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Article

Farewells to the Peasantry

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This lecture is about a theoretical issue that has obsessed me, on and off, for many years: how to understand the conditions of existence of those people termed 'peasants', or collectively 'the peasantry', within the world of mature capitalism.² Any pursuit of the theme immediately confronts an issue that plagues the social sciences as much as it does everyday dispute: it all depends on what you mean by 'peasantry'. Indeed it does, and this is not merely a semantic issue because different conceptions of the peasantry, and its fate in modern capitalism (and once socialism), resonate different interpretations of modernity and 'development' and the dramatic dialectic that attaches to them of destruction and creation, in short, the dialectic of progress (Berman 1983). The central analytical issue at stake here is whether 'the peasantry' constitutes a general (and generic) social 'type' (entity, formation, class, and so on). That is, whether there are qualities of 'peasantness' applicable to, and illuminating, different parts of the world in different periods of their histories, not least the poorer countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa today, and their processes of development/underdevelopment.

The view that there are such qualities is termed 'peasant essentialism'. Those qualities include such familiar notions as household farming organised for simple reproduction ('subsistence'), the solidarities, reciprocities and egalitarianism of (village) community, and commitment to the values of a way of life based on household and community, kin and locale (and harmony with nature, a motif revived and privileged by current 'green' discourses). The qualities of an essential 'peasantness' can thus be constructed in economic, sociological or cultural terms, or some combination of them, in order to specify what makes peasants different and special, and to contrast them – explicitly or implicitly – with (rural) proletarians on one hand, market-oriented and entrepreneurial 'farmers' on the other. Such essentialist

constructions acknowledge the relations of peasants with other social groups and entities – landlords, merchants, the state, the urban in general – which they typically view as relations of subordination and exploitation that also define the peasant condition and generate the politics of peasant resistance. The most important and enduring claim (or assumption) of peasant essentialism is that the core elements of peasant ‘society’ – household, kin, community, locale – produce (or express) a distinctive *internal* logic or dynamic. It follows that the relations of peasants with powerful others amount to various forms of appropriation and oppression *external* to that essence of peasant existence, which, in principle, can thus not only survive their demise but subsequently, and consequently, flourish.

It is more difficult to construct a generic ‘peasantry’ in sociological and cultural terms that travel across different types of society and historical periods with much plausibility, than it is to do so in terms of conventional economics with its postulate of a universal matrix of human behaviour. Arguably the most rigorous formal attempt to theorise a *sui generis* peasantry is the model of peasant economy of the great Russian agrarian scholar AV Chayanov (1966). The originality, and indeed peculiarity, of Chayanov’s model consists in its combination of a claim for ‘peasantry’ as a specific and generic type of economy, akin to a mode of production in Marxist terms, and staking that claim on a marginalist analysis of the behaviour of the peasant household as both unitary farming enterprise and site of (biological) reproduction.³

The plot now thickens because ideas of peasant essentialism do not attach to any one ideological position or programme, in my view. First, essentialist conceptions lurk in both Left and Right versions of the disappearance of the peasantry necessary to economic, social and cultural progress (‘development’). Second, they can inspire varieties of populism that celebrate ‘resistance’ to urban-industrial civilisation and its discontents (‘anti-development’); or, third, that advocate a programme of development that frees the productive energies, and social and moral virtues, of the peasantry from its historic condition of subjugation and exploitation. The last has probably never been better expressed than in Chayanov’s definition of neo-populism: ‘a theory for the development of agriculture on the basis of cooperative peasant households, a peasantry organised cooperatively as an independent class and technically superior to all other forms of agricultural organization’ (Bourgholtzer 1999:3, 16).⁴ How Chayanov envisaged a society built on these foundations is set out in his strange novella, written in 1920

and set in 1984, *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia*. There, among other good things, Alexei discovered that he 'was positively crazy about Utopian women'! (Chayanov 1976:83).

