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***Into their land and labours. Towards a comparative and global analysis of trajectories of peasant transformation.***

The rise of historical capitalism has transformed and subjugated peasant societies for centuries. Different concepts such as de-ruralisation, de-agrarianisation and de-peasantisation have been utilised to define and understand this process, albeit in an unsatisfactory manner. As vectors of modernisation, they tend to ignore the diversified effects of capitalist expansion on rural societies. Peasantries are not an archetypical social formation; they are the historical outcome of agrarian labour processes that are constantly being adjusted to surrounding conditions. The gradual incorporation of peasant worlds into the globalizing economy has put increased pressure on their basis for existence by altering access to their essential means of production: land and labour. This has diversified household and communal work and the income strategies that have always been part of peasant survival strategies. In this paper, we argue that the position of rural zones in the modern world cannot be understood in one single manner.<sup>1</sup> Peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of adaptation and resistance. The expansion of the global division of labour triggered different paths of both de-peasantisation and re-peasantisation. How can we make sense of this in a comparative, interconnected and global perspective? We answer this question in four steps: (1) we question the concept of the peasantry as a social category and social process and we introduce the analytical notion of peasantries as a social frontier (sections 1 and 2); (2) we advocate a communal approach of the peasant question (section 3); (3) we formulate a framework to research and understand the divergent strategies that peasant populations have developed to secure access to their essential means of production: land and labour (section 4); and (4) with these elements we compile a research agenda that aims to describe

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on an ongoing collaborative research program that aims to understand the divergent paths of peasant transformation in modern world history. See for more information: <http://www.ccc.ugent.be/vanhaute>, and Eric Vanhaute, 'The End of Peasantries? Rethinking the Role of Peasantries and Peasant Families in a World-Historical View', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 31, 1, 2008, pp. 39-59; Eric Vanhaute, "'Peasants, peasantries and (de)peasantization in the capitalist world-system", in: C. Chase Dunn and S. Babones (eds), *Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 313-321; Eric Vanhaute, Hanne Cottyn, Wang Yang, 'Peasantries', in I. Wallerstein (ed.), *The World is Out of Joint. World-Historical Interpretations of Continuing Polarizations*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014, forthcoming.

This paper has benefited greatly from a large group of commentators during and after presentations at the universities of Ghent, Vienna, Peking, Harvard, Aalborg, Fudan, Pittsburgh, Humboldt, East China Normal, Innsbruck, Leuven, Leipzig, Lund, Leiden, Wageningen and the International Institute of Social History.

and understand the divergent trajectories of peasant transformation in history, related to different patterns of internal social organisation and different paths of external incorporation (section 5).

## 1. The peasantry as a social process

The peasant is still with us.<sup>2</sup> When we look beyond our premises of westernised development, we still see vast worlds of family-based and village-based agricultural societies that combine diversified production chains and multiple strategies of risk minimisation with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems.<sup>3</sup> In nineteenth and twentieth century modernisation thinking, the peasant -as a kind of archetypical rural producer- represented the starting point on the axis of evolution: the traditional community and the opposite of modernity. 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. In the 1960s and 1970s rural anthropologist and sociologist Eric Wolf and Theodor Shanin moved the debate beyond this a-historical and dichotomist picture.<sup>4</sup> The question is not whether peasants were naturally conservative, values-rational, safety-oriented investors in their land and labour or whether they tended to be risk-taking, market-oriented maximisers. They were and are both; they respond to different socio-political and economic pressures. They are "rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred 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

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<sup>2</sup> "The question how to define 'peasant' and 'peasantry' has a long, complicated and contentious history" (Marc Edelman, 'What is a peasant? What are peasantries? A briefing paper on issues of definition', *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) paper*, 2013, p. 2 [<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPeasants/Edelman.pdf>]). In general, we define peasants as members of rural, agricultural households who have direct access to the land they work (either as tenants or as smallholders). They are organised in family bonds and village communities that 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 (non-balanced) 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 (Eric Wolf's "fund of rent" that distinguishes the peasant from the "primitive cultivator"). We locate peasant farming on a continuum with industrial or entrepreneurial farming (cfr. Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries. Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization*, London: Earthscan, 2008, p. XIV).

<sup>3</sup> See amongst others Miguel Altieri and Clara Nicholls, *Agroecology and the search for a truly sustainable agriculture*, Berkeley: University of California, 2005; Philip McMichael, 'Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please..', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8, 2008, 2-3, pp. 205-228; Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg, 'The peasantries of the twenty-first century: the commoditisation debate revisited', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37, 1, 2010, pp. 1-30; Vanhaute, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966; Teodor Shanin, 'Measuring peasant capitalism', in E.J. Hobsbawm et al (eds), *Peasants in history. Essays in honour of Daniel Thorner*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 89-104; Idem, 'Introduction. Peasantry as a concept', in T. Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and peasant societies. Selected readings*, Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

for their specific goods and services in return.”<sup>5</sup> That is why peasants only exist within a class relationship, read: the external subordination to lords, government/state authorities, and regional or international markets which involves surplus extraction and social differentiation.

