

Rethinking Peasants

A Dialog between Michael Kearney and Michael J. Watts

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Michael Kearney (MK): First of all, I would like to say that I see this dialog as more of a fine tuning of some theoretical and mainly definitional differences between you and me. These differences are in part reflections of differences between our respective disciplines – geography and anthropology – which have also channeled our professional experiences into somewhat contrasting social and political settings. I also see some differences within the general framework of Marxist theory, but they are more ones of emphasis, rather than substance.

Michael J. Watts (MW): I take it as axiomatic that we are both writing about peasants as critical intellectuals with some sort of Left sympathy and some sort of practical political involvement – you in your longstanding farmworkers concern and myself since the 1970s in a number of struggles in Nigeria, most recently in the Delta. Our theoretical concerns are therefore practical-political. Second, that we need not rehearse too much of the debates within Marxism – recognizing that we are both profoundly shaped by Marxisms of various sorts. There are probably differences in how we both read so called »Classical Marxism«. Third, we do write from differing disciplines (anthropology and geography) and I realize that both disciplines are inseparable from the histories of colonialism, both generating differing debates and questions. And fourth, I take it for granted that we are both struggling with the complexity of class and other forms of identification, the simultaneity of

identities, what is new and different about these multiplicities, and how and in what ways globalization makes a palpable difference to such multiplicities.

Peasants or simple commodity producers?

MK: Much of your criticism of *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry*¹ is based on a different definition of peasants than the one that the book is based on. And here is where the disciplinary differences between geography and anthropology cause a considerable degree of dialog at cross purposes. My working definition is based on a mode of production approach and class analysis, according to which peasants are not capitalists, not socialists, not proletarians, not farmers, not small entrepreneurs. What distinguishes them from these modern types is that they use simple technology and primarily their own labor and that of their animals to produce first and foremost to feed themselves and their animals, and to reproduce themselves and their animals. To be a peasant you also have to be politically subordinate to urban or rural elites. In addition to political subordination, to be a peasant you must be involved in class relationships with these elites, i. e., you must be producing an economic surplus in some form of value – most likely agrarian produce and/or labor power – that is transferred to the elites. If some such form of class relationship does not exist, then there are no peasants. Instead what you have are just small-scale subsistence agriculturalists who existed for thousands of years between the time when plants were domesticated and the first urbanization began. Another essential feature of peasants is their distinctive demographic characteristics: they tend to have high birth rates. Indeed – and rarely considered – is how the absorption of »surplus« peasant population into pre-industrial cities and armies is but one of the many ways in which surplus value was extracted from peasant communities. This is admittedly an ideal type; but we need some such distinctions. Not attending to such terminological concerns, you and most other writers on contemporary rural political economy slide back and forth between vague references to »peasants«, and »farmers«, »small producers« etc. If the term »peasant« is to have any theoretical and analytic utility, it must be defined more discreetly. One thing that most geographers, rural sociologists, agricultural economists of agriculture, and many anthropologists cannot understand or do not want to understand is that peasants exist outside of capitalist relations of production. This is not to say that when capitalism appears, it does not subsume peasants to it; of course it does. But what are the class mechanisms by which surplus value is extracted from the non-capitalist peasant household to capitalist communities?

MW: You adopt a narrow Wolfian definition² in the interests of typological precision. But I am confused because this is itself a vast terrain and you seem to want to abandon precisely such vast categories. I am parenthetically rather taken aback by

