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# **The End of Peasantries? Rethinking the Role of Peasantries in a World-Historical View**

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# *The End of Peasantries?*

## **Rethinking the Role of Peasantries in a World-Historical View**

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*Eric Vanhaute*

The peasant is back. In its *World Development Report 2008*, the World Bank rediscovered, after 25 years, agriculture as “a road to development.” If we want to meet the Millennium Goals of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, dixit the report, the agricultural sector must be placed (again) at the center of the development agenda. This implies new investments in the first sector, after decades of negligence, and support to small farmers. At the same time “countries must deliver on vital reforms such as cutting distorting subsidies and opening markets” (World Bank, 2008). In this way the report tries to reconcile new forms of national development with the old mantra of open borders and free trade. More recently, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), a World Bank and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) organization, put things more clearly, stressing that “business as usual is no longer an option.” Agricultural progress has to place “greater emphasis on safeguarding natural resources and on ‘agro-ecological’ practices. These include using natural fertilizers and traditional seeds, intensifying natural processes and reducing the distance between agricultural production and the consumer” (IAASTD, 2008).

Is it a coincidence that the small agricultural producer is back in a time of soaring food prices and new waves of food riots, in a year that the United Nations declared as an historical turning point? For the first time in our history, more people on earth live in cities than in the countryside (U.N. Human Settlements Programme, 2006). One out of three city dwellers, about 1 billion people, are living in slums, which brings into question the idea of urban sustainability. Combining these events and putting them in

an historical perspective can deepen our understanding of what is going on.

This article tries to understand today's concerns about the decay of the peasantries and the loss of food security on a massive scale within a long-term and global perspective. Guiding questions are: How to handle the local scale of the peasant with the global scale of societal transformations? How to define peasantries? How is the fate of peasantries linked to economic development and social inequality? What can new research on the success and decline of peasantries teach us?

## 1. SCALES AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN WORLD HISTORY

In a recent publication, Saskia Sassen stressed the importance of divergent scales of time and space in social research. What we need, she claimed, is a critical stance toward scale, recognizing the historicity of scales and resisting the reification of the national scale so present in most social science (2007: 82). To understand the global, we have to understand the subnational and the local: "Studying the global, then, entails not only a focus on that which is explicitly global in scale, but also a focus on locally scaled practices and conditions articulated with global dynamics and a focus on the multiplication of horizontal cross-border connections among various localities" (Sassen, 2007: 90). This understanding, or reconceptualizing, of the local entails "an at least partial rejection of the notion that local scales are inevitably part of nested hierarchies of scale running from the local to the regional, the national, the international" (Sassen, 2007: 99).

World-systems analysis is one of the strongest tools for this simultaneous analysis of time and space as structuring variables. Although often criticized as a one-dimensional top-bottom paradigm, Wallerstein's work can also be read as intensive dialectics between the global and the local, as "a sophisticated tension between scales rather than a simplistic global determinism" (Moore, 2003: 311). World-systems analysis labels the modern world-system as both an historical and geographical structuring system. As Jason Moore states, four processes interact in this restructuring: equalization (new scales of production), expansion (of geographical scales), di-

vergence (between geographical regions, core and periphery), and agro-ecological transformation (“the rise of capitalism was part and parcel of a radical reshaping of world ecology” 2003: 310–11). Asymmetric relationships between regions feed the system and time and again restructure geographical spaces.

On a systemic level not only spaces but also social formations are redefined. It must be the ambition of world history to become, as Kenneth Pomeranz describes it, part of the social history of communities and social groups. This can only be achieved by combining different scales: “And ultimately, of course, world history, like any national or local history, must integrate culture, politics, economics, environment, and so on, no matter how difficult this is on a given spatial or temporal scale” (2007: 70). Essential is the labelling and categorization of social groups, which is an interaction between the local, the supralocal, and the global: “In the process, we create more multilayered and nuanced social histories of conventional local, regional, and national units, histories to place alongside the social histories of groups whose definitions and spatial boundaries come from world history itself” (Pomeranz, 2007: 98).