Like every social formation, peasantries are sets of social relationships. The households are basic economic units and the gateway to the wider world. They are engaged in economic transactions for the main purpose of securing a level of subsistence, within the framework of a broader market economy.<sup>6</sup> The gradual incorporation of peasantries into a polarising capitalist world-economy has turned them into producers of commodities, export crops, food staples for domestic markets, and manpower via free or indentured labour systems. This has created a large variety of land tenure systems, labour regimes, and differential forms of access to land, labour and credit markets.<sup>7</sup> That is why, contrary to the beliefs of Henry Bernstein, peasants do not cease to exist when they “become petty commodity producers (...) unable to reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production”.<sup>8</sup> Peasant production has been part and parcel of capitalist accumulation from the beginning. Within this framework, the peasantry is an open concept that interacts within multiple forms and scales of action and conflict; it leaves room for different levels of autonomy. “Like every social entity, peasantry exists in fact only as a process.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the combined processes of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces have considerably weakened their material basis over time. The concept of de-peasantisation has to be understood as a multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It is increasingly difficult to combine subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organisation based on family labour and village community settlement.<sup>10</sup> This has triggered a further diversification of rural coping mechanisms, such as petty commodity production, rural wage labour, seasonal migration, subcontracting to national and multinational corporations, self-employment, remittances, and income transfers. What is often regarded as ‘de-peasantisation’ is, in essence, part of more diversified and more precarious labour and income strategies developed by the peasantry. On a global scale, processes of de-agrarianisation in the core zones often created new peasantries in the periphery. For example, nineteenth century colonialism in India and twentieth century colonialism in Africa engendered processes of systemic peasantisation that facilitated the colonial government’s agricultural commodity export goals. Spurred by colonial taxation, African agrarian producers increasingly produced agricultural commodities in conjunction with their subsistence production, or alternatively exported male labour on the basis of circular migration. Recent forces of de-agrarianisation are triggered by the enforcement of neo-liberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. In many peripheries, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being. This is countered

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf, 1966, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> John R. Owen, ‘In defense of the ‘peasant’’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 35, 3, 2005, pp. 368-385.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Bernstein, ‘Farewells to the peasantry’, *Transformation*, 52, 2003, p. 10; Idem, *Class dynamics of agrarian change*, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2010, pp. 110-112.

<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Shanin, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Fahy Bryceson, *African rural labour, income diversification and livelihood approaches: A long-term development perspective*, Leiden: African Studies Center, 1999, p. 175.

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.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The peasantry as a social frontier

The historical process of agrarian change refers to agrarian-rural-agricultural worlds that have been absorbed within wider geographies and different sectors. That is why "agrarian change in the modern world centres on the analysis of capitalism and its development".<sup>12</sup> In capitalism, incorporation equals processes of commodification, "through which the elements of production and social reproduction are produced for, and obtained from, market exchange and subjected to its disciplines and compulsions."<sup>13</sup> These processes have never been absolute or complete. Capitalism's tendency towards generalised commodity production has created immense disparities on a global level; uneven or semi-commodification has always been at the heart of historical capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The densely populated and highly urbanised regions around the North Sea Basin initiated strongly commercialised agriculture, an interregional and intercontinental trade system and intensive industrial production starting in the twelfth century. This triggered transformations in rural societies, thereby generating strong regional differentiation. Capitalist agriculture zones, dominated by commercial farms and wage labour, developed in regions bordering the North Sea. These zones were bound by two types of peasant societies. The first combined small-scale family farming with an expanding proto-industry, thus creating export commodity production. More distant, but still integrated in a regional division of labour, we find more autarchic peasant zones with a significant labour surplus.<sup>15</sup> The first global food regime arose in the 1870s, and the expansion of grain and meat production in settler economies and the expansion of tropical export crops in colonial Asia and Africa coincided with massive de-agrarianisation and de-peasantisation and more diversified, capital-intensive farming in Europe.<sup>16</sup> The globalisation of farming and food consumption in the twentieth century also had differential impacts on societies in the North and South, shaped by new international divisions of labour and trade in agricultural commodities. The commodification and marginalisation of peasant subsistence in the South coincided with the expansion of export crops like coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, cotton and palm oil, the promotion of high value commodities like horticultural products and the expansion of large-scale production of soy, sugar and grains.<sup>17</sup> The working poor of the South were increasingly forced to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of

<sup>11</sup> Frank Ellis, 'Agrarian change and rising vulnerability in rural Sub-Saharan Africa', *New Political Economy*, 11, 3, 2006, p. 393.

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bernstein, 2010, p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*, London and New York: Verso, 1995, pp. 13-43.

<sup>15</sup> Bas Van Bavel, and Richard W. Hoyle (eds), *Rural economy and society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000. Social Relations: property and power*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010; Eric Vanhaute, Isabelle Devos and Thijs Lambrecht (eds), *Rural economy and society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000. Making a living: family, income and labour*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011; R.P. Brenner, 'The Low Countries and the transition to Capitalism', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1, 2, 2001, pp. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Harriet Friedmann, 'Feeding the Empire. The pathologies of globalized agriculture', in L. Panitch and C. Leys (eds), *The socialist register 2005*, London: Merlin Press.

