

# The Agrarian Question: Past, Present and Future

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Agriculture and ecological sustainability have been the basis of all historical civilizations. This is no less true of our contemporary world system, despite the capitalist, industrial, informational and biotechnological revolutions that have transformed agriculture and nature on a world scale. What is different in the contemporary world system, beyond its truly planetary scope and its necessary centre–periphery structure, is the range of functions that agriculture, land and other natural resources are called upon to perform. These extend from servicing the profit requirements of monopolistic firms and financial speculators to meeting planetary food needs, supplying raw materials, producing energy, releasing labour, absorbing carbon and providing space for industrial and service activities, as well as for the residential and reproductive imperatives of the world’s population; this includes its poorest layers, that *half* of humanity reduced to a labour reserve and reproduced largely by unwaged labour, especially of women and children.

The conventional wisdom of the last quarter century has been that the agrarian question is a thing of the past, given the many social and technological revolutions of the last two hundred years. ‘We have been liberated from the constraints of agriculture, land and nature’, they proclaim!

We believe that the agrarian question is the most fundamental question of the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is the century in which nature, the current system of agriculture and historical capitalism will reach their reproductive limits. The agrarian question today is a question of wresting global agriculture, land and other natural resources from the predatory logic of monopoly–finance capital, and of submitting them to

the logic of autonomous, egalitarian, democratic, industrial and sustainable development, for the benefit of all the peoples of the world.

In what follows, we outline our understanding of the agrarian question and the challenges of its resolution in the twenty-first century.

## The Agrarian Question of Industrialization

Although agriculture has been the basis of all civilizations, an ‘agrarian question’, understood as a problematic of world–historical significance, emerged belatedly in the late nineteenth century. This was the time of the first great capitalist crisis. It was also the time of rapid industrial transformation in the North Atlantic, coupled with democratic transitions internally and a new wave of imperialist expansion against the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The agrarian question, as conceived by the emerging parties of the European Left, eventually obtained three dimensions, tailored mainly to internal industrial priorities.

The initial, explicitly *political* dimension of the agrarian question was concerned with the need to mobilize the European countrysides in the process of electoral competition, at a time when male universal suffrage was being extended beyond propertied classes, to the industrial proletariat and the peasantry. This was seen as necessary, for the prior experience of the Paris Commune, particularly its urban isolation and defeat, had shown that a programmatic vision was required for the countryside so as to accumulate forces for political change.

This political question subsequently evolved into a *social* question. Evident differences in the character of capitalist penetration in the countrysides, marked either by the dispersion of peasants or their persisting dependence upon landed gentries, required special attention. This led to a concern with establishing the social facts regarding the new social relations of production, the growing social differentiation and their articulation with the industrial home market.

Yet, a third, explicitly *economic*, dimension was to emerge in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Under foreign encirclement and aggression, the question then became how to engineer an industrial transition in an agrarian country, and how to finance this transition from domestic surpluses, that is, agriculture, as opposed to colonial resources. This

third dimension also inaugurated the agrarian question as a living question for socialism, that is, a question that would not be magically resolved by the mere suppression of private property and the development of industry.

The colonial, semi-colonial, neocolonial and dependent peripheries received much less attention by the European Left, save for the very few who sought a link between crisis, imperialist expansion and war. Nonetheless, the process of expansion would sow the seeds of a new critique, now emanating from the nationalist and communist movements born in the peripheries, for which the militarized carve-up of the world and its attendant policies—racial domination, land alienation, forced production for export, the pillaging of mineral resources and the creation of commercial monopolies—would become priority concerns.

Over the following decades, these movements would condense the three inherited dimensions of the agrarian question, but also reorganize them within a project of *national liberation*. In their hands, the resolution of the agrarian question would become more than a mechanism of industrial development, whether socialist or capitalist: it would become intrinsically linked to the realization of national independence. It was this nationalist critique that opened the way for a holistic understanding of the agrarian question under imperialism.

## The Agrarian Question of National Liberation

The anti-imperialist forces in the peripheries incorporated the requirement of industrialization, but the immediate challenge in most cases was the concentration of land in the hands of capitalist and quasi-capitalist classes, most often racial or caste minorities, either of European settler or indigenous stock. With the exception of the territories in Africa where colonial land alienation was not widespread, land reform would become of fundamental importance to both industrialization and national liberation.

