

# **Tiny Engines of Abundance**

**A History of Peasant  
Productivity and Repression**

**JIM HANDY**

**CRITICAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**



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## Critical Development Studies Series

Three decades of uneven capitalist development and neoliberal globalization have devastated the economies, societies, livelihoods and lives of people around the world, especially those in societies of the Global South. Now more than ever, there is a need for a more critical, proactive approach to the study of global and development studies. The challenge of advancing and disseminating such an approach — to provide global and development studies with a critical edge — is on the agenda of scholars and activists from across Canada and the world and those who share the concern and interest in effecting progressive change for a better world.

This series provides a forum for the publication of small books in the interdisciplinary field of critical development studies — to generate knowledge and ideas about transformative change and alternative development. The editors of the series welcome the submission of original manuscripts that focus on issues of concern to the growing worldwide community of activist scholars in this field. Critical development studies (CDS) encompasses a broad array of issues ranging from the sustainability of the environment and livelihoods, the political economy and sociology of social inequality, alternative models of local and community-based development, the land and resource-grabbing dynamics of extractive capital, the subnational and global dynamics of political and economic power, and the forces of social change and resistance, as well as the contours of contemporary struggles against the destructive operations and ravages of capitalism and imperialism in the twenty-first century.

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EXCERPT

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EXCERPT



## 1

## “Swept Away through Injustice”

I live in the prairies, the heartland of Canadian industrial agriculture, and I teach at the University of Saskatchewan. The University’s College of Agriculture, one of Canada’s largest, is dedicated to “improving” large-scale industrial agriculture. We are regularly warned by our College colleagues that these improvements are necessary to feed our hungry planet. Support for large-scale industrial agriculture is thus framed as a moral requirement; to do otherwise would supposedly condemn millions around the world to food scarcity, hunger and starvation. I am a bit surprised the College doesn’t have a large portrait of Thomas Robert Malthus hanging in its atrium. This kind of perceived moral obligation is an important part of what the University of Saskatchewan self-righteously declares is its mission: to be “the university the world needs.”

I was recently reminded of exactly what such support for industrial, large-scale agriculture means. On July 5, 2021, in the immediate aftermath of the most extreme heat wave ever to hit parts of western Canada (and western United States), I was sent a rather disturbing video that advertised land for rent from Saskatchewan’s largest landowner. Robert Andjelic has built an empire of more than 218,000 acres of land in the province. The video was pitching a parcel of 22,000 acres for rent. A talking head explained that improvements to this piece of land were so recent they did not show up on Google satellite imagery. The video provided its own images. Where there had been landscape broken by the occasional stand of trees, some windbreaks and hedges, some sloughs and wetlands, and a few small hills, the company spokesperson explained, the land had been changed. The trees were gone, the windbreaks removed, and as the spokesperson enthusiastically proclaimed, the sloughs had been drained so that the land could now be farmed “from corner to corner.” It was one big industrial agricultural landscape.

I had multiple concerns on viewing this video. There is little doubt that

Andjelic's company felt that the boasted millions of dollars spent on improvements would appeal to those seeking to rent land in the industrialized agricultural spirit of the age, notwithstanding the disappearance of wetlands and the grave reality of climate change, not in the distant future but now.

Along with a certain horror at the environmental monstrosity this represented, the video also prompted a vague feeling of *déjà vu*. It called to mind other accounts from earlier periods of agricultural improvement. Those promoting agricultural improvement often touted the benefits of clearing the land, the value of bigness and the supposed miracles created by the expenditure of capital on the land. Others, however, detailed the damage done through such actions and offered alternatives in the form of small-scale, peasant<sup>1</sup> agriculture.

In England in 1798, Sir Thomas Bernard, a wealthy member of the English gentry, sent a note to the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement. Bernard was the owner of a large estate and a member of the Board, a semi-public organization meant to represent the interests of large estate owners and promote agricultural "improvement." Bernard, however, was one of a small group of owners of large estates who expressed concern about the direction of agricultural change. He was especially worried about increasing poverty among rural workers who were deprived of the small bits of land they could farm independently. He described a very small farm near Tadcaster he had often admired when passing on the road. One day he stopped to inquire. According to Bernard's note, the farm was rented by an old man named Britton Abbot. It consisted of a cottage and a *rood* of land (a quarter of an acre or a tenth of a hectare), "inclosed by a ... hedge; and containing the cottage, fifteen apple trees, one green gage, and three winesour plum trees, two apricot-trees, several gooseberry and currant bushes, abundance of common vegetables, and three hives of bees." According to Bernard, Abbot and his wife of forty-five years got forty bushels of potatoes from the quarter acre, raised seven children and "lived very happy together" on the land.<sup>2</sup>

A little over fifty years later, John Davy, Inspector General of British Army Hospitals in the Caribbean, described typical house gardens there:

The culture of these small properties is remarkable ... The crops grown are extremely various, and the produce commonly large ... On one little property ... there may be seen growing side by side, or intermixed, almost all the different vegetables which are in request in the island,—the sugar-cane, yam, sweet potatoe, eddoe, cassava, ground nut, ... the cotton plant, ginger, arrow root and the aloe.

