

Agrarian worlds of 1913 and 2013. Implications for land reform today

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This brief presentation sketches, and contrasts, some of the most salient features of world agriculture in 1913 and 2013. The aim is to contribute to the comparative dimension of the conference, and to provide its themes with some 'world-historical' context, in however sketchy and schematic a manner given constraints of time.

The substance of the contrast centres on patterns of change in capitalist agriculture, in 'peasant' farming, and in the relations between them. This includes forms of 'peasant' resistance to capitalist agriculture, with special reference to land and land reform, in the wider context of imperialism (now known as 'globalisation'), both during and following colonialism.

The four decades from the early 1870s to 1913 were a crucial phase in the development of the capitalist world economy and its contradictions, well known to us from Lenin's analysis of imperialism. The period is also increasingly described by economic historians as a first ('golden') age of globalisation due to its vastly expanded scale of international trade and finance, and formation of new world markets and divisions of labour.

Those decades saw the last great moment of European colonial expansion, above all in sub-Saharan Africa and in parts of Southeast and Western Asia too. South Africa had experienced colonial dispossession for much longer, of course, but the 'mineral revolution' of the late nineteenth century generated a new phase of capitalist control and restructuring of the land and labour of its indigenous people, of which the 1913 Natives Land Act was a key marker. South Africa in 1913 was evidently part of a wider world of imperialism, now shaped by the hegemony of industrial capital. Its historical specificities included the 'historic compromise' after the Anglo-Boer War between imperialist capital and the landed and agrarian interests of its Afrikaner settlers.

The hegemony of industrial capital had lasting effects for world agriculture, some of which are less remarked or understood. First, I would emphasise a difference between, and transition from, capitalist farming to capitalist agriculture, understood as the integration of farming into circuits of capital upstream and downstream of farming – 'agri-input' and 'agro-food' capital in today's parlance (Weis 2007), and the original source of our notions of 'agribusiness'. The 'agricultural sector' in this sense,

shaped by non-agrarian capital, also became an object of state strategies and a terrain of political struggle.

Second, and as already hinted, this was possible only through the systematic application of industrial means of production and methods of organization in farming and in agriculture more widely. A key stimulus in this was the ‘second industrial revolution’ from the 1870s, centred on steel, chemicals, electricity and petroleum (the first was based in technologies using iron, coal and steam power).

Third, this dynamic was manifested in an emergent global division of labour in agriculture in the late nineteenth century between Europe, its tropical colonies, and the settler states of the Americas (USA, Canada, Argentina) and elsewhere (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). This last group of countries, and above all the USA, provided the basis of an ‘international food regime’ – the ‘first price-governed [international] market in an essential means of life’. The ‘temperate grain-livestock complex’ was central to subsequent global food markets, divisions of labour, and trade strategies (Friedmann 2004).

Fourth, the colonial project incorporated a range of strategies to promote the commodification, and integration in growing domestic and international markets, of ‘peasant’ farming and reproduction, in those instances where ‘peasants’ were not (fully) dispossessed (as they were mostly in South Africa after 1913, but rarely in sub-Saharan Africa more generally).

Finally, we should note the effects of imperialist (re-)organisations of land and labour in the South - the disruption of existing agrarian systems - manifested in the great famines described by Mike Davis (2001) as ‘late Victorian holocausts’: in China and India above all, but also in Brazil and Eastern and Southern Africa at that time, and in subsequent twentieth-century famines.

In the century between 1913 and 2013 capitalist agriculture continued to grow, with a particular burst since the 1950s of the development of the productive forces in farming, notably through mechanisation and ‘chemicalisation’, and with greater concentration of agribusiness, and expansion in the forms and scope of its activity, especially in the current moment of ‘globalisation’.

It is impossible to summarise the responses and fates of the highly diverse and differentiated ‘peasantries’ of the South during this intervening century: some succeeded in becoming viable petty commodity producers and even petty capitalist farmers, many – in today’s world I would suggest most – did not. The latter are better understood, in my view, as particular components of classes of labour who reproduce themselves principally through the sale of their labour power (Bernstein 2010), a point I come back to.

I would stress that the most wide-reaching cases of land reform of modern history, including those of the USSR and China, followed the revolutionary ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ (Wolf 1969) concentrated from the 1910s to 1970s. Moreover, these cases of radical land reform/redistribution mostly resulted from a combination of (a) struggle in the countryside against ‘pre-capitalist’ landed property and its forms of exaction, mediated and intensified by the effects of incorporation in capitalist commodity relations, and (b) national liberation struggles often led by communist parties.