The utopia of peasant socialism in a post-Soviet Russia in 1984 was presented by Chayanov as a 'third way' of development, a desirable alternative to both capitalism and Bolshevism, and one he portrayed in strongly modernist terms of the development of technology and social regulation, as well as in aesthetic and even mystical terms. If Chayanov pinned his hopes of progress on the return of the peasantry, I refer next to another scholar whose modernism bids farewell to the peasantry with no apparent regret. In his *Age of Extremes*, E.J. Hobsbawm declared that 'For 80 per cent of humanity, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s... the most dramatic change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry' ('which had formed the majority of the human race throughout recorded history') (Hobsbawm 1994: 288-9, 415).

Hobsbawm locates the disappearance of this truly world-historical anachronism in the 'revolution of global society' or 'global transformation' from the 1950s that extended industrial capitalism beyond its historic heartlands of Western and Central Europe and North America. 'Only three regions of the globe remained essentially dominated by their villages and fields: sub-Saharan Africa, South and continental South-east Asia, and China' – although 'admittedly' these regions of 'peasant dominance' comprised half the world's population in the 1990s (Hobsbawm 1994:291). The 'death of the peasantry' is thus somewhat exaggerated, even according to Hobsbawm's idiosyncratic demographic accounting, and 'even' though these regions 'were crumbling at the edges under the pressures of economic development' (Hobsbawm 1994:291).

Let me reprise briefly different versions of the 'death of the peasantry'. First, there are denials of this event, and of the inevitability of processes that produce it: views of the 'persistence' of the peasantry in the world of mature capitalism. Such 'persistence' may be celebrated in various forms of agrarian populism as the effect of qualities of peasant resilience and 'resistance'. Or it may be regretted, in both Marxist and bourgeois versions of modernisation. Second, the prediction of the 'death of the peasantry' may be maintained, and again whether this outcome is regretted or welcomed, as it is by Eric Hobsbawm albeit with a recognition that the death throes are more protracted than once believed (and that this itself is an historical puzzle). What these

positions share, despite all their other differences, are typically essentialist views of 'the peasantry' as pre-capitalist.⁵

Is a different approach possible, without any assumption of 'the peasantry' as anachronism or exemplifying 'backwardness', and without any trace of peasant essentialism and romanticism? I believe that it is. My argument also entails a farewell to 'the peasantry', but in a different manner to those which deny, confirm or predict its demise from essentialist premises. I start from the other direction, as it were. Rather than seeking to explain the 'persistence' of a pre-capitalist social form as an historical puzzle, as cause for celebration or regret, I ask whether and how those termed 'peasants'/'peasantry' in the contemporary world can be theorised by investigating their conditions of existence, and reproduction, through the categories of the capitalist mode of production: the social relations, dynamics of accumulation, and divisions of labour of capitalism/imperialism. I attempt to answer this by considering the specificities of, first, petty commodity production, and, second, agriculture, in capitalism. A third step concerns how 'peasants' in the South and 'family farmers' in the North are located in the international divisions of labour of imperialism and their mutations.

First, then, the concept of petty commodity production. This specifies a form of small-scale - 'family', 'household' or individual - production in capitalism engaged in more or less specialised commodity production and constituted by a particular combination of the class places of capital and labour (Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985). The agents of this form of production are capitalists and workers at the same time because they own or otherwise command means of production and employ their own labour. This specification of a form generic to the capitalist mode of production is necessarily highly abstract. It does not distinguish agricultural from non-agricultural enterprises nor their locations in the social divisions of labour of the South and the North. 'Peasants' become petty commodity producers in this sense when they are unable to reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production, when those relations and processes become conditions of existence of peasant farming and are internalised in its organisation and activity. That historical moment is satisfied when 'forced commercialization' (Bharadwaj 1985), typical of early colonialism, gives way to the reproduction of commodity production and producers through 'the dull compulsion of economic forces' (in Marx's term). And that, I would argue, was the case for the vast majority of 'peasants' by the end of the colonial era in Asia and Africa.

