

INTRODUCTION

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1. The origins and contents of this book

This book is based on papers presented at the International Seminar on Peasant Poverty and Persistence in the Contemporary World, which took place at El Colegio de México, Mexico City on 13–15 March 2012. The seminar was originally conceived in 2009 at a Scientific Committee meeting of the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP), which is a programme of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) hosted by the University of Bergen, Norway. In that meeting, committee member Julio Boltvinik highlighted the fact that, among the world's poor, the great majority are peasants and that the specific topic of peasant poverty had not served as a central topic in any of the international seminars organised by CROP since its creation in 1992. His suggestion to organise a seminar on this topic was approved and Professor Boltvinik offered to write a background paper on peasant poverty and persistence to establish the themes to be addressed at it. This background paper is included as Chapter 1 in this book. The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco (UAM-X) co-sponsored this event together with CROP and El Colegio de México, and scholars from both the global North and the global South participated in this exciting transnational conference.

The strategy adopted for selecting seminar participants was twofold. On the one hand, distinguished scholars in the field of agrarian studies were personally invited to participate. On the other, CROP launched a call for papers through its broad network of contacts. The background paper was distributed to all the invitees and potential participants, who were asked to submit an abstract of their proposed paper and who were invited to react to the contents of the background paper and to address two main questions: what are the roots of peasant poverty? And why has the peasantry as a distinct form of production been able to persist into the twenty-first century

in the face of global capitalist development? An academic programme committee was appointed to select the papers to be included in the seminar.

This book is organised in three parts, and the second part is divided into four sessions that mirror the actual sessions of the seminar in Mexico City. The first part includes the foreword and the introduction to the book; the second part includes the background paper and ten papers presented at the seminar (Chapters 1 to 11); and the third part, which closes the book, is a post-seminar paper prepared by Professor Boltvinik. This latter paper includes replies, clarification and precisions to the comments on and critiques of his original background paper, a deepening of some important topics, a succinct discussion of certain issues that are not included in this volume but are highly relevant to the subject of the book, and a typology of replies to the central questions of the seminar. Thus, the structure of the twelve chapters of the book comprises one pre-seminar paper, ten seminar papers, and one post-seminar paper. This structure provides the book with its distinguishing feature: its emphasis on dialogue and debate, on criticism and reply. Overall, the motto of CROP – ‘mobilizing critical research for the prevention and eradication of poverty’ – captures the purpose of this book.

2. On the definition of poverty and the low reliability of rural poverty data

The word *poverty* originated in everyday life. According to the Spanish dictionary *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (DRAE), the noun *poverty* means ‘need, narrowness, lack of what is *necessary* to sustain life’, while the adjective *poor* means ‘in need, poverty-stricken and lacking the necessities to live’. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the noun expresses the state of being poor and also the lack of the *necessities* for life, and the adjective refers to a person who ‘lacks money or adequate means to live comfortably’. In an Arabic dictionary of 1311 AD, poverty is defined as the ‘inability of the individual to satisfy his own *basic needs* and the needs of his dependants’ (Spicker et al. 2007: 10). As seen, poverty and needs are inextricably linked in everyday life.

Amartya Sen (1981: 26, emphasis added) distinguishes two procedures for identifying who is poor: the direct method checks ‘the set of people whose actual consumption baskets happen to leave some

basic need unsatisfied'. The 'income method's first step is to calculate the minimum income at which all the specified minimum needs are satisfied. The next step is to identify those whose actual incomes fall below that poverty line' (ibid.). For Sen, these two procedures:

are not, in fact, two alternative ways of measuring the same thing, but represent two alternative *conceptions* of poverty. The direct method identifies those whose actual consumption fails to meet the accepted convention of minimum *needs*, while the income method is after spotting those who do not have the ability to meet these *needs*. (Sen 1981: 28, emphasis in original)

Both conceptions are present and combined in the dictionary definitions given. Poverty is either unsatisfied needs or the inability to satisfy them (as in the Arabic definition). Poverty and needs are also inextricably linked in social sciences.

In the poverty literature, one finds, among others, the additional following concepts:

- *Primary and secondary poverty*: 'The families living in poverty may be divided into two sections: 1) Primary Poverty. Families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency. 2) Secondary Poverty. Families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful' (Rowntree 2000 [1901]: 86–7).
- *Relative poverty*: 'Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they *lack the resources* to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong' (Townsend 1979: 31, emphasis added).

In its *Rural Poverty Report 2011* (IFAD 2010), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) *estimated that about 1 billion rural people are poor*. IFAD reached this figure by following the World Bank's poverty measurement methodology, using a

poverty line of \$2 a day per person and an extreme poverty line of \$1.25; in both cases, these amounts are expressed in the national currencies of each country, so that they can be compared with the income of the population, through so-called purchasing power parities (PPP). However, IFAD's figure, alarming and appalling as it is, clearly underestimates rural poverty. Thomas Pogge referred to World Bank figures resulting from the application of the same criteria in his lecture at the round table 'Poor thought: challenging the dominant narratives of poverty research', which took place at the University of Bergen on 12 May 2010 (Pogge 2010). He explained how these statistics shamelessly underestimated global poverty and presented a false trajectory of global poverty reduction that served the interests of neoliberal capitalism:

1. The evolution one depicts of world poverty in the long term, between 1981 and 2005, depends highly on the poverty line (PL) used. If one uses the 'official' WB [World Bank] PL of \$1.25 (of purchasing power parities: PPP) per person per day, poverty in the 25 years decreases 27 per cent; but if one uses a \$2 PL, poverty increases 1 per cent, and using a US\$2.5 PL, it increases by 13 per cent. As seen, the lower the PL is, the more optimistic and more favourable is the outcome for neoliberal capitalism. In all three cases the total population in poverty would, respectively, be in 2005: 1.38 billion (b) with \$1.25 PL; 2.56b with \$2 PL; and 3.08b with \$2.50 PL.
2. *WB's official PLs have been falling in real terms*, while the institution has intended to give the opposite impression: that its PLs have been rising. The truth is that in terms of 2009 purchasing power, the original PL of \$1, which was used between 1990 and 1997, was \$1.99; that of \$1.08, used between 2000 and 2008 was \$1.60; and that of \$1.25, which is now being used, is equivalent to \$1.37.

Hence, to observers unschooled in the dense details and intricate machinations of poverty statistics, the World Bank appears to be raising the poverty line but actually lowers it in terms of real purchasing power. By lowering the real poverty line, the World Bank suggests that poverty is falling. This adds falsehood to the open and shameless cynicism that is implied in offering to nearly half of

the world's population a subsistence level that barely meets animal survival, which is what people would be able to attain with an income at the level of such squalid poverty lines.

IFAD data in the 2011 report refer only to developing countries and cover the period from 1988 to 2008. Note that 1988 is situated towards the end of the severe debt crisis of the 1980s which affected mainly Latin America and Africa. Therefore, the baseline year chosen is one of very high poverty rates, fostering the view that poverty is decreasing. IFAD calculations depart from World Bank estimates at the national level and are disaggregated by the institution using the proportion represented by rural poverty in total national poverty as derived from national estimates (each of which has its own poverty measurement methodology and definitions of 'rural' and 'urban').

As the report points out in the notes to Annex 1, which presents the figures for rural poverty and rural extreme poverty by region for developing countries, there 'are also two important assumptions behind the calculations':

The first is that the incidence of rural poverty rates according to national surveys remains the same at the US \$1.25/day poverty line. Ravallion, Chen and Sangraula (2007) showed that while this approximation is quite accurate for US \$2/day poverty lines, it may be weaker for US \$1.25/day. Because urban poverty lines are often higher than rural poverty lines, such an assumption may *underestimate* the incidence of rural poverty at the US \$1.25/day poverty line. The second assumption is that definitions of urban and rural populations are consistent across countries, and that the ratios of urban poverty lines to rural poverty lines are constant within regions. This is not the case, but intraregional variations are relatively limited. (IFAD 2010: 235, emphasis in original)

It is not only that the World Bank's calculations distort the evolution of world poverty and that IFAD's disaggregation of these figures add more doubts, but that the thresholds of \$1.25 and \$2 per person per day lack any support in any conception of human needs. This is shown in the example of Mexico, where a poverty line of \$1.25 PPP results in a single-digit poverty incidence (5.3 per cent in rural areas and 1.3 per cent in urban settlements), while the two

official poverty measures used by the Federal Government (Coneval) show it to be around 50 per cent of the population, and two other options estimate an incidence of around 80 per cent. The first of these is *Evaluía DF*, which uses the Integrated Poverty Measurement Method as its official procedure. The second is a reinterpretation of Coneval's results that replaces the intersection criterion (used by Coneval) with the union criterion (traditionally used in Latin America). Both options are applied to two sets of the poor population: one defined as those with an income below the poverty line, and the second as the population with unsatisfied basic needs. The four alternative indices to the World Bank's \$1.25 per person per day result in very high multiples of the incidence of poverty using World Bank thresholds: the national incidence is 8.7, 9.7, 15.2 and 15.6 times higher respectively. The contrast is even more acute in urban areas, where the results are 61, 59, 35 and 31 times the World Bank estimates. It is quite obvious that these enormous distances between the World Bank's poverty line and Mexican official estimates make World Bank and IFAD figures, as well as goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals, absolutely irrelevant for Mexico. (One can generalise this conclusion for many developing countries.) The next paragraph describes what you can buy in Mexico with \$1.25 PPP and therefore what this World Bank ultra-poverty line means.

