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Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century?

Henry Bernstein

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ABSTRACT — *This paper first explores the lineages and applications of the "classic" agrarian question, including its fateful adaptation in the early Soviet Union, as the agrarian question of capital. It then argues that the agrarian question of capital has been superseded in the current period of globalization. There are no longer classes of predatory pre-capitalist landed property of any major weight, nor is it useful to regard today's small farmers as "peasants" in any inherited historical sense. Struggles over land may manifest an agrarian question of (increasingly fragmented) classes of labour, but — for all their importance — do not have the same systemic (or world-historical) significance as the agrarian question of capital once had.*

RÉSUMÉ — *L'auteur explore d'abord les ramifications et les applications de la question agraire « classique », notamment son adaptation fatidique dans l'ancienne Union soviétique sous la forme de la question agraire du capital. Il affirme ensuite que cette question agraire du capital a été supplantée au cours de la présente période de mondialisation. Il n'existe plus de classes de prédateurs des biens fonds précapitalistes qui aient le moindrement d'importance; de plus, il n'est pas utile de considérer les petits fermiers d'aujourd'hui comme des « paysans » dans le sens hérité de l'histoire. Les luttes pour les terres peuvent exprimer une question agraire pour des classes ouvrières (de plus en plus fragmentées), mais — malgré toute leur importance — elles n'ont pas la même signification systémique (ou mondiale historique) que la question agraire du capital dans le passé.*

My talk is on a topic of world-historical scope, and bears the marks of long-standing preoccupations and tensions in my own thinking about the history of modern capitalism and the theoretical demands its understanding imposes. To take on so broad a theme means that my presentation is necessarily highly selective and schematic. It is also contentious.

I propose to sketch several broad theses, and to frame and connect them in terms of their coordinates and implications — theoretical and historical, economic and political. The theses are

1. that the "agrarian question" of the Marxist tradition is, in effect, the agrarian question of capital;
2. that the Soviet collectivization of agriculture represented a historically unprecedented attempt to translate aspects of the "classic" agrarian question into a "doctrine of development": an "intent" and strategy to achieve modernization and accumulation;[1]

This is the text of a keynote address to the CASID Congress, Toronto June 1–3, 2006, to which some footnotes and references have been added. I am grateful to Henry Veltmeyer for his invitation to publish the address, previously posted on the CASID website, in *CJDS*. It draws substantially on other recent work: Bernstein 2006a, 2006b, 2006c.

1. Here I adapt the terms of the seminal work by Cowen and Shenton (1996) although, strangely perhaps, a (state-led) drive to accumulation is missing from their account of "doctrines of development," as I have discussed elsewhere (Bernstein 2006d).

3. that other models and experiences of agrarian development doctrine manifested the ideologies and interests of classes of capital and of aspirant "modernizers" (e.g., varieties of bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalism) in different times and places of the formation of modern capitalism;
4. that of special significance among the latter was the period from, say, the 1910s to the 1970s, in terms of class and popular struggle in the countryside — Eric Wolf's "peasant wars of the twentieth century" (Wolf 1969) — which, of course, affected how development doctrine was framed and applied by colonial, then politically independent, regimes across Asia and Africa, as well as by the politically independent states of Latin America;
5. that an effect of the profound changes since the 1970s that we term "globalization" is that there is no longer an agrarian question of capital on a world scale, nor a "peasant question" in any helpful sense, even though the agrarian question has not been resolved in much of the "South."

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The last thesis points to the question of my title: if there is no longer an agrarian question of capital in the globalizing world of this century, might there be another agrarian question (or questions)? I suggest that there may be agrarian questions of labour, and explore what I mean by this.

My starting point is that the agrarian question, in its "classic" and inherited sense, is the agrarian question of capital. It began its career with Marx's compelling account of the primitive accumulation that produced the first agrarian capitalism in England (Marx 1867, pt. 8), and his theorization of the class basis and dynamics of capitalist farming (including capitalist landed property and the theory of rent; Marx 1894, pt. 6). There is an obvious sense, then, in which this is the *agrarian question of capital* (although I have never seen it termed as such). It centres on the transition to capitalism in which two definitive ("stylized") classes of pre-capitalist agrarian social formations ("feudalism") — namely predatory landed property and the peasantry — are transformed (displaced, "eliminated"), by the emergence of capitalist social relations of production, in turn the basis of an unprecedented development of the productive forces in farming.[2] Emergent capitalist landed property and agrarian capital displace predatory landed property and dispossess the peasantry — what may be termed the "enclosure" model of agrarian transition and proletarianization.