The theory of petty commodity production suggests that its 'spaces' in the social division of labour are continuously (re)created as well as destroyed in processes of capitalist development, a dynamic likely to be particularly accentuated in agriculture for reasons I return to. Here a distinction is necessary between the destruction of petty commodity production in particular branches of activity (for example, the emblematic fate of hand-loom weavers in both nineteenth-century Britain and colonial India, as a consequence of British industrialisation) and the demise of individual enterprises as the effect of competition between petty commodity producers and the pressures on their reproduction as both capital and labour. This also points to the vexed issue of class differentiation.

For Marx, whose research centred on the original transition to capitalism in Britain, the transformation of agriculture was charted above all through the displacement or dispossession of peasant by capitalist farming, what might be called the enclosure model or effect. Lenin's emphasis on the tendency to class differentiation of peasants (and other petty commodity producers) was a fundamental addition to understanding paths of agrarian change, identifying the possibility of the dissolution of the peasantry through the formation of distinct classes of agrarian capital and wage labour from its ranks. Lenin's argument, of course, is strenuously contested by versions of peasant essentialism inherent in agrarian populism. It is also often misunderstood theoretically, hence misapplied empirically, by its adherents as well as its opponents. The tendency to class differentiation arises from the peculiar combination of the class places of capital and labour in petty commodity production, hence its 'exaggerated form of instability' (Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985). Poor peasants are subject to a simple reproduction 'squeeze' as capital or labour, or both. Their poverty and depressed levels of consumption (reproduction as labour) commonly express intense struggles to maintain their means of production (reproduction as capital), loss of which entails proletarianisation. Middle peasants are those able to meet the demands of simple reproduction; while rich peasants are able to engage in expanded reproduction: to increase the land and/or other means of production at their disposal beyond the capacity of family/household labour, hence hiring wage labour.

I want to emphasise two further aspects of the class differentiation of the peasantry. One is that the class places of capital and labour which combine to constitute petty commodity production in capitalism are not necessarily distributed symmetrically within 'family' or 'household' production. Indeed,

they are unlikely to be so as they typically follow the contours of gendered (and other unequal) divisions of property, labour and income in 'family' and kinship structures. The other aspect is that class differentiation of peasants can proceed via the increasing 'entry' or reproduction costs of petty commodity enterprise, resulting in the dispossession/proletarianisation of weaker producers/poor peasants without any necessary formation of classes of rich peasants or capitalist farmers. This is emphasised because the presence/reproduction of 'family farmers' (in the USA and Europe) or of middle peasants (in the imperialist periphery) is so often, and mistakenly, understood to signal an absence of differentiation rather than *one kind of outcome of class differentiation*, generated by the levels of capitalisation necessary to the simple reproduction of farming enterprises.⁶

The abstract ideas I have presented are necessary to provide a theoretical point of entry and basis for considering 'peasants' in the capitalist mode of production, and in imperialism as its modern global form. They suggest (and help explain) class differentiation of 'peasants' (as of other petty commodity producers) as a tendency within capitalism, not as an inevitable and uniform empirical trend. This tendency contains its own distinctive complexities and contradictions, as I have noted, which are compounded by introducing other, more concrete observations. First, many – no doubt the great majority – of 'peasants' today are not engaged exclusively in farming but combine agricultural petty commodity production (including so-called 'subsistence' farming) with a range of other economic activities. They rotate between different locations in social divisions of labour constituted variously by agricultural and non-agricultural branches of production, by rural and urban existence, and by the exchange of labour power as well as its combination with property in petty commodity production. Of course, these diverse combinations of farming with other activities are also structured by class relations. Poor peasants are most likely to engage in wage labour and in the more marginal (and 'crowded') branches of non-agricultural petty commodity activity, in other words pursue 'survival' in conditions of extreme constraint; middle peasant households also typically diversify sources of income (including from wage labour) to reproduce their means of production (reproduce themselves as capital); rich peasants frequently pursue diversified accumulation strategies, with investment 'portfolios' in crop trading and processing, money lending, rural transport, tractor renting, and village shops and bars (this can help explain why agrarian accumulation by rich peasants often does not proceed beyond certain limits).

