

## Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay (eds): Peasants and globalization: political economy, rural transformation and the agrarian question

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Marygold Walsh-Dilley

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On May 23, 2007, for the first time in history, most of the world's population lived in urban rather than rural settings (Araghi, this volume). Furthermore, neoliberal globalization has tended to deepen agricultural integration into global economic flows (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, this volume). For some, most notably Hobsbawm (1994), these trends signify the “death of the peasantry”, and place in doubt the continued relevance of the agrarian question. *Peasants and Globalization: Political economy, rural transformation and the agrarian question* is about the fate of the peasantry in the contemporary world—a world subject to continual agrarian change. It asks if peasants, and agriculture more broadly, continue to matter in contemporary processes of capital accumulation on a global scale.

The volume brings together a multidisciplinary group of scholars who all use the agrarian question as their analytical starting point. It is framed as a conversation between different positions on the agrarian question—a conversation that sometimes plays out in fascinating ways, like the side-by-side chapters by Henry Bernstein and Michael Watts that debate the contemporary relevance of “peasant” as an analytical category. This book would be suitable for graduate and advanced undergraduate readers and courses, particularly since it locates itself within a timely and highly relevant debate about the future of rural spaces, people, and products. Each author brings his or her own perspective to this discussion, which the editors highlight through six different “agrarian questions” at play within the chapters of the book. Still, the reader is struck by the ways in which

these different positions are frequently not at all mutually exclusive. Thus, while the editors identify separate agrarian questions of land, gender, labor, class and food, for example, a reading of the full volume suggests that the answer to the contemporary agrarian question must simultaneously incorporate all these factors.

The bulk of the book is arranged in two parts, highlighting, respectively, historical and contemporary perspectives on agrarian change. The first three chapters of the section on historical perspectives focus on the origins and early period of capitalism, arguing that capitalism had its origins in agriculture, and in particular in changing patterns of land use, rather than technological development (Ellen Meiksins Wood), that rural class differentiation determined the timing and nature of agrarian transition (Terence Byres), and that colonialism was the most important factor preventing the agrarian transformation in the colonies and new republics in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Amiya Kumar Bagchi). A chapter by Farshad Araghi takes a world-historical perspective and draws connections between the globalization of the late twentieth century and the colonial-liberal globalism of the nineteenth century. Using the memorable metaphor of the “visible foot”, Araghi outlines global depeasantization, the process of dispossession by displacement, as a defining feature of the agrarian program of postcolonial neoliberal globalism. Wrapping up the historical section of the book is Miguel Teubal's discussion of peasant struggles in Latin America, in which he argues that contemporary social movements around land and agrarian reform present new characteristics not seen in twentieth century movements. The new movements are based on the peasantry and indigenous communities, which were frequently left out of or hurt by previous reforms. In these movements, land remains of central importance, but agrarian reform is not associated

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M. Walsh-Dilley (✉)  
Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University,  
Ithaca, NY 14853, USA  
e-mail: ms396@cornell.edu

with the modernization objectives of previous reform movements.

In the second part of the book, on *Contemporary Perspectives on Agrarian Change*, Ray Kiely provides a critique of what the volume editors call the “path dependency” agrarian question by emphasizing the uneven and unequal forms of contemporary participation in global processes. Bridget O’Laughlin argues that gender is missing from most discussions of the agrarian question. She emphasizes the need to engender the agrarian question and to bring the issues it raises into the analysis of gender relations. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Cristóbal Kay and Saturnino Borrás, in their contribution, centralize land in the agrarian question, which, they argue, has commonly focused instead on the balance of forces between capital and labor. They reframe the agrarian question as one of land, who controls it, how, and for what purposes. Henry Bernstein, in his chapter, argues that the classical agrarian question of capital is no longer important. Rather, he suggests, the new agrarian question is that of labor. Furthermore, Bernstein argues, this implies that “peasant” is no longer a useful category of analysis. In the following chapter, Michael Watt’s takes Bernstein’s suggestion of the “end of the peasantry” as his point of departure, and while he agrees with Bernstein’s assertion about the shift to the new agrarian question of labor, Watts argues that this does not, in fact, signify the death of the peasantry, which remains a salient organizing and analytical category. Philip McMichael, in the final chapter of this section, centralizes food as the key organizing dynamic within the new agrarian question. He highlights peasant food sovereignty movements, which use food and food-related issues to express a new political identity and make claims for substantive rights. Like Teubal, McMichael argues that these movements are creating a vision for an alternative modernity that enables sustainable and democratic forms of social reproduction.

This volume, with its diverse perspectives, argues for the continued salience of the agrarian question, while at the

same time emphasizing that, as Watts puts it, “Globalization and transnationalism [provide] new coordinates for the study of the agrarian question” (this volume, 275). The classical agrarian question of capital, with its focus on how capital shapes and is shaped by an agrarian transition towards capitalist agriculture, is less relevant than in the past. But rural issues of land, labor, and food remain of primary importance—for all of society. This volume suggests that the new agrarian question, in a sense, stands the classical agrarian question on its head (to use Araghi’s language, 138). Whereas historically the agrarian question was in a peripheral and subordinated relationship to the concerns and dynamics of the growing cities (*ibid*), this volume centralizes agriculture and rural issues as key to understanding the dynamic within the contemporary global system. Bridget O’Laughlin writes “No agrarian question is purely about agriculture or rural life” (199). This volume makes clear that agriculture, land, and the peasantry are central to the processes of accumulation, politics, and class that now take place on a global scale. As rural spaces become increasingly integrated into global systems, the relevance of rural struggles and tensions are amplified. Thus, this volume suggests that the agrarian question—though refocused and reformulated—has become one of the greatest social questions of our time.

## Reference

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## Author Biography

**Marygold Walsh-Dilley** is a PhD candidate in Development Sociology at Cornell University. Her dissertation focuses on globalization and rural livelihood construction in highland Bolivia.