<sup>17</sup> Bernstein, 2010, p. 87.

precarious small scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including marginal farming. Moreover, livelihoods were pursued across different spaces of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, in the early twenty-first century almost 50 percent of the world's population still lives in the countryside and agriculture is still the main basis for employment and income for 2.3 billion people worldwide (37 percent of world population).<sup>19</sup>

Peasantries fed former civilisations and empires; they fuelled the expansion of the capitalist world-economy. We consider them to be vital frontiers within the globalising world. What do we mean by that? Frontiers are constantly shifting processes of contact between different social spaces and social systems. They materialise in contact zones between social systems, they disappear when the interaction ends or when one system is fully incorporated into another system.<sup>20</sup> Capitalist incorporation and expansion was fuelled by the opening of the 'Great Frontier', a metaphor for an interconnected set of shifting frontiers, in the sixteenth century. Frontier expansion provided an astounding wealth of nature that reduced production costs and increased profitability for centuries to come. Jason Moore defines these frontiers not as fixed geographical places, but as socio-ecological relations "that unleash a new stream of nature's bounty to capital: cheap food, cheap energy, cheap raw materials, and cheap labour".<sup>21</sup> They generate shifting sets of 'localised' activities to secure access to labour and land for 'globalised' commodity production (primarily agricultural, forest and mining goods). Via processes of incorporation, they disclose new supplies of land and labour that can be mobilised in new production processes.<sup>22</sup> The sites where this happened become frontier zones. This process and these zones have been crucial to the expansion of the global capitalist system of production and consumption. Frontier expansion has often been associated with problems of social, economic and ecological sustainability. This results in the apparent need for them to be continually shifting towards new areas. We expect that the twenty-first century will witness the closure of this type of frontier expansion, blocking the central way that capital has dealt with the rising costs of production up to now.

Frontiers can be external and internal. Both incorporation and differentiation create frontiers, such as the delineations between old and new social groups and the extent to which they are included or excluded. Frontier zones do not vanish after incorporation; they

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<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, 2010, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> FAOSTAT Database [<http://faostat.fao.org>]

<sup>20</sup> As this perspective is to a large extent constructed within a world-systems framework, we coin it a "world-systems frontier analysis". As its *raison d'être*, a frontier perspective explores the implications of the unequal exchange that binds the world-system for groups who live at, on or even beyond the periphery. Moving beyond deterministic or dichotomist notions of how global and local processes interact, it seeks to grasp the unevenness of incorporation processes.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Moore, 'Cheap Food and Bad Money. Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 33, 2-3, 2010, p. 245. Compare with Edward B. Barbier, *Scarcity and frontiers. How economies have developed through natural resource exploitation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 7, who defines frontier expansion, or frontier-based development as "exploiting or converting new sources of relatively abundant resources for production purposes".

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hall, 'Incorporation into and merger of world-systems', in Salvatore J. Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn (eds), *Routledge handbook of world-systems analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 51. Frontiers are thus "concerned with the creation, transformation and elimination of boundary zones".

are permanently replicated by converging and dialectical processes of homogenisation (the reduction of frontiers) and heterogenisation (the creation of new frontiers).<sup>23</sup> New forms of colonisation and imperialism starting in the sixteenth century instigated a huge expansion and shift of peripheral frontier zones. This expansion connected large rural populations to the European world-economy and often gave them means for new forms of production, identity and resistance (for example via new forms of peasant agriculture and so-called 'informal economies'). Along the borders of social and economic systems, hybrid cultures originated; social groups and social zones were incorporated or excluded. Rather than lines, frontiers must be envisioned as historical and dynamic processes of both incorporation and differentiation that create and reorganise spatial settings (frontier zones).

The movement of frontiers and the creation and recreation of frontier zones, is inherent to the expansion of historical capitalism. Peasantries and rural zones have been primary frontiers and frontier zones since the European Late Middle Ages. Peasantries constitute a wide range of social groups of 'partially' incorporated people, Eric Wolf's 'people without history'. They appear to be inundated by the tidal wave of the modern world. This apparent vanishing of the peasantry hides mixed, complex and often opposing processes of restructuring, generating a multiplicity of frontier zones. The frontier perspective grasps the imbalances of incorporation processes, emphasising the role of the margins and friction zones. Due to the incomplete nature of incorporation, frontier zones are the prime locus of negotiation processes about socio-economic commodification and socio-cultural assimilation.<sup>24</sup> This insight has created a proliferation of frontier-related concepts, moving it from the edges to the centre of 'modernity'.<sup>25</sup> Walter Mignolo for example developed the concept of 'colonial difference' as a conflict of types of knowledge and structures of power.<sup>26</sup> These interpretations have revealed frontiers as the locus of both contestation (war, resistance, lawsuits, intolerance, plunder, extraction, sabotage, ecological degradation, segregation) and alliance (biological symbiosis, marriage, economic partnership, political bonds and treaties, celebration, conversion, gifts). Frontiers and frontier zones can be differentiated on the basis of intensity (open-closed, informal-formal),

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<sup>23</sup> Eric Vanhaute, *World History. An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 157-159. Delario Lindsey ('The embedded periphery. Slums, favelas, shantytowns and a new regime of spatial inequality in the modern world-system', in Salvatore J. Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn (eds), *Routledge handbook of world-systems analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 351) coins the term 'systemic disincorporation' to describe a particular form of spatial inequality and disconnection associated with slum areas in contemporary metropolitan cities.