A second and related observation is that rural labour markets are pervasive in most areas of peasant production and much middle peasant farming (as well as rich peasant farming) depends on hired labour. The rural labour question is complicated by the fact that some middle peasant households sell as well as buy labour power (and even poor peasant households occasionally hire labour), and that the boundaries between the poor peasantry and the rural proletariat are typically blurred. Nonetheless, the prevalence and importance of labour hiring to agricultural petty commodity production (and its implications) is often overlooked as is the intensity of class struggle it generates in some areas of peasant capitalism. Third, if the poor peasantry is typically an important component of the reserve army of labour in the countryside of the imperialist periphery, all classes of the peasantry are likely to have links, albeit of different kinds, with urban centres and markets.

The framework sketched points to the great diversity of 'peasants' in the history and current period of capitalism/imperialism. It should be clear that 'the peasantry' is hardly a uniform, or analytically helpful, social category in contemporary capitalism, whether by anachronistic reference (the survival of 'the world of the past') or in seeking to understand changes in agriculture and rural social existence generated by imperialism/globalisation. The same stricture necessarily applies to views of 'the peasantry' as a (single) 'class' ('exploited' or otherwise) common in agrarian populism.

I move now to the second theme, that of specific structural sources of diversity (and instability) in the characteristics of agriculture as well as of petty commodity production in capitalism, hence in the ways that they intersect in 'peasant' production (as well as other 'family' farming).

A common assumption, inherited from classical political economy (and its roots in England's distinctive, indeed unique, path of transition to capitalism) is that the capitalist agricultural enterprise – the farm – is homologous with the mode of production, that it necessarily consists of capital and 'free' wage labour. By analogy with manufacturing industry, capitalist farming should increase its scale (concentration of capital), technical divisions of labour (formation of the collective worker) and productivity of labour (development of the productive forces), in line with the laws of motion of capitalism. Already in the late nineteenth century, this expectation was contested by reference to the strong 'persistence' of small-scale ('family') farming into the era of industrial capitalism: in Europe in the form of peasantries of feudal provenance (by contrast with the fate of pre-industrial artisans), and in the USA in the form of mechanised grain production in the

prairies by family (rather than wage) labour farms.

The particular unevenness of the capitalist transformation of farming has thus long been remarked, and attempts to explain it in general terms typically start from the conditions of transforming nature peculiar to agriculture, and their implications for capital. While manufacturing industry transforms materials already appropriated from nature, agriculture only transforms nature through the very activities of appropriating it, and thus confronts the uncertainties of natural environments and processes and their effects for the growth of plant and animal organisms.

Accordingly, it has been suggested that capital is inhibited from direct investment in farming for several reasons. One is that this tends to be riskier than investment in other branches of activity; the normal risks of market competition are compounded by the risks inherent in the environmental conditions of farming. A second reason, derived from Marxian value theory, is the non-identity of labour time and production time: production time exceeds labour time because of the growth cycles of plants and animals during which capital is 'tied up' and unable to realise profit (Mann and Dickinson 1978). Another argument from value theory emphasises the burden of ground rent which capital tends to leave to 'family' farmers to absorb, similar to their absorption of risk and the delayed realisation of surplus value (Djurfeldt 1981). Yet other arguments centre on labour markets and labour processes: capitalist agriculture is unable to compete for labour as economic development raises wage rates, giving family labour farms a 'labour-price advantage' (Koning 1994:172); the labour process argument is that it is much more difficult, hence costly, to supervise and control the pace and quality of wage labour in the field than in the factory (Nolan 1988).

These are, of course, very general reasons advanced to explain a tendency, the accentuated unevenness of capitalist transformation of forms of production in farming. At the same time, they point to two features of agriculture in capitalism that are key to the formation and mutations of its international divisions of labour, especially in the era of globalisation. The first is the drive of technical innovation to simplify and standardise the conditions of agricultural production: to reduce the variability, obstacles and uncertainties presented by natural environments to approximate the ideal of control in industrial production. This means to produce yields that are as predictable as well as large (and fast maturing) as possible – by acting on soils, climate, the attributes of plant and animal organisms, parasites and diseases, weed growth, and so on.

