

Seven theses about re-peasantization, its relevance and foundations

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1. On re-peasantization

Processes of de-peasantization are not inevitably leading to the demise of the peasantries of this world (as many scholars and politicians claim). They are countered and accompanied by important processes of re-peasantization, through which new peasantries are emerging.

Repeasantization can take different forms: the agricultural sector as a whole might become more peasant-like. This means that the *processes of agricultural production* are restructured so they more closely resemble a peasant-like way of production. There might also be an increase in the *numbers* of peasants. This can occur through land reform, through an inflow of new people into the agricultural sector, starting new peasant farms, and through the division of existing peasant farms.

Recent times have seen sturdy processes of repeasantization. In 1979 in Anhui, rural workers in China challenged the tyranny of collectivism provoking a process of repeasantization that has resulted in the creation of 200 million new peasant farming units. Brazil was the location for yet another sea change: through land occupations and subsequent *campamentos*, the MST (*Movimento dos Sem Terra*) generated 400,000 new peasant units of production that, between them, cover an area equal to the total agricultural area of Switzerland, Portugal, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands put together.

A classic example of de-peasantization can be found in the ongoing ‘modernization’ of European agriculture since the 1960s. This modernization, a state driven project, has explicitly promoted de-peasantization. The authorities and experts considered peasants to be too traditional and stuck in their ways, unwilling to accept the benefits that agro-industries, banks and modern sciences were supposed to bring. Leading intellectuals of that time (such as the Dutchman Hofstee and the Frenchman Mendras) heralded the “end of the peasantry” (which would later be echoed by the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm): their land was to be taken over by new “agricultural entrepreneurs”.

Five key differences between peasants and these new agricultural entrepreneurs were outlined at around this time (see Table 1). Firstly there was the relation with the land. Peasants were tied to the land. The land was testimony to their (and their ancestors’) blood, sweat and tears, of their ongoing efforts to improve soil biology and soil fertility. Peasants were tied their land, it was their pride and sometimes their curse. And they were definitely knowledgeable about it. By contrast, the agricultural entrepreneur was assumed to have a very different relation with the land as he could make ample use of chemical fertilizers and the findings of applied soil science. Thus

the umbilical cord that united the farmer and his soil was cut. Secondly, the new entrepreneur faced the need for, and challenge of, new investments. Throughout agrarian history there have always been *labour* investments, but now the tractor, the combine, and new buildings required huge *financial* investments. These new technologies had to be acquired, making for a third change: *credit* was needed to finance the new technologies. The fear about, or acceptance of, credit was (and remains) the line of demarcation between the two groups of farmers: peasants avoid credit as much as they can, while entrepreneurs embrace it and use it as the main mechanism for farm development.

The widespread use of credit brought a fourth change. It obliged farmers to become entrepreneurs. They had to play the game according to the logic of the market. The life of peasants was (and is) guided by a social logic: working the land, try to get a good income out of it and to further improve the resource-base, thus creating a good foundation for the next generation. By contrast the entrepreneurial farmer has to put ‘economic rationality’ centre stage. A fifth change occurred in the context in which farmers operated. Many considered that peasants were subject to a suppressive moral economy that dominated the peasant communities – by contrast the new entrepreneurs were supposed to be free, unbounded and able to make rational decisions.

Table 1: Seven strategic differences between peasants, entrepreneurs and ‘new peasants’

Key areas	Peasants	Entrepreneurs	New peasants
land	Bound to the land	Ample use of chemical fertilizers and other external inputs	Putting soil biology centre stage
technology	Labour intensive	Mechanical technologies that replace labour	Skill-oriented technologies
credit	reluctance	Turning credit into major tool	Own savings, labour investments, cooperation
Decision making	Local style of farming	Economic rationality, farm accountancy	Labour income, solidarity, reciprocity
Relation with community	Moral economy	Individualism, free entrepreneur	Autonomy, pride

I delve into these aspects of history to argue that we are currently witnessing a kind of U-turn. While the protagonists of modernization dismissed the connection between man and the land as irrelevant, we are currently seeing a return to the specificities of soil, the local and the knowledgeable farmer. The emergence of agroecology, now a widespread social movement, is a clear expression of this. The same applies to credit. We now know the terrible dangers that come with financialization, just as we now know, far better, the dangers of following the logic of the markets.