There is a less obvious implication of the agrarian question of capital, less obvious because it is simply assumed in the "classic" tradition: namely, that as capitalism is more progressive than the pre-capitalist modes of production it replaces, *the agrarian question of capital subsumes the interests of labour* as capitalism is a (necessary) stage towards an eventual socialist (or communist) society.

Marx's (enclosure) model of the transition to capitalist agriculture was soon subject to various, and increasing, theoretical, historical, and political complexities and tensions. In his "Peasant Question in France and Germany" (1894) Engels sought to address the political challenges confronting mass political *movements* based in a growing industrial working class in countries where "the peasant is a very essential factor of the population, production and political power"; that is, he noted, *all* European countries at that time except Britain and Prussia east of the Elbe. Issues of the role of rural classes in relation to the program of a mass working-class party in Germany, and in relation to the strategic considerations of an underground vanguard party in Russia, informed the classic works of Kautsky (1899) and Lenin (1899), respectively, which did much to define "the agrarian question" as it was understood subsequently. In particular, Lenin established another possible path of

2. On which see the celebrated debate in Dobb et al. (1954), and reprinted in an expanded version as Hilton, ed. (1976). This debate was given a fresh stimulus by the powerful arguments of Robert Brenner — see Aston and Philpin, eds. (1985); Brenner (2001); and the commentaries of Wood (2002a) and Post (2002); also Wood (2002b).

the formation of classes of agrarian capital and labour (hence a different route to proletarianization) via the class differentiation of the peasantry.[3]

Another aspect, and complication, of the "classic" agrarian question is the issue of how agrarian transition contributes (or otherwise) to the accumulation necessary for industrialization. For Marx the sequence from capitalist agrarian transition (commencing in the 16th century) to industrial revolution (from the late 18th century) in Britain was already accomplished. Of course, Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin too were well aware of the connection between agrarian transition and industrialization but it was not central to their theoretical concerns. Ironically, and with fateful consequence, this connection only became an overriding preoccupation of theory and politics as *strategic intervention* in the historically unprecedented circumstances of the first attempt at socialist construction, an "intent" to develop centred on rapid industrialization in a primarily agrarian or "peasant" society. In the fledgling USSR Preobrazhensky (1926) proposed, in uniquely explicit fashion, a strategy for the taxation of agriculture, now in the hands of peasant farmers freed from the exactions of landed property, as the basis of early socialist industrialization. He did not advocate collectivization, which under Stalin's leadership marked a definitive resolution, of a certain kind, of the agrarian question in Soviet conditions. Agrarian transition was to be achieved through the dispossession of the Russian peasantry to establish forms of production that could reap the economies of scale and development of the productive forces hitherto exemplified by capitalist farming. Development of the productive forces through mechanization on large farms would not only boost the agricultural surplus available to an industrial accumulation fund, but also provide the greatly enlarged labour force needed for rapid industrialization. And not least, ostensibly collectivization would resolve the tensions of the worker-peasant alliance, of the union of hammer and sickle, in the moment of October 1917 and its aftermath.

In short, from its original, and retrospective, focus on the first transition to capitalist agriculture in England (Marx), the concerns of the "classic" agrarian question were expanded and extended to the contemporary industrializing countries of western Europe (Engels, Kautsky), and then further afield to its eastern and southern peripheries (Lenin; and also to Ireland). They soon came to encompass as well most of Asia and Africa during the period of colonial imperialism and thereafter, and likewise the social formations of politically independent Latin America whose agrarian class structures of landed property and peasantry were inherited from its experiences of (pre-capitalist) Spanish and Portuguese colonialism. Various attempts to address the complexities and ambiguities, tensions and contradictions, of these trajectories of historical and spatial extension of the agrarian question — and to do so through the formulation and pursuit of doctrines of development — were made both by classes of capital and by its opponents. They confronted each other in a range of specific historical circumstances that they shared and sought to transform for (wholly or partly) different reasons and in (wholly or partly) different ways.