the tagging of peasants in terms of limited technology and high fertility regimes. You want to distinguish between peasants and farmers (and proletarians) and to acknowledge that peasants »exist outside of capitalist relations«. I find this mildly astonishing. If you are saying that according to your Wolfian definition peasants pre-existed capitalism, say in 10th century China, then this is self evident and I see nobody challenging such a claim. It was surely the staple of the early peasant debates that peasants could be inserted into a variety of historical social formations. If you are saying that now peasants exist outside of capitalism I am totally confused. Where are there substantial numbers of peasants not shaped in some ways by the dynamics of the capitalist market, by neoliberal forces in their panoply of forms? You say your definition is an ideal type and requires distinctions. But why is this any different from a definition of contemporary peasants as forms of simple commodity production (SCP) – a form of production that contains contradictory class relations (labor and capital)? You are concerned that peasants encompass diversity which you see in terms of niches, and a variety of cultural identifications, and class relations. Why is SCP any less capable of encompassing such diversity? The category SCP is not of the same logical type as the empirical forms it can assume. I argued for peasants as forms of SCP, and this would encompass both a vast array of historical circumstances and conditions (early modern France, and contemporary Nigeria, and indeed forms of capitalized US family farms). I have no trouble in distinguishing the varied forms of SCP that they assume and the need to draw distinction on the basis of the degrees of commodification. If you are saying that at some point in the past there was no commodity involvement – they existed outside of capitalism – then we are really dealing with a different social category. There is nothing in the form of production here that specifies how they are related to other social classes or to capital. This is what an empirically informed class analysis does for one.

MK: If the term »peasant« is to have any defining value, it must refer to some social type that is more specific than the plethora of types so often lumped into it. Again, I argue that the term »peasant« should refer to three conditions: agrarian production at the household level, using simple technology; production primarily for auto-consumption; class relation(s) with non-peasants. Clearly this is an ideal type which no doubt existed at different historic moments. Students of agrarian issues in effect usually recognize that this ideal type decomposes into related real types. And here is where I think the fundamental definitional and theoretical problems occur – and they have to do with the two different ways in which states and intellectuals classify. One is a more or less naive reflection of ›things‹ as nouns in a natural language, e. g., a potato is a »potato«. But when we are dealing with social identities in complex societies, the state inevitably takes major responsibility for and control of classifying things of social and political importance, and in doing so it gives them an official identity. Thus for example, property laws and legal con-

tracts define such identities as land owner, tenant, employee, etc. In *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* I discuss how these official identities are the result of specific political policy objectives, rather than scientific efforts at objective categorizing of actually existing entities.

MW: I fail to understand this point. You say SCP fails because it does not refer to a distinct social type (rather than a panoply of forms) but how is your three-part definition any less specific than SCP and hence any less subject to your own critique. You then seem to be concerned not with the definition per se but how words (nouns) like peasant are used discursively and politically especially by states. This is obviously an important question: the discursive deployment of peasants and peasant imagery is surely part of the ways in which governable subjects (Foucault) are produced. But this is a different set of questions which my deployment of SCP is not necessarily designed to explicate. At this point then I have questions over, first, how you wish to use peasants as an ideal type; second, why the questions of diversity and heterogeneity is a problem in the deployment of analytical categories; third, whether your concern with definitions is more about deriving a useful analytical category or with the politics and deployment of a peasant lexicon in various state and other political discourses?

MK: Your usage of »peasant« basically includes what I would call farmers, i. e., market oriented types growing non-subsistence crops, e. g., the small producers of high value foods under conditions of contract farming, as well as other kinds of what I see as basically small entrepreneurs. You make it abundantly clear that various such kinds of small agrarian producers persist, and you refer to them as »peasants«. I, on the other hand, argue for more typological precision, and also that for the most part, the term »peasant« has outlived its referents. I do not argue that the kinds of agrarian types that you refer to as »peasants« have ceased to exist. Indeed, I recognize the same types, but I do not refer to them all as »peasants«. For to do so is to lose analytic power – which starts with the naming and definition of things, of nouns. The word »peasant« blurs two kinds of complexity – two kinds of social differentiation – which must be appreciated for basic empirical social science and for practical projects based on it. The first kind of differentiation is within community which is due to the presence of »the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker« as well as the peasant, all of whom interact in the local economy. The second kind of differentiation is internal to persons within such communities, thus resulting in the person having multiple class positions and relationships, as well as multiple corresponding identities. This is the polybian who occupies numerous economic niches. This neologism is necessary because of the general ethnographic lack of awareness of the occupational complexity of »rural« social types. Polybians are not recognized in official systems of classification; usually the state uses its defining powers to slot identities into its own hegemonic projects.

