

## **12 | DIALOGUES AND DEBATES ON PEASANT POVERTY AND PERSISTENCE: AROUND THE BACKGROUND PAPER AND BEYOND**

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This chapter starts with the dialogue on the background paper (Chapter 1) that has taken place in this book. This task is carried out in the first two sections of this chapter: in section 1, clarifications, precisions and backups to the paper are analysed, while in section 2, my replies to criticisms are presented. Section 3 provides an enriched version of the distinctive features of agriculture and how it contrasts with industry, which were presented in Chapter 1 and systematised by Bernstein in Chapter 5, and section 4 lists some of the pending issues that could not be covered in depth because of length constraints. Section 5 closes the chapter and the book, outlining two typologies of replies to the central theoretical questions addressed in this volume.

### **1. Commentaries and criticisms to the background paper: clarifications, precisions and backups**

As originally intended, the background paper received numerous commentaries and criticisms in some of the seminar papers (summarised in Table 12.1 at the end of the chapter), although the dialogue with Bartra started in 2008 and the one with Arizmendi two months before the seminar. In this section, I present clarifications, precisions and backups on the background paper, and I include my replies in section 2. These exclude the dialogue with Bartra, which has been covered in two chapters of the book (Chapters 1 and 2).

Table 12.1 enumerates twenty-five observations numbered sequentially and grouped by author. In this and the following section, I identify them by their number in Table 12.1.

I start with a caveat.

*A caveat on the different meanings of the word 'agriculture' in English and Spanish.* The word *agriculture*, despite deriving in both English and Spanish from the same Latin word, has different meanings. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines agriculture as 'the science or occupation of cultivating land and rearing crops and livestock'. The definition in *Webster's New World Dictionary* is practically the same. The *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Real Spanish Academy defines *agricultura* as: '1. Tillage or cultivation of the land; 2. Art of cultivation of the land.' And María Moliner's *Diccionario de Uso del Español* gives practically the same definition. Thus, *in English, agriculture includes livestock raising, but not in Spanish.* These different meanings of the word agriculture in the two main mother languages of the contributors to this book have represented a serious communication problem. Translations become deceiving: when you translate this word from Spanish to English you broaden its meaning, whereas in translating from English to Spanish you narrow it. An exact Spanish translation of the English 'agriculture' would be *agricultura y ganadería*.

*Clarifications I: On the genesis and the theoretical bases of my theory.*

I shall first explain how I came up with my 'theory' on peasant poverty and persistence, and what are its theoretical bases. Then I will clarify some points about what I do and do not say. As stated in the background paper (Chapter 1, section 1), my theoretical position started from a theory on peasant poverty only (Boltvinik 1991; 2007). These two initial texts quoted Chayanov (mainly on the slave mode of production) and Brewster (1970 [1950]) on family farms, but did not rely at all on Marx or Marxists. This initial position reflected my training in agricultural economics and rural development at the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia (1972–73)<sup>1</sup> and the fact that I was working with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on its Regional Project to Overcome Poverty in Latin America (1988–91). It was later, in the initial rounds of my (almost) permanent (and friendly) debate with Armando Bartra, that I discovered that my theory on peasant poverty also constituted a theory on the persistence of the peasantry, and that I perceived the necessary symbiosis between capitalist agriculture and the peasantry, as can be seen in a later text (Boltvinik 2009). Still, Marx, Kautsky and Lenin were not present in my arguments.

It was in preparing the background paper (2010–11) that I became involved in these authors' views on the peasantry.

So, despite the perception of some authors of this book, *my theory on peasant poverty and persistence is not based on Marx*. I consider myself a non-dogmatic, non-orthodox Marxist. But my Marxist background and my agricultural economics and rural development backgrounds remained separate until recently. It might be said that, having already outlined my theory on the peasantry from outside Marxism, I was able to read Marx from a perspective that allowed me to be aware of the fact that he neglects the discontinuous production processes in agriculture in his theory of value, despite his great clarity, in Volume II of *Capital*, on the differences between working time and production time in agriculture. The sequence of chapters in the background paper reflects genetically how I read Marx (and Kautsky and Lenin) with respect to agriculture. I found that both in Volume I of *Capital* and in the reproduction schemes of Volume II there were no references to discontinuities, and on that basis I formulated my critique of Marx's theory of value. In conducting this analysis, and also in reading Lenin and Kautsky, I brought together my Marxist and my agricultural economics backgrounds.

I find it understandable that the discontinuities of the labour process in agriculture are not included in Marx's schemes of simple and amplified reproduction, as the schemes are built from a capital-centric perspective and these discontinuities *apparently* do not pose a problem for the reproduction of total social capital. The same can be said of mainstream current macro-economics, where these discontinuities are also absent. It is only for people-centric perspectives, focused on human life (which are also very much present in Marx's gigantic and revolutionary *Werke*), that the discontinuities pose a problem, and this *appears to be* only a human problem. To paraphrase Leff's statement on nature (Chapter 7), the *reproduction of human life has been externalised* from macro-economic models, Marxist and non-Marxist.

In some of the chapters in the book, there are some misinterpretations of what I say in the background paper, and so it is necessary to clarify what I say and what I do not say.

#### *Clarifications II: Things I never say*

- I never say that absorbing the costs of seasonality *is the only cause* of peasant poverty. Although in some non-nuanced expressions

- (for example in section 1 of the background paper) I say that ‘peasant poverty is determined by the seasonality of agriculture’, the correct statement, reflecting my real intention, would have been that ‘peasant poverty is determined *mainly* by the seasonality of agriculture’. In section 13 of the paper (somewhat late), I give a numerical hypothetical example through which I show that ‘even if we eliminate (through assumptions) the *other poverty factors of peasant producers*’ (low productivity and the undervaluation of labour power), they would ‘continue to be poor in a market where price levels are determined by the operating logic of capitalist firms’. My acknowledgement of these other factors expresses the fact that seasonality, for me, has never been the only factor of peasant poverty. Some authors underestimate or forget the importance of prices in the determination of family farmers’ or peasants’ income – not those who emphasise unequal exchange, but certainly those who emphasise the factors behind the low volume of peasant production: small plots, low-quality land, archaic technology, and so on. But explaining poverty as a consequence of these type of factors implies circular reasoning, for one could easily make the contrary argument: that they lack capital and have small plots because they are poor. This has been argued convincingly by Galbraith (1979: Chapter 1). The equation for the income of a family farm (assuming only one crop, which is totally sold, and no hiring of wage labour), is  $Y = QP$ , where  $Y$  is income,  $Q$  is the quantity of product, and  $P$  is the net price, once market-bought input costs per unit of product are deducted. This makes it clear that peasants can be poor as a consequence of low production levels ( $Q$ ) and/or low price levels ( $P$ ). Although both low  $P$  and low  $Q$  can be causes of peasant poverty, arguments relating to low prices are not involved in circular reasoning, unlike arguments about low quantities.
- I did not state that *capitalism is impossible in agriculture* or that industry cannot deal with living organisms, as Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld (WMDB) (no. 5 in Table 12.1) imply when they state that both the fact that capitalism has successfully penetrated many branches of agricultural production and the fact that some industries rely on micro-organisms in their processes ‘undermine essentialist arguments about agriculture’. What I do say is that capitalist agriculture, to the extent that it requires

seasonal labour power, is dependent on the existence of a poor population willing, and capable, to work seasonally for low wages, and thus that pure capitalism in agriculture (not combined with peasant or poor family farms) is impossible. As long as such a supply of labour is available (whether it comes from nearby peasant units or from far away), capitalist agriculture can thrive. There is indeed an omission in the background paper in that it does not mention exceptions such as the fact that some industries do deal with micro-organisms, but this omission does not undermine the consequences: labour processes are still (almost always) *continuous in industry* and *discontinuous in agriculture*. I also omitted to say that agricultural discontinuities are greater in some plant species or varieties than in others (see ‘Precisions on seasonality’ below).

- Nor do I say (or think) that capitalist accumulation is a function of the congruence between production time and working time, as WMDB state that I do (no. 9). As Bernstein (Chapter 5) points out, the background paper’s focus is ‘on the reproduction of rural households ... it broadens often capital-centric arguments about the uneven development of capitalism’. Explaining capitalist accumulation is completely alien to the theory of peasant poverty and persistence postulated in the background paper.

### *Clarifications III: Things I do say*

- I *do* say that capitalist agriculture is dependent on seasonal labour power provided by poor peasants. So Bernstein (no. 20) is right, *empirically speaking*, when he says that there *might be* other sources, besides peasants, of seasonal labour. Students and teachers can be – and sometimes are – hired during their off-school months; the non-active population (housewives, for example) or the unemployed can also be hired. But this is contingent and anomalous. If you are going to plant fruit trees, you have to be sure that you will have (for many years to come) a sufficient supply of able, efficient and cheap seasonal labour. Migrant labour coming from poor countries to work in agriculture in the rich countries mainly consists of members of poor peasant families. So *conceptually Bernstein is not right*: in a society with full employment, where all who are willing to work are working, only those employed in discontinuous processes of production (such as agriculture or

teaching/learning) are available to be hired in some seasons. The rest of the working population is occupied throughout the year. This is why poor peasants and capitalist agriculture have to live in symbiosis.

### *Precisions on seasonality*

- Seasonality is not only a consequence of the differences between production time and working time, which is what is assumed both by the Mann–Dickinson thesis and by Contreras (1977). Take corn (or maize), the most important crop in both the US and Mexico. Relying on information on sowing and harvesting dates from the US Department of Agriculture ([www.nass.usda.gov/](http://www.nass.usda.gov/)) for Iowa, the state with the largest acreage of maize in the US, I have calculated the length of production time and working time using two procedures: 1) taking the *most frequent* dates for *starting* sowing and the most frequent dates for *ending* harvesting; and 2) taking the period from the *first to sow* until the *last to harvest* for Iowa as a whole. In the first case, the production period would be 183 days (2 May to 31 October); in the second, it would be 210 days (22 April to 17 November). The same two options can be used for calculating working time, taking only the peak labour demand tasks (planting and harvesting) that require seasonal labourers to be hired. Using the most common dates, the number of working days is 40 (15 for planting and 25 for harvesting); using dates for Iowa as a whole, working days are 103 (43 for sowing and 60 for harvesting). In both cases, working days are part of the production period. The rest of the year is non-production time and therefore also non-working time: that is, it is non-agricultural time (NAT). This is the complement of the agricultural production time or agricultural time (AT), and therefore  $\text{NAT} + \text{AT} = 365$ . The two NAT values are therefore  $365 - 183 = 182$  days (1 November to 1 May) and  $365 - 210 = 157$  days (18 November to 21 April). The exact calculation is not important here. What I want to convey is that *there are not two but three 'agricultural' periods in a year*: 1) working time (40 or 103 days); 2) the production period without working time, which, in the words of Marx, is the period when 'the unfinished product is handed over to the sway of natural processes' (143 or 107 days, so the total production time is 183

or 210 days); and 3) NAT or non-production time (the winter or dry season, which equates to 182 or 155 days). Of the 365 days of the year, as we see now, the working days (counting only the two periods of peak labour requirements) account for between just over 10 per cent to 28 per cent, and the longest non-working period is winter or dry season, or the period from the end of harvesting to the beginning of sowing (182 or 155 days). The latter is greater than the difference between production time and working time ( $210-103 = 107$  or  $183-40 = 143$ ). These three periods are different in the case of winter wheat, which is sown before the winter and harvested the following autumn; in this case, the production period is very long, almost one year, and NAT is almost zero. Nevertheless, winter time is still a non-working period. So, going back to WMDB, accumulation can never be a function of the congruence between production time and working time, as agricultural time also involves such 'essentialist' facts of life as the winter or the dry season.