There was nonetheless a common thread running through all the historical specificities indicated (and differences of outcome they imply). That was the theme identified by Marx, albeit elaborated (and complicated) by subsequent experiences and reflections on them: the fate of pre-capitalist agrarian classes of landed property and labour (the peasantry). Of particular significance to the dispossession of pre-capitalist landed property were land reforms following longer or shorter episodes of typically intense class struggle in the countryside (struggles which could also stimulate the "internal metamorphosis," in Lenin's term, of predatory to capitalist landed property, as happened in very different ways in England and Prussia, and subsequently in parts of Latin

3. Strongly emphasized in the important work of T.J. Byres (1991, 1996); see also Byres (2006).

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America and South Asia). The defeat of predatory landed property was an objective shared by Marxists and by bourgeois "modernizers." For the latter, the ambition to establish bourgeois property rights in land (as a condition of capitalist agriculture), was, of course, often compromised by alliances with traditional landed classes to secure and maintain social control and political order (e.g., colonial India and Latin America in the same period). This points to the most fundamental observation: that struggles against predatory landed property and its exactions were manifested in a series of momentous social upheavals to which peasant movements were central. Those struggles traverse modern history from the French Revolution onwards but culminated with particular intensity across much of the world in a period from the 1910s to the 1970s: the period *par excellence* of Wolf's "peasant wars." Examples include Mexico and Russia in the 1910s, eastern and southern Europe and China in the interwar period (continuing in China into the 1940s and 1950s), and in the postwar period Bolivia in the 1950s, Vietnam and Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s, Peru in the 1960s, and Mozambique in the 1970s.

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The resonances of land reform effected by "peasant wars" thus remained potent in the period of state-led development initiated, and generalized, in the postwar conjuncture of decolonization in Asia and Africa and superpower rivalry between the USA and USSR for influence in the Third World. In effect, the period from the 1940s to the 1970s was simultaneously the last phase of Wolf's "peasant wars," and of the "golden age" of land reform in recent history, which also coincided with, and helped shape, the brief moment of state-led developmentalism following decolonization. This was manifested in land reforms of very different types during this period, driven by: continuing (or renewed) impulses of social revolution, as in China and Vietnam; strategies to pre-empt the possibility (or "threat") of social revolution, as in Italy, Japan, and Korea in the 1940s and 1950s under US military occupation, and in the US-led Alliance for Progress in Latin America in the 1960s following the Cuban revolution; between the 1950s and 1970s in (other) state-led development strategies pursued by modernizing regimes of varying nationalist complexions, from Nehru's India and Nasser's Egypt to the Iran of the last Shah.

This wide range of examples from the different zones and times of Wolf's period of "peasant wars" suggests that more and less comprehensive land reforms were pursued for different purposes, by different social and political forces, through more and less radical means, and with various outcomes. Due to land reforms and other dynamics of capitalist restructuring and accumulation in the postwar period, and with all the variation indicated, I suggest that *predatory landed property had largely vanished as a significant economic and political force by the end of the 1970s.* This was one marker of the end of the agrarian question of capital *on a world scale.* Other markers were the implosion of the project of state-led development (and to the extent this had incorporated an agrarian-based strategy of industrial accumulation with any plausibility), and the extraordinary ongoing growth of productivity in capitalist agriculture together with the globalization of agribusiness and all that entails.