<sup>24</sup> M.L. Galaty, 'World-Systems Analysis and Anthropology: A New Détente?', *Reviews in Anthropology*, 40, 1, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Examples are Beltrán's 'regions of refuge' (1991), the 'middle ground' conceptualised by Richard White (1991), Ferguson and Whitehead's 'tribal zone' (1992), the 'frontiers and frontier zones' of Hall (1997, 2000, 2001, 2009, 2012), Guy and Sheridan's 'contested ground' (1998), the 'hidden frontiers' of Cole and Wolf (1999), the 'spaces in between' and 'colonial difference' of Mignolo (2000), the 'contested peripheries' of Cline (2000), the 'diachronic frontiers' of Schon and Galaty (2007), 'negotiated peripherality' of Kardulias (2007) and Scott's plea for 'Zomia studies' (2009).

<sup>26</sup> W.D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. As the system expands, Mignolo explains, the local histories of subaltern groups become structured by the single logic of 'global designs', that is, to reinforce the coherence and expansive course of the modern world-system (Mignolo 2000, p. 43). This is closely related to the 'coloniality of power', defined as a power-binding medium to channel knowledge production that operates in a space structured by coloniality and modernity, which are each other's reverse (Mignolo 2000, pp. 16-17).

location (on the edge of a world-system or within the system) and the links and transfers that connect them to the system (bulk goods, luxury goods, political authority, military power, labour, information, etc.). Through their interactions with overarching systems (civilisations, world-systems) peasantries constitute a social frontier of 'incomplete' incorporation or, borrowing the concept of Kardulias, of 'negotiated peripherality', spaces of exploitation, negotiation and opportunities.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Communities and the peasant question

The 'peasant question' queries the role and fate of peasantries within the process of capitalist transition. It entails essentially political questions that "reflect the very structure of the society", although "it was a question posed *about* the peasantry, not necessarily *of* or *by* them."<sup>28</sup> In a non-Western and global context, this socio-economic peasant question (peasantry as a class) became complexly entangled with the socio-cultural indigenous question (indigeneness as a cultural identity).<sup>29</sup> The labels 'peasant' and 'indigenous' refer to a set of claims that may coincide or overlap with various other identities (gender, class, linguistic, national). However, peasant and indigenous identities have increasingly become overlapping and reinforcing categories of 'peripherality', an umbrella stigma of the poor and the marginalised in today's globalising world.

In turn, this has generated new forms of 'peripheral consciousness'.<sup>30</sup> The locality and the community are reinforced; sometimes they are reinvented as a basic framework for both peasant and indigenous identities. Battles related to the contested peasant and indigenous claims to land, territory and resources, which usually have a communal rather than an individual nature, are a central instigator. For peasantries, land has been and still is the main basis of negotiation and interaction with other sectors of society because its use has direct implications for their exchange relations (products derived from that land) and for their power relations (the regulation of access to the land).<sup>31</sup> The communal level becomes a space for self-determination, negotiation and resistance. This combination of autonomy and

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<sup>27</sup> Kardulias tested 'negotiated peripherality' in two settings, ancient Cyprus and contact-era North America. The concept refers to "the willingness and ability of individuals in peripheries to determine the conditions under which they will engage in trade, ceremonial exchange, intermarriage, adoption of outside religious and political ideologies, etc. with representatives of expanding states" (P.N. Kardulias, 'Negotiation and Incorporation on the Margins of World-Systems: Examples from Cyprus and North America', *Journal of World Systems Research*, 13, 1, 2007, p. 55).

<sup>28</sup> W. Roseberry, 'Beyond the Agrarian Question in Latin America', in: F. Cooper et al (eds), *Confronting Historical Paradigms. Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, 1993, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, pp. 321-323.

<sup>29</sup> Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, New York: Knopf, 2005, pp. 1-27; Amy Sturgis, 'The Myth of the Passive Indian. Was America before Columbus Just a "Continent of Patsies"?', in: *reason.com*, 2006 [<http://reason.com/archives/2006/04/01/the-myth-of-the-passive-indian>].