In May 2005, a PPP dollar was equivalent to 7.13 pesos, while the nominal exchange rate was 10.96 pesos per dollar. Therefore, the poverty line defined by the World Bank (\$1.25) was equivalent to 8.91 pesos per person per day (81 per cent of the nominal value of a dollar at that time). It is hard to imagine how a person could, in 2005, meet her or his most basic needs with an income of less than 9 pesos a day. Suffice it to say that even the very frugal *food poverty line* defined by the Federal Government (which, until 2009, was the lowest of the three official poverty lines used) recognises that to acquire the *raw food basket* to meet average nutritional requirements, a person needs an income of \$19.50 or \$26.36 pesos (in rural and urban areas respectively). This means that people who have an income equal to the World Bank's ultra-extreme poverty line would be able to acquire only 46 per cent or 34 per cent of the minimum requirements for not being extremely (or food) poor, according to federal criteria in rural and urban areas respectively. This shows that such poverty lines are meaningless in terms of human needs.

Given the three groups of limitations present in World Bank/IFAD poverty estimates already mentioned – the ones identified by Pogge with respect to the World Bank’s figures; those indicated for IFAD’s disaggregation process between urban and rural levels; and the one outlined above for the poverty and extreme poverty thresholds – it is unnecessary to elaborate on the results obtained by IFAD as they cannot give an adequate picture of rural poverty levels and their evolution through time.

Although the measurement of poverty is not a central object of this book, one of the papers deals with alternative figures for one specific country (see Chapter 6).

3. Situating this volume in the history of peasant studies

The theoretical debates over peasant poverty and persistence that fill this volume have a long history. They are part of a century-old debate over the reasons for peasant persistence and the defining features of the uneven development of capitalism in agriculture. We cannot do justice in this brief introduction to the detailed history of agrarian studies over the past century. However, we can at least highlight the integral relationship between theory, history and political praxis, by pointing out how major political, economic and social events spurred transformations in agrarian social thought, as well as how the papers in this book contribute to this critical knowledge production.

Referred to as the ‘agrarian question’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, debates over peasant persistence primarily took place between Marxist theorists and populist theorists (known as the Narodniks) over the nature of capitalist development in Russia. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists from various countries and representing diverse political perspectives had predicted the demise of non-wage forms of production in their grand theories of modernisation and industrialisation (Durkheim 1960 [1893]; Weber 1978 [1922]),¹ the stubborn persistence of peasant farms into the twentieth century presented a serious anomaly. Few countries had such immediate political pressures to address this issue as did early twentieth-century Russia. Indeed, it is no surprise that the most fertile political debates over peasant persistence grew on Russian soil, given the importance of the peasant–proletarian alliance for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917,

as well as for the New Economic Policy of the 1920s – a policy created to deal with the rural instability that threatened the young Soviet Republic.

Marx and Engels had predicted as early as 1848 in *The Communist Manifesto* that the cheap prices of capitalist commodities would ‘compel all nations, on pain of extinction to adopt the bourgeois mode of production’ (Marx 1970 [1848]: 39). However, this prediction came up short as capitalism failed to ‘create a world after its own image’ (ibid.) – particularly in the Russian countryside, where non-capitalist forms of production, such as peasant farms, engaged the bulk of the population in pre-revolutionary Russia. To address this uneven development, numerous Marxist theorists entered these agrarian debates – the most famous works being Karl Kautsky’s *The Agrarian Question* (1988 [1899]) and V. I. Lenin’s *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1967 [1899]).

These Marxist writings have been historically interpreted as foreshadowing the impending doom of the petty producer. While Marxist analyses have become more sophisticated and complex, sometimes even challenging these earlier interpretations (as in Chapter 12), the view that capitalism holds dominion over the fate of non-capitalist forms of production remains a point of reference to be discussed or accepted in some of the papers in this volume (see Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5 and 10).

In contrast, the Narodniks idealised peasant production and romanticised rural life (especially the peasant commune or *mir*) as part of a more general belief in the unique historical destiny of Russia to find a path of development different from that of the West. The premier theorist of that era to articulate this perspective was the Soviet agrarian economist Alexander V. Chayanov. His most famous works, published in English under the title *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (1966 [1925]),² elaborated his theory of peasant self-exploitation, a theory that is still invoked in explaining peasant persistence today, as various papers in this volume attest (see Chapter 9). The Narodniks’ favoured path to development, which was based on petty commodity production and came to be known as an alternative ‘third path’ (being neither capitalist nor socialist), also remains alive in this volume, although it appears in the more *au courant* discourse of a path to sustainable development (see Chapter 7), as we shall discuss at more length below.

After World War II, these early twentieth-century debates were resurrected once again in the face of the global instability created when anti-colonialist and/or socialist revolutions caused the sun to set on many former European empires. Between 1945 and 1981, more than 100 new countries joined the United Nations, tripling the ranks from 51 to 156 nations (McMichael 1996: 25). However, colonial independence did not necessarily transform the uneven and unequal nature of global stratification. Many former colonies did not modernise or industrialise significantly; rather, large portions of their populations remained plagued by absolute poverty – lacking the basic necessities of human life, such as food, clean water and adequate shelter. Moreover, while national liberation movements had promised greater freedom and democracy in their anti-colonialist revolutionary zeal, these countries often ended up with small, indigenous elites enjoying great wealth and power amid the poverty of the masses, or what Frantz Fanon called ‘the wretched of the earth’ (Fanon 1967 [1961]).

Within the broader field of social change and development, the reasons for this extremely uneven and unequal global development became the central questions debated by theorists after World War II. The major conceptual schemes of these post-war theories reflected the Iron Curtain divide between capitalism and socialism that was established by the success of socialist revolutions in such largely agrarian countries as the USSR, China and Cuba. Modernisation theory was associated with bourgeois theory and its pro-free enterprise stance, whereas dependency theory and world systems theory were developed by Marxist and neo-Marxist theorists. No doubt, the heightened role of the US in these global conflicts – the Vietnam War, for instance, along with similar struggles in Chile, El Salvador and Nicaragua – galvanised mass movements both domestically and internationally that called for more critical approaches to understanding modernisation and development. This volume reflects the impact of these Cold War era debates, given that many papers contain references to the underlying theses of dependency and/or world systems theories.

Within the subfield of agrarian studies, anti-colonialist and socialist revolutions led a new generation of scholars to examine more critically the ‘peasant wars of the 20th century’ (Wolf 1969), as well as the distorted development that continued to characterise

many former colonies and Third World countries. Indicative of this revitalised interest in peasant poverty and persistence, the early 1970s witnessed a proliferation of research, scholarly books and new specialised journals, such as *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, which recently celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Because this new research incorporated more critical and conflict-oriented theoretical perspectives than its rather stodgy predecessor – traditional rural sociology rooted in government-funded applied research and structural functional theory – it was heralded as ‘the new sociology of agriculture’ (Buttel et al. 1989).

Yet, here again, two distinct interpretations of rural development were advanced, and they continued to mirror the earlier Marxist/Narodnik debate. Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars continued to view capitalism as the hegemonic mode of production shaping modern rural class structures, but paid more attention to historically specific and natural factors that delayed or averted this practice. Despite the greater complexity of these theories, their vantage point remained anchored in the logic of capitalist accumulation. In contrast, more micro-oriented approaches, which were often rooted in the neoclassical economic views of A. V. Chayanov or Max Weber, focused attention on the way in which the internal logic of non-wage forms of production (which differed from capitalist logic) presumably enabled them to resist capitalist penetration and remain permanent oases in a hostile capitalist world. These discussions also have become more sophisticated in recent years, as various papers in this volume suggest. For example, a number of papers discuss how features of agriculture that some authors (see, for example, Mann and Dickinson 1978; Contreras 1977) have seen as obstacles to capitalist development – such as the seasonality of production – have been functional in peasant persistence and poverty (see Chapters 1 and 6). Some authors highlight the important role of peasant cultural ‘imaginaries’ and their attachment to their historical and terrestrial roots (Chapter 7). Others highlight how peasants’ engagement in diversified farming (Chapter 2) or forms of peasant multi-activity – such as seasonal wage labour at home or abroad in both agricultural and non-agricultural production – provide alternative sources of income for peasant households (Chapters 1 and 6). Still others point to the importance of peasants organising their communities along the principles of ‘good living’

or '*sumak kawsay*', in order to ensure both social and ecological reproduction (Chapter 11).