An inspiring example of reconceptualizing a social formation within changing global contexts is the work of Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Creating and Transforming Households* (1992). This book on “households as an institution of the world-economy” was a real eye-opener for me, a “rural historian” who had finished my Ph.D. in the *Annales* tradition of microscopic village studies. The constructivist view, which states that these institutions have different forms and play different roles in different social settings, is pivotal to our understanding of household formation. Together with this, world-systems analysis allows us to combine this micro-view on households with changes on the meso- (regional systems, states), and the macro-scale (world-economy). Households compose the broader system, but are also modelled by that system.

In more general terms, capitalism can be defined as an inclusive system, integrating also what generally is perceived as non-capitalist institutions, processes, or systems. As Smith and Wallerstein have argued, households are non-capitalist islands within the big capitalist sea. Even more, they are very functional and even indispensable for the working of that societal system, by providing cheap labor, subsistence, and protection and by lowering social costs. “Non-waged labor is no less capitalist than the labor in the

most advanced robotized plant” (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992: 264). As they argue, this capitalist system cannot bear the cost of a majority of truly wage-centered households: “In a capitalist system, wages can never be the sole or even the principal mode of payment of the vast majority of the world’s work force” (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992: 264).

On the other hand, this inclusive world-system uses increasingly exclusive concepts to define and remodel reality: capitalist vs. non-capitalist, citizen vs. non-citizen, labor vs. non-labor, etc. The question of how the capitalist system invented or redefined social concepts such as household, class, gender, race, and also peasant and worker is a major research topic in modern world history. It is obvious from the work of Wallerstein and Smith that we need an inclusive model of analysis to understand the way these social constructs have changed. Turning back to our example, peasantries are probably the most clear-cut example of non- and even anti-capitalist production and survival systems, in which not the outside markets, but the internal balance of consumption and production are regarded to be central.

## 2. PEASANTRIES AND HISTORICAL CAPITALISM

After five centuries of an emerging capitalist world-economy and two centuries of true globalization of that system, about 50% of the world population is still labelled as peasants. This figure means two things: First, the ratio must have been much higher until only recently, even in the West. Secondly, our time marks a fundamental shift. For the first time in world history, less than half of the population lives “from the land.” If we take *rural population* as a (maximum) proxy, the evolutions and the predictions are clear.

What does this tell us about the relationship between peasantries and capitalism? A quick look at the literature on peasantries in a historical perspective shows that the concept is still highly under-theorized. Broadly speaking, we can define peasants as members of rural, agricultural households, who control the land they work, either as tenants or as smallholders, who are organized generally in households and in village communities that meet most of their subsistence needs (production, exchange, credit), who pool

**Table 1**  
Rural Population (% total population)

	Total Population (billion)	World %	(number)	Africa	Asia	Mid & South America	North America	Europe
1950	2.54	71%	(1.79)	85%	83%	58%	36%	49%
1970	3.70	64%	(2.37)	77%	77%	43%	26%	37%
1990	5.29	57%	(3.02)	68%	68%	29%	25%	29%
2000	6.12	53%	(3.27)	64%	63%	25%	21%	27%
2010	6.91	49%	(3.41)	60%	57%	21%	18%	26%
2030	8.32	40%	(3.35)	50%	46%	15%	13%	21%
2050	9.19	30%	(2.79)	38%				

Source: U.N. World Urbanization Prospects. The 2007 Revision Population Database (<http://esa.un.org/unup>)

different forms of income, and who are ruled by other social groups, which extract a surplus either directly via rents, via (non-balanced) markets, or through control of state power (taxation). Key words are (some degree of) autonomy, income-pooling, household-based village structures, and surplus extraction outside local control.

This ambiguous relationship with the outside world is responsible for the often complicated scientific interpretation of peasantries; consider the famous quote of Fernand Braudel: “The peasant himself, when he regularly sells a part of his harvest and buys tools and clothing, is already a part of the market. But if he comes to the market town to sell a few items—eggs or a chicken—in order to obtain a few coins with which to pay his taxes or buy a plowshare, he is merely pressing his nose against the shopwindow of the marketplace” (Braudel, 1977: 19). Market versus non-market: that seems to remain the question.