Thus, the conditions of peripheral capitalism germinated a specific *land* question. This, in turn, gave way to an historic dispute between, on the one hand, the emergent bourgeoisies, often followed by Soviet-inspired communist parties, which viewed land reform mainly as an

*Agrarian South: The Journal of Political Economy, 1, 1 (2012): 1–10*

instrument of industrial expansion; and on the other, popular classes, variously organized and autonomous, which viewed land reform as a political imperative in the elimination of the local surrogates of imperial power, the landed classes and associated racial/caste minorities. The latter saw in land reform the possibility of eliminating conservative forces and reconstituting political power as a precondition for articulated national development.

The turning point in the nationalist struggles worldwide was the victory of the Chinese communists, who did eliminate conservative forces in the countryside and set into motion an autonomous development programme with collectivized peasants in the forefront. Its historic contribution to the agrarian question was the re-articulation of the home economy free of foreign interference, in a way which would seek to maintain rural–urban political unity and inter-sectoral balance, all within a self-financed and rural-based industrial transformation. This was starkly different from both the North Atlantic and Soviet models, putting into practice the nationalist critique in a vanguard way.

In the rest of the periphery, a variety of transitions was implemented, generally without major structural reforms, especially land reform. The only exceptions to the rule were the East Asian ‘developmental states’, which did implement major structural reforms under United States (US) occupation, to embark on a strategically protected industrial trajectory. Under the threat of revolutionary advance, landed power was eliminated, but the dominant classes were preserved and transformed into industrial classes subservient to the North Atlantic alliance. In most other cases, attempts to implement land reforms were repressed, discontinued or reversed. Among these, a few other states also entered the path of industrial transition (for example, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Turkey, Iran and India), but in the absence of major structural reform, this would be a path of partial domestic articulation, intensified super-exploitation and renewed dependence. But the large majority of peripheral states evaded the industrial transition altogether, remaining agrarian, wholly disarticulated and perpetually beholden to foreign capital, finance and markets.

Those peripheral and semi-peripheral states which evaded structural reform became, subsequently, the targets of a ‘green revolution’ led by Western multinationals, by the incorporation of new hybrid seed varieties, chemical inputs and machinery. In all, the theory and practice of

agrarian transition that prevailed during the Cold War, and expressed by such agencies as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), was founded on the notion that production for Western and elite domestic markets, together with the transfer of finance and technology from the West, was sufficient to obtain 'food security' and induce industrial transition. The objective was to 'catch up' with the economic, social and political structure of the West, including its industrialized agriculture, its urbanization, its indulgence in fossil fuels and its patterns of individualist mass consumption. In practice, dependence evolved in differentiated ways, not least by establishing a new international division of labour in agriculture, marked by unprecedented food dependence in the South. The current 'food crisis' has its roots precisely in this engineered international division of labour.

The world system as a whole entered a period of profound crisis in the 1960s. In the periphery, it manifested itself in a robust agrarian crisis, mass exodus to urban centres and terminal debt crisis. It was also accompanied by a new wave of mass mobilizations, which culminated either in new revolutionary ruptures by peasant guerrilla forces (Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, Mozambique), or military coups under the aegis of the North Atlantic alliance (Latin America, Congo, Ghana, the Arab world).

At this juncture, imperialism was forced into retreat. The new forms of dependence notwithstanding, imperialism acquiesced to the expansion of political sovereignty to the South. Eventually, it was able to launch anew its predatory global project, by means of a new round of financialization and militarization, but it could not turn back the clock on the realities of a world system now founded on a globalized principle of national sovereignty.

It is often poorly acknowledged that it was in this seismic shift ushered in by national liberation that the agrarian question obtained two further dimensions, those of *gender* and *ecology*. Indeed, a regime of imperial sovereignty would never have admitted to these vital questions, save in a distorted, racist manner. It was the process of mass mobilization, decolonization and universal suffrage in the peripheries that created the conditions for the onward expression of these struggles. National liberation, despite all its contradictions, created new spaces for the political participation of women and the struggle for recognition of their contribution to production and reproduction. Equality in law, equal pay and reproductive rights henceforth became essential to any development

project claiming universality. Similarly, the destruction inflicted on the planet's atmosphere and the environment of the peripheries, whether in the course of colonial pillage and early industrialization or with the onset of post-colonial 'green' technologies and ad hoc urbanization, could henceforth be denounced on a global level. The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the subsequent protocols, which enshrine the historical responsibility of the industrialized North in the destruction of the atmosphere, are an unmistakable legacy of national liberation.

