

05. PEASANTRIES

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Research questions and research strategy

A comparative and global analysis of the position of peasant societies within the expanding capitalist world-system from 1500 to 2000 must address three different but interrelated global questions: de-agrarianization, de-ruralization, and de-peasantization¹. We try to understand the different roads of transition via a comparative research design, looking for similar and divergent trajectories of peasant transformation, both in space (zoning within the world-economy) and over time (phases of incorporation). We do this by focusing on three cases: Northwestern Europe (North Sea Basin), the East coast of China (Yangzi River Delta), and Latin America (Central Andean Highlands). They are analyzed via four successive snapshots: circa 1600, 1800, 1900, and 2000.

The choice of the three regions reflects the zoned division within the modern world-system:

- *North Sea Basin (England and the Low Countries)*: a predominantly core region from the late Middle Ages onwards within the (western European) interstate system and the capitalist world-economy (incorporation through core-making processes);
- *Central Andean Highlands (southern contemporary Peru and the western areas of Bolivia)*: from the core of an Andean world-

¹ Our analysis is based on a larger project "The end of peasant societies? A comparative and global research into the decline and disappearance of peasantries and its impact on social relations and inequality, 1500-2000", a research project coordinated by Eric Vanhaute and funded by the Flemish National Science Foundation. The project is summarized in Vanhaute (2008) and Vanhaute (2011). Our analysis here sketches the general outline of the project.

system (Inca empire) to an incorporated and increasingly peripheralized region within the modern world-system since the sixteenth century (incorporation through periphery-making processes);

- *the east coast of China (Yangzi River Delta)*: from being a core region in the East Asian world-system to becoming primarily a peripheral (late nineteenth century) and then a semiperipheral (late twentieth century) zone within the modern world-system (incorporation by inheritance).

Three interlocked dimensions constitute the trajectories of transformation of these rural zones: a) the (re)constitution of the peasant societies - household organization, village systems, regional networks; b) the relations of these rural zones to broader societal structures - trade and commerce networks, fiscal systems, power and property relations; c) the transformation of these societies and the effects on their social relations, survival, and income levels. To understand the interaction between these three dimensions, we analyzed three interlocked research themes: political and economic organization and social power relations; regulation of and access to labor, land, and natural resources; household and village strategies.

An integrated analysis of these themes allows us to address the following questions: What were the trajectories of incorporation of rural zones into the capitalist world-system? How did this incorporation affect the spaces and edges of peasant subsistence systems? Did and do these processes of peasant transformation create a more homogeneous world, or do they feed new trends of heterogenization?

Hypotheses and definitions

Historical capitalism has been at the heart of the permanent (re)creation and marginalization of peasant societies. We define peasants as members of rural, agrarian households who have direct access to land and natural resources. They are organized in family groups and village communities that meet a large part of their subsistence needs (production, exchange, credit, protection), and they pool different forms of income from land, labor, and exchange. They are ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus either via rents, via (unbalanced) market transfers, or through control of state power (taxation). The key analytic issues are the degree of household and local autonomy, the flexible strategies of income-pooling, the household-based village structures, and the surplus extraction that is outside local control.

The long-term decline of the centrality of rural zones has been framed within three interrelated concepts: de-ruralization, de-agrarianization, and de-peasantization. De-ruralization refers to the decline of rural spaces and the growth of "urbanized" zones. De-agrarianization refers to the decline of reliance on agriculture as the principal source of livelihood. De-peasantization refers to the erosion of the family basis of their livelihoods and the commodification of subsistence (see *inter alia* Bryceson 1999, Johnson 2004, Bernstein 2010, and Vanhaute 2011).

The common use of de-peasantization as a unilinear vector of modernization is misleading, ignoring the diversified effects of capitalist expansion on rural societies. Peasantries as a social group are a dynamic social process in themselves. They are "the historical outcome of an agrarian labor 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"

(Bryceson *et al.* 2000: 2-3). This implies that processes of de-peasantization and re-peasantization are the outcome of changing strategies of peasant livelihood diversification. As Van der Ploeg has argued, the re-emergence of twenty-first century peasantries follows the same historical patterns of survival ("self-provisioning") and autonomy ("distantiation"), albeit in different societal settings: "Today's peasantries are actively responding to the processes that otherwise would destroy, by-pass and/or entrap them" (van der Ploeg, 2010: 2, 21).