Much literature is spent on the internal differences between peasants (economic, demographic, legal, etc.). The work of Chayanov was very instrumental to understand some of these differences. Now forgotten (Marxist) debates on different (feudal vs. capitalist) modes of production or differentiation within peasantries started from a clear distinction between peasant and modern, capitalist societies. Eric Wolf’s *Peasants* (1966) is, among others, important in the paradigm shift toward a more integrated view. “Wolf’s peasants live, instead, in economies where secular swings in intertwined and highly contingent markets determine economic options ... where the peasant economy is part of local corporate and business as well

as distant financial sectors” (Scott, 1998: 199). Three decades ago, the sociologist Teodor Shanin tore down the dualist view when he argued that “measuring peasant capitalism lies at the heart of the major concerns of contemporary social science. It has to do with capitalism as a process, it relates the understanding of the origins of our time to the characterization of the essential tenets of the global system we live in” (Shanin, 1980: 89). In this way he criticized both classical and Marxist political economy, which explained capitalism “outside peasant economies and societies,” with the assumption “that capitalism equals de-peasantation” (Shanin, 1980: 89). In his introduction to a reprint of Chayanov’s *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, Shanin wrote:

The only way to handle effectively contemporary social reality is through models and theories in which peasant family farms do not operate separately and where peasant economy does not merely accompany other economic forms but is inserted into and usually subsumed under a dominant political economy, different in type. Also peasant economies are being transformed (and even re-established) mostly by “external” intervention, especially by the state and the multinational companies (1986: 12).

It seems clear that the role and fate of peasantries in the last few centuries can be understood only in regard to the rise of historical capitalism as an integrated societal model.

### 3. PEASANT ECONOMIES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH, THE FLEMISH EXAMPLE

The debate on the relationship between agrarian and economic change is often immobilized by a double dualism: a) the antagonism between internal relations and structures of production, reproduction, and power and external markets; and b) the antagonism between non- or precapitalist and capitalistic production relations and markets. The fate of peasant economies cannot be meaningfully evaluated within these dualisms, in terms of production or circulation, in terms of traditional or modern (capitalist).

The story of Flemish peasant agriculture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries illuminates this point (Vanhaute, 1993; 2001). This *Flemish Husbandry* originated in the “long” thirteenth century, only to disappear in the second half of the nineteenth century (Thoen, 2001). The secular trend of commercialization within the Flemish countryside did not alter structurally the Flemish peasant economy. On the contrary, this rural organization was responsible for a very substantial long term increase of both total agricultural output and land productivity. Moreover, the Flemish peasant economy generated huge capital surpluses; until the late nineteenth century, it was responsible for the greater part of the Flemish “national” income. In the long term, the Flemish rural society, based on peasant farming and income pooling, was an extremely rewarding economic system. Surpluses of goods, labor, and capital could be directed toward profitable markets, without undermining, at least until the nineteenth century, the basic logics of the rural survival economy. Two processes went hand-in-hand and even strengthened each other: 1) an increasing input of household labor to sustain the household survival; and 2) the pruning away of productivity profits (of land and industrial activities) toward social groups mainly outside the rural society. This was done mainly by adjusting land rents, not only to higher land yields, but also to higher combined household earnings, including extra-agricultural activities.

The example of the Flemish agro-system reveals the survival of a peasant agriculture within a world that was becoming commercialized. The basic logics of the peasant household (family labor, subsistence production, survival strategies) determined the agro-system in the greater part of what is now Flanders and Belgium until the second half of the nineteenth century. The peasant household was fully integrated in local and regional exchange networks of goods, labor, and capital. These internal exchange circuits were kept together by a credit and debt system that was dictated by local needs. The success of the Flemish peasant economy was based on a twofold, interlinked principle: first, higher yields of land and labor in general, which were pruned away in an indirect way; and secondly, social costs of commercialization, which were passed on to the peasant family, rather than, as in Great Britain, on to a rural landless class. How can we understand these processes within Flemish agriculture and rural society?



a) The unmistakable processes of growth within the Flemish countryside can only be explained by the cohabitation of a growing commercial capitalism with a vast peasant economy. Processes of commercialization not only extracted in an indirect way the profits of the combined labor input on the countryside, they also provided the means for an age-long survival of this mixed economy. It is impossible to understand the logic of the Flemish economy before the nineteenth century without integrating both traditional and modern systems of (re)production and exchange. This challenges the proposition that capitalism only exists where commerce controls and determines the structure of (rural) production in a pre-conditioned way.

