

Eric Vanhaute

### 3.1. Agriculture

Peasants are workers of the land. They live in rural, agricultural households that have direct access to the land they work, either as common users, tenants, or small-holders. They are organized in family bonds, village communities, and social groups, which we call peasantries. These bonds pool different forms of income and meet a major portion of their subsistence needs via networks of production, exchange, credit, and protection. Most of the time, peasantries have been ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus either via rents, via market transfers, or through control of public power (taxation). Key terms are (a degree of) household and local autonomy, direct access to land and labour resources, flexible strategies of income-pooling, household-based village structures, and surplus extraction outside local control.<sup>1</sup> Differences between peasants, market-driven farmers, and industrial or entrepreneurial farming must be understood on a continuous scale. The primacy of subsistence production, household labour, and local community relations is the main discriminating variable. As a rule, peasant labour relations comprise a mix of activities, including subsistence farming, market production, and agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour. Peasantries are not undifferentiated social entities; they include middle and small peasant farmers, and self-employment and waged labour in combination with subsistence farming. Because peasant households combine multiple income strategies, peasantries cross all categories in the taxonomy of *the Global Col-laboratory on the History of Labour Relations*, except the group of ‘non-working’.<sup>2</sup>

Peasantries have been the largest and most important social group in human history. Until the end of the twentieth century, agricultural work was the main profession around the world. Although employment growth in agriculture has slowed, farming remains the world’s largest economic sector. Still more than thirty percent of the world population, about 2.5 billion people, is economically dependent on agricultural production as a source of income. Agriculture employs over 1.3 billion people throughout the world, or close to forty percent of the global workforce. This goes up to seventy-five percent in the poorer nations.<sup>3</sup> Most of these men and women work as peasant farmers or as agricultural wage labourers. Both in developing and devel-

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1 This equals Eric Wolf’s ‘fund of rent’ that distinguishes the peasant from the ‘primitive cultivator’. In his book *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966) Wolf asserts that after ensuring their own survival, peasants must put any surplus to three uses: 1) Ceremonial fund (social and religious activities), 2) Replacement fund (repair/replacement for future production), 3) Rent fund (payment for use of land and/or equipment). See also Eric Vanhaute, “Peasants, Peasantries and (De)peasantization in the Capitalist World-system”, in: Salvatore J. Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn (eds), *Routledge Handbook of World-systems Analysis* (London and New York, 2012), pp. 313–321.

2 <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations>.

3 FAO, *State of Food and Agriculture 2015*; <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofa/2015/en>.

oped countries, peasant farming remains the predominant form of agriculture in the food production sector.<sup>4</sup> According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), today more than 570 million farms exist throughout the world, from which more than ninety percent are managed and operated by a family and predominantly rely on family labour—carried out by both women and men.<sup>5</sup> Peasant or family farms remain by far the most prevalent form of agriculture in the world. Estimates suggest that they occupy around seventy to eighty percent of farm land and produce more than eighty percent of the world's food in value terms. The vast majority of the world's farms are small or very small, and in many lower-income countries farm sizes are becoming even more miniscule. Worldwide, farms of less than one hectare account for seventy-two percent of all agricultural holdings but control only eight percent of all agricultural land. In contrast, only one percent of all farms in the world are larger than fifty hectares, but they control sixty-five percent of the world's agricultural land. Of the world's 570 million farms, almost seventy-five percent are in Asia (thirty-five percent in China, twenty-four percent in India), nine percent in sub-Saharan Africa, four percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and four percent in high-income countries.

Rural labour markets are much more extensive and differentiated than often perceived. They include a small stratum of commercially-oriented smallholders and owners of medium- and large-sized farms, and a growing mass of wage labourers, many of whom still cling to small plots of land as part of their livelihoods. This is a large, poorly paid, footloose reserve army of labour, either confined to local labour markets, or part of a migratory labour force reliant on seasonal and casual wage labour, in both agriculture and the rural nonfarm sectors.<sup>6</sup> According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), roughly 500 million agricultural workers are employed as casual and temporary workers by small and large growers. This includes women and children, both constituting up to thirty percent of the total group. Rural wage workers are engaged in a highly diverse range of work experiences and conditions, often mixing agricultural and non-agricultural activities as well as wage labour and subsistence activities on small plots. It is difficult to identify distinct groups based on the continuum from small peasant families relying predominantly on subsistence agriculture, over self-employed labour, to households of landless wage labourers.

While the number of workers in agriculture is expected to decline over time, the share of the working poor in the sector will rise. Particularly in the Global South, the inherently uncertain nature of agricultural work continues to promote subjection to

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<sup>4</sup> FAO, *Towards stronger family farms*, 2014; <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4171e.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2014. Innovation in family farming*; <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4040e.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Carlos Oya, *Rural Labour Markets in Africa: The Unreported Source of Inequality and Poverty* (Department of Development Studies, SOAS); <https://www.soas.ac.uk/cdpr/publications/dv/file63653.pdf>.

volatile prices, low wages, deficient labour regulations, dangerous working conditions, and a high incidence of child and forced labour. This coincides with a process of feminization of agriculture, referring to women's increasing participation in the agricultural labour force, whether as independent producers, as unremunerated family workers, or as agricultural wage workers. Today, women comprise an average of forty-three percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, varying considerably across regions from twenty percent or less in Latin America to fifty percent or more in parts of Asia and Africa. Nonetheless, women farmers control less land and have more restricted access to inputs, seeds, and credits. Less than twenty percent of landholders are women. Gender differences in access to land and credit still affect the relative ability of female and male farmers and entrepreneurs to invest and benefit from new economic opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

