

# The Classical Agrarian Question: Myth, Reality and Relevance Today

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## Abstract

This article traces a particular view of the classical agrarian question in Marxian political economy which has sustained the myth of industrialization as the basic objective of transformation. The idea was born in the late nineteenth century among the European vanguard, then consolidated as an axiom during the Cold War, only to be resurrected in the neoliberal period by a professionalized discipline of 'agrarian studies'. This article argues that such a view fails to acknowledge the historic importance of the national question and its land and peasant components, which are irreducible to industrialization. The article restores national sovereignty to its proper place in the classical agrarian question and argues that it remains the cornerstone of all other dimensions of the agrarian question, including gender equity and ecological sustainability.

## Keywords

classical agrarian question, industrialization, national question, land question, peasant question

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## Introduction

A specter is haunting the world—the specter of a new agrarian question. There is no country today that can ensure the food security of its people into the future; no major investor that has not bet on agriculture and natural resources; no international organization that is not concerned with its consequences; and no serious social or political movement that is not considering the peasant path as a modern solution to the multiple crises of our times, the economic, climate, energy and food.

The contrary solution—to grab land and natural resources—is no solution for the large majority of humanity and in the long run it cannot but result in catastrophe for civilization. There is urgent need to think creatively about alternatives in development and, indeed, rethink the fundamentals of modernity, if we are to save it from its own barbarism. What we cannot do is blind ourselves by established conventions, create myths about the past and illusions as to the future.

One such myth/illusion concerns the role of industrialization in overcoming ‘backwardness’ and resolving the agrarian question. This is a tremendously resilient idea, basic to Eurocentric modernity, which however must deny its imperialist foundations and its genocides in order to become good coin. It is true that industrialization remains necessary to the advance of humanity, but not on any terms and certainly not the anti-popular and militaristic terms of monopoly capitalism. How then to think of advance without surrendering to the monopolies?

Such a reflection continues to require a critique of Eurocentric and economistic tendencies which have made a comeback in Marxian political economy, to the point of pronouncing the classical agrarian question dead, purportedly for no longer serving its primordial function, industrialization. Absent in these approaches is acknowledgement of a series of questions, namely the national question and its land and peasant components, which are irreducible to industrialization, but which are basic to autonomous, democratic, equitable and sustainable development. It is precisely the national question that marked the culmination of the classical agrarian question and remains the cornerstone of contemporary agrarian questions.

In what follows, we trace the trajectory of the industrialization myth, before clarifying the nature of the classical agrarian question and suggesting how it remains relevant today.

## The Making of Classical Myth

The notion of an 'agrarian question' (henceforth AQ) became central to Marxian political economy in the late nineteenth century. From the beginning, different dimensions of a larger whole were privileged in alternative formulations. Terry Byres (1991a: 9) has argued that '[t]hree distinct senses of the agrarian question may be distinguished: (a) the Engels sense, (b) the Kautsky-Lenin sense, and (c) the Preobrazhensky sense'. We need not dwell on the merits of this typology yet. The point we wish to explore first is how, on the basis of this earlier generation of thinking, Marxist discourse on the AQ evolved largely in relation to the theme of backwardness, seen as the main ailment and industrialization as the prescribed remedy. This binary of backwardness/industrialization became the basis of latter-day myth-making.

Each of the three senses referred to the political, social and economic dimensions of backwardness, respectively. Yet, they also converged in their underlying concern with obtaining, whether by capitalist or socialist means, the modern industrialized outcome that England had obtained earlier, ahead of her 'great power' rivals. Among this first European generation of theorists, later imputed classical status, the agrarian question was essentially the agrarian question of industrialization. It was a question which permitted a variety of perspectives on the politics and economics of industrialization, but without managing ultimately to transcend the political and ideological limitations of turn-of-the-century Europe.

After the Second World War, the theme of backwardness/industrialization gained new life and evolved in different directions, either towards a radical reinterpretation, or a conservative rendition which, more often than not, reduced industrialization to a technocratic exercise and accentuated Eurocentric distortions. At the crux of the matter were deeply political issues, such as land concentration, or what to do with a mass peasant population, which continued to determine the relation of forces of whole economies and societies. It was here that the backwardness/industrialization binary would become an axiom with strongly conservative tendencies.

In its most conservative rendering, backwardness was posited as a quality innate to non-European societies and industrialization as an end in itself, best left to trained economists and development planners. This formulation was consecrated during the Cold War in the discipline of

'development economics' and its founding agenda defined by W.W. Rostow and Arthur Lewis in terms of 'stages of growth' and 'dual economies', respectively. A Marxian discourse of Soviet vintage ran parallel to this view to propound a 'stage' theory of its own, based on the thesis of a stagnant 'imperialist-feudal' alliance in the non-European world. It recognized land reform as an obstacle, but it would not, for the most part, support radical alternatives, or a peasant path, until the Chinese divergence. Meanwhile, 'Western Marxism', to use Perry Anderson's (1976) term, drifted away from political economy towards philosophy, as disenchantment and social democracy set in. Yet, a new generation of theorists also emerged at this time, more organic to the peasant struggles of the Third World, for whom backwardness was seen as a dynamic process intrinsic to imperialism and industrialization as an aspect of a larger strategic objective: national liberation. Knocking down obstacles such as land monopolies, which condensed economic, political and ideological power, or mobilizing the peasantry, was naturally seen as necessary to unlocking the energies of liberation.

