

‘THE PEASANTRY’ IN GLOBAL CAPITALISM: WHO, WHERE AND WHY?

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THE END OF AN ANACHRONISM?

In his *Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm declared that ‘*For 80 percent of humanity, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s ...*’. He was referring to peasants: ‘*the most dramatic change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry*’ (‘which had formed the majority of the human race throughout recorded history’).¹

Hobsbawm locates the disappearance of this truly world-historical anachronism in the ‘revolution of global society’ or ‘global transformation’ from the 1950s that extended industrial capitalism beyond its historic heartlands of Western and Central Europe and North America. This movement was registered in the ‘spectacular figures’ of the decline of the agricultural populations of Southern Europe, Eastern and South-eastern Europe (‘ancient strongholds of peasant agriculture’), Latin America, ‘western Islam’ (North Africa and Western Asia), and the populous islands of South-east and East Asia. ‘Only three regions of the globe remained essentially dominated by their villages and fields: sub-Saharan Africa, South and continental South-east Asia, and China’—although ‘admittedly’ these regions of ‘peasant dominance’ comprised half the world’s population in the 1990s. The ‘death of the peasantry’ is thus somewhat exaggerated, even according to Hobsbawm’s idiosyncratic demographic accounting, and ‘even’ though these regions ‘were crumbling at the edges under the pressures of economic development’ by the 1990s. What is clear is Hobsbawm’s belief that the demise of the peasantry is long overdue, noting that in his student days in the 1930s ‘the refusal of the peasantry to fade away was

still currently used as an argument against Karl Marx's prediction that it would'.²

Did Marx predict this? And if so, what did he mean by 'the peasantry'? Questions of what and who 'peasants' are, where they are, and indeed *why* they are, in the world of global capitalism in the early twenty-first century, remain as difficult, elusive and contentious as they have been throughout the history of industrial capitalism, perhaps even more so. And not least because notions of 'the peasantry' are so encrusted with ideas, images and prejudices, ideologically both negative and positive, that attach to our core ideas of modernity. There is little doubt that for Marx (and successive generations of 'classic' Marxists, and Hobsbawm today) 'peasants' have indeed been emblematic of 'the world of the past', specifically as represented by the feudal (and 'Asiatic') agrarian formations of Europe and Asia and their classes of essentially parasitic (aristocratic and/or bureaucratic) landed property and of peasant labour exploited through rent and/or tax.

For 'classic' Marxism (i.e., that of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe) both pre-capitalist landed property *and* peasantries confronted, and inflected, transitions to capitalism (and democracy) with material, social and cultural 'backwardness' and political reaction. Landed property is likely to be autocratic as well as parasitic, while 'family' or 'patriarchal' farming denies the advantages of economies of scale, development of the productive forces, and the technical division of labour (formation of the collective worker) in production on the land. Material and social backwardness generates reactionary culture and politics. Localism and stagnation in the countryside—a hermetic cultural space of custom, superstition and 'rural idiocy' (stuck in 'the Middle Ages?')—contrasts with the expansive, indeed explosive, possibilities of bourgeois civilization as definitive of modernity: large-scale industry *and* urbanism and their culture of science and universality. The tenacious defence of small-scale property and its inheritance, if originally directed against feudal depredation, now contested the project of social ownership and production vested in the proletariat. By a profound irony of history, when classes of pre-capitalist landed property are swept away by bourgeois revolution (or national liberation) which confers or confirms, rather than dispossesses, peasant property, the latter becomes the principal, and problematic, manifestation of the past in the present.³

Such constructions of modernity thus view 'peasants' in the contemporary world as the great (if dwindling) residual of earlier historical epochs and modes of production. What alternative views and approaches are there? One alternative shares the position (albeit often implicitly) that peasant production is emblematic of 'backwardness' without, however, seeing it as anachronistic, as it performs the 'functions' for capital of cheapening the prices of agricultural commodities and/or labour power in accumulation on a world scale. An evident example is the idea of the 'articulation' of capitalism with other (pre- or non-capitalist) modes/forms of production, with its particular link to Rosa Luxemburg's theorization of imperialism. In this approach, the 'persistence'

(*and* 'exploitation') of peasant production on a significant scale is part of, or especially representative of, the subordinate (and 'exploited') 'backward' capitalist economies of the imperialist periphery more generally.⁴

A different approach, followed here, is to investigate the constitution and reproduction of peasantries through the social relations, dynamics of accumulation and divisions of labour of capitalism/imperialism, without any assumption of either anachronism or 'backwardness'. This approach can deploy theoretical categories and methods used by Marx, Lenin and others, detached from the notions of peasant 'backwardness'/anachronism they held and that Hobsbawm clearly continues to hold.⁵ Another advantage of this approach is that it brings 'peasants' within the same theoretical framework as 'family farmers' in the industrialized capitalist countries: both are situated at the intersection of two areas of major theoretical debate and contention concerning the specificities of agriculture and of petty commodity production in capitalism. What differentiates the 'peasants' of the South and the 'family farmers' of the North theoretically, then, might not be any intrinsic 'logic' of their forms of production or economic calculation (e.g., 'subsistence' and 'commercial') but how they are located in the international division of labour of imperialism and its mutations.⁶

CAPITALISM AND AGRICULTURE

A common assumption, inherited from classical political economy (and its roots in England's distinctive, indeed unique, path of transition to capitalism), is that the capitalist agricultural enterprise—the farm—is homologous with the mode of production, that it necessarily consists of capital and 'free' wage labour. By analogy with manufacturing industry, capitalist farming should increase its scale (concentration of capital), technical divisions of labour (formation of the collective worker), and productivity of labour (development of the productive forces), in line with the laws of motion of capitalism. Already in the late nineteenth century, this expectation was contested by reference to the strong 'persistence' of small-scale ('family') farming into the era of industrial capitalism: in Europe in the form of peasantries of feudal provenance (by contrast with the fate of pre-industrial artisans), and in the U.S.A. in the form of mechanized grain production in the prairies by farms employing family- (rather than wage-) labour.

The particular unevenness of the capitalist transformation of farming has thus long been remarked, and attempts to explain it in general terms typically start from the conditions of transforming nature that are peculiar to agriculture, and their implications. While manufacturing industry transforms materials already appropriated from nature, agriculture only transforms nature through the very activities of appropriating it, and thus confronts the uncertainties of natural environments and processes and their effects for the growth of plant and animal organisms.

Accordingly, it has been suggested that capital is inhibited from direct

investment in farming for several reasons. One is that this tends to be more risky than investment in other branches of activity: the normal risks of market competition are compounded by the risks inherent in the environmental conditions of farming. A second reason, derived from value theory, is the non-identity of labour time and production time: the latter exceeds the former because of the growth cycles of plants and animals during which capital is 'tied up' and unable to realize profit. Another argument from value theory emphasizes the burden of ground rent which capital tends to leave to 'family' farmers to absorb (in the same way that they absorb risk and the delayed realization of surplus value). Yet other arguments centre on labour markets and labour processes. Capitalist agriculture is unable to compete for labour as economic development raises wage rates, giving family labour farms a 'labour-price advantage'. The labour process argument is that it is much more difficult, and hence costly, to supervise and control the pace and quality of wage labour in the field than in the factory.⁷

These are, of course, very general reasons advanced to explain a tendency, the accentuated unevenness of capitalist transformation of forms of production in farming. At the same time, they point to two features of agriculture in capitalism that are key to the formation and mutations of its international divisions of labour, especially in the era of globalization. The first is the drive of technical innovation to *simplify* and *standardize* the conditions of agricultural production: to reduce the variations, obstacles and uncertainties presented by natural environments to approximate the ideal of control in industrial production. This means producing yields that are as predictable as well as large (and fast maturing) as possible—by acting on soils (fertilizers, drainage), climate (irrigation, greenhouses), the attributes of organisms (improved varieties through selective breeding and now genetic engineering, hormonal growth stimulants), parasites and diseases (pesticides, veterinary medicines), weed growth (herbicides), and so on. Such technical innovations are conventionally classified as bio-chemical, raising the productivity of land (and often intensifying the quantum and quality of labour required), and mechanical, raising the productivity of labour (hence labour-displacing). The former are ostensibly scale-neutral (as claimed for the 'Green Revolution'), while the latter promote economies of scale, on *both* wage and family labour farms.