The world of today mirrors a major trend in historical capitalism. Capitalist expansion induced a highly divergent range of labour regimes and systems of recruiting, organising, and reproducing labour. Most regimes combine subsistence with commodity production; fully proletarianized wage labour still only makes up a minority today.<sup>8</sup> These labour systems include so-called free (waged, unbound) labour, forced labour (by tribute, taxation, and forced labour service) and semi-proletarian labour (wage labour plus subsistence production). Many researchers have stressed the centrality of coercion in the massive group of *subaltern workers*, including peasant populations. Every person whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion belongs to this class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether he or she is a free labourer or owns/controls part of the means of production.<sup>9</sup> Within the variety of labour regimes that exist, boundaries are flexible and sometimes vague. Moreover, individual relations are embedded in household-based and group-based networks. 'The partiality of wage labour' is especially clear from a household perspective, since a large majority of households has never been solely dependent on wage labour incomes.<sup>10</sup> Non-wage labour has been an essential part of capitalist reproduction; it produces 'cheap labour', it creates part of the surplus, and it absorbs part of the costs (of care and reproduction).

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, "Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-economy", in: Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-economy* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 283–293; Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the world. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), pp. 291–292.

<sup>9</sup> Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, pp. 33–35.

<sup>10</sup> Wilma A. Dunaway, "The Centrality of the Household to the Modern World-system", in: Babones and Chase-Dunn, *Routledge Handbook of World-systems Analysis* (London and New York, 2012), pp. 453–459; Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds), *Creating and Transforming Households. The Constraints of the World-economy* (Cambridge, 1992).

## Peasant worlds and peasant work

The minimum social conditions for farming include access to land, labour, tools, and seeds. Historically, the principal social units through which the means of farming have been secured were the rural household and the village household system, both varying greatly in size, composition, and social relations through time and space. For a long time, intellectuals aimed to describe and understand the ‘distinctness’ of the peasantry, to explore the ‘essence’ of the peasant, the “countryman working on the land”, and “member of the class of farm labourers and small farmers”.<sup>11</sup> Disdain toward the peasants has been part of the discourse of the wealthy, the powerful, and the literate in the West for a long time.<sup>12</sup> The dualistic and biased images of the rural versus non-rural worlds can be traced back to the origin of the concepts of *pagensis/paysan(ne)/paisano(a)/peasant*, meaning from the pays, the countryside. In the Anglo-Saxon version peasant continues to keep its narrow meaning, basically pointing at the eras of so-called feudalism, and referring to social groups from the (far away) past. Even in its broadest usage, such as *campesino(a)* in Latin America, peasants have been viewed as remnants of the past.<sup>13</sup> In nineteenth and twentieth century modernisation thinking, the peasant as a kind of archetypical rural producer represented the starting point on the axis of evolution: the traditional community and the opposite of modernity. Western-based historiography has long developed and described the ‘anti-modern’ model of a ‘familistic’ (family-based) society as a relatively undifferentiated economy of family farms and rural crafts and services, structured by internal agencies such as family, kinship, and village. In the 1960s and 1970s, the rediscovery of the works of the Russian agrarian economist and rural sociologist Alexander V. Chayanov (1888–1937) triggered a new wave of peasant studies and a renewed debate about the nature of peasant societies. The rural anthropologist Eric Wolf and rural sociologist Theodor Shanin, amongst others, moved this debate beyond a-historical and dichotomist representations.<sup>14</sup> The question is not whether peasants are naturally conservative, values-rational, safety-oriented investors in their land and labour or whether they tend to be risk-taking, market-oriented maximizers. They were and continue to be both. They are “rural cultivators whose

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<sup>11</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford, CA, 1999). “The point is that farmers figure as examples, as stereotypes, that had nothing to do with the daily work experience and actual living conditions of real people.” Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts. Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Annette Desmarais, *Globalization and the Power of Peasants. La Vía Campesina*, (Halifax, 2007), pp. 195–198.

<sup>14</sup> Wolf, *Peasants*; Theodor Shanin, “Measuring Peasant Capitalism”, in: E.J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds), *Peasants in History. Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 89–104; Theodor Shanin, “Introduction. Peasantry as a Concept”, in: Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and Peasant Societies. Selected readings* (Oxford and New York, 1987).

surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in return.”<sup>15</sup> That is why peasants—contrary to Eric Wolf’s primitive cultivators—only exist within a social formation: peasantries, and within a class relationship: the subordination to lords, government/state authorities, and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and social differentiation.