The above bifurcation between the Eurocentric convention, of Right and Left and the radical critique was most pronounced in the political and ideological struggles of the decolonizing and developing nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America. They synergized in the 1960s with the Sino-Soviet split and also had influence over a new generation of Marxists in the West who re-engaged after 1968. Nonetheless, with the benefit of hindsight, the North-South dialogue remained problematic, if not superficial; the radical critique could rather easily be dismissed as *passé*, little more than a decade later. In the process, Marxists in the West returned to political economy, but intellectual thought on the AQ became ever more professionalized and confined to the halls of academia.

Once professionalized, the AQ obtained a new level of sophistication, but could not easily shed its Eurocentric and economistic heritage, or avoid political self-absorption. In fact, a new conceptual fabric began to be woven with threads drawn from the earlier generation of European thinkers, now termed 'classical', all the while their dialectical method was being eroded and the Eurocentric convention reinforced. This would widen the gap between intellectual trends and the new political struggles against neoliberalism, especially in the South. Indeed, they would enter

a collision course, as a new wave of rural movements emerged to bring the land and peasant questions back to the agenda. In the event, eminent Marxist scholars would respond by waging ideological war against the most basic demand of the new movements, land reform, for not meeting their high socialist standards! The collision was all too similar to that of the 'two lefts' of the previous period (Moyo and Yeros 2007a). Its immediate cause was the radical land reform occurring in Zimbabwe, the most important land reform after the Cold War.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the South embarked on its own trajectory of intellectual professionalization, but of a different sort. Under structural adjustment, university infrastructures and salaries came under assault in most countries and research became increasingly subordinated to 'project funding'. Thus, the detachment that had long characterized the North finally spread to the South. The process was so consequential that the new wave of rural movements very often evolved at a distance from the traditional national intelligentsia as well. Research became ever more vulnerable to the co-optation strategies of donors and governments, plus the North Atlantic centres of learning. In these difficult years, the AQ was kept alive largely by the rural movements and their 'peasant intellectuals' (Moyo and Yeros 2005).

In this process, the backwardness/industrialization axiom was also resurrected in Marxian political economy. We believe that the drifting apart of research and praxis goes a long way to explain this outcome. As the Cold War came to a close, no less a scholar than Terry Byres (1991a: 9) would insist on the importance of 'backwardness' to the AQ, evade mention of land reform and speak of socialism almost stoically:

[a]n unresolved agrarian question is a central characteristic of economic backwardness. In its broadest meaning, the agrarian question may be defined as the continuing existence in the countryside of a poor country of substantive obstacles to an unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside agriculture. Originally formulated with respect to incomplete capitalist transition and certain political consequences of that incompleteness, the agrarian question is now part, also of the debate on possible socialist transition in poor countries.

This accompanied an important essay on the diversity of agrarian transitions (Byres 1991b: 12), in which industrialization was defined as the

benchmark of 'resolved' agrarian questions, regardless of the fate of the countryside:

[i]f ... the agrarian question is so resolved [in this case, on the basis of peasant production, but not exclusively] ... in such a way that capitalist industrialization is permitted to proceed, then, as the social transformation comes to be dominated by industry and by the urban bourgeoisie, there ceases to be an agrarian question with any serious implications. There is no longer an agrarian question in any substantive sense.

We must emphasize that we are speaking of a new level of sophistication, which has otherwise contributed to important aspects of the research agenda, such as on the question of historic transitions. One might recall that this question had been raised by Lenin with programmatic purpose, to defend the American path ('capitalism from below') against the Prussian ('capitalism from above'), while also explicitly leaving open the possibility of a wider spectrum of transitions. Subsequent Marxist scholarship elaborated on the diversity of transitions in the South, constituted by a host of factors, such as contingent agrarian structures, the nature of the state, linkages with non-agricultural sectors and insertion of the particular country in the world economy. Thus, Byres (1991b) distinguished between six paths of capitalist agrarian transitions in Asia, adding to a corpus of research already established in the South, such as on socialist transitions in Asia (Amin 1981) and the capitalist transitions in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Amin 1972; Cardoso and Falleto 1979; Mafeje 1991 and Williams 1994[1944]). Yet, the point remains that industrialization was now being reinstated as an end in itself, by scholars as influential and open-minded as Byres.

Two important and related problems arise from linking the agrarian question to the backwardness/industrialization axiom: (a) the 'export' of the AQ from the North to the South, which must carry the burden of transition alone; and (b) the banalization of industrial transition, abstracted from its relations with monopoly capital and its militarism and its social, political and environmental consequences.