MK: I find it surprising that in your paper, which is ostensibly a Marxist analysis, and which is indeed a highly informative and innovative, you barely raise the issue of the class nature of the various kinds of agrarian types that you lump together (inappropriately, as I see it) as peasants. Indeed, in the last four sections, the term class does not appear. In this writing, there is a constant sliding back and forth between »peasant,« »farmer« and »petty commodity producer« and how they are involved in new forms of production and distribution. What are we to make of the ways in which small producers are planting high value foods, and that they are involved in complex corporate relations? The fact that some small farmers in Central America are, let us say, producing specialty greens for salads at *Chez Panisse* (a restaurant in Berkeley), is interesting. But, the bottom line question is, what are the class relationships in the chain of production-consumption between a lettuce field in Guatemala and the diners in California. And, then there is the basic practical question: What does the analysis imply for political projects?

MW: You are concerned, in your definitional debate, with my apparent lack of concern with class or class analysis. I see SCP as a contradictory class location (along the lines suggested by Friedmann, Gibbon and Bernstein³), and this is precisely what makes the question of »what is happening to the peasantry« so important and complex. I have no difficulty with your argument concerning multiple identities; but again I return to the question of whether the polybian is in any sense new. I see class as the variety of processes through which surplus labor is produced, distributed and appropriated, and a person may be involved in a variety of such processes (though some may be more constitutive than others, and this is what analysis sheds light on). In this sense the analysis I provided of new agricultures and contracting (in *Reworking Modernity* and *Life Under Contract*⁴) is a class analysis without at all suggesting that contract growers simply fit a class – hence my deployment of »propertied laborers«. I am assessing how surplus is appropriated among men and women and between households and forms of capital being all the while sensitive to the experience of the work associated with such new production relations. These are types of peasant-workers. Douglas Holmes sees the peasant-workers in the North-Italian region of Friuli as product of a long history of contracts with local estates that produced a particular type of consciousness.⁵ He sees the peasant-worker as residing in a sort of liminal world. I fully acknowledge that these questions pertaining to subjectivity that derive from being, in the Friuli case, both workers and peasants are complex; but this does not alter the fact that we can pose other questions (as important) about the stability of this »class« and whether the conditions of its genesis and reproduction are changing and with what consequences for the very idea of a worker-peasant. I do not know whether this sort of approach is congruent with the polybian category that you use.

MK: Many contemporary so-called »peasants-workers« are a good point of departure to re-examine the concept of class because they, as it were, have two feet in capitalism and one foot in subsistence agricultural production of a non-capitalist nature – that is the class and identity nature of polybians. Two feet in capitalism? Yes, one as part time migrant worker employed by capitalist farmers and corporations, and one as petty commodity or small capitalist producer who employs some labor. And then there is involvement in the service and informal economies by working full or part-time as maids, busboys, servants, prostitutes, pimps, poachers, shoeshiners, smugglers, and thieves. A question that arises with respect to class differentiation is, what is the basic social unit and what is the unit of analysis? Most social science proceeds with the assumption that it is the individual. But the ›individual‹ is largely a hegemonic construction of the state. I have proposed regarding the ›individual‹ as an object of analysis but not as a tool of analysis, for to do so is to participate in the hegemony of the state and official social science. Instead I have proposed referring to the person – an entity which incorporates (literally) the working body and its various (polybious) identities. To date, Marxist analysis of the dynamics of social (class) differentiation has not penetrated beyond the official category of the individual – hence the concept of the polybian. Were I a postmodernist, which I am not, I would say that the polybian deconstructs the individual. Instead let us just say that it is an effort to deepen conventional class analysis. And one objective of this analysis is to better understand the typical complex nature of class positions, class differentiation, and class relations.

