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Abstract:

The survival and persistence of peasantries 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 intellectuals, capitalists, reformers and development planners alike. That is why the very notion of peasants and peasantries confronts us with the flaws of traditional/mainstream economic development theories. Understanding old and new 'agrarian questions' requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term economic and social transformations. This essay explores the concept of peasantries in the past, present and future world. It interrogates peasants as a social category, peasantry as a social process and the processes of de- en re-peasantization as an outcome of an ever more intrusive world-system.

Main text:

Peasants are the workers of the land. They are organized in rural, agricultural households who have direct access to the land they work, either as tenants or as smallholders. They are organized in family bonds, village communities and social groups, peasantries. These meet a large portion of their subsistence needs (production, exchange, credit, protection) and pool different forms of income (from land, labor, and exchange). They are ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus either via rents, via market transfers, or through control of state power (taxation). Key terms are (a degree of) household and local autonomy, direct access to land and labor resources, flexible strategies of income-pooling, household-based village structures, and surplus extraction outside local control (Wolf 1966; Vanhaute 2012; Edelman 2013). Peasantries have been the single most important social group in world history since the Neolithic Revolution. All successful cultures and civilizations, excluding the nomadic empires, were based on extensive peasant economies, comprising 90% and more of the population. Today, still about 35% of the world population is economically dependent on agriculture production, of which more than 95% as smallholders in the Global South. Although in sharp decline in the last century - around 1950 still two third of the world population was engaged in agriculture - the absolute numbers have never been so high. Still about 2,5 billion people (as much as the total population in 1950) eke out a living from predominantly peasant-based agriculture. It is generally agreed on that smallholders still provide for the majority of the world food supply, adding up in some Asian and sub-Saharan regions to 70% and more (FAO).

The peasant is still with us. The survival and persistence of peasantries 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 intellectuals, capitalists, reformers and development planners alike. That is why the very notion of peasants and peasantries confronts us with the flaws of traditional/mainstream economic development theories. Understanding old and new 'agrarian questions' requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term economic and social transformations. The mainstream image of the fate of peasants and of peasantries is still based on the standard story of the much praised English Road to capitalist agriculture, and the concurrent disintegration of peasant societies. Recent history has shown that the English and European experience of the dissolution of peasant societies within the context of expanding industrial and welfare economies, is not and cannot be the general example for the rest of the world. When we look beyond the old premises of westernized development, we see a very different picture. It is a picture of vast family-based rural and agricultural economies, in which diversified production chains and multiple strategies of risk minimization are pooled with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems. In many cases these include effective, 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).

Peasants as a social category: who were the peasants?

For a long time intellectuals aimed to describe and understand the 'distinctness' of the peasantry, to explore the 'essence' of the peasant, the "countryman working on the land" and "member of the class of farm laborers and small farmers" (Oxford Advanced Learned Dictionary). This dualistic and biased image of the rural versus non-rural worlds can be traced back to the French equivalent concept of paysan/paysanne (meaning from the pays, the countryside). 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. The Anglo-Saxon concept of peasant continues to keep its narrow meaning, basically pointing at the eras of so-called feudalism, and referring to social groups from the (far away) past (Desmarais 2007). In nineteenth and twentieth century modernization thinking, the peasantry still represented the left (starting) point on the axis of evolution, the epitome of traditionalism and the opposite of modernity. In these 'stationary' peasant societies, the economy was still dominated by agricultural subsistence activities; 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 this '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 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; 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 shop window of the marketplace." (Braudel 1977: 19). Market versus non-market relations, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, a long tradition of rural sociology is grafted upon these dichotomies. Ultimately peasantry has been considered as a class whose significance would necessarily diminish with the further development of capitalism.