b) This interpretation surpasses both Braudel and Brenner. Braudel correctly described the symbiosis of the worlds of daily (material) production and of market exchange. The highly artificial delinking of the countermarket of capitalism (defined as autonomous commercial chains) troubles his analysis of the Early Modern European economy (Braudel, 1977). Local and regional markets cannot be interpreted merely in the context of an emerging capitalist system (in which he is correct), but neither can they be isolated from it. As argued, markets can function in both ways, strengthening local labor relations and exchange circuits and directing surpluses toward external markets. Brenner (1997) insists on a breakthrough of capitalist property relations as a prerequisite for modern economic growth; but I doubt that we can make a unilateral and stringent interpretation of this relationship. First, long-term profit maximization is possible in (close) relationship with peasant economies. Secondly, capitalist relations must also be interpreted in the context of emerging and changing interregional and international division of labor. Ergo, I argue for an interpretation scheme with two axes: First, the organization of production and reproduction (social property relations); secondly, the processes of economic integration and the flows of goods, labor, and capital. The following example from two different regions in Flanders clarifies this.

c) Until the late nineteenth century, Inner-Flanders was a much more commercialized peasant economy than the Campine region east of Antwerp. The consequences are obvious: higher yields, more leaseholding, higher rents, more local markets, more profits.

The peasant economy of the Campine region was much more integrated within the village society, including common land and common regulations. This situation resulted from a divergent historical evolution: In the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, the Campine area was strongly integrated, albeit as a peripheral region, into the Antwerp market economy. Export products such as wool and cloth were sold on the Antwerp market. But in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, the Campine region was largely disconnected from any central market place; internal relations of production and exchange were much less challenged in this region. This means that the place of a region within the overarching economic division of labor matters a great deal. These networks of (unequal) exchange can cover different economic systems, but for that reason cannot be called less capitalist.

d) There is no such thing as an automatic transformation of a regional and even national market system in a global capitalist market (Braudel, 1977: 75; Polanyi, 1957: 57). No general line of evolution exists, as the roads to integration differ greatly according to local/regional circumstances. This interaction is often studied in the context of transformation. What do we mean by this concept? How can processes of transformation be correctly evaluated as processes of (slow) transition from one societal system to another, with long periods during which different systems exist next to each other and even thanks to each other? Long-term societal shifts on the European continent from the Middle Ages onwards can only fully understood when the changes of the “great transformation” of the “long” nineteenth century are included in the overall picture.

e) Interpreting the “Flemish case” within the debate on markets/production relations as prime movers reveals Flanders as an interesting case. The emergence of a commercializing, capitalist system does not necessarily break down traditional production structures, and certainly not on a short-term basis. On the contrary, the advantages of (part-time) unpaid household labor are a *conditio sine qua non* for the growth of a capitalist world-economy (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992; Vanhaute, 1993). This becomes clear when we look at the working of colonial economies in the twentieth century and even at the globalizing capitalism of the early twenty-first century. Could it be that this interaction between capitalist profits

and cheap and unpaid household labor is not a relic of the past, but the main road to modern economic transformations?

#### 4. ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE DECLINE OF PEASANT AGRICULTURE, THE EUROPEAN EXAMPLE

A central problem of contemporary global society concerns the failure of the capitalist world-economy to advance without limit and at the same time to secure general welfare in ways expected by the nineteenth-century theories of progress, liberal and socialist alike. Or is the failure due, conversely, to the world not being “modern” enough? This dispute often centers on the European example, related to contemporary problems of poverty and famine.

Europe’s great escape from hunger and famine in the nineteenth century went—chronologically—hand-in-hand with the end of the European peasantry. The conclusion seems to be straightforward: famines are related to peasant societies and so-called backward economies, while modernization equals the end of famines as something “incorporated into man’s biological regime” (Braudel, 1981: 73). However, this important event in world history, and more generally the rise of the West, cannot be understood without taking into account the broader context of the transformation of the capitalist world-system. Or: Europe could escape also and only because of its position in the nineteenth-century international economy. Two elements are central here.

