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9.3

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

Eric Vanhaute

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 capitalists, intellectuals, national, and development planners; "indeed, by virtually everyone but the peasants themselves" (Desmarais 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 peasantries 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 peasantries within the long-term transformations in the capitalist world-system.

The mainstream image of the peasant and of peasantries is still deformed by a twofold myopia. First, the much praised English Road to capitalist agriculture, built on rapid depeasantization, has never been the standard road to development. The quasi permanent transformation of peasantries 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 rights of use of common goods such as water and natural resources (Altieri and Nicholls 2005; McMichael 2006; Vanhaute 2008). These worlds are under increasing stress. This essay tries to understand the survival of the peasantry as a social process within historical capitalism.

Peasants as a social category

Social categories shape and reshape our social knowledge. They are constructs, ever redefined within changing social contexts. Social categories can also shape and reshape reality. When institutionalized, social categories become "bounded," they create boundaries and categorical differences. 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 referring to gender, class, and race occupy distinct positions in social life (Tilly 1998: 240). Stressing the exclusive character leads to essentialism that can create unilinear, often teleological and mostly biased explanatory stories. In social sciences, many of these categories became framed and institutionalized; a topic of intense academic discussions. 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 is to advance the rights (and privileges) of the group. (...) How local, regional, or transregional we wish to define the location of a group ... is function of the political alliances we are creating and recreating constantly" (Wallerstein 2007: 5-6). This 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 Learned 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*. Disdain toward the "louts and oafs" has been part of the discourse of the wealthy, the powerful and the literate in Europe for a long time (Freedman 1999). Anette Desmarais has often repeated that the Anglo-Saxon concept of peasant continues to keep its narrow meaning, basically related to the European era of feudalism. The words *paysan* or *campesino* have *in se* a broader meaning but they still often refer to a social group from the (far away) past (Desmarais 2007, 2008).

In nineteenth and twentieth century modernization thinking, the peasant represented the left (starting) point on the axis of evolution, the traditional community and the opposite of modernity. In this "stationary" 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 familistic, 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; 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, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, a long tradition of rural sociology is grafted 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 (Thorne et al

1966). The two works, "Peasant farm organization" 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, or the "economic unit of a peasant family that does not employ paid workers" (Chayanov 1966: 1). Intense debates about Chayanov's work delegitimized former, ethnographical 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 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 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 investors 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—and that they engaged in a special 'peasant rationality' only in so far as this appeared in terms of agricultural and village contingencies that could vary greatly in proportion to the manner and complexity of their internal and external articulations with both local and wider markets" (Scott 1998: 197).

The wide and rich oeuvre of rural sociologist Teodor Shanin is a quasi permanent struggle with the difficult integration of internal and external analyses. His definition of peasants tries to reconcile the insights of Chayanov and Wolf: "Peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment, and the labour of their family, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of the holders of political and economic power" (Shanin 1990: 5; first published in 1971). Central concepts are the farm (the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood combining subsistence and commodity production), the family (internal social organization based on the family as the primary unit of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare, and risk-spreading), and class (external subordination to state authorities and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and class differentiation). What is largely missing is the community, the village society. He justifies his integrated view by arguing that "measuring peasant capitalism lies at the heart of the major concerns of contemporary social science. It has to do with capitalism as a process; it relates the understanding of the origins of our time to the characterization of the essential tenets of the global system we live in" (Shanin 1980: 89).

He criticized both classical and Marxist political economies that explained capitalism "outside peasant economies and societies" with the assumption "that capitalism equals de-peasantization" (Shanin 1980: 89). Peasants are neither remnants of the past nor victims of the present. Ethnographical research and modernization theory chained the peasant in static, a-historical narratives. The search for "other," "backward," "non-capitalist" characteristics and for separate modes of production has burdened peasant studies for a long time. This is especially true of their relationship with capitalism: "Ultimately peasantry is considered as a class whose significance will necessarily diminish with the further development of capitalism, as occurred in Europe a century ago" (Owen 2005: 369–71). 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 (Shanin 1986: 6, 1990: 3).

Peasantry as a social process

Post-modern and globalization studies have amplified the thesis of "the end of peasantries" while dismissing the concept of the peasant altogether. This deconstruction and "hybridization" dispossesses history of its ability to shape contexts. The alternative, according to John Owen, is to construct "articulated" social concepts: "The question is thus a matter of reintroducing a localized concept of peasantry whilst acknowledging the extent of changing capitalist relations in places of articulation" (Owen 2005: 379). This peasant is a set of social relationships. The household is the basic economic unit and the gateway to the wider world. It is engaged 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 essentialist or dualistic frameworks such as agency-structure, west-rest, 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 peasantries 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 peasantries 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, peasantry exists in fact only as a process" (Shanin 1987: 6). Contemporary peasant studies since the 1990s have shown time and again how useless binary, static concepts are for understanding the fate of the rural and agrarian populations: "Peasantries are best understood as the historical outcome of an agrarian labour process which is constantly adjusting to surrounding conditions, be it fluctuations of climate, markets, state exactions, political regimes, as well as technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. These rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status only gradually over time" (Byreson 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 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 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, ethno-cultural identity. Over the long-term, the scales on which these social power relations are expressed have not only been widening and multiplying, they have also become increasingly interdependent. This is translated in the interconnected processes of de- and re-peasantization.