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 (Thorner, Kerblay & Smith 1966). The two works, '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-capitalistic principles. Chayanov's definition of a peasant focuses therefore on the family as a production/consumption unit. Intense debates about Chayanov's work delegitimized former, ethnographical perceptions of peasant societies as undifferentiated, primitive and static. In the 1970s and 1980s, a long series of local, micro and village studies attempted to understand the internal logics of survival within past and contemporary peasantries. Nevertheless, a formal demarcation line between peasant-based non-capitalist and capitalist economies frequently 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 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's work is appreciated as both a summary of, as well as a new departure from, the old debates. He moved the debate beyond the question whether peasants were naturally conservative, values-rational, safety-oriented investors of their land and labor or whether they tended to be risk-taking, market-oriented maximizers. They were both, balancing household needs with local and extra-local demands, politics and markets (Scott 1998).

The wide and rich oeuvre of rural sociologist Teodor Shanin is a quasi-permanent struggle with the difficult integration of internal and external schemes of analysis. His definition of peasants aims 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 local and regional 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). He criticizes both classical and Marxist political economies that explained capitalism outside peasant economies and societies based on the assumption “that capitalism equals de-peasantation” (Shanin 1980: 89). Peasants are not remnants of the past nor victims of the present. For too long ethnographical research and modernization theory has chained the peasant in static, a-historical narratives, searching for ‘other’, ‘backward’, ‘non-capitalist’ characteristics and for separate modes of production. On the other hand, the picture of the peasant as a (eternal) victim, part of dependency thinking that originated in the 1970s, gave birth to what Shanin has called a new essentialism, peasantism or peasantology.

Peasantry as a social process: where are the peasants?

For more than a century, debates about the ‘peasant question’ have been dominated by two groups of protagonists (Araghi 1995). 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 into new, distinct groups: capital owners (capitalist farmers) and wage laborers. On the other hand, 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. A central question behind this debate is if and how peasants who formed the vast majority of the population in former agrarian societies, thereby sustaining and reproducing both themselves and the dominant classes and institutions, still can be perceived as a social group within the contemporary globalizing and de-ruralizing world. Do peasantries still constitute a general (and generic) social 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? The search for ‘peasant essentialism’ has been apparent in both historical (peasants as pre-capitalist remnants) and contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. The definition of a sui generis peasantry is supported by the ‘classic’ view of class formation in the countryside during transitions to capitalism, causing the emergence of new social formations of agrarian capitalists and wage laborers. The process of ‘differentiation of the peasantry’ involved also a transition to petty commodity production. Peasants 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 (Bernstein 2006). This model of peasant differentiation supplements the binary Marx/Lenin model, stressing not only the suppression of peasantries but also their gradual incorporating 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. Post-modern and globalization studies have often amplified this thesis of ‘the end of peasantries’ while sometimes dismissing the concept of the peasant altogether.

Both the teleological (disappearance as social group) as the essentialist (survival of a ‘sui generis’ group) views have been suffering from a-historical and often functionalistic presumptions. This intellectual deadlock is countered by the search for a more articulated social conceptualization of peasant and peasantry, defining them as a set of social relationships. The peasant household is

both 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, pursuing this mostly within the framework of a wider market economy. That is why the concept of the peasant needs to be contextually redefined in order to be sensitive to local situations and global transformations, and not to obscure peasant societies into essentialist or dualistic capitalist - non-capitalist frameworks (Owen 2005). Historically the processes of peasant transformation have neither been unilinear nor have they been taken fixed forms of social differentiation over time and space. Within this framework, peasantry remains an open concept that interacts within multiple forms and scales of conflict and interaction and leaves room for different levels of autonomy. Peasantization and de-peasantization are ongoing processes of creation, decline, adaptation and resistance. That is why, like every social entity, peasantries exist only as a process. Throughout history peasantries have been the historical outcome of labour and survival processes that are constantly adjusted to surrounding conditions, such as fluctuations of markets, state control, technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. Rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status only gradually over time (Bryceson, Kay, Mooij et al 2000).

Peasantization and de-peasantization: will there be peasants?