The second, and related, feature is the increasing *integration* of farming by capital concentrated upstream and downstream of production on the land. The former refers to capital in input production (above all chemical corporations which dominate seed development and production as well as fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals, but also farm machinery manufacturers), the latter to agrofood corporations in processing and manufacturing and the giant companies in food distribution and retailing. The provenance of such corporations is in the industrialized capitalist countries, and they tend to be the more concentrated the more developed the agricultural sector (and the economy in which it is located). Nonetheless, they are now engaged in a new wave of globalization (see below),

in ways that affect the fortunes and prospects of many different kinds of farmers, including 'peasants' in the imperialist periphery. Of course, a strategic implication of the features of agriculture in capitalism outlined above is that the diversity of types of farming is much greater than that of the (increasingly globalized) branches which integrate the backward and forward linkages of farming. Farming enterprises in contemporary capitalism, *within* as well as across North and South, exhibit great diversity in their size, scale, social organization and labour processes (forms, and combinations, of family labour, free and unfree wage labour), their degree and types of capitalization and mechanization, and their forms of insertion/integration in markets and commodity chains.⁸

CAPITALISM AND PETTY COMMODITY PRODUCTION

The concept of petty commodity production specifies a form of small-scale ('family' or 'household') production in capitalism engaged in more or less specialized commodity production and constituted by a particular combination of the class places of capital and labour. The agents of this form of production are capitalists and workers at the same time because they own or have access to means of production and employ their own labour. 'Peasants' become petty commodity producers in this sense when they are unable to reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production, when the latter become the conditions of existence of peasant farming and are *internalized* in its organization and activity. This historical moment is satisfied when 'forcible commercialization'⁹ gives way to the reproduction of commodity reproduction through what Marx called 'the dull compulsion of economic forces':

[To] suggest that a social formation is capitalist by virtue of being founded on the contradiction between wage-labour and capital is not to assert that all—or even the majority of—enterprises in this social formation will conform to a 'type' in which capitalists and wage-labourers are present ... what makes enterprises, and more generally social formations, capitalist or not, is ... *the relations which structurally and historically explain their existence* ... what has to be shown in order to 'prove' the capitalist nature of such social formations is that the social entities and differences which form [their] social division(s) of labour ... are only explicable in terms of the wage-labour/capital relation.¹⁰

It is contended here that the social formations of the imperialist periphery are capitalist in the sense specified, and that by the end of the colonial era in Asia and Africa the vast majority of farmers termed 'peasants' had been constituted as petty commodity producers within capitalism. Other aspects of the theory of petty commodity production also illuminate the character of peasantries in contemporary capitalism/imperialism. One is that 'spaces' for petty commodity production in the social division of labour are continuously [re]created as well

as destroyed in processes of capitalist development (as noted by Lenin), a dynamic likely to be particularly accentuated in agriculture for reasons outlined above. This also points to a necessary distinction between the destruction of petty commodity production in particular *branches* of production as a result of capitalist development (e.g., the emblematic fate of hand-loom weavers, in both Britain and colonial India, in British industrialization), and the demise of *individual* petty commodity enterprises as a result of competition between petty commodity producers and the pressures on their reproduction as both capital and labour, which points to the vexed issue of class differentiation.

For Marx the development of agriculture in capitalism was charted above all through the *displacement* of peasant by capitalist farming (what might be called the enclosure model or effect). Lenin's emphasis on the tendency to class differentiation *among* peasants (and other petty commodity producers) was a fundamental addition to understanding paths of agrarian change, identifying the possibility of the *dissolution* of the peasantry through the formation of distinct classes of agrarian capital and wage labour from within its ranks.¹¹ Lenin's argument, contested at the time and ever since by agrarian populism, is often misunderstood theoretically (hence misapplied empirically). The tendency to class differentiation arises from the peculiar combination of the class places of capital and labour in petty commodity production, hence its 'exaggerated form of instability'.¹² *Poor peasants* are subject to a simple reproduction 'squeeze' as capital or labour, or both. Their poverty and depressed levels of consumption (reproduction as labour) express their intense struggles to maintain their means of production (reproduction as capital). Loss of the latter entails proletarianization. *Middle peasants* are those able to meet the demands of simple reproduction, while *rich peasants* are able to engage in expanded reproduction: to increase the land and/or other means of production at their disposal beyond the capacity of family/household labour, hence hiring wage labour.

Two additional theoretical aspects of class differentiation of the peasantry should be noted. One is that the class places of capital and labour which combine to constitute petty commodity production in capitalism are not necessarily distributed symmetrically within 'family' or 'household' production. Indeed, they are unlikely to be so as they typically follow the contours of gendered (and other unequal) divisions of property, labour and income in 'family' and kinship structures.¹³ The other aspect is that class differentiation of peasants (*and* 'family farmers' in the advanced capitalist countries) can proceed via the increasing 'entry' or reproduction costs of petty commodity enterprise, resulting in the dispossession/proletarianization of weaker producers/poor peasants *without* any necessary formation of classes of rich peasants or capitalist farmers. This is emphasized because the presence/reproduction of 'family farmers' (in the U.S.A. and Europe) or middle peasants (in the imperialist periphery) is so often, and mistakenly, understood to signal an absence of class differentiation rather than being *one kind of outcome of class differentiation*, in which some petty commodity producers are unable to reproduce themselves as capital (often in conditions of

particular kinds of relations with other capitals and/or technical change and its demands on investment). The point is relevant to the tendency towards fewer but larger (more highly capitalized) 'family' grain farmers in the U.S.A., for example,¹⁴ and was also registered early in India's Green Revolution in the distinction between 'scale neutrality' and 'resource neutrality'. While the (bio-chemical) package of new hybrid seeds and fertilizers has no intrinsic scale economies and hence, in principle, can be adopted by all sizes of farms (a technical proposition), its adoption in practice depends on a minimum level of resources, and a capacity to take risks, that poor peasants lack (a socio-economic reality reflecting and reinforcing class differentiation).¹⁵

The abstract ideas just presented are necessary to provide a theoretical point of entry and basis for considering 'peasants' in the capitalist mode of production, and in imperialism as its modern global form. The concepts used suggest and help explain the class differentiation of 'peasants' (as of other petty commodity producers) as a *tendency* within capitalism, not as an inevitable and uniform empirical trend. This tendency contains its own distinctive complexities and contradictions, some of which have been noted, and which are compounded by other more concrete observations.

First, that many—no doubt the great majority—of 'peasants' today are not exclusively engaged in farming but combine agricultural petty commodity production (including 'subsistence' in the sense noted above) with a range of other economic activities. That is to say, they rotate between different locations in social divisions of labour constituted variously by agricultural and non-agricultural branches of production, by rural and urban existence, and by the exchange of labour power as well as its combination with property in petty commodity production. Of course, these diverse combinations of farming with other activities are also structured by class relations: poor peasants are most likely to engage in wage labour and in the more marginal (and 'crowded') branches of non-agricultural petty commodity activity, in other words pursue 'survival' in conditions of extreme constraint; middle peasant households also typically diversify their sources of income (including from wage labour) to reproduce their means of agricultural production (including in those circumstances where the costs of their reproduction as capital increase, as noted above); rich peasants frequently pursue diversified accumulation strategies, with investment 'portfolios' in crop trading, money lending, rural transport, tractor renting, village shops and bars (which can help explain why agrarian accumulation does not proceed beyond certain limits).

A second and related concrete observation is that rural labour markets are pervasive in most areas of peasant production, and much middle peasant farming (as well as rich peasant farming) depends on hired labour.¹⁶ The rural labour question is complicated by the fact that some middle peasant households sell as well as buy labour power (and even poor peasant households occasionally hire labour), and that the boundaries between the poor peasantry and the rural proletariat are often blurred (as the common and apparently paradoxical

term 'landless peasants' suggests). Nonetheless, the prevalence and importance of labour hiring for peasant production is often overlooked, as is the intensity of the class struggle it generates in some areas of peasant capitalism.¹⁷

Third, if the poor peasantry is typically part of the reserve army of labour in the countryside of the imperialist periphery (for capitalist estates and plantations where they exist, as well as for rich and middle peasant farms), all classes of the peasantry are likely to have links, albeit of different kinds, with urban centres and markets.¹⁸

The framework sketched here points to the great diversity of 'peasants' in the history and current period of capitalism/imperialism. Beyond the range of empirical variation and complexity we normally expect, there are specific structural sources of diversity (and instability) in the characteristics of both agriculture and petty commodity production in capitalism, hence in the ways that they intersect in 'peasant' production (as well as other 'family' farming). These sources of diversity include the 'obstacles' to capitalist farming presented by the conditions of agricultural production, both technical and social (e.g., rent, labour markets), and the tendencies to class differentiation of petty commodity production. And it should be clear that 'the peasantry' is hardly a uniform, or analytically helpful, social category in contemporary capitalism, whether by anachronistic reference (the survival of 'the world of the past') or in considering changes in agriculture and rural social existence generated by imperialism/globalization. The same stricture necessarily applies to any views of peasants as a (single) 'class' ('exploited' or otherwise).