Agrarian theories of late modernity also were influenced by the rise of the New Left. Whereas the Old Left had highlighted the battle between labour and capital as the primary axis of oppression in modern societies and had championed the working class as the major agent of revolutionary change, the New Left included the new social movements of late modernity, such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the anti-Vietnam War and other anti-imperialist movements, and the environmental movement. These new social movements addressed conflicts and cleavages generated by various forms of domination – by race, gender and global location, as well as the domination of nature. Historian Van Gosse refers to the New Left as a 'movement of movements' that encompassed all of the struggles for fundamental change from the 1950s to the 1970s (Gosse 2005: 5).

Spurred by the burgeoning environmental movement, in the 1970s various agrarian theorists wove into their analyses a growing awareness that the environmental destruction inflicted by and on human societies was beginning to encompass the entire earth. Not only had World War II revealed the devastating effects of nuclear arms, but non-renewable fuels such as coal, oil and gas, upon which modern, industrial societies are so dependent, were being exhausted. Control over these valuable fuel supplies became hotly contested – especially when the OPEC oil crisis in the early 1970s brought home to the First World how less developed societies were capable, through the organisation of cartels, of controlling the prices of some strategic resources. Although the replacement of natural raw materials by synthetics had begun in the early decades of the twentieth century and was largely under First World control, the abundance of non-biodegradable waste created by these synthetic fibres was becoming ever more apparent. In turn, the spillover effects of the toxic wastes generated by urbanisation, industrialisation and militarisation plagued the air, land and water of communities, not only locally but globally. It was frighteningly apparent that industrial societies had done more damage to the natural environment in 200 years than all previous civilisations combined (Balbus 1982: 362–3). Perhaps it took such world-scale damage to make people critically aware of the dangers of continuing on this path of environmental destruction. A

number of papers in this volume reflect this environmental awareness, and focus on the contributions of industrial-style farming to ecological degradation and its effects on agriculture (see Chapters 2, 4, 7, 8 and 11) – an awareness that was largely absent in earlier versions of these agrarian debates.

The despoliation of the planet was further fostered by the deregulation of economic life that accompanied the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. When the state relinquishes the will and capacity to regulate capital, this loss has irrational and self-defeating consequences. The neoliberal political agenda excludes all possible futures that would be incompatible with commodification. Indeed, some observers have grimly noted: ‘The logical end of neoliberalism is the commodification of everything’ (Leys and Harriss-White 2012). Already, the commodification of nature has gone far; this process started before neoliberalism, but received a tremendous impulse under it. Not only have farmland and fresh water supplies been commodified, but also parts of the oceans (through the creation and sale of exclusive fishing and drilling rights) and even air itself (carbon trading is, in theory, a market for fresher air). One of the papers in this volume focuses on the impact of this process in terms of how the commodification of water supplies affects peasant producers (Chapter 8), while other authors discuss the global ‘land grabs’ currently taking place (Chapters 4, 5 and 10). The paper by Luis Arizmendi (Chapter 4) couples what he calls the ‘epochal’ environmental and food crises today to discuss the ‘worldisation of poverty’ and how food circuits have ‘become ... the most lucrative business on the planet’ for transnational capital.

In turn, even the functions of the state have been privatised and commodified under the reign of neoliberalism: not just the provisioning of public goods and services, such as utilities, but activities hitherto seen as quintessentially public, such as schools, prisons and policing. This attack on the public sphere is visible in neoliberalism’s austere structural adjustment programmes, which have created further grotesque social inequalities on a world scale. The impacts of these structural adjustment policies on the health and welfare of peasant producers are addressed in this volume – especially by authors who focus on indebted countries of the global South, where these structural adjustment programmes were first imposed (Chapters 3 and 9).

Perhaps the major contribution to agrarian studies by feminists of the second wave of the women's movement was their documentation of how gender matters in global development. Feminist scholars across the political spectrum empirically documented how modernisation and development had different impacts on women as opposed to men (Mann 2012; Chapters 9 and 10). Feminist scholars have argued that both Marx and Chayanov failed to adequately address the reproduction of labour power under capitalism and petty commodity production respectively; this argument is of particular relevance to the papers in this volume that mirror the early Marxist/Narodnik debates. Chayanov's theory of 'self-exploitation' in the peasant economy essentially obscured the way in which the peasant household is the locus of domestic patriarchy (Mallon 1987; Hammel and Gullickson 2004; Welty 2012). Peasant households were never the equitable institutions Chayanov supposed; rather, women and children were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by the male head of the household, often supported and reinforced by traditional customs and religion. Although Marx and Engels devoted more attention to the oppression of women (Marx 1986 [1882]; Engels 1972 [1884]), Marx's political economy of capitalism focused on the sphere of production and did not venture far into the ways in which labour power – either of the proletariat or of other classes – was reproduced on a day-to-day and intergenerational basis (Vogel 1983 [1973]; Hartmann 1981). Even today, agrarian studies are largely gender blind. As one observer wryly noted: 'It is remarkable how intellectual life for centuries was conducted on the tacit assumption that human beings had no genitals' (Eagleton 2003: 3–4).

Two papers in this volume directly address gender issues. Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld (Chapter 3) specifically address the social reproduction of labour power, while Damián and Pacheco (Chapter 6) document not only the negative effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on peasant producers but also how women, children and the elderly are left in the countryside as young and/or able-bodied men migrate to urban areas or abroad. Hopefully, this type of research will trigger more critical gender work in agrarian studies, particularly given how recent data estimate that women comprise just over 40 per cent of the agricultural labour force in the developing world, a figure that has risen slightly since 1980 and ranges from 20 per cent in the Americas to almost 50 per cent

in East and Southeast Asia, as well as in Africa (FAO 2011). In turn, because the structural adjustment programmes imposed by neoliberal regimes are quick to cut state subsidies for health, education and welfare, women are more likely than men to be affected by longer working hours spent in care-giving labour. As David Harvey has observed, women ‘bear the brunt’ of neoliberal policies (Harvey 2007 [2005]: 170).

Together, the death of nature and the death of even the most meagre social safety nets led a number of theorists to contest altogether the assumption that modernisation and development (whether in its capitalist or socialist guise) resulted in progress. Concepts such as ‘degrowth’, ‘maldevelopment’ and ‘necropolitics’ became more evident in social thought,³ as did critiques of the Enlightenment’s meta-narrative of progress that had undergirded two centuries of modern Western thought. The critiques of progress by ‘populist’ theorists often highlight the benefits of pre-market subsistence production and its organic links to nature. Here, focus is placed on how the replacement of subsistence agriculture with modern cash crops results in a scarcity of the water, food, fodder and fuel that had sustained earlier peasant communities. Today, this third path is often couched in a discourse of ecological balance, and principles such as ‘simple living’ resonate strongly with such theorists.⁴ Advocates of this path typically support grass-roots social movements and small, decentralised, democratic social organisations centred in local and community politics. Reliance on barter and social bonds of community replace market and financial institutions, while natural resources such as water and land are neither privatised nor commodified but treated as community responsibilities. The papers in this volume that highlight the indigenous ‘*milpa*’ path to sustainable development (Chapter 2) or the benefits of organising social life along the principles of ‘good living’ (Chapter 11) exemplify this approach. Notably, these papers also highlight ethnicity and the important alternative bodies of knowledge and collective responsibility or accountability that characterise indigenous cultures.

Other authors focused their critique of progress on a more discursive level, attacking the master narratives of development (both bourgeois and Marxist) created by Eurocentric or Western thought. These critical perspectives – many of which fall under the rubric of ‘postcolonial thought’ today – argue that the very idea of ‘modernity’

is one of the 'central tropes' through which the West constructed itself as the centre and rest of the world as its periphery (Mary Louise Spratt quoted in Spurlin 2006: 3). In the field of peasant studies, this approach is best illustrated by the rise of subaltern studies, first in India and later in Latin America (Rodríguez 2001). Initially, subaltern studies was part of a broader trend in social history to provide histories 'from below' in order to rectify an elitist bias – especially colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. However, by the mid-1980s a rift opened up between scholars committed to subaltern class analysis and their forms of resistance and those who found that discursively deconstructing cultural power was more compelling in the face of the failures of modernity, positivism and the Enlightenment (Ludden 2002). While some scholars, such as Mohanty, coupled her earlier focus on decolonising Western thought with a later focus on capitalism and subaltern forms of resistance and consciousness (Mohanty 2006), others focused heavily on the discursive power of colonialism. In the latter case, subaltern studies largely became a postcolonial critique of modern, Enlightenment-based epistemologies written 'under Western eyes' (Mohanty 1984: 333), and debates centred on whether and how the subaltern could speak (Spivak 1988). This linguistic turn rendered into problems of subjectivity and epistemology the concrete and material problems of everyday life in the New World Order of transnational capitalism (Dirlik 1997).⁵

While none of the papers in this volume follow this discursive path, they still contend with the same failures of modernity and the rise of a New World Order that eludes earlier Cold War conceptual schemes. By the end of the 1980s, the 'three worlds' framework for understanding uneven capitalist development appeared obsolete. Not only had the Second World witnessed a significant demise with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the penetration of capitalism into the former communist bloc – both in Eastern Europe and in the Far East – but also industrial capitalism in the West was being decentred as offshoring, outsourcing and subcontracting abroad resulted in deindustrialisation. This meant that, for the first time in the history of capitalism, the capitalist mode of production was divorced from its historically specific origins in Europe and appeared as an authentically global abstraction (Dirlik 1997). Indeed, transnational capital is no longer just Euro-American, and neither

is modernity. Rather, the situation is far more fluid and hybrid. Moreover, the increasing role of finance capital is unprecedented. Although theorists of imperialism had predicted the growing influence of finance capital in the early twentieth century (Hilferding 2007 [1910]; Lenin 1996 [1917]), the ‘financialisation’ of the globe, as one paper in this volume calls it (Chapter 9), has increased the complexity of contemporary capitalism, making it more difficult to understand, to control and to resist.

