

# Reflection

## ‘Farewells to the peasantry?’ and its relevance to recent South African debates

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In this brief contribution I address, and summarise, more recent work that follows up on the article ‘Farewells to the peasantry?’ in *Transformation* 52 (2003), and sketch its relevance to South Africa. The article concerned longstanding debate of the social conditions of existence and dynamics of ‘peasants’/‘peasantry’: whether ‘the peasantry’ constitutes a general (and generic) social ‘type’ (entity, formation, class, and so on) applicable to different parts of the world in different periods of their histories, not least Latin America, Asia and Africa today and their processes of development/underdevelopment, and indeed whether current globalisation spells the final ‘death of the peasantry’ (Hobsbawm 1994) or ‘peasant elimination’ (Kitching 2001). Of course, such debate is simultaneously *analytical*: how to theorise ‘peasants’?; *empirical*: have ‘peasants’ disappeared?; and (heavily) *normative*: is ‘peasant elimination’ desirable? necessary to economic progress? etc.

I argued that those termed ‘peasants’ in the contemporary world are best theorised by investigating their conditions of existence, and reproduction, through the categories of the capitalist mode of production: the social relations, modalities of accumulation, and divisions of labour of capitalism/imperialism.<sup>1</sup> My approach entailed three (connected) steps in relation to (i) the nature of petty commodity production and its tendency to class differentiation; (ii) the specificities of agriculture and how capitalism pushes against both ecological and social constraints on capitalised/‘industrialised’ farming; (iii) how ‘peasants’ in the South and ‘family farmers’ in the North are located in the international divisions of labour of imperialism and their mutations.

Further elaboration since then has developed the macro-historical framework in terms of world-historical shifts from farming to agriculture (in the era of industrial capitalism from the nineteenth century) to globalization from the 1970s (Bernstein 2010a: Chs 3-5), and the analysis of class dynamics. The key element of the latter is the notion of 'classes of labour': 'the growing numbers ... who now depend – directly and indirectly – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (Panitch and Leys 2001: ix). They might not be dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing themselves, but nor do they possess *sufficient* means to reproduce themselves, which marks the limits of their viability as petty commodity producers in farming ('peasants') or other branches of activity. Those commonly termed 'peasants' today represent different classes: emergent capitalist farmers, relatively stable petty commodity producers, and those 'poor' and marginal farmers whose reproduction is secured principally by selling their labour power, the majority in many countrysides in the South (Bernstein 2010a: Chs 6-8).<sup>2</sup>

(Final) 'peasant elimination' in the period of neoliberal globalisation is registered in the views of those who deplore it. For example, 'relative depeasantization' has given way to 'absolute depeasantization and displacement through a wave of global enclosures' (Araghi 2009: 133-4); globalization represents a 'massive assault on the remaining peasant formations of the world' (Friedmann 2006: 462); the globalising "'corporate food regime"... dispossess[es] farmers as a condition for the consolidation of corporate agriculture' (McMichael 2006: 476).<sup>3</sup>

My position remains that 'peasant'/'peasantry', and cognate terms such as 'depeasantization', and indeed 'repeasantization', are anachronistic in contemporary capitalism, typically express ideological yearning, and obscure more than they illuminate. My reading of agrarian class dynamics – especially of (differentiated) 'peasants'/'small farmers' – thus makes me sceptical of various populist views, now expressed or updated within an 'anti-globalization' perspective. For example, arguments that: the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra in Brazil, and comparable social movements elsewhere, represent (mass) 'repeasantization' (eg Robles 2001); 'new peasantries', exemplifying alternative ways of farming to capitalist agriculture, are growing in significance in both South and North (Van der Ploeg 2008); there is a 'global agrarian resistance', an 'agrarian counter-movement' able to able to reclaim and reinstate 'the peasant way' and 'revaloriz(e) rural cultural-ecology as a global good' (McMichael 2006); low-input 'peasant' farming can feed the world's large, growing and increasingly urban population

(Weis 2007).<sup>4</sup>

How does all this apply to South Africa? Some consider that ‘peasants’ here disappeared in the continuous processes of dispossession of the colonial and apartheid areas. However, the various currents of agrarian populism indicated are well represented in South Africa today, with local inflections and emphases that express South African specificities. Central to the latter, of course, are its long histories of land dispossession, the forms of farming and agriculture that evolved during the different phases of a distinctively racialised capitalism, especially in the twentieth century, and their legacies for the moment of 1994 and since. A striking feature of those legacies is the potential overlap and tension – explored with illuminating effect by Cheryl Walker (2008) – between (i) the memories, experiences, and potent symbolic charge of *land* dispossession as a keystone of national oppression that requires redress through restitution, and (ii) *agrarian* questions concerning forms of production and their effects for such strategic issues as the supply and prices of staple foods, and rural employment and livelihoods.<sup>5</sup>

The problematic populist tendency to homogenise ‘small farmers’, ‘small holders’ and the like (‘peasants’) – as well as diffuse and misleading notions like ‘the rural poor’ – is complicated/compounded in South Africa by longstanding contention of the interactions of class dynamics and national oppression in the trajectories of its capitalist development. Such contention, of course, continues to permeate political discourse and policy debates since 1994 with particular intensity around class formation and dynamics within and across ‘population groups’ and in relation to massive structural unemployment (eg Seekings and Nattrass 2005, Marais 2011).