The next two sections outline a periodization of imperialism and agriculture, first from the 1870s to 1970s and then since the 1970s (the era of 'globalization'), to indicate the differential locations of 'peasants' (in the South) and 'family' farmers (in the North) in international divisions of labour. This outline can only illustrate one source of determinations of agrarian formations and their dynamics within the imperialist periphery, the concrete analysis of which amplifies the wide range of diversity already noted, since such analysis necessarily introduces and integrates other determinants as well. The latter include pre-existing forms of agrarian structure and their specific modes of integration in international divisions of labour at different times; the forms and practices of both colonial and independent states in processes of agrarian change, and their effects; and, not least, the trajectories of class and other social struggles, in both countryside and town, and their outcomes for forms of agrarian property, labour and production.

IMPERIALISM AND AGRICULTURE, 1870s–1970s

The last three decades of the nineteenth century were as momentous in the formation of global capitalism as the period from the 1970s to the present; it was marked by the 'Second Industrial Revolution', by that wave of internationalization of investment emphasized in Lenin's analysis of modern (capitalist) imperialism, and by the formation of the first 'international food regime' iden-

tified by Harriet Friedmann's remarkable project on the international political economy of food.¹⁹ The basis of that regime was the massive growth of grain (and livestock/meat) production on the vast internal frontiers of 'settler' states—Argentina, Australia, Canada, and above all the U.S.A.—combined with a (relatively) free trade order that made Europe increasingly dependent on grain imports.

Settler agriculture cheapened agricultural commodity production, via the political appropriation and colonization of new lands. Subsequent technical changes, especially mechanized harvesting, adapted settler agriculture to labour shortages. Specialized commodity production ... [was] actively promoted by settler states via land and immigration policy, and the establishment of social infrastructure, mainly railways and credit facilities.²⁰

Exports, especially of wheat, competed directly with the temperate agriculture of the European heartlands of industrial capitalism, by contrast with the complementary tropical agricultural production and exports of Asia and Africa whose colonial subordination and incorporation was completed in the same period. There were thus three distinct zones in the global division of labour in agricultural production and trade.

For the agrarian economies of the imperialist periphery this new period was marked by three broad types of change, the forms and effects of which remain pertinent to today's agrarian questions. One was the emergence of the 'industrial plantation' which replaced earlier types of plantation in Asia, the Caribbean, and parts of Latin America, generated new plantation 'frontiers' (in Indochina, Malaya, Sumatra), and greatly enlarged the scale and volume of this kind of highly specialized world market production of rubber, oil palm, sisal, sugar, cocoa, tea and bananas in what Stoler aptly described as a 'worldwide shift towards agribusiness'.²¹ Latin America (mostly independent of colonial rule before the international hegemony of industrial capitalism) experienced a massive agricultural export boom—'a virtually unique combination in the nineteenth century of political independence and primary commodity-led incorporation into the international capitalist economy'²²—through the new 'industrial plantation' and the second type of change: a new phase of commoditization of the colonial *hacienda*, involving further land grabbing from peasant communities and the expansion of a servile labour force.

The third kind of change, pervasive in much of Africa and most of Asia, where colonialism did not dispossess the varied peasantries it encountered, was the increased incorporation (in scale and intensity) of peasant farmers in the capitalist economy as producers of export crops (cotton, oil palm, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, groundnuts), of (sometimes new) food staples for domestic markets, and of labour power via migrant labour systems (including indentured and *corvée* labour) to build the railways and roads, and to work in the plantations, mines and ports. Of course—and as indicated above—there was a great variety of

forms of land tenure and differential access to land, reflecting both diverse pre-colonial agrarian structures and the complex ways in which colonial rule and commoditization incorporated and changed them. Patterns of ownership and/or control of land were combined with a variety of labour regimes in Latin America, Asia and Africa, in both plantation production (with its drive to recruit and control a servile labour force) and peasant farming (not least in relation to changes in gender divisions of labour and their contestations).

Following the first 'golden age' of globalization (1870s–1914), the interwar period plunged the first international food regime into crisis. During the uneven recovery of the world economy in the 1920s, the basic branches of the most advanced (highest productivity) agriculture in Western Europe and the 'settler' economies again started to experience the effects of overproduction (later to become one of their defining features). This was especially so in the U.S.A. where 'the Depression for agriculture really began in the 1920s',²³ manifested in falling agricultural commodity prices and the falling value of land assets. With the advent of the Depression of the 1930s the major capitalist countries embarked on a course of agricultural protectionism: in Europe reviving and reshaping policy instruments improvised during the First World War to enhance self-sufficiency in food production, and in the U.S.A. initiating the comprehensive farm support policies of the New Deal. In the imperialist periphery, the decade of the 1920s in sub-Saharan Africa was (together with the 1960s) one of the two decades of greatest expansion of export crops in the twentieth century. In the 1930s, the instruments of agricultural protection and regulation introduced in Europe, such as marketing boards, were adapted to imperial purposes to extract the maximum transfers from the peasant agricultural export branches of the Asian and African colonies. In India the Depression intensified the long-standing colonial pattern of displacement of food staple production for domestic consumption by peasant-produced exports of cotton, jute, sugar, and fine grains.²⁴

In the revival and accelerated growth of the world economy from the 1950s to the early 1970s a new and quite different 'international food regime' was established, under American hegemony and turning on the 'Atlantic pivot' of the U.S.A. and Europe. Its peculiarities, and the tensions it contained, are formulated as follows by Friedmann.²⁵ The regime maintained the farm support policies of the pre-war years in both the U.S.A. and the European Community (EC) which were integrated, however, by the use of American maize and soy products (the definitive field crops of the postwar 'second agricultural revolution') in processed animal feeds for intensive livestock/meat production. In fact, the production of meat and of high value-added manufactured foods ('food durables') for mass consumption became the leading international agribusiness sectors in the developed capitalist world as the postwar economic boom accelerated. In return for its openness to U.S. exports of raw materials for feedstuffs (and U.S. corporate investment in their manufacture in Europe) the EC was permitted to maintain high levels of protection for other branches, notably

wheat and dairy products. In effect, this generated systems of national agricultural regulation by which European countries sought to replicate U.S. agricultural growth through a combination of import tariffs and export subsidies, without similar limits on the movement of agribusiness capital—an unstable combination of the freedom of capital with restriction on trade, as Friedmann puts it.