The long-term process of capitalist expansion has both widened (expansion) and deepened (intensification) relations of commodification. Commodification refers to the commercialization of goods, sold to or bought from external markets. However, the central tendency of capitalism towards generalized commodity production does not mean that all elements of social existence are necessarily and comprehensively commodified (Bernstein 2010). Over time, uneven incorporation has been creating new frontier zones, in which the commodification of subsistence goods is followed by an increasing social and spatial differentiation.

The gradual incorporation of vast rural zones has subjugated, transformed, and sometimes (re)created peasantries. It has put increasing pressure on their bases of existence through the alteration of peasant access to the essential means of production - land, labor, and capital. In general, the survival margins of the former majority of small-scale, diversified, community-based agricultural systems have significantly decreased.

However, we cannot understand the position of the rural zones in the modern world-system in a singular manner. Peasantries over the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of adaptation and resistance. Throughout its

history the expansion of the capitalist world-system has been fueled by the creation of new social and ecological frontier zones, spaces that generated new sources of cheap land, labor, and natural resources (Hall 2000, Moore 2010).

Peasantries have always been a vital frontier zone. The process of incorporation created flows of surplus extraction, without necessarily dispossessing rural producers of their land and other means of production. These dynamic zones of uneven commodification led to new forms of struggle and resistance. That is why trends of homogenization on a macro level can generate new forms of heterogenization on the micro level. The expansion of the global division of labor triggered different paths of de-peasantization and re-peasantization. These differences are a consequence of different balances between internal dynamics (processes of internal change) and external pressure (changes caused by actors outside local society), and/or between peasant modes of extraction (exploiting family labor) versus capitalist production modes (creating capitalist labor relations) (McMichael 2009).

The three cases illustrate the three basic models of the transformation of peasantries in the last five centuries: as internal frontier zones in the core of the modern world-system (incorporation through core-making processes), as newly incorporated frontier zones in the periphery of the modern world-system (incorporation through periphery-making processes), and as external zones to the modern world-system (incorporation by inheritance). In the North Sea region the expansion of zones of capitalist agriculture initiated strong processes of regional and social differentiation. The violent incorporation of the Andean peoples created new intra-regional and inter-regional relationships as part of a process of peripheralization. In the highly commercialized Yangzi River Delta, the trend of growing differentiation was slowed down by

the persistence of both a redistributive state system and kinship and clan networks.

Sixteenth century: regional incorporations

The sixteenth century marked the beginning of fundamental divergences in the development paths. On the eve of the sixteenth century we find a polycentric world with thriving agrarian civilizations all around the world - from East Asia, India, the Middle East and Europe to West Africa and Central and South America (Marks 2007). Most of these regional world-systems were interconnected in supra-regional networks. For thousands of years all these regions were characterized by cyclical changes in climate and population, linked to long-term transformations in political and social organization, economic production, and living standards.

This "biological ancien régime" was organic. It depended on solar energy to grow crops and on wood for fuel. Overall progress was limited due to the physical constraints on such solar energy-based agrarian societies. That is why agrarian systems all over the world lived at more or less the same level. This world of about 450 million people was an overwhelmingly rural one, in which 80-90% of the population lived as peasants. Nearly all of them were located in a handful of civilizations occupying only a small proportion of the earth's surface. These civilizations or empires, and above all the ruling elites, survived on the extraction of surpluses from those who worked the land, mostly via rents to landowners and taxes to the states.

Three of the most important regional systems were the (western) European interstate-system, the Inca empire, and the Chinese empire. On the eve of the sixteenth century, the core areas in these regional systems (North Sea Basin, Central Andean Highlands, and Yangzi River Delta) were all expanding economically and demographically, and increasing their supra-

regional interconnectedness. In all three regions, regional autonomy was combined with a continuing integration in broader commercial networks. They were developing complex societies, with elaborate city-networks, advanced levels of intensive agriculture, and expanding exchange networks.