At the same time, one is struck by how little structural change has occurred in South African agriculture since 1994. In my own research on the maize industry in the mid-1990s I concluded that behind the façade of the Maize Board, a new structure of private/corporate regulation had formed, ready to take over once the Maize Board was abolished (Bernstein 1994, 1996, a view since cited by others, eg Chabane 2004, Traub and Meyer 2010).<sup>6</sup> Continuity of the basic structures of capitalist agriculture has some new twists through the ‘opening’ provided by the end of apartheid and aspects of ‘globalisation’. For example, two multinational firms, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus, are said to account for 70 per cent of maize trades in SAFEX (South African Futures Exchange); multinational companies have established themselves to provide GM (genetically modified) seed for field crops, eg

Pioneer (DuPont); there are Danon, Parmalat and Nestle in the dairy industry; Walmart wants to enter the SA retail food market by buying out Massmart, and so on. To the extent that their ambitions, entry and activities are contested, and attract headlines, this tends to cluster around whether the Competition Commission takes an interest, or is urged to – itself indicative of the extent to which it's (agri-)business as usual.

Most FDI in SA agriculture since 1994 then is not in farm production but in (agribusiness) 'services'. It will be worthwhile watching what happens with biofuels production; South Africa has its own large, concentrated and technically sophisticated agribusiness, including engineering companies, and it is possible (or likely) that outward investment in Africa by SA agribusiness will prove more significant than inward investment (Hall forthcoming).

A last, and painfully ironic, note to the long histories of dispossession and the land and labour questions is that more black people left white-owned farms in the ten year after 1994, including substantial numbers evicted, than in the previous 20 plus years of forced removals (Wegerif et al 2005).

This returns us to questions of 'peasants'/rural classes of labour, in the vexed context of land reform since 1994. Symptomatically, in 2011 there is still little systematic information on the people of the former bantustans and their social conditions, and *a fortiori* on the extent of demand for land for farming, by whom, where they are located, the skills they might bring to farming, and so on. What we do know is that there has been relatively little land redistribution, and even less that has generated effective small-scale farming (Greenberg 2010).

Restitution had almost a symbolic necessity, one might say. But its political salience did not connect at all with any proper consideration of issues of farming and agriculture, and indeed which it may have diverted attention from and obscured. This is, in part, because of a fatal combination of the complexities of historical claims to land and their discourses (as above) on the one hand and cumbersome and slow legal procedure/process on the other. Indeed there has been a kind of 'double whammy' of projectisation and its straitjackets: first the project framework of land transfers that have taken place (and the problems of Communal Property Associations, CPAs), and second in many cases the project framework of subsequent land use 'models' tying CPAs into PPPs (public-private partnerships), SPVs (Special Purpose Vehicles) and the like, that is, under the tutelage of (at best?) and extortion by (at worst) agricultural business 'expertise', typically contracted

from white farmers and consultancy outfits.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘failure’ of land reform is emphasised both by those who want to see much more extensive, farmer-oriented, land redistribution and those who maintain that it is mistaken (and detrimental): ‘see, it doesn’t work’. Has it been tried and found wanting or has it not been tried seriously enough? To consider this question, one needs an analytical grasp of the social dynamics of the countryside, not least in terms of the many linkages between rural and urban existence and activity, of class differentiation and other forms of social differentiation – gender and generation – that intersect with class, principal themes of my article (and subsequent book).