The U.S.A. also deployed its surpluses of subsidized grain (and soy oil) for strategic foreign policy purposes through foreign aid and export promotion (dumping), which stimulated dependence on (cheap) American wheat in many areas of the imperialist periphery which had hitherto been largely self-sufficient in staple food production. In turn this facilitated the further specialization of the latter in the production of industrial and (mostly non-staple) food crops for world markets, as did the ambitious development plans of the newly independent former colonies of Asia and Africa, for most of which the earnings of primary commodity exports (agricultural and mineral) were the principal source of foreign exchange for import-substituting industrialization (together with foreign aid; in Latin America foreign direct investment in manufacturing as well as extractive sectors was of particular importance). This created the conditions of a potential scissors effect for many poor, primarily agricultural, countries: one blade being increasing food import dependence, the other the fluctuating but generally declining terms of trade for their historic export crops. Friedmann emphasizes the contribution to the latter of the growth of industrially processed substitutes in the developed capitalist countries, notably high fructose corn (i.e., maize) syrup and soy oil substituting for sugar and (other) vegetable oils respectively (two of the principal tropical agricultural export commodities); we can add to this the substitution of synthetic for natural fibres, and the tendency to systematic overproduction of certain tropical crops like sugar or cocoa—the opening of virgin areas for plantations in South-east Asia overturned the long-standing dominance in world cocoa production of West African peasant farmers, for example.²⁶

Agricultural production in the imperialist periphery thus became increasingly internationalized in a number of significant ways during the 'golden age'. One was through the international quasi-public investment of aid agencies, notably the World Bank, and their programmes to create more systematically commoditized and productive export-cropping peasantries in the name of 'national development' (which also built on the development plans of the late colonial state after 1945, notably in sub-Saharan Africa). Another was through American (and later European) strategic food aid and/or commercial dumping. A third example, reflecting postwar Malthusian fears of mass famine and starvation (hence pursued alongside population control), was international research and development of new high-yielding hybrid grain varieties (in order of importance, of rice, wheat and maize) to boost domestic food production capacity in peripheral countries.²⁷ Given the size of its population, India is the most celebrated example of such a 'Green Revolution', achieving national self-

sufficiency in grain production in less than ten years by the mid-1970s.²⁸

It was also during this period that major demographic shifts from rural to urban population occurred in the regions listed by Hobsbawm, resulting from industrialization and/or ‘agricultural revolutions’ (in his term) *whether such ‘revolutions’—major advances in the productive forces in farming—occurred in those regions or elsewhere.* This of course, is a characteristic manifestation of the dynamics of ‘uneven and combined development’ within international divisions of labour, as noted if not explored by Hobsbawm in *Age of Extremes*, and in this instance at least partly explicable by the political economy of the ‘second international food regime’ as sketched above.

THE 1970s ONWARDS: INTO THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

The conjuncture of the 1970s appears, in retrospect, to have been as definitive a moment of subsequent structural shifts in the world economy as that of the 1870s a century before (similarly manifested in a dialectic of global recession, adjustment, and massive expansion of international flows of money and commodities).²⁹ This applies to the collapse of the prevailing international food regime no less than to the end of international monetary stability and the declining competitiveness of U.S. industry. The proximate cause or trigger of the collapse was a brief episode of ‘a sudden, unprecedented shortage and skyrocketing prices’³⁰ in world grain markets, linked to enormous (and preferential) U.S. grain sales to the U.S.S.R.. This stimulated greatly increased borrowing by American farmers in the 1970s to expand production (on a scale equivalent to the growth of Third World debt in the same period), paving the way for the U.S. farm crisis of the 1980s.

Various U.S. governments applied (wholly ineffectual) embargoes on grain sales to the U.S.S.R. and China (in 1974, 1975 and 1980) before the structural nature of overproduction, and its attendant problems of surplus disposal, reasserted itself in the 1980s. By then U.S. grain exports, both for human consumption and animal feeds, faced increasing competition—in wheat from the EC (above all from France), and in soya, and especially processed soy products, from what Friedmann terms New Agricultural Countries (NACs), notably Brazil but also Argentina, Chile, India and China; while Thailand became a major exporter of cassava products for industrial starches as well as feedstuffs. In short, the basis of the relatively stable postwar international food regime—the export-oriented system of U.S. national agricultural regulation and its negotiated linkages with the EC around the ‘Atlantic pivot’—was undermined as the EC and the NACs successfully *replicated* the American model, and in ways that ‘modernized’ and overtook it, according to Friedmann. The definitive end of the cold war, with the demise of the Soviet Union and its bloc, further undermined a key strategic rationale of the Atlantic pivot. As is well known, the Uruguay Round of 1986 established agricultural trade and its liberalization as central to the agenda of GATT under pressure from the U.S.A.,

which had hitherto blocked its subjection to GATT processes and rules. This started a fraught process, still far from complete, to bring international trade rules *and* national agricultural policies in line with 'what has already occurred structurally', as Friedmann puts it.

The most fundamental structural shift she points to—and one that is immediately recognizable in terms of debates about globalization—is the emergence, from the ruins of international (Atlantic-centred) regulation, of transnational agrofood corporations as 'the major (global) agents attempting to ... organize stable conditions of production and consumption which allow them to plan investment, sourcing of agricultural materials, and marketing'³¹—that is, *integrating* various sites of production and consumption through global private (corporate) regulation.³² This occurs in a conjuncture in which the debt of the imperialist periphery, escalating since the 1970s, became the key lever of structural adjustment lending and trade liberalization, with a renewed emphasis—for the poorest countries—on their comparative advantage in agricultural exports as the principal means of economic recovery. Thus Friedmann formulates their position in a globalizing division of labour shaped by transnational agrofood corporations as debt-driven 'export platforms'. 'While feedstuffs, the heart of the food regime, are becoming globalized rather than merely internationalized, the completely new markets in "exotic" fruits and vegetables are global from the outset.'³³ The trade in such 'exotics' is often remarked as emblematic of contemporary globalization, manifesting a significant new wave of diversification of Northern diets (including 'designer' foods) through expanding consumer tastes and world-wide sourcing (including from 'peasant' farming) to satisfy them. Also suggestive of certain images of globalization is Friedmann's view of 'the subordination of the particularities of time and place to accumulation' by transnational agrofood corporations.³⁴

As with many claims about globalization, those concerning the dynamics and mechanisms of the global restructuring of agriculture, food systems, and diets, require careful empirical and analytical consideration. In a recent (preliminary) assessment of globalization and export crop production in sub-Saharan Africa, Raikes and Gibbon call attention to the 'highly uneven extent of genuine globalization of (agricultural) raw material production, industrial processing/production and consumption', and suggest that concerning Africa the 'issue is not simply one of globalization, but of a more complex redefinition of economic role, whereby some of Africa's established links with the world economy are strengthened, others are weakened and disappear, and others are restructured.'³⁵ Their analysis is disaggregated in several pertinent ways over the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, including the dynamics of different commodity chains for most of Africa's 'traditional' export crops (including coffee, cocoa, cotton, tea, sugar and tobacco) and 'non-traditional' exports of fresh fruit and vegetables and cut flowers, and categories of producers of these various export crops. Commodity chains differ according to their forms of primary production and marketing, international trading, and

distribution and retailing; to the types of degrees and locations of industrial processing and secondary manufacture they require; and to whether, how, and how much, each commodity chain is integrated and controlled by capitals concentrated at particular points in the chain. Raikes and Gibbon also distinguish four types of production systems: low-input and high-input smallholder (i.e., 'peasant') farming, large-scale commercial farming (mostly of European settler provenance in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe), and multinational corporate plantations and estates. From the mid-1980s there have been important and interrelated changes that blur the boundaries between the first two and the last two categories: 'a steady increase of the extent of low-input smallholder production at the expense of its high-input counterpart, associated with the dissolution of parastatal- or quasi parastatal-led systems, and with trade liberalization' (i.e., effects of structural adjustment policies), and greater differentiation of large-scale commercial farming 'with part of it becoming more vertically integrated.'³⁶

In addition to the agricultural 'export platform' dynamic, globalization also impacts on countries of the imperialist periphery with sufficient demand to attract agribusiness production for domestic markets, whether as an element of wage goods (e.g., certain parts of Latin America and North Africa) and/or luxury consumption. India provides a perhaps surprising, and hence instructive, example of the latter. Despite its levels of poverty, both rural and urban, the size of its population and the inequality of its income distribution have made India an arena of intense competition between transnational agrofood corporations since liberalization of its economy in the early 1990s. Jairus Banaji, who has documented this, suggests that globalization (in general terms) is principally about the restructuring of international investment patterns, with international firms 'attracted to large and expanding markets in the unsaturated regions of the world economy' (notably Asia) through 'a surge of investments in highly capital-intensive production facilities', including food processing and manufacturing plants.³⁷ In India many new factories are located in areas lacking histories of worker organization, where they can also be sourced by converting adjacent farm land to the production of the raw materials they require, often through contract farming arrangements.