Attention now turns even more strongly, then, to the fate(s) of the peasantry, or rural classes of labour, in contemporary capitalism, a theme of continuing — and highly charged — debate. Of course, the other side of the equation of "modernizing" (nationalist) land reforms that served to accelerate the formation of capitalist landed property, hence pace of capitalist development in agriculture (often part of their rationale), was that landless workers and poorer farmers mostly obtained less land (if any) than richer "peasants" and embryonic capitalist farmers — in India, Egypt, Iran, and much of Latin America, for example — and especially women farmers and agricultural workers who generally continue to have the weakest land rights (Razavi 2003). Land reforms in the name of "land to the tiller," a slogan shared across a wide ideological spectrum, seldom led to compre-

hensive redistribution in terms of who received land, except perhaps in the most dramatic instances of social revolution. Rather, who got land, what land, how much land, and what they were able to do with it, was contested along — and often followed — the contours of existing, typically intricate, structures of inequality in agrarian populations beyond that represented by landed property: most ubiquitously inequalities of class and gender among the peasantry and in some cases those of ethnicity and caste as well.

In other instances of major historical significance the initial dispossession and division of large ("feudal" or colonial-commercial) landholdings in favour of "land to the (peasant) tiller" was quickly followed by collectivization under communist regimes: notably the adaptations of the Soviet "model" in China and Vietnam. As noted earlier, this may be considered the equivalent in socialist construction to the formation of large-scale farming, and its contributions to industrialization, in the agrarian transition to capitalism conceived in the "classic" schema, albeit now highly focused by political intent and highly compressed in time. In another kind of scenario, exemplified by generally later cases, when large commercial estates and plantations (often foreign-owned) were expropriated by socialist and radical nationalist regimes brought to power by national liberation struggles they were converted into state farms rather than divided for distribution to peasants/small farmers (for example, in Cuba, Algeria, Mozambique, and Nicaragua).

The most "virtuous" realization of the logic of the "classic" agrarian question, in transitions to both capitalism and (once) socialism, is when rapid agricultural productivity growth can help finance an initial accumulation fund for industrialization without severely undermining investment in farming and the living standards of its classes of labour. Such virtue is historically rare by contrast with far more vicious ways of trying to effect agriculture's contribution to industrialization. This typically proceeds through one form or another of taxing agriculture, regardless of its levels of productivity and investment, and the conditions of labour in the countryside, and/or otherwise intensifying state control over peasant production, and/or promoting/intensifying production and accumulation by agrarian capital (including "progressive," i.e., richer, strata of the peasantry). All these measures were deployed, to varying degrees and in various forms and combinations, in projects of "national development" pursued in the moment of independence from colonial rule in Asia and Africa (and also in Latin America), albeit without the consistency and force, and extreme circumstances, of the Soviet experience, and without generating the levels of industrialization achieved in the USSR.[4]

To reiterate, land reforms, often driven by peasant political action, played a key historical role in a number of agrarian transitions, both capitalist and socialist, by overturning pre-capitalist landed property and its predatory grip on agricultural production and producers. Such land reforms were followed more or less quickly, brutally, and comprehensively, by subsequent change in the forms of farming and whether and how agriculture — or more precisely different agrarian classes — could be pressed into the service of a project of industrial accumulation pursued with more or less clarity, coherence, and effect by a range of "modernizing" regimes. At this point, on the verge of considering globalization and its effects for the agrarian question, I advance another argument: that from the end of the 1970s (if not earlier), it makes little sense — at least from the viewpoint of political economy — to refer to "peasants" in the world(s) of contemporary capitalism. In short, if there are *agrarian questions of labour in the 21st century, they have little connection with any "peasant question" constituted in the earlier epochs — the different times and places — of the formation of modern capital-*

4. Although the contribution of agriculture to the accumulation fund for industrialization in the Soviet Union has been questioned, famously by Ellman (1975).

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ism on a world scale, or indeed with the "classic" agrarian question of capital. This argument is likely to provoke strong responses, and I concentrate now on explaining the components of its reasoning and how they come together.

