

The Agrarian Question a Century after October 1917: Capitalist Agriculture and Agricultures in Capitalism

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Abstract

This article addresses one of the key dimensions confronting the Russian and Chinese revolutions, that of the agrarian question for the peasantry which constituted popular majorities in each of these countries at the time of their revolutions. In commemoration of the centennial of the Russian Revolution, two challenges are presented here. The first concerns the manner through which historical capitalism has ‘settled’ the (agrarian) question in favour of minorities comprising the populations of the developed capitalist economies of the centre (about 15 per cent of the total world population). Is the reproduction of this model of ‘development’ feasible or achievable for the populations of contemporary Asia, Africa and South America? It is argued that the agrarian question of the peoples of the South can only be solved by a bold vision of socialism. The second challenge concerns the strategy of stages which I propose as a longer-term process of constructing a socialist alternative for the populations of these three continents. As it must, the new agrarian question is the key issue to be addressed in the processes of building socialism in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Authored in commemoration of 1917, this article addresses one of the key dimensions confronting the Russian and Chinese revolutions, that of the agrarian question for the peasantry which constituted popular majorities in each of these countries at the time of their revolutions.

These two great revolutions were confronted by three other major challenges. The first challenge originated in the fact that these revolutions with socialist goals had triumphed in ‘single countries’—albeit the size of continents; two countries, moreover, situated in the peripheries of the global system of capitalism. An important issue concerned the question of how to progress towards a perspective with a universal reach, under conditions of permanent hostility and violence characterizing the intrinsically imperialist processes of capitalist globalization.

The second challenge concerned the question of democracy. How to construct practices capable of promoting the democratization of society? How to create institutions for a new participative democracy, which would guarantee a role for all workers in the decision-making processes at all levels of economic and social governance? How was this to be achieved without sacrificing personal rights, but, instead, integrating individual emancipation, through the deployment of personal liberty and creativity, as a key dynamic in the development of society?

The third challenge concerns the ecological dimension which twenty-first-century socialism must boldly address as a fundamental point of departure in shaping a vision of a socialist future and the concrete policies required to achieve it. Establishing a harmonious relationship between society and nature demands a radical break with the dominant logics of capitalism predicated on the essential destruction of the material basis of society and the reproduction of life on the planet.

My book entitled *October 1917 Revolution, A Century Later* (Amin, 2017) proposes a comprehensive analysis of these challenges, organized around the central theme of Soviet isolation imposed by imperialist globalization. This work places the focus on the particular challenge posed by the peasant question. I emphasize the examination of this issue primarily because contemporary and largely urban social movements

generally ignore it, thereby constraining the formulation of a coherent strategy for socialism in the twenty-first century.

In this respect, this work is situated alongside publications inspired by the works of Sam Moyo, whose authors recognize the importance of the new agrarian question.

The first issue presented here concerns the manner through which historical capitalism has ‘settled’ the (agrarian) question, in favour of minorities comprising the populations of the developed capitalist economies of the centre (about 15 per cent of the total world population). Is the reproduction of this model of ‘development’ feasible or achievable for the populations of contemporary Asia, Africa and South America? My response to this question is negative, and as a result, the contemporary world is confronted with a challenge which, I argue, can only be solved by a bold vision of socialism.

The second issue concerns the strategy of stages which I propose as a longer-term process of constructing a socialist alternative for the populations of these three continents. As it must, the new agrarian question is the key issue to be addressed in the processes of building socialism in the twenty-first century.

Historical capitalism provided its own types of solutions to the agrarian problem in Europe and the USA. Theorists and ideologists of capitalism all imagined that this same solution would result from the transfer and application of organizational models derived from large-scale industry to agriculture. History has proved them wrong. The solution has actually operated in a very different manner; notably, through the emergence of new strata of the bourgeoisie, made up of ‘agriculturalists’ (who are no longer peasants). Today, the capture of agriculture by large-scale corporate capital in the financial monopolies places the future of family farming in jeopardy while new strategies deployed by the agro-industrial complex aim to substitute family farms with agri-business.