- Some authors (for example, Mann and Dickinson 1978) make a false identity between biological (or chemical processes), which take time, and *plant growth*, which also takes time but *is also attached to a specific period of the year* (e.g. spring for planting; autumn for harvesting) when the specific climatic conditions (temperature, rain, etc.) that it requires are present. The gestation periods of cows, pigs and rabbits (around 280, 115 and 31 days respectively) take time but they can become pregnant at various seasons, as heat periods are not tied to seasons. So, in cattle raising, you can have pregnant cows, and deliveries, all year round. Cows produce milk throughout the year. Livestock production is not seasonal. This is even more applicable to chemical or bacterial reactions, for example in brewing. When some authors say that the achievement of factory-like production in hog and chicken rearing reflects the possibility of attaining the same in plant cultivation, they are neglecting the seasonal and climatic determination of this last activity. Hothouses introduce a degree of man-made climatic control, but at a very high cost and they require irrigation.
- I did not state it explicitly, as I assumed it was evident, that seasonality manifests itself in diverse rhythms in different *plants*. Grains are, generally, an annual crop. In some weather conditions, two cycles per year are possible if irrigation facilities are available,

as in north-western Mexico. Some vegetables have shorter periods of growth than grains (lettuces and peas, for instance), so they can be harvested twice a year even in colder weather like that of Iowa, but even in these cases the winter (November–March) is NAT. Other vegetables (such as onions, tomatoes and potatoes) can only be harvested annually (information from Iowa State University, Extension and Outreach, web page). Fruits, some of which are perennial plants, have a variable harvest period but this is also mostly annual. Seasonality *seems to be present in all agricultural products (in the Spanish sense of the term, i.e. plant rearing)*. WMDB state: ‘Yet, to say that the production of many agricultural commodities reflects the confluence of these natural features is not the same as saying that all agricultural commodities are subject to the same logic’; while this remains valid for *agriculture* in the English sense, it is not valid for the Spanish sense.

*Backups I: Unexpected findings in Lenin’s and Danielson’s thinking.* The generalised interpretation of Lenin’s position is that *capitalism would take over direct production in agriculture*, in a similar way as it did in handicrafts, displacing the peasantry, which would then vanish as peasants would differentiate into capitalists and proletarians. But reading Lenin closely leads one to nuance this sharply defined position. In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1964 [1899]: 175–90), Lenin arrives at ten conclusions; the first six are as follows (the page references are those for each conclusion; I am excerpting Lenin’s text rather than reproducing it verbatim):

1. *The contemporary Russian peasantry are immersed in a commodity economy* and thus subject to all its inherent contradictions. The peasantry is completely subordinated to the market (ibid.: 175).
2. These contradictions show that the system of economic relations in the ‘community’ village does not constitute a special economic form (‘people’s production’, etc.) but is an ordinary petty-bourgeois one. *The Russian community peasantry are not antagonists of capitalism, but, on the contrary, are its deepest and most durable foundation* (ibid.: 175–6).
3. The sum total of all the economic contradictions constitutes what we call the *differentiation of the peasantry*, which peasants themselves characterise by the term ‘*depeasantising*’. The old peasantry is not



only ‘differentiating’, it is being completely dissolved – it is ceasing to exist (ibid.: 176–9).

4. *The differentiation of the peasantry creates two new types of rural inhabitants: the first is the rural bourgeoisie or the well-to-do peasantry. The size of their farms requires the formation of a body of farm labourers and day labourers* (ibid.: 179–80).
5. *The second new type is the rural proletariat, the class of allotment-holding wage workers. This covers the poor peasants, including the completely landless; however, the most typical representative of the Russian rural proletariat is the allotment-holding farm labourer, day labourer, unskilled labourer, building worker or other allotment-holding worker. Insignificant farming on a patch of land, the inability to exist without the sale of labour power, an extremely low standard of living – these are the distinguishing features of this type. Our literature frequently contains too stereotyped an understanding of the theoretical proposition that capitalism requires the free, landless worker. This proposition is quite correct in that it indicates the main trend, but capitalism penetrates into agriculture particularly slowly and in extremely varied forms. The allocation of land to the rural worker is very often in the interests of rural employers themselves, and that is why the allotment-holding rural worker is a type to be found in all capitalist countries. In assigning the indigent peasants to the rural proletariat, we are saying nothing new, only the Narodnik economists persist in speaking of the peasantry in general as being something anti-capitalist* (ibid.: 180–1).
6. *The intermediary link between these post-reform types of ‘peasantry’ is the middle peasantry, which covers his maintenance in perhaps only the best years, and his position is extremely precarious. In most cases, the middle peasant cannot make ends meet without resorting to loans, to be repaid through labour service, and without the sale of his labour power. Every crop failure flings masses of middle peasants into the ranks of the proletariat* (ibid.: 183–4).

What Lenin calls the ‘rural proletariat’ (allotment-holding worker<sup>2</sup>) is what most authors in this book call peasants. Thus, his thesis on the proletarianisation of the peasantry is built through an *act of labelling*. Lenin was aware of the symbiosis between agricultural capital and ‘allotment-holding workers’ but did not link it explicitly to seasonality. His implicit explanation of the dominance of allotment-holding

workers (instead of landless workers) in agriculture, that capitalism penetrates slowly in agriculture, involves circular reasoning. Paradoxically, to explain why the allotment-holding rural worker is present in all capitalist countries, he resorts to the interests of the rural employers. This is linked to the tendency, noted by Djurfeldt (1982: 141), for the big *latifundistas* to divide parts of their land into parcels where they settle their workers. Djurfeldt adds that this is complemented by legislative action, which he illustrates with the British Small Holding Act of 1892, the Danish *husmandsbevaegelse* and the Swedish *egnahemsrörelse*. Then he adds that ‘it is a way of decreasing the cost of labour in a capitalistic enterprise, which in more recent times also has been the specific aim of land reforms in many Latin American countries’ (for a longer quote, see Chapter 1, section 6).

Lenin (1964 [1899]: Section X, Chapter IV) was confronted with the Narodnik theory of the ‘freeing of winter time’. He describes ‘the essence’ of this theory of N. F. Danielson (who he refers to as ‘N.-on’ or ‘Nicolai-on’) as follows:

Under the capitalist system *agriculture becomes a separate industry, unconnected with the others. However, it is not carried on the whole year but only for five or six months.* Therefore, the capitalisation of agriculture leads to ‘the freeing of winter time’, to the ‘*limitation of the working time of the agricultural class to part of the working year*’, which is the ‘*fundamental cause of the deterioration of the economic conditions of the agricultural classes*’. (ibid.: 323, emphasis added)

Lenin attacks this theory: ‘Here you have the whole of this *celebrated* theory, which bases the most sweeping historical and philosophical conclusions solely *on the great truth that in agriculture jobs are distributed over the year very unevenly!*’ Lenin’s critique reminds the reader of Bernstein’s critique of my theory (Chapter 5), which is also based on that *great truth*:

To take this one feature, to reduce it to absurdity by means of *abstract* assumptions, to *discard all the other specific features of the complex process which transforms patriarchal agriculture into capitalist agriculture* – such are the simple methods used in this latest attempt to restore the romantic theories about pre-capitalist ‘people’s production’. (Lenin 1964 [1899]: 319, emphasis added)

Lenin qualifies Danielson's theory as an 'inordinately narrow' and 'abstract postulate'. In order to show this, 'he indicates five aspects of the actual process that are either entirely lost sight of, or are underrated by our Narodniks'. My ability to judge the cogency of Lenin's argument is limited as I have had no access to the works of Danielson, which, apparently, are not available in English, Spanish or French. Hussain and Tribe (1983) cite a German-language edition of Danielson's book *Russian Economy after the Peasant Emancipation* (written under the pseudonym Nicolai-on). I highlight aspects three to five of Lenin's critique which relate directly to my theory:

'Thirdly, capitalism presupposes the complete separation of agricultural from industrial *enterprises*,' says Lenin, rephrasing the Narodnik thesis. And replies: 'But whence does it follow that this separation does not permit the combination of agricultural and industrial *wage-labour*? We find such a combination in developed capitalist societies everywhere'. He adds that unskilled workers 'pass from one occupation to another, now drawn into jobs at some large enterprise, and now thrown into the ranks of the workless'. Lenin quotes *Capital*, Volume I, where Marx uses the expression 'nomad labour', and Volume II, where he says that 'such large-scale undertakings as railways' withdraw labour power that 'can come only from certain branches of the economy, for example, agriculture' (Lenin 1964 [1899]: 324-6).

'Fourthly, if we take the present-day rural employers, *it cannot, of course, be denied that sometimes they experience difficulty in providing their farms with workers*,' says Lenin, adding: 'But *it must not be forgotten that they have a means of tying the workers to their farms, namely, by allotting them patches of land*. The allotment-holding labourer is a type common to all capitalist countries. One of the chief errors of the Narodniks is that they ignore the formation of a similar type in Russia' (ibid.: 326). 'Fifthly, it is quite wrong to discuss the *freeing of the farmer's winter time* independently of the general question of capitalist surplus-population' (ibid.: 326, emphasis added).

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Lenin tries to subsume the specific idleness of agricultural labour in winter in the general problem of the industrial reserve army, and attributes this approach to Marx. But Lenin argues inadvertently

against himself when he quotes Marx underlining the seasonality of agricultural activities: ‘There are always too many agricultural labourers for the ordinary, and always too few for the exceptional or temporary needs of the cultivation of the soil’ (Marx 1976 [1867]). Lenin comments: ‘So that, notwithstanding the permanent “relative surplus population”, the countryside seems to be inadequately populated.’ So, instead of subsuming the seasonal unemployment of agriculture as part of the surplus population, Lenin makes it clear, non-voluntarily, that it is an *independent characteristic*. Lenin refers to Chapter 13 of Volume II of *Capital*, where Marx discusses the difference between ‘working time’ and ‘production time’. He notes that, in Russia, compared with other European countries, *this difference is a particularly big one*, and quotes Marx again, in this case backing up Danielson’s thesis, again inadvertently (I add, in brackets, a sentence that precedes the two quoted by Lenin):

[We see here how the distinction between production period and working period, with the latter forming only a part of the former, *constitutes the natural basis for the unification of agriculture with rural subsidiary industries ...*]. In so far as *capitalist production later manages to complete the separation between manufacture and agriculture, the rural worker becomes ever more dependent on merely accidental subsidiary employments and his condition thereby worsens. As far as capital is concerned ... all these differences in the turnover balance out. Not so for the worker.* (Marx 1978 [1885]: 319; 1957 [1885]: 241; different translations)

Lenin comments (agreeing with Danielson, who is backed up by Marx):

So then, the only conclusion that follows from *the specific features of agriculture ... is that the position of the agricultural worker must be even worse than that of the industrial worker. This is still a very long way from Mr. N’s theory that the freeing of winter time is the fundamental reason for the deterioration of the conditions of the ‘agricultural classes’*. *If the working period in our agriculture equalled 12 months ... the entire difference would be that the conditions of the agricultural worker would come somewhat closer to those of the industrial worker.* (Lenin 1964 [1899]: 327)

Going back to Danielson, ‘the conversion of agriculture *in a separate industry*’ must be based on the text just quoted from Volume II of *Capital* (he had an ongoing relation with Marx and Engels, and translated the three volumes of *Capital* into Russian). Additional evidence for this is that the paragraph from which the last quote from *Capital*, Volume II is taken by Lenin refers to Russia! The phrases quoted by Lenin and the one I added are at the end of a long paragraph in which Marx had previously stated:

Thus the more unfavourable the climate, the more the agricultural working period, and hence the outlay of capital and labour, is compressed into a short interval, as for example in Russia. ‘In some of the northern districts, field labour is only possible during from 130 to 150 days in the course of the year, and it may be imagined what a loss Russia would sustain, if out of the 65 million of her European population, 50 million remain unoccupied during six or eight months of winter, when all agricultural labour is at a standstill.’ ... particular cottage industries have grown up everywhere in the villages. ‘There are villages, for instance, in Russia in which all the peasants have been for generations either weavers, tanners, shoemakers, locksmiths, cutlers, etc.’ ... These cottage industries, incidentally, are already being pressed, more and more into the service of capitalist production. (Marx 1978 [1885]: 318–19; the text previously quoted appears after this)

Kautsky (1988 [1899]: 181–2) gives the following succinct account of the forced specialisation of peasants in agriculture, which coincides in general terms with the Marx–Danielson view:

Originally peasants were both farmers and industrialists. The development of urban industry eventually forced them to devote themselves exclusively to agriculture. Nevertheless, the peasant family retained a number of manual skills. Wherever agriculture begins to fail as the sole source of income these can be resurrected, but not as handicrafts working directly for the customer. The isolated peasant cannot compete with the urban handicrafts, which have access both to larger markets and all the other advantages of the town. As commodity-production, rural industry can only

develop as production for a capitalist, a merchant or a putter-out, who establishes the link with distant markets inaccessible to the peasant.