A first step is to establish, if only by assertion within the limits of time, some key elements of the political economy of agriculture in modern capitalism. First, by the time of independence from colonial rule in Asia and Africa, the economies of their former colonial territories were permeated (like those of Latin America by the same time) by generalized commodity production, that is, capitalist social relations of production and reproduction. Generalized commodity production includes both (1) the internalization of capitalist social relations in the organization of economic activity (including "peasant" production), and (2) how economies are located in international divisions of labour, markets, and circuits of capital and commodities. Classes of agrarian capital and labour have a range of sources beyond the countryside and its "original," localized (indigenous) rural classes of landed property and peasantry (as assumed in the "classic" agrarian question and the historical debates informed by it). Non-rural, non-indigenous sources of agrarian capital are likely to expand and diversify, and their significance to increase, over the history of capitalism. Different types of agrarian capital (in capitalist and petty commodity production, among different peasant classes) are increasingly likely to be combined or articulated with forms of activity and income in non-agricultural sectors, or spaces in social divisions of labour, with (variant) effects for the specific forms of organization, scale, economic performance, and simple or expanded reproduction of farming enterprises. There are similar tendencies to the decomposition of (notionally) once "pure" classes of agrarian labour (including that combined with capital in petty commodity production) that have to diversify their forms, and spaces, of employment (and self-employment) to meet their simple reproduction needs as labour ("survival"), and in the case of petty commodity producers as capital too.

These observations express some of the reasoning why nothing is gained, and much obscured, by characterizing contemporary small farmers as "peasants." For me this typically resonates a notion of deep continuity with past worlds: the "persistence" or "survival" of some essential pre-capitalist social category or form (emblematic of most of recorded history) into the era of current globalization or imperialism — and whether such continuity is celebrated as "resistance" in various strands of populism, or regretted as an index of incomplete development (Hobsbawm 1994, chap. 10) or obstacle to development (Kitching 2001, chap. 10).

Furthermore, agriculture in capitalism today is not synonymous with, nor reducible to, farming, nor is it constituted simply as a set of relations between agrarian classes (landed property, agrarian capital, labour), as in the "classic" agrarian question. Rather, agriculture is increasingly, if unevenly, integrated, organized, and regulated by the relations between agrarian classes and types of farms, on one hand, and (often highly concentrated) capital upstream and downstream of farming, on the other hand. Moreover, such integration and regulation operates through global as well as national (and more local) social divisions of labour, circuits of capital, commodity chains, sources and types of technical change (including in transport and industrial processing as well as farming), and markets.

The salience of these processes for particular branches and types of agricultural production, and forms of agrarian capital and labour, in different times and places is a matter of investigation which, of course, is bound to reveal massive unevenness and variation. They all predate contemporary globalization, but are undoubtedly intensified by the ways in which it affects agriculture directly and indirectly. Important "globalizing" tendencies that affect agriculture directly include new strategies of sourcing by transnational agribusiness; new forms of organization and regulation of global commodity chains for agricultural products; the high profile of agricultural trade and its regulation

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in the agenda of, first, GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) from the mid-1980s and now of the WTO (World Trade Organization); and the drive of transnational agribusiness (chemical and seed) companies to patent, monopolize, produce and sell genetic (plant and animal) material, and to lock in farmers (in both "North" and "South") to its use.[5]

Less direct but no less important effects derive from what may be regarded as the broader tendencies of contemporary globalization. On one side is the widely-held, if still contested, view that "globalization" today represents a new phase of the international centralization and concentration, as well as mobility (and "financialization"), of capital. Perhaps less acknowledged, but still more potent, is that globalization also intensifies the *fragmentation of classes of labour.* Arrighi and Moore (2001, 75) observe that: "the underlying contradiction of a world capitalist system that promotes the formation of a world proletariat but cannot accommodate a generalized living wage (that is, the most basic of reproduction costs), far from being solved, has become more acute than ever." I prefer the term "classes of labour" to the inherited vocabulary of proletarianization/proletariat (and semi-proletarianization/semi-proletariat), as it is less encumbered with problematic assumptions and associations in both political economy (e.g., functionalist readings of Marx's concept of the reserve army of labour), and political theory and ideology (e.g., constructions of an idealized [Hegelian] collective class subject). Classes of labour comprise "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). And the term "fragmentation" encapsulates the effects of how classes of labour in global capitalism, and especially in the "South," pursue their reproduction, that is, through insecure and oppressive — and in many places increasingly scarce — wage employment, often *combined with* a range of likewise precarious small-scale farming and insecure "informal sector" ("survival") activity, subject to its own forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste, and ethnicity. In short, most have to pursue their means of livelihood/reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment.