No doubt the situation looks bleak for the vast reservoir of disposable people bereft of social protections and for whom there is little to expect from neoliberalism except poverty, hunger, disease and despair. However, key topics of discussion at the international seminar on peasant poverty and persistence were forms of peasant resistance that respond directly to this neoliberal phase of transnational capitalism. In particular, there was a focus on La Vía Campesina – an organisation considered by many to be the most important transnational social movement in the world (Borras 2004; McMichael 2008; Patel 2006; 2013). This movement had its roots initially in Latin America but now has 148 member organisations in sixty-nine countries that cross five continents, and it claims to represent over 500 million rural families worldwide (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). La Vía Campesina has levelled scathing attacks on World Bank land policies and has been involved in protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Its member organisations have even helped topple national governments in Ecuador in 2000 and in Bolivia in 2003. Although La Vía Campesina defines capitalism as the ultimate source of crises facing the global countryside and identifies transnational corporations as the worst enemy of peasants and small farmers, it also seriously addresses environmental and gender issues. It promotes ecological sustainability, demands parity between men and women within its organisation, and counterpoises the peasant ‘moral economy’ (Scott 1977) with the dominant ‘market economy’ model. It thereby brings all of these important social, economic and political concerns directly into the global debate over the future of agriculture (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

In summary, the seismic transformations in social life over the last half century require equally seismic transformations in social thought and political praxis if we are to understand and respond adequately

to the crises of global rural poverty created by the twin processes of neoliberalism and transnational, flexible capitalism. While the papers in this volume address a century-old ‘agrarian question’, they do so in original, creative ways that better meet the conceptual needs of the social, political and economic problems thrown up by this New World Order.

4. Conceptualising the peasantry or the ‘awkward class’

Just as the theoretical debates over peasant poverty and persistence discussed above exhibited much contested terrain, so does the very issue of defining the peasantry. The contributors to this volume share no single definition, but rather advocate a range of definitions that reflect a number of complicated and contentious issues.⁶ The absence of a shared definition is not a failing of this text but reflects the historical reality that peasants as a social group have never fitted easily into the analytical categories used by social scientists, irrespective of their theoretical perspectives. For this reason, Teodor Shanin – one of the leading scholars of peasant societies in the twentieth century – referred to the peasantry as ‘the awkward class’ (Shanin 1972).⁷

In the pre-modern era, peasants often constituted an estate-like or caste-like subordinated group characterised not only by economic exploitation but also by limited social rights – both *de jure* and *de facto*, such as restrictions on geographical and social mobility and obligations to provide services and deference to the dominant groups. By the twentieth century, the spread of capitalism and market economies, with their attendant social upheavals and political movements, meant that many of these unfree or serf-like forms of labour and obligatory service had ended in much, but not all, of the globe (Edelman 2013).

As noted in the section above, scholarly interest in the peasantry initially arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to the industrialisation and capitalist transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, with the most heated debates over how to conceptualise the peasantry taking place largely between the Marxists and populists of that era. The Chayanovian model viewed the peasantry as a unitary category with its own unique economic modus operandi whose focus on subsistence production and willingness to engage in self-exploitation to maintain its ties to the land

distinguished it from more market-oriented and market-governed producers. By contrast, the Marxist-Leninist model highlighted how the peasantry would differentiate into distinct classes as capitalism and commodity production penetrated the countryside: rich peasants, who owned landed property and hired wage labour; middle peasants, who were small landowners operating on the basis of family labour alone; and poor peasants, who lacked sufficient land and therefore were forced to sell their labour to make ends meet. This differentiation would eventually signal the demise of the peasantry since it was assumed that small-scale petty commodity production could not compete over time in societies dominated by capitalism. In this volume, this approach is elaborated most fully by Henry Bernstein's contribution (Chapter 5; see also Bernstein 2010).

The famous peasant wars of the mid- to late twentieth century, coupled with the way in which Vietnamese peasants stood up to the most industrialised nation in the world, reawakened interest in the peasantry in the 1960s and 1970s. As peasants became armies and major actors on the global stage, their continued persistence and their political importance were evident. The flourishing of peasant studies in this era rejuvenated and extended the earlier debates that had focused largely on political economy. Often, attempts were made to distinguish 'peasants' from 'farmers' on the basis of their social relations of production and/or their relations to the market. This approach was exemplified in works such as Wolf (1969), Shanin (1971; 1972; 1973) and Mintz (1973), where the following questions became prominent. Did peasants own their own means of production, such as their land or farm equipment? Did they use family labour, hire labour, or hire themselves out as wage labourers? Were there seasonal differences in these occupational practices or did they maintain the same occupation throughout the year? Were their farm inputs and outputs commoditised or produced for use? Did they produce primarily for subsistence or to invest and expand their scale of operations? Were peasants more willing than other workers or producers to receive substandard wages or farm incomes because of their deep ties to the land? How were peasants exploited by other groups through rent, taxes, cheap labour and/or unequal market exchanges? When, if at all, do peasants cease being peasants if they still maintain rural units of production, even if those units are not economically viable? Do peasants have particular social

and moral obligations to their communities that supersede market considerations and that entail obligatory ceremonial or ritual redistributions of wealth? The importance given to these different variables often distinguished the adversaries in any debate. For a fine example of an empirical study that examined many of these questions, see Deere and de Janvry (1979).

More recent conceptualisations reject a ‘peasant’ versus ‘farmer’ dichotomy and locate peasant farming on a continuum with entrepreneurial farming, although money and market relations still govern specific locations on this continuum (Van der Ploeg 2008). Here, key features of the peasantry include minimising monetary costs through cooperative relations that provide alternatives to the market, and non-monetary means of obtaining farm inputs and labour, as well as a greater prevalence of crop diversification to reduce economic and environmental risks (Edelman 2013).

Boltvinik (Chapter 12) quotes Alavi and Shanin (1988: xxxv, emphasis added), who refer to how V. P. Danilov et al. (in an article in Russian published in 1977) distinguish peasant family units and farmer family units:

In Danilov’s view the distinction based on the respective relations of production which delimits family labour from wage-labour under capitalism, must be supplemented by a further distinction based on *qualitative differences in the forces of production deployed*. Peasant production is family agriculture where natural forces of production, land and labour predominate. Farmers, on the other hand, represent family farms in which the man-made forces of production, mostly industrial in origin, come to play a decisive role. The particularity of family farming as a form of organisation of production does not disappear thereby, but the characteristics of its two different types can be distinguished more clearly.

An expanded analysis of Danilov’s views can be found in Figes (1987).

Some authors in this text use the terms ‘peasant’ and smallholding ‘farmers’ interchangeably. At times, this interchangeable conceptual scheme is empirically driven – governed by the way in which existing data are organised. At other times, it is a political act. For example,

La Vía Campesina, mentioned in numerous contributions to this book, uses an umbrella concept that loosely defines peasants as ‘people of the land’. This broad definition is not surprising, given that social movements seek to attract large numbers of supporters. La Vía Campesina includes small- and medium-sized Canadian farmers alongside poor peasants in the global South. It excludes large farms, not because of their size or social relations of production, but because of their support for unfettered trade liberalisation, industrial or chemical-intensive agriculture and genetically engineered crops. It also includes people involved in various occupations who live in rural areas, such as those engaged in handicraft production related to agriculture (Edelman 2013).

Indeed, it is often highlighted today how the rural poor engage in occupational multiplicity – or what authors Damián and Pacheco in this book call ‘pluri-activity’ – where they move between various occupations, such as from farming to wage labour, urban service work, and/or mercantile trade. While some scholars use the concept of ‘peasant’ to refer to these rural poor, others argue that the term is obsolete because of this occupational multiplicity – especially given how globalisation has intensified migration and the existence of transnational households (Kearney 1996). Still others warn against mistaking temporary migration and/or occupational multiplicity as reliable indicators of depeasantisation, since these activities can also lead to accumulation that enables rural viability (Bebbington 1999).