The second, and related, feature is the increasing integration of farming by capital concentrated upstream and downstream of production on the land. 'Upstream' refers to capital in input production, above all chemical corporations which dominate seed development and production as well as that of fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals; 'downstream' refers to the giant corporations in food processing/manufacturing and distribution. The provenance of such corporations is in the industrialised capitalist countries, and they tend to be the more concentrated, the more developed the agricultural sector (and economy in which it is located). These corporations are now engaged in a new wave of globalisation, in ways that affect the fortunes and prospects of many different kinds of farmers, including 'peasants' in the imperialist periphery. Of course, a strategic implication of the features of agriculture in capitalism outlined is that the diversity of types of farming is much greater than that of the (globalising) branches which integrate the backward and forward linkages of farming. Farming enterprises in contemporary capitalism, within as well as across North and South, exhibit great diversity in their size, scale, social organisation and labour processes (forms, and combinations, of family labour, free and unfree wage labour), their degree and types of capitalisation and mechanisation, and their forms of insertion/integration in markets and commodity chains.

The third element of my argument entails a periodisation of imperialism and agriculture from the 1870s, to sketch the differential locations of 'peasants' (in the South) and 'family' farmers (in the North) in international divisions of labour.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century were as momentous in the formation of global capitalism as the current period since the 1970s, marked as they were by the 'Second Industrial Revolution', the new wave of internationalisation of capital and final major phase of European colonial expansion emphasised in Lenin's analysis of imperialism, and the formation of the first 'international food regime' identified by Harriet Friedmann's remarkable project on the international political economy of food (Friedmann 1978, 1982a, 1982b, 1993; Friedmann and McMichael 1989).⁷ The basis of that regime was the massive growth of grain (and livestock/meat) production on the vast internal frontiers of 'settler' states – Argentina, Australia, Canada, and above all the USA. In a (relatively) open international trade order, the exports of these countries, especially of wheat, competed directly with the temperate agriculture of the European heartlands of industrial capitalism, by contrast with the complementary tropical agricultural exports of Asia and

Africa whose colonial incorporation was completed in the same period.

For the agrarian economies of the imperialist periphery, this period was marked by three broad types of change. One was the emergence of the 'industrial plantation' which replaced earlier types of plantation in Asia, the Caribbean, and parts of Latin America, generated new plantation 'frontiers' (in Indochina, Malaya, Sumatra) and greatly enlarged the scale and volume of highly specialised world market production of rubber, oil palm, sisal, sugar, cocoa, tea and bananas. Latin America, which was mostly independent of colonial rule before the international hegemony of industrial capitalism, also experienced a second type of change; central to its massive agricultural export boom in the same period was a new phase of commoditisation of the originally colonial *hacienda*, involving further land grabbing from peasant communities and the expansion of a servile labour force.

The third kind of change, pervasive in much of Africa and most of Asia where colonialism did not dispossess the varied peasantries it encountered, was the increased incorporation (in scale and intensity) of peasant farmers in capitalist economy as producers of export crops (cotton, oil palm, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, groundnuts), of (sometimes new) food staples for domestic markets and of labour power via migrant labour systems (including indentured and *corvée* labour) to build the railways and roads, and to work in the plantations, mines and ports. Of course, these processes manifested a great variety of forms of land tenure and differential access to land, labour and markets, reflecting both diverse pre-colonial agrarian structures and the complex ways in which colonial rule and commoditisation incorporated and changed them.

Following the (first) 'golden age' of globalisation (1870s-1914), the interwar period plunged the first international food regime into crisis. During the uneven recovery of the world economy in the 1920s, the agriculture of the developed capitalist economies again started to experience the effects of overproduction (still one of their definitive features). With the advent of the Depression of the 1930s the major capitalist countries embarked on a course of agricultural protectionism.⁸ In the Asian and African colonies, the instruments of agricultural protection introduced in Europe (like marketing boards) were adapted to extract the maximum transfers from peasant export agriculture to imperial exchequers.