Paradoxically (and perversely?!) the most vivid concrete exploration of the dynamics and effects of the fragmentation of classes of labour I have come across is in an urban rather than rural context, namely Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums* (2006, and especially chap. 8).[6] There is a strong affinity between what I designate classes of labour and their (intensified) fragmentation and Davis's notion of an "informal working class"; moreover, Davis's emphasis on the dramatic increase of "economic informality" — what I term fragmentation — in Latin American cities since 1980 also applies to the countrysides of the "South" with all their diversity.

It is thus the crisis of labour as a crisis of reproduction — hardly unique to capitalism today but undoubtedly intensified by its globalizing tendencies — that compels attention, and that leads to consideration of an agrarian question of labour. If, as suggested earlier, there is no longer an agrarian question of (global) capital, nor of "national" capitals (and states) in poorer countries today — because they lack the intent or the means, or both — might there be a (new) agrarian question of labour, separated from its historic connection and subordination to that of capital and manifested in

5. For an interpretation within the framework of *la longue durée*, see the remarkable historical political economy of "international food regimes" of Harriet Friedmann (2004); on current agricultural export commodity/value chains, and their wider determinants in processes of globalization, see Gibbon and Ponte (2005) and the review essay by Bernstein and Campling (2006a, 2006b).

6. Although note that Davis acknowledges his debt to the ethnography of Jan Breman which has explored the circuits of "footloose labour" within and between countryside and town in India to such illuminating effect. Davis cites *The Labouring Poor in India* (2003) among Breman's prolific publications.

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struggles for land against "actually existing" forms of capitalist landed property and production?

The appropriate starting point for considering agrarian questions of labour, then, is provided by popular struggles over land today that are driven by experiences of the fragmentation of labour (including losses of relatively stable wage employment in manufacturing and mining, as well as agriculture), by contestations of class inequality, and by collective demands and actions for better conditions of living ("survival," stability of livelihood, economic security), and of which the most dramatic instances are land invasions and occupations. Given the wide, if patchy, spread of such struggles in the "South," it is not surprising that after a hiatus of some decades redistributive land reform is now "back on the agenda" — that is, on the agenda of (neoliberal) development policy as well as that of the Left. Here I focus on the challenges that confront the latter's revived interest in the significance of struggles over land to the social dynamics and class politics of the "South" during the current period of globalization and neoliberalism. While of wider relevance, this restatement incorporates a strong Latin American lineage, and all the more notably so, given the continuing rural-urban migration over the last three decades in Latin America, as well as the continent's generally much more developed capitalist agriculture and industry relative to South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

If there are agrarian questions of labour today, I believe that understanding and assessing them should be disciplined by some important qualifications, in contrast to more enthusiastic (triumphalist?) celebrations of popular struggles over land. First, such struggles do not have the same structural or world-historical significance as the agrarian question of capital, once central to conceptions of the transition to capitalism. Second, it is not helpful to regard land as the definitive political question and terrain of struggle of a (globalized) semi-proletariat, as some do (for example, Moyo and Yeros 2005a, 2005b). Third, it is even more misleading to regard popular struggles over land as a replay in contemporary conditions of the epic peasant movements and struggles of previous epochs, or as representing a dynamic of "re-peasantization" (other than in terms of an ideological yearning).

On the first qualification, popular struggles over land are marked by the contradictions that permeate the fragmentation of classes of labour and their crises of reproduction, which I come back to in a moment. In effect, they are not systemic struggles, although they might disclose possibilities ("imaginaries") of a post-capitalist agrarian order (see note 9 below).