He mentioned that they all raised chickens and goats, and some even had a cow.<sup>3</sup>

More than a century later, geographer Gene Wilken provided this account of intense peasant farming in Central America. In what he described as “door-yard gardens,” he said, “plots of no more than 0.1 ha may contain two dozen or more ... plants,” each carefully calibrated to take up distinct spaces, from tall trees (mango, papaya) to medium-height trees (banana, peach, citrus) to crops of maize, beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, squash and an understory of herbs, all intertwined with useful vines. No wonder such small-scale peasant agriculture, using intensive labour, brought forth seemingly miraculous returns. Wilken summarized this by suggesting, “any lingering images of the lazy, dull, noneconomic peasant farmer must surely have vanished.”<sup>4</sup>

I could go on with this list (and will in the chapters that follow). Taken together, these accounts provide over 200 years of descriptions of the marvellous productivity of small-scale, peasant agriculture. Sometimes sympathetic, often astonished, observers noted what should have been obvious to anyone seriously considering the nature of agricultural production: the return from any piece of land is directly proportionate to the amount of labour and care that goes into it. Almost all these observers described an agriculture that was startling in its diversity, yet remarkably similar in many respects. Around the world, throughout history, those with control over tiny plots of land converted them into gardens. Crops not only used up all available space on the ground but grew to different heights, with roots that tapped the soil at varying depths. Different plants replenished the soil, fixing nitrogen or providing an abundance of organic litter. Others provided shade, protected more fragile crops from wind or had roots that were especially important in binding the soil and preventing erosion. Some plants did better in particularly damp soils, others flourished in dry, sandy or rich soils. Some produced early, providing nutrition before the full harvest came, others bore fruit late, extending the harvest and allowing labour demands to be spread out. Getting the right mix required years of experience, hard work and constant care. As one Guatemalan reformer proclaimed, the land had to be worked with a combination of the “hoe and love.”<sup>5</sup> The right mix also required careful experimentation. These accounts describe a remarkable array of “new” crops, borrowed from far-flung parts of the world. It was peasant producers who insured that a broad range of new world crops, from potatoes to tomatoes to corn, became staples of small-scale production — from Europe to China and in between.

The lives depicted here might be surprising to some. We have been programmed, through 200 years of writing about improvement, progress,

agricultural modernization and development — 200 years of proclaiming the moral imperative of improved industrial agriculture to feed the world — to conflate “peasant” with poverty. We have been programmed to regard a peasant existence as synonymous with “almost idiotic wretchedness,” as one description of Irish cottiers suggested in the 1830s.<sup>6</sup> It could be wretched in times of particular stress, such as crop failure, or more often, repression and dispossession. Peasant livelihoods should not be romanticized. There is a reason commentators often saw these lives as miserable, poverty-stricken and without hope. As one Japanese doctor suggested in the 1920s, “There is no one as miserable as a peasant.”<sup>7</sup> As anyone who has sought to feed a family from a sizeable garden can imagine, peasant lives were often full of deprivation and despair. Relationships in peasant communities could be acrimonious; conflict over land abounded, between neighbours, between sexes and across generations. Young people often took the least opportunity to flee the confines of their peasant communities and embrace both the freedoms and the potential in bigger centres or in distant lands. More often, though, descriptions of peasant livelihoods speak of determined self-reliance, carefully limited needs, simple comforts and hard-won independence. Peasant livelihoods often were (and are) pieced together with equal mixes of hard work, ingenuity and anxiety. In many regions, such self-reliance is, perhaps ironically, also dependent on the support of the community, the embrace of shared space and culture as much as a convenience of interests that counsel co-operation. What often emerges in these descriptions of peasant livelihoods is not wretchedness but abundance.

The three descriptions provided above were meant as advertisements, as surely as Andjelic’s soaring description of his newly created environmental catastrophe was meant as an enticement to tenants. They were designed to defend peasants from attacks and policies that threatened them. They were also meant as counterweights to an onslaught of arguments that sought to justify taking these tiny plots of land away from those who had worked them so carefully. Bernard explained how Abbot had similarly lost a piece of land he had carefully cultivated when it had been included in an enclosure some years earlier. With the seizure of his land, “when he had six young children ... and his wife preparing to lie in of a seventh, his whole little system of economy and arrangement was at once destroyed; his house, his garden, his little field taken from him.”<sup>8</sup> Bernard hoped that his account of Abbot’s steady productivity might help turn aside measures that were increasing rural poverty in the name of agricultural improvement everywhere he looked. Davy’s account was meant to help blunt actions designed to force recently liberated ex-slaves from their holdings and back to labour on sugar. Wilken’s

was partly an appeal to better consider peasant agriculture in the midst of policy and legislation favouring the expansion of agro-export plantations.