The theory of the freeing of winter time can be seen as an obvious (but very little known) precedent of my theory. The Narodnik theory refers to one of the non-working periods defined above (in the section ‘Precisions on seasonality’): the winter or the NAT. Winter unemployment is explained by Danielson as a result of the development of capitalist industry, which converts peasants into *specialised producers* within the social division of labour. In a preceding stage, which Lenin calls patriarchal peasantry, peasants were occupied in the winter in various crafts (as the preceding quote of *Capital* makes clear). Some of these crafts were ruined first by capitalist-promoted cottage industries, and later by manufacturing and rural industry (the period to which Marx refers as *unification of agriculture with rural subsidiary industries*). But at some point, as Marx says, capitalism manages to *complete the separation between manufacturing and agriculture*. At this point, local crafts had been completely (or mostly) displaced by industrial products, now relocated mostly to towns. Marx maintained that, with this ‘complete separation of agriculture and manufacture’, the *‘rural worker becomes ever more dependent on merely accidental subsidiary employments and his condition thereby worsens’*, and, as stated by Lenin, our Narodnik theorists expressed this as the *‘limitation of the working time of the agricultural class to part of the working year, which is the fundamental cause of the deterioration of the economic conditions of the agricultural classes’*. What they are saying, together with Marx, is that the growing social division of labour, or branch specialisation – which was highly praised, correctly, by Adam Smith as one of the forces of the wealth of nations – finds an exception in agriculture. *People involved in agriculture, given the discontinuity of agricultural work, are damaged by the growing division of labour*. In a given state of technological development, the limitation of the working time of the *vast majority of humanity* means that the wealth they are able to create (which is a function of working time) is severely diminished, and this has to be reflected in the economic conditions of this population. The quotations from Marx and Lenin show that they both agree on this, although Lenin expresses the opposite by saying ‘this is still a very long way from Mr. N’s theory’.

As a general conclusion as to how Lenin's text strengthens my theory, I can make the following two points. Firstly, if one looks more closely into Lenin's peasant differentiation analysis, it confirms the symbiosis between capitalist agriculture and poor peasants, rather than the disappearance of peasants; the latter (whom Lenin labels proletarians) provide cheap seasonal labour to the former. Lenin provides no argument on why this symbiosis should be unstable or why it should tend to be displaced by pure capitalist relations: that is, relations between capital and landless labourers. Secondly, Danielson's theory of the 'freeing of winter time', based on Marx, is reluctantly and partially accepted by Lenin 'as worsening the position' of the agricultural worker. Lenin's description also shows that *the peasant's access to land is (sometimes) carried out voluntarily by rich farmers to guarantee their provision of labour power*. This undermines positions such as Leff's – that the poverty of peasants is explained as a consequence of dispossession of their land. History shows that dispossession and re-possession are frequently sequential.

*Backups II: Kautsky's views on why capitalism needs the peasantry.* As shown in Chapter 1, section 6, Kautsky (1988 [1899]) implicitly argues, for demographic reasons, that the peasantry is an integral part of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture and that he *expects a symbiotic relationship between peasantry and capitalism to last a long time*. Also, he quotes Marx, arguing that, as long as bourgeois relations subsist, 'agriculture necessarily proceeds in an incessant cycle of concentration and fragmentation of the land'.

Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009) state that 'the establishment of agrarian capital began, according to Kautsky and Lenin, with the deepening use of non-rurally produced simple manufactures in rural society', as 'urban manufactures were cheaper than rural' ones; this coincides with what was said in the previous subsection. This increased the need for money and, as a consequence, according to Kautsky, led to 'the commoditization of agricultural production' (ibid.: 8). And this, in turn, led to competition and social differentiation.

But Akram-Lodhi and Kay add that Lenin and Kautsky 'did not propose that rural transformation was subject to "path-dependence", i.e. self-reinforcing tendencies':

Kautsky, in particular, but also Lenin, argued that the process of agrarian change could take multiple forms ... Agro-industrial capital ... might in particular circumstances *prefer to sustain a non-capitalist rural economy because of the unique characteristics of agricultural production. These characteristics include seasonal and biological aspects*, as well as the capacity of family based agricultural production to depress real wages by working longer and harder ... In such circumstances, according to Kautsky, *agro-industrial capital would restrict itself to food processing, farm inputs and rural financial systems, using science, technology and money to subsume petty commodity production to the demands of agro-industrial capital* ... For Kautsky there was no tendency for the size distribution of farms to change over time, as might be inferred if capitalist agriculture overwhelmed peasant farming. (ibid.: 10–11, emphasis added)

The depeasantisation thesis – assumed by many to be *the* thesis sustained by both Lenin and Kautsky – is completely transformed into a thesis on the persistence of the peasantry, at least for Kautsky, thus confirming the position adopted in the background paper.

Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin (1988), in their introduction to the English edition of *The Agrarian Question*, highlight some points that characterise it. Below, I summarise, and discuss, three that are closely related to the topics of this chapter.

#### *The demographic role of the peasantry*

Alavi and Shanin note that Kautsky's arguments are often misread. This could be partly due to the fact that Kautsky started his book with certain preconceptions that he modifies 'quite radically ... in the light of his findings as the analysis progresses'. Initially, he presumed that ... capital would eliminate petty commodity production; the peasantry would be dissolved ... But rural censuses in Germany did not show a progressive concentration of land in fewer hands. So, as 'Kautsky proceeds with his analysis ... he defines with increasing clarity the significant structural differences between the conditions of peasant production and petty commodity production in manufacturing' (ibid.: xiii). By Chapter 7, Kautsky finds himself 'explaining why such a tendency does not prevail; why the peasantry may even persist within the general framework of capitalism'. Alavi and Shanin add that, in the section 'Shortage of labour power' –



from which I quoted extensively in Chapter 1, section 6 – we ‘find him pointing out the functional role of small farms as “production sites” for labour-power needed by the capitalist large farms and industry’. They quote Kautsky: ‘The growth in the number of large farms curtails the supply of rural labour power while, at the same time, increasing the demand for it ... This in itself is sufficient to ensure that despite its technical superiority, the large farms can never completely prevail’ (ibid.: xiii–xiv).

Alavi and Shanin contrast Kautsky’s view with that of Lenin, which they characterise as the classical notion of the inevitable transformation of rural Russia through polarisation, and conclude that Kautsky’s perception is significantly different from Lenin’s (ibid.: xiv). As can be seen, my interpretation of Lenin’s views differs from that of Alavi and Shanin.

The question arises on the relations between two functions of the peasantry, both of which are assumed to explain its persistence: the production of labour power, attributed by Kautsky; and the provision of cheap seasonal wage labour, attributed in Chapter 1 by me. In Kautsky’s view, it is the integration of the production unit and the household unit that explains the peasant’s capacity to procreate, whereas he argues that both domestic servants and free wage workers do not have this capacity *as they lack an autonomous household unit*. This is obvious for domestic servants; however, in the case of free wage workers there is a missing argument, namely that they cannot form a household as they are *nomadic workers*.

In contrast, Kautsky (1988 [1899]: 163, emphasis added) says that small farms supply labour power for themselves and also produce a surplus. In explaining this function, Kautsky notes that their ‘bit of cultivation of their own land *does not take up all of their time and they hire themselves out as day labourers on larger farms*, or they provide a surplus of workers via their children, for whom there is no room on the family farm’ (ibid.). In my theory, all active members of a family might be able to alternate work on their own land with wage work on other farms, which corresponds with Kautsky’s phrase highlighted in italics. The difference is that Kautsky does not emphasise seasonality as the explaining factor. Nevertheless, his demographic theory and my seasonal theory complement each other. His theory explains why capitalist farms, which do not reproduce labour, *need peasant households to procreate*. My theory explains that capitalist farms, which

have to hire labour power mostly in peak seasons, *need a reliable, seasonal, cheap supply of labour*.

*Overexploitation of peasant labour power*

‘The lower-than-average price of labour-power that is realised in agriculture reinforces its functional significance for capitalism.’ Although for Kautsky large-scale agriculture is more effective than peasant farming, peasants survive because they are ready to accept ‘underconsumption’ and ‘excessive labour’, underselling permanent wage workers.

*Technological progress and historicity of the peasants*

Despite his position on peasants’ persistence and their functionality for capitalism, Kautsky insisted ‘on the historical nature of the peasantry’. The element that made these two positions compatible is, according to Alavi and Shanin, Kautsky’s idea that the ‘end of the peasantry would come about as a result of technological progress rather than from the impact of capitalism’ (Alavi and Shanin 1988: xvi). Kautsky is completely right. Seasonality makes capital dependent on a cheap seasonal supply of labour, but, as Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson have argued, complete mechanisation releases this dependence:

New plant breeding techniques have permitted the complete mechanisation of cultivation in major crop sectors. [They then provide two examples.] Today with the precision planting of monogerm seeds ... the production of sugar beets in the US is completely mechanised. *The growers have become independent of migrant labour* [p. 35, quoting Rasmussen]. Tomato picking in California, until 1964 had been a manual operation performed by Mexican workers ... Successful industrial appropriation of this task was achieved by ... a harvesting machine and a new variety of tomato plant with fruit that would ripen at about the same time and be able to withstand machine handling. (Goodman et al. 1987: 34–5)

Alavi and Shanin appraise Kautsky’s main achievements. The example that is most clearly related to the debates in this book is that Kautsky:

traced the regularities and stages through which peasant firms were transformed under the impact of capital: the *agriculturalization of the peasant, i.e. the increase of farming activity as against the self-supporting crafts*; the commercialisation and monetisation of their economic activities; and the *increasing engagement in extra-farm wage labour*. (Alavi and Shanin 1988: xxxi)

*Luis Cabrera and agricultural capitalism's needs for peasants.* According to Schejtman and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (Schejtman 1982: 27), 'Luis Cabrera was perhaps the most influential of the agrarian intellectuals of the first stage of the Mexican revolution'. Arnaldo Córdova describes Cabrera's position: 'it was necessary to "reconstruct the *ejidos*, making sure that these are *inalienable*"' (quoted in *ibid.*: 28). The purpose of this reconstruction was that the *ejidos* would become part of an agrarian structure in which fully exploited agricultural medium and large enterprises would coexist with *ejidos*. These would be constituted using land appropriated from the big latifundia, which *would allow day labourers* to have more income so that they would not become Zapatistas and take up rifles (*ibid.*: 28, quoting Luisa Paré). In 1912, in his position as a deputy to the Federal Congress, Cabrera presented a project for a law that would reconstitute the *ejidos*. The speech he gave on that day is reproduced in Silva-Herzog (1964: 200–8). I translate some excerpts that are highly pertinent to the debates in this book (specific page numbers are given in brackets):