The relationship between agrarian transition and industrialization has been scrutinized towards very different conclusions. At the heart of the matter is the historic role of global primitive accumulation in the transition to industrial capitalism. Rather than an incidental affair, global

primitive accumulation was a basic determinant of industrial transition in England and Europe, which would have otherwise been stifled and reduced to a lesser event. The original English and European paths of industrialization were hardly an endogenous affair (Amin 1976; Rodney 1972; Williams 1994[1944]), much less did they entail an 'agricultural revolution' in Europe (Patnaik 2006, 2011), if by this is meant a transformation sufficient for industrialization. Slave labour and other types of forced labour in the old colonies and the markets for precious metals and tropical agricultural commodities which they sustained, were fundamental sources of surplus appropriation and capital accumulation in the leading countries, which over a long period sustained investment in manufacturing. The subsequent influx of tropical food goods was just as crucial to capital accumulation in the leading industries, by reducing the wage bill and compressing competing demands in the new colonial territories. This relationship would not rupture after decolonization and in fact would re-intensify under neoliberalism (Patnaik 2012). We must conclude that the agrarian question of advanced capitalism has never been resolved: *economic progress has been as congenital an ailment as economic backwardness.*

The gravest consequence of connecting the AQ exclusively to backwardness has been the displacement of the debate over politics and policy from North to South, absolving the North of any transformative obligation, other than providing 'aid' to the South, or removing subsidies to help the poor 'compete'. Such a line of thinking permeates both Left and Right, with few exceptions.<sup>2</sup> As for the banalization of industrialization, even the early European thinkers who converged around this objective had divergent views on how to obtain it and differences were stark: there were advocates of capitalist or socialist industrialization, fast or slow, light or heavy, balanced or unbalanced, violent or non-violent. Today, there is great effort in affirming one tendency, the economicist.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this tendency has reached new extremes, particularly in the work of Henry Bernstein, who has gone further to declare the classical agrarian question resolved on a global scale, independently of the degree or quality of industrial transitions in the South. To understand this argument, we might recall a simpler notion of transformation, much simpler than Byres' numerous transitions above, but present in a wide

spectrum of discourses in heterodox economics on structural economic transformation—or ‘modern economic growth’, in Simon Kuznets’s expression. This notion holds that a significant spurt in agricultural growth either precedes or accompanies early to middle stages of modern economic transformation, until a stage is reached when the share of agriculture in total output, as well as labour force, starts declining: the faster this decline, the more successful and complete is supposed to be a process of agricultural transformation. Such a rendering of ‘resolution’ hinges on the view that agriculture plays a central role in modern economic transformation and that its success or failure may be measured with reference to the nature of overall economic transformation.

A minimalist version may even specify a set of changes in economic and social relations of production within agriculture, necessarily required for significant increases in productivity and investible surplus to facilitate a process of successful transition capitalism. Once the logic of capitalist social relations in agriculture is firmly in place (*e.g.*, agrarian capital and agrarian proletariat), resulting in technical development and enhanced surplus generation (via increased productivity of both land and labour), it may be said that the AQ has been addressed.

In recent years, Bernstein has been the most spectacular advocate of such a minimalist view, assuming a harder line than Byers, who had made a point of not specifying a necessary set of changes in the countryside. Bernstein has provided a ‘stylized’ outline highlighting what he considers to be the core dimensions of the classic agrarian question and goes on to conclude that (2004: 200, *italics in original*):

[t]he ‘classic’ agrarian question, I would suggest, is the agrarian question of capital. To the extent that its logic of agrarian transition succeeded (and may still succeed?) in accomplishing the social transformation and technical development of agriculture...and in ways that contribute to industrialization...then the agrarian question of capital is *also* that of labour as the two definitive classes of a new mode of production, representing historical progress.

As should be evident, Bernstein’s classic agrarian question hinges on what he considers to be the necessary economic and social wherewithal for the launch of capitalist development. Furthermore, he also suggests that the logic of capitalist development in his scheme of resolution of the



‘classical’ agrarian question subsumes the ‘agrarian question of labour’ by which, presumably, he implies absorption of dispossessed producers from agriculture (via primitive accumulation) in industrial and related non-agricultural sectors.

Bernstein goes on to argue that across ‘times and places’, the changing material and social conditions underlying capitalist trajectories may imply very different expectations and demands as regards the resolution of the agrarian question in specific contexts. He suggests that the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, by the time of their decolonization and developmentalism had already been permeated by capitalist social relations of production and reproduction and thus for them to embark on their respective (capitalist) economic transformations would have required unlocking the critical constraint of capital investments, or adequate agrarian capital. But if agrarian capital has sources beyond the local countryside and if ‘the range of non-agrarian capital’ may diversify and expand over time, in accordance with expectations (Bernstein 2004: 201), then clearly the critical constraint above may be diluted both for the capitalist transformation of agriculture, as well as towards its contribution to industrialization.

Given the nature and direction of Bernstein’s argument, it leads him to suggest that (2004: 202, *italics in original*):

with contemporary ‘globalization’ and the massive development of the productive forces in (advanced) capitalist agriculture, the centrality of the ‘classic’ agrarian question to industrialization is no longer significant for international capital. In this sense, then, there is *no longer an agrarian question of capital on a world scale*, even when the agrarian question—as a basis of national accumulation and industrialization—has not been resolved in many countries of the ‘South’...

To put it simply: for Bernstein, given the possibility of large capital inflows for the developing countries in the era of contemporary globalization, *the classical agrarian question is dead!*

The problems with this abound. The analytical rupture between the so-called agrarian questions of ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ for the contemporary South is not only misleading but also a misreading of the ‘classics’ for whom questions of capital and labour were viewed in a dialectical manner; it was certainly not the case, as Bernstein claims, that in their

agrarian question of capitalist transition the question 'of labour' was simply subsumed by the question 'of capital'. Also, the claim that the mobility of international capital in the era of globalization implies the 'end' of the AQ of 'capital' is a travesty of even the minimalist rendering of the theme, as there is no automatic/organic connection between the flow of capital and successful capitalist transitions in agriculture and elsewhere. Finally, the fact that land grabs have been steadily escalating in the South throughout the neoliberal period (Moyo 2008a; Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012), demonstrates that capital accumulation, whether linked to contemporary Western finance or Chinese industry, remains closely integrated with agriculture.