Peasant households are basic economic units and the gateway to the wider world. They pursue an agricultural livelihood by combining subsistence and commodity production, through direct access to nature, land, labour, and commodities. Together with extended families, kinship, and village societies they are the vital nodes of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare, credit, and risk-spreading. Peasant worlds are built on peasant work. Work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services.<sup>16</sup> In the last three centuries, the use value of work has been increasingly defined in terms of economic independence; economic activities taking place in manifold and extended subsistence networks are increasingly labelled as worthless or even as forms of idleness.<sup>17</sup> The differentiation between work and non-work is an invention of industrial society, together with a growing emphasis on different social meanings of work and on different gender roles. This fixation has seriously affected our view of peasant worlds and peasant work. The economic roles that different household and community members take on are not fixed nor permanent. They signify a transient social relationship, one that can be replaced rather quickly by other sources of labour and income. That is why the dividing lines between paid and non-paid work, between workers in the rural and non-rural worlds, between visible (registered) and hidden labour, and between free and unfree labour are fuzzy at best.<sup>18</sup> Peasant labour should be understood within the dialectics between humans and nature, to put it with the famous words of Marx: “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. [...] By this acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.”<sup>19</sup> Through these sets of relations work/nature is transformed into value, which can be appropriated via coercive (non-economic) means, or capitalized as commodified labour-

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<sup>15</sup> Wolf, *Peasants*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lis and Soly, *Worthy Efforts*, e.g., p. 3, p. 569.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (Fall 2012), pp. 57–76.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital. Volume One. Part III: The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value. Chapter Seven: The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value. Section 1: The Labour-Process or the Production of Use-Values* [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>].

power.<sup>20</sup> In the end, the valorisation of labour-power always causes the appropriation of unpaid work/energy from nature, including human/peasant work.

## Peasant transformation and the agrarian question

Peasantries create societies, and societies create peasantries. Surplus production from the land is a precondition for large-scale societal change. Societal change is necessary to group the agricultural producers into peasantries. Agricultural-based economic systems facilitate vaster communal units and extended village networks. This provokes profound changes in the structure of social relations, population growth, and village and supra-village institutions.<sup>21</sup> Like every social formation, peasantries develop as sets of social relationships. Peasant transformation has often been framed in dichotomous and predominantly a-historical models.<sup>22</sup> Market versus non-market relations, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, modern versus traditional societal arrangements – a long tradition of rural sociology is grafted upon these dichotomies. Concepts as traditional, survival, subsistence, or informal economies have not been very helpful to understand social change in a world-historical context. They freeze peasants's history in dualistic frames and fail to grasp the dynamics and changes within peasant societies. When survival and subsistence refer to self-supporting at a level at which the bare minimum is produced and there is little or no surplus, peasant economies do not fit these typologies. On the contrary, they are rooted in a wide variety of reciprocal exchanges, that integrate different spaces in networks of mutual obligations, and regional and extra-regional market transactions and public retributions. Ultimately, peasantry has often been considered to be a class whose significance inevitably diminishes with the further development of capitalism.

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**20** Jason Moore, "Cheap Food and Bad Climate. From Surplus Value to Negative-Value in the Capitalist World-Ecology", *Critical Historical Studies*, 2, 1 (2015), p. 3. [<http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads>]

**21** Paul Brassley and Richard Soffe, *Agriculture. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2016); Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *A History of World Agriculture. From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis* (London and Sterling, VA, 2006).

**22** These models are framed in the tradition of modernization theories, de/prescribing a progressive transition from a 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' to a 'modern' society; see e.g., Jan K. Coetzee, J. Graaff, G. Wood, F. Hendricks, *Development: Theory, Policy and Practice* (Cape Town, 2002). Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966) argued the centrality of struggle between classes of pre-capitalist landed property and (peasant) agrarian labour in the differential paths of state formation in the modern world. Seth La-Anyane, *Economics of Agricultural Development in Tropical Africa* (Chichester, 1985), highlights the stereotypes of modernization theory.

For more than a century, debates about this ‘agrarian question’ have been dominated by two groups of protagonists.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, the *disappearance thesis* defends that the inevitable expansion of capitalism will lead to the extermination of the peasantry. Following Lenin and Kautsky, the former, more or less undifferentiated class of peasants is transformed into new, distinct groups: capital owners (capitalist farmers) and wage labourers. On the other hand, advocates of the *permanence thesis* argue that, according to Chayanov’s peasant mode of production, peasant societies have a distinct developmental logic that supports the survival of the peasantry within capitalism. A central question behind this debate is if and how peasants, who made up the vast majority of the population in former agrarian societies, thereby sustaining and reproducing both themselves and the dominant classes and institutions, still can be perceived as a social group within the contemporary globalizing and de-ruralizing world. Do peasantries still constitute a general (and generic) social group, determined by a set of distinct qualities, from household subsistence over village solidarity to social/ecological harmony, as opposed to other social groups such as rural proletarians and market-oriented farmers?<sup>24</sup> The search for ‘peasant essentialism’ has been apparent in both historical (peasants as pre-capitalist survivors) and contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. Post-modern and globalization studies have often amplified the thesis of *the end of peasantries* while sometimes dismissing the concept of the peasant altogether.

Both the teleological (disappearance as social group) and the essentialist (survival as a *sui generis* group) views have been suffering from a-historical and often functionalistic presumptions.<sup>25</sup> Historically, the processes of peasant transformation have neither been unilinear nor have they taken fixed forms of social differentiation over time and space. In this sense peasantry is an open process that interacts within multiple forms and scales of conflict and interaction and leaves room for different levels of autonomy. The concepts of *peasantization*, *de-peasantization* and *re-peasantization* refer to the ongoing processes of creation, decline, adaptation, and resistance. Throughout history, peasantries have been the historical outcome of labour and income processes that are constantly adjusted to surrounding conditions, such as fluctuations of markets, state control, technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. Rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status only gradually over time.<sup>26</sup> However, the combined processes of overburdening, restricting, and reducing peasant spaces have considerably

23 Farshad Araghi, “Global Depeasantization, 1945–1990”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36 (1995), pp. 601–632.