In sum, as Teodor Shanin (1973) argued almost half a century ago, conceptualisations of the peasantry must acknowledge the complexity of their social reality and recognise peasant heterogeneity across the globe and across historical time. Although there is no single, shared definition of peasants today, most scholars would agree that, while they have diminished as a proportion of the global population over time, their size in absolute numbers has increased, as has their impoverishment. Thus, a better understanding of the various reasons for peasant poverty and persistence is still of utmost importance in the new millennium.

5. Contributions of the authors

This section describes the contents of Part II of the book, starting with the **background paper** and the three additional papers included in **Session I: Theoretical perspectives on peasant poverty and**

persistence, which provide a wide variety of theoretical perspectives on these issues.

In the **background paper**, ‘**Poverty and persistence of the peasantry**’, **Julio Boltvinik** argues that peasant poverty is determined by the seasonality of agriculture as expressed in unequal labour demands throughout the year, concentrated in periods of sowing and harvesting, and by the fact that, in capitalist systems, prices only incorporate (as costs) the wages of days that have effectively been worked. Since peasant producers are price takers in the same markets as capitalist firms, the prices of their products can only reward them for the days that have been effectively worked. In other words, *the social cost of seasonality is absorbed by peasants, who therefore have to live in permanent poverty as errant proletarians in search of additional income.*

Boltvinik discovered (in the course of his polemic with Armando Bartra) that his theory of peasant poverty also explained peasant persistence – that capitalism cannot exist in a pure form in agriculture. *Without the peasants’ supply of cheap seasonal labour, capitalist agriculture would be impossible* because there would be (virtually) no one prepared to work *only* during the sowing and harvesting periods. Hence, *this persistence is not only functional but indispensable to the existence of capitalist agricultural firms.* However, peasants will be obliged to sell their labour seasonally (and cheaply) *only if they are poor*: rich farmers in the USA can (and do) spend off-season periods in idleness. In other words, *agricultural capitalism can only exist in symbiosis with poor peasants, prepared (and compelled) to sell their labour seasonally.* Thus, a theory that explains peasant survival should also explain their poverty.

The background paper examines the nature of agricultural production by contrasting it with industry, emphasising seasonality. It also includes a brief characterisation of the peasant family unit. Various sections of the paper are devoted to discussions of diverse theoretical positions on the persistence of the peasantry.

The background paper describes a public polemic between Boltvinik and Armando Bartra, who, in his theory of the persistence of the peasantry (see below for more detail), argues that peasants persist because they act as a buffer mechanism for differential rent, which damages non-agricultural capital, diminishing it substantially. Playing this role explains peasants’ persistence. Bartra admits that

peasants absorb the full cost of seasonality. He argues that peasants are subject to *polymorphous exploitation* when they absorb this cost, when they sell their labour power and when they migrate. Bartra ends his polemic with Boltvinik by arguing that the main difference between them lies not in their diagnoses but in their proposals for dealing with peasant poverty. Whereas Boltvinik proposes that Third World countries should subsidise peasants, Bartra argues that, while subsidies have a positive role to play, the real solution lies in agricultural diversification. For Boltvinik, Bartra has an original theory of peasant persistence that largely complements his own.

The background paper then closely examines and critically assesses the Mann–Dickinson thesis, which shares features with the work of Ariel Contreras (1977). Boltvinik points out that both papers, being based only on *Capital's* Volume II, disregard the equalisation of rates of profit (the process by which values are transformed into prices of production), as analysed by Marx in Volume III of *Capital*. As a result, they identify false obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture.

Boltvinik maintains that when the reality of discontinuous work in agriculture is introduced into Marx's theory of value, the value of labour power in agriculture will not be sufficient for the reproduction of the labour force: for example, the people who sowed will have died by harvest time. He notes that a third equation is needed in Marx's Simple Reproduction Scheme, which would specify the conditions needed for the reproduction of the working force. In order to maintain equilibrium in the scheme, the working time incorporated into the commodity needs to account for not just the live work undertaken by the worker during the days he works, but also the value of his labour power during the days when he does not work. He calls the resulting scheme a *general theory of value* to distinguish it from Marx's original theory, which is more accurately seen as a *theory of value for continuous labour processes*. Boltvinik's thesis here gave rise to a debate with Luis Arizmendi, as seen in the latter's paper for this volume.

The paper concludes by arguing that Third World countries should do what most developed countries do: subsidise their peasants or farmers and thereby recognise the *right of peasants to a minimum standard of living*. Boltvinik argues that, in the EU and the US, the cost of seasonal farm labour is absorbed by society as a whole through subsidies to agricultural production. Boltvinik enumerates three

factors that explain why most peasant households in Mexico and the rest of the Third World live in abject poverty: first, their productivity is below that of their competitors in developed countries; second, their labour power is undervalued; and third, they absorb the cost of seasonality.

Chapter 2, by **Armando Bartra**, ‘**Rethinking rustic issues: contributions to a theory of contemporary peasantry**’, begins by pointing out the irony in that the Great Crisis has led such a conspicuous agent of modernisation as the World Bank to call for the promotion of peasant production. For Bartra, the ‘recipes for industrial agriculture [are] unsustainable’, so he proposes to recover ‘certain models of production ... developed by the great agricultural cultures that might be inspirational for the replacement paradigms’ now required urgently. To elaborate his proposal, he goes into some detail to explain one of these holistic models: the *milpa* – the mixed maize field. He also associates the multicropping that is characteristic of the *milpa* with the multicultural values adopted by Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic civilisations.

One of Bartra’s major contributions is that he has developed an original theory of the persistence of the peasantry centred on land rent. He argues that, as demand grows, additional production has to be derived from less fertile (marginal) land that produces agricultural products at higher costs. He states that ‘differential rent is unavoidable when the same goods with different costs are regularly sold at the same price’ (Bartra 2006). This would be the case if marginal lands were cultivated by capitalist enterprises. But if these lands are exploited by peasants, as they usually are, ‘peasants can be forced to work below average profits and, on occasions, at the simple point of equilibrium’. Thus, peasants are essential as a buffer mechanism for land rent, and this helps explain their persistence. Bartra also points to unequal market exchanges as another basis of peasant exploitation. He argues that, rather than seeking government subsidies to compensate for the idle time associated with the seasonality of rural production, promoting diversified farming – as exemplified by the environmentally sustainable, indigenous, *milpa* fields – would be a more viable way to reduce peasant poverty.

In **Chapter 3**, ‘**From field to fork: labour power, its reproduction, and the persistence of peasant poverty**’, **Gordon Welty, Susan Mann, James Dickinson and Emily Blumenfeld**

argue that the historically specific and commodity-specific analysis underlying the Mann–Dickinson thesis is preferable to the ‘ontology of industry and agriculture’ proposed in Boltvinik’s background paper. They also discuss how Boltvinik’s analyses of both wage-based production and petty commodity production ignore the role of gender and patriarchy. They highlight not only how peasant women play important roles in subsistence production and the informal sector, but also how the political economy of domestic labour and the social reproduction of labour power are critical to an analysis of peasant persistence.

The authors highlight the *less visible and hidden universe of unpaid labour within the home that goes into the production and reproduction of labour power*. By doing so, they point to the gender inequality entailed in this process, as well as to the fact that unpaid domestic labour enables lower wages to be paid to workers in capitalist enterprises. They argue that many agrarian theorists have been gender blind to the patriarchal inequalities within peasant households, including A. V. Chayanov and his famous theory of peasant economy.

They counterpose the background paper’s thesis that capitalist agriculture cannot exist without a pauperised peasantry with the idea that capitalism relies on, creates and perpetuates many peculiar non-capitalist forms of production to operate both in industry and in agriculture. To them, it is not so much that the world’s poor, especially the rural poor, are poor because of the way capitalism exploits the peasant’s ability to undertake much of its reproduction, but because masses of humanity are now surplus and disposable. They discuss outsourcing, illegal migration, temporary work, the informal sector and permanent casuals – in short, the mass of surplus humanity located off the grid of capitalist accumulation proper. Their paper ends by arguing against the likelihood that subsidising peasant production is a viable solution to peasant poverty, as the background paper proposes. In their view, the current era of neoliberalism and flexible capitalism is one of the least ripe times in history to be calling for government subsidies to end peasant poverty.

In **Chapter 4, ‘Baroque modernity and peasant poverty in the twenty-first century’**, Luis Arizmendi agrees with Armando Bartra that, given the global food crisis, the controversy around the complex relationship between capitalism and the peasantry in the twenty-first century has become central. According to Arizmendi,

the myth of progress mistakenly associates peasant poverty with the persistence of pre-modern, pre-capitalist forms, thus evading capitalist domination as the basis for peasant poverty. Indeed, capitalism's 'rule' is that the wages received by rural workers 'will never be adequate for satisfying their needs'. This fact forces peasant households to invent mixed strategies for their social reproduction, combining petty commodity production with wage work.