<sup>30</sup> E. Devés-Valdés, 'The World from Latin America and the Peripheries', in: D. Northrop (ed.), *A Companion to World History*, 2012, Chichester: Wiley, 2012, pp. 466 and 469-74

<sup>31</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Land, Space, and People: Constraints of the Capitalist World-Economy', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 18, 1, 2012, p. 6.

intermediation converts 'the communal' into a crucial gateway to different and independent 'local histories' and to interaction within larger and incorporative systems.<sup>32</sup>

Communities facilitate the organisation, procurement and defence of common goals, but this implies certain costs.<sup>33</sup> Hence, communal structures show complex patterns and internal conflicts that make community life "complex, conflictive, messy, and contradictory, rather like people's lives anywhere else in this world".<sup>34</sup> The persistence of community systems supports 'private' households to intervene in the 'public' sphere in the form of reciprocal mechanisms, authoritative bodies and collective actions. These regulatory structures determine and allocate rights among community members; "there are no commons without communities within which the modalities of access to common resources are negotiated, [...] there is no enclosure of commons without at the same time the destruction and fragmentation of communities. Common resources and empowered communities are two sides of the same coin."<sup>35</sup> The combination of safeguarding a minimum of autonomous control over vital resources and securing a minimum of involvement in broader socio-political structures accounts for the peasant communities' multifaceted, apparently contradictory, but above all alert attitude towards incorporation processes. On the one hand, the resistant stance adopted by peasants is based on an attempt to defend a particular method of regulating access to livelihood resources. On the other hand, these groups adopt a pragmatic stance and often adapt or even assimilate to new and incorporating entities. This is reflected in the development of market and trade relations as well as in legal-political struggles. Rather than attesting to the group's openness to or craving for capitalist incorporation, this claim to participation should be assessed in relation to the survival guarantees that peasants can obtain from their 'extractors', usually in exchange for taxation and surplus production. Resistance is seldom simply 'opposition'; it is diverse in motivation, strategy and representation. This points to peasant/indigenous communities' 'frontier position' from where they can tap into different (more, less, not-incorporated) spheres in order to promote alternatives. So-called peasant or indigenous resistance includes diverse response options sprouting from this 'subversive complicity'.<sup>36</sup> They range from overt to covert, material to cosmologic, institutionalised to symbolic, individual to collective strategies; peasant resistance should be addressed as a nuanced continuum.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> James V. Fenelon and Thomas D. Hall, *Indigenous Peoples and Globalization*, Boulder, Paradigm Publishers, 2009; W.D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> E. Mayer, *The Articulated Peasant: Household Economies in the Andes*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2002, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> A. Canessa, *Intimate Indigenities: Race, Sex, and History in the Small Spaces of Andean Life*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> M. De Angelis, "Obama Meets Lenin", *The Commoner*, 2009 [http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=80].

<sup>36</sup> R. Grosfoguel, 'World-System Analysis and Postcolonial Studies: A Call for a Dialogue from the "Coloniality of Power" Approach', in R. Krishnaswamy and J.C. Hawley (eds), *The Postcolonial and the Global*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 103; Eric Vanhaute, 'Globalizing local struggles-Localizing global struggles. Peasant movements from local to global platforms and back', forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> A key contribution to this nuance has been Scott's assessment of resistance in its covert or 'everyday' disguise. See amongst others James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985 and *The Art of Not Being Governed, An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.



#### 4. A research frame: peasant regimes of land and labour

Frontier expansion within the capitalist world-economy has been generating shifting sets of 'localised' activities in order to secure access to new supplies of land and labour for 'globalised' commodity production. The incorporation of new rural zones has redefined and recreated the spaces and boundaries of peasant survival systems. This has fuelled divergent trajectories of peasant transformation and has created new social and ecological frontier zones.<sup>38</sup> This process has three interlocking dimensions that constitute the trajectories of transformation of rural zones: (1) the constitution and reconstitution of peasant societies (household organisation, village systems, regional networks), (2) their relations within broader societal structures (trade and commerce networks, fiscal systems, power and property relations), and (3) the transformation of these societies and the effects on social relationships, survival and income positions. To understand the interaction between these three dimensions, we have to understand the interconnection between the social power relations within, between and above local communities, as well as the regulation and access to land and labour resources. This addresses questions like: How different were the trajectories of incorporation of rural zones in the capitalist world-system? How did this incorporation affect the spaces and edges of peasant survival systems? How did peasantries negotiate their changing position in power and property relations? How did peasantries evolve from external to internal frontiers, and how did this stimulate new trends of heterogenisation?

Land and labour regimes regulate relations of property and tenure between owners of the land, users of the land and governors of the land; between landlords, peasants and governments. Property relations are tightly intertwined with social power relations; this reflects the capacity of one social group to dominate other groups. These social relations of power include the relationship between landlords and tenants, between owners and occupiers, between farmers and labourers, between the owners and occupiers of the land and governments, and between rural and non-rural interests. In rural and agrarian societies property rights have been central to the emanation of social power relations.<sup>39</sup> Where peasants did not have full ownership of the land, there was a tendency for them to press for such rights. The outcome of these power relations, the social distribution of land, differed wildly over time and space. Why?