24 Henry Bernstein, “Farewells to the Peasantry”, p. 10; Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (Halifax and Winnipeg, 2010), pp. 110–112.

25 John R. Owen, “In Defense of the ‘Peasant’”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 35, 3 (2005), pp. 368–385.

26 Deborah Fahy Bryceson, Cristobal Kay and Jos Mooij (eds), *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London, 2000).



weakened their material basis in the last few centuries. The concept of de-peasantization refers to this multi-layered processes of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It is increasingly difficult to combine subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organisation based on family labour and village community settlement.<sup>27</sup> This has triggered a further diversification of rural coping mechanisms, including petty commodity production, rural wage labour, seasonal migration, sub-contracting to national and multinational corporations, self-employment, remittances, and transregional and transnational income transfers. So-called de-peasantization very often hides more diversified and more precarious labour and income strategies developed by the peasantry. Moreover, processes of de-agrarianization in the core zones often coincide with the creation of new peasantries in the periphery. Recent forces of de-agrarianization are triggered by the enforcement of neo-liberal policies and structural adjustment programmes. In many parts of the periphery, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being. This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification such as taking up non-farming activities and relying on non-farming income transfers.<sup>28</sup>

## Peasant frontiers and peasant regimes

The survival and persistence of peasantries in a globalizing and ever more commodified world has been puzzling social scientists for a long time now. Time and again, the demise of the peasant was announced by intellectuals, capitalists, reformers, and development planners alike.<sup>29</sup> The very notion of peasants and peasantries confronts us with the flaws of traditional/orthodox economic development theories. The mainstream image of the fate of peasants and peasantries is still based on the standard story of the much-praised English road to capitalist agriculture, and the concurrent disintegration of peasant societies. Recent history has shown that the English and Western European experience of the dissolution of peasant societies within the context of expanding industrial and welfare economies is not and cannot be the general example for the rest of the world. When we look beyond the old premises of westernized development, we see a very different picture. It is a picture of vast, family-based, rural, and agricultural economies, in which diversified production chains

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<sup>27</sup> Deborah Fahy Bryceson, *African Rural Labour, Income Diversification and Livelihood Approaches. A Long-term Development Perspective* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1999), p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Ellis, "Agrarian Change and Rising Vulnerability in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa", *New Political Economy*, 11, 3 (2006), pp. 387–397, at 393.

<sup>29</sup> For example, in his acclaimed 1994 book *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that "the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry". Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London, 1994), p. 289.



and multiple strategies of risk minimization are pooled with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems.<sup>30</sup>

The fate of rural societies in the past and today cannot be understood in a singular manner. Understanding multiple trajectories of peasant change requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term and world-wide economic and social transformations. Peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of accommodation, adaptation, and resistance. The expansion of civilizations, states, imperialism, socialism, and global capitalism triggered different paths of peasant transformation, of processes of peasantization, de-peasantization, and re-peasantization. Peasants's history is the history of the struggle over the fruits of their labour. In agricultural societies, social relations are built on the returns of the land to support and reproduce institutions and norms that define new rules of ownership, inheritance, transmission, and control. Peasants gain a substantial part of their income from direct access to products that are a result of the input of their labour on the land; any loss implies a notable decline in their living standards. Peasantries not only feed civilizations, empires, states, and economies. They support their ecological and social resilience and fuel their expansion. Gradual processes of incorporation disclose new supplies of labour, land, and nature, which are mobilised in new production processes.<sup>31</sup> The incorporation of rural zones and the creation of new peasantries have been central to the expansion of global capitalism. In most societal settings, these zones are integrated as loci of appropriation of the produce of land and labour and as peripheral spaces of production, exploitation, and recreation. Peasantries are thus primary frontiers in societal expansion. Their partial incorporation as producers of new surpluses instigates mixed, complex, and often opposing processes of restructuring, generating a multiplicity of rural frontier zones. Capitalist incorporation and expansion is fuelled by the opening of the *Great Frontier*, a metaphor for an intensifying and interconnected world-wide set of new and shifting frontiers. This instigates an intensifying process of exhaustion of both land and labour, and the appropriation of new frontiers of what Jason Moore coins as *uncapitalized nature*. New frontiers are opened, their 'free gifts' (of land, labour, nature) identified, mapped, secured, and appropriated.<sup>32</sup> This massive process of creating new commodity frontiers

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**30** See, amongst others, Miguel Altieri and Clara Nicholls, *Agroecology and the Search for a Truly Sustainable Agriculture* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); Philip McMichael, "Peasants Make Their Own History, But Not Just as They Please ...", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8, 2–3 (2008), pp. 205–228; Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg, "The Peasantries of the Twenty-first Century: The Commoditisation Debate Revisited", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37, 1 (2010), pp. 1–30.

**31** Jason Moore, "Cheap Food and Bad Money. Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 33, 2–3 (2010), pp. 225–261, at 245; Edward B. Barbier, *Scarcity and Frontiers. How Economies Have Developed through Natural Resource Exploitation* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 7.