'Baroque modernity' refers to this peculiar combination of modern and pre-modern forms aimed at resistance in times of adversity. For Arizmendi, the best approach to deciphering its historical complexity has been developed in Latin America, where the relationship between the peasant economy and the capitalist economy has been investigated not as a relation of exteriority, nor as the contact between two forms of production that are articulated from outside, but rather as a relation of domination in which the capitalist economy absorbs and penetrates the peasant economy, placing the latter at its service.

To understand this complex relationship, Arizmendi further develops the concept of subsumption. In this, he departs from Marx's concepts of formal subsumption (where the worker is a wage worker dispossessed of his or her means of production) and real subsumption (where capital introduces new technology and controls it); instead, he couples the insights of Bolívar Echeverría (who showed that these forms of subsumption are not necessarily successive) with the work of Armando Bartra, arguing that capital can dominate labour from the sphere of commodity circulation – the market – through unequal exchange. This constitutes a type of *indirect formal subsumption* which makes possible the exploitation of labour (the extraction of surplus value) without the commodification of labour power. Based on these ideas, Arizmendi creates new labels. For peasants, 'seasonal time wages' represent the *specific formal subsumption of the labour force*, while unequal exchange represents the *non-specific formal subsumption of labour by capital*. Both externalise annual reproduction costs, leaving them in the hands of peasant producers.

In analysing the evolution of food regimes throughout the world, Arizmendi distinguishes a stage of self-sufficiency (up to the 1970s); a stage of artificial food dependency, where the main providers are US food corporations; and a new stage sparked by the collapse of international food reproduction. In this latter stage, to avoid assuming the annual reproduction costs of labour power, capital 'places on the

shoulders of the *campesindios* not the ecological rebalancing of the planet but rather the externalities produced by both global warming and experimentation with genetic engineering’.

In the persistence in Latin America of ecological and communitarian forms of contact with nature, Arizmendi finds a set of proposals for coping with the current food and environmental crisis. In order to overcome the world food crisis, for him it is crucial to promote the design of strategic policies based on principles of human security that prioritise the reproduction of life, rather than capitalist accumulation.

Opening this part’s **Session II: Historical and empirical approaches** to the issues of peasant poverty and persistence is **Chapter 5, Henry Bernstein’s ‘Agriculture/industry, rural/urban, peasants/workers: some reflections on poverty, persistence and change’**. Bernstein responds to Boltvinik’s ‘stimulating’ background paper, pointing to both shared and contested terrain. He applauds Boltvinik’s focus on the reproduction of rural households for broadening what too often are capital-centric arguments about ‘obstacles to capitalist agriculture’, where peasant persistence is treated simply as residual. Bernstein synthesises in a table the distinctive features of agriculture vis-à-vis industry as described in the background paper. However, Bernstein finds problematic the highly abstract nature of the background paper, in which abstractions are not grounded in *theory as history*, nor is the theory tested empirically. He proposes an alternative and complementary approach that is both historically and empirically informed.

Bernstein adopts a broad definition of agriculture which includes farming as well as economic interests, institutions and activities that affect the activities and reproduction of farmers. He argues that *‘one cannot conceive of the emergence and functioning of agriculture in modern capitalism without the centrality and reconfigurations of new sets of dynamics linking agriculture and industry, and the rural and urban (and indeed the local, national and global)’*.

Bernstein also highlights the high levels of commodification that exist in many rural areas of the globe and that undermine any notion that existing production units are pre-modern or pre-capitalist. He contends that, by the time of independence in Asia and Africa, *subsistence among peasants had been commodified*. This means that their *reproduction could not take place outside commodity relations*

and the discipline they impose, and this results in a tendency towards the decomposition of once pure classes of agrarian labour, since they have to diversify their forms and spaces of employment (and self-employment) to meet their simple reproduction needs.

Bernstein questions whether poor peasants should be considered ‘peasant’ farmers at all or more accurately viewed as wage workers. While they ‘might not be dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing themselves’, most do not *possess* sufficient means for their reproduction; this ‘marks the limits of their viability as petty commodity producers’. Based on data from the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2008*, Bernstein argues that ‘own-account farming is the primary economic activity for more than half of the adult rural population *only* in sub-Saharan Africa’. He suggests that capitalism has successfully penetrated the countryside, resulting in the depeasantisation of agricultural labour.

Bernstein rejects farm subsidies as a solution to rural poverty, arguing instead that the key question is the broader struggle over employment and real wage levels. He adds: ‘And if I had to emphasise only one aspect of the remarkable trajectories of capitalist farming over the last 150 years ... it would be its remarkable development of the productive forces, of the productivity of labour, in farming.’ For Bernstein, without these achievements, feeding the large urban populations of the globe today would be impossible. This is an interesting point for debate, as some authors in this volume (Vergopoulos, for instance) hold the opposite view.

Chapter 6, ‘Employment and rural poverty in Mexico’, by **Araceli Damián** and **Edith Pacheco** discusses the findings of empirical research on peasant poverty and persistence in Mexico. After providing an overview of the history of the Mexican countryside since the Revolution of 1910, the authors contend that today only some regions of the country have modern agriculture, while most peasants continue to use rudimentary technology. Although rural to urban migration explains why the rural population dropped from 66.5 per cent in 1930 to 23.2 per cent in 2010, part of this migration was circular and seasonal, with peasants combining work in the city and in the countryside. In turn, Mexican peasants have long provided cheap seasonal labour to US agriculture and to other US economic activities, and these migrants send important money remittances back home. The authors conclude that circular

migration to the USA contributes to the persistence of the peasantry in Mexico.

Damián and Pacheco provide a detailed analysis of two surveys: the special section on agriculture of the National Employment Survey (known as ENE from its name in Spanish), or the agricultural module, undertaken from 1991 to 2003; and the National Household Income and Expenditure Survey (known as ENIGH from its name in Spanish), which is carried out every two years. From the first survey they estimate that slightly more than one-third of all households reporting agricultural income own land and can be classified as peasant units. Applying the Integrated Poverty Measurement Method to the second survey, they present rural poverty incidence data and classify the poor in three strata: indigence, extreme poverty and moderate poverty. These figures show that *most rural inhabitants are poor (around 95 per cent since 1984)*. Nevertheless, the internal structure of rural poverty has changed: the percentage of indigents (the poorest stratum) has declined from 74 per cent in 1984 and 74.7 per cent in 2000 to 58 per cent in 2010, while there have been increases in the other two strata.

The remainder of their paper analyses the results of the agricultural module, which identified workers using a period of reference of the previous six months (instead of the last week, as is usually the case in employment surveys all over the world). Given the seasonal nature of agricultural work, it is not surprising that the module identified *1 million more workers in agriculture* than were previously identified using a one-week reference period. As Damián and Pacheco point out: ‘This result constitutes the first evidence of the high level of intersectoral occupational mobility of agricultural workers in Mexico in a context in which the seasonality of production plays a central role.’

The authors emphasise that their findings must be placed in the context of a decreasing contribution of agriculture to gross domestic product (GDP) and a decreasing proportion of the working age population engaged in agriculture. Nevertheless, 60 per cent of the working population in rural areas was still engaged in agricultural production in 2003, based on data from the agricultural module. The authors also found that ‘*very few rural households were able to live exclusively off the land, since only 8.3 per cent had all household workers engaged in agricultural activities*’. They also found that *fewer than one*

in six agriculturally engaged persons belonged to households able to live exclusively off the land; that the broad participation in agricultural activity in rural contexts (only 24.6 per cent of the labour force lives in households that are totally non-agricultural) points to the persistence of the peasantry; and that widespread peasant multi-activity 'is largely due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work'.

At the end of their paper, Damián and Pacheco highlight the huge gaps between agricultural and non-agricultural wages and between the proportion of people with access to social security in rural and non-rural areas. They also point to how the poorest peasant households show high rates of labour participation even in the very young age group (ages 12 to 17) and among those aged 65 years and over. The authors conclude that 'there is evidence that the peasantry absorbs the economic and social cost of capitalist labour seasonality and instability of work, constituting an industrial reserve army'.

Session III is titled **Environment, food crisis and peasants**. Its first paper – **Chapter 7, 'From the persistence of the peasantry in capitalism to the environmentalism of indigenous peoples and the sustainability of life'**, by **Enrique Leff** – argues that explanations of peasant poverty and persistence have to adopt a more historical, anthropological, social and ecological perspective that relies less on economic reasoning. For Leff, a shift from traditional Marxist to eco-Marxist explanations is required to better address the issues of political ecology and environmental sustainability and to show how peasant poverty is also the product of a *historical process of entropic degradation of their environment and their livelihoods*.