The fact that for 200 years these carefully weighed but glowing descriptions of peasant agriculture were considered necessary tells us much about the persistence of arguments to the contrary. Indeed, attacks on peasants, both physical, in the form of repression and dispossession, and intellectual, in the form of arguments about peasants being inimical to modernity and progress, may be one of history’s most enduring attributes. As the Old Testament told readers more than 2000 years ago, “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.”<sup>9</sup> Scarcely a year has gone by since, it seems, that peasants have not been similarly repressed or attacked, most obviously because others more powerful or ruthless wanted their land and/or their labour. Very often this was linked to making peasants more dependent on wage labour, to allow their labour to be captured more easily by capital. As Marx described it, they became “sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production.”<sup>10</sup>

The justifications for such policies have grown more sophisticated over time: peasants were incompatible with progress, their “clumsy” labours, as the *Economist* described them,<sup>11</sup> could never be as productive as they would be under the direction of capital. They were threatening in a whole host of ways: prone to rebel and to have too many children, resistant to the embrace of the state or the nation, immune to the siren song of development. Despite careful stewardship of tiny plots of land that nurtured generations, peasants have been portrayed as serious threats to the environment, too slow to adapt and too quick to take offence.

Most consistently, it seems, peasants have been portrayed as incompatible with economic development. If, as Malthus tried to argue, “It is unquestionably true that wealth produces wants; but it is a still more important truth, that wants produce wealth,”<sup>12</sup> then peasants — with carefully limited needs, calibrated to returns from the land and adhered to as a means of insuring self-reliance and independence — have been for most of these 200 years anathema to both capitalists and development specialists. When, belatedly, some development programs and states embraced smallholder production, most often they ignored the careful rhythms of labour and the intricate use of land in often fragile locations. Instead, they sought to impose new crops, new agricultural techniques and new inputs that were often toxic and expensive. These new impositions threatened peasant livelihoods as surely as repression and dispossession.

This book provides a history of these tiny engines of abundance. It focuses on five regions at different times: England in the late 1700s and

early 1800s, in the midst of what has often been called an agriculture revolution; Jamaica in the decades following slave emancipation in the 1830s; Guatemala in the middle of the 20th century as various governments sought to “modernize” Mayan *milpa* agriculture and eventually unleashed a genocide directed at both Mayan peasants and *milpa* agriculture; Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s, when governments, advised by development specialists, sought to “capture” peasant production and boost export agriculture; and the Indian state of Kerala beginning in 1969, when important reforms helped nurture a much-admired “model” of development, one that has been threatened partly because an embrace of green revolution technology altered peasant hut-dweller production.

This is history and thus both describes these scenes of peasant productivity at particular moments in time and analyzes the sources, many of which need to be read against the grain, which provide us with these images. But this is also a history in its truest sense, replete, I hope, with lessons to help us understand and contend with contemporary problems.

These stories provide us with portraits of carefully limited needs, of sustainable livelihoods and of resilient independence attacked relentlessly and mercilessly in the name of capital, progress, development, modernity and/or the state. For 200 years, we were told that the key to economic growth was capital’s ability to command labour; as the *Economist* newspaper said in 1844, “A pursuit ... for which the capitalist cannot pay wages should be instantly abandoned.”<sup>13</sup> Peasants resisted that command.

Peasants were never against producing for the market, never opposed to experimentation and often quite prepared to work away from their gardens if the labour demands of their smallholdings permitted it. Most often, however, peasants balanced increased production with risk and tempered returns from the market with subsistence needs. As the French historian Fernand Braudel once noted about an earlier time, for capitalism to have unchallenged dominance, peasants needed to be “suppressed, at least contained and outmaneuvered,” but such capitalist dreams were often stymied because peasants ensured “that one could not simply walk into the countryside and do as one pleased.”<sup>14</sup> Peasants have never been opposed to the market, perceived as a place to exchange produce for income. Rather, they opposed capitalism if it meant capitalists could do what they wished in the peasants’ countryside. For more than 200 years, those proposing “improvement” or “progress” or “development,” have argued that to better peasant lives, “progress” meant denying them that for which they most yearned: some land of their own to farm and a cottage in which to live and raise their family. Most often peasants have disturbed the dreams of

others: capitalists’ yearnings for quiescent labourers at their beck and call, state planners’ visions of orderly and ordered rural societies, development planners’ schemes for economic growth that ignored peasants’ visions of a good life. Perhaps it is time “development” paid attention to what peasants say they want.<sup>15</sup>