First, even with the unprecedented increase of land and labor productivity in agriculture, Europe became a net importer of basic foodstuffs in order to feed its own population. Great Britain around 1900, for example, had to import 70% of its bread grains and 40% of its meat from outside Europe. The cost of these huge imports could only be paid by the profits of the Industrial Revolution. Secondly, Europe disposed of an important part of its own surplus labor by migration to the periphery of the world-system, the non-European world. In the nineteenth century, 40 to 50 million Europeans left the Old Continent.

So, Europe’s escape from hunger is a result of both a spectacular transformation of its old society, creating huge financial surpluses, and, as the center of the nineteenth century world-econ-

omy, of having and using its own periphery. To put it more bluntly: for Great Britain's hegemony and the resultant commitment to *laissez-faire*, both Ireland and India paid a high price. The big difference is that present-day weak economies do not have the power and the opportunities a) to import basic foodstuffs on the basis of self-regulated trade terms and b) to export surplus population to new peripheries (or present-day core countries).

Europe's example did not stop the threat of famines. On the contrary, more people than ever died in twentieth-century famines, and in the twenty-first century, structural food insecurity will still be at the top of the world agenda. Although per capita agricultural output rose more than 20% between 1960 and 2000, there are no signs of a structural decline in overall malnutrition. According to statistics released by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the world counted 920 million undernourished people in 1970, 800 million in 1995, and 850 million in 2006. This is still one of every five or six men, women, and children. Moreover, the group of people facing temporary food insecurity is not counted, and seems to rise (cf. urbanization and the contemporary food riots). This is related to the fact that the improvement of the general nutritional status is very unequally spread geographically. General improvement of these statistics is due mainly to an improved situation in China. Average caloric intake in China increased 66% between 1960 and 2000, against 21% in India and a mere 7% in Africa (FAO; Institute for Food and Development Policy).

In the meantime, the belief that a "green revolution" would solve the problem of food insecurity faded away. Technical improvements raise output and productivity substantially, but do not guarantee food security on a global scale. For example, in the twentieth century, about 75% of the existing food variety has been lost. The world is more and more dependent on a selected number of crops and varieties. Nowadays three of every four countries facing severe child malnutrition are net food exporters. India exports 60 million tons of rice and wheat every year, but has 200 million undernourished inhabitants. Brazil, the world's major soya exporter, used mainly to produce cat and dog food, counts 20 million un-

dernourished inhabitants (FAO; Institute for Food and Development Policy).<sup>1</sup>

## 5. THE END OF PEASANTRIES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY, THE NEED FOR A GLOBAL PICTURE

The world is facing increasing global inequality. While in the early nineteenth century, the income gap between the richest and poorest countries was 3 to 1, this increased to 11 to 1 in the early twentieth century and to more than 70 to 1 in the late twentieth century. One reason for this acceleration is that population growth has been situated mainly in the so-called less developed world. In 2050, more than 90% of the world population will live in the regions we now call the Third World.

I believe there is a structural relationship between growing inequality and the marginalization and eventual dismantling of peasantries, although this is hard to prove with existing statistics. The sharpest rise in global inequality occurs after 1950, the period in which de-peasantization really takes off. Between 1950 and 2010 the share of rural population declines, from 71% to 49% (see table 1 above). The numbers of agricultural population (families living predominantly from agricultural income) drop even more, from 65% of the world population in 1950 to 42% in 2000, and they are expected to drop to 38% by 2010 (FAO). In mid-twentieth-century Africa and Asia, about 80% of the population lived predominantly from agriculture; in 2010 this will be less than 50%. It is expected that both rural and agricultural population will decline also in absolute terms from 2010–20 onwards.

Recently, international organizations have reformulated their view of the relationship between development and peasantries. The *World Development Report 2006, Equity and Development* states: “Land is a key asset for poor people. . . . Inequality in the ownership of land has such far-reaching consequences for the well-being and the organization of society for generations to come” (World Bank, 2006: 162). However, the quantification of a global relationship be-