Before protecting the small rural property, it is necessary to solve another agrarian problem ... This consists in liberating the people from the economic and political pressures exerted by the *haciendas*, within the limits of which the proletarian villagers are kept as prisoners. For this, it is necessary to think of reconstituting the *ejidos*,<sup>3</sup> making sure that they are inalienable, taking the land required from the large surrounding big properties. (p. 200) ... What you are going to hear is the bare but moving observation of the facts. The *hacienda* ... has two types of servants or workers: the *annual peon* and the *task peon*. The annual peon is the *acasillado* peon who lives in the *hacienda* together with his family. The task peon is the one who renders

his services occasionally, for the sowing or harvesting period. The annual peon has the most insignificant wage that a *human beast* can have ... lower than what is required for his subsistence, even lower than the amount required for the subsistence of a mule. Why does this wage exist? (p. 202) ... For the following reasons: the *hacienda* ... calculates it can pay an average of 120 pesos for the four months in which it needs the labour of the peon; this means that it would have to pay 30 pesos per month or one peso per day. But if it received the peon and let him go again, *it would have the difficulties associated with the search for arms*. He needs to seek the permanence of that peon in the *hacienda*, so he dilutes the wage for four months over the whole year, paying a daily amount of 0.31 pesos per day, or the same 120 pesos per year. [If the merely repressive means of retaining the peon fails,] he uses other economic means to attract him. I am going to enumerate them. The price at which the peons of the *hacienda* have the right to acquire maize [is below the market price]. This ... represents a small increase in the peon's wage ... barely sufficient for him not to starve to death (p. 203) ... He also receives as a complement to his wage the *casilla*, a half, third or eighth part of the *casilla* that is his dwelling ... Next, there is the credit he has in the *tienda de raya* [the *hacienda* store]. (p. 204) [Here he receives] as credit every day what he needs to eat, which is deducted from his weekly wage ... and he gets loans in Holy Week, on All Saints Day and at Christmas Eve ... These loans are made without any intention of them being repaid by the peon. What, then, is the purpose of these loans if the peon cannot repay them and the owner of the *hacienda* has no intention of collecting them? It doesn't matter; he will collect the debt in the blood of the peon's children and grandchildren ... The three annual loans are not, apparently, an increase in the peon's wages, but that is what they really are. (p. 205) ... Lastly, another way of increasing wages is given to a select group of peons ... a small piece of land, around a quarter of a hectare, which the peon has the right to cultivate ... [I]t is therefore the most interesting one for our purposes. *As long as it is not possible to create a system of smallholders' agricultural exploitation that replaces the big exploitations and latifundia, the agrarian problem should be solved through the exploitation of ejidos as a way of complementing wages.* (p. 206, emphasis added)

In this astonishing text, Cabrera shows an extreme solution, not foreseen in my seasonal theory: wages are paid only for the days worked (as my theory says) but the workers are retained in the hacienda by spreading these wages throughout the year and indebting the peons until they become *peones acasillados* (a sort of prisoner). This retention is performed to guarantee that, in the following peak periods, the hacienda will have labour to do the work. In Cabrera's speech it becomes clear who pays the social cost of seasonality and the recruiting difficulties involved for wage-paying entrepreneurs. It is like a *reductio ad absurdum* performed in real life, not in thought. It shows the extremes to which capitalist enterprises would have to go to solve the recruitment problems of seasonal agriculture if there were no poor landholding peasants around to voluntarily provide seasonal labour. Cabrera's speech is also enlightening because he sees only two possible futures: 1) the agrarian reform he proposes, which is equivalent to the practice mentioned by Lenin of giving small parcels of land to the peasants so that they can complement their seasonal wages; and 2) production based totally in smallholdings. *Cabrera does not conceive the possibility of a completely capitalist system operating in agriculture, as he knew it would be impossible.* His speech is a very strong reinforcement of the theory of peasant poverty and persistence presented in Chapter 1.

## 2. Reply to commentaries and criticisms

*Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld.* I will not repeat those points already covered in the previous section; instead, I will start with commentaries numbered 4 to 6 in Table 12.1, all of which relate to the alleged 'essentialist' (a term used derogatorily) view of agriculture in the background paper. Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson would receive the same criticism from WMDB:

The key to understanding the *uniqueness of agriculture* ... lies neither in its social structure nor in its factor endowment. Rather *agriculture confronts capitalism with a natural production process.* Unlike sectors of handicraft activity, agriculture could not be directly transformed into a branch of industrial production. There was no industrial alternative to the biological transformation of solar energy into food. (Goodman et al. 1987: 1)

TABLE 12.1 Contributors' criticisms of and disagreements with the background paper's account of peasant poverty and persistence

Author(s) and chapter	Disagreements and criticisms in relation to the background paper (BP)
Bartra (Chapter 2)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seasonality is not the most important explanation of peasant persistence. Peasants' function as a buffer of differential ground rents is more important.</li> <li>2. More than subsidies, diversification is the solution to peasants' poverty.</li> <li>3. Peasant <i>exploitation</i> is polymorphous, absorbing the costs of seasonality; wage work, unequal market exchange and absorption of ground rent are other forms.</li> </ol>
Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld (Chapter 3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Take issue with the BP's <i>ontology</i> of industry and agriculture and its '<i>essentialist</i> view of agriculture'.</li> <li>5. Think that the BP maintains that <i>capitalism is impossible</i> in agriculture and that industry <i>cannot deal</i> with living micro-organisms, so that any example in either case would be a proof against the theory.</li> <li>6. Question the distinction between organic and inorganic features of production, i.e. '<i>essentialist, ontological distinctions</i>' between agriculture and industry, as a basis to account for differences in their development.</li> <li>7. The BP is said to blur the distinction between the use value of labour power and its exchange value.</li> <li>8. It passes over the fact that, in capitalism, the maintenance and reproduction of labour power are almost entirely privatised.</li> <li>9. The BP regards '<i>capitalist accumulation as a function of the congruence between production time and labour time per se</i>'.</li> <li>10. Disagree with its proposal to subsidise peasant agriculture in the global South.</li> </ol>
Arizmendi (Chapter 4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Introduces the distinction between critical and normative theory as the correct framework with which to evaluate Marx's theory of value with respect to its neglect of discontinuities.</li> <li>12. Criticises the BP's step to try to formulate a general theory of value as being unnecessary.</li> </ol>
Bernstein (Chapter 5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Finds the highly abstract nature of its theory problematic, that abstractions '<i>are not grounded in theory as history</i>' and that the theory (and its assumptions) are not tested empirically.</li> <li>14. Does not answer questions such as: Why are some farmers or peasants not poor? Does all capitalist farming depend on seasonal cheap labour?</li> <li>15. Lacks a move to periodise and explore the development of agriculture in capitalist society.</li> <li>16. Instead of the two-sector (capitalist and peasant farming) model of the BP (with barely any reference to the wider capitalist economy), proposes the notion of fragmented classes of labour.</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. The notion of a 'pure capitalist agriculture' confronts the great diversity of historically and actually existing forms of capitalist farming.</li> <li>18. Wonders about the accuracy of some of the BP's observations and whether the analytical framework deployed provides the means for investigating the kinds of questions posed.</li> <li>19. Criticises the use in the BP of the concept of petty commodity production for not being similar to his own use of it.</li> <li>20. Capitalist farming finds various means of dealing with labour recruitment and is not necessarily structurally dependent on cheap seasonal labour supplied by peasants, as the BP holds.</li> <li>21. Criticises the bracketing of family farmers in the USA and Europe with peasants.</li> <li>22. Rejects farm subsidies as a solution to rural poverty and problematises their consequences, but does not state his stand on agricultural subsidies in the global North.</li> <li>23. Notes the striking fact that land reforms and other redistributive measures are not posed in the BP.</li> </ol>
Leff (Chapter 7)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>24. Challenges the idea of reforming value theory to offer a 'general theory'.</li> <li>25. Criticises the theory of value for not valuing nature's contribution to value (i.e. for externalising nature), and because a quantitative labour theory of value is untenable today.</li> </ol>

In this transformation (*photosynthesis*) lies the miracle of life as we mostly know it. This is indeed *a very essential fact*. I do not regard *essentialism* as something negative, as WMDB do, and I will defend it. But first I will clarify whether my position is essentialist and how far it is, in this respect, from the Mann–Dickinson thesis (MDT).

WMDB qualify the description of distinctive features of industry and agriculture in Chapter 1 as an 'ontology' of industry and agriculture, and add that it is based on an 'essentialist view of agriculture' taken from John Brewster. 'Ontology' is a branch of philosophy that deals with *being in itself*; it studies the more general characteristics of reality (Bunge 2001: 155). Apparently, WMDB object to all essentialist approaches, although the MDT accepts the 'non-identity of production time and labour time' (Mann and Dickinson 1978: 477) and its corollary of seasonal labour *as facts of agriculture*. 'In the literature on family farming, the employment of seasonal wage labour is acknowledged, but its importance is generally

underplayed,' they say, and add: 'However as *labour time* may be almost entirely suspended between, say, sowing and harvesting, *seasonal wage labour becomes extremely important in the determination of the value of the agricultural commodities produced*' (ibid.). However, they want to distance themselves from essentialist and determinist approaches. In Chapter 3, WMDB do this by criticising my position, which they regard as essentialist. But in the MDT *it becomes clear how important the natural (and essential) features of agriculture* (as well as the contrast with industry) *are in their theoretical position*. Mann and Dickinson (ibid.: 478) express caveats ('the theoretical approach which we have sketched out here must only be used in conjunction with a social and historical analysis') that communicate how they want their theoretical position to be construed or used, rather than what it really is:

The argument that *it is the natural characteristics of the production process which ultimately inhibit capitalist development must not be misinterpreted as natural determinism*. Indeed, *the relationship to objective, natural processes is much closer in agriculture than in industry*; but an explanation based on nature *alone* does not explain why some spheres of agriculture become capitalistic relatively rapidly while other spheres are characterised by non-capitalistic forms. In a general sense, *the inability to control natural factors affects all forms of agricultural production ... An appeal to nature alone is an ahistorical argument*.

This paragraph shows a pendular movement from non-willing naturalism to the rejection of its essentialist or deterministic consequences. This is present in the first sentence and repeated in the second. Finally, the last two sentences quoted, taken together, repeat the pendular movement.

This shows that the only difference between the MDT and my theory with regard to their natural (essential) features is that I do not reject their consequences and do not express caveats as to their use.

Describing features of a human activity (agriculture) and contrasting them with those of industry, as Chapter 1 does – or as Bernstein does when he draws a table of these comparisons – are descriptive activities. This would constitute an *ontology* if these



characteristics were seen as the more general features of agriculture and industry. Neither I nor the MDT identifies what each one does as ontology. If one is called ontology, then both should be. But the specific critique by WMDB is that my ontology is said to rest on ‘an essentialist view of agriculture drawn from the writings of John Brewster’. This is inexact: the distinctive features of agriculture are part of the prevailing conventional wisdom of people working in agriculture (not only academics, but also managers, consultants, and so on), as the following text illustrates:

From a management perspective, *agriculture is quite distinctive*. This distinctiveness primarily relates to the *time-dependent biological nature of agricultural production ... Industrial production, being independent of the natural environment, is mechanical*. In contrast, the *biological nature of agricultural production* causes it to be strongly influenced by the natural environment. In consequence, *agriculture has its own innate rhythms and significant elements of agricultural production are not under the farmer’s control*.<sup>4</sup>

I conclude that enumerating some distinctive features of agriculture is not necessarily an essentialist activity. Many relativists would agree that those features do, in fact, distinguish agriculture from industry. The feature of agriculture on which I base my theory of peasant poverty and persistence is seasonality, which, as we have seen, is also strongly emphasised by the MDT. But as I do not regard essentialism as a negative quality, I do not write caveats as Mann and Dickinson and WMDB do. WMDB define essentialism as follows:

An essentialist argument generally claims that there are natural or inherent traits that characterise a particular group or category and *that these irreducible traits constitute its very being*, but this type of essentialism has been called into question by a number of critics of *modernist thought*. (Chapter 3, section 2)

They quote Diana Fuss’s book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, nature, and difference* (1989) as an example of this critique. It refers not to essentialism in agriculture but to essentialism in human beings.

When referring to human beings, essentialism is expressed through the concepts of human essence and human nature. I wrote a long discussion based on Erich Fromm and Ramón Xirau (1968), György Márkus (1978) and Martha Nussbaum (1992), and pointed out that there are other important authors who have defended essentialism and universalism. Just to mention three of them: from the philosophical field, Thomas Hurka in his *Perfectionism* (1993); from the social sciences, Len Doyal and Ian Gough in *A Theory of Human Need* (1991); and, from the natural sciences, Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature* (2002). For reasons of space, nevertheless, I had to delete the discussion mentioned, which showed that there are many distinguished scholars today who strongly defend essentialist approaches and illustrated the force and consistency of their arguments.

