman 1999). Anette Demuzaris has often repeated that the Anglo-Saxon concept of peasant continues to keeps its narrow meaning, basically related to the European era of feudalism. The words paysan or campesino have in a broader meaning but they still often refer to a social group from the (far away) past (Demuzaris 2007, 2008).

In nineteenth and twentieth century modernization thinking, the peasant represented the left standing point on the axis of evolution, the traditional way of life and the opposition to industrialization. In this "parasitical" society, the economy was still dominated by agricultural subsistence activity; its 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 long developed and described the "anti-modern" model of a "familistic," family-based society, as 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. The success of modernity depended on "the degree to which the prevailing ideology of social relations was predicated on familial, or individualistic, principles" (Schofield 1989: 304). The peasant's ambivalent relationship 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; for example, the famous quote of Ferdinand 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—to order to obtain a few coins with which to pay his taxes or buy a plowshare, he is merely pressing his nose against the shop window of the marketplace" (Braudel 1977: 19). Market versus non-market, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, a long tradition of rural sociology is graphed upon these dichotomies.

The 1966 publication of the English translation of two texts by 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 (Thomson et al 1966). The two words, "Peasant farm organisation" and "On the theory of non-capitalist systems," written around 1925, compile Chayanov's main ideas. First, to explain the economic behavior of peasants, traditional concepts such as wages, rents, and profits do not apply. The absence of wage labor (and a labor 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 that is based on fundamentally non-capitalist 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). Intense debates about Chayanov's work deconstructed the former, ethno-geographic perceptions of peasant societies as undifferentiated, primitive, and static. In the 1970s and 1980s, a series of "local," "micro," and "village" studies attempted to understand the internal logic of survival within past and contemporary peasant societies. Nevertheless, a formal demarcation line between peasant-based non-capitalist and capital economies financially constituted the underlying macro-story.

Around the same time, the anthropologist Eric Wolf published his groundbreaking 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 analyse 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 actions of villagers to those forces" (Wolf 1966: 1). He defined peasants as "rural cultivators whose subsistence is transformed to a dominant group of rulers that use the surplus 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). Tom Scott argued that "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 inventors of their land and labor 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 that 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 markers" (Scott 1998: 197).

The wide and rich source of rural sociology Teodor Shanin is a quintessential 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 labor of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of the bohmen 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 familial (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).
Peasantry as a social process

Post-modern and globalization studies have amplified the thesis of “the end of peasantry” while diminishing the concept of the peasant altogether. This deconstruction and “hybridization” disguises history in its ability to shape contexts. The alternative, according to John Owen, is to construct “articulated” social concepts. “The question is thus a matter of reintroducing a localized concept of peasantry while acknowledging the extent of changing capitalist relations in places of articulation” (Owen 2005: 379). This peasantry is a set of social relationships. The household is the basic economic unit and the gateway to the wider world. It engages in economic transactions for the main purpose of securing a level of subsistence, within the framework of a broader 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 essentialized or dualistic frameworks such as agency-structure, west-east, self-other, capitalist-non-capitalist (Owen 2005: 382).

In his manifold publications, Henry Bernstein challenges the view of peasants as a separate social category within the contemporary deruralizing world. He denies that contemporary peasants constitute 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, as opposed to other social groups such as rural proletarians and market-oriented farmers (Bernstein 2010: 2-4). This so-called “peasant essentialism” is apparent in both historical (peasants as pre-capitalist remnants) and contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. The rejection of a contemporary sui generis peasantry is supported by the “classic” view of class formation in the countryside, following the emergence of agrarian capital and wage labor. However, this “differentiation of the peasantry” also involved the transition to petty commodity production, with its varying scales of 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 peasants as a social reality but by 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 created a large variety of systems of land tenure and differential forms of access to markets of land, labor, and credit (Bernstein 2003: 10, 2010: 101–12).

Within this framework, peasantry is an open concept that interacts within multiple forms and scales of action and conflict and leaves room for different levels of autonomy. (De-)peasantization is an ongoing process, both of adaptation and of resistance. Moreover, “like every social entity, peasants exist in fact only as a process” (Shanas 1987: 6). Contemporary peasant studies since the 1990s have shown time and again how useless binary, static concepts are for understanding the processes of modernization in agrarian societies. Peasants are best understood as the historical outcome of the interaction of social, agrarian, and state formations. Agricultural identities, state institutions, and political imperatives are as important as social networks in shaping peasants’ daily lives (Bryceson et al. 2000: 2–3).