In the revival and unprecedented growth of the world economy from the 1950s to early 1970s, a new and quite different 'international food regime' was established, under American hegemony and turning on the 'Atlantic

pivot' of the USA and Europe. This both maintained the farm support policies of the pre-war years and added the export of American maize and soya (the definitive field crops of the postwar 'second agricultural revolution') for animal feeds. The production of meat and of high value-added manufactured foods ('food durables') for mass consumption became the leading international agribusiness sectors in the developed capitalist world as the postwar economic boom accelerated. In return for its openness to US exports of raw materials for feedstuffs (and US corporate investment in their manufacture in Europe), the EU was able to maintain high levels of protection for other branches, notably wheat and dairy products. In effect, this generated systems of national agricultural regulation by which European countries sought to replicate US agricultural growth through a combination of import tariffs and export subsidies, without similar limits on the movement of agribusiness capital – an unstable combination of the freedom of capital with restriction on trade, as Friedmann (1993) puts it.

The USA also deployed its surpluses of subsidised grain (and soy oil) for strategic foreign policy purposes through foreign aid and export promotion (dumping), which stimulated dependence on (cheap) American wheat in areas of the imperialist periphery hitherto largely self-sufficient in staple food production. In turn this facilitated the further specialisation of the latter in the production of industrial and (mostly non-staple) food crops for world markets, as did the ambitious development plans of the newly independent former colonies of Asia and Africa, for most of which the earnings of primary commodity exports (agricultural and mineral) were the principal source of foreign exchange for import-substituting industrialisation. This created the conditions of a potential scissors effect for many poor, primarily agricultural, countries, one blade being increasing food import dependence, the other the fluctuating but generally declining terms of trade for their historic export crops.

Agricultural production in the imperialist periphery thus became increasingly internationalised in this period: through the quasi-public investment of aid agencies, notably the World Bank, to create more systematically commoditised and productive export-cropping peasantries in Asia and Africa in the name of 'national development'; through American (and later European) strategic food aid and/or commercial dumping; and, reflecting post-war Malthusian fears of mass famine and starvation (hence pursued alongside population control), through (international) research and development of new high-yielding hybrid grain varieties (in order of

importance, of rice, wheat and maize) to boost food production in poor countries: the 'Green Revolution'.

The conjuncture of the 1970s appears, in retrospect, to have been as definitive a moment of subsequent structural shifts in the world economy as that of the 1870s a century before (similarly manifested in a dialectic of global recession, adjustment, and massive expansion of international flows of money and commodities). This applies to the collapse of the prevailing international food regime no less than to the end of international monetary stability, the declining competitiveness of US industry, or the subsequent global(ising) ascendancy of neo-liberalism. The proximate cause or trigger of that collapse was a brief episode of 'a sudden, unprecedented shortage and sky-rocketing prices' in world grain markets, linked to enormous (and preferential) US grain sales to the USSR in the early 1970s (Friedmann 1993: 40). This stimulated greatly increased borrowing by American farmers to expand production, paving the way for the US farm crisis of the 1980s when the structural nature of overproduction reasserted itself.

US grain exports now faced increasing competition – in wheat from the EU (above all France), and in soya, and especially processed soy products, from what Friedmann (1993) terms New Agricultural Countries (NACs). In short, the basis of the relatively stable post-war international food regime was undermined as the EU and the NACs successfully replicated the American model. The increasing weakness and then demise of the Soviet Union and its bloc further undermined a key strategic rationale of the Atlantic pivot. As is well known, the Uruguay Round from 1986 established agricultural trade and its liberalisation as central to the agenda of GATT (now the WTO) under pressure from the USA, which had hitherto blocked its subjection to GATT processes and rules.