Replies to criticisms, as has been seen, take up a lot of space. The replies to other criticisms by WMDB not addressed in the main text are presented in Table 12.2. I do the same with some of Bernstein's criticisms: some will be replied to at length, and others in a compact form in Table 12.2.

*Bernstein's commentaries (numbers 13 to 23).* Bernstein's criticisms are combined with praise and are very helpful. I do not agree with some of his points, but they provide good grounds for reflection. The first one (13) says that he 'finds the highly abstract nature' of the theory expounded in Chapter 1 'problematic', as 'abstractions are not grounded in theory as history', and that the theory and its assumptions 'are not tested empirically'. This commentary is linked to numbers 15 ('lacks a move to periodise and explore the development of agriculture in capitalist society') and 17 ('the notion of a pure capitalist agriculture confronts the great diversity of historically and actually existing forms of capitalist farming'). Commentary number 20 (on sources of seasonal labour for agricultural capitalism) has already been dealt with in the previous section. Since some of his commentaries refer to what Chapter 1 does *not* contain, Bernstein clarifies that 'the point is not to suggest that one paper can cover everything' but rather to 'enquire whether the analytical framework provides the means for investigating the kinds of questions noted'.

My first answer to this group of commentaries is that *theories are necessarily abstract*. For instance, both the Marxist theory of value and

the neoclassical theory of prices are highly abstract. But Bernstein's main critique is that my abstractions are not grounded in 'theory as history'. The expression 'theory as history' comes from the title of J. Banaji's book; in the foreword to it, Marcel van der Linden (2010: xi) explains the meaning of this expression:

If we are to understand historical processes truly and in depth, then we ought to do full justice to the empirical record. But that is not all. We also have to reveal the abstract determinations which are hidden 'behind' the concrete, and which 'lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought' [quotes Marx's *Grundrisse*]. If we disregard this necessary dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, one of two kinds of errors is likely to result. Either we remain entrapped in a descriptive narrative of a mass of empirical details failing to reach the abstract determinations that identify and convincingly *explain* the real nature of a historical process in its totality. Or, we superimpose 'forced abstractions' on history, which are not grounded in a thorough analysis of its concrete specificities, and which, therefore, are to a large degree arbitrary and superficial, or even purely subjective preferences.

This text demolishes the position assumed by WMDB (Chapter 3, section 2) when they say (opposing my theory in Chapter 1 in a binary fashion) that 'we hold that historically specific and commodity-specific analysis are always preferable to an explanatory framework based on an essentialist ontology'. I agree fully with the view of Bernstein, Banaji and van der Linden, and would be very happy to be able to engage in an effort to ground *fully* my theory in history. Let me just clarify that it is not completely detached from history, as can be seen in many arguments of a historical concrete nature to which I refer in Chapter 1 and in this chapter (using examples from Mexico, Russia, Germany and USA, mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), as can be seen in the perception of these facts by Marx, Kautsky, Lenin, Cabrera and many contemporary authors. What is lacking is a systematic historical appraisal of my theory and a contrast with complementary or rival theories.

The notion of a pure capitalist agriculture (number 17) refers to an agriculture in which all production takes place in capitalist enterprises that hire seasonal labour in the peak seasons and a smaller

number of permanent workers. This is not an empirical or historical category but an ideal type category. If it does not exist (and I think it does not), this is evidence in favour of my theory, which maintains that such a pure capitalist agriculture is impossible.

On commentary number 21, which refers to the bracketing of family farmers with peasants, Alavi and Shanin (1988) state that ‘the possible Marxist designation of the difference between peasants ... and the highly capital-intensive family farmers’, which came from Kautsky’s vision, has ‘escaped theoretical specification, becoming a blind spot’. However, they add that a ‘conceptual step forward within a Marxist frame of reference’ has been suggested by Danilov:

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 ... 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. (ibid.: xxxv)

Alavi and Shanin say that modern agricultural technologies have altered the criterion of the optimal size of the labour team, lowering it for some branches of contemporary agriculture. A family farm is not necessarily at any advantage over a large enterprise but nor is it debarred from utilising new technology. They add that, given some conditions:

it is often more effective and stable than a parallel large enterprise based on wage labour. Subsumed under capitalism as the dominant mode of production, it can secure higher or safer profits for agribusiness while at the same time providing an improved livelihood for its own members – an equation which facilitates the continuation of family farms as a social form, at least for a time. (ibid.: xxxiv–xxxv)

Orlando Figes (1987: 123–4) adds: ‘Danilov moves away from assuming the exclusivity of market relations and/or relations of production in determining the rural social form and emphasises instead the changing nature of production forces as an objective system distinguishing peasants from farmers.’

Strikingly, the authors just cited agree with Brewster on one central point, quoted extensively in section 4 of the background paper: in 1950, Brewster pointed out the competitiveness of family farms, both before and after mechanisation. Two other interesting points in these quotations are the role of the development of productive forces in a field of thought obsessed with social relations of production, and the idea that the fully mechanised family farm of rich countries is *subsumed under the capitalist mode of production*.

*Arizmendi’s and Leff’s commentaries on the theory of value.* I will broach here the commentaries (numbers 11 and 12 in Table 12.1) by Arizmendi, and the two commentaries (24 and 25) by Leff. All of them refer to the validity of Marx’s theory of value and the possible reforms of it. Arizmendi introduces the distinction (absent in Chapter 1) between critical and normative theory as the correct framework within which to evaluate Marx’s theory of value with respect to its neglect of the consequences for workers of the discontinuities of the labour process in agriculture (11). He therefore disagrees with my attempt in Chapter 1 to formulate a general theory of value as an unnecessary step (12). He says (in Chapter 4, section 3) that the genuine problem I pose is not solved ‘by questioning the Critical Theory of Value’. His position is that: ‘The premise that the value of labour power must invariably be equivalent to the satisfaction of needs, thus guaranteeing the process of social reproduction of the worker ... disregards the unavoidable violence contained and unleashed by the commodification of human labour power.’

In Chapter 1, section 11, I showed that by introducing the seasonality of agriculture in Marx’s Simple Reproduction Scheme (SRS), *the conditions of equilibrium that Marx uses to demonstrate the possibility of reproduction of capital are not sufficient to reproduce the agricultural labour force*. I argued that the SRS needs an additional equation that establishes the payment of wages to the agricultural labour force for 365 days a year; but, in doing this, a discrepancy arises, as goods produced incorporate as value only the work done

in, say, 100 days a year, not in 365, so the SRS equations would be unbalanced. I solved this discrepancy by arguing that the rural wage worker who works for 100 days a year, for example, but consumes (together with his or her family) a livelihood over 365 days, *not only objectivises in his work value for the 100 days of living labour, but also (like machines or working animals) transfers to the value of goods produced the value of his means of subsistence during the 265 days not worked*. Arizmendi replied (in an unpublished text not included in his chapter) that the consumption of value of the labour force, ‘when not configured as a commodity is destruction of value’.

I normatively reject this phrase for the reasons given. I conclude that, if the agricultural wage worker reaches the harvest carrying the accumulated value of the means of subsistence consumed between the end of the sowing period and the beginning of harvest (*objectified past labour*), he or she will transfer this value together with the new value that his or her new *living labour* generates when working on the harvest. This rebalances the equation and we would have an SRS valid for both continuous and discontinuous processes. This I called a *general theory of value*. Arizmendi replied, in a text not included in his chapter, that the postulate of equality of the value of the labour force and the peasant’s wage has both a critical and a normative sense. Regarding the former, he says:

*Critical for its negation, as the specificity of peasant wage labour consists in the fact that such equality is not met. As peasant wage labour is discontinuous labour, it receives as payment a form of time-wage: seasonal time-wage. Time-wage implies that the worker is paid only for the hours effectively worked; in seasonal time-wage, he/she is not paid for the working year, but only for the season when she/he works. The conclusion is: the law of peasant labour wage is the violation of the law of value in the relation between capital and labour.*

Arizmendi generalises to *seasonal time wages* what Marx said in Chapter 20 (‘Time-wages’) of Volume I of *Capital*:

If the hour’s wage is fixed in such a way that the capitalist does not bind himself to pay a day’s or a week’s wage, *but only to pay wages for the hours during which he chooses to employ the worker* [... the] capitalist can now wring from the worker a certain

quantity of surplus labour *without allowing him the labour-time necessary for his own subsistence*. (Marx 1976 [1867]: 686)

An important insight I derived from my discussion with Arizmendi is that *this form of exploitation, in which the worker's life apparently does not matter, is only possible in practice because agriculture is only partially capitalist*. Previous theoretical reflection (sections 10–12 of Chapter 1) highlighted that ‘pure capitalism in agriculture is impossible unless workers were paid for the entire year even though their labour power were only used for part of it, with the additional cost being transferred to consumers’. Arizmendi’s statement that ‘*the law of peasant labour wage is the violation of the law of value in the relation between capital and labour*’ is made possible by the presence of peasants with access to land that can provide, through direct production, at least some of their ‘self-preservation’. Otherwise, people would die and the population growth required by capitalist accumulation would be destroyed. Empirical observation that confirms that the law of value is not met in peasant wage work takes place in a context where the form of peasant production is present. *Any theory of capitalism has to include, therefore, its necessary coexistence and articulation with the peasantry (or poor family farm)*. As a positive theory, Marx’s theory of value fails in this respect, and this failure is related to Marx’s ambiguous stand with respect to the persistence of the peasantry.

Arizmendi expresses the *normative sense* he perceives in my assumption of equality between the value of labour and the wage paid to the agricultural wage worker as follows:

Normative, because its assertion makes sense as a guide in the fight to defend the historical–moral dimension of the peasant’s labour–force reproduction ... it is vital to open our eyes to *the invention of forms of decommodification of labour power*. The struggle for a *rural moral economy* should go beyond the decommodification of labour.

I agree with Arizmendi on this and have therefore advocated a ‘basic income’ (or universal citizen income or UCI) which eliminates (totally or partially) the forced commodification of labour power. But respect for the law of value (in its normative sense and thus

payment of wages for 365 days to all people working) would, by itself, totally eliminate the poverty of around 2 billion people in the world. I have previously said:

The works of E. P. Thompson (1991) and Scott (1976) ... reflect the inescapable fact that *human life cannot be left to the market*. No society has done this. Labour power is not an ordinary commodity, whose value and employment rate can be decided by market forces. The moral element comes in inevitably. Rising the price of bread can balance the supply and demand of bread, but does not solve the hunger of the people. Any self-respecting economic science, *any political economy must also be a moral economy*. (Boltvinik 2010: 190)

Leff says that he will ‘challenge [Boltvinik’s] proposal to reform value theory to incorporate the full cost of peasants’ labour force reproduction’ and ‘offer a “general theory of value”’ (number 24 in Table 12.1). But instead of providing specific arguments on my proposed reform, he moves to what he considers a more general problem. So he subsumes the problem that I am addressing within the problem he wants to address. He argues (number 25) that ‘the natural processes involved in the production of commodities’ are not valued in Marx’s theory of value; that ‘neither nature’s contribution to production nor the destructive effects of production on nature are valued’. He does not mention that, in non-Marxist economics, this neglect is also present.