Like the nationalist critique before them, these two critiques have amounted to more than just the addition of new elements to the agrarian question, but a reorganization of the way the agrarian question is conceived. If the resolution of the agrarian question is part and parcel of national liberation, so is the fight against the instrumentalization of gender in the process of accumulation, as is the fight against the monopolization and depletion of natural resources and atmospheric space.

It is clear to us that, in the twentieth century, the agrarian question evolved far beyond the question of industrialization for its own sake. It is also clear that the motive forces of the progressive change have been the struggles against colonialism and its legacies.

## **The Agrarian Question of Monopoly–Finance Capital**

The neoliberal project on which the world system embarked in the 1970s was a strategy to recuperate monopolistic profits and stave off an emergent South. In so doing, the project abandoned whatever policy commitment to industrialization had previously existed, while also seeking to co-opt the politics of gender and ecology into a 'market friendly' development industry. Neoliberalism heralded not the 'end' of the agrarian question, but the re-launching of the agrarian question of monopoly–finance capital.

Under the leadership of deregulated finance, and through the leverage of debt, the whole of the South was gradually reopened and placed at the disposal of monopolistic firms and speculative interests. The end of the Cold War reinforced this movement, to the point even of bringing

*Agrarian South: The Journal of Political Economy*, 1, 1 (2012): 1–10

pressure to bear on China and East Asia. But until the mid-1990s, the states that were most affected were the highly indebted peripheral and semi-peripheral states, which were forced unilaterally to lift state controls on currencies, prices, capital and trade, roll back industrial policies, privatize public enterprises and retreat to the export of cash crops and minerals as a means of servicing debt. Agriculture became a special target of a new round of 'green' technologies, including genetically modified organisms, controlled by a handful of Western firms. The purported objective was to 'get the prices right', yet the Northern-controlled trade regime continued to shut the door on a wide range of Southern crops, and hence on the possibility of escaping the debt trap.

The results of this most recent phase of globalization have shifted, once again, the coordinates of the agrarian question. The rural exodus has continued unabated, without absorption of the expelled workforce into industrial employment. Part of this workforce has sought refuge in the expanding service sectors, but overall, it has remained insecurely employed, underemployed or unemployed, in constant flux between town and country and, most precariously, across international borders. Instead of the classical dichotomy between 'peasants' and 'workers', in transition from the former to the latter, the phenomenon that has prevailed is that of permanent semi-proletarianization, whereby the expelled, super-exploited workforce competes with the exploited in relatively secure employment to drive down wages all around. This phenomenon has a clear functional relationship with gender and inter-generational hierarchies: women and underaged youths have been burdened ever more disproportionately with the social reproduction of an increasingly degraded labour reserve.

This phenomenon has been interpreted in diverse circles, and not just by the mouthpieces of big capital, as the 'disappearance' of the peasantry. Indeed, some 'progressives', having pronounced both the agrarian and land questions as 'dead', and having entirely missed the agrarian question of big capital, have proceeded to proffer a historically emasculated 'agrarian question of labour'. Policy debates have shifted in the same direction, concerned with providing 'livelihood' opportunities to the super-exploited. This has been accompanied by a rekindled interest, across the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America, in social policies geared towards subsidizing the social reproduction of the rural

and urban poor, as a substitute to structural reform. A disarmed United Nations (UN) General Assembly has similarly declared its own vacuous support for eight ‘millennium development goals’.

Nonetheless, the semi-proletariat never abandoned the agrarian question, or the land question. The demand for land has expanded in rural areas, where land continues to be seen as fundamental to the social reproduction of the household, while the same demand has also expanded to urban areas for the purpose of housing as well as urban agriculture. Indeed, the most politically significant trend over the last three decades, against the wishes of both big capital and the ‘progressives’, is the upsurge in land occupations in both town and country. This—and *this alone*—has placed, once again, the agrarian question on the agenda, alongside new land questions as distinct from the agrarian. Access to land for the expelled semi-proletariat is now also a question of regaining access to basic citizenship and social rights, in both rural and urban areas—a political motive that is, as before, distinct from the productionist.