MW: Of course I agree that non-farm income is and has been for a long time substituting land based production. This is why a primary axis for me remains in the study of peasants the extent to which production is market mediated (commodities producing commodities), and the extent to which household reproduction is secured through the wage relation. Proletarianization is an inexorable force among the peasants, taking differing forms and speeds. In spite of the ways in which livelihoods are transformed by something called globalization (or by the complex forms of cultural identification associated with and emerging from the labor process), the power of these two forces seems to me to be undiminished and retains its analytical centrality. I simply think that differing forms of Marxism – Lenin, Trotsky, Kautsky, Gramsci – are capable of shedding much light on different aspects of the ›peasant condition‹ under conditions of globalization, and that they do so by never losing sight of the dull discipline of the market, of commodification, of competition, and of proletarianization as massive structural forces. I am in this sense not entirely sure what is the question which the category of polybian is designed to shed light on. I think it implies a sense of many simultaneous identities that is, in my view, not terribly helpful. I am a worker of a particular sort and I have a community garden which helps reproduce my family subsistence needs – I frankly do not see this as complicating my class position very much.

MK: Another issue here is peasants in space: do they stay put, or do they migrate? In the classic literature on the Agrarian Question (Marx, Lenin, Kautsky, Chayanov, etc.) migration was not an issue. It has, however, become a major concern in contemporary consideration of agrarian issues. Perhaps I am overly sensitized to this issue from living and working primarily in California and Mexico, where migration is of paramount political significance to both political economies. Highly capital intensive and highly labor intensive agribusiness is California's main industry and since its inception in the 19th century it has relied primarily on migrant workers from rural communities throughout the Pacific Basin – primarily China, Japan, the Philippines, and Mexico. The typical trajectory of transnational Mexican migration from specific communities is for it to start in agriculture and then in a generation or two penetrate into service jobs, self-employment, and informal economic activities. Within Mexico, the migration from rural communities into commercial agriculture and urban employment has basically dissolved fundamental distinctions between ›rural‹ and ›urban‹. This is certainly true in terms of household economics, in that most households reproduce from a variety of income sources. Similarly, it is true with respect to cultural reproduction in that people in ›rural‹ areas consume the same popular media and are at the ends of the same global commodity chains (fast food, clothing, gadgets, media, etc.) as urbanites.

MW: You seem unduly concerned with the consequences of migration in relation to an ideal type peasant or SCP. My point is not to deny the reality of migration but rather to say what question are you posing that migration provides an insight into? Is it about the ways in which migratory wage work transforms the household reproduction strategy? Is it about how male migration provides a pretext for reworking access to and control over domestic resources or gender relations? The fact of migration (assuming wage work) is saying something about how household forms of production are changing – a process of proletarianization is in train that may be more or less stable. The empirical complexity of its circumstances (long distance work in California or seasonal circulatory migration between town and country) should not alter this fact. I do not really understand either the significance that you attribute to migration in relation to the peasant question, or relatedly, why the obliteration you see between rural and urban (as important as it may be culturally) complicates the political economic questions.

MK: One more issue that I would like to discuss is my thesis about deterritorialization which has two meanings: First, that there is a long-term trend in the history of capitalism toward interest in ever more immaterial forms of value. This argument is consistent with David Harvey's argument about how capitalists constantly seek to reduce the »turn around time« between investment and the taking of profits.⁶ What

this means for agriculture is that the smart money is no longer interested in owning the primary means of production, viz., land. Land ties up too much capital. Better to leave land to those with fewer capital resources and lesser transnational corporate connections. Borrowing money to invest in crops and being dependent on the vagaries of market prices and weather is too risky for the smart money. Better to sell a contract to some land owner to have him put in a crop, take the risks, and be responsible for delivering the product to your enterprise, e. g., tomatoes for McDonald's hamburgers and produce for supermarket chains. In this situation the lender specifies the product and how it is to be produced (seed, fertilizer, pesticides, etc.), but takes no primary risk in producing it.

MW: You rightly emphasize how capital and other actors are not terribly interested in land or directly controlling the point of production and how various contracts now link producers ('peasants') to, say, export markets. Kautsky noted this 100 years ago, and I have written on it at length. My point is not to belittle your observation but to say in what sense does this compromise a Marxian analysis of petty commodity production? Contract farming in this sense raises a number of important issues such as: is household labor under the contract free or are they disguised proletarians? How might the labour process and its regimentation compromise household domestic relations? To put the matter crudely, I am not sure what extra leverage we get from polybians, or rather we have to retain classic concerns in looking at contracting with commodification and proletarianization?