**32** Moore, "Cheap Food and Bad Climate", pp. 20–21.

and the gradual commodification of the global countryside have opened up an unseen bounty of nature, land, and labour's rewards, fuelling globalizing capitalism.

Peasant change has often been understood from a post-hoc perspective. It gets its meaning from the outcome we measure. Agrarian and farming systems are an influential ordering tool in agricultural and rural history. Research concentrates on the organization, functioning, and outcomes of subsequent systems, with a strong focus on ecology, technology, and farming practices. This often results in models of evolution, classification, and differentiation of agrarian systems in a given region or within the world.<sup>33</sup> Social-ecological agrosystems describe rural production networks as sets of region-specific social power relations shaping the economic reproduction of a given geographical area. They are the theoretical expression of historically constituted and geographically localized types of agriculture and ecological and social (re) production systems.<sup>34</sup> In a global-comparative context, these typologies are frequently based on Eurocentric models and understood in *a priori* historical sequences. This risks creating new myths that underpin existing power relations and legitimizing discourses both in academic knowledge and in applied fields such as development work.<sup>35</sup> Time and again, bottom-up research discloses that agrarian and peasant regimes cannot be predicted from environmental, demographic, or evolutionary contexts.

In order to make sense of social change in a broad time/space span we can frame social realities in a genealogy of evolving and changing *peasant regimes*.<sup>36</sup> The peasant regime is a tool to contextualise and understand how peasantries in a certain time/space are (internally) organized and (externally) embedded. Each regime embodies an institutionalization of economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological forces that structures internal and external peasant relations. It organizes forms and relations of production, reproduction, exchange, and extraction. It defines how these

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Mazoyer and Roudart, *History of World Agriculture*, pp. 21–23; Guy M. Robinson, *Geographies of Agriculture. Globalisation, Restructuring and Sustainability* (Harlow, 2004), pp. 1–29; Mark B. Tauger, *Agriculture in World History* (London and New York, 2010), pp. 2–3.

<sup>34</sup> Erik Thoen, “‘Social Agrosystems’ as an economic concept to Explain Regional Differences. An Essay Taking the Former County of Flanders as an Example (Middle Ages-19th Century)”, in B.J.P. van Bavel and P. Hoppenbrouwers (eds), *Landholding and Land Transfer in the North Sea Area (Late Middle Ages-19th Century)* (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 47–66; Erich Landsteiner and Ernst Langthaler (eds), *Agrosystems and Labour Relations in European Rural Societies (Middle Ages–Twentieth Century)* (Turnhout, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Mats Widgren, “Four Myths in Global Agrarian History”, in M. Bondesson, A. Jarrick and J. Myrdal (eds), *Critical Studies in World History* (Lund, forthcoming); online manuscript: <https://stockholm.university.se/shared/static/bp0kb081zko2onfunx1zbzeuekxr4bm.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> I borrow the concept of genealogy from Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY, 1980), pp. 139–164. “Genealogy [...] rejects the meta-historical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies [...]. Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity [...]. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people.” (pp. 140, 146).

relations are ordered and represented (or legitimized) via structures of power and forms of hegemony. A genealogy of peasant regimes claims that episodes of restructuring and transition are bounded by more stable periods of regulation and organization, albeit in a non-determined way. The genealogy of societal regimes provides a global comparative-historical lens on the social, economic, political, and ecological relations of agrarian empires and global capitalism.<sup>37</sup> It aims at a non-hierarchical, non-evolutionary, and non-deterministic interpretation of global social change. Despite huge differences in time and space, these peasant regimes are mostly defined by gradual peasant incorporation into wider social systems, indirect political control, and coerced extraction of land and labour surpluses via taxes, tributes, rents, and confiscations.<sup>38</sup> The invention of private property and the commodification of the countryside mark the beginning of capitalist expansion, accelerating in the long sixteenth century. Within capitalism, peasant regimes are premised on new forms of enclosure of land and labour. Direct incorporation thoroughly altered ecological relations and changed the rules of the game. This resulted in a greater diversification of systems of access to nature, land, and labour, of systems of production, and reproduction, and of survival and coping mechanisms.

## Agrarian change and the peasant question in global capitalism

Fernand Braudel famously characterized the early modern world as “one vast peasantry, where between eighty and ninety percent of the people lived from the land and from nothing else.”<sup>39</sup> He distinguished between three main types of agricultural societies: “nomads and stockbreeders”, “peoples practicing a still deficient form of agriculture, primarily peasants using hoes”, and what he labelled as “civilizations; relatively dense populations possessing multiple assets and advantages: domestic animals, swing-ploughs, ploughs, carts, and above all, towns.”<sup>40</sup> As a general rule, Braudel wrote, the civilizations played and won. They took over ‘cultures’ and ‘prim-

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<sup>37</sup> Philip McMichael, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* (Halifax and Winnipeg, 2013), pp. 1–12; Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School. A Critical Introduction* (New York, 1990). The regulation school studies the transformation of social relations in the context of changing regimes of accumulation: patterns in the way production, circulation, consumption, and distribution organize and expand capital and stabilize the economy over time.