Minimal social conditions for farming include direct access to the means of production: land and labour, capital (tools and seeds) and knowledge. Historically, the principal social units through which the means of farming have been secured and farming has been conducted have been the rural household and the village household system. Strong, dynamic local communities generally supported collective resource control and promoted risk-avoiding strategies such as income pooling. They avoided increasing flows of surplus extraction, allowed for a more egalitarian division of land, promoted collective regulation of the harvest and grazing, and stimulated collective use of capital goods and

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<sup>38</sup> Eric Vanhaute, Hanne Cottyn, Yang Wang, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Bas Van Bavel and Richard Hoyle (eds), *Rural Economy and Society in North-western Europa, 500-2000. Social Relations: Property and Power*, Turnhout: Brepols; Daniel R. Curtis, *Pre-industrial societies and strategies for the exploitation of resources: a theoretical framework for understanding why some societies are resilient and some settlements are vulnerable to crisis*, PhD Thesis Utrecht University, 2012.

sustainable ecological management.<sup>40</sup> The expansion of the 'Great Frontier' required direct intervention in peasant institutions and practices of allocation and use of land and labour.<sup>41</sup> This frontier-based development of exploiting relatively abundant resources necessitated a permanent restructuring of agrarian land and labour regimes. This generated significant differences over space and time.

Firstly, the expansion of a capitalist world-system is rooted in *the transformation of land rights*. While the forms that this transformation took were complex and varied across time and space, four central features can be distinguished: (1) the transformation of a complex system of customary rights to land usage and to legal and written titles to land ownership; (2) the transformation of the concept of property from jurisdiction over ambiguously defined areas to concretely defined, and possibly enclosed, physical spaces; (3) the rationalisation of the use of such demarcated landed property as a form of capital; (4) the increasing privatisation of the earth's surface through dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous populations.<sup>42</sup> The intensification of commodified land rights since 1850 has been fuelled by colonial (a massive land grab transforming communal and peasant land rights), developmental (state-sponsored collectivisation schemes including expropriation and displacement), and neo-liberal globalisation projects (global enclosures, massive contraction of land rights and accelerated de-peasantisation on a world-scale).<sup>43</sup> A global land grab, unprecedented since colonial times, is currently underway as states and speculative investors acquire millions of hectares of land through the purchase of land in the global South.<sup>44</sup>

*Variations in labour regimes* -systems of recruiting, organising and reproducing labour- have been a second key feature within the expanding capitalist world-system. Most regimes combine subsistence with commodity production; fully proletarianised wage labour is still infrequent today.<sup>45</sup> Labour systems include 'free' (wage, unbound) labour, forced labour (by tribute, taxation and forced labour service) and semi-proletarian labour (wage labour plus subsistence production). Surplus extraction from labour implies at least a partial separation from the means of production, either through extra-economic coercion or direct economic coercion ('the dull compulsion of economic forces').<sup>46</sup> Van der Linden stresses the centrality of coercion in the massive group of 'subaltern workers'. Every person whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion belongs to this class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether he or she is a

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<sup>40</sup> Curtis, 2012, p. 58

<sup>41</sup> Barbier, 2011, p. 418; Bernstein, 2010, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> Based on F. Araghi, and M. Karides, 'Land Dispossession and Global Crisis: Introduction to the Special Section on Land Rights in the World -System', *Journal of World-Systems Research: Special Issue Land Rights in the World System*, 18, 1, 2012, pp. 1-5.

<sup>43</sup> Philip McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*, Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press, 2012; F. Araghi, 'Accumulation by Displacement: Global Enclosures, Food Crisis, and The Ecological Contradictions Of Capitalism', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 33, 1, 2010, pp. 113-146.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Scoones, Ruth Hall, Saturnino M. Borrás Jr, Ben White, Wendy Wolford, 'The politics of evidence: methodologies for understanding the global land rush', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, "Forum on Global Land Grabbing", special issue *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40, 3, 2013, pp. 469-483.

<sup>45</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Class conflict in the capitalist world-economy', in I. Wallerstein, *The capitalist world-economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 283-293; Marcel Van de Linden, *Workers of the world. Essays toward a global labor history*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008, pp. 291-292.

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, 2010, pp. 52-55.

free labourer or owns/controls part of the means of production.<sup>47</sup> The degree of autonomy or coercion is determined by two sets of relations: (1) the worker and his or her labour power, means of production, and labour product, (2) the worker connected to other household members, to employers, and to the other workers.<sup>48</sup> Within the variety of labour regimes that exist, boundaries are flexible and sometimes vague. Moreover, individual relations are embedded in household-based and group-based networks. 'The partiality of wage labour' is especially clear from a household perspective since a large majority of households have never been solely dependent on wage labour income.<sup>49</sup> Non-wage labour has been an essential part of capitalist reproduction; it produces 'cheap labour', creates part of the surplus, and it absorbs part of the costs (of care and reproduction). This process of incorporation has created dynamic frontier zones where new people have been absorbed in the capitalist system while developing strategies of adaptation, differentiation and resistance. Sometimes peasant agency has created relative prosperity; for example when they were able to mobilise land and labour for export commodity production that could be integrated into subsistence farming.<sup>50</sup>