The above has sought to clarify how a Eurocentric and economicist version of the AQ has sustained a myth around industrialization: the idea was born in the late nineteenth century among the European vanguard amid great power rivalries; it was then consolidated as a politically convenient axiom among Cold Warriors; only to be resurrected in the neoliberal period by a highly professionalized discipline of 'agrarian studies'. We have also suggested that this classical myth-making has drawn on the earlier European generation, but 'purified' it. Yet, neither did the classical agrarian question end with Preobrazhensky, nor did the original European vanguard have enough insight on, or organic experience of, the struggles and transitions in the South.

## **When and What was the Classical Agrarian Question?**

The periodization of the classical AQ determines its content, which in turn demands that we justify our method of periodization. In our view, such periodization must correspond to the major stages and phases of imperialism, which in themselves have defined the challenges of the whole of humanity (Moyo and Yeros 2011; Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012). The stage of imperialism dominated by corporate monopolies, finance capital and militarism and which took hold in the late nineteenth century, presented challenges to both metropolitan and peripheral societies. The challenges in question did not mature simultaneously, nor were they identical; nonetheless, they were continuous and dialectical. To identify

this stage exclusively with the challenges presented to the European vanguard is unjustifiable.

The classical category must incorporate two sets of agrarian questions: that of industrialization and that of national liberation. As we have seen, the European vanguard, confronted with unequal development and imperialist rivalries, was called upon to respond to the challenge of industrialization, whether by capitalist or socialist means. By contrast, the nationalist vanguard under imperialist domination was presented most immediately with the task of liberation. It is true that a few European Marxists, with special mention of Rosa Luxemburg, grappled with the character and consequences of capitalist expansion in the peripheries, but an organic response to such a challenge would have to await the maturation of anti-imperialist nationalism. As this spread and gained its footing, the agrarian question itself evolved, reaching its most robust expression first in Maoism, then in African nationalism and the new revolutionary thought emanating from Latin America and the Caribbean. It was in these tectonic shifts of the middle of twentieth century that the political, social and economic dimensions of the AQ, which the European vanguard had previously articulated, were ultimately restructured and submitted to the quintessential cause of the time, national liberation. The great feat of the agrarian question of liberation was to incorporate industrialization without surrendering to it; and thereby to create political space for the elaboration of new agrarian questions.

The key difference between the AOs of industrialization and liberation is that the latter has articulated with unprecedented clarity and conviction the requirement of *sovereign* industrialization, or the safeguarding of the capacity to determine one's own external relations and internal balances. Moreover, by its very logic, it has enabled the posing of new agrarian questions in a universal way, namely gender equity and ecological sustainability—these being the dimensions that have most defined the contemporary AQ—as well as the incipient debate on 'regional integration'. Thus, the AQ of liberation has been the common thread between the classical and contemporary AOs, consisting in the maturation of the former and cornerstone of the latter. We submit that the AQ of liberation remains at the heart of the contemporary AQ, for its fate will continue to have preponderant influence over the fate of gender relations, ecology, or regionalism. Put differently, neither gender equity, nor ecological sustainability, nor autonomous regional integration can be

expected to progress under the tutelage of monopoly capitalism. It is this which justifies our own exclamation: *long live the agrarian question!*

To explain how national liberation constitutes the mature form of the classical AQ and how it relates to the contemporary, three methodological points are in order with regards to their dialectical continuity, the structure of imperialism and the political subject of the AQ.

First, every new dimension of the AQ has consisted not in a rupture, but a continuous restructuring of the previous dimensions, entailing their clarification and re-qualification on a new level. This applies to both the classical and contemporary dimensions of the AQ and does not in itself create a boundary between one and the other. What it does is shed light on the arbitrariness of confining the classical question to the boundaries of Europe. Thus, the social dimension emphasized by Lenin/Kautsky did not suppress the political dimension of Engels; it only made clearer the trends in the countryside (social differentiation) and re-qualified the political questions at stake, on which Lenin and Kautsky were to grow apart (starting with the land and peasant question). Similarly, the economic dimension of Preobrazhensky (or Chayanov, for that matter) did not suppress either Engels or Lenin/Kautsky; it sought to clarify the economic imperatives of the Soviet Union in the face of its existential threat (imperialist encirclement and capitalist restoration), requiring the re-qualification of the peasant question and its role in industrialization (via 'socialist primitive accumulation' or 'vertical cooperativism'). It was precisely at this time, the middle of 1920s, that Mao also began to condense the political and social dimensions of the AQ into a 'national revolution' and submit them to the requirement of liberation from imperialist domination. The same methodological point holds for the contemporary gender, ecology and regionalist dimensions, which have not entailed a mere addition of new items onto a long list, but a restructuring of the relationship and meaning of all dimensions involved.