Peasantization and depeasantization within the capitalist world-system

The capitalist world-system has historically expanded and transformed in coexistence with agrarian zones or zones of contact (Hall 2000). These zones, where non- and semi-fully-integrated exchange and structures meet, are vital to the inherent expansive drive of historical capital. The processes of interaction that emanate from these spaces are shaped by pressures for incorporation into the modern world-system. These pressures contribute to the homogenization of the world-system by reducing its frontiers, but they simultaneously lead to heterogenization because they are answered by the (re)formulation of new frontiers. Throughout history, peasant societies and rural zones represent geographically dispersed frontier-zones. Rural communities are not and have never been able to escape the pressures of incorporation since coming into contact with the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974: 400). In response, they have been developing strategies for survival and resistance, articulated toward expanding state power, expanding market relations, class struggle, and, in other cases, processes of incorporation into the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974: 400). In response, they have been developing strategies for survival and resistance, articulated toward expanding state power, expanding market relations, class struggle, and, in other cases, processes of incorporation into the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974: 400). In response, they have been developing strategies for survival and resistance, articulated toward expanding state power, expanding market relations, class struggle, and, in other cases, processes of incorporation into the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974: 400).
commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labor and village community settlement (Brycecon 1999a: 175). As Heather Johnson has stressed, the biggest problems with the concept of depastoralization is in (mostly inherent and often not explicited) links with urbanization, industrialization, development, and marginalization. Measuring the process is risky and difficult, not only because of the diffuse strategies of labor and income pooling within households, but also because seemingly opposite processes such as urbanization and migration can become part of rural income strategies. This also includes a diversification of rural coping mechanisms, such as petty commodity production, rural wage labor, 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 (Johnson 2004: 56, 63). What is often regarded as "depastoralization" is, in essence, part of more diversified labor and income strategies of the peasantry. Due to the marginalization of a growing part of the world's population, these mixed survival strategies become 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 "recreational of a peasant strategy" (van der Ploeg 2010: 20-25). This century would even witness a new turning point, via a re-emergence of the peasantry. One of the signs, according to van der Ploeg, is that in 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, depastoralization (the erosion of an agrarian way of life) is supplemented with the concepts of denationalization (as a synonym of urbanization, or the decline of rural area) and deagrarization (Brycecon 1996). Deagrarization refers to the process of income differentiation, resulting in the long-term decline of agrarian-based activities and a shrinking self-sufficiency. Deagrarization (a decline of reliance on agriculture within the diversification of livelihood) does not necessarily imply depastoralization (the erosion of the family basis of their livelihoods) (Ellis 2006: 387). Diversification has always been part of peasant survival strategies. The accelerated process of erosion is a sign of the growth of highly vulnerable peasant populations in the last two decades. Depastoralization can be seen as a specific form of deaggrarianization in which peasants lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and shrink in size. Conversely, depastoralization can be regarded as an answer to deagrarization, when the loss of (as exclusive) agrarian income is supplemented by other forms of income pooled by the rural household. On a global scale, processes of deagrarization in the core zones often created new paymasters in the periphery. For example, twentieth-century colonialism engendered processes of penetration 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. Recent forces of deagrarization are triggered by the enforcement of neoliberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. This often stimulated rural producers to reallocate land and labor to smaller and "pseudogarden" plots whose output is oriented to domestic production and gift-giving rather than commercial sale (Brycecon 1999b: 2-7).

Conclusion: New peasant strategies

In a retrospective of their 1977 pamphlet "Thesen on Peasantry," Johnson, Winer, and O'Keefe list what they see as the most important research questions regarding the twenty-first century peasantry (Johnsen et al 2005: 951-52). 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 forms of resistance. This implies, in their words, a neutral and ideological representation of the resurgence of a peasant movement. What might this look like?

The early twenty-first century has put peasant back on the global agenda of governmental and non-governmental institutions alike. In recent reports, the World Bank has revisited smallholder farming as "a powerful path out of poverty" (World Development Report 2008) while still farming as "a powerful path out of poverty." After five centuries of capitalism, two centuries of industrialization, and three decades of neo-liberal globalization, self-possessing family-owned companies have transformed the family of peasants into a major force in the twentieth century world. A large part of farming continues to be a major force in livelihoods of the twenty-first century world. A large part of farming continues to be a major force in the livelihoods of the twenty-first century world. A large part of farming continues to be a major force in the livelihoods of the twenty-first century world.

References

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