The problem of the big cut

MK: Sometimes there are more or less distinct class cleavage planes – you have hinted at some. But in most subaltern communities they are absent. Instead class relations take on the nature of complex food webs, in which polybians feed on each other in complex class relationships that defy neatly identifying ›good guys‹ and ›bad guys‹, i. e., exploited and exploiter. Yet traditional class-based projects demand finding such cleavage plans that demarcate the two species. This is what I refer to as the ›problem of the big cut‹. It was relative easy to make the big cut in the 19th century industrial capitalism that Marx knew – the bosses were upstairs in clean white shirts and the grimy workers were down on the shop floor. It was also no doubt easy to do so in some moments in European feudal societies which were clearly divided into nobility, Church, and burgers – all of which parasitized the peasantry who were at the base of the economy. I think that the main differences between you and me hinge on the problem of the big cut, which is the theoretical and practical problem with which you rightly and justifiably are most concerned. However, I think that the applicability of this important project is increasingly limited, given the ever increasing internal social differentiation of identities taking place

within persons under conditions of contemporary capitalism and the kinds of non-capitalist activities articulated to it, i. e., polybianization of persons. For all its power, Marx's classic class analysis was still based on the individual as the basic social unit. In contrast, in *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* I give primary attention to the particular cultural-political needs of polybians without denying the validity of directly class-based projects. Here is the basic difference: directly class-based projects seek to mobilize a specific class or spectrum of class fractions qua class identity, i. e., the cultural correlates of structural class positions. The problem with such political projects is that social class identity is usually too weakly experienced to inform a commitment to a collective project based on it. Certainly, in capitalist and other societies, nationality, ›race‹, and religion more often than not define personhood more strongly than class identity. In other words, the task of making the big cut is over-complicated by multiple class positions and the lack of clearly defined class identities.

MW: I just do not see the study of peasants as SCP as like »complex food webs« with people feeding on one another in such a way that one cannot tell the good from the bad guys. This strikes me as a very curious formulation. In the same way I do not understand what you mean when you say Marx deploys the individual as a basic social unit – I would have thought it was social relations. And then you continue that these multiples identified, multiple class polybians are at heart self-interested individualists – all of this sounds like a strange mix of methodological individualism, analytical Marxism, and poststructuralism. I certainly believe that there can be something like multiple class positions; but how many are we talking about? Class boundaries can be labile because class is culturally constructed in some way obviously. But all of this does not translate for me into some poor ›peasant‹ toting around four class positions, three cultural identities, and social boundaries that are coming and going every half an hour. If a person is a worker, and a peasant, and an informalist (this could be many things including SCP), well there are only 24 hours in a day; each of these activities provides sources of income which allows us to see trends over time (how the sources shift and how stable and self-reproducing is the condition), and to make judgments how each is contributing to an individual or social reproduction. If we want to know about the subjectivity of a person who has three different income sources, all located within the frame of capitalist relations, then it is an empirical question as to how and why we can locate particular class ›ideological‹ or political subjectivities. In some cases it may not be all that complicated, and the invocation of hybridities and so on would not be terribly helpful. But at base we know that the contradictory status of SCP means that political practice will be related to particular social forces and political projects through which mobilization occurs. Indigenous movements may not self-identify as class movements (but some do); but it is surely of relevance for us as analysts to grasp how class forces of various sorts have shaped its genesis – and perhaps shapes its trajectory. How

can class and other popular struggles help generate more progressive agrarian relations and deepen the process of democratization? I think I am working my way around to asking you why these polybian circumstances do not characterize say Chinese peasants/tenants in the late 1940s; and why would the analyses of the peasant mobilization of the period, which were sensitive to social and cultural heterogeneity yet were determined to show how solidarity was constructed, not be any less relevant for today?

