

## Introduction

# The Political Economy of Agrarian Change

Agrarian political economy, as defined in the mission statement of the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, investigates “the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, property and power in agrarian formations and their processes of change, both historical and contemporary.” Understanding agrarian change in the modern world centres on the analysis of capitalism and its development. By capitalism I mean a system of production and reproduction based in a fundamental social relation between capital and labour: capital exploits labour in its pursuit of profit and accumulation, while labour has to work for capital to obtain its means of subsistence. Beyond this initial and general definition, and indeed within it, there are many complexities and challenges that this book aims to explore and explain.

First, I want to set the scene, introduce my approach and identify key issues it addresses.

### **The Big Picture: Farming and World Population**

Tony Weis (2007: 5) suggests that “the origins of the contemporary global food economy could be traced back through a series of revolutionary changes, which once took shape over the course of millennia, then over centuries, and which are now compressed into mere decades.”

*Millennia* – From about 12,000 years ago, one form or another of settled farming became the material foundation of society. The reference to revolutionary changes taking place over millennia indicates that although changes were profound in their consequences they were typically gradual, more usually termed “evolutionary.” Agrarian civilizations came to encompass most people in Asia, the “sown” areas of North Africa and Europe, and parts of the generally

less populated expanses of sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. In these agrarian societies the vast majority worked the land as peasant farmers. By 1750, they supported a world population of some 770 million.

*Centuries* – From the second half of the eighteenth century, the emergence and spread of industrialization started to create a new kind of world economy, to “accelerate history” and to transform farming. By 1950, world population had grown to 2.5 billion.

*Decades* – World population grew to six billion in 2000 (and is expected to increase to about nine billion by 2050). This suggests the part played by increases in the productivity of farming, which have kept up with population growth. And in 2008, global urban population equalled rural population for the first time, and started to overtake it.

One part of the big picture, then, is the growth in food production and in world population, especially since the 1950s. Both are aspects of the development of capitalism and of the world economy it created. Another part of that picture is massive global inequality in income and security of livelihood, and in quality of life and life expectancy, as well as in productivity. While more than enough is produced to feed the world’s population adequately, many people go hungry much or all of the time.

### Who Are the Farmers Today?

#### *Some Figures*

As countries industrialize, the proportion of their labour force working in agriculture declines. In 2000, the proportion of the total labour force employed in agriculture in the U.S. was 2.1 percent, in the European Union (E.U., then with fifteen member countries) 4.3 percent, in Japan 4.1 percent, and in Brazil and Mexico 16.5 percent and 21.5 percent respectively. In China, the proportion of the total labour force employed in agriculture has declined from about 71 percent in 1978 to less than 50 percent, which still amounts to over 400 million people. With an additional 260 million people in India and 200 million in Africa working in farming — in both cases about 60 percent of their “economically active population” — it is clear

that the vast majority of the world's agrarian population today is in the Third World, or South.

This is corroborated by the standard estimate, derived from the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), that today "agriculture provides employment for 1.3 billion people worldwide, 97 percent of them in developing countries" (World Bank 2007: 77).<sup>1</sup> Some of those 1.3 billion qualify as "farmers," subject to many variations of what type of farmers they are, where, and *when*: during peak moments of the annual agricultural calendar? In good or bad rainfall years? Good or bad market years? In other words, not all farmers are farmers all the time. Many rural people may not qualify as "farmers" in any strong sense — perhaps a majority in some countrysides at some times and over time — because they lack land or other means to farm on their own account or are engaged in only "marginal" farming. Peter Hazell et al. (2007: 1) define marginal farming as "incapable of providing enough work or income to be the main livelihood of the household." They point out that in India, for example, the term is used for farms of less than one hectare, which make up 62 percent of all landholdings but occupy only 17 percent of all farmed land.