The enhanced connections of the sites and forms of production and consumption in a globalization of agriculture driven by transnational corporations might seem a compelling manifestation of 'the pressures of economic development' on the 'peasantry' asserted (if not specified) by Hobsbawm, even allowing for the unevenness of such globalization emphasized by Raikes and Gibbon. The effects are likely to be uneven and contradictory for the kinds of reasons discussed. In some cases, particular forms of globalization generate expansions of capitalist agriculture that displace peasant farming (the enclosure effect)—for example, the development of large-scale mechanized cultivation of feed grains in Mexico at the expense of peasant land and production. In this instance, feed grain cultivation for direct export, and for feeding livestock

destined for U.S. abattoirs and consumers, also combines with the increased exposure of Mexico's domestic markets to grain imports for human consumption. The latter exert pressure on peasant commodity production of food staples for domestic markets in many areas of the imperialist periphery, a feature of Friedmann's second international food regime (above) and one that continues and intensifies in the era of globalization and (selective) trade liberalization.³⁸

Globalization can thus reduce or marginalize the contributions of their own farming to the incomes/reproduction of (especially poor but also many middle) 'peasants' and/or accelerate tendencies to class differentiation. In most of sub-Saharan Africa, the generalized economic and social crisis since the 1970s has depressed farm incomes and investment, as Raikes and Gibbon's observation of the shift from high-input to low-input smallholder agriculture suggests—a process compounded by the removal of subsidized inputs and credit, and the dismantling of the parastatal and state-managed co-operative organizations that channelled them to peasant farmers and marketed their crops (despite the ineffectuality of many such organizations).³⁹ The era of structural adjustment and liberalization has also generated new opportunities for land-grabbing at the expense of peasants in some parts of Africa, whether by local or foreign/international interests or alliances between them, and whether this represents *de jure* or *de facto* forms of privatization/enclosure. Another factor of interest is the apparently increasing difficulty, in these conditions of crisis, of recruiting labour for peasant farming, *including* that of younger men and women born into peasant households.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, then, the costs of entry into such new activities as the contract farming of high value 'non-traditional' crops (fresh fruits, vegetables, cut flowers, decorative house plants) for global markets are beyond the reach of most peasant farmers, while expansion of these crops generally stimulates the demand for rural wage labour.

While it is impossible to generalize about the impact of uneven and diverse forms of globalization on (differentiated) peasantries, it is likely that in this current phase of imperialism most poor peasants confront an increasing simple reproduction 'squeeze'. Together with the landless rural proletariat, they form part of an expanding reserve army of labour in the countryside *and* in the cities and towns of large areas of the imperialist periphery, given the prevalence of rural-urban links which include, for many members of poor peasant households, regular migration in search of wage employment as 'footloose labour'.⁴¹ This does not, however, indicate any uniform or linear route to an inevitable destination: the general or definitive demise of 'the peasantry'. The impulses to economic change generated by globalization, and how they are mediated by the diverse class structures and dynamics of the imperialist periphery, can consolidate certain spaces for agricultural petty commodity production, and create new spaces as well as destroy existing ones. Indeed, pressures on industrial and urban employment, and the immiseration that results, may generate tendencies to 're-peasantization' in some instances—one manifestation of how the growing numbers of the reserve army of labour straddle city and countryside in their pursuit of means of livelihood.

Any notion and possibility of ‘re-peasantization’ no doubt affronts the view of the ‘death of the peasantry’ as definitive of modernity even more than either the facts or the explanation of the reproduction of agricultural petty commodity production in mature capitalism. It perhaps serves, though, as a useful reminder that the sociological (or phenomenal) features, hence boundaries, of the *urban* (as well as the rural) proletariat and the reserve army of labour are not as clear-cut as suggested by careless application of the abstract categories necessary to theorize their conditions of existence. This can be illustrated by the magnitude (as well as the enormous variation) of urban ‘informal’ sector self- and wage-employment, and by the fact that many urban working-class households in the imperialist periphery (and indeed in its core) depend on a range of petty commodity activities as well as wages for their reproduction.

In the era of globalization such processes are framed by the liberalization of international and domestic trade in agricultural commodities, the tendencies to regulation of global production and trade by new patterns of corporate agribusiness investment, and technical change in farming and food processing, manufacturing and distribution. All of these combine to affect the prospects and problems of agricultural petty commodity producers located differentially within the international division of labour.

The analysis of ‘peasants’ presented and illustrated here has concentrated on peasant production as an *economic form*, agricultural petty commodity production, constituted by the class relations (and contradictions) of capital and labour and located in the shifting places of agriculture in the imperialist periphery within international divisions of labour. If ‘the peasantry’ is thus constituted *and* differentiated by class relations, what implications does this have for the issues at stake in contemporary instances of ‘peasant’ politics, not least given the ‘classic’ Marxist presumption, referred to above, that those politics must be reactionary—anti-proletarian and anti-democratic?⁴² To elaborate this question, and illustrate answers to it in particular circumstances, it is useful first to sketch, however schematically, some problematic aspects and characteristic tensions of the materialist analysis of politics more generally.

POLITICS: WORKERS AND ‘PEASANTS’

Issues in political analysis

The starting point, already indicated at several points in this essay, is the proposition that the relation of wage labour and capital—the essential, hence definitive, basis of the capitalist mode of production—is neither self-evident nor experienced in ‘pure’ ways. Capitalist divisions of labour *necessarily* incorporate and generate social differences and divisions other than those of class (which does not mean that they lack effects for class relations and dynamics), of which Marx emphasized those between industry and agriculture, town and countryside, and mental and manual labour, to which (most) historical materialists today would add relations and divisions of gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, all such differ-

ences/divisions are inflected and overlaid by those generated by the international divisions of labour (and of property, income and power) of imperialism. If this is true of the economic forms and patterns of global capitalism today, requiring analysis adequate to their complexities, it applies just as (or more) forcefully to political and ideological dynamics and their determinations.

In short, and by extension, there is no (self-)evident or 'pure' phenomenal or concrete class subject given (or pre-given) by the essential social relation of the capitalist mode of production. Concretely, capitalism is structured through a variety of specific conditions and forms of exploitation and oppression (albeit linked by an underlying 'logic' of accumulation and class power), which are not experienced uniformly by those subject to different locations in its social divisions of labour. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, there are 'many ways in which power fragment(s) the circumstances and experiences of the oppressed', some of which are manifested as what Mao Zedong termed 'contradictions amongst the people'.⁴³

What should be evident, then, is that such observations simultaneously enrich *and* complicate the demands of theory and practice on any socialist politics that abandons the ideal(ist) assumption of a 'pure' class subject (the proletariat), that recognizes the need to engage with popular and democratic struggles generated by and contesting the multiple forms of oppression within contemporary capitalism (including those manifested as 'contradictions amongst the people'), and that is open to new possibilities of practice, alliance and organization such struggles may disclose.⁴⁴ At the same time, this is not to yield to ideas that essentialize political subjects other than the working class, be they 'peasants', 'small farmers', 'indigenous people' or 'women' (as in so-called eco-feminism).⁴⁵ It is ironic that *because* a (collective) proletarian subject has often been essentialized in the socialist tradition, anti-proletarian ideological currents (sometimes quite explicit) find it easier to substitute for 'the working class' their own idealized (collective) subject of choice. The point is that socialist politics, in engaging with and contributing to a range of popular and democratic struggles, does so from the viewpoint of their class content and implications, in a sense embracing their contradictory impulses in order to assess their progressive character, rather than dismissing such struggles *a priori* for their class 'impurities' (according to an equation of class 'impurity' with reaction).

The question about 'peasant politics' posed above can be elaborated thus: how can the course of class and popular struggles generate more progressive forms of agrarian relations in the imperialist periphery, and otherwise contribute to progressive change including the broadening and deepening of democracy? And, of course, what does 'progressive' mean in particular circumstances of struggle, marked by specific forms of exploitation, by multiple types of oppression and their contradictions?