The proposed frontier perspective is necessary in our ambition to track and analyse the movements and interconnections of these peasant regimes of land and labour; how they have shaped historical and regional trajectories of incorporation, how they have hampered these trajectories and have inserted new dynamics. In the peasant question, land and labour rights are the prime subject of expropriation and negotiation. Regulations pertaining to land use have been a primary tool for opening access to labour and commodity production, albeit in very different ways.<sup>51</sup> The most fundamental challenge to capitalist expansion has been communal ownership of resources because it denies the overarching dominance of private property rights.<sup>52</sup> The shared land question is a prime conflict zone for the simultaneous adoption of strategies of adaptation/assimilation and strategies of resistance. Grafted on the land question are negotiations pertaining to access to labour, market and trade relations and legal-political integration. Claims to participation do not back an aim for fully fledged

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<sup>47</sup> Van der Linden, 2008, pp. 33-35.

<sup>48</sup> Van der Linden, 2008, pp. 34-35.

<sup>49</sup> Wilma A. Dunaway, 'The centrality of the Household to the modern world-system', in Salvatore J. Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn (eds), *Routledge handbook of world-systems analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 453-459; J. Smith and I. Wallerstein (eds), *Creating and transforming households. The constraints of the world-economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Bernstein, 2010, p. 52; Thomas Hall, 'Incorporation into and merger of world-systems', in S.J. Babones and C. Chase-Dunn (eds), *Routledge handbook of world-systems analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 51; Eric Vanhaute, 2012, pp. 317-318.

<sup>51</sup> The struggle for land rights and land reforms has been central in large parts of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The struggle included confiscation, collectivization, redistribution and collective peasant action. In some regions, the prime crowbar of incorporation was the imposition of collective labor regimes, as illustrated in a case study on labor relations in coffee plantations in the Kivu region (Sven Van Melkebeke, 'Dualisme ou dynamisme? Une analyse de l'économie rurale congolaise durant l'Entre-deux-guerres', *Journal of Belgian History*, 42, 2/3, 2013, pp. 152-177). The opening of the 'Tropical Frontier' in the 1870s necessitated the incorporation of new colonial peasantries as producers of export crops, of food staples and of labor power. In most sub-Saharan regions peasants were not dispossessed but 'encouraged' (through taxation and forced crops) to enter the capitalist economy as producers of agricultural commodities and/or labor force.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas D. Hall and James V. Fenelon, 'Indigenous Movements and Globalization: What Is Different? What Is the Same?', in: *Globalizations* 5, 1, 2008, pp. 6-7.

incorporation. On the contrary, they are often part of the strategy of safeguarding some autonomous control over vital resources and securing some involvement in broader structures.

## 5. A research agenda: trajectories of peasant transformation

Ever since the early agricultural civilisations, peasants have been the major social force in world history. Not only did they feed the world, they supported states, kingdoms and empires, they overthrew existing powers and changed the course of history, and they fuelled economic and social expansion. For thousands of years and up to very recently, a large majority of humanity worked the land, raised livestock and supported the non-rural classes.<sup>53</sup> Today more than two billion men and women make a living by producing food; they remain the single largest social group in our modern world. Over time, peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of adaptation and resistance. The expansion of agrarian civilisations and the subsequent globalising capitalist system has been fuelled by the incorporation of new social and ecological zones and by intensifying peasant production. Peasantries have been recreated through their position of subordination to lords, government and state authorities, and regional and international markets. They have been vital social frontiers, supplying 'cheap' land, labour and commodities for the world market, and absorbing increasing social costs.

Peasant change in a world-historical perspective has to be understood from a triple and interlocking perspective. Firstly, the peasant is a central actor in world history. Household and villages have been the basic economic units and gateways to the wider world. They engage in economic transactions for the purpose of securing a level of subsistence in relation to broader market economies. That is why the peasantry, as a contextually redefined concept and process, cannot be understood in essentialist or dualistic frameworks such as agency-structure, west-rest, self-other, past-present, traditional-modern or capitalist-non-capitalist. Secondly, rural communities organise themselves in response to the pressures of larger societal entities. They develop strategies for survival and resistance in response to the expanding impact of state powers, market relations, class struggles and ethno-cultural identity conflicts. Over time, the scales upon 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-peasantisation and re-peasantisation. Thirdly, the combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of the peasant survival system. In this context, the concept of de-peasantisation has to be 'historicised' as a multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It reflects the increased difficulty of combining subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organisation based on family labour and village community settlement. What is frequently regarded as 'de-peasantisation' is often the expression of more diversified labour and income strategies developed by the peasantry. Due to the marginalisation of a growing portion of the world's population, these mixed survival strategies are more important than ever. This century could even witness a new turning point, via a re-emergence of peasant-like survival systems. One of the signs that points towards this is the

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<sup>53</sup> Mark B. Tauger, *Agriculture in World History*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

fact that farming is increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way in many regions in response to the agrarian crisis of the last decades.<sup>54</sup>

Processes of incorporation and control, and of peasant reaction and resistance differ greatly over space and time. The strategy for researching this diverse, long-term and often interconnected process has to combine three interrelated research routes: (1) integrated research: incorporation, alienation, interaction, negotiation and resistance affect all aspects of peasant life, such as family, land, labour, capital, knowledge, production and reproduction; (2) comparative research: a reciprocal comparative framework looks for differences and similarities in trajectories of peasant change; (3) systemic research: processes of change are part of systemic transformations on a regional and later on a global scale. This research model clarifies the differentiation between trajectories of peasant transformation through two dominant story lines: first, the interconnection between peasant frontiers, the zones of action and negotiation (about land, labour, knowledge etc) and second, the interconnection between scales of action and negotiation (from household and village to transregional and transnational levels).