### *Terms and Concepts: Peasants and Small-scale Farmers*

Terms like "peasant," "small" or "small-scale" farmer, and "family" farmer are often used interchangeably in ways that are easily confusing. This is not just a semantic issue but has important analytical issues and differences. The term "peasant" usually signifies household farming organized for simple reproduction, notably to supply its own food ("subsistence"). Often added to this basic definition are presumed qualities such as the solidarity, reciprocity and egalitarianism of the village and commitment to the values of a way of life based on household, community, kin and locale. Many definitions and uses of the term "peasants" (and "small-scale" and "family" farmers) have a strong normative element and purpose: "taking the part of peasants" (Williams 1976) against all the forces that have destroyed or undermined peasants in the making of the modern (capitalist) world. In my view, the terms "peasant" and "peasantry" are best restricted to analytical rather than normative uses and to two kinds of historical

circumstances: pre-capitalist societies, populated by mostly small-scale family farmers (see Chapter 1) and processes of transition to capitalism (see Chapters 2 and 3).

With the development of capitalism, the social character of small-scale farming changes. First “peasants” become petty commodity producers, who have to produce their subsistence through integration into wider social divisions of labour and markets. This “commodification of subsistence” is a central dynamic of the development of capitalism, as explained in chapter 2. Second, petty commodity producers are subject to class differentiation. The historical framework of these processes is presented in Chapters 2 to 5, and its theoretical basis is explored further in Chapters 6 to 8. I suggest that as a result of class formation there is no single “class” of “peasants” or “family farmers” but rather differentiated classes of small-scale capitalist farmers, relatively successful petty commodity producers and wage labour.

Concerning size, some sources define “small farms” as those with less than 2 hectares of crop land, while others characterize small farms in the South by low levels of technology, reliance on family labour and a “subsistence” orientation (that is, “peasant”-like attributes). Thus, one criterion is spatial (farm size) and the other sociological (type of farming). The two criteria can diverge according to the conditions of farming:

A 10-hectare farm in many parts of Latin America would be smaller than the national average, operated largely by family labour, and producing primarily for subsistence . . . . The same-sized holding in the irrigated lands of West Bengal, on the other hand, would be well above the average size for the region, would probably hire in much of the labour used, and would produce a significant surplus for sale. (Hazell et al. 2007: 1)

Finally, the term “family farm” often conflates farms that are family *owned*, family *managed* or worked with family *labour*. Some “family farms” combine all three characteristics, but others do not, as I explain further in Chapter 6.

*Snapshots from the South*

Beyond the statistical, definitional and conceptual issues noted so far, the following five quotations provide vignettes of farming in northern India, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Brazil and Ecuador.

In the new capital-intensive agricultural strategy, introduced into the provinces in the late 1960s, the Congress government had the means to realize the imperial dream: progressive farming amongst the gentry. Within a year or two... virtually every district could field a fine crop of demonstration *ex-zamindars*... with their 30-, 40-, 50-, 100-acre holdings, their multiplication farms of the latest Mexican wheat and Philippines paddy, their tube wells gushing out 16,000 gallons an hour, much of it on highly profitable hire, their tractors, their godowns stacked with fertilizer, their cold-stores. (Whitcombe 1980: 179)

Sharecropping is not much better. I do all the work, and then at harvest time Mahmud Haj takes half the crop. When I work for wages, at least I bring home rice every night, even if it's not enough. But when I work on my sharecropped land, I have to wait until the harvest. In the meantime I have no cow or plough. I have to rent them from a neighbour. The price is high — I plough the land for two days in return for one day's use of his cattle. In this country, a man's labour is worth half as much as the labour of a pair of cows! (Landless villager quoted in Hartmann and Boyce 1983: 163)

Women weed the coffee, they pick coffee, pound it and spread it to dry. They pack and weight it. But when the crop gets a good price, the husband takes all the money. He gives each of his wives 200 shillings and climbs on the bus the next morning... most go to town and stay in a boarding house until they are broke. Then they return and attack their wives, saying "why haven't you weeded the coffee?" This is the big slavery. Work had no boundaries. It is endless. (Rural woman activist quoted in Mbilinyi 1990: 120–1)

The reason for all this was land speculation: two thousand hectares of virgin forest would be cleared, a thousand turned over to pasture, and then rubber tappers were deprived of their livelihood. From this developed the struggle for extractive resources in Amazonia, which is also a tribal area. The Indians... do not want private property in land, we want it to belong to the Union and rubber tappers to enjoy usufruct rights.... [In 1980] a very important leader, who headed all the movements in Amazonia, was murdered. The landowners... had him killed. Seven days later the workers took their revenge and murdered a landowner. This is the way justice operates. (Mendes 1992: 162, 168, interview published after Mendes' murder on December 22, 1988)