<sup>38</sup> See for example: Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn (eds), *The Cambridge World Prehistory*. 3 vols (Cambridge, 2014); Michael E. Smith (ed.), *The Comparative Archeology of Complex Societies* (Cambridge, 2011); Graeme Barker, *The Agricultural Revolution in Prehistory. Why did Foragers become Farmers?* (Oxford, 2006); Peter Bellwood, *First Farmers* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life. The Limits of the Possible* (London, 2002), p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

itive peoples' and what was perceived as 'unoccupied territory'.<sup>41</sup> This generally happened via widespread peasant colonization, such as the East frontier towards the east of the Elbe, Siberia and the steppes between the Volga and the Black Sea; and the western frontier in North America. Successful frontier movements are backed by expanding state power, pushing back what James Scott labelled *non-state spaces*, or *state-preventing societies*, peoples that "have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states."<sup>42</sup> Quoting Scott again, "The founding of agrarian states, then, was the contingent event that created a distinction, hence a dialectic, between settled, state-governed population and a frontier penumbra of less governed or virtually autonomous peoples." The objective of this 'last enclosure' "has been less to make them productive than to ensure that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable, or failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were."<sup>43</sup> According to Scott, these peoples were not archaic residues, they were "barbarians by design", created by states. They – temporarily – escaped the status of *core peasantries*, practicing fixed field agriculture, tied to the land through redefined property entitlements, and living in permanent settlements and patriarchal family bonds.<sup>44</sup>

The incorporation of non-capitalist, rural worlds into a capitalist world economy animated several intensive and long-standing academic debates, all addressing the peasants and the fruits of their labour. A key concept within the debate on the transformation of pre-capitalist societies has been primitive accumulation, defined as extra-economic coercion and dispossession, distinct from the market-derived compulsion of economic forces characteristic of capitalist exploitation.<sup>45</sup> Typically, different models of accumulation, and different paths of agrarian transition towards capitalism have been identified. These include: the English path (original transition to capitalist farming, with the disposition of the peasantries), the Prussian path (feudal landed property transformed itself into capitalist commodity production, turning peasants into wage-workers), the American path (capitalism developed within the peasant sector through a process of socio-economic differentiation, turning smallholders into petty commodity producers), and the East Asian path. In Japan and South Korea, for example, peasant surpluses were used to finance capitalist industrialization without a transition to agrarian capitalism (in the English sense). This differentiation begs the question about the range of possible connections between the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2009), pp. ix–x.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., , pp. 8–9.

<sup>45</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, pp. 27–32.

development of capitalism and peasant transformation.<sup>46</sup> Initially, this debate focused on class transformation within the European countryside, and capital's subordination of landed property. Lenin defended the inevitability of capitalist transition in agriculture following the same basic pattern.<sup>47</sup> Peasants became locked into commodity production by the 'dull compulsion of economic forces', the commodification of their subsistence. This triggered a differentiation of the peasantry into distinct—rich, middle, and poor—rural classes. In his *Die Agrarfrage* (1899), Karl Kautsky explored the impact of capitalism on agrarian societies, the role of agriculture during capitalist development, and the political role (or lack thereof) of the peasantries in radical social change.<sup>48</sup> Though the book follows a standard, teleological conception of capitalist development, Kautsky questioned the prescribed evolution towards large-scale, wage-labour based production in agriculture. Peasant agriculture can, in fact, be functional according to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. In the end, Kautsky supported the view of an increasing polarization of classes in agrarian society and the attendant concentration of rural property. In response, Chayanov tried to demonstrate that capitalist class polarization was not an inevitable outcome of capitalist transformation. He argued that the peasantry could play a significant role as individual family farmers within modern (socialist) societies, for example through the establishment of cooperatives.<sup>49</sup> The rediscovery of his research in the 1960's inspired a powerful wave of peasant studies, illustrating the resilience of peasant farming, the regional specificity of agrarian change, and the diversity of forms of dispossession and control of peasant labour.<sup>50</sup>

The transformation of the countryside, and especially the transformation of rural property relations, has taken centre stage in a range of debates on the origins of agrarian capitalism.<sup>51</sup> This process of transforming 'peasants into farmers' started

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<sup>46</sup> Terence J. Byres, "The Landlord Class, Peasant Differentiation, Class Struggle and the Transition to Capitalism: England, France and Prussia Compared", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, 1 (2009), pp. 33–54.

<sup>47</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia. The Process of the Formation of a Home Market for Large-Scale Industry* (1899, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/devel>).

<sup>48</sup> Karl Kautsky, *The Agrarian Question*, 2 vols (London, 1988. Orig. 1899).

<sup>49</sup> Alexander V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. Orig. 1924).

<sup>50</sup> "Following its translation, Chayanov's work became enormously influential in the Anglophone academy, not least as an inspiration of neo-populist analysis of peasants and agricultural development." Henry Bernstein and Terence J. Byres, "From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1, 1 (2001), pp. 1–56, at 5.