In the *North Sea Basin* this expansion was related to accelerated processes of market integration and state formation (Dyer 2005, Hoppenbrouwers & Van Zanden 2001, Thoen 2001, Van Bavel 2010, Van Bavel & Hoyle 2010, Vanhaute *et al.* 2011). Historically, England and the Low Countries constituted the core area of the North Sea Basin. From the twelfth to thirteenth centuries onwards they formed the central area of structural transformations in the economy (commercialization), demography (urbanization), and politics (state-building). These regions were comparatively densely populated and highly urbanized. They had a strongly commercialized agriculture, a growing interregional and intercontinental trade system, and intensive industrial production. The transformation in the rural societies generated strong regional differentiation. Zones with capitalist agriculture, dominated by commercial farms and wage labor, developed in the regions bordering the North Sea. These zones were bounded by two types of peasant societies. The first combined small-scale family farming with an expanding proto-industry, thus creating a commercial subsistence economy. More distant, but still integrated in a regional division of labor, we find more autarchic peasant zones with a significant labor surplus.

At the time the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived, the (relatively) densely populated highlands and intermountain valleys of the *Central Andes* constituted the core region of an expanding Inca world-empire. In response to altitudinal zoning, a system of direct (diffusion of colonists) and indirect (long-distance trade) "vertical ecological control" and community-based reciprocal traits, rather than markets,

structured the access of communities to complementary resources (Larson, Harris & Tandeter, ed. 1995; Lehmann, ed. 1982; Masuda et al, eds. 1985; Mayer 2002; Murra 1975; Hirth & Pillsbury 2013). Highly reliant on previous developments, the Incas managed to unify this patchy landscape around a central bureaucracy and a redistributive division of goods and labor (Andrien 2001, Collier, Rosaldo & Wirth 1982). In the sixteenth century the region was incorporated as a peripheral zone in the new European-Atlantic system. This incorporation into the capitalist world-economy and the accompanying Columbian exchange led to a new regional and sectorial differentiation. Serving as the economic backbone of the Spanish metropolis, the mines of Potosí gave rise to a network of regional markets and trade circuits that linked local communities to a silver export economy (Larson, Harris & Tandeter 1995, Assadourian 1982, Garavaglia 1983, Glave 1986). In response to the drastic decline of the native population and in order to facilitate efficient evangelization and labor and tribute extraction, the scattered kin-based ethnic groups were concentrated into Spanish-style villages under local control and cut off from their outlying lands. Local peasant production modes shifted substantially as labor was absorbed by agro-exporting estates (hacienda system) and obligatory service in the mines (mita system) (Aylwin 2002; Bakewell 1984; Carmagnani 1999, Hoberman & Socolow 1996). Although the shift from an auto-sufficient society marked by reciprocity and redistribution into a tributary and mercantile society deeply affected rural Andean life, the integration of the countryside was a process of dynamic encounters rather than of unidirectional imposition.

Since the beginning of the second millennium the *Yangzi River Delta* has been one of the most developed and densely populated regions in East Asia, becoming the agricultural and industrial center in China (Shiba 2000, Fan 2008). For this

region, the final phase of the Ming Dynasty in the sixteenth century was a period of economic and commercial growth based on a well-integrated commodity economy with high land productivity, cash crops, and livestock farming (Liang 1980, Li 1998, Pomeranz 2000, Fan 2005). Cities grew and rural industries flourished. Regional differences were caused by ecological factors (plains, mountains) and reflected a differentiated agricultural output (grains, rice, cotton, mulberry) (Feng 2002). The international trade network, lubricated by silver imported from Japan and the Americas, increased inland commerce and led to a diversified industrial production around Taihu Lake, the Grand Canal, and the Yangzi River (Atwell 1982, Qian & Zheng 1998).

As in most rural societies, families in these regions were organized in small households, knit together in kinship/clan/village systems. These rural and peasant families pooled the fruits of their land with income from a wide range of labor activities. Village communities acted predominantly as informal exchange and credit networks. In the North Sea Basin a growing part of this income came from commodified labor, either in the form of proto-industrial activities or as wage labor outside the farm and village (including migrant labor). The integration in broader economic systems put local exchange networks under growing constraints, resulting in more unequal economic and power relations. Along with a gradual decrease of the commons, land rights became more individualistic (family-based). Proletarianization promoted polarization, with the concentration of village power and the control over village institutions such as poor relief in the hands of land-based oligarchies.