Second, the classical and contemporary AQs are differentiated most clearly by the phasing of imperialism and the distinct challenges which each phase has imposed. National liberation altered the coordinates of political action on a world scale, by wresting political sovereignty from monopoly capital. But it did not oust monopoly capital: this regrouped into a 'collective imperialism' (Amin 2003) to regain the political initiative in the late 1970s and impose a new set of challenges. The ensuing consolidation of monopoly-finance capital and the new scramble for

monopoly control over the planet's natural resources and agricultural land have constituted a concerted attempt to reverse the gains of national liberation (Foster 2010; Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012). The challenge in the current phase is thus qualitatively different: the key issue is no longer the conquest of political sovereignty, in a generalized sense, although colonial questions do persist and even expanding (Moyo and Yeros 2011); but the defense and deepening of the already conquered sovereignty regime. Today, this would be impossible without a gendered understanding of the AQ, or enforcement of the differential ecological rights and obligations pertaining to North and South, or regional pooling of sovereignty and coordinated agro-industrial integration.

Third, the political subject of the AQ has undergone progressive conceptual shifts in a single stream of thought, whose continuity, by virtue of the Marxian grammar used, is especially unambiguous in the classical agrarian question. This stream began with the privileging of the industrial proletariat and the disparaging of the peasantry, as in Marx, Engels and Kautsky; to recognizing the peasant land cause as a key question in the proletarian revolution, as in Lenin; to embracing the peasantry, intellectually and organizationally, as in Mao, Fanon and Cabral. It is this stream of thought which is especially indicative of the maturation of the classical AQ, whereby the universal challenge of national liberation finally obtained its most natural political subject. With these three points in mind, we may now outline the basic contours of this process of maturation.

The political, social and economic dimensions of the AQ were already present in Marx, although not articulated as a programmatic 'AQ'. Analysis of the social appears especially in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where class analysis comes to life and in his retrospective on primitive accumulation, in the final chapter of Volume I of *Capital*, where he details the expulsion of the English peasantry from the land and the associated process of enslavement in the colonies and pillaging of natural resources. Primitive accumulation was, for Marx, a secular tendency, which condemned the peasantry to extinction. On this basis, the economic dimension of the AQ, if it was ever suggested programmatically, was this: despite all its barbarism, primitive accumulation must be allowed to proceed. Arguably, the only discernible variable in capitalism which distorted its otherwise secular path was the operation of land rent, elaborated in Volume III of *Capital*, or otherwise the reactionary politics

that intervened, feudal or parasitic. Notwithstanding his later self-doubt in connection to the possibilities of the Russian commune, his historic verdict was unambiguous: the peasantry was a 'sack of potatoes', exploited by the system but still conservative, superstitious and reactionary; the associated 'lumpenproletariat' was a hopeless tool of reaction; and the indigenous peoples and slaves of the old and new colonies were either without much history of their own, or subject to more backward modes of production, to which European capitalism was an advance.

This analysis and verdict weighed heavily over a whole generation, reflecting not only the factual absence of political alternatives in the face of globalizing capital, but also the arrogance of bourgeois, industrial European society, with an evolving race consciousness.

Engels' contribution, which was a hard line up to the end, was a refinement of analytical tools for the study of social differentiation, in particular among the French and German peasantries, via a typology of rich, middle and poor peasants. However, what distinguished him most was his position on matters of political programme. The urban isolation and defeat of the Paris Commune had given way to the advance of universal male suffrage and the political organization of the working class. The new situation demanded that the emerging social-democratic parties formulate an electoral strategy for the countryside. In the event, Engels reacted strongly to any suggestion of promising what the peasantry demanded and his own verdict was clear: do not promise them land, but socialist cooperatives and economies of scale. This marked the birth of the AQ as a 'peasant question'. The verdict was essentially unchanged, despite the fact that the modern social-democratic parties now had organizational capacity to advance concrete alternatives and organize town and country. But the peasantry, for old Engels, remained 'apathetic', land reforms were out of place, and the colonial people off the map.

Kautsky carried the essence of this tradition forward, even though he belonged to a new generation which took the analysis of agrarian transformation to an even higher level of sophistication. His publication of the *Agrarian Question* in 1898 was a landmark. His analysis of the relations between large- and small-scale farming was of particular importance: capitalism no longer exhibited an unambiguous secularity, but presented a semi-functional inter-dependence between large and small farms. Such relations were determined primarily by the accumulation needs of large-scale farming and secondarily by the social

reproduction needs of a 'semi-proletarianized' peasantry. Nonetheless, for Kautsky, the latter remained historically condemned and politically hopeless, save for those whose 'intellectual horizon' could be widened by external migration!

Lenin published his *Development of Capitalism in Russia* in the same year. He shared Kautsky's sophistication and emphasis on social differentiation; and their conclusions on the inter-dependence of farming scales and the role of the semi-proletariat were remarkably similar. However, Lenin is wrongly placed in the same category as Kautsky. The similar analytical conclusions led Lenin to very different political praxis, that is, to a re-qualification of the political question and fresh thinking on economic possibilities. Indeed, Lenin was the transitional figure in the political theory of the AQ and this must be recognized if we are to have a bearing on subsequent developments. In his *Agrarian Programme*, published in 1907, after having seen what is at stake in a revolutionary situation, Lenin unambiguously proclaimed 'the struggle for land' by the poor peasantry to be the basis of the strategic alliance with the proletariat. From this ensued his economic programme of radical land reform and a peasant path similar to America, as a means of advancing the forces of production in the countryside, without the reactionary influence of the junkers. It is true that he never questioned the leading role of the proletariat vis-à-vis the peasantry—'all power to the Soviets' would express most powerfully the revolutionary vision of 1917—and he never lost faith in economies of scale either. But his tolerance of the peasantry, especially as a political ally in the revolution, did define his thought, which helps to explain his defence of the New Economic Programme based on peasant production in the post-revolutionary state.