The most useful attempt to do this that I know in the South African context is Ben Cousins’ ‘class-analytic approach to small-scale farming’, centred on concepts of petty commodity production and ‘accumulation from below’. I find it useful not (simply) because it has a strong affinity with the approach I adopt, deploying a similarly tripartite class categorisation of what Cousins terms small to medium-scale capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers, and worker-peasants – but because he explores, elaborates and, in effect, ‘concretises’ (specifies) these class categories, and their dynamics, in South African countrysides and policy debates, drawing on available empirical studies. He concludes that

Land and agrarian reform policies should aim to improve the prospects for small-scale farming in general in communal and commercial farming areas and on redistributed land, be as broad-based as possible, and aim to benefit large numbers of rural (and peri-urban) people with access to agricultural land. If successful, these policies would see the expansion of marketed output by increasing numbers of petty commodity producers and worker-peasants, and create conducive conditions for accumulation from below. This in turn could see a marked increase in the numbers of (black) small-scale capitalist farmers. This class would then be well placed to play the leading role in reconfiguring the dualistic and still racialised agrarian structure inherited from the past, through being able to compete with large-scale commercial farmers in supplying both domestic and export markets. (2010:18)

While Cousins acknowledges that his policy approach does not guarantee the elimination of rural poverty, in my view he underplays likely conflict between his three agrarian classes, not least in rural labour markets, and I much prefer the concept of ‘classes of labour’ (above) to that of ‘worker-peasants’, long established in Southern African historiography.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, his perspective, in effect, avoids the problems of (class-blind)

populist analysis and prescription and grasps the nettle that conventional 'win-win' policy 'solutions' – centred on both boosting production/productivity and eliminating poverty within capitalist social relations – ignore the contradictions of the latter, rather than aiming to shift the balance of forces they express and produce.<sup>9</sup>

Cousins' approach is illustrated in the outstanding study by Ian Scoones and his Zimbabwean co-workers (2010), who provide one of the few systematic accounts of what has actually happened in Zimbabwe (specifically parts of Masvingo) in the past ten years.<sup>10</sup> Their findings of dynamic growth and 'accumulation from below', albeit uneven and precarious, along the contours of class differentiation in the countryside (with all its pervasive if not uniform urban linkages), lend support to Cousins' 'class-analytic approach' and to ways of thinking about alternative agrarian futures for South Africa that both subvert the entrenched 'common sense'/ideological power of its inherited capitalist agriculture and avoid the fantasies of a classless agrarian populism.

## Notes

1. The social relations of capitalism include centrally those of gender in all its diverse forms, not least gender divisions of property, labour and income in petty commodity production in farming.
2. Chapter 7 of my book illustrates, and explains further, the concrete diversity of classes of capital and labour in the countrysides of the South, and how that diversity is further shaped by 'determinations' (in Marx's term) beyond the countryside, beyond farming, and beyond agriculture in the era of globalisation (including financial speculation in world markets for food and other agricultural commodities, and its contributions to their price inflation; for which also see Ghosh: 2010). Any concrete 'economic sociology' of agrarian class dynamics must consider, on different scales: forms of production and labour regimes, social divisions of labour, labour migration, rural-urban divisions and connections, organisational forms of capital and markets, and state policies and practices and their effects. To move from the economic sociology of class relations and dynamics to their political sociology concerning themes of class identities and consciousness, of political agency and collective political practice, involves a series of further complexities in concrete analysis and thus further determinations, that I outline in Chapter 8.
3. For those familiar with the debates, this suggests a historic end of the 'benefits' to capital of reproducing peasant farmers in order to 'exploit' them (Bernstein 2010a, Chapter 6).
4. None of this scepticism entails writing a blank cheque for the 'progressive'

nature of industrialised capitalist agriculture (Bernstein 2010b, Bernstein and Woodhouse 2010). For a less triumphalist account of the MST, see Wolford (2010); for sceptical views of a global agrarian counter-movement, Scott (2005); for a good discussion of the capacity of different types of farming to feed the world's population, including comments on Van der Ploeg (2008), see Woodhouse (2010).

5. The last connects with the issue of structurally 'surplus populations' in contemporary capitalism, marked in especially sharp form in South, and southern, Africa since the 1970s. More generally this is discussed in Tania Murray Li's lively essay (2009). *Inter alia*, Li argues against functionalist readings of Marx's notion of the reserve army of labour and how it is deployed, and demonstrates that current dispossessions by large-scale 'land grabs' in Southeast and South Asia are only one part of the story, another important part being long histories of 'peasant'/local class differentiation and landlessness in those populous regions.
6. This included, strategically, the former summer grain cooperatives converting themselves into listed companies, in the process privatising billions of rands of apartheid state subsidies over the decades, and rebranding themselves explicitly as agribusiness ventures.
7. This debate is permeated with a long history of colonial and apartheid-era discourses and practices concerning small-scale (black) farming, conceived as a suitably scaled-down version of large commercial farming (Cousins and Scoones 2010).
8. I do so because of a concept of wage labour in capitalism close to that articulated and investigated in sometimes breathtaking fashion by Jairus Banaji (2010).
9. This always involves typically complex and uncertain political processes, one of the central motifs analysed for South Africa since 1994 with power and subtlety by Hein Marais (2011), who unfortunately says very little about agriculture or the countryside.
10. See also Moyo et al (2009).

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