What about the constant apocalyptic pronouncements warning us that a deeper level of industrialized agriculture is necessary to feed the world, to save it from the “domestic imprudence” of peasants? Despite 200 years of attack, peasants and smallholders still produce most of the world’s food. Despite 200 years of attack, they most often do this in sustainable ways that shepherd the land. Despite 200 years of attack, they still use the scarce resources (land, water and fertile soil) more efficiently than any other form of farming. And they do so by applying more of the most abundant of all factors of production: labour. Despite 200 years of attack, they might be our best source for healthy foods, societies and environments. Despite 200 years of attack, many still cling resolutely to an alternative vision of the good life. It is the modest proposition of this book that if we are to embrace real development for the future, we need to capture some of that vision. This would, this history suggests, foster stronger communities, deeper democracies and less wear and tear on a polluted, overheated and careworn world.

It is a bit rash for an author to suggest the emotions their writing might evoke in readers. I can with more certitude describe the emotions that reading these accounts and writing this book provoked in me. I first experienced a sense of awe at the wondrous productivity of these tiny engines of abundance — productivity described by commentator after commentator over the years, some initially intent on depicting peasant life as idiocy. I was awed at the industriousness and hard work that went into winning a peasant livelihood — again, industriousness described by commentator after commentator, some initially intent on demonstrating that peasants were indolent and lazy. And I was awed at the skill that turns making a living from tiny pieces of land into the art of peasant livelihood — again, often described by commentators initially intent on depicting peasants’ wretchedness.

The other emotion that telling these stories evokes is anger at the lost opportunities and the unnecessary suffering that resulted from 200 years of attacks on peasant livelihoods. For 200 years we were told that peasants were inefficient and unproductive. For 200 years we were told peasants would have too many children and, thus, breed themselves out of existence or into misery if not curtailed. For 200 years we were told that peasants need to be dispossessed and displaced to allow for other “more efficient” uses of their labour, “supervised by capitalists,” to enable economic growth and

prosperity. For 200 years we have been told that hundreds of thousands — or millions or billions (pick your number) — of hungry mouths require that peasants be dispossessed to allow more industrious farmers to feed them. I hope this book helps make it clear how wrong we have been.

## NOTES

- 1 Throughout this book, I use the term “peasant” in an inclusive manner, much as “campesino” is used in the Latin American literature. That is, I use it to refer to smallholders who farm land on which they make production decisions, produce both for subsistence and for the market and employ primarily family labour.
- 2 Sir Thomas Bernard, “An Account of a Cottage and Garden,” *Annals of Agriculture, and Other Useful Arts* 30 (1798), 1–9.
- 3 John Davy, *The West Indies Before and Since Slave Emancipation*, London: W&F.G. Cash, 1854, 149–151.
- 4 Gene Wilken, *Good Farmers: Traditional Agricultural Resource Management in Mexico and Central America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, esp. 41, 49, 249, 250, 263.
- 5 Asamblea Constituyente, *Diario de sesiones: Asamblea constituyente de 1945*, Guatemala City: Tipografía Nacional, 1951, 751.
- 6 Cited in J. Killen et al., *The Famine Decade: Contemporary Accounts, 1841–1851*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995, 32.
- 7 Cited in M. Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan*, New York: Pantheon, 1982, 34–35.
- 8 Bernard, “An Account of a Cottage and Garden,” *Annals* 30 (1798), 1–9.
- 9 Proverbs 13:23.
- 10 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, New York: International Publishers, 1967, 715.
- 11 *Economist*, “The Labourer’s Panacea — The Allotment System,” 2:62 (Nov. 2, 1844) 1369–1370.
- 12 T.R. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy, Volume I*, (ed. John Pullen), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 470. [note: this is the 1820 edition, with edited changes for 1836 marked].
- 13 *Economist*, “The Labourer’s Panacea — The Allotment System” 2:62 (Nov. 2, 1844) 1369–1370.
- 14 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Century, Vol 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (translated by Sian Reynold), London: Collins, 1982, 251–253.
- 15 Part of the reluctance to foster development by providing peasants with what they want is related to perceptions of poverty and how best to “attack” it. For an account of an interesting and ultimately failed attempt to define the multiple and complicated dimensions of poverty — one that despite thousands of interviews with “poor” people was reduced to defining the poor as those who lived on less than \$1.08 a day, see the World Bank’s *World Development Report, 2000/2001*, 2001. For a discussion of the conflicts over the final draft of that report, see Robert Hunter Wade, “Making the World Development Report 2000: Attacking Poverty,” *World Development* 29:8 (2001), 1435–1441.