For our purposes, two further aspects of his thought and practice must be highlighted: his contradictory relegation of the countryside to its 'spontaneous' political tendencies (he had criticized this in relation to the urban proletariat, but lower organizational standards applied to the peasantry); and his defense of national self-determination as the basis for socialist internationalism. As the AQ moved South, the organization of the peasantry by the vanguard parties of liberation would be claimed as a fundamental political task; and national self-determination would finally encounter its motive force.

The penultimate dimension of the classical AQ, which is conventionally identified with Preobrazhensky, should be widened to include his

detractors, especially Chayanov. Again, demoting the latter has a silencing effect on the subsequent evolution of the AQ. The post-revolutionary situation presented for the first time the problem of economic development in a state with a socialist orientation. The question of how to transform Soviet society and economy adhered to the modern industrial ideal of the West, but the goal was to be achieved differently: defensively, against external aggression and without embarking on colonial pillage. This in itself was a novelty: all the alternatives of industrialization were on the table, but not colonialism. The 'left' tendency of Preobrazhensky and Trotsky defended rapid industrialization, the imposition of a high tribute on the peasantry and non-violence, which together defined the proposal of 'socialist primitive accumulation'. Implausible in its commitment to non-violence, it was appended with faith in the advance of revolution in the West and eventual technological assistance from the more advanced countries. The 'right' tendency of Stalin, Bukharin and the independent Chayanov defended, to differing degrees, the worker-peasant alliance, implying a slower pace of industrialization, a more plausible strategy of non-violence and reliance on one's own resources and capacities, or 'socialism in one country'.

We do not know if the latter policy would have succeeded. We do know that Stalin's tragic genius was suddenly to put 'socialist primitive accumulation' to the service of 'socialism in one country'. But we also know that the worker-peasant alliance in the Russian revolution was profoundly unbalanced from the beginning; and that the whole weight of European Marxism had always been disparaging of the peasantry. In this sense, it remains hypocritical by an assortment of Marxists, including purists, to demonize Stalin for a tragedy that was written into the anti-peasant logic of the European convention, if not also the genocidal tendencies of European society. Indeed, the only leading intellectual who sought a more profound understanding of the peasantry was Chayanov. He went beyond Lenin's political theory to seek an economic theory of the peasantry, via its 'operational logic' and propose forms of cooperativism aimed at a functional inter-dependence between large- and small-scale cooperative enterprises. If the Marxist convention had overplayed the secular force of social differentiation, Chayanov may certainly be accused of underplaying it. But he did take the necessary intellectual step to engage with 80 per cent of the Soviet population. To dismiss him as a 'populist' would only distort his contribution and reinforce the



'anti-Stalin' hypocrisy. Moreover, it would erase an important element in the evolution of the AQ, which continued to mature as it moved southward.

The culmination of the classical agrarian question was to occur in the ensuing years. As early as 1926, Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were applying concepts and methods inherited from Europe, but also adjusting them to Chinese realities and making substantive advances. In his class analysis of Chinese society, Mao not only elaborated a complex dynamic of social differentiation, but submitted it to the primary political question pertaining to a 'semi-colonial' country, the 'national revolution'. The analysis was an attempt to identify which classes could be united against 'the true enemies', the landowners and the comprador bourgeoisie, whose existence and development 'depended on imperialism'. Rising above the prejudices of inherited conventions, *all* the remaining segments of society needed to be meticulously understood—the petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the semi-proletariat, the proletariat, the lumpenproletariat—and their revolutionary potential identified. In theory, the proletariat continued to be identified as the leading and most progressive agent of the national revolution, in line with the Marxist-Leninist convention. In practice, the national revolution would stand or fall on the ability of the CCP to organize the main victims of primitive accumulation. The argument was consolidated a year later, in the midst of the terror unleashed by the Kuomintang against the Communists, when Mao chastised members of the CCP who turned their back on the peasantry and threatened the urban isolation and defeat of the CCP. Recognizing the spontaneous organization of the peasantry, he would proclaim: 'All Power to the Peasant Associations!' And against purist dogma, he would defend the violent tactics employed by the peasantry.

The protracted struggle in China led to national independence and unity and a socialist orientation whose great novelty was a solid worker-peasant alliance. This did not sit well with inherited Marxist-Leninism, and while many theoretical allegiances were maintained, substantive innovations had to be made. Most basically, they included land reform and collectivization based on the initiatives of the peasantry; a new concept of industrialization now placed in the service of agriculture; and the requirement of maintaining politics in command, as opposed to economics, with respect to the worker-peasant alliance and foreign

relations. The commune system would also mark a historic innovation—which no doubt would have piqued Chayanov's interest—in its capacity to integrate the various levels of production, from the village team up to the brigade and the commune, notwithstanding all the new contradictions which this would introduce. It remains the most important socialist experiment of the twentieth century—and we might add, the most precocious, given that the multiple crises that are now maturing might in fact prove this blue-print of sovereign industrialization to be humanity's life-jacket.