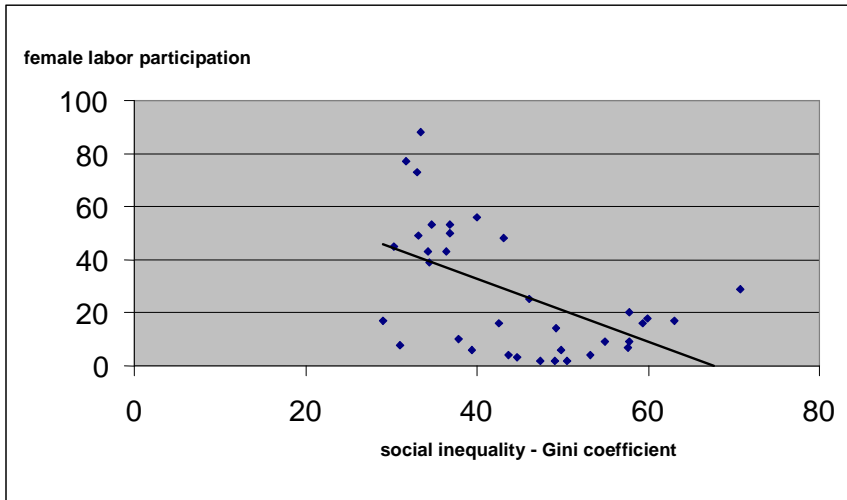
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<sup>1</sup> The statistics were compiled by the author from Food and Agricultural Organization and Institute for Food and Development Policy websites.

tween peasant economies and social inequality is almost unachievable, because of the lack of reliable figures (who are peasants? how is internal inequality measured?) and because we calculate only national averages (combining urban and rural data). One example plots the relationship between female labor participation in agriculture (as a proxy for family-based agriculture) and social inequality in so-called medium- and low-income countries (World Bank, 2006), suggesting that in the non-Western world, social inequality is lower in societies with a stronger family-based agriculture.

**Figure 1**

Relationship between Female Agricultural Labor and Social Inequality



The Gini coefficient is a measure of statistical dispersion most prominently used as a measure of inequality of income distribution or inequality of wealth distribution. It is defined as a ratio with values between 0 and 1. A low Gini coefficient indicates more equal income or wealth distribution, while a high Gini coefficient indicates more unequal distribution.

## 6. OUTLINES FOR NEW RESEARCH ON THE END OF PEASANTRIES

The focus of a research project on the end of peasantries has to be comparative and global. It has to integrate diverging scales from the local to the global, and it has to analyze in exclusive terms defined social formations as an integral part of an inclusive overarching system. In this way we aim to discern different roads of transition, related to different frames of place and time, putting the British/European transition into perspective. This aim is not only ambitious, but also necessary and possible. Necessary, because this comparative and global angle is the only way to evaluate, in a non-Eurocentric way, the impact of this most important transition process since the Neolithic agricultural revolution. It is possible because of new developments in modern world history and global studies, in focus, methodology, sources, and in possibilities for collaboration (Manning, 2003). Such a project is backed by two main hypotheses.

First, the global economic world-system, with its roots in the European Middle Ages, has fuelled itself by a process of incorporation, transformation, and eventually, absorption of its peasant societies. The extraction of goods, labor, and capital from the “non-capitalist” rural society was vital for the expansion of the system. Secondly, this disintegration has promoted, rather than diminished social inequality, by a twofold process: by the creation of a bigger middle class, which receives higher wages in new sectors, and by the increase of income and survival insecurity in the lower social groups that derive a living from unskilled labor (pressure on wages, and dismantling of common goods, such as land, energy, water, social protection, etc.). Timing and phasing of these processes are very unequal over time and place, and this is what the project wants to reconstruct.

Such a research project has to be structured in two steps. First, the process of disintegration of peasant societies must be reconstructed in a global context. Secondly, an analysis of the causes and the consequences of this process must be undertaken, differentiating general causes, related to the global process of transformation and specific causes, related to time and place. A double research strategy underlies this structure: First, the global angle, collection

of data about peasants and peasant societies on a global scale (statistics on demography, labor, agriculture, income, etc.); secondly, a comparative analysis of the transformation and dismantling of peasant societies in different times and places. These have to be described as cases and analyzed in a comparative way. The focus will be on the functioning of the peasant societies (households, local, regional level), the position of these societies within broader societal structures (trade and commerce, fiscality, power and property relations, regulation) and the transformation of these societies, with the effects on social relations, survival, and income positions. A broad comparative research is preferred, with cases from north-west Europe, the Ottoman Empire, China (Yangtze valley), West Africa (West Sudan), South America (Brazil).