A first instance is the organization and struggles of agricultural workers (including those recruited from the poor peasantry) for better conditions of work and payment, for basic democratic rights, and to defend themselves

against the class violence of landed property, agrarian capital and the state. This includes fighting against all forms of ‘tied’ labour relations based in personal dependence, debt bondage, and patronage—in short, any form of ‘deproletarianization’ that denies the one positive freedom of the proletarian condition in face of ‘the dull compulsion of economic forces’, namely mobility within labour markets and between employers.⁴⁶

A second instance is struggles to establish and/or improve access to land (and other conditions of production) by landless workers and (poor and middle) ‘peasants’ against ‘parasitic’ forms of appropriation by landlordism and merchant’s and usurer’s capital, and/or by states that (variously) support individual accumulation by ‘bureaucrat capital’ or privileged sectors of capitalist farming at the expense of petty producers (who may be part of the reserve army of labour, as noted above).⁴⁷ This instance is more ambiguous than the first for reasons that should be evident from the preceding discussion. On one hand, ‘accumulation from below’ can have a democratic political dynamic, especially when agricultural petty producers (poor and middle peasants) and landless workers are subject to ‘national’ (ethnic, caste) as well as class oppression, and/or combine with workers (and perhaps the urban petty bourgeoisie) in democratic struggles against capital, and state policies and practices that favour it.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the success of such struggles *may* consolidate petty property in ways detrimental to workers’ interests, especially when the ‘agrarian interest’ is defined by rich peasant ideology and rich peasant leadership of ostensibly encompassing rural (‘peasant’ or ‘farmer’) organizations and movements. These tensions can be illustrated briefly with reference to agrarian political movements in Brazil and India.

Brazil

James Petras has recently acclaimed the centrality of rural movements to Latin America’s ‘third wave’ of radical politics in the postwar period, the most significant response so far to the advent of globalization and neoliberalism, which emerged and has developed independently of the electoral and sectarian parties of the Left (or their remnants) of earlier ‘waves’ of struggle. At the same time, this ‘peasant resurgence’ does not replicate ‘peasant movements in the traditional sense, nor are the rural cultivators who comprise them divorced from urban life or activities.’⁴⁹ Petras’ survey of this rural ‘third wave’—in Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Colombia, Chile, Argentina and Mexico—indicates specificities and differences due to variations in the agrarian histories and class structures, and the national political contexts, of these countries, but also suggests some common elements. These include ‘the crises affecting industrial and urban areas, particularly growing unemployment and poverty’, and how trade liberalization as above and increasing debt threaten the reproduction of poor peasant livelihoods. The ‘basic class composition’ of these movements in Brazil and more generally is ‘rural landless workers’ and the poor peasantry: ‘impoverished peasants either ... evicted from land or unable to subsist on tiny

plots.⁵⁰ In Bolivia the 're-peasantization' effect includes over 30,000 retrenched tin miners (the former vanguard of working-class struggle) who are now coca farmers and 'the most dynamic and influential sector in direct confrontation with the regime.'⁵¹ The kinds of 'structural' or 'objective' factors noted here go together with a striking 'subjective' feature of the 'new peasantry' and its politics: 'a new generation of "educated" (primary or secondary school) peasant leaders ... with strong organizational capabilities, a sophisticated understanding of national and international politics, and a profound commitment to creating a politically educated set of cadres.'⁵²

Together with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, probably the internationally best known 'new' rural movement in Latin America is the MST in Brazil: the *Movimento Rural Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement). This was started in the 1980s in the south and south-east of the country by the daughters and sons of European immigrant small farmers, and has since spread to most agricultural areas of the rest of Brazil. Its characteristic political tactic is land occupation and settlement, preferably followed by the formation of production co-operatives. Petras enumerates and explores regional variations in the activity and success of the MST, identifying a number of factors: the social origins of its activists; local histories of previous land occupations; proximity to big cities and mobilization of urban support by trade unions and municipal governments controlled by the Workers Party; the local balance of class forces as manifested in the (varying) ability of landowners to deploy state and extra-state violence and the capacity of the MST to defend itself; and the availability of land for occupation, together with concentrations of landless workers/poor peasants.⁵³

Petras is aware of some of the problems and limits of these movements. He observes the 'heterogeneity' of the category of 'landless workers' and also its 'ambiguity' in relation to forms of production established on land seized by (re)occupation—whether this will consolidate agricultural petty commodity production (generate or strengthen a rural petty bourgeoisie?) or be able to sustain the political dynamic of the MST.⁵⁴ He notes too the difficulties of moving 'from protest to politics' in some instances (e.g., in Argentina), the organizational fragmentation strongly localized peasant politics are prone to (e.g., Mexico by contrast with the MST in Brazil), and that 'while this third wave represents intransigent opposition to the imposition of neoliberalism, it does not yet as offer a fully articulated plan for the seizure of power.'⁵⁵ However, these new rural movements lead the way in revitalizing mass democratic politics in much of Latin America; the MST is expanding its political work into the shanty towns of Brazilian cities; and, in Petras' view, this distinctive peasant resurgence exhibits creative forms of class analysis and political practice that connect with other sites of democratic struggle, including those of ethnic oppression.

India

India reveals substantial differences from Latin America. Its densely populated areas of irrigated cultivation contain no 'large uncultivated farms with

fertile land near roads, markets and credit facilities' such as the MST targets for occupation in Brazil,⁵⁶ but display their own diverse and complex range of political processes and energies. The Indian counterparts to the MST of Brazil—in terms of significance and impact if not social character—are the 'new farmers' movements' that emerged in the 1970s in most of the major states of western India and peaked by the late 1980s, but remain politically significant in Maharashtra and the Green Revolution heartlands of the north-west (Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh).⁵⁷ These movements claim, in one way or another, to represent *all* classes of farmers (and sometimes also the rural proletariat and rural women as a particular constituency) against particular government policies or the state more generally (and often urban-industrial society as well, including the urban proletariat). 'Their impact extends from demonstrations, blocking the food transportation system, denying officials access to villages, refusing to pay outstanding bills (tax arrears, electricity dues, bank loans) and withholding crops from local markets (which results in price rises) to an important role in the overthrow of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government in the 1989 elections.'⁵⁸

There is fierce debate about whether these movements are progressive, in what ways, and to what extent, starting with the claims to novelty signalled by the language of *farmers'* movements rather than peasant movements (which have specific associations with key processes and moments of struggle in India's colonial and independent history), their agitation over prices and subsidies (rather than land issues), and their declared autonomy from political parties. Similarly fiercely contested—in relation to the farmers' movements of particular parts of India as well as more generally—are explanations of their emergence and, above all, interpretations of their social composition and ideology, programmes and practices. At one end of the spectrum of debate Gail Omvedt, an activist intellectual in Maharashtra, supports what she sometimes calls the 'new peasant movement' in India as a progressive force for agricultural labour as well as peasant farmers, with an explicit critique of Marxist class theory and the way it has been used to justify industrialization financed by surpluses extracted from agriculture. She thus argues not only for increases in crop prices and rural wages, but for a national economic strategy that prioritizes investment in the countryside in the interest of rural development. She also rejects such charges as that the 'organized farmers' movement' is preoccupied with fertilizer subsidies, and that (religious and caste) communalism has specific rural roots in the rich peasantry: 'communalism has spread from the cities (the middle classes, the urban poor, *and* the organized working class) to the countryside, and ... farmers' organizations have a rather decent record on the issue.'⁵⁹

At the other end of the spectrum are those like Brass and Banaji whose sophisticated analyses of rural class relations are far from the crude (but still common) Marxist positions targeted by Omvedt.⁶⁰ These critics of the new farmers' movements in India maintain that they are reactionary, not as a necessary consequence of their class membership, but because of their ideological and

political impulse—to reinforce the existing property rights and consolidate a broad-based and diversified rural capitalism⁶¹—and their effect in obscuring capitalist development and its class divisions in the countryside. Factors adduced to explain the emergence of the new farmers' movements include shifts in the terms of trade between industry and agriculture, which began to move against the latter from the late 1970s; a slowing down in the rate of profit and accumulation of capitalist farmers and rich peasants, *and* pressures on the incomes of highly commoditized middle and small peasants, in the Green Revolution heartlands; loss of Congress Party hegemony in the countryside in the 1980s; and the interpenetration of urban and rural commercial capital. Possibly linked to the last is another contextual feature: the reduction of bonded and other servile labour relations in farming due to struggles by agricultural workers, facilitated by the increased availability of non-agricultural employment in the countryside, including rural towns.⁶²