Leff argues for an alternative theory of value, claiming that the main problem of the Marxist theory of value is not that it fails to include the discontinuity of work in seasonal production processes, as argued in the background paper, but *'that nature is not valued and that nature does not determine value or surplus value'*. For him, *the problem is crystal clear: nature contributes to production*. Yet, in Marxist theory, *only labour time, determined by technological progress, contributes to value; 'nature has been externalised by the economy'*. Herein lies a major theoretical difference between Leff's views and those of many other authors in this volume who rely on Marx's theory of value.

Eco-Marxism is praised by Leff for highlighting the hidden *second contradiction of capital*, or how capitalism destroys the ecological conditions for its own social reproduction. While the peasantry has

survived through complex socio-cultural and political mechanisms of resistance, Leff asks how long can we expect nature to survive when its resiliency mechanisms have been eroded. For him, this problem can be solved only through a ‘shift in economic paradigms ... the deconstruction of economic rationality and the construction of an environmental rationality’.

Moreover, the questions posed are not only about the conservation of biodiversity or the persistence of peasantry, but also about the survival of the living planet and human life. If capitalist-induced entropic degradation is what is driving the ecological destruction of life support systems and cultural resiliency, then the future persistence of the peasantry will depend on envisioning and constructing a sustainable mode of production, one based in the *negentropic potentials of life*. This implies a labour process oriented towards enhancing and magnifying the principle of life: the process of photosynthesis. Thus Leff proposes a sustainable negentropic paradigm of production that is ‘articulated in a spatial and temporal frame of non-modern cultural imaginaries and ecological practices’. For him, the privileged spaces in which to deploy this strategy of *negentropic* production are the ‘rural areas of the world’ inhabited by indigenous peasant peoples.

Leff ends his paper by highlighting the importance of ‘the social imaginaries of the sustainability of traditional peoples’, the persistence of their attachments to their historical and territorial roots, such as those being expressed today through the principle of well-being – *sumak kawsay* – and their ability to trust that another world is possible.

Chapter 8, ‘South American peasants and poor farmers facing global environmental change: a development dilemma’, by **Elma Montaña** reports the findings of a research project on the vulnerability of rural communities in watershed basins of Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. In this comparative study of dry land areas of these three countries, she maps out different adaptive strategies undertaken by capitalists, large landowners and poor peasants in response to dwindling water supplies, as well as the strikingly different government policies of each of these countries: Chile’s neoliberal agenda, Argentina’s welfare state and Bolivia’s policies to revitalise indigenous communities. She also notes how expected changes in climate and hydrology are likely to affect the availability

of drinking and irrigation water, threatening productive systems and the subsistence of rural dwellers.

Montaña carefully illuminates the social divisions created by *water access*. In explaining how the expected decrease in the rivers' flows will exacerbate the disadvantages of small producers, thereby polarising the hydraulic societies still more, she quotes a popular saying that captures the political economy of these hydraulic societies: 'Water flows uphill towards money.' This social inequality is driven to its extreme in Chile, where water is transformed into a commodity by the prevailing neoliberal, pro-market, public policy.

Indeed, the manner in which droughts are faced in each case is related to water governance. In Mendoza, Argentina, the supply of irrigation water is proportional to the land area and water is inherent to the land, so it cannot be used on other farms. In Chile, water can be used anywhere by those who buy shares; this is a very competitive system in which 'water is concentrated in the hands of the most powerful producers'. In Bolivia, conflict is mitigated by the relative homogeneity of producers and their cultures. In turn, trade unions and irrigators' associations make up for the lack of financial resources with solidarity and mutual aid mechanisms, creating more favourable settings in which conflicts can be resolved by taking into consideration an interest in the commons. Yet, in all three basins, migration as a result of poverty is a common element.

Linking water with the notion of poverty evokes the issue of scarcity. However, as Montaña points out, physical scarcity is produced when water availability is limited by nature; *economic and political scarcity* occurs 'when people are barred from accessing an available source of water because they are in a situation of political subordination'.

Although Montaña explores the strengths and weaknesses of various adaptive strategies, she shares with other authors the view that the most viable strategy for peasant persistence requires an emphasis on diversified farming and environmental sustainability.

In **Chapter 9, 'Financialisation of the food sector and peasants' persistence'**, **Kostas Vergopoulos** examines the relationships between the following elements: the present financial and economic crises; financialisation in general and the financialisation of the agro-industrial food circuit in particular; the generalised increase in food prices; peasant poverty and persistence; and recent policies

to enhance both food security and family-based agrarian production. He discusses how those responsible for the recent financial crisis are desperately trying to mitigate the consequences of the burst housing bubble by replacing it with new speculative bubbles of commodities and food. Vergopoulos argues that the major world economic event in recent years has been the 'food tsunami': a quick acceleration of food prices combined with decreasing production and the breakdown of productivity in the world food economy. According to the US Department of Agriculture, there has been a sharp decline in agrarian productivity by acre of cultivated land, as well as a decrease in US cereal stocks. On the other hand, the 'worldwide struggle for water and against the threat of pervasive desertification represents an overwhelming limiting factor for many ... food projects'. Vergopoulos goes beyond the conventional causes of increases in food prices and argues that the structural penetration of capitalism into agricultural production is an additional cause. He further states that inflation in food prices has an impact on the *overall global valorisation of capital*.

Although Vergopoulos views the entrance of traders and international banks into the domain of foodstuffs as tantamount to an invasion by 'true carnivores', he still sees speculation in food commodities as only the tip of the iceberg. He identifies the root of the problem as 'structural mutations created by the extension of capitalism into the agri-food sphere'.

In addition, Vergopoulos examines why food security policies and the return to family-based forms of food production are being encouraged. For a number of years, both the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, (FAO) have emphatically encouraged and financed the worldwide implementation of 'food security' programmes based on the consolidation of family farming. Quoting Chayanov, Vergopoulos argues that the family mode of production permits a maximisation of the agrarian product while minimising prices and production costs. Hence, the poorer peasants are, the more competitive they become. As such, peasant poverty and persistence, far from being a relic of the past, is simply an inexpensive safety net for capitalist food crises.

He adds that, under the capitalist mode of production, the supply of the 'special' commodity of labour power must be ensured through a non-capitalist (read: family labour production) process – in order

to keep its price substantially, structurally and permanently low. He concludes:

Peasants' poverty, instead of being a handicap, represents the competitive advantage of this type of production and a way out of the current impasse.

By the same token, we can understand not only why peasants remain poor, but also why they certainly will not disappear and why the capitalist mode of production in the agri-food sector is now tending to restore the land to its traditional residents and workers ...

The relation between the two worlds – capitalist and peasant – might well turn out to be as deeply opposite and antagonistic, but also as deeply functional, as it has been in the past.

Opening **Session IV: Policy, self-reliance and peasant poverty** is **Chapter 10, Farshad Araghi's 'The rise and fall of the agrarian welfare state: peasants, globalisation, and the privatisation of development'**. Araghi analyses what he calls 'agrarian welfare systems', or food regimes that managed labour and food supplies in different historical epochs. He discusses the role of overseas colonialism in 'constructing export-dependent monocultures that subsidised the reproductive needs of European labour and capital'. Similarly, the success of settler colonial states also lowered food costs, which, in turn, 'lowered the value of labour power and enhanced the rate of surplus value' for capital. This 'global food regime' came to a 'political end' as a consequence of 'socialist movements at home' and 'peasant and anti-colonialist movements in the colonies' towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century.

For Araghi, a new stage of 'long national developmentalism' began with the Russian Revolution. It was the success of the Soviets in linking national and colonial questions with the peasant question and in supporting the demands of an insurgent peasantry that put the 'Third World and its development on the agenda of the United States'. The compromise forced upon the US by these conditions was a 'market-led national developmentalism' that was designed to 'placate postcolonial peasant movements by accommodating their land hunger within a market-led framework', and to 'demobilise ...

and ... unlink them from urban nationalist and/or socialist movements'. Here, US-sponsored land reform, dominated by a 'family farm' ideology, was seen as a 'way of creating a stable and highly conservative social base'.

Yet, as Araghi points out: 'Ironically, a global agrarian programme that ... had sought to create a class of peasant proprietors as a stable social base for the postcolonial states, *ipso facto* created the conditions for a process of depeasantisation on a world scale.' He identifies two dynamic forces that created these conditions: 1) the expansion of monetised and commodity relations, exposing emerging small farms to market forces that favoured large-scale producers; and 2) the emerging world market, which substantively undermined home market formation and nation-based divisions of labour. The disposal of increasing US grain surpluses as food aid or concessional sales further depressed world prices of grain and encouraged Third World food imports and food import dependency. In Araghi's view, '*peasantisation and depeasantisation are neither unilinear nor mutually exclusive national processes*'. Moreover, *peasant dispossession from class differentiation in this period occurred at a sluggish rate and, in the end, was subordinated to peasant dispossession via urban displacement*. This relative depeasantisation process took place in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s.