The growth of a flexible and extra-village labor market was much more limited in the Inca and Chinese world-empires. In the Andes, the import of the Spanish village system after the *Conquista* cut through inter-ecological and intra-community

solidarity systems. Although increasingly under pressure, communitarian support systems still relied primarily on pre-colonial mechanisms in the hands of rotating village leadership. Clan loyalties remained strong in the Yangzi River Delta. In periods of social unrest they replaced failing state engagements (Huang 1990, Fuma 2005, Li & Jiang 2000).

In the sixteenth century rural zones in all three areas were subject to new processes of political and economic incorporation, albeit of fundamentally different types. In the North Sea Region the direct impact of (internal) integration in an expanding inter-state and capitalist system resulted in the growing commodification of land, labor, and capital. This accelerated a process of regional and social differentiation. These regional zones and social groups with different production and labor regimes were interconnected through unequal power relations. The North Sea Basin is a typical example of transformation via the formation of new internal frontiers, frontiers that fed the expanding capitalist world-system. In the Andes, the (external) process of incorporation was much more sudden and violent. Processes of commodification were inserted into a village and kin-based rural society. This was accompanied by a regional reorganization of the rural economies, which created a new, external frontier zone. In both western Europe and the Andes, new flows of commodities, capital, and labor reorganized the rural zones with new spatial and social boundaries. The Yangzi River Delta encountered successive processes of increasing and decreasing political incorporation within the context of the Chinese world-empire. The sixteenth century was marked by processes of agricultural and commercial expansion in combination with the dissolution of Ming state structures and a strengthening of local clan systems (Hillman 2004). Structural transformations remained limited.

1800: Global incorporation

In the three centuries after 1500, world population doubled and tensions between peasant producers and ruling elites increased. Shifting power relations sharpened regional differentiation. In general, peasants became more subordinate to landlords and/or the growing power of governments (Tauger 2011). This coincided with an unprecedented expansion of long-distance markets, creating a remarkable differentiation in labor relations - from tributary labor (slavery and indentured labor) to different forms of commodified labor from sharecropping to self-employed market production (Van der Linden 2008). In Europe, increasing pressures of commodification spurred social differentiation in peasant societies. In the Americas, Western explorers, rulers, and investors created a strongly polarized "plantation complex." Chinese Manchurian rulers tried to soften tensions by protecting peasant rights (Goldstone 2009).

In the *North Sea Basin* agrarian capitalism was firmly established by the early nineteenth century (Allen 2009, Hoppenbrouwers & Van Zanden 2001, Overton 1996, Van Bavel & Hoyle 2010, Vanhaute et al. 2011). The combination of labor-employing capitalist farmers and wage laborers was widespread in much of England and in some parts of the European continent. In other regions, peasant market-economies based on household farm work and proto-industrial activities remained predominant. They were based on local credit networks that linked the logic of subsistence farming with the logic of external market production. The economic transformations accompanying industrialization resulted in a massive contraction in the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture, and in a sharp rise in agricultural labor productivity. Around 1800, one agricultural laborer in England and the Low Countries produced enough to support two workers

in manufacturing and services. In the nineteenth century the share of non-agricultural population rose to 60-65%, followed by rapid urbanization.

This process of de-agrarianization started in the areas around the maritime ports of the North Sea Area and, from 1800 onwards, followed the spread of industrialization. By the early nineteenth century, population pressure and economic transformations increasingly affected the fundamentals of the rural economy in western Europe (subsistence farming, commons, village autonomy). This coincided with a deepening social polarization. After 1800, ever larger portions of the rural population could secure their survival only via a deeper exploitation of family labor on small pieces of land, in old and new putting-out industries (such as the clothing and lace industries), and by seasonal agricultural and industrial activities.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Central Andean region* experienced sharp processes of peripheralization. Since the sixteenth century the silver economy organized around Potosí was the centerpiece of the peripheral connection of the Central Andes to core zones and the main shaping force of the Andean peasant (socio-ecological) space (Bonilla 2007: 108, Moore 2011; Tandeter 1995). Colonial reforms initiated a major reconfiguration of the Central Andean rural space towards an incomplete and uneven model of capitalist organization. Peasants were subjected to tribute payments in money, species, and labor, and to evangelization. Indigenous tribute and labor extraction eroded the village community, instigating market participation and shaping the space for new community survival systems (Larson, Harris & Tandeter 1995). In late colonial times, peasant economies faced increasing levels of surplus extraction by an interventionist Bourbon state, a system of coerced commodity commerce (*reparto de mercancías*) and ethnic