The AQ of national liberation reached its fullest expression in the final contributions made by Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral. They did not address themselves to the nuts and bolts of the post-revolutionary transition (neither survived to see it), but their 'weapon of theory' sought the further clarification of class dynamics under colonial rule and re-qualification of the political question. Two interrelated points are of special importance. First, it is here that the peasantry is seen for the first time as the revolutionary class, not only in practice but also in theory. Freed from dogmas pertaining to other peoples and other times, it is the peasantry that becomes the main revolutionary force, not the trade unions or the petty-bourgeoisie, whatever progressive role the latter may come to play (via 'class suicide', in Cabral's terms). This is because the peasantry is the most destitute class, the 'wretched of the earth', that has 'nothing to lose and everything to gain'. It is a class which is indeed steeped in superstition, tribalism and internecine violence, but nonetheless capable of overcoming its vices to channel its energies towards the national revolution. Second, in Fanon and Cabral, the national revolution is a process of self-becoming of a people denied of history by colonial rule and racial doctrine. It thus becomes an ideological struggle which is both larger and inseparable from political and economic sovereignty. It is through this ideological struggle, consummated by tactical or strategic violence, that the political subject, the peasantry, attains universality as a people among peoples, with a past and a future, irreducible to this or that class category.

In these final contributions, the agrarian question becomes fully consonant with the national question and the victims of primitive accumulation fully human, thereby closing the circle which began with imperialist partition and ideological dominance. The symbiotic relationship between the agrarian and national questions posed here has not been superseded to this day. Insofar as political sovereignty was conquered

and imperialism forced to concede, the classical agrarian question reached a turning point. Insofar as imperialism regrouped and the scramble re-launched, the classical agrarian question remains the pillar of all further struggles. Their advance depends on the defense of the political conquests of the past.

## **The Specter of a New Agrarian Question**

Any attempt to defend the conquests of the past and project into the future must involve an appreciation of the long duration of agrarian transition, the new dynamics of land alienation and resistance and the role of small producers in national development. These are the concrete issues with which all dimensions of the agrarian question must contend, including gender, ecology and regional integration. We emphasize this, for there are many other ways of looking at these latter dimensions, but with no clear sense of the objective historical constraints and possibilities, no appreciation of the dialectic of primitive accumulation and popular struggle and much contempt for the peasantries of the world.

One such perspective is, of course, that of monopoly-finance capital, which in its discourse is full of praise for progressive gender relations and all human rights and full of solutions for all pressing issues, from food security to our ecological dead end. It is once again leading the new scramble for land and natural resources, especially in Africa, followed by private and state companies from East and South. We have noted the dynamics of this new scramble in a recent statement and need not extend the argument for now (Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012). Suffice it to note that the scramble is different from prior scrambles, not only in its hyper-speculative logic and participation of non-Western competitors, but also the unprecedented potential of resistance and maneuver inherent in formally sovereign states.

Insofar as the scramble is concerned, its main thrust is to establish large-scale farming and extractive enclaves for the export of food, biofuels, minerals, and energy resources, by means of production chains integrated into foreign monopolies. In the case of the US-led Western alliance, this project is bolstered by the militarization of all corners of the planet, none of which bodes well for progressive causes of any kind.

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the US-led scramble is placing genocide back on the agenda in the twenty-first century.

There is another perspective which deserves mention, quite apart from the trends of resistance. Prior to the major land grabs, there were also those who took interest in historical transitions, to construe the low-profile land alienations carried out under the aegis of neoliberal policies as possibly the final blow to the 'disappearing peasantries' (Bryceson et al. 2000; Graziano da Silva 1999). It amounted to a narrow notion of transition, springing from an implicit (if not also explicit) desire for a post-peasant world which appeared to be on the horizon, on account of structural adjustment, outmigration and especially the flowering of 'multi-occupational' survival strategies. The analysis was linked to a new set of reformist and welfarist policies to be undertaken by the development industry, namely support for the 'livelihood strategies' of the dispossessed (what Bernstein called 'the agrarian question of labour') and the technical upgrading and market integration of the remaining farmers (Graziano da Silva and Tavares 2008). With the onset of major land grabbing, such thinking could only take flight in a moralistic discourse and an empiricist vocation, without a clear perspective on what is at stake. To this day, neither imperialism nor sovereignty has become relevant enough a category to the mainstream of agrarian studies to organize the discussion on the agrarian question.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, how can one defend the national question after having wished away the inhabitants of whole nations?

The 'multi-occupational' deepening of the last 30 years—which we have called 'semi-proletarianisation'—has been neither a new, nor a linear phenomenon. Even in Africa, in the non-settler regions where land dispossession was never extensive and peasant societies remain predominant, 'virtually all small producers practiced more than subsistence production', as the late Archie Mafeje noted (2003: 15). Moreover, semi-proletarianisation has never gone without a fight. Indeed, so-called de-peasantization has produced a new wave of land occupation movements, across the South, this being one of the most important political facts of our times (Moyo 2001; Moyo and Yeros 2005). The land movement in Zimbabwe may have been the most successful in reclaiming land, but the depth of the political work that has been underway on all continents has set the stage for consideration of 're-peasantization' as a modern, sovereign project in the twenty-first century.

The forces arrayed against such a project are certainly enormous. But there are counterforces at play, arising especially from small countries like Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nepal, which have weathered crisis and radicalization to bring back the national question to the development agenda (Moyo and Chambati 2012; Moyo and Yeros 2007b, 2011, 2012). It is no coincidence that the idea of a 'return to the countryside' has been most clearly expressed in these countries, uniquely in every case. A further counterforce may also emerge from the large semi-peripheral countries, namely China, India, Brazil and South Africa. To date, they persist in a contradictory systemic function, but depending on the relation of forces within around them, they do have the potential to drive a wedge in the workings of monopoly capitalism (Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012).