The practical-political question

MK: What then is an appropriate project to mobilize and work to reduce class exploitation? The strategy that I propose in *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* is not to abandon efforts to find class cleavage planes as a basis of mobilization in terms of specific class interests. It is for this reason that I work with farmworker unions in Mexico and the United States, Mexican shantytown dwellers associations, and urban street workers, and binational indigenous organizations. But these are tactical struggles; and organizing them is extremely difficult and only marginally successful because the vast majority of the members are highly differentiated into other occupational niches and geographic spaces – the fluid, highly migratory nature of the members of such organizations weakens them, as their members move in and out of them. It is for this reason that more primary strategies are needed to not only agglutinate these highly differentiated, spatially dispersed identities, but to also displace the struggles onto other political terrain where the state, employers, and elites in general are not so hegemonic. The most basic extension of this strategy of displacement is to reframe the basic local issues in terms of violations of Universal Human Rights. Thus, just as capitalists are always ahead of subalterns in the race to deterritorialize and accumulate value (capital), so does this strategy displace local subaltern struggles into global spaces that transcend the boundaries of the nation state. A good example of the deployment of this strategy is the 1994 Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas. Indeed, the ›peasants‹ always lost when they so organized locally and pressed their grievances as peasants within the national context. But by shifting to the strategy of defining themselves not as just peasants, but primarily as ›indigenous peoples‹, existing in a broad spectrum of social identities, they effectively displaced their struggle onto ground where their enemies, including the Mexican state, were off balance. Furthermore, by defining their grievances not in terms of local land disputes, but as fundamental violations of their Universal Human Rights, they effectively displaced their grievances into the court of world opinion and politics. Thus, for example, their property disputes as peasants would most likely not attract the deep support of someone like Madame Mitterand of France. But she did become deeply involved in opposing ›violations of the human rights‹ of the *Tzeltal*, *Tzotzil*, and other ›Mayan indians‹ in Chiapas. Clearly, the ethni-

city card is one that cannot be played in very many situations, and indeed, when it is played, it is usually retrograde and even catastrophic, e. g., Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. But Human Rights as a strategy does not have the same limited potential or the potential for exacerbating ethnic hostilities. So – my position is that traditional agrarian struggles are still important and necessary; but new strategies must also be grafted on the old ones from the time of Kautsky.

MW: Class mobilization has pretty much always been about the creation of a unity amidst a proletarian diversity. That is why in the absence of a class project ethnicity might look pretty good, but the »catastrophic« implications of some of these non-class ('indigenous') identifications have to be addressed. What might make ethnicity or indigeneity or race not just another retrograde particularism? You provocatively end with practical and political questions, and I suspect we are close to being on the same page in this regard. Social class identities may not be providing a commitment to a collective project. Of course it is one thing to see the September 11th perpetrators as militant political Islamists without a powerful social class identity; on the other I would think that the social class forces that created the conditions – the crisis of secular nationalist development in West Asia – from which they emerged are perfectly clear. Surely history has taught us (a long time back) that reading particular actions, class positions, or politics from being a peasant (however defined) is a very tricky business. I do not see many varieties of peasant studies now endorsing such simple minded reading. The question I cannot clearly answer is what work the ›polybian‹ is doing for us that sheds some different light of these practical-political questions however new or different we feel the conditions of the ›peasantry‹ to be.

Notes

¹ Micheal Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry. Anthropology in Global Perspective*, Boulder 1996.

² See Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs 1966,

³ See, for example, Harriet Friedmann, *Household Production and the National Economy: Concepts for the Analysis of Agrarian Formations*, in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 7 (1980), 158-184; Henry Bernstein, *Capitalism and Petty-Bourgeois Production: Class Relations and Division of Labour*, in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 15 (1988), 258-271.

⁴ Michael J. Watts and Allan Pred, *Reworking Modernity. Capitalisms and Symbolic Discontent*, New Brunswick 1992; idem, *Life Under Contract*, in: Peter D. Little and Michael J. Watts, eds., *Living Under Contract. Contract Farming and Agrarian Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Madison 1994, 21-77.

⁵ Douglas R. Holmes, *Cultural Disenchantments. Worker-Peasants in Northwest Italy*, Princeton 1989.

⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford 1989.