The most fundamental structural shift Friedmann points to – and one familiar from wider debates about contemporary globalisation – is that from the ruins of international (Atlantic-centred) regulation emerged transnational agro-food corporations as 'the major agents attempting to...organize stable conditions of production and consumption which allow them to plan investment, sourcing of agricultural materials, and marketing', that is, as integrating various sites of production and consumption through global private (corporate) regulation (*ibid*: 52). This occurred in a conjuncture in which the debt of the imperialist periphery, escalating since the 1970s, became the key lever of structural adjustment lending and trade liberalisation with a renewed emphasis – for the poorest countries – on their comparative

advantage in agricultural exports.⁹

In addition to this agricultural 'export platform' dynamic, globalisation also impacts on countries of the imperialist periphery with sufficient demand to attract agribusiness production for domestic markets, whether as an element of wage goods (eg certain parts of Latin America and North Africa) and/or luxury consumption. India provides a perhaps surprising, hence instructive, example of the latter. Despite its levels of poverty, both rural and urban, but given the size of its population and inequality of income distribution, since liberalisation of its economy in the early 1990s India has become an arena of intense competition between transnational agro-food corporations. They seek to locate new food processing and manufacturing plants in rural areas lacking histories of worker organisation, where they can also be sourced by converting adjacent farm land to production of the raw materials they require, often through contract farming arrangements (Banaji 1996).

The enhanced connections of sites/forms of production and consumption in a globalisation of agriculture driven by transnational corporations might seem a compelling manifestation of 'the pressures of economic development' observed (if not specified) by Hobsbawm (1994: 291). The effects are likely to be uneven and contradictory for the kinds of reasons I suggested earlier. Some forms of globalisation undoubtedly generate expansions of capitalist agriculture that displace peasant farming (the enclosure effect), for example, large-scale mechanised cultivation of feed grains in Mexico together with increased grain imports for human consumption, and otherwise reduce or marginalise the contributions of their own farming to the incomes/reproduction of especially poor, but also many middle, 'peasants' and/or accelerate tendencies to class differentiation. Not surprisingly, the costs of entry into such new activities as contract farming of high value 'non-traditional' crops (fresh fruits, vegetables, cut flowers, decorative house plants) for global markets, are beyond the reach of most peasant farmers (while expanded production of these commodities generally stimulates the demand for rural wage labour).

In short, while it is impossible to generalise about the impact of (uneven and diverse forms of) globalisation on (differentiated) peasantries, it is likely that in this current phase of imperialism, most poor peasants confront an increasing simple reproduction 'squeeze', as indeed do the great majority of the poor in both South and North. Together with the landless rural proletariat, poor peasants form part of an expanding reserve army of labour in the

countryside and in the cities and towns of large areas of the imperialist periphery, given the prevalence of rural-urban links which include regular migration in search of wage employment as 'footloose labour' in Jan Breman's term (Breman 1996). This does not, however, indicate any uniform or linear route to an inevitable destination: the general or definitive demise of agricultural petty commodity production. The impulses to economic change generated by globalisation, and how they are mediated by the diverse class structures and dynamics of the imperialist periphery, can consolidate certain spaces for agricultural petty commodity production, and create new spaces as well as destroy existing ones. Indeed, pressures on industrial and urban employment, and the immiseration that results, may generate tendencies to 're-peasantisation' in some instances. Latin America again provides some notable examples, like the former tin miners, historically the vanguard of the Bolivian working class, now turned coca growers (Petras 1997:26-9), and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil (*Movimiento Rural San Terra*) which James Petras (1998:124) considers 'the most dynamic rural social movement in Latin America' today.¹⁰

To conclude: the argument I have presented and illustrated for bidding farewell to 'the peasantry' concentrates on the theorisation of an economic form – agricultural petty commodity production – constituted by the class relations (and contradictions) of capital and labour, and located in the shifting places of agriculture in the international divisions of labour of imperialism. I do not claim that the ideas I have presented are sufficient to explain the great diversity of forms of agricultural production and their dynamics, and the various fortunes and fates of different types of farmers in the world today, but I do believe that they have a lot to contribute to the investigation of contemporary agrarian change, including theorising its diversity (a challenge TJ Byres addressed in his inaugural lecture some years ago; Byres 1995). The same applies to the potential value of this primarily economic analysis for considering sociological, political and cultural issues, as Byres and I try to illustrate in our introductory essay in the new *Journal of Agrarian Change* we have established (Bernstein and Byres 2001). This journal will provide a forum for a wide range of contributions and debates on the terrain of the agrarian political economy that lecture has sketched.