According to Foster, Clark and York (2010: 61 ff.), many green thinkers share the idea that Marx ‘attributes no intrinsic value to natural resources’. Given the importance of what is at stake here, I will describe the story of the Lauderdale Paradox, as narrated by Foster et al., in order to clarify Marx’s standpoint. Foster et al. (ibid.: 53) say that ‘self-styled sustainable development economists claim that there is no contradiction between the unlimited accumulation of capital and the preservation of the earth’, which would be achieved by bringing market efficiency to bear on nature and its reproduction. Behind this, say Foster et al., is a distorted accounting deeply rooted in the workings of the system, which sees wealth entirely in terms of value generated through exchange. *In such a system only commodities for sale on the market really count*. External nature – water,



air, living species – is seen as a ‘free good’. In the usual calculus of the capitalist system, both the contributions of nature to wealth and the destruction of natural conditions are largely invisible. The fatal flaw of received economics can be traced back to its conceptual foundations. They argue that neoclassical economics meant the abandonment of:

the distinction between wealth and value (use value and exchange value). With this was lost the possibility of a broader ecological and social conception of wealth. These blinders of orthodox economics ... were challenged by ... critics such as James Maitland (Earl of Lauderdale), Karl Marx ... Today, in a time of unlimited environmental destruction, such heterodox views are having a comeback. (ibid.: 54)

In analysing their ideas, Foster et al. achieve some very deep insights into the complex dialectic of wealth value or use-value value. ‘The ecological contradictions of the prevailing economic ideology are best explained in terms of ... the “Lauderdale Paradox”’, formulated in 1804:

Lauderdale argued that there was an inverse correlation between public wealth and private riches, such that an increase in the latter often served to diminish the former. Public wealth, he wrote, ‘may be accurately defined – *to consist of all that man desires, as useful or delightful to him.*’ Such goods have use value and thus constitute wealth. But private riches, as opposed to wealth, required something additional ... consisting of ‘*all that man desires as useful or delightful to him; which exists in a degree of scarcity.*’ (ibid.: 55)

As Foster et al. explain, Lauderdale holds that if exchange values were attached to goods that are necessary for life and were previously abundant, such as air, water and food, but are now of increasing scarcity, this would enhance individual private riches, and indeed the riches of the country (conceived as the sum of individual riches), but at the expense of the common wealth. They add that if one could monopolise water that had previously been freely available by placing a fee on wells, the measured riches of the nation would be increased at the expense of the growing thirst of the population.

Foster et al. add that wealth, as opposed to mere riches, was associated in classical political economy with what John Locke called the ‘intrinsic value’ and classical economists called ‘use value’. While material use values had always existed and were the basis of human existence, commodities produced for sale embody something else: exchange value. Commodities have a twofold aspect: use value and exchange value. ‘The Lauderdale Paradox was nothing but an expression of this twofold aspect of wealth/value.’

Foster et al. (ibid.: 56 ff.) say that Marx adhered to the Lauderdale Paradox and went beyond it:

Indeed, Marx built his entire critique of political economy in large part around the contradiction between use value and exchange value ... Under capitalism ... nature was rapaciously mined for the sake of exchange value ... This was closely related to Marx’s attempt to look at the capitalist economy simultaneously in terms of its economic-value relations and its material transformations of nature. Thus Marx was the first major economist to incorporate the new notions of energy and entropy ... into his analysis of production. (ibid.: 59)

The first sentence of this quote expresses a view that coincides greatly with that of Bolívar Echeverría (2010:12), who said that the central contradiction in *Capital* is the one between value (exchange value) and use value.

Foster et al. point out that, when analysing capitalist agriculture, Marx often refers to sustainability as a requirement for any future society – the need to protect the earth for successive generations. *A condition of sustainability, Marx insisted, is the recognition that no one owns the earth, which must be preserved for future generations:*

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even ... all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and must have to bequeath it in improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias*. (Marx 1981 [1894]: 911)

The strong presence of nature in Marx's thought is evident. However, green thinkers, such as Leff in this book (Chapter 7), frequently point out that the labour theory of value put Marx in direct opposition to the type of ecologically informed value analysis that is needed today. As a reaction to these claims, Foster et al. adopt an interesting position:

Here it is important to understand that certain conceptual categories that Marx uses in his *critique of political economy*, such as nature as a 'free gift' and the labour theory of value itself, were inventions of classical-liberal political economy that were integrated into Marx's *critique* – insofar as they exhibited the real tendencies and contradictions of the system. Marx employed these concepts in an argument aimed at transcending bourgeois society and its limited social categories. The idea that nature was a 'free good' for exploitation ... [was] advanced by the physiocrats [and the classics] – well before Marx [... and] was perpetuated in mainstream economic theory long after Marx. Although accepting it as a reality of bourgeois political economy, Marx was acutely aware of the social and ecological contradictions embedded in such a view. (ibid.: 61–2)

Foster et al.'s vision is that Marx faced a strong tension between *what is* and *what ought to be*. For that purpose, it was paramount to maintain explicit the contradiction between use value and (exchange) value. For Foster et al., *Marx developed both a positive and a critical theory* describing how capitalism works and what it is, but also showing its contradictions from the perspective of a post-capitalist society: that is, from the perspective of *what should be*. Therefore, Foster et al. add that, 'as treating nature as "free good" was intrinsic to the operation of the capitalist economy, it continued to be included as a basic proposition underlying neoclassical economic theory'. This proposition is even explicitly held in mainstream environmental economics. They conclude:

Misconceptions pointing to the anti-ecological nature of the labour theory of value arise due to conflation of the categories of *value* and *wealth* – since in today's received economics, these are treated synonymously ... In the capitalist logic there was no question that

nature was worthless (a free gift). The problem, rather, was how to jettison the concept of wealth, as distinct from value, from the core framework of economics, since it provided the basis of a critical – and what we now call ecological – outlook. (ibid.: 63)

Marx resisted the elimination of the wealth–value distinction. For Marx, those who saw labour as the only source of wealth attributed to it a supernatural creative power, as Foster et al. point out. Both in *Critique of the Gotha Program* (2010 [1891]: 341) and Volume I of *Capital* (1976 [1867]: 133–4, emphasis added) the old Marx defined his position:

Labour *is not the source* of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use-values (and surely these are what make up material wealth!) as labour.

Use-values ... the physical bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements, the material provided by nature, and labour. If we subtract the total amount of useful labour of different kinds which is contained in the coat, the linen, etc., a material substratum is always left. This substratum is furnished by nature without human intervention ... [*L*]abour is therefore not the only source of material wealth, i.e. of the use-values it produces. As William Petty says, *labour is the father of material wealth, the earth is the mother.*

Capitalism's failure to incorporate nature into its value accounting and its tendency to confuse value with wealth were *fundamental contradictions of the regime of capital itself*, argue Foster et al. Those who fault Marx for not ascribing value to nature, they say – quoting Paul Burkett (2014) – should redirect their criticisms to capitalism itself.

Although the debate is obviously unfinished and incomplete, I feel that my theory on the poverty and persistence of the peasantry, having been exposed to the critical views of many experts from Mexico and other countries, has survived the storm. This – together with the backups analysed in this chapter that buttress my theory – means to me that it deserves (and needs) to be elaborated further and improved (taking into consideration the critiques received).

TABLE 12.2 Replies to some comments and criticisms not addressed in the text

Authors and numbers	Replies
WMDB 7, 8, 10	<p>On <b>7</b> ('the BP blurs the distinction between the use value of labour and its value of exchange'). This is based on the alleged fact that I treat the exchange value of labour power (wage) as a value that directly corresponds with time worked. My short reply is: capitalism blurs the distinction through time wages (Chapter 20, Volume I, <i>Capital</i>); normatively, I say in the BP that wages should be independent of the number of days (hours) worked.</p> <p>On <b>8</b>, the BP is criticised (in other words) for not accepting at face value the 'freedom of the worker to starve'. My reply is (as stated above) that the works of E. P. Thompson and J. C. Scott reflect the inescapable fact that <i>human life cannot be left to the market. No society has done this. Any self-respecting political economy must also be a moral economy.</i></p> <p>On <b>10</b>, they disagree with my proposal to subsidise peasant agriculture in the global South. Their argument is that this idea is not ripe because it goes against the dominant neoliberal credo. A similar argument is made by Bernstein (see below). I reply that, in this case, agricultural subsidies would have to be eliminated in the global North, which they do not propose, and that the intellectual attitude of equating <i>ought to be</i> with <i>is</i> helps explain why neoliberalism is dominant. Some countries in South America have implemented many non-ripe ideas successfully. As part of their commentaries against ontology and essentialism (see <b>4</b> to <b>6</b> in Table 12.1), WMDB refer to Lukács to criticise me for 'translating the concretely historical into supra-historical essences' and for adopting binary thought that serves the purposes of quietism. My reply is that, in the quoted phrase, Lukács was criticising two contradistinctions made by Tönnies in aspects that are quite distant from nature (community–society, civilisation–culture), whereas the distinction agriculture–industry is permeated by the presence of natural features, to the extent that man is unable to transform 'solar energy into food' – it depends on photosynthesis, a natural process that is non-modifiable by humans. Stating <i>this fact</i> cannot be seen as translating 'the concretely historical into supra-historical essences', as there is no concrete historical feature but rather a constant natural one. The same applies to the imputation of quietism to my thought: am I being accused of not fighting our dependence on photosynthesis?</p>

TABLE 12.2 Continued

Authors and numbers	Replies
Bernstein 18, 19, 22	<p>On <b>18</b>, where Bernstein expresses his doubt about the accuracy of the BP's 'observations about current realities, in the (mostly) timeless world of his abstractions, for example, concerning the "numerical importance of peasants in Latin America"'. He is right: every assertion has to be backed up with evidence, but then one requires not a paper but a book. The evidence on Mexico is discussed in Chapter 6 of this book by Damián and Pacheco.</p> <p>On <b>19</b>, Bernstein criticises my use of the concept of petty commodity producers 'as a descriptive synonym for peasants or family farmers rather than as a theoretically defined category'. My reply is that I use it exactly as Marx uses it, whereas his use of the term (seeing peasants as both wage workers and capitalist) implies imputing capitalist categories to non-capitalist forms of production.</p> <p>On <b>22</b>, Bernstein rejects my position of subsidising peasants in the South if it implies a redistributive policy from rich to poor, which it does, as this is ruled out by dominant neoliberal ideology. My reply would be the same as the one given to WMDB above. But Bernstein looks at the possible consequences within my model and points out, rightly, that if subsidies eliminate the main cause of peasant poverty, capitalist agriculture would not have the cheap supply of seasonal labour and would disappear. My reply is that this might indeed occur in the long run and would be very good for humanity.</p>

### 3. The distinctive features of agriculture: a detailed version

In Chapter 5, Bernstein synthesised in a table the distinctive features of agriculture and industry as described in Chapter 1. As a result of my debates with Armando Bartra, I perceived the contrast between the character of machinery, the main means of production in industry, which are man-made, and soil, water and climate (nature), the main means of production in agriculture, which are not man-made. Machinery can be increased (and modified) at will, whereas nature can be modified and increased only within limits. Additionally, I perceived the importance of contrasting the typical flows of production in agriculture and industry. Starting from Bernstein's table, adding these two features and a column of consequences in agriculture, and making other slight changes, I have come up with an updated and completed version of the contrasts and consequences of conditions of production in agriculture and industry as presented in Table 12.3. I have included in the first two rows the traits of the

TABLE 12.3 Conditions of production in agriculture and industry: contrasts and consequences

Aspect	Industry	Agriculture	Consequences for agriculture
1. Character of the object of work and contents of production.	Almost always inert material. <i>Production</i> consists in modifying and/or assembling these objects.	Biological (seeds, plants). <i>Cultivation</i> consists in provoking, stimulating and taking care of the biological growth of the plant.	Uncertainty: the biological growth process can be interrupted or modified, by causes beyond human control.
2. Character of the main means of production.	Machinery produced by human beings.	Land (soil), water and climate – natural.	Absence in agriculture of a trend to equalise labour productivity among producing units, which gives way to <i>differential land rent</i> .
3. Work process 1.	Continuous.	Discontinuous (seasonal).	Seasonal work: the main determinant of peasant poverty and persistence.
4. Work process 2.	Activities are simultaneous (highly developed technical division of labour).	Activities are sequential (little technical division of labour).	Low presence and importance of economies of scale, in contrast to industry.
5. Location of the labour process.	Flexible: materials are moved to where machines and workers are.	Fixed by location of cultivated land: workers and machines are moved to the land.	Diseconomies in very large units.
6. Character of work product.	Almost always inert. It can be stored during long periods.	Frequently perishable. It has to get to consumers promptly or its character is modified.	Excess production can be more disastrous: prices can fall abruptly.
7. Flow of production.	Continuous in most branches of industry.	Products are obtained only at harvest time, usually once a year.	Financial requirements (of circulating capital) are strong as expenditures are dispersed over the production period, but income is concentrated in a few weeks.

object of work and of the main means of production in industry and agriculture. These two rows highlight that both the object of work and the main means of production are natural in agriculture. I illustrate that agriculture (in the Spanish sense of the term) consists in provoking, stimulating and taking care of the biological growth of plants; *that it is*, as Malita (1971: 302) has described it, *cultivation, not production*, and thus in sharp contrast to most industrial activities. This is reflected in the third row – the discontinuity of the labour process in agriculture – because, as Marx said in *Capital*, after planting, the labour process is interrupted almost completely and the unfinished product is left to the influence of natural processes. The second row refers to the characteristic of agriculture that explains both the rise of agricultural land rent and, according to Bartra, the persistence of the peasantry: the non-human-produced character of land, water and climate. The third row highlights the seasonal character of agriculture, which, in my view, is the main explanation for both the persistence of peasantry and its poverty. The last four rows add features of agriculture that contrast with industry; they explain the minor role of economies of scale in agriculture (row 4) and therefore that agriculture is less prone to the concentration of production (rows 4 and 5). Row 6 explains the urgent character of harvesting, especially in the case of highly perishable products (vegetables and fruits), in addition to its seasonality and the tremendous impact on prices of excess production. Row 7 illustrates that, while the flow of products is continuous in most industries, in agriculture products are obtained only at harvest time; this occurs mostly once a year, and is usually concentrated in a few weeks. Financial requirements (of circulating capital) are strong, as expenditures are dispersed over the production period but income is concentrated in a few weeks.