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Dobb et al., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism. A Symposium* (London, 1954); Rodney Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976); T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin (ed.), *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (New York, 1999); Peter Hoppenbrouwers and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into Farmers? The Transformation of Rural Economy and Society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages–19th Century) in Light of the*

in a specific time and place, England in the Late Middle Ages, setting in motion a capitalist dynamic, and a growing subjection of rural producers to market imperatives. The differentiation of the English peasantry deprived direct producers of their non-market access to the means of their production and reproduction, creating a growing market dependence of producers, as well as appropriators.<sup>52</sup> Capitalism, with all its very specific drives for accumulation and profit maximization, was born in the countryside; it required not a simple extension or expansion of barter and exchange but a complete rupture in peasant societies. With a distinct twist, the Danish economist Ester Boserup described peasant transformation towards agrarian intensification as a process of economic growth. She defined population pressure as a major cause of change in land use, agricultural technology, land tenure systems, and settlement forms. Farmers were induced to adopt more intensive cropping systems and, hence, to innovate.<sup>53</sup>

Studies on ‘the agrarian question’, although bringing in peasant transformation as a constitutive process in modern social change, substantiated a distorted, often teleological view on ‘the end of peasantries’. In addition, most of this work is dismissive of peasants’s social consciousness and agency, resembling Marx’s famous qualification of the rural underclasses as a ‘sack of potatoes’. From the 1960’s, this structuralist view provoked new bottom up research, focusing, among others, on peasant agency in social movements.<sup>54</sup> These studies repeatedly show that peasant mobilization was not only part of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies, but remains a major social force in the modern capitalist world.<sup>55</sup> This reassessment of peasant studies has been criticized because of its alleged ‘populist postmodernism’, aiming to reconstruct previously hidden subaltern voices, re-essentializing a distinct

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*Brenner Debate* (Turnhout, 2001); Bas van Bavel, *Manors and Markets. Economy and Society in the Low Countries 500–1600* (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure* (London, 1965).

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Century* (Manchester, 1959); Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1985); Gerrit Huizer, *Peasant Unrest in Latin America: Its Origins, Forms of Expression and Potential* (Amsterdam, 1970); Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj. Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1980); Herbert P. Bix, *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590–1884* (New Haven, CT, 1986); Christopher R Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos. Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935* (Stanford, CA, 2003); Eric Vanhaute, “Globalizing Local Struggles. Localizing Global Struggles. Peasant Movements from Local to Global Platforms and Back”, *Workers of the World. International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflict*, 1, 5 (2014), pp. 114–129.

<sup>55</sup> Annette Aurelie Desmarais, *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* (Chicago, IL, 2007); “Conflict in the Contemporary Rural World. New Interpretations of an Old Problem”, *Workers of the World. International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflict*, 1, 5 (2014).



‘peasantness’ in the rural worlds.<sup>56</sup> This debate addresses not only the questions of agrarian change and economic growth but the very essence of (modern/capitalist/socialist) development itself, and the agency of peasant consciousness and peasant mobilization. These agrarian and peasant questions received a major platform in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, founded in 1973.<sup>57</sup> From the start, peasant change and peasant differentiation became the pervasive themes, thus transcending the limitations of inward-looking peasant studies. Peasant change has been researched in a wide range of subjects such as pre-capitalist agrarian formations, transitions to capitalism in the industrialized and non-industrialized countries, projects of socialist agrarian transition, experiences of colonialism in the imperialist periphery and contradictory processes of development/underdevelopment in poor countries after the end of colonial rule. In 2001, the *Journal of Agrarian Change* (JAC) joined the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (JPS). Both journals remain committed to the promotion of “critical thinking about social structures, institutions, actors and processes of change in and in relation to the rural world” (JPS) and the “investigation of the social relations and dynamics of production, property and power in agrarian formations and their processes of change, both historical and contemporary” (JAC). Increasingly, research into rural power relations between classes and other social groups includes perspectives on gender relations, technological change, and ecological and global transformations.

## The transformation of the global countryside

The incorporation and redefinition of rural zones in the last few centuries has continuously redefined and recreated peasant regimes. The outcome of the configuration of power relations, i.e. the social distribution of land and labour, differed wildly over time and space. The expansion of the Great Frontier required a more direct intervention in peasant institutions and practices of allocation and use of land and labour.<sup>58</sup> This frontier-based development of new resources necessitated a permanent restructuring of peasant land and labour regimes, generating significant differences over space and time. In the peasant question, land and labour rights have been the prime subject of expropriation and negotiation.<sup>59</sup> These processes have never been

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<sup>56</sup> Tom Brass, *Peasants, Populism, and Postmodernism. The Return of the Agrarian Myth* (London, 2000); Tom Brass, *Class, Culture and the Agrarian Myth* (Leiden and Boston, 2014).

<sup>57</sup> Bernstein and Byres, “From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change”, pp. 1–56.

<sup>58</sup> Barbier, *Scarcity and Frontiers*, p. 418; Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> Philip McMichael, “Peasant Prospects in the Neoliberal Age”, *New Political Economy*, 11, 3 (2006), pp. 407–418; Farshad Araghi, “The Great Global Enclosure of Our Times. Peasants and the Agrarian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century”, in: Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster and Frederick H. Buttel (eds), *Hungry for Profit. The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food and the Environment* (New York, 1999), pp. 145–160.