Soviet socialism inherited the dominant conception of the nineteenth century, transmitted by Kautsky and inspired by the model of Soviet collectivization. In my book cited above, I articulate the reasons why I consider this as the fundamental mistake underlying the rupture of the worker-peasant alliance—which had itself assured the success of the October Revolution. By avoiding this mistake, Maoism, on the other hand, opened up to a different path for the resolution of the peasant question founded in the principal of equal access to land for all rural peoples. This continues to be relevant for the future of the populations of Asia, Africa and South America. The distinction I make between capitalist agriculture and agriculture under capitalism constitutes, in my humble opinion, a new

contribution which historical Marxism and, *a fortiori*, bourgeois theories, have ignored (Kautsky, [1899]1988).

In the North: An Efficient Family Agriculture Perfectly Integrated into Dominant Capitalism

Modern family agriculture, dominant in Western Europe and in the USA, has clearly shown its superiority when compared to other forms of agricultural production. Annual production per worker (the equivalent of 1000–2000 tons of cereal) has no equal, and it has enabled a minimum proportion of the active population (about 5 per cent) to supply the whole country abundantly and even produce exportable surpluses. Modern family agriculture has also shown an exceptional capacity for absorbing innovations and much flexibility in adapting to demand.

This agriculture does not share the specific characteristic of capitalism, its main mode of labour organization. In the factory, the number of workers enables an advanced division of labour, which is at the origin of the leap in productivity. In the agricultural family business, labour supply is reduced to one or two individuals (the farming couple), sometimes helped by one, two, or three associates or permanent labourers, but also, in certain cases, a larger number of seasonal workers (particularly for the harvesting of fruit and vegetables). Generally speaking, there is not a definitively fixed division of labour, the tasks being polyvalent and variable. In this sense, family agriculture is not capitalist.

However, this modern family agriculture constituted an inseparable part of the capitalist economy into which it is totally integrated. In this family agricultural business, its self-consumption no longer counts. It depends entirely for its economic legitimacy on its production for the market. Thus, the logic that commands the production options is no longer the same as that of the agricultural peasants of yesterday (analysed by Chayanov, 1996), or of today in Third World countries.

The efficiency of the agricultural family business is due to its modern equipment. They possess 90 per cent of the tractors and other agricultural equipment in use in the world. These machines are ‘bought’ (often on credit) by the farmers and are therefore their ‘property’. In the logic of capitalism, the farmer is both a worker and a capitalist and the income earned should correspond to the sum of the wages for the work and the profit from the ownership of the capital being used. But it is not so. The net income of farmers is comparable to the average wage earned in industry in the same country. The state intervention and

regulation policies in Europe and in the USA, where this form of agriculture dominates, have as their declared objective the aim of ensuring (through subsidies) the equality of 'peasant' and 'worker' incomes. The profits from the capital used by farmers are therefore collected by segments of industrial and financial capital further up the food chain.

In the family agriculture of Europe and the USA, the component of the land rent, itself meant to constitute, in conventional economics, the remuneration of the productivity of the land, does not figure in the remuneration of the farmer/owner, or the owner (when not the farmer). The French model of 'anaesthetizing the owner' is very telling: in law, the rights of the farmer are given priority over those of the owner. In the USA, where 'respect for property' always has the absolute priority, the same result is obtained by forcing, *de facto*, almost all the family businesses to be owners of the land that they farm. The rent of ownership thus disappears from the remuneration of the farmers.

The efficiency of this family agriculture is also due to the fact that it farms (as owner or not) enough good land: neither too small nor pointlessly large. The surface farmed corresponds, for each stage of the development of mechanized equipment, to what a farmer alone (or a small family unit) can work. It has gradually expanded, as Marcel Mazoyer has extremely well demonstrated (by the facts) and illustrated (as an efficiency requirement) (Mazoyer & Roudard, 1997).

Control over agricultural production also operates down the food chain by modern commerce, particularly the supermarkets. In actual fact, the agricultural family unit, efficient as it is (and it is), is only a sub-contractor, caught in the pincers between upstream agribusiness (which imposes selected seeds today, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) tomorrow), industry (which supplies the equipment and chemical products), finance (which provides the necessary credits), and downstream in the commercialization of the supermarkets. The status of the farmer is more like that of the artisan (individual producer) who used to work in the 'putting out' system (the weaver dominated by the merchant that supplied the thread and sold the material produced).