One notable indication of these contradictions is the 'family farming' model for food security promoted in Brazil in the 2000s (Graziano da Silva et al. 2010) and now projected onto the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) by the election of José Graziano da Silva to the top job. It amounts to a 'middle peasant' response which, by design, implies a diversion from the land question, but which, given the proactive role that it ascribes to the state, becomes subject to capture by diverse forces: not only the preponderant green revolutionaries driven by corporate giants and Rockefeller/Gates philanthropy, but also agro-ecologists associated with *Via Campesina* and radicalized states with a 'Look East' policy (Moyo and Yeros 2012).

It is also important to note that the concern with redefining development in the twenty first century and reconsideration of the peasant path have returned with conviction to the agenda of the research community, especially in the South. Well prior to the major land grabs, in the late 1990s, researchers were challenged by the upsurge in land occupations and onset of radicalization to think through the new possibilities. Debates in Africa, occurring within the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), had the effect of placing a new land and peasant question on the research agenda, in settler and non-settler Africa alike, together with a new interest in long transitions (Mafeje 2003; Mamdani 1996; Moyo 1995, 2000, 2008a). The debate synergized with like-minded debates among major South-South research networks, including the Dakar-based Third World Forum, the Latin American Council for the Social Sciences (CLASCO), and the

Delhi-based International Development Economics Associates (IDEAS), to promote a peasant-friendly agenda generally across the South. Henceforth, a series of collaborative and autonomous research initiatives have been recuperating ground on a variety of issues, inspiring young scholars and fomenting a convergent point of view on basic matters.<sup>5</sup> When the global land grabs escalated in 2007–08, one could indeed speak of an identifiable and convergent Southern perspective on the nature and future of the agrarian question.<sup>6</sup>

The debate regarding a new agrarian question based on a peasant path has been once again pried open. And there is growing recognition of its basic elements, namely that:

- the peasantry is a force which has remained untested as an agent of development in most places in the South, despite the historic failure of other agents;
- the peasant path does not necessarily imply the unleashing of a new round of social differentiation and land alienation, which may be regulated by state support and protection of markets and tenure, especially against the cooptation strategies of corporate monopolies;
- cooperativism remains an important method for overcoming the shortcomings of peasant production, in terms of scale and position against monopolistic markets, while enhancing its many unique advantages in terms of labour absorption, versatility in production, low energy requirements, regard for ecological balance and popular participation;
- the peasant path does not imply abandonment of industrialization, which may have unique starting-points in every case, not least external to agriculture, but which must serve the technical upgrading of agriculture and cooperative enterprise and the attainment of food sovereignty on national and regional levels;
- gender equity and ecological sustainability are fundamental to the success of the peasant path and its associated industrialization, both in the process of political mobilization and in the cooperative organization of production and reproduction;
- the land question is separate from, but overlapping with, the peasant and agrarian questions, insofar as land has reproductive

functions for diverse communities, whether urban or rural, 'indigenous' or otherwise, quite apart from production.

Should movement in this direction gain force, as it is likely to do in the deepening crisis ahead, it will be consonant with the requirements of historic advance on an autonomous, democratic, equitable and sustainable basis and a vindication of the liberation struggles which first pried open the political space for such an historic advance.

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### Notes

1. It is notable that the specialized journals, the new *Journal of Agrarian Change* and the more established *Journal of Peasant Studies*, either turned a blind eye (the *JPS* responded a decade after the event), or disparaged the Zimbabwe question from the start (in the case of the *JAC*, which devoted its inaugural special issue). It is also notable that the *JAC*, in a subsequent special issue (Byres 2004; Bernstein 2004), turned its aim against *liberal* advocates of land reform, instead of engaging with rural movements or associated Marxists, all now being roundly dismissed as 'populists'.
2. The most notable exception is arguably the *Monthly Review* school. Lest we be accused of exaggeration, one need only browse the four decades of cumulative publications in the specialized journals, *JPS* and *JAC*, to note that hardly any sustained thought and certainly no special issue, has ever been devoted to the agrarian question in the contemporary North Atlantic. Over the course of 40 years, just half a dozen articles have been published on the matter.
3. One might again protest, pointing to the recent attempt by Henry Bernstein (2010a) to marry 'political economy' with 'political ecology' as an intellectual project. But without genuine recognition of the silences and evasions of the past, this project is likely to founder, as indeed it appears to have done in a book published simultaneously on 'the class dynamics of agrarian change' (Bernstein 2010b; Yeros 2012).

4. The usual proviso applies to *Monthly Review*, but the challenge remains for the specialized journals, *JPS* and *JAC*.
5. See Mbilinyi (1997), Moyo (1997), Moyo *et al.* (1998), Moyo (2000), Moyo (2008b, 2012), Moyo & Romadhane (2002), Jha (2002), Jha *et al.* (2007, 2010), Moyo & Yeros (2005, 2008, 2011), Amanor & Moyo (2008), Tsikata (2009), Shivji (2009), Tsikata & Golah (2010), Rosa (2011), Moyo, Tsikata & Yakham (forthcoming).
6. See Patnaik & Moyo (2011), Amin (2012), Ghosh (2012), Patnaik (2012), Moyo, Yeros & Jha (2012), Kamata (2012).

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