We are presently in the midst of a monumental systemic contradiction. Monopoly–finance capital has escalated its rapacious accumulation of land and natural resources, as the North itself has plunged into deep crisis. Like a wounded bull, imperialism is scrambling anew, lashing out at weak links in the system, deploying its unparalleled military might and invoking, most cynically, a ‘right to protect’ the peoples of the South, so as to re-establish monopoly control over whole regions. Yet, apart from its own decadence, it faces two challenges: the national sovereignty regime established in the last century which, in recent years, has been exercised, even in radical ways, by small states; and the emerging semi-peripheries in the South which, although not radical in themselves, have created new possibilities for manoeuvre.

The trends are by no means predetermined; intra-South competition may also serve polarizing ends. The challenge is, thus, put to the South as well. Monopolistic firms springing up in the South are scrambling for natural resources themselves. Their home states may not be militarizing their own scramble, and they generally do maintain a higher commitment to the sovereignty regime. Moreover, the economic flows ushered in across the South have permitted some to circumvent the Western debt trap. But unless sovereignty is exercised by the targeted states in the



interest of autonomous development, inherited economic structures will only be reinforced, and resistance to imperialism will itself flounder.

The stage is set for an historic showdown, and it is in this that we must now reclaim the agrarian question.

## Reclaiming the Agrarian Question

The agrarian question continues to evolve. It certainly remains a question of national sovereignty, under conditions of a new scramble. It still concerns the joining of the hammer and the sickle; but both have now mutated. The land question itself has taken on new meanings. And it is, more emphatically than ever before, a question of gender equity and ecological sustainability.

The political question now is: what type of political organization can attend to the expelled population, the semi-proletariat in town and country? And how to join the expelled with the exploited, those in formal employment?

Rural movements have given their own response. From the 1990s onwards, rural movements have proliferated in Latin America (Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia), Africa (most notably Zimbabwe) and Asia (Nepal, India, Philippines) to become the organizing centres of the semi-proletariat and to pursue none other than the recuperation of land, by means of mass occupations, among other tactics. By the very nature of their land demands, rural movements have often come into direct conflict with racial and caste hegemonies, given the enduring structures of landed power. Moreover, women, for whom land as a reproductive space is most crucial, have obtained a more pronounced role. And the environmental cause has become a priority, given that the destruction inflicted by big capital occurs most immediately at the expense of marginalized communities. This explains why rural movements have converged with indigenous rights, feminist and environmental movements, to the point even of forming a new global 'movement of movements', World Social Forum (WSF). For rural movements, the contradictions of imperialism have been lining up.

As a whole, however, rural movements have made few organizational inroads into urban areas. In fact, they have come up against a durable

political division between town and country: one the one hand, a tendency to occupational corporatism (or workerism) among conventional trade unionism, which lays emphasis on wages and working conditions in discrete occupational sectors; and on the other, organizational segmentation among the landless, tending to single-issue platforms, such as land access and basic services, and to uncoordinated struggles. Thus, organizational unity between the rural and the urban, and between the expelled and the exploited, has not materialized, or been sustained, in most cases. Nor has such unity been served by the international convergence around the WSF, which itself has evaded calls for programmatic action.

A different response to the political question has been given in a handful of cases, where internal contradictions have escalated towards the radicalization of politics, involving often the same movements. In Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Zimbabwe and Nepal, rural–urban unity has been realized by broad-based mobilization, in the course of successive crises and political polarization, which have fused the land and related questions with the national question as a whole. In these cases, the correlation of forces has surpassed conventional channels of political expression, to recast ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ as belonging to the oppressed, and to clinch electoral victories.

The question thus becomes: what alliances are likely to enable the resolution of the agrarian question in alternative ways. Rural–urban and South–South alliances must be given priority; and they must be able to confront monopoly power outright and propose an alternative global society in response to the structural imperatives of our times. Such an alternative society will most certainly be forced to take seriously ‘re-peasantization’ (or re-agrarization) as a modern project, along with new collective forms of production, labour absorption and sustainable industrialization. Moreover, such an alternative society must be able to go beyond the nation-state and propose forms of expressly *regional* agro-industrial integration, against the market- and rules-based integration that neoliberalism has imposed.

The only certainty in the twenty-first century is that the South will not find in the North an image of its own future. The idea of a collective ‘emergence’ in the South and its ‘convergence’ with the North on the terms of capital is, quite simply, a systemic impossibility and an ecological dead end.

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