

Social Anthropology, Peasantry, and Agricultural System Analysis

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In social anthropology, agricultural production systems are inextricably embedded in the peasant world with its economic, social, political, and cultural factors.¹ The peasant world and its parts are much less "systemic" than true agro-pastoral production systems; we will discuss this later. In other words, an agricultural or agro-pastoral system of production is embedded within a larger, and more complex, diverse, and changing set of practices, institutions, controls and representations, which for convenience we can refer to with the term "peasant". Ironically, however, classic anthropological tradition makes little use of this term although the majority of the people studied by anthropologists are clearly peasants and not "primitive peoples".

It is generally accepted that the peasant world is characterized by its relative autonomy as contrasted with the main socio-economic structures to which it belongs (feudal, tributary, state, colonial, capitalist, socialist, etc.). These various powers took advantage of the peasantry using political means to impose, and often still do impose, tributes or "levies" under the guise of "paybacks" that varied in substance as well as in effectiveness (religious or military protection, security, development, etc.). Other characteristics were added in order to create a sort of "ideal type" of peasantry (Mendras, 1976):

- the household is the main structure of production and the family is the dominant mode of social organization,
- agriculture (associated in various ways with cattle farming and artisan work according to the context) places a definite importance on the relationship with the land (whether it is economic and patrimonial or symbolic and religious),
- peasant societies are "face to face" societies (Maquet, 1962) where the relationships are multiplex (i.e., people are simultaneously united on different levels—family, neighborhood relationships, participation in joint activities, etc.); the village is the most widespread example of this,
- "prominent citizens" provide decisive mediation between the peasant community and the surrounding society.

These characteristics of classic western peasantry can easily be applied to the majority of the contemporary rural societies in the Third World. In the North, in fact, the "end of peasantry" has long been discussed (Mendras, 1984). In the South, however, peasantry remains the dominant social structure for agricultural production, although ties with the surrounding society have been greatly modified. The link with the world economy (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992) suggests there are now new types of extortion or even an inverse flow of "assistance".

For those who conduct studies in terms of extortion, these are now passed through economic channels (issue of "unequal exchange": cf. Emmanuel, 1972). However, in a number of Third World countries, particularly in Africa, the deterioration of conditions for production and the decay of the State are such that foreign aid has become a central factor in the rural landscape. In these circumstances, it is difficult to speak of extorting the peasantry, and the flow seems to be partly reversed. It can even be referred to as "development rent". Several agricultural production systems in Africa can be studied only by taking into account the role that this rent² plays.

In a general sense, the "autonomy" of these peasant societies in the South must increasingly be questioned. At a time when peasantry in the North is disappearing, urbanization and the very rapid growth of the under-class in Third World cities as well as the numerous ties between the rural and urban worlds, due in particular to migrations (not to speak of the new phenomenon of "returning to

Social Anthropology Of Peasantry

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