authorities (kurakas), erupting in the great Andean rebellions of 1780-81 (Andrien 2001, Garrido 2001, Golte 1980, Stern 1987, Stavig & Schmidt 2008). Indigenous groups were gradually pushed to the margins of the markets to which they had adapted as traders and transporters, initiating a long transition phase until the second half of the nineteenth century (Larson 1995, 1998; Langer 2004). From the 1780s on, the declining silver economy and the chaotic transition to independence shifted further the position of the Central Andes, which became a periphery of the periphery. State revenues would continue to depend almost exclusively on indigenous contributions until the export boom of the second half of the nineteenth century, indirectly contributing to a ruralization of Andean national economies (Langer 2004, Larson 2004, Platt 1982).

During the Ming Dynasty the peasants in the *Yangzi River Delta* strongly increased agricultural outputs by reclaiming new land, planting new crops, and adapting labor-intensive techniques (Huang 1990, Pomeranz 2000). After 1644, Manchu rulers promoted a massive change in class structure and power relations, followed by rapid economic and demographic growth (Ho 2000, Gao 2005, Goldstone 2009). Many peasants acquired property rights, strengthening Qing autocratic rule. This agricultural and demographic expansion increased pressure on the use of public goods, such as water and commons management, market infrastructure, public relief, social safety, and education. The local clan elites played an important role in safeguarding village credit networks, in preserving the environment, and in land redistribution. This did not prevent the decay of rural institutions in the nineteenth century, leading to peasant bankruptcies and to the dismantlement of village communities. The local gentry left for the cities and rural common interests were neglected (Qian & Zheng 1998). This

implosion of Chinese peasant societies preceded the process of the incomplete incorporation and peripheralization of China.

1900: Imperialist intensification

As of 1900 only about 15% of the world's population were living in urban areas. Twelve cities had more than one million inhabitants. By 1950 the ratio of urban population has doubled to 30% and the number of cities with over one million people had grown to 83. This overall trend is the outcome of divergent paths of transformation. From the 1870's, a "first global food regime" based on a settler-colonial model created a new global division of agricultural labor (McMichael 2009). The colonial/imperialist project implied control over labor in the rural zones in the global South. This required a direct intervention in the rural institutions and practices of land allocation and use, sometimes destroying them, sometimes modifying them. Rural regions specialized either in grain and meat production (extra-European settler economies), or in tropical export crops (colonial Asia and Africa, and former colonies in Latin America), both via plantations and via forced peasant production.

This imposed the commodification of peasant and settler farming and facilitated the creation of industrial plantations. In Latin America's process of brutal peripheralization, peasantries adapted to encroaching processes of commodification, while in China the implosion of rural societies foreshadowed the painful process of an indirect incorporation. In the western European core, peasant societies crumbled and were absorbed by "modernized" economic and political structures.

By the 1870s markets in the *North Sea Region* were liberalized. Large-scale grain and food imports provoked a fall in market prices, and the number of farmers started to

decline (Overton 1996, Van Bavel & Hoyle 2010, Vanhaute et al. 2011). Surviving family farms were reoriented towards commercial crops and raising livestock. In these farming households, family labor was more and more restricted to the nuclear household, gradually excluding all forms of labor exchange with other family and non-family relations. Ever more inputs came from outside the farm and the village, making farmers more dependent on external factors. New types of farmers' organizations succeeded in filling the gap, via cooperatives for the purchase of fertilizers and livestock feed, savings and loan cooperatives, cooperative dairy farms, and mutual insurances.