The class dynamics and trajectories of the new farmers' movements, as of rural politics in India more generally, are also inflected by ideologies and practices of caste oppression, how they are resisted, how issues of caste shape political parties and electoral competition at local, provincial and national levels, and how election outcomes affect rural class and caste relations. Jens Lerche provides a detailed analysis of the 'politics of the poor' in Uttar Pradesh with special reference to agricultural wage workers, trends in rural labour relations, and the role in the state government since 1993 of the low-caste BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party): 'for the first time in India a party headed by, run by and voted for by the lowly "untouchable" castes formed part of the winning coalition in a state election.'⁶³ The success of the BSP both reflects and catalyzes successful struggles by low-caste agricultural workers, whose support it gained through its focus on fighting caste oppression and exclusion while the Communist Party (CPI[M]) pursues a policy of broad alliances to attract middle and rich peasants and opposes the caste-based mobilization of workers. Even within the limits of the BSP programme that Lerche emphasizes—its 'utopian perspective of the creation of a largely untouchable petty bourgeoisie, and its refusal to tackle core class issues like land reforms'—he concludes that the fact of its electoral success (and consequent access to patronage in state administration and appointments, including the police) strengthens the position of agricultural workers in the countryside of Uttar Pradesh.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

To return to where this essay started: there is, of course, a rationale to Hobsbawm's view of 'the death of the peasantry' by the late twentieth century, but it is tautological at best: the peasantry (or better, peasantries) that inhabited 'the world of the past' (the greater and lesser agrarian formations of pre-capitalist eras) are indeed destroyed by capitalism and imperialism. At worst, however, it follows that 'peasants', 'smallholders', or 'small farmers' today are

then viewed as ‘survivals’ of that past, emblematic of ‘backwardness’, anachronistic, (explicitly or implicitly) reactionary, and doomed to extinction—a position that precludes rather than encourages investigation and analysis of exactly who, where and why ‘peasants’ are in contemporary global capitalism. This essay has tried to suggest some of the theoretical means of such investigation and analysis, and to illustrate their applications.

Notwithstanding the brevity of the examples of agrarian political movements in Brazil and India, they serve to suggest the dynamic character of change in the countryside of the imperialist periphery, and the (different) places within it of (differentiated) peasantries, both economically and politically. There is nothing here to sustain inherited notions of ‘the peasantry’ as anachronism, or as ‘backward’ in material, cultural or political terms: many ‘peasants’ occupy, and reproduce themselves within, the economic ‘spaces’ for agricultural petty commodity production in the divisions of labour of (a globalizing) capitalism, and in processes of class differentiation, just as many fail to do so; they often move between countryside and city and negotiate, and help shape, the cultural worlds of both; they are clearly capable of effective collective action (for different and sometimes contradictory class ends) in ways that can expand the economic ‘spaces’ of their farming activity/reproduction and impact on national political processes; they can be both militants and opponents of progressive struggles that extend beyond their rural locales.

NOTES

Parts of this essay draw on and develop material presented in previous work, especially Henry Bernstein, ‘Agrarian Classes in Capitalist Development’ in Leslie Sklair, ed., *Capitalism and Development*, London: Routledge, 1994. My debts to the work of others like Harriet Friedmann and Peter Gibbon and his co-workers should be obvious. I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft to comrades at the *Socialist Register* conference in Toronto in January 2000, and to colleagues in the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University.

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994, pp. 288–9, 415 (emphases added).
2. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, pp. 291, 289.
3. On this Hobsbawm’s perspective on land reforms in the twentieth century is instructive—Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, pp. 354–7.
4. For example, Utsa Patnaik, ‘Peasant Subsistence and Food Security in the Context of the International Commoditization of Production: the Present and History’, in Peter Robb, ed., *Meanings of Agriculture. Essays in South Asian History and Economics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
5. As demonstrated by Peter Gibbon and Michael Neocosmos, ‘Some Problems in the Political Economy of “African Socialism”’, in Henry Bernstein and Bonnie K. Campbell, eds., *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa. Studies in Economy and State*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985.
6. Two observations (whose rationale is explained below) may help demystify the

- notion of ‘subsistence’ production by peasants (let alone its celebration). The first is that when commodity relations and circuits become internalized in conditions of peasant existence, the spaces and forms of ‘subsistence’ production (for own consumption) are determined by specific modes of insertion in commodity economy (agricultural and non-agricultural). The second is that the conditions of ‘subsistence’ production are themselves often commoditized, e.g., the purchase of inputs and labour hiring to cultivate food staples for one’s own consumption, although the extent of this varies across different classes of peasants. On this see also Philip Woodhouse, Henry Bernstein and David Hulme, *African Enclosures? The Social Dynamics of Soil and Water*, Oxford: James Currey, in press.
7. On the non-identity of labour time and production time see S. A. Mann and J. A. Dickinson, ‘Obstacles to the Development of a Capitalist Agriculture’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1978, and for the rent burden argument: Gjoran Djurfeldt, ‘What Happened to the Agrarian Bourgeoisie and Rural Proletariat Under Monopoly Capitalism? Some Hypotheses Derived from the Classics of Marxism on the Agrarian Question’, *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1981. See also the ‘labour-price advantage’ of family farms as formulated by Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism. Agrarian Politics in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846–1919*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 172.
 8. For important explorations of unfree labour, and related issues of class formation and struggle in agrarian production, see Tom Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour*, London: Frank Cass, 1999.
 9. The formulation of Krishna Bharadwaj in her seminal essay, ‘A View of Commercialization in Indian Agriculture and the Development of Capitalism’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1985.
 10. Gibbon and Neocosmos, ‘Some Problems’, p. 169.
 11. V. I. Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964 (first published 1899), ch. 2.
 12. Gibbon and Neocosmos, ‘Some Problems’, p. 177.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 177; Tom Brass, ‘The Elementary Structures of Kinship’ in Alison McEwan Scott, ed., *Rethinking Petty Commodity Production*, special issue series of *Social Analysis*, vol. 20, 1986; Henry Bernstein, ‘Capitalism and Petty-Bourgeois Production: Class Relations and Divisions of Labour’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1988.
 14. Grain (and other) production on ‘family’ farms in the U.S.A. provides a neat illustration of the theorization of petty commodity production presented here: are these farms family *labour* enterprises as well as family *property*? Many, in fact, are barely worked by family labour at all (except for a residual management function) in the sense that their ploughing, planting, spraying, and harvesting are done by specialized contractors. (Rich) peasant enterprises in some instances display analogous features.
 15. Just as rich peasants are situated, both economically and politically, to gain disproportionate advantages from new technologies, including those that are supposedly scale-neutral; this was noted by perceptive observers of the early stages of India’s Green Revolution.
 16. The 1991 Indian census reported that of the agricultural workforce (about two-thirds of the total workforce) just under 60 percent were (owner) cultivators and just over 40 percent agricultural labourers, as cited in Gail Omvedt, “‘We Want

- the Return for Our Sweat”: the New Peasant Movement in India and the Formation of a National Agricultural Policy’, in Tom Brass, ed., *New Farmers’ Movements in India*, London: Frank Cass, 1994, p. 144.
17. Emphasized for India by Jairus Banaji, ‘Illusions About the Peasantry: Karl Kautsky and the Agrarian Question’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1990.
 18. Also noted by Hobsbawm, for whom such links are the channels through which modernity diffuses from city to countryside—Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, pp. 364–9.
 19. Harriet Friedmann, ‘World Market, State and Family Farm: Social Bases of Household Production in the Era of Wage Labour’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 20, 1978; ‘The Political Economy of Food: the Rise and Fall of the Post-war International Food Order’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 88 (annual supplement), 1982; ‘The Political Economy of Food: a Global Crisis’, *New Left Review*, 197, 1993. As well as the juncture of the ‘failure of agrarian capitalism’, that is, a shift from the wage labour agricultural enterprise to the family labour farm in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA, according to Koning’s stimulating comparative study, ‘The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism’.
 20. Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, ‘Agriculture and the State System: the Rise and Decline of National Agricultures, 1870 to the Present’, *Sociologica Ruralis*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1989, p. 101.
 21. Ann Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt, 1870–1979*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 17; see also Valentine E. Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass, eds., *Plantations, Peasants and Proletarians in Colonial Asia*, London: Frank Cass, 1992.
 22. Eduardo P. Archetti, Paul Cammack and Bryan Roberts, eds., *Sociology of ‘Developing’ Societies: Latin America*, London: Macmillan, 1987, p. xvi.
 23. S. A. Mann and J. A. Dickinson, ‘State and Agriculture in Two Eras of American Capitalism’, in F. H. Buttel and H. Newby, eds., *The Rural Sociology of the Advanced Societies: Critical Perspectives*, London: Croon Helm, 1980, p. 305.
 24. Patnaik, ‘Peasant Subsistence and Food Security’, p. 210.
 25. This section and the next draw heavily on Friedmann, ‘The Political Economy of Food: a Global Crisis’.
 26. There is a fuller and more nuanced discussion of issues of ‘structural oversupply’ of tropical agricultural export commodities in Philip Raikes and Peter Gibbon, ‘“Globalization” and African Export Crop Agriculture’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000.
 27. The first systematic biochemical innovations applied to their food staples by western scientific research, by contrast with earlier extensive research efforts on export crops like sugar, rubber, and cotton.
 28. Which does not mean that the Green Revolution was without its contradictions, which confounded the ‘win-win’ vision and claims of its architects. As is well known, among its other effects, it accelerated class differentiation of the peasantry in north-west India, displaced the cultivation of coarse grains and pulses essential to the diets of the poor with finer grains they cannot afford, distributed its productivity (yield) gains very unevenly across different parts of the country, and so on.
 29. Explicit comparisons with the late nineteenth-century world economy in assessing globalization at the end of the twentieth century are made by, among others, Deepak Nayyar, *Globalization: the Past in our Present*, Chandigarh: Indian