Notes

1. This is the slightly modified text of an inaugural lecture delivered in the Lecture Theatre of the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS),

University of London, on 20 October 2000. Notes and references have been added.

2. A first foray in this area was in a review article in the first volume of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Bernstein and Pitt 1974), influenced by theories of the articulation of modes of production with which I grappled for several years. My scepticism about this approach (with no loss of respect for its foremost thinkers like Claude Meillassoux and Pierre-Philippe Rey) sharpened during a growing engagement with issues of agrarian political economy over four years at the University of Dar es Salaam (1974-1978), which afforded the opportunity for fieldwork as well as a rich and dynamic intellectual milieu. Work based in this experience (Bernstein 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1981, 1982) was influenced by the idea of peasants in capitalism as 'wage labour equivalents', proposed in a powerful theoretical essay by Jairus Banaji (1977). A subsequent, and continuing, phase of thinking about 'peasantry' has been informed above all by the seminal contribution of Peter Gibbon and Michael Neocosmos (1985). This contained a detailed (and persuasive) critique of my earlier work and formulated an alternative approach to petty commodity production that I have since incorporated, adapted and sought to apply in analyses of the agrarian question in transitions to capitalism (Bernstein 1994, 1996b), of South Africa (1996a, 1998), of the historical trajectories of land reform (Bernstein 2002), and of environmental change in sub-Saharan Africa (Bernstein and Woodhouse 2001). The lecture drew substantially on two papers (Bernstein 2000; Bernstein and Byres 2001) not yet published when the lecture was given.
3. These two complementary aspects of Chayanov's theory are represented respectively in his works *On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems* and *Peasant Farm Organization*, in Chayanov (1966).
4. From notes written by Chayanov for the OGPU (Soviet secret police apparatus) during his first arrest during the early 1930s, as translated in Bourgholtzer's splendid edition (1999) of Chayanov's letters from his time in Germany and Britain in 1922-3.
5. As any 'persistence' view must be.
6. As Mamdani (1987) illustrates, in extreme conditions the poorest peasants may not even be able to replace their hoes as they become worn.
7. And from which much of the following is drawn. The highly original thesis of Benoît Daviron (2002) suggests that relative shifts from plantation to peasant production of tropical export crops that began in this period (in parts of Latin America, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) were facilitated by the evolution of nationally established (and internationally recognised) standards for products like cocoa, cotton and rubber and the linked emergence of futures markets in their trade. At the same time, this was also the conjuncture of the impact of devastating famines on entire regional peasantries in India and China

when the mechanisms of colonial and quasi-colonial imperialism combined with extreme (*El Niño*) climatic conditions (Davis 2001).

8. As did South Africa, whose Marketing Act of 1937 was influenced by British and other European legislation of the time; there is an illuminating first-hand account in the memoir by De Swardt (1983).
9. Aspects of 'globalisation' since the 1970s have also affected the marketing of tropical agricultural exports in ways that tend to reduce the earnings they generate for both their producers and the national economies from which they emanate, in a general (if not uniform) shift from 'producer-driven' to 'buyer-driven' global commodity chains. Those aspects include, on one hand, changes in transport logistics, processing technologies and industrial organisation in global markets, and, on the other hand, the effects of liberalisation/privatisation in the domestic marketing of export crops. The former are illuminated by Ponte (2001) for coffee, and Fold (2002) and Losch (2002) for cocoa/chocolate; the latter by Fold (2002) for cocoa in Ghana, Larsen (2002) for cotton in Zimbabwe, Losch (2002) for cocoa in Côte d'Ivoire, and Ponte (2002) for coffee in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda; see also Raikes and Gibbon (2000), Daviron (2002), and Daviron and Gibbon (2002).
10. Southern African examples include the 'return'/move to the countryside of those retrenched from waged employment in mining and industry in Botswana (O'Laughlin 1998), Zambia (Ferguson 1999), and Zimbabwe (Nyambara 2001).

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