The capitalist world-system has historically expanded and transformed in coexistence with frontier-zones or zones of contact (Hall 2000). These zones, where non-, semi- and fully-integrated actors and structures meet, are vital to 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 global capitalist system by reducing its frontiers, but they simultaneously lead to heterogenization because they are answered by forms of resistance and 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 of incorporation since coming into contact with globalizing capitalism. But they did and do respond in divergent ways. They develop strategies for survival in accordance with the social power relations that be (state control, market relations, class struggle, ethno-cultural identity). They transform, decline or regenerate. 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 massive increase of the interconnected processes of de- and re-peasantization (Vanhaute 2012).

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 point of view, 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 de-peasantization, one of the major indices of the process of societal 'modernization', is mostly defined as a multi-layered process of 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 labor and village community settlement. The biggest problem with the concept of de-peasantization 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 often hidden strategies of labor 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. De-peasantization includes a diversification of survival coping mechanisms on behalf of the rural poor, 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: income sent to rural areas, food sent to the urban family members). So, what is often regarded as de-peasantization is, in essence, part of more diversified labor and income strategies of the peasantry. Due to intensifying processes of economic and social uprooting, for an important portion of the world's population these survival strategies become more important than ever. Some authors have coined these revived multi-level strategies of survival, autonomy and resistance a recreation of peasant strategies (Van der Ploeg 2010). In this view this century could witness a re-emergence of the peasantry. As a reaction to the eminent agricultural and food crises farming is in some regions increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way.

Because of the complexity of these transformations, de-peasantization (the erosion of an agrarian way of life) is supplemented with the concepts of de-ruralization (as a synonym of urbanization, or the decline of rural areas) and de-agrarianization. De-agrarianization refers to the process of income differentiation, resulting in the long term decline of agrarian-based activities and a shrinking self-sufficiency. This process of a decline of reliance on agriculture within the diversification of livelihood does not necessarily imply de-peasantization (the erosion of the family basis of their livelihoods) (Ellis 2006). Diversification has always been part of peasant survival strategies; the process of erosion of agricultural income is a sign of the accelerated emergence of highly vulnerable peasant populations in the last two decades. De-peasantization can be seen as a specific form of de-agrarianization in which peasantries lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and shrink in size. Moreover, 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 (re)peasantization. On a global scale, processes of de-agrarianization 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. Recent forces of de-agrarianization 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.

The early twenty-first century has put peasants back on the global agenda of governmental and non-governmental institutions alike. In recent reports, the World Bank has revalued smallholder farming as 'a powerful path out of poverty' (World Development Report 2008) while 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 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 marginalization. This includes the reinforcement of peasant production and knowledge systems, peasant land holding systems (access to land, land rights, land use), peasant food provisioning systems (food sovereignty), peasant movements and peasant forms of resistance, and a mental and ideological re-peasantization.

Nowadays, massive declines in the reliance on agriculture (de-agrarianization), erosion of the family basis of peasant livelihoods (de-peasantization), and an exodus from the countryside (de-ruralization) 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 always been the main answer. However, a continuing erosion of the family basis of livelihoods has created new forms of vulnerability. In many cases vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a

structural state of being. 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 own 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. Three decades of economic liberalization and institutional restructuring, resulting in multiple and intensified involvement in markets - for commodities, credit, technology, land, and all kinds of services - have created growing and interconnected vulnerabilities and new risks. New forms of organized peasant reactions such as the global peasant movement *Via Campesina* try to formulate an answer to the predominantly neoliberal modes of food production. 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 of the return to smallholder farming. At the same time, peasant's rights are now defined as a set of 'transgressive rights', challenging the primacy of the nation-state and addressing international (international business) and even universal (human rights) actors and values (Patel 2007; Edelman 2005). The present material and ideological struggles for 'peasant spaces' has put the peasantry in the hearth of the debate about the future of mankind in the 21st century.

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