In contrast, *absolute depeasantisation* defines the character of global dispossession in the late twentieth century and beyond under postcolonial neoliberal globalism. The 1970s witnessed a profound capitalist crisis and, as a response, capital's *counterrevolution*, which implied capital withdrawal from reformist social compacts. The *retreat from development* was a component of a systemic counteroffensive that sought to reverse the protection of society from the market. From 1973 onwards, the 'privatisation of the agrarian welfare state to the advantage of northern transnational agribusinesses and capitalist farms' generated 'absolute depeasantisation and displacement'. Debt-enforced structural adjustments in many agrarian sectors of the globe led to: 1) the deregulation of land markets and the reversal of land reform policies; 2) drastic cuts in farm subsidies, price supports and irrigation support; 3) the expanded commodification of seeds and seed reproduction; 4) a marked and growing dependence on chemical and hydrocarbon farm inputs; and 5) the promotion of agro exports at the expense of food crops. In this period, 'the "invisible

hand” of the debt regime ... functioned as the “visible foot” of the global enclosures of our times’.

Asymmetric power relations, argues Araghi, forced millions of petty producers in the South to compete with heavily subsidised transnational corporations in the North. The inability to compete led in turn to massive peasant dispossession by displacement. Araghi describes how the global enclosures of postcolonial neoliberal globalism have led to the creation of masses of semi-dispossessed peasantries who have lost their non-market access to their means of subsistence, but still hold formal ownership to some of their means of production. As a result, agrarian direct producers are thrown into ‘the vortex of globalisation as masses of surplus labour in motion’. Key to this project was the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture, which is an agreement between the United States and Europe to resolve their overproduction crisis by expanding the space of commercial dumping in the South.

In his concluding paragraphs, Araghi adds that an *unprecedented global land grab is underway as speculative investors, who now regard ‘food as gold’, are acquiring millions of hectares*. The human cost of such actions will be dispossessed and displaced peasants, who, in India, according to one source, will be ‘equal to twice the combined population of UK, France, and Germany’.

Chapter II, ‘Overcoming rural poverty from the bottom up’, by **David Barkin** and **Blanca Lemus** is a heterodox paper that focuses on the market itself as the principal obstacle to peasants escaping the poverty imposed on them by their participation in the capitalist circuit of accumulation. The authors argue that millions of rural denizens have adopted different strategies for confronting their structural weaknesses using communal principles of collective action and traditional organisation. Indeed, many rural organisations have chosen to collectively administer and control their social and natural resources. To achieve their goals, peasant communities also must ensure a diversified productive structure that allows members to satisfy their basic needs, as well as to produce goods used for exchange.

Although there are many examples of these alternative forms of organising rural production, social scientists have largely ignored them. In contrast, this paper draws from the proposals of diverse indigenous and peasant groups whose own organisation of the rural

production process forms part of their diagnosis for overcoming peasant poverty. Their collective commitments to an alternative framework for production and social integration offer a realistic but challenging strategy for local progress. Barkin and Lemus enumerate the following principles that have been widely agreed upon in broad-based consultations among these peasant communities: autonomy, solidarity, self-sufficiency, productive diversification, and sustainable management of regional resources. An emphasis on local or regional economies, the use of traditional and agro-ecological approaches in production and the integrated management of ecosystems constitute the foundations for the groups' ability to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all their members. These communities also require a commitment to participate in production, thus eliminating unemployment.

A major thrust of this paper is its critique of the notion of progress where well-being is measured in terms of economic growth or other objective indicators. Barkin and Lemus highlight three major features of this critique. First, they suggest alternative measures of well-being, such as an index of 'gross domestic happiness'. They argue that 'throughout the world we are suffering a deterioration in our quality of life, resulting from the weakening or destruction of social and solidarity networks ... and the accelerated destruction of the ecosystems on which we depend'. Questioning the meaning of progress requires a multidisciplinary vision and a re-evaluation of some of the fundamental elements that we normally associate with traditional society.

Second, the authors emphasise *degrowth* and *good living* (*sumak kawsay*) in contrast to the development paradigm that, in their view, entails the transformation and destruction of both the natural environment and social relations. *Sumak kawsay* implies *recognising the 'rights of nature'* and a complex citizenry that accepts social as well as environmental commitments. The basic value in a 'good living' regime is *solidarity*. The success of such a regime requires that the essential function of the market is transformed so that it can serve society rather than determine social relations, as it does at present.

Third, the authors embrace communality. This concept includes: direct or participatory democracy; the organisation of community work; community possession and control of land; a common cosmology; and a respect for community leadership. Communality

is a contract one accepts on the understanding that it involves commitment to the well-being of the group as a whole, even if a particular situation works against an individual's interests. It implies a concept of democracy that is simultaneously an ethical agreement.

Their overall view is captured well near the end of their paper where Barkin and Lemus state:

it might be that much of the poverty to which most of the literature is addressed has its origins in the individualism and alienation of the masses whose behaviour is embedded in the Western model of modernity, a model of concentrated accumulation based on a system of deliberate dispossession of the majority by a small elite ... To escape from this dynamic, the collective subject that is emerging in the process offers a meaningful path to overcoming the persistence of poverty in our times.

Chapter 12 by **Julio Boltvinik, 'Dialogues and debates on peasant poverty and persistence: around the background paper and beyond'**, responds to the various papers in this volume in diverse ways and expands some of the initial discussions in the background paper. First, in Table 12.1, Boltvinik lists the commentaries and criticisms included in five of the chapters of the book. He organises his reactions (and his deepened analysis) in four groups: 1) general clarifications (divided into three groups: genesis and theoretical bases of his theory; what he does not say; and what he does say in the background paper); 2) precisions on seasonality; 3) backups for his theory (where he examines the positions by Lenin, Danielson, Kautsky and Luis Cabrera, finding expected and unexpected support for his theory); and 4) replies to the authors in this book. Replies are organised in two groups. Short replies to non-central commentaries are presented in Table 12.2, while longer replies to Welty et al., Bernstein, and lastly Arizmendi and Leff together are presented in section 2.

Outstanding points in sections 1 and 2 are Boltvinik's discovery of a precedent to his theory in Danielson's theory of the 'freeing of winter time' as the fundamental cause of peasant poverty; his unveiling of a little known facet of Lenin's work that rejects, ambiguously, the theory of the vanishing peasantry; the complementarity between

Boltvinik's theory and Kautsky's theory on the demographic role of the peasantry; the importance of discussing the alleged neglect of nature in Marx's labour theory of value, the Lauderdale Paradox, or the contradiction between use value and exchange value; and, lastly, the profound insight, generated in Boltvinik's debate with Arizmendi, on discontinuities and the labour theory of value – that is, that any theory of capitalism has to include its necessary coexistence and articulation with the peasantry (or family farm).

Section 3 summarises the distinctive features of agriculture, drawing on Bernstein's Table 5.1 to create Table 12.3. The list of features included in this table is longer than those in earlier analyses by both authors. One of the features added, inspired by Bartra's chapter, contrasts the natural character of agriculture's main means of production (land, water and climate) with human-produced machinery in industry. Boltvinik also adds a column that describes how each feature impinges on the technical and economic logic of the production process in agriculture.

Section 4 is a heterogeneous list of topics not covered in the book but that are important to understand the plight (and possible futures) of peasants. Originally, this chapter was meant to cover the contents of this list in depth, but this was precluded by space limitations.

The chapter, and the book, ends with section 5, which builds two typologies of replies included in this volume, one for each of the two central theoretical questions – on poverty and on the persistence of the peasantry. The section discusses both the replies sustained by the contributors to this book and those by other authors. The end result of this exercise is synthesised in Tables 12.4 and 12.5.

Notes

1 These earlier grand theories of modernisation are discussed in Araghi (1995).

2 *The Theory of Peasant Economy* includes two of Chayanov's works that were published in Russian as *Peasant Farm Organisation* and *The Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Forms*.

3 For more on 'degrowth', see Barkin and Lemus (Chapter 11 in this volume); for 'maldevelopment', see Shiva (1989); and for 'necropolitics', see Mbembe (2001).

4 As noted above, an example can be found in this volume where Barkin and Lemus discuss how the concept of '*sumak kawsay*' or 'good living' is defined in the preface to the new Ecuadorian Constitution as a new form of citizens' coexistence, in harmony and diversity with nature, in order to achieve a good life.

5 For a challenge to these approaches, see Vivek Chibber (2013), who makes a strong case that the

non-Western world can be conceptualised using the same analytical lens that we use to understand developments in the West. He offers a sustained defence of employing categories, such as capitalism and class, as well as for the continued relevance of Marxism.

6 In Boltvinik's background paper (see Chapter 1, section 3), there is a short

discussion of the features of peasant family units.

7 Marc Edelman's 2013 briefing paper on conceptualising the peasantry provides an especially instructive overview of the ways in which peasants have been defined historically, in the social sciences, normatively, and as activist political movements. We draw from his analysis below.

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