On the second, I am unconvinced by the sweeping nature of the "semi-proletarianization thesis" which tends to rest on a view of global capitalism based in dependency theory, with its functionalist account of the place of the periphery (as in Moyo and Yeros 2005a). There are issues in the political economy used to argue this position, and how it may be subjected to critique, which cannot be pursued here. I would emphasize two things, however. One is that the political struggles of classes of labour today range across far wider terrains than issues of land, important as those are in particular places to particular groups of the "labouring poor." The other is that contemporary struggles over land applauded by advocates of the "semi-proletarianization" approach are typically far more complex and contradictory, and by extension more diverse, than they allow. In part, this reflects the always difficult — *and* unpredictable — process of "translating social facts into political ones," especially when "the many ways in which power fragment(s) the circumstances and experiences of the oppressed" (in the words of Mamdani 1996, 219, 272) are so pervasive an aspect of the "social facts." This is compounded by the (structural) "fragmentation of labour" in the conditions of its pursuit of means of reproduction, proposed here as a central feature of globalization. On one hand, there is a pervasive dynamic of class relations at work; on the other hand, those class relations are not manifested in, or as, (self-)evident or unambiguous class categories and subjects/agents in the manner of "purist" class analysis. Popular struggles over land are more likely to embody uneasy and erratic, contradictory and shifting, alliances of different class elements and tendencies than to express the

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interests of some (notionally) unambiguous and unitary class subject, be it proletarian or "peasant," semi-proletarian, or "worker-peasant."[7]

This links to my third qualification. The vast range of combinations of wage labour with petty commodity production in the pursuit of means of reproduction by the "labouring poor" discloses another, and distinctive, source of fragmentation among classes of labour. This is that petty commodity production in farming and other ("informal sector") activities always contains the possibility of social (class) differentiation. As proposed earlier, petty commodity production within capitalism is constituted as a contradictory combination of the class places of capital and labour, both of which have their own circuits (and disciplines) of reproduction. And petty commodity production, especially when it is founded on access to means of production (notably farmland in this context), typically contains an aspiration to accumulation, even when this is likely to be realized by only a (small) minority of petty producers. Petty production embroils the "labouring poor" in a world of "relentless micro-capitalism," in Davis's (2006) formulation. He further remarks that "petty exploitation (endlessly franchised) is its essence, and there is growing inequality *within* the informal sector," including how it permeates "the sphere of the household" (181). While his observations concern the urban informal economy, they describe dynamics that apply to petty commodity production in farming (and other activities) in the countryside. Champions of the "semi-proletarianization thesis" seem to aspire to liberate "worker-peasants" from direct subsumption by capital (workers employed by others), and to restore them to full "peasantness." In the analytical framework deployed here, this means enabling them to work for themselves by dint of their possession of capital. It also subjects them to the vagaries of "relentless micro-capitalism," which generate tendencies to individualization: the pursuit of individual solutions to the contradictions of social existence, through securing and "setting in motion" private property in means of production. This also includes more or less overt forms of exploitation that permeate patriarchal farming households and relations between households, and aspirations to accumulation, noted earlier.[8]

These observations are not offered in any "anti-peasant" spirit nor, more to the point, in any prescriptive stance on petty commodity production. Rather, they seek to contribute to a dispassionate and realistic analysis of the social conditions of classes of labour in global capitalism, and the challenges their diverse forms of fragmentation present to those whose political sympathies are with the exploited and oppressed. The structural source of the agrarian question of labour is that encapsulated by Arrighi and Moore (2001) (quoted above): the scarcity, and increasing scarcity, of employment in contemporary capitalism that can provide "a generalized living wage (that is, the most basic of reproduction costs)." To what extent, and in what ways, that scarcity generates struggles for land, by whom, and how (the modes of struggle), are issues at the core of *problematizing* agrarian questions of labour and understanding their specificities across a wide range of conditions: of different agrarian structures and dynamics, rural and urban structures of class inequality (and their intricate interconnections), and labour markets and patterns of employment and reproduction in local, national, and global circuits of economic activity (and their interconnections).

At the same time, recognizing the possibilities of agrarian questions of labour can contribute to a long overdue reconsideration by historical materialism of the theories, histories, and sometimes catastrophic politics of its inherited understanding of the agrarian question of capital. This includes any

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7. As I have tried to argue in the case of Zimbabwe (Bernstein 2004, 210–220).