For more than a century, debates about the "peasant question" have been dominated by two groups of protagonists (Araghi 1995: 338–43). On the one hand, the "disappearance thesis" defends that the 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. Araghi labels the first option as teleological and the second as essentialist, both suffering from a-historical and often functionalist presumptions. According to Araghi, "depeasantization has been neither a unilinear process, nor has it taken the historically particular form of differentiation in the countryside within each and every nation-state" (Araghi 1995: 359).

Over time, the combined process of overburdening, restricting, and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of this once so dominant 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 (United Nations 2007). Less developed regions will hit the halfway point later, but more than likely before 2020. However urbanization, as one of the major indices of the process of "modernization," is a very narrow and often misinterpreted index. The concept of depeasantization has to be understood as a multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life, the increasing difficulty to combine subsistence and

commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labor and village community settlement (Bryceson 1999a: 175). As Heather Johnson has stressed, the biggest problem with the concept of depeasantization is its (mostly inherent and often not explicated) links with urbanization, industrialization, development, and marginalization. Measuring this process is 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, 61). What is often regarded as "depeasantization" 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 "recreation of a peasant strategy" (van der Ploeg 2010: 20–23). This century would even witness a new turning point, via a re-emergence of the peasantry. One of the signs, 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, depeasantization (the erosion of an agrarian way of life) is supplemented with the concepts of deruralization (as a synonym of urbanization, or the decline of rural areas) and deagrarianization (Bryceson 1996). Deagrarianization refers to the process of income differentiation, resulting in the long-term decline of agrarian-based activities and a shrinking self-sufficiency. Deagrarianization (a decline of reliance on agriculture within the diversification of livelihood) does not necessarily imply depeasantization (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. Depeasantization can be seen as a specific form of deagrarianization in which peasantries lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and shrink in size. Conversely, peasantization can be regarded as an answer to deagrarianization, when the loss of (an exclusive) agrarian income is supplemented by other forms of income pooled by the rural household. On a global scale, processes of deagrarianization 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 deagrarianization are triggered by the enforcement of neoliberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. This often stimulated rural producers to reallocate land and labor to smaller residential "garden" plots whose output is oriented to domestic production and gift-giving rather than commercial sale (Bryceson 1999b: 2–7).

Conclusion: New peasant strategies

In a retrospective of their 1977 pamphlet "Theses on Peasantry," Johnson, Wisner, and O'Keefe list what they see as the most important research questions regarding the twenty-first century peasantry (Johnson 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 mental and ideological repesantization, the resurrection of a peasant movement. What might this look like?

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 uncertain increases predicted for large corporate-controlled monocultures (Altieri and Nicholls 2005). In this context, a strategy of "peasantization" can be a powerful answer to real marginalization. Massive declines in the reliance on agriculture (deagrarianization), the erosion of the family basis of peasant livelihoods (depeasantization), and an exodus from the countryside (deruralization and "slumpization") are quickly redefining the place and the nature of the remaining peasantries.

Vulnerability, the link between risk and the precariousness of people's livelihood, has always been part of the peasant's 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 and more massive forms of vulnerability. According to Frank Ellis, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being (Ellis 2006: 393). This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification such as taking up non-farm activities and relying on non-farm income transfers. Rural household income becomes less based on farm activities and on the exploitation of 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 (Bengstson 2004: 33–35; Vanhaute 2011). 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 *Via Campesina*, try to formulate an answer to the predominantly neoliberal mode of food production (Patel 2006: 84–85). Food sovereignty, control over one's own food production and food markets, is put forward as an alternative for food security, a concept agnostic about food production systems. A call for localizing food power implies support for domestic food production and promotion of the return to smallholder farming (Holt-Giménez 2008: 13–14). At the same time, peasant's rights are now defined as a set of "transgressive rights," challenging the primacy of the nation-state and calling for international (international business) and even universal (human rights) spaces (Edelman 2005; Patel 2007). This clarifies how the present material and ideological struggles for "peasant spaces" (McMichael 2008) put the peasantry in the hearth of the twenty-first century's systemic crisis.

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