The *hacendado* moved to Guayaquil during the crisis. My father knew him well and he would rent us as much land as we wanted. The *hacendado* just wanted someone to watch his property until cacao came back. Javier and I had our little farm. We grew corn, beans, fruits. We even had a cow or two. But this was extremely hard. Sometimes there was nowhere to sell what we grew. And it was just my husband and I. We worked side by side in the fields. We didn't have children who could help out. And my family couldn't help much. The two of us had to do everything. We had few tools and no resources. And we didn't really own the land. So eventually I said let's follow Javier's brother Paco to Guayaquil. (Ecuadorian woman labour migrant quoted in Striffler 2004: 14–5)

The first vignette describes the wealth of rich farmers, who benefitted most from the Green Revolution in grain production in India, introduced by its Congress Party national government from the late 1960s. Elizabeth Whitcombe identifies those farmers as former *zamindars* or landowners, but they also included many rich peasants who had accumulated enough to become capitalist farmers (Byres 1981). They have highly capitalized farms and command substantial quantities of the "inputs" required to get the best yields from the new high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of wheat and rice seed

introduced by the Green Revolution: tractors, irrigation pumps and fertilizer, stacked in their “godowns,” or stores. The HYVs they use — and multiply themselves for future planting — originated in agricultural research stations in distant parts of the world. And the size of their farms would seem very big to most of their neighbours, and to nearly all farmers in Bangladesh or Tanzania, for example, but very small to their counterparts in Brazil.

The second vignette — that of a landless poor villager in Bangladesh — offers many contrasts with the first. It suggests a relentless daily struggle for a livelihood, with particular reference to that most basic need: securing enough to eat. The villager combines renting land, draft animals and a plough, to grow his own rice crop, with working for others for wages. Compared with the first vignette, this one does not provide any glimpses of places outside the immediate rural locale of the sharecropper. At the same time, the reference to working for wages might prompt us to ask who provides the labour on the thriving commercial grain farms of northern India described in the first vignette.

The third vignette, from Tanzania, provides a strong illustration of highly unequal gender relations (see Chapter 1). Unlike the previous two, it concerns an export crop produced for international markets, in this case by small farmers. We might want to ask how the land, labour and other resources devoted to growing coffee affect the cultivation of food for household consumption. Here, the payment after a good harvest, most likely the bulk of cash income for a year, is not used to meet the needs of the family but is spent on a “binge” by the male head of the household.

In the Brazilian vignette, we encounter themes long familiar in the agrarian histories of the modern world, including competition for land between different uses, and not least competition over forests — in this case between those who gain their livelihood from tapping rubber from wild rubber trees and those who want to clear forest to create pasture for large-scale ranching or to plant soy, which will be processed for animal feed. We also see a conflict over conceptions of property in land: between land as private property for the exclusive use of its owners and land as a common resource, to which particular communities or groups share usufruct rights,

that is, common rights to use it. Moreover, as in so many countries formed from a colonial history, this conflict occurs between groups of people who are differentiated ethnically and culturally, as well as in terms of their power.

The final vignette describes the attempt of a young landless couple in Ecuador to make a go of modest farming on land rented from a *hacendado*, the owner of a *hacienda*, a relatively large estate in Latin America. The landowner had planted his land to cacao (cocoa) but abandoned it when the price declined drastically, the crisis that Maria refers to. Here, we have another international export crop — as in the case of Tanzanian coffee and Brazilian soy and beef — and also a glimpse of the difficulties of small-scale farming. Maria tells us that she and her husband Javier lacked enough labour between them to succeed, which raises questions about the kind of land they were farming and the tools they had to farm it. She also indicates that while they grew food for their own consumption, they also had to sell some of their crop because they needed money to purchase basic goods they did not produce themselves. While they were still young, they decided to follow Javier's brother Paco to see if they could earn a more secure livelihood in the large port city of Guayaquil, on Ecuador's Pacific coast.