#### 4. Pending issues for discussion

The text of the previous sections outgrew their expected length, and so I had to eliminate most of the contents (which I had partially written) of this section, which deals with issues (and authors) not discussed in the book, and had to change its title and outlook. The main elements to be included in it were as follows:

- a I had written a long account of what I had labelled ‘An alternative theory of capitalist agricultural development’, developed



by Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson (1987). This theory is centred on the processes of *appropriationism* and *substitutionism* adopted by capital to control agriculture, which I regard as quite relevant to understanding the relationship between peasant units and capital and thus throwing light on the central issues of this book. The following excerpts from the introduction synthesise how they construe those concepts and give an idea of their importance:

The key to understanding the *uniqueness of agriculture* ... lies neither in its social structure nor in its factor endowment. Rather *agriculture confronts capitalism with a natural production process*. Unlike sectors of handicraft activity, agriculture could not be directly transformed into a branch of industrial production. *There was no industrial alternative to the biological transformation of solar energy into food*. The industrialization of agriculture therefore took a decisively different path ... determined by the *structural constraints* of the agricultural production process, represented by *nature as the biological conversion of energy, as biological time in plant growth and animal gestation, and as space in land-based rural activities*. Unable to remove these constraints directly ... industrial *capitals* have responded by adapting to the specificities of nature in agricultural production ... [D]iscrete elements of the production process have been taken over by industry – broadcast sowing by the seed drill, the horse by the tractor, manure by synthetic chemicals ... *This discontinuous but persistent undermining of discrete elements of the agricultural production process, their transformation into industrial activities, and their incorporation into agriculture as inputs we designate as appropriationism*. The products of agriculture likewise presented unique problems for industrial production. Their destiny as food impeded simple replacement by industrial products. Nevertheless, *the emergence of the food industry, we would argue, represents a similarly discontinuous but permanent process to achieve the industrial production of food which we denominate substitutionism ... the agricultural product, after being reduced to an industrial input, increasingly suffers replacement by non-agricultural components. Appropriationism is constituted*

*by the action of industrial capitals to reduce the importance of nature in rural production, and specifically as a force beyond their direction and control.* This was achieved initially by relaxing the constraint of land as space via mechanization, and subsequently by the continuing struggle *to transform the secrets of biological production into scientific knowledge and industrial property ...* The logic of *substitutionism* has led to the creation of sectors of accumulation in the downstream stages of food and fibre manufacture ... [T]he tendential outcome of substitutionism is to eliminate the rural product, and thus the *rural* base of agriculture ... [T]he advent in the 1970s of modern biotechnologies, particularly genetic engineering ... mark a generalised advance in the industrial manipulation of nature, and have triggered a technological revolution in plant and livestock breeding, agrichemicals and food manufacture. (ibid.: 1–5, emphasis added)

It is worth highlighting that the authors start with the premise of the *uniqueness of agriculture* and regard it as *lying in a natural production process: the biological transformation of solar energy into food*. Although the starting point of the background paper is similar in stressing the natural and biological character of plant growth, the perspectives from which this essential feature is seen are different. Goodman et al. emphasise industrial capital's *lack of control* as it cannot replace the biological growth of the plant by an industrial process ('*as a force beyond their direction and control*'). They identify *biological time in plant growth and animal gestation and space in land-based rural activities* as constraints derived from its uniqueness. Chapter 1 emphasises the *discontinuous requirements of labour power* and its social consequences in capitalism. Although this acute consciousness of the natural character of plant growth is shared in this book by many authors, its social consequences are not as widely grasped.

- b The general account of rural poverty that is present in some development studies centred on the crucial role of security in peasant societies and on adaptation to their realities. John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (1979), in which he develops the concepts of *equilibrium of poverty* and *accommodation*<sup>5</sup> as the forces explaining rural poverty in the Third World, was to

- be discussed with other related works, such as Albert Hirschman (1958) and Raúl Prebisch (1963).
- c I was to explore the demographic factor, including the relation between population and arable land, that was brought into the analysis by Galbraith and is also present in Chayanov. On the one hand, the position adopted by Gordon Childe in *Man Makes Himself* (1936) was to be made explicit: human beings, as a species, as *Homo sapiens*, have to be regarded as successful as they have survived for many millennia and have multiplied their numbers. This perspective leads to a paradox: Chinese and Indian societies would be regarded, in terms of their numbers, as the most successful human societies, although they are considered among the less successful in terms of their GDP per capita and the percentage living in poverty. As WMDB say in Chapter 3, three types of production processes have to be considered: the production of the means of subsistence, of the means of production and of labour power. India and China (peasant societies since antiquity) should be considered as very efficient producers of labour power.
  - d I had planned to examine James C. Scott's (1976) concepts of *subsistence ethics* and the *moral economy* of the peasantry.
  - e I would also have discussed George M. Foster's (1967) concept of the 'image of the limited good', a specific 'cognitive orientation' connected with other authors' ideas and with the category of 'ethos' used by Luis Arizmendi in this book, following Bolívar Echeverría.
  - f The concept of a 'culture of poverty', as developed by Oscar Lewis (1959) and criticised by, among others, Charles Valentine (1968), was to be included.
  - g I intended to explore the concept of the social character of the peasantry, which was developed and applied empirically by Fromm and Maccoby (1970) in a Mexican village.

The preceding five lines of thought (c to g) are closely interlinked and were to be developed in the same subsection. They would also be related to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of '*exis*', which he enunciated thus:

Scarcity is a fundamental relation of our History ... If a state of equilibrium is established within a given mode of production, and

preserved from one generation to the next, it is preserved as *exis* – that is to say, both as a physiological and social determination of human organisms and as a practical project of keeping institutions and physical development at the same level. This corresponds ideologically to a decision about human ‘nature’. Man is a stunted misshapen being hardened by suffering, and he lives in order to work from dawn till dusk with these (primitive) technical means, on a thankless threatening earth. (Sartre 2004: 125–6)

The concept of scarcity is central to any systemic understanding of the world. While the Marxist project of the (future) society of organised producers is based on overcoming scarcity and on replacing the realm of necessity with the realm of freedom, the current environmental crisis has put a serious question mark on this vision. In the final analysis, the critical scarcity is that of food. If capitalist agriculture is unsustainable, how are we going to supply food for 7.25 billion people, a number that is increasing by 42 million every year? Is it possible to develop a sustainable agriculture that can provide food for such an enormous volume of people?

- h The unsustainable nature of capitalist agriculture and its environmental crisis are rooted in the scission of cities and countryside and thus in the interruption in the cycling of soil nutrients, what Marx called the *ecological rift*. More specifically, the position of Marx in ecological thinking was to be reviewed. For these purposes, the following books were to be reviewed: Foster et al. (2010), Magdoff et al. (2000), Foster (2000; 2002; 2009); Burkett (2014); O’Connor (1998); Altwater (1993); Leff (2014); González de Molina and Toledo (2014); and Klein (2014).
- i A comparative analysis of the present book and similar books that collect papers on the peasantry (classic and recent) was to be conducted in order to specify the contributions of this volume and its distinctive character.

## **5. Different replies to the two central theoretical questions of this book: a sketch**

The two central questions posed in the background paper (Chapter 1), and to which the call for the seminar suggested that all participants give their answers, were as follows:

1. What are the reasons for peasant poverty? In other words, why are most peasants poor?
2. Why has the peasantry as a distinct form of production been able to persist in the twenty-first century in the face of global capitalist development?

A third question also was posed:

3. Are the replies to the two previous questions related and, if so, in what way?

The purpose of this section is to assess how generalised are the replies to the two central questions in the book, and to build two *typologies of reply*. I consider replies both by the authors of chapters themselves and by other authors that are discussed in the book.

The following topics are not included as they are not strictly theoretical replies to the two questions: the account given on definitions of poverty and the peasantry, and the historical view of ideas on Question 2 (Introduction); Arizmendi's discussion on the various modes of subsumption of the peasantry to capital (Chapter 4); Damián and Pacheco's empirical findings on rural poverty, seasonality and persistence (Chapter 6); Montaña's case studies in three countries on the impact of water scarcity on peasants according to the degree of water commodification in each (Chapter 8); and Araghi's historical analysis of food regimes that promote peasantisation and/or depeasantisation (Chapter 10). Authors' proposals to reduce poverty and/or support the peasant economy are also not included.

*Replies to the peasant poverty question (Question 1).* I have identified the following replies to Question 1. I indicate in brackets whether the reply is associated with peasants' low levels of production, Q, or with the price levels, P, at which they sell and/or buy.

*Chapter 1 or the background paper (Boltvinik)*

- 1.1. 'Conventional answers': severe limitations of resources and technology and low labour productivity [Q].
- 1.2. Exploitation, including self-exploitation (Chayanov and Bartra) and labour-power undervaluation (Boltvinik) [P].

1.3. Seasonal theory: peasants absorb the cost of agricultural seasonality [P] (Boltvinik; see also replies to Questions 2 and 3).

*Chapter 2 (Bartra)*

2.1. Self-exploitation and polymorphous exploitation, including absorbing the cost of seasonality, buying dear and selling cheap, and labour-power undervaluation [P] (linked to replies to Question 2).

*Chapter 3 (Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld)*

3.1. In the highly commoditised, capitalist-dominated global economy, peasants are impoverished because of their low labour productivity. Social differentiation renders poor peasants either landless or forced to find additional forms of income to survive [Q].

3.2. Unpaid domestic labour, which keeps at a low level the value of commodity labour power [P].

*Chapter 4 (Arizmendi)*

4.1. Domination (subsumption) by capitalism, which absorbs and penetrates the peasant economy, placing it at its service [P].

*Chapter 5 (Bernstein)*

5.1. Social differentiation of the peasantry – which results from their character as petty commodity producers who internalise and combine the class locations of both capital and labour – leads to their doom.

5.2. ‘Simple reproduction squeeze’ caused by exploitation [P].

*Chapter 7 (Leff)*

7.1. Colonialism and capitalism resulted in an impoverishing process that entailed pillaging peasants’ resources, degradation of the productivity of their ecosystems, dispossession of their territories, and the colonisation of their knowledge. In short, a historical process of entropic degradation of their environment and livelihood [Q].

*Chapter 9 (Vergopoulos)*

9.1. Peasants maximise production and minimise prices. If capitalism were to produce every commodity, profits would be impossible; at least one commodity, labour power, has to be produced non-capitalistically, to avoid paying profit and land rent revenues.

So peasant poverty is, for him, a necessary condition for the general profitability of capitalism [P] (see also replies to Question 2).