8. The Bolshevik notion that all peasants, albeit differentiated by class relations, are "ideological *kulaks*" has a rational kernel, if hardly one that justified the extraordinary force applied to the dispossession of the Russian peasantry in the name of building socialism.

uncritical attachment to the benefits of large-scale farming. First, it is salutary to recover a properly materialist rather than technicist conception of scale in agriculture as an effect of specific, and variant, forms of social relations. Second, the scale and distribution — *and* uses — of capitalist landed property in particular circumstances are often shaped by speculative rather than productive investment. In short, the relations between capitalist landed property and agrarian capital (invested in production) have to be problematized and investigated, as well as the relations of both with classes of labour, of course. Third, the productive superiority of large(r)-scale farming is often contingent on conditions of profitability underwritten by direct and hidden subsidy and forms of economic rent, and indeed ecological rents. Fourth, then, materialist political economy needs to take much more seriously the environmental consequences and full social costs of the technologies that give modern capitalist farming the astonishing levels of productivity it often achieves. And, I would add, that endeavour needs to confront issues of population, which are central to the ecological economics of Joan Martinez Alier (2002), for example, but are (so far) completely absent from the historical political economy of international food regimes developed by Harriet Friedmann (see note 5 above). This also indicates an issue for the politics of land today, especially as manifested in romantic or populist versions of "re-peasantization." Even if land redistribution from below through popular struggle is able to generate the benefits of more secure, adequate, and sustainable bases of livelihood for those who gain land — perhaps initially, and fundamentally, by enabling them to eat more and to eat better from their own efforts — there remains the question of provisioning, just as effectively, the massive urban populations of the world. That, it seems to me, is a crucial aspect of any more systemic notion of an agrarian question of labour.[9]

The different types of issues and problems I have sketched illustrate some of the challenges of, and demands on, an agrarian political economy less confined by its historic sources and preoccupations, and more committed to problematizing what is changing in today's (globalizing) capitalism. They are *not* presented as elements of a general argument *against* large-scale farming. Indeed, as might be apparent, I am skeptical about *any* "models" of (virtuous) farm scale — large or small as "beautiful" — constructed on deductive or a priori grounds. The problems of this procedure are apparent when it is applied — as it typically is in "comparative statics" — across such different agrarian zones as, say, the densely populated and intensely cultivated areas of "peasant capitalism" of South Asia with their often violent class struggle between (rich and middle) "peasants" and labour (Banaji 1990), and those areas of "large uncultivated farms with fertile land near roads, markets and credit facilities" that the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) (Landless Workers' Movement) targets for occupation in Brazil, according to James Petras (1998, 130). What should also be clear, I trust, is my belief that a materialist political economy has the intellectual means to confront contemporary realities, and to take on the challenges of recognizing, and assessing, new forms of struggle in — and over — a wide range of socially and environmentally diverse countrysides.

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9. In effect, one that moves from a focus on specific (and diverse) concrete struggles that manifest agrarian questions of labour to the terrain of an older socialist tradition that equated the interests of labour with those of humanity as a whole. This is the terrain of imagining entirely different systems of agriculture able to provision the world with adequate and healthy sources of nutrition. Key challenges to any such "imaginaries" with claims to plausibility are issues of population and the development and application of new farming technologies (which might include genetically modified organisms), as well as of desirable social organization of production and distribution. Of the authors cited here, Martinez-Alier (2002) is alert to problems of population size and growth and has a realist (rather than constructivist) view of the science of nature — both to the good, but his proposed solution of a return to small-scale ("peasant") farming and its ostensible virtues is a fantasy (see Bernstein 2005). McMichael (forthcoming) seems to share a similarly romantic view of the ("peasant") alternative to contemporary capitalist agriculture/agribusiness.

Once again, this is not to deny the class impulses underlying struggles for land — otherwise it would make no sense to conceive of agrarian questions of labour. Nor is it to withdraw political sympathy and support for such struggles because they fail to satisfy the demands of an idealized (class-purist or other) model of political action. The point rather is, first, to recognize and, second, to be able to analyze, the contradictory sources and impulses — and typically multi-class character — of such struggles, in ways that can inform a realistic and politically responsible assessment of them. This includes recognizing that agrarian questions of labour are typically only *one* element of many struggles for land — and an element that can be greater or smaller, more or less clearly articulated, more or less organized, pursued more or less effectively, *and* connected more or less programmatically with wider social and political struggles of labour.

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