These five vignettes point to the immense variety of types of farming and their social relations, of market conditions for crops, “inputs” and labour, and of environmental conditions of farming in different regions and for different types of people in the South. That variety makes any simple empirical generalization impossible. Nonetheless, in all their local and specific detail, these few vignettes give us glimpses of the following broader themes and dynamics of agrarian change:

- class and gender differentiation in the countryside;
- divisions of access to land, divisions of labour and divisions of the fruits of labour;
- property and livelihood, wealth and poverty;
- colonial legacies and the activities of states;
- paths of agrarian development and international markets (for technology and finance as well as agricultural commodities); and

- relations of power and inequality, their contestation and the violence often used to maintain them, from “domestic” (gendered) violence in Tanzania to organized class violence in Brazil.

The agrarian political economy, and the political economy of capitalism more broadly, used in this book to explore these broader themes and dynamics derives from the theoretical approach of Karl Marx.

### Marx’s Political Economy

Living in England from the 1850s to the 1870s, Marx (1818–1883) witnessed the transformations wrought by the world’s first industrial revolution. In his great (and unfinished) theoretical work, *Capital*, Marx sought to identify the key relations and dynamics of the “capitalist mode of production” in its (then) most advanced industrial form. For Marx, capitalism — and especially industrial capitalism — is “world historical” in its nature and consequences. There was nothing natural or inevitable about its emergence as a new, and indeed revolutionary, mode of production, but once established its unique logic of exploitation and accumulation, competition and continuous development of productive capacity (Chapter 2), imposes itself on all parts of the world.

The fact that Marx analyzed the capitalist mode of production with reference to the industrial capitalism of northwest Europe leaves plenty of scope for different interpretations and debates about the histories of capitalism *before* modern industrialization and *since* his time, including

- how capitalism developed in primarily agrarian societies before industrialization (Chapters 2–3) ;
- how agrarian change has been shaped by industrial capitalism once it was established and spread (Chapters 3–5).

My goal is to use some of the concepts of Marx’s theory of the capitalist mode of production to make sense of diverse and complex agrarian histories in the modern world. I propose some very general

themes of the world-historical career of capitalism and try to connect them with the complex variations that particular histories weave from them (to borrow, from a different context, the formulation of the anthropologist Michael Gilsenan [1982: 51]). There is no suggestion that Marx provided everything we need to know about capitalism in theory or in terms of its histories, as he was the first to point out. Indeed the relation between his theoretical system (which is necessarily highly *abstract*, as well as incomplete) and its application in historical or *concrete* investigation remains a source of great tension and debate. In his notes on “The Method of Political Economy,” Marx (1973: 101) suggested that “The concrete... is the concentration of many determinations” or what we might call, more loosely, “causal factors.”

Each chapter in this book introduces theoretical ideas and questions and briefly illustrates them historically, sometimes through summary generalizations. Such generalizations, like those I use in Chapters 2 to 5 to outline the formation of the modern capitalist world, cannot do justice to historical specificities and variations. The same warning applies to the conventions of historical periodization: usually marked in centuries or part-centuries, periods are necessary to identify change, and we are unable to think about history without them, without asking what changed, how, why *and when*? At the same time, periodization runs the danger of obscuring the complexities of discontinuity and continuity. Historical periods in this book serve as “markers” of important changes: they do not signify that change from one period to another was always an encompassing, and dramatic, rupture with what existed before, although some historical processes involve more radical changes than others. With these necessary qualifications, the historical outline and sketches in this book are offered to illustrate an analytical approach that readers can test — that is, interrogate, apply, adapt or reject — for themselves.

To grasp that analytical approach and assess its usefulness is challenging. This is a challenging book, but how can understanding the world we inhabit, with all its complexity and contradictions, be simple? My aim is to provide some tools to think with, not to tell simple morality tales that we might find ideologically appealing (for

example, “small is beautiful” versus “big is ugly,” virtuous peasant versus vicious corporate agriculture).

Finally, the strongest arena of disagreement about Marx’s ideas, and how to interpret and apply them, is among Marxists, or those strongly influenced by Marx. Those familiar with this history and its debates will no doubt recognize particular interpretations of materialist political economy that I present in this short book. But the book does not assume any prior knowledge of political economy, and I provide a glossary of key terms. An author’s only hope is that readers will find enough that is relevant, interesting and provocative to reflect on and pursue further for themselves.

### Note

1. Numbers of “small farmers” in the South are often exaggerated, sometimes greatly so, by those “taking the part of peasants” (see further below), for example, Joan Martinez-Alier (2002) and Samir Amin (2003), who give figures of two and three billion respectively.