absolute or complete. Capitalism's tendency towards generalised commodity production has created immense disparities on a global level; uneven commodification has always been at the heart of historical capitalism.<sup>60</sup> For example, nineteenth century colonialism in India and twentieth century colonialism in Africa engendered processes of systemic peasantization that supported the colonial governments's agricultural commodity export goals.<sup>61</sup> Spurred by colonial taxation, African agrarian producers increasingly produced agricultural commodities in conjunction with their subsistence production. Alternatively, they exported male labour based on circular migration. The major expansion of peasant and commodity frontiers redesigned rural societies and fuelled both state and capitalist growth. This transformation of the global countryside gained momentum after 1850.<sup>62</sup> Until the nineteenth century, most world regions produced agricultural commodities by peasant labour. It took massive state efforts to integrate this labour into a global capitalist production system. For example, the expansion of capitalist cotton agriculture from the last third of the nineteenth century was a direct result of powerful interventions of the state, first and foremost through a redefinition of property rights, redistributing land away from village societies and nomadic peoples.<sup>63</sup> The transformation of the countryside through the commodification of land and labour spread capitalist social relations, including private credit and private ownership of land. This momentous process of making peasants into cultivators and eventually consumers of commodities was supported by the spread of a variety of labour regimes, such as sharecropping, family yeoman farming, and proletarian agricultural labour. It was also supported by new forms of coercion through taxation, compulsory crops, debt-bondage etc. By the end of the nineteenth century, sharecropping and tenant farming had become the dominant mode of mobilizing agricultural labour. In many parts of the world, integration into the capitalist world market went hand in hand with widespread re-peasantization—not straightforward proletarianization. Meanwhile, the expansion of grain and meat production in settler economies and the expansion of tropical export crops in colonial Asia and Africa coincided with massive de-agrarianization and de-peasantization and more diversified, capital-intensive farming in Europe.

The globalisation of farming and food consumption in the twentieth century reinforced the highly differential impacts on societies in the North and South, through

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<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 13–43.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Workers. Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India* (Oxford, 1985); Jan Breman, *Labour Migration and Rural Transformation in Colonial India* (Amsterdam, 1990); Fred Cooper, Allen Isaacman, Florencia Mallon, William Roseberry, and Steve Stern, *Confronting Historical Paradigms. Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America* (Madison, WI, 1993), Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana. From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 184.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

new international divisions of labour and increased trade in agricultural commodities. The commodification and marginalisation of peasant subsistence in the South coincided with the expansion of export crops like coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, cotton, and palm oil, the promotion of high value commodities like horticultural products, and the expansion of large-scale production of soy, sugar, and grains. The working poor of the South were increasingly forced to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious small scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including marginal farming. Moreover, livelihoods were pursued across different spaces of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment.<sup>64</sup> Coercion remained central in the twentieth century colonial worlds, permanently recasting social structures, and mobilizing labour in different ways. In many places constraints to mobilize sufficient workers for large plantations stimulated systems of share-cropping. The recasting of the countryside spread to the Soviet Union, China, and India, making these regions part and parcel of the new geography of global capitalism. By the mid twentieth century, governments and capital had transformed the global countryside.<sup>65</sup> Developmentalist projects integrated peasantries as part of nationalist movements and as citizens of new states. Since they no longer needed the state to turn rural cultivators into commodity growers, from the 1980's capitalists increasingly turned away from state intervention. The neoliberal revolution created new frontiers of market expansion in the countryside, instigating a new phase in its revolutionary transformation.

Developments that have often been regarded as historical processes of de-peasantization were, in essence, part of the spread of more diversified labour and income strategies of the peasantries. Due to intensifying economic and social uprooting, for an important portion of the world's population these survival strategies have become more important than ever. Some authors have coined these revived multi-level strategies of survival, autonomy, and resistance as a recreation of peasant strategies. This argument has revived the classic peasant question, that has been raised to query the role and fate of peasantries within the process of capitalist transition. It essentially entails political questions that "reflect the very structure of the society", although "it was a question posed *about* the peasantry, not necessarily *of* or *by* them."<sup>66</sup> In a non-Western and global context, this socio-economic peasant question (peasantry as a class) becomes complexly entangled with the socio-cultural indigenous question (indigenouness as a cultural identity). The labels *peasant* and *indigenous* refer to a set of claims that may coincide or overlap with various other identities (gender, class, linguistic, national). However, peasant and indigenous identities have increasingly

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<sup>64</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, pp. 87, 111.

<sup>65</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, p. 376.

<sup>66</sup> William Roseberry, "Beyond the Agrarian Question in Latin America", in Fred Cooper et al. (eds), *Confronting Historical Paradigms. Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America* (Madison, WI, 1993), pp. 321–323.

become overlapping and reinforcing categories of *peripherality*, an umbrella stigma of the poor and the marginalised in today's globalising world. In turn, these global processes generate new forms of *peripheral consciousness*.<sup>67</sup> The locality and the community are reinforced; sometimes they are reinvented as a basic framework for both peasant and indigenous identities. Battles related to the contested peasant and indigenous claims to land, territory, and resources, which usually have a communal rather than an individual nature, are a central instigator. For peasantries, land has been and continues to be the main basis of negotiation and interaction with other sectors of society because its use has direct implications for their exchange relations (products derived from that land) and for their power relations (the regulation of access to the land). The communal level remains a central space for self-determination, negotiation, and resistance. This combination of autonomy and intermediation converts 'the communal' into a crucial gateway to both different and independent 'local histories' and to interaction within larger, incorporative, and global systems.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Eduardo Devés-Valdés, "The World from Latin America and the Peripheries", in Douglas Northrop (ed.), *A Companion to World History* (Chichester, 2012), pp. 466, 469–474.

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