There is irony in this history. Scientists and policy makers dismissed the importance of caring for, and having a strong linkage with, the soil and considered that farmers who were reluctant to take on high debts would make themselves economically irrelevant. This allowed them to write-off, at least conceptually, the peasantry. However, 5 or 6 decades later these same features are once again playing a central role in the debate: they are at the heart of today's agrarian crisis. Soil fertility has decreased enormously in many parts of the world, whilst farmers' debts and the unwillingness or incapacity of banks to refinance them represents another major threat to the continuity of food production. In short: the entrepreneurial model, which promised to make the peasant redundant, failed precisely where it was thought to be superior: by going beyond the limits of the ecosystem and farming solely on the logic of the markets. As a consequence we now, once again, need the peasantry. Not yesterday's peasantry, but a peasantry of the 21st century. New peasants (see again Table 1) that care for, and have knowledge of, the soil: who are prudent in dealing with the capital market: who develop new ways to link to consumers of food and other services that farming can provide and who reconstitute communities in which solidarity, reciprocity and the drive for autonomy are driving forces.

The massive state-induced process of modernization that was intended to align farming with the needs of capital, initially brought about de-peasantization. The number of peasant producers decreased considerably, although important pockets of peasant farming remained intact. But as modernization finally ran to its own limits a new process of re-peasantization was triggered. This occurred and is occurring, where it might have been least expected: in Europe's highly 'modernized' agriculture.

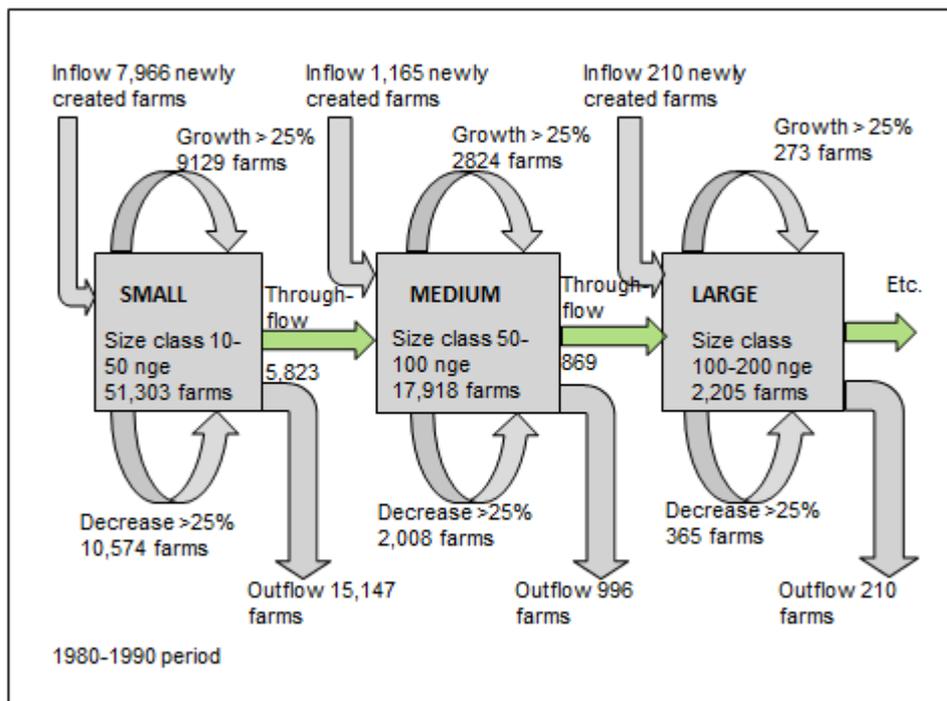
2. Simultaneous processes depeasantization and re-peasantization

De-peasantization and re-peasantization do not necessarily occur sequentially: they often occur simultaneously. The two can even be tightly interlinked: each feeding the other. However, standard statistical methods (mostly based on the use of census data) obscure such interactions. They hide the empirical processes of re-peasantization.

Figure 1 summarizes the developmental dynamics of one section of Dutch agriculture: it shows the 71,540 farms with grazing animals that existed in 1980 and how they developed over the following decade. It is important to add that this figure is not based on agricultural census data, which only shows aggregate changes, but on the rarely-used Dutch mutation data base that allows us to follow individual farms through time.