Processes of incorporation or frontier making have been centred on the control and appropriation of access to land and labour. That is why this comparative, interconnected and systemic research frame focuses on the dynamics between social relations of power and social relations of property; it also focuses on the control, access to and alienation from land and labour. Land and labour regimes are part and parcel of the constitution of peasant societies. They organise the external relations of these societies, their social relationships, and their survival and income positions. These regimes reflect the communal base of the peasant survival systems. Case-research starts with a collection of regional/village studies that clarify the constitution or reconstitution of peasant societies around household organisation, village systems, regional and interregional networks. It questions the strategies that peasant populations have developed in order to secure access to land and labour. In general, peasant strategies related to work and income are geared towards the self-organisation of systems of land-holding and labour organisation. What systems existed and how were they affected by the intensifying trend of incorporation and commodification? Which differences can we discern over time and between regions and what is the impact of the expansion of new forms of agrarian civilisations on capitalist production?

Within our collaborative project we investigate four cases via a comparative research design. We look for similar or divergent processes of peasant transformation, both in space (zoning within the world-economy) and over time (phases of incorporation). The four cases are: Northwestern Europe (North Sea Basin), Middle Africa (Great Lakes Region), Latin America (Central Andean Highlands) and the East Coast of China (Yangzi River Delta). These four cases reflect the impact of divergent historical roads of peasant incorporation: (a) core-making processes by decomposition (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; old core regions); (b) core-making processes by settlement (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; new core regions, settler economies); (c) periphery-making processes by alienation (creating a system of core-oriented plantation agriculture); (d) periphery-making processes by adaptation (creating a system of core-oriented peasant agriculture); (e) periphery-making processes by inheritance (incorporating 'independent' peasant

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<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau and Justin Myers, 'Repeasantization', *The Interdisciplinary Journal of The New School for Social Research*, Fall 2009 [<http://canononline.org/archives/fall-2009/repeasantization>].

agriculture; e.g. China).<sup>55</sup> We aim to understand why an expansion of the global division of labour triggered different paths of both de-peasantisation and re-peasantisation. For example, in the North Sea region (core-making), the expansion of zones of capitalist agriculture initiated strong processes of regional and social differentiation. Core processes of incorporation were eventually able to absorb the impact of uneven economic and social growth. Peasant zones differentiated into a small fraction of commercial farmers and a large, non-agricultural labour force. The violent incorporation of people from the Andes and the Congo (periphery-making by alienation and/or adaptation) created new intra-regional and inter-regional relationships. Peripheral incorporation processes brutally redirected these economies towards the needs of the metropolis. Although this process was not unilinear nor equal, it gradually affected the capacity of peasant livelihood diversification. At the same time, it created new frontiers and opportunities of interaction and survival. In the highly commercialised Yangzi River Delta (periphery-making by inheritance), the trend of growing differentiation was slowed by the redistributive state system and the persistence of kinship and clan networks. However, the 'protective' policies of the Chinese empires and the twentieth century Chinese state could not prevent new forms of social tension nor the ultimate breakdown of peasant production and survival systems.

The 'long twentieth century' corporate food regime expanded through successive waves of imperialist and neo-liberal intensification, globalizing the North Sea geo-model of a core of capital intensive market production with peasant-based export cum survival zones at the edges. This restructuring and intensification of core-periphery relations created new divergences in the rural economy and in peasant societies. The disappearance of peasantries in Europe, the forced neutralisation of rural societies in China, and the struggle to formulate new peasant responses to peripheral positions in Africa and Latin America are all part of the changing global geo-system in the early twenty-first century. This has greatly strengthened global inequality. Contrary to the urbanised and semi-urbanised labour forces in the North, the rural workers of the global South have to pursue their reproduction increasingly through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious, small-scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including marginal farming. Peasant livelihood strategies related to land and labour remain a central part of twenty-first century global capitalism, both as means of survival and as hotbeds for resistance.

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<sup>55</sup> The first four trajectories reflect the impact of direct incorporation/colonisation, the last one of indirect incorporation. Mirroring this schedule, Peter Taylor argues that within the expansion of a capitalist world-economy, and depending on time and place, processes of urbanization can be core-making or periphery-making (Peter Taylor, "Cities", in: I. Wallerstein (red), *The World is Out of Joint. World-Historical Interpretations of Continuing Polarizations*, Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014, forthcoming).