*Chapter 11 (Barkin and Lemus)*

11.1. Poverty originates in the individualism and alienation of the masses and the market is the main obstacle to escaping poverty.

*Chapter 12 (Boltvinik)*

12.1. Presents, through Lenin's words, Danielson's theory on Question 1 of the 'freeing of winter time', which is caused by the ruination of peasant handicrafts, which in turn is caused by the development of capitalist manufacturing or industry; this shows a strong coincidence with a text from Volume II of *Capital*.

12.2. Argues that Kautsky's position coincides with Danielson's, whose theory is a significant (but very little known) precedent to Boltvinik's theory.

12.3. Other issues listed and related to the central questions include Galbraith's theory of the *equilibrium of poverty* and *accommodation* as the forces explaining rural mass poverty.

12.4. The *demographic factor* in Questions 1 and 2, complementing Kautsky, as explored by Galbraith and Gordon Childe.

*Replies to the peasant persistence question (Question 2)*

*Chapter 1 or the background paper (Boltvinik)*

1.4. Classical Marxist position attributed to Lenin: disappearance of peasants (Ellis).

1.5. Exploitation breaks differentiation (simple reproduction squeeze: all surplus is extracted), contributing to persistence (Bernstein).

1.6. Seasonal theory (Boltvinik): symbiosis of agricultural capitalism and the peasantry, expressed by peasant seasonal wage labour in capitalist agriculture (see also 1.3 in the replies to Question 1 above).

1.7. The self-exploitation theory and the non-accumulation motives of peasants explain Question 2 (Chayanov).

1.8. Obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture explain Question 2 (Mann and Dickinson; Contreras).

1.9. Peasant households have to persist as they produce the labour power capitalist units require (Kautsky's demographic theory).

1.10. Peasants are functional for capitalism and thus persist, as they do not pursue profits, they can function at lower prices and thereby reduce differential rent, which is detrimental for non-agricultural capital (Bartra).

*Chapter 2 (Bartra)*

2.2. Serving as a buffer for differential rent, peasants are functional to capitalism (see 1.10 above).

*Chapter 3 (Welty, Mann, Dickinson and Blumenfeld)*

3.3. Question 2 is explained by the Mann–Dickinson thesis and its focus on natural and socio-historical obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture. Given these or similar obstacles, in agriculture and elsewhere, capitalism promotes, or is able to work with, many peculiar non-capitalist forms of production, whenever this enhances profits and/or diminishes risks.

*Chapter 5 (Bernstein)*

5.3. Question 2 is a non-question as poor and marginal peasants should not be considered peasants or farmers at all, but workers.

*Chapter 7 (Leff)*

7.2. Question 2 has to be understood on the basis of peasants' attachments to land and territory.

*Chapter 9 (Vergopoulos)*

Same as 9.1 above.

*Chapter 12 (Boltvink)*

12.9. Kautsky's demographic theory with regard to Question 2 and my theory are complementary: Kautsky explains why capitalist farms, which do not reproduce labour, need peasant households to 'produce' labour power, while my theory maintains that capitalist farms need peasants to provide a reliable seasonal, cheap supply of labour.

\* \* \*

Observing the broad list of replies to both questions, and taking into account the numerous topics not covered in these lists, one concludes that most chapters include a reply (or replies) to both



questions, and/or present empirical evidence on them, or look at them historically – both the history of food regimes and the history of ideas. Thus the central questions have a strong and generalised presence in the book and the reader receives, in addition, a rich panorama beyond the specific replies (or theories) advocated by the contributors to the book.

I move now to building one typology for the replies to Question 1 and one for the replies to Question 2. In the case of Question 1, I have already classified replies according to whether the cause identified involves low levels of production (Q) or low prices of products and the labour force, and/or high prices for inputs (P). Tables 12.4 and 12.5 present the typologies of the replies to the two questions derived from the previous listing. They are not, obviously, the only possible typologies.

In Table 12.4, five types of reply to Question 1 are derived from the previous list by combining two or more specific replies in each type. Only the first type is classified as attributing low levels of production (Q) as the cause of poverty. It could be worded as follows: ‘Peasants are poor because they produce very little.’ As stated by Galbraith (1979: 1–22), these types of theory involve circular reasoning, as it could also be said that peasants have small plots and use traditional technologies because they are poor. In the case of dispossession, the question this theory cannot answer is why they are not dispossessed of all their land. The second type of reply involves the prices at which peasants buy and sell (P). Self-exploitation, exploitation or domination (subsumption) by capital, despite their differences, are all associated with peasants receiving low prices for their product and buying their inputs at high prices (P) through unequal exchange that might – or might not – involve contract farming (see row 2 in Table 12.4). This domination (subsumption) has other consequences, including dispossessing peasants of their capacity to decide, that are not captured in the table. This could be worded as: ‘Peasants are poor because they are exploited, self-exploited, or dominated by (subsumed to) capital.’ My theory that peasants are poor because they absorb the costs of seasonality (row 3) impinges on both the prices (P) at which they sell their product and the wages received for their seasonal work (W); both of these reflect only the time effectively worked, which, given seasonality, is only a fraction of the year. This has been classified in the same category as

Danielson's theory (backed up by Marx and Kautsky) of the 'freeing of winter time', which relates to the reduction in the time during which labour power can be deployed. So both theories are complementary: peasants cannot work in the winter, nor in the non-working time of the production period, and the prices and wages they receive do not compensate these losses. This might be worded as: 'Peasants absorb both winter and pre-harvest seasonality costs.' The fourth type of reply to Question 1 involves wages (W). The poverty of peasants results from the fact that they produce labour power non-capitalistically, lowering wages. This might be worded as: 'Peasants are poor because they subsidise capital by selling their labour power cheaply.' Lastly, the fifth type of reply identifies 'cultural explanations' (individualism, alienation and accommodation) for peasant poverty and the idea of the equilibrium of poverty, which attests that 'an increase in income could set in motion the forces that would eliminate the increase and restore the previous level of deprivation. Improvement would devour itself' (Galbraith 1979: 45).

Table 12.5 presents the typology of replies to Question 2. Type 1 denies the persistence of the peasantry: both Lenin and Bernstein consider poor landholding peasants as proletarians, not peasants. The five remaining types accept peasant persistence and their mottos could be written as 'peasants persist because': 'the production and seasonal-supply functions of their labour power are indispensable for agricultural capitalism' (Kautsky; Boltvinik, Chapter 1; Vergopoulos, Chapter 9; see row 2); 'by not requiring profits, nor rent, but only subsistence income, they become very competitive' (Chayanov; Bartra, Chapters 1 and 2; see row 3); 'capitalism cannot overcome the obstacles present in agriculture for its development' (Mann and Dickinson; Contreras; WMDB, Chapters 1 and 3; see row 4); 'peasants function as buffers for differential rents, which damage non-agricultural capital' (Bartra, Chapters 1 and 2; see row 5); and 'peasants' attachment to land is very strong' (see row 6). Two of the types (rows 2 and 5) refer to the peasant economy's functionality for capitalism, although for Bartra it is functional for non-agricultural capitalism, and in Kautsky's, Boltvinik's and Vergopoulos's replies it is functional for agricultural capitalism. The remaining three types refer to peasants' competitiveness (see row 3; Chayanov; Bartra), given their own attributes as simple commodity producers; to natural obstacles to capitalist development that would then be unable to displace the peasantry (row 4); and lastly

TABLE 12.4 Typology of replies to the peasant poverty question (Question 1)

Type of theory (reply)	Chapter and author of the reply	Impinges on Q, P, W, LP and/or O	Sustained or discussed	Comment and/or critique
1. Limitation of resources or technology; low productivity; dispossession or degradation.	1. Authors not identified 1. Boltvinik 3. WMDB 7. Leff	Q Q Q Q	D S S S	'Conventional' (circular reasoning)
2. Self-exploitation, exploitation or domination (subsumption); Functional for capitalism.	1. Chayanov 2. Bartra 5. Bernstein 4. Arizmendi 9. Vergopoulos	P P P P P	D D S S S	Includes unequal exchange, contract farming, etc.
3. Peasants absorb seasonality costs; working time reduced; 'freeing of winter time'	1. Boltvinik 12. Marx, Danielson and Kautsky	P, W LP	S D	Symbiosis of peasants and agricultural capital
4. (Re-)production of labour power is non-capitalist; done with unpaid domestic work.	3. WMDB 9. Vergopoulos	W W	S S	LP produced in non-capitalist way
5. Individualism and alienation; equilibrium of poverty and accommodation.	11. Barkin and Lemus 12. Galbraith	O O	S D	'Cultural explanations'

Key: Q = quantity produced; P = price; W = low and/or seasonal wages; LP = labour power deployed; O = other; S = sustained; D = discussed.

TABLE 12.5 Typology of replies to the peasant persistence question (Question 2)

Type of theory (reply)	Chapter and author of the reply	Sustained or discussed	Comment, clarification and/or critique
1. Non-persistence (doom).	1. Lenin (attributed to) 5. Bernstein, following Lenin	D S	Poor peasants <i>are</i> workers, not peasants. Labelling act by Lenin and Bernstein.
2. Symbiosis of capital and peasants (seasonal supply and production of LP).	1. Boltvink 1. Kautsky 9. Vergopoulos	S D S	They are complementary.
3. Self-exploitation and non-accumulation motives.	1. Chayanov 2. Bartra	D S	It would predict persistence of artisans also.
4. Obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture.	1. Mann and Dickinson; Contreras 3. WMDB	D D	Omits equalisation of profit rates; thus obstacles identified are not real. WMDB do not reply to this critique.
5. Peasants function as buffers for differential rents.	2. Bartra	S	By being able to function with low income or prices.
6. Peasants' attachment to land.	7. Leff	S	Not convincing.

Key: LP = labour power deployed; S = sustained; D = discussed.

to a subjective property of peasants – their attachment to land. The second and fifth reply types are relational explanations: the role played by peasants within capitalism explains their persistence, and therefore peasants are not a mere remnant of previous modes of production, but rather they persist because they play a positive, new role within capitalism. The other three explanations can be conceived as ‘resistance of the peasantry’, either because their will to resist is very strong, or they have competitive advantages or the competitor (capitalist agriculture) has disadvantages.

The last column of Table 12.5 shows my criticisms of three of the reply types. The competitive advantage argued in row 3 would explain the persistence of all simple commodity producers (artisans), which has not happened. The Mann–Dickinson and Contreras theses, which are also supported by WMDB, identify false obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture, as they disregard the equalisation of the rate of profit analysed by Marx in Volume III of *Capital*. WMDB (Chapter 3) do not counter-argue against this critique. Lastly, explaining peasant persistence by the peasant’s attachment to land forgets the great gap in economic, political and military power between the peasantry and capital. It also forgets that capital has not only dispossessed peasants, but in many periods and places it has allotted plots of land to them.

## Notes

1 When I came back to Mexico I prepared and published three articles centred on peasant economies and technological innovations (Boltvinik 1975; 1976; 1979).

2 The Spanish translation of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin 1950 [1899]) uses the expression ‘with *nadiel* land’ instead of ‘allotment-holding’. The translator explains (p. 51) that *nadiel* refers to the land given to peasants in usufruct (it could not be sold) after the abolition of serfdom in 1861; this land was communal property and was redistributed periodically among peasants for their cultivation. ‘*Nadiel*’ in Russia and ‘*ejidos*’ in Mexico had strong similarities.

3 See the footnote in Chapter 6,

section 1, by Damián and Pacheco, which explains what the *ejidos* are.

4 See ‘The distinctive features of agriculture’, New Zealand Digital Library, University of Waikato, Agricultural Information Modules Collection. Available at [www.nzdl.org/](http://www.nzdl.org/) (accessed 23 August 2015).

5 In brief, *the equilibrium of poverty* argues that ‘an increase in income could set in motion the forces that would eliminate the increase and restore the previous level of deprivation. Improvement would devour itself’ (Galbraith 1979: 45). By *accommodation*, Galbraith refers to the fact that ‘[p]eople who have lived for centuries in poverty in the relative isolation of the rural village have come to terms with this existence’ (ibid.: 62).

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