In 2013 there is a notable revival of commitment to agrarian reform, informed by an even wider range of concerns, and involving much changed social forces, than those that drove the revolutionary land reforms achieved by those ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’.

Three notable expansions of current agendas of radical land reform concern, first, gender relations in the countryside (and beyond), that is, championing the interests of women farmers. I do not have time to discuss this, other than to note (a) that it registers the impact of recent feminist scholarship and activism of different kinds in different social sites; (b) the hope that it will be properly considered in other contributions to this conference; and (c) that such struggles embrace the enormously challenging politics of contesting various deep-rooted, if hardly immutable, forms of patriarchy, interacting with and inflected by the dynamics of social change in capitalism.

Second is the concern with the ecological destructiveness/unsustainability of ‘industrialised’ capitalist agriculture, and the urgency of alternatives to it (of which the best single statement I know is by Weis 2010). This is signalled, for example, in notions of ‘food sovereignty’ (eg Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2010), originally launched by *La Vía Campesina*, and in the hopes invested in transnational agrarian movements that confront capitalist globalization of agriculture (Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008). The central claim of this emphasis is that a return to small-scale, household or family farming, is necessary not just to save (and expand) the world’s peasantries but indeed to save the planet and all who inhabit it. This may or may not entail radical redistribution of land to small farmers according to circumstances, including those of so-called ‘global land grabbing’ by corporations, finance capitals, and states. What we see here then is explicitly anti-capitalist, or at least anti-capitalist farming and agribusiness. It contains an encompassing vision of agrarian reform which adds saving the planet to earlier, often contradictory, concerns simultaneously to achieve social justice in the countryside (and between the rural and the urban, farming and industry) and to improve agricultural productivity so that enough food for all is produced.

Third, and finally, livelihoods based in small-scale farming are sometimes seen, including in South Africa today, as a solution to the widespread crises of reproduction of classes of labour in contemporary (‘globalised’) capitalism. This at least builds on a key recognition: that the first

‘moment’ of proletarianisation, that of dispossession, does not necessarily (or ever) lead to a second ‘moment’ of relatively secure and adequately paid wage employment as the basis of reproduction of classes of labour – a recognition that was strongly stated by Marx, of course.

Let me conclude with some brief observations on the changed social terrain of land reform in 2013.

First, while most of the world’s population in 1913 were no doubt ‘peasants’ in some broad sense, providing the militants and constituents of radical agrarian movements in the twentieth century, this is not the case for the much larger world population of 2013. Nor is this solely an effect of statistics on urbanisation, even though more than half the world’s population is now classified as urban, and the highest current rates of urbanisation are in Africa (Severino and Ray 2011). Rather it is that so many of those in the South classified as ‘rural’ - and indeed sometimes by default, and misleadingly, as ‘farmers’ - are unable to reproduce themselves exclusively, or mainly, through their own farming. Rather, as suggested above, they are part of classes of labour in today’s global capitalism, and moreover ‘footloose labour’ (in the title of Breman’s important book, 1996; on the crucial case of India, see also Lerche’s compelling essay, 2010).

Second, this means that world farming has to feed ever greater numbers than those who work in it. This has implications for labour productivity in farming, and remains an unresolved tension in the agenda of ‘food sovereignty’ which tends to focus on (rural) household and ‘community’ self-provisioning of food.

Third, this further suggests to me that forms of small(er)-scale farming able to displace the levels of mechanisation ‘chemicalisation’, concentration and economies of scale of capitalist farming, *and* to feed the world’s population, would need to employ different technologies, types of state support and social organisation than is available to most small-scale farming today.

Fourth, this implies that probably only a minority of current rural people – even if a significant minority according to circumstances, say a quarter to a third – would be able to thrive as small-scale farmers. These (optimistic) figures are indicated by studies of the positive outcomes of Zimbabwe’s land reform (Moyo et al 2009; Scoones et al 2010; Hanlon, Manjengwa and Smart 2013). Those studies, together with many others, show how important off-farm income and labour supply and control are to the viability of petty commodity production in farming today – matters which touch on ubiquitous if diverse forms of class and gender differentiation in the countryside, and which caution against the blanket use of such terms as ‘small-scale farmers’ or ‘peasants’.

Finally, there may be a case, again according to circumstances, for types of land redistribution which aim to support the livelihood or reproduction base of rurally based wage workers (including labour migrants) rather than to establish them as full-time farmers (so-called 're-peasantisation') – in effect strengthening the 'reserve wage' (eg for South Africa, see Cousins 2010). I can only table this in hope of its further discussion and elucidation during the conference.

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