- Economic Association, 1995, and Paul Q. Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.
30. Friedmann, 'Political Economy of Food: a Global Crisis', p. 40.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
 32. P. McMichael and D. Myrhe, in 'Global Regulation vs. the Nation State: Agro-food Systems and the New Politics of Capital', *Capital and Class*, 43, 1991, present arguments for very strong and encompassing forms of globalization of agriculture, in contrast to the more cautious and differentiated approach of Raikes and Gibbon, 'Globalization'—see note 26 and below.
 33. Friedmann, 'Political Economy of Food: a Global Crisis', p. 53.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 55; this suggests a transposition to the global plane of features long established in the US meat industry, by 1900 the prototype of industrial food production: 'Geography no longer mattered very much except as a problem in management; time conspired with capital to annihilate space'—W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis. Chicago and the Great West*, New York: WW Norton, 1991, as quoted by Alexander Cockburn, 'A Short Meat-oriented History of the World. From Eden to the Mattole', *New Left Review*, 215, 1996, p. 27.
 35. Raikes and Gibbon, 'Globalization', pp. 86, 53.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 37. Jairus Banaji, 'Globalization and Restructuring in the Indian Food Industry', in Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass, eds., *Agrarian Questions. Essays in Appreciation of T. J. Byres*, London: Frank Cass, 1996, p. 192.
 38. Noted for Latin America more generally by James Petras, 'Latin America: the Resurgence of the Left', *New Left Review*, 223, 1997.
 39. The negative effects of the withdrawal of fertilizer subsidies on maize production in East and Southern Africa are documented in Derek Byerlee and Carl K. Eicher, eds., *Africa's Emerging Maize Revolution*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997, where it provides one source of tension (among others) for the generally neoliberal tenor of the analysis. This does not imply, however, that state support and regulation is all that sustains agricultural petty commodity production, which otherwise would ('naturally?') succumb to the superior efficiency of capitalist farming. This lingering and problematic assumption—derived from 'classic' Marxism—continues to permeate much contemporary materialist analysis of agrarian questions. It is also very difficult to demonstrate empirically, given the wide range of subsidies, direct and indirect, that support large-scale (capitalist) farming in contemporary imperialism, in both core and periphery.
 40. Noted by, among others, Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent. The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
 41. Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour. Working in India's Informal Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
 42. As well as Marx's apparent view that peasants are incapable of effective collective action, expressed in the notorious 'sack of potatoes' metaphor in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970.
 43. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1996, p. 272.
 44. Implicit here is the inadequacy, or historic redundancy, of adherence to the

- Leninist party as the central, or even exclusive, form of organization of socialist politics, typically associated with 'purist' views of the proletarian subject.
45. Cecile Jackson, 'Women/Nature or Gender/History? A Critique of Ecofeminist "Development"', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1993.
 46. On processes of 'deproletarianization', their importance and effects see Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy*.
 47. On Latin America, see for example, Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1981, and with E. Sadoulet and E. Wilcox Young, 'Land and Labour in Latin American Agriculture from the 1950s to the 1980s', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1989; on Africa, Mahmood Mamdani, 'Extreme But Not Exceptional: Towards an Analysis of the Agrarian Question in Uganda', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1987; and Peter Gibbon, 'A Failed Agenda? African Agriculture under Structural Adjustment with Special Reference to Kenya and Ghana', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1992.
 48. For example, on Latin America, Petras 'Latin America', and Tanya Korovkin, 'Weak Weapons, Strong Weapons? Hidden Resistance and Political Protest in Rural Ecuador', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2000; on Africa, Mamdani, 'Extreme But Not Exceptional', and Michael Neocosmos, *The Agrarian Question in Southern Africa and 'Accumulation from Below'*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1993; on South Africa specifically, Richard Levin and Daniel Weiner, 'The Politics of Land Reform in South Africa after Apartheid: Perspectives, Problems, Prospects', in Henry Bernstein, ed., *The Agrarian Question in South Africa*, London: Frank Cass, 1996, and Henry Bernstein, 'Social Change in the South African Countryside? Land and Production, Poverty and Power', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1998.
 49. Petras, 'Latin America', p. 21.
 50. James Petras, 'The Political and Social Basis of Regional Variation in Land Occupations in Brazil', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1998, p. 125.
 51. Petras, 'Latin America', p. 27. Petras also notes the migration to the countryside of unemployed working-class households from provincial cities and towns in Brazil. There are some indications of similar movement from the mining areas of Central and Southern Africa to their historic rural zones of labour supply as mine-workers are retrenched on a large scale. The rural (black) townships of South Africa's highveld (the countryside of 'maize and gold') provided the hubs of massive (and still growing) shack settlements of evicted farm workers and retrenched miners in the 1990s. The politics of coca-growing 'class-conscious miners turned peasants' in Bolivia provides more than one interesting variation on themes of globalization. According to Petras, 'Latin America', pp. 26–9, the radical politics of the *cocaleros* 'involves harnessing ancestral spiritual beliefs to modern forms of class and anti-imperial struggle. Marxist analysis is linked to pre-European values [concerning coca, H.B.] ... While the land issue continues to be important ... the main struggle is for free trade against the US-directed attempt to eradicate coca production'! It is often remarked that the organization of narcotics production and distribution (and laundering of its profits) is a particularly instructive arena of globalization; domestically produced marijuana (mostly by small farmers) and the transit trade in cocaine (sourced in Brazil for European markets) and heroin (sourced in Thailand for European and North American markets),

provide probably the most dynamic and valuable commodities among Africa's 'non-traditional' exports and re-exports today—see Henry Bernstein, 'Ghana's Drug Economy: Some Preliminary Data', *Review of African Political Economy*, 79, 1999.

52. Petras, 'Latin America', p. 19.
53. Petras, 'Political and Social Basis'.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 132.
55. Petras, 'Latin America', pp. 37, 43, 23.
56. Petras, 'Political and Social Basis', p. 130.
57. And that may re-emerge in one form or another as India's agrarian classes experience the effects of globalization, following liberalization of the country's economy from the early 1990s.
58. Tom Brass, 'Introduction' in T. Brass ed., *New Farmers' Movements in India*, London: Frank Cass, 1994, pp. 3–4.
59. Omvedt, 'Sweat of Our Brow', p. 158.
60. Brass, 'Introduction' and 'The Politics of Gender, Nature and Nation in the Discourse of the New Farmers' Movements', and Jairus Banaji, 'The Farmers' Movements: A Critique of Conservative Rural Coalitions', in Brass, *New Farmers' Movements*.
61. Banaji, 'Farmers' Movements', p. 239.
62. Although the decline in servile labour is also much debated, and its unevenness and gendered features widely acknowledged—see Terence J. Byres, Karin Kapadia and Jens Lerche, eds., *Rural Labour Relations in India*, London: Frank Cass, 1999.
63. Lerche, 'Politics of the Poor: Agricultural Labourers and Political Transformations in Uttar Pradesh', in Byres et al., *Rural Labour Relations*, p. 183.
64. Lerche, 'Politics of the Poor', p. 226; the progressive element or effect of BSP electoral successes in Uttar Pradesh is also noted by Banaji, 'Conservative Rural Coalitions', p. 240.