Figure 1: Differential dynamics in Dutch agriculture (farms with grazing animals, 1980-1990)¹

¹ NGE is a measure for economic size used in the Netherlands



The Figure shows that many farms do disappear, but it is not just the small farms that disappear (in which case one can talk about de-peasantization) – it also happens among medium and large farms. Figure 1 also shows that apart from this outflow, there was also an inflow: during this 10 year period 9,359 new farms were created. This represents re-peasantization.

Growth occurs in all size categories with strong growth (>25%) occurring mostly in the category of small farms: 18% of these grew strongly as opposed to 12% of large farms. This growth often results in a ‘through flow’: with small farms becoming medium-sized farms, and medium-sized farms developing into large ones. Finally there is decline. And again the empirical evidence goes against the conventional narrative. There was a strong decrease (>25%) among all size categories – even among the large farms. Hence, the overall picture is far more complex than the simple mantra: ‘small farms will disappear and only large farms continue to grow’.

3. On the relevance of re-peasantization

The contribution of peasant farms to overall agricultural development and growth greatly exceeds the contribution of large entrepreneurial farms.

Table 2 refers to the same set of farms, following them until 2006 (the last year for which this dataset is available). It shows the net contribution (that is growth minus decrease and outflow) that different size units make to the overall growth of the agricultural sector in the Netherlands for small, medium, large, very large and mega farms. In short it shows that small farms contributed nearly 5 times as much to overall growth than large farms. This is due, of course, to the sheer number of small farms. Individually, they develop and grow in a modest and step-by-step way. But multiplied by their large number this makes for a substantial contribution. The contribution of medium sized farms stands out even more. Single large farms might grow in a very impressive-looking way but since they are few in number they contribute far less to

overall growth. And when we look at the very large and the so-called mega farms (> 400 NGE in 1989) we see that their contribution is miniscule.

Table 2: The contribution made to total agricultural growth by different size categories of Dutch farms with grazing animals (1980-2006)

Size category (departing from the 1980 situation) in nge	Net contribution to total growth in 1980-2006 period (measured in nge)
< 50 nge	175,416
50-100 nge	258,913
100-200 nge	37,979
200-400 nge	3,237
>400nge	119

4. Biased policies that operate against peasant producers

Agricultural policies can help to create the space that peasant farms need to develop further and thus contribute to food security, food sovereignty and overall economic development. However, in the current epoch most agricultural policies strongly favour large, entrepreneurial farms whilst neglecting peasant farms. This is like betting on a lame horse.

Table 2 demonstrates that the policy focus on large farms and the preferential allocation of developmental opportunities to them – enshrined in agricultural policies – is like betting on a lame horse. This is especially the case when the costs of such policies mostly fall on the peasant’s side of the agricultural economy.

A few years ago the High Level Panel of Experts (2013) of the Committee for World Food Security of the FAO discussed the need to invest in smallholder agriculture, stressing the importance of peasant agriculture. Peasant agriculture, the Panel argued, contributes greatly to food security, overall economic development, employment and income, productivity, sustainability, landscape, biodiversity, climate, emancipation and cultural heritage. Peasant agriculture not only makes positive contributions, it contributes considerably *more* than other modes of farming, both in the Global North

and in the Global South. A recent set of studies (organized and published by the FAO) on family farming in different continents convincingly reiterated this. Peasant agriculture is important to the world – at least, if it has the space, the room for manoeuvre, to make a contribution. In this respect, access to markets, knowledge, land, genetic material, the security that the resources needed cannot and will not be appropriated and monopolized by others, and the right to obtain a fair share of the produced wealth, are all crucial. Denying peasants such space and the associated rights is not only a direct threat to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people all over the world – it also poses serious threats to food security, sustainability, overall economic development. Despite this, entrepreneurial agriculture and the policies that support it are continuously and voraciously devouring this space.

5. The specificity of our times

The tragedy of the current period is that de-peasantization is increasingly facilitated by state apparatuses, whilst processes of re-peasantization are blocked. Neo-liberal policies completely fail to find a balance between the two processes.