This twofold research strategy will collect information on four themes: ruralization/urbanization; demographic processes and patterns; income structures; social protection and inequality. The combination of these themes will shed a light on the main question of the research project; timing, causes, and effects of the end of peasantries on a global scale.

Naturally such a research project shares common concerns, questions, and premises. First, peasants/peasantries/peasant societies need a new conceptualization, one not based on a dualistic, linear, evolutionist modernization view, but as part of a global perspective on the origins, growth, and functioning of the capitalist world-system. I define peasant societies not as autarchic, antimarket communities, but as rural societies based on a number of internal and external equilibria (internal: labor and income division within households, means of production, crop rotation, balance between arable and livestock farming; external: exchange relations of labor, goods, services). This system, as the examples of Flanders and the regions outside the old West show, proved to be extremely resilient, even within a context of a society that was becoming commercialized.

Even more, as Wallerstein suggested, peasantries are absolutely necessary for the survival of historical capitalism. It is the emergence of what he calls semiproletarian households that guarantees "the lowest possible wage-level threshold" (Wallerstein, 2003: 39). "What is surprising is not that there has been so much proletarianization, but there had been so little. Four hundred years at least into the existence of a historical system, the amount of fully proletari-



anized labor in the capitalist world-economy today cannot be said to total even fifty percent” (2003: 23).

Secondly, peasant societies are the best guarantee against large-scale human disasters. During and after famines, for example, peasant societies absorbed the tensions and acted as a buffer. That is why famines within peasant societies were short-term events, confined to restricted geographical areas and, in general, taking the lives of a limited number of people. In this respect, the extremely high death toll of the Irish famine in the 1840’s is an exception, the result of the total breakdown of the local structures of the peasantry (O’Grada et al., 2007).

In the contemporary, globalized world, with a substantial share of the population living on or under the basic level of food security, and with peasant societies disappearing at a high rate, famines threaten to become major disasters that last for extended periods of time, cover broad geographical areas, and involve tens of millions of people. For one of the major trends in the expansion of the capitalist world-system is the undermining and eventually disappearance of small-scale, diversified, community-based agricultural systems, and their replacement by corporate-run, market- and export-oriented monocultures. This has raised total production and the productivity of land and labor, but also has promoted dependence on a small number of crops, on international corporates, and on global market systems. Besides high outputs, corporate large-scale agriculture also generates high costs, which are in large part hidden: social costs (displacement), ecological costs (such as degradation of the soil and of water supplies), and energy costs (intensive exploitation, transport).

Thirdly, in one way or another, the future is in a new *peasantation*. This means an age-old trend must be adapted. Structural and global food security will not result from the expansion of a global free-market ideology, because food security in one part of the world was, is, and will be at the cost of more insecurity in other parts. On the contrary, food security must be based on a diversity of more secure food systems. These systems need to be embedded in local and regional rural communities that are interconnected, but also protected, and in control of their own land and resources. International food policy must be based on the promotion and support of diverse, productive, and sustainable food systems (in

plural). Food security must be regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon, with at least three levels: global (world), regional (community), and individual (household). Elements of an overall, global action program includes, first of all, the principle of subsidiarity. Whenever production can be achieved by local farmers, using local resources for local consumption, rules and benefits should favor that option, thus shortening the distance between production and consumption. New rules should permit the judicious use of selected trade tariffs and import quotas to regulate imports of food and to prevent dumping. A new policy program must also focus on localizing food regulations and standards, localizing rules on intellectual property and patenting, promoting redistributive land reform, and eliminating direct export subsidies and dumping. In short, individual and household access rights need to be guaranteed: access to land, access to commons (water, air, energy, knowledge), access to credit, access to (protected) markets, and access to protection (security systems).

Fourthly, in the expansion of the global capitalist system, the existence of peasantries was and still is pivotal. Global transformation seems not to have followed the “British way,” in which a dissolving peasant society is replaced by a capitalist agriculture, as suggested by (Eurocentric) modernization stories. The “continental” variant, which “skims” the peasants until their basis of survival becomes too weak, is the dominant path that the peasantries of the world have followed and still follow. Or as Shanin wrote: “Capitalist profit-accountancy prevailed over the capitalist form of production” (Shanin, 1986: 3).