The farmers unions presented themselves as the political representatives of the farmers, and efficiently supported their members through the process of modernization. Non-agricultural alternatives, such as sub-contracting production, commuting, and new industrial activities relieved the growing tension between labor and income. Expelled surplus labor could largely be absorbed by urban and rural industrialization and by the new service sectors. Rural society separated into a smaller fraction of market-oriented specialized family farmers and a growing number of households pooling their own farm income with outside agriculture and other employment outside the village economy. Villages in these regions suburbanized, becoming part of bigger systems of employment, transport, and provisioning. Regional differences were gradually blotted out in favor of a much more uniform "sub-rural/sub-urban" society. In the longer run, the fact that the majority of rural households broke their ties with agriculture paved the way to a continuous rise in economic welfare in twentieth-century western Europe.

In the post-independence *Andean Highlands*, colonial power relations were reproduced at the local level by new rural provincial elites, at the national level by oligarchic and new

capitalist elites basing their power on land and mining, and at the international level by foreign capitalist entrepreneurs. The attempts to create a land market and convert indigenous commoners into a smallholder class in the late nineteenth century, however largely frustrated, substantially altered Amerindian-State (tributary) relations and heightened rural unrest (Jackson 1997, Larson 2004, Mallon 1995, Platt 1982, Stern 1987, Yopez del Castillo 1972, Thurner 1997). Liberal reforms and the shift to free trade policies went accompanied by pressures towards the enclosure, displacement, and absorption of rural communities by the world market and its local agents (Larson 2004). However, the indigenous community was able to negotiate, escape and resist these commodification projects rather than yielding to one-sided incorporation or isolation (Baud 2009, Grieshaber 1980, Jacobsen 1993, Klein 1993, Langer 1989, Mallon 1983, Moreno & Salomon 1991, Platt 1984, Rivera 1987).

After the 1840s, the process of indirect incorporation confined China to a peripheral position in the capitalist world-economy. Agricultural and industrial performance deteriorated in the *Yangzi River Delta*. In the early twentieth century, a new wave of innovation launched the modernization of China's agriculture. A cooperative rural reconstruction movement filled the gap left by failing state power. This could not stop rising social vulnerability and polarization (Wang 2003). The rural areas were not able to absorb the growing supply of labor. Social differences in the villages increased, and a rural exodus loosened community ties.

2000: Neo-liberal intensification

In 2000 almost half of the earth's population resided in urbanized settings. Only 42% still lived predominantly from agricultural labor. One is tempted to see this as a central

vector of convergence in the contemporary world, incorporated in a single capitalist world-system. However, beneath the overall trend of contraction of rural/peasant zones, one discerns striking regional differences. Between 1950 and 2000 the disparity in agricultural population ratios between "highest income" and "lowest income" countries increased from circa 1-4 in 1960 (19% and 78%) to circa 1-20 in 2000 (3% and 59%). This went along with opposite trends in land/labor intensity. While in the global North the long-term trend was one of labor saving, in the global South more agricultural workers were employed per unit of farmland in 2000 than in 1950. These divergences are part of a shared experience of a more global and more entangled corporate food regime, shrinking the margins for peasant and family farming. While peasant farming in the global North virtually disappeared, in the global South large parts of rural and urban populations clinged to small-scale agricultural production. Neoliberal globalization included a shift towards a corporate regulation of the global food economy, with an increasing concentration of global firms in both agri-input and agri-food industries, and an ongoing and deepening commodification of peasant subsistence in the global South.

In the *North Sea Region*, the development of a European agricultural policy in the 1950s sealed the breakthrough of a highly commercialized, industrialized, and interconnected agricultural sector (Van Bavel & Hoyle 2010, Vanhaute et al. 2011). The remaining small farmers were pushed out, except for those who switched to producing high-value, capital-intensive crops and livestock. Labor was replaced by machinery. Increasing farm sizes required farmers to have more capital resources at their disposal.