Globalization, deregulation, the rise of entrepreneurial farming, imbalanced state policies, the growing hegemony of food empires and the associated squeeze on agriculture, high levels of indebtedness, suffocating regulatory schemes, the expropriation of genetic materials and, more recently, the new wave of land grabbing are all playing havoc with the prospects of many millions of peasant families in both the Global South and the Global North. In many places this has resulted in strong processes of de-peasantization and is blocking the possibilities for re-peasantization. The regulatory and financial systems are completely out of kilter. This also explains the deep worries among civil society that have led international organizations, such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to once again pay more attention to family farming and peasant agriculture. It also explains why a range of nation states (headed at the moment by Bolivia) is trying to get the United Nations (UN) to recognise an International Declaration of Peasant Rights. It is also the reason for the existence of a strong and growing global movement in favour of food sovereignty. Today, more than ever, these countervailing powers are much needed.

6. On defence mechanisms

In the meantime the peasant populations of this world are not passively awaiting or accepting their assumed fate. On the contrary, new defence mechanisms are being developed in order to sustain, and strengthen, peasant agriculture.

All over the world peasantries are actively responding to the many threats they face, albeit it with very different rhythms and impacts. There are a number of tools being used by peasants in defence of their livelihoods and their peasant way of farming. These include: the wide spread development of multifunctionality, the further unfolding of low-external-input farming (now being carried forward under the logo of agroecology), the creation of new markets (often referred to as ‘peasant markets’), the construction of new forms of territorial autonomy and the blossoming of new forms of cooperation. These new mechanisms have all emerged as responses to the squeeze upon agriculture exerted by food empires and they are all part of the process of re-

peasantization: reshaping agriculture so it is more peasant-like, and attracting new entrants, especially young people who are enlarging the rank and file of the peasantry. It is important to stress that on-farm food processing, agro-tourism, farmers' management of nature and landscape, the creation of new markets, etc. – are not just activities that are *additional* to farming. Rather they are helping to *re-pattern* farming. They are an expression of 'farming differently' in a style that clearly differs from the entrepreneurial-like industrialization of agriculture. It is making farming more 'gentle' again. This is why large parts of civil society increasingly favour and support re-peasantization.

7. Peasants' freedom

Through the ages peasants have struggled for a 'double freedom': freedom *from* crude exploitation, deprivation and expropriation and freedom *to* farm in a way that is in line with their own interests and prospects. It is time to reaffirm this double freedom and make it concrete. This makes the Declaration of Peasant Right a strategic, timely and badly needed statement.

Peasant agriculture allows for emancipation, but is also the outcome of emancipation. Self-controlled resource-bases have been constructed through many sided and continually repeated social struggles. In many places in the world men and women continue to struggle for land, seeds, water, access to markets and services. Once such a self-controlled resource base is constructed people's emancipatory aspirations (e.g. to improve one's own livelihood, create new foundations for the children, etc.) become the major driver of agricultural growth and development. The simultaneous improvements in production (in quantity and/or quality) and the betterment of livelihood are the wheels that move agrarian history forward and provide food to an ever growing world population.

There are no grounds whatsoever for arguing that peasant agriculture no longer plays an emancipatory role, or that growing urban economies will completely take over this role. In Latin America, Asia and Africa, where the majority of the world's peasantry are located, this definitely is not the case. In the decades to come, there will be hundreds of millions of young people who need to develop a livelihood in the countryside. Urban economies in the Global South, however much they grow, will not be able to absorb wave upon wave of rural migrants and the economic and social costs of such dislocation are often tragic and unacceptable.

By contrast in the Global North there is now a strong flow of young people into the countryside. This flow partly results from the ongoing economic and financial crisis and lack of opportunities in urban areas but is equally due to young people's search for attractive livelihoods. These 'off-comers' (although many are returning to 'ancestral lands') are developing amazingly novel farms and highly innovative schemes to link with urban consumers.

In the search for emancipation the strife for "peasants' freedom"(as the great agricultural historian Slicher van Bath called it) has played, and continues to play, a strategic role. This peasant freedom has two dimensions. It is freedom *from* e.g. oppression, deprivation, violence, insecurity and grabbing of whatever kind. It is also freedom *to*. That is freedom *to* farm in such a way that it is in line with the needs,

possibilities and prospects of the farming family. The freedom *to* organize the production, processing and distribution of food in such a way that peasant producers get a fair share of the produced wealth and much more. Only when this double freedom is strongly institutionalized, protected and respected, will peasant agriculture fully contribute to meeting the needs of society as a whole (in terms of food sovereignty, employment opportunities, the generation of incomes, etc.). That is why the Declaration of Peasant Rights is so vitally important – not only for peasants themselves but for our societies as a whole.