## 7. PEASANTRIES AND THE NEW AGRARIAN QUESTION

The world of today faces a new “agrarian question.” This metaphor refers of course to the *Agraffrage* of Karl Kautsky, in which the process of the decline of the peasantry and of power concentration within agriculture is seen as a necessary stage in the collectivization of the rural sector (1966). Nowadays, the agrarian question, manifested in global struggles for land, sovereignty, and security, is not only much larger and more encompassing, but it also needs new answers. “This broader ‘agrarian question’ focuses attention on the relentless assault on small farming by a new balance of forces, in-

cluding financial relations incorporating agriculture into global industrial-retailing circuits, intellectual property, [and] rights protocols” (McMichael, 2006: 407). Philip McMichael concludes: “In other words, the contemporary global agrarian question is pivotal to all other social arrangements” (2006: 415). Samir Amin approves: “The ‘agrarian question,’ far from being solved, is now more than ever at the heart of the major challenges which humanity will face during the twenty-first century” (Amin, 2005: 271; 2003).

Understanding the new agrarian questions needs new historical knowledge of the role of peasantries within capitalist transformations. The existing knowledge is all too often still deformed by a twofold myopia. First, the much praised British road to capitalist agriculture, including rapid depeasantation, seems not to be the standard road to development. On the contrary, the survival and eventual slow decay of peasantries and small-scale agriculture within the expansion of the modern world-economy—I call it the Flemish road—is much more the normal journey of peasants throughout the world. Secondly, the inevitability of the European experience, the dissolution of the peasantries within the industrial and postindustrial economies, is not and cannot be the example for most of the non-Western world. Being at the top of the global pyramid, Europe could easily and cheaply transform, by importing the basic products it needs and exporting its surplus labor to its former colonies.

Laying down the old macropremises of Westernized development, and at the same time going back to the microhistories of our own rural past reveals a different picture, one of family-based agriculture that has always been and still is a highly productive system, which combines diversified production chains, strategies of risk minimalization, stimuli for local and regional income and exchange systems, and a high sense of ecological protection. All this under precondition of regional market systems that guarantee both transparency and protection, of secured access to land, and guaranteed rights to use common goods, such as water and natural resources (see e.g., Altieri & Nicholls, 2005).

The historical experience has to be complemented by contemporary analysis, such as of the success of the East Asian way, which protects land rights, credit systems, and market access. Between

1981 and 2001, poverty in rural China dropped from 75% to 12%. This shows that “the peasant approach,” which engages and does not marginalize peasantries in the process of economic modernization, can produce results that could be more socially just and more ecologically sustainable than the much propagated British and European paths. Philip McMichael calls this “the peasant way,” strategies to reconstitute “peasant spaces” which can challenge the current dominant corporate food regime (McMichael, 2006: 413–15). These spaces combine local forms of social reproduction with local strategies of income and food security and local forms of knowledge. Most important is the peasant knowledge of internalizing costs of production and reproduction, contrary to the dominant and ultimately dead-end tendency within historical capitalism to externalize social and ecological costs. This logic of subsistence has roots in a peasant past and contradicts the lessons of European capitalist modernity.

Recently William H. McNeill made a plea to the field of global history for more attention to what he calls “the peasant and ex-peasant majority of humankind” (McNeill, 2006: 286). This was one of his “afterthoughts” in an edited book on interconnections between the universal and the local: “But it seems to me also worth knowing that across most of the world another universal has been at work, disrupting age-old local self-sufficiency and village autonomy by folding the rural population into an urban-based, urban-managed, high-tech, flow-through society, whose potentialities for the multiplication of wealth are matched only by its potentialities for unprecedented disaster” (2006: 290). He marks the middle of the twentieth century as a turning point: “But until about 1950 the majority of human beings still lived in villages and raised most or all of the food they consumed. That elementary fact created a safety net for times of trouble whenever the flow of goods and services that sustained cities experienced temporary breakdown. . . . The post-World War II transformation of urban-rural relationships affected far larger numbers around the globe, with long-term consequences yet to be seen” (2006: 287). The consequences of this new “great transformation” cannot be properly assessed, but it is clear, according to McNeill, that the biological and cultural continuity of humankind is at stake. Thus it is a prime task facing global history to get a better understanding of this “intensely local yet also

universal (or close to it) transformation of human society” (2006: 289).

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