While in Europe farmers as a social group disappeared from the social radar at both village and national levels, in the *Andes* the socioeconomic and political emancipation of

indigenous peasants gained major impetus (Stern 1987, Larson 2004, Gotkowitz 2007). Peasant mobilization was triggered by servile labor relations, extreme land concentration, and syndical organization around the middle of the twentieth century. Land and constitutional reforms enhanced formal and individualizing land and civil rights, but failed to halt land fragmentation, extreme poverty, and marginalization, and generally favored capitalist production (Kay 1998, Mayer et al. 2009 for Peru; Urioste et al. 2007 for Bolivia). Although the majority of the Andean population still lived in indigenous peasant communities in the Altiplano and valleys, demographic pressures in combination with large-scale mining and small-scale agriculture prohibited further expansion of the agricultural frontier. This led to de-ruralization, intra/inter community conflicts, and massive migration towards the lowlands, coastal and urban areas, and abroad. Environmental degradation, climate change, and migration were changing the face of the Andean countryside. There was a widening socio-economic gap, particularly between the rural and the urban zones. Social conflicts marked the enduring processes of peripheralization.

After 1950 the Communist state apparatus in China tried to speed up the processes of de-ruralization and de-peasantization in the *Yangzi River Delta* (MacFarquhar 1997). The household-based peasant system was replaced by a collective production system. Landlords were eliminated after a process of mass collectivization. Through highly centralized social institutions, the rural cadres of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled social and economic resources, which greatly strengthened the state's social mobilization capacity. After the 1980s, peasants gradually privatized land use rights in practice, and an agricultural marketing system was gradually rebuilt (Carter et al. 1996). The people's communes were replaced by a "town-level government plus village-

autonomy." However, social and economic stress on the rural society increased heavily during the last decades of the twentieth century. Local governments were trying to raise land-based revenues by enlarging farms and increasing mechanization. Massive migration flowing from villages to cities fuelled the most radical process of de-ruralization up to then. The imbalanced rural/urban growth fundamentally undermined the basis of social order in rural areas, increasing social inequality and social protest.

Trajectories of peasant transformation: distinct stories in a single narrative

The incorporation of rural zones in the capitalist world-economy has thoroughly redefined and recreated the spaces and boundaries of peasant survival systems. The decline of both its agrarian organization as its family and village basis has fundamentally altered the strategies of livelihood diversification. The uneven nature of the processes of incorporation and commodification has fuelled divergent trajectories of peasant transformation and created new social and ecological frontier zones. All world regions encountered between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries new and more intensive forms of social and geographical polarization, albeit in strongly different manners. The breakthrough of commercial and agricultural capitalism in the North Sea Area and of a trans-Atlantic trade system in the long sixteenth century thoroughly reconfigured peasant zones in both core and peripheries. Inequality increased, within and between regions. Core processes of incorporation in western Europe could eventually absorb the impact of uneven economic and social growth. Peasant zones differentiated into a small fraction of commercial farmers and a large non-agricultural labor force. Peripheral processes of incorporation, such as in the Andean

Highlands, had a disastrous impact on the regional rural systems, brutally redirecting them towards the needs of the metropolis. This process was not at all unilinear or equal. Although it gradually weakened the capacity of peasant livelihood diversification, it also created new spaces of interaction, survival and resistance.

The long-term transformation of peasant communities in the Yangzi River Delta was rooted in the gradual decline of the inclusive and protective policies of the Chinese empires. This process was amplified by the indirect, unequal incorporation of China. This triggered new forms of social tension, to which the new republican and communist states responded inadequately. The rural-urban gap has become a crucial determinant in the fast growing inequality in China.

The "long twentieth century" corporate food regime globalized through waves of imperialist and neo-liberal intensification the North Sea geo-model of a core of capital intensive market production with peasant-based export cum survival zones at the edges. This restructuring and intensification of core-periphery relations created new divergences both in the rural economy as in peasant societies.

The disappearance of peasantries in Europe, the reconfiguration of rural societies in China, and the struggle to formulate new peasant responses to peripheral positions in Latin America are all part of the changing global geo-system of the early twenty-first century. This has greatly strengthened global inequality.

Contrary to the (semi-)urbanized labor force in the global North, the rural workers of the global South have to pursue their reproduction through increasingly insecure, oppressive, and scarce wage employment and/or a range of precarious small scale and "informal economy" survival activities, including marginal farming. Peasant livelihoods strategies remain a central part of twenty-first century global capitalism, both

as means of survival, and as ammunition for new forms of resistance.