It is true that this is not the only form of agriculture in the modern capitalist world. There are also large agribusiness enterprises, sometimes big owners who employ many waged labourers (when these estates are not leased out to tenant family farmers). This was generally the case with land in the colonies and still is the case in South Africa (this form of *latifundia* having been abolished by the agrarian reform of Zimbabwe). There are various forms in Latin America, sometimes not very 'modernized' and sometimes very 'modernized' (i.e., mechanized),

as in the Southern Cone. But family agriculture remains dominant in Europe and the USA.

‘Really existing socialism’ carried out various experiences in ‘industrial’ forms of agricultural production. The ‘Marxism’ underlying this option was that of Karl Kautsky who, at the end of the nineteenth century, had ‘predicted’, not the modernization of the agricultural family business (its equipment and its specialization), but its disappearance altogether in favour of large production units, like factories, believed to benefit from the advantages of a thoroughgoing internal division of labour. This prediction did not materialize in Europe and the USA. But the myth that it transmitted was believed in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe (with some nuances), in China, in Vietnam (in the modalities specific to that country) and, at one time, in Cuba. Independently of the other reasons that led to the failure of these experiences (bureaucratic management, bad macroeconomic planning, reduction of responsibilities due to lack of democracy, etc.), there were also errors of judgement about the advantages of the division of labour and specialization, extrapolated—without justification—from certain forms of industry and applied to other fields of production and social activity.

While if the reasons for this failure are now recognized, this cannot be said for the forms of capitalist agriculture in the regions of Latin America and Southern Africa mentioned above. And yet, the failure is also obvious, despite the profitability and the competitiveness of these modernized forms of *latifundia*. For this, profitability is obtained through horrific ecological wastage (irreversible destruction of productive potential and of arable land), as well as social exploitation (miserable wages).

In the South: Poor Peasant Cultivators as Part of a Dominated Peripheral Capitalism

Peasant cultivators in the South constitute almost half of humanity—three billion human beings. The types of agriculture vary, from those that have benefited from the green revolution (fertilizers, pesticides and selected seeds)—although they are not very mechanized, their production has risen to between 100 and 500 quintals per labourer—to those which are the same as before this revolution whose production is only around 10 quintals per labourer. The gap between the average production of a farmer in the North and that of peasant agriculture, which was from 10 to 1 before 1940 is now from 100 to 1. In other words, the rate

of progress in agricultural productivity has largely outstripped that of other activities, bringing about a lowering of the real price from 5 to 1.

This peasant agriculture in the countries of the South is also well and truly integrated into local and world capitalism. However, closer study reveals immediately both the convergences and differences in the two types of 'family' economy.

There are huge differences, which are visible and undeniable: the importance of subsistence food in the peasant economies, the only way of survival for those rural populations; the low efficiency of this agriculture, not equipped with tractors or other materials and often highly parcellized; the poverty of the rural world (three-quarters of the victims of under-nourishment are rural); the growing incapacity of these systems to ensure food supplies for their towns; the sheer immensity of the problems, as the peasant economy affects nearly half of humanity.

In spite of these differences, peasant agriculture is already integrated into the dominant global capitalist system. To the extent of its contribution to the market, it depends on purchased inputs (at least chemical products and selected seeds) and is the victim of the oligopolies that control the marketing of these products. For the regions having 'benefited' from the 'green revolution' (half of the peasantry of the South) upstream and downstream, the siphoning off of profits on the products by dominant capital are very great. But they are also, in relative terms, for the other half of the peasantry of the South, taking into account the weakness of their production.

Is the Modernization of the Agriculture of the South by Capitalism Possible and Desirable?

Let us use the hypothesis of a strategy for the development of agriculture that tries to reproduce systematically in the South the course of modern family agriculture in the North. One could easily imagine that some 50 million more modern farms, if given access to the large areas of land which would be necessary (taking it from the peasant economy and, of course, choosing the best soils) and access to the capital markets enabling them to equip themselves, they could produce the essential of what the creditworthy urban consumers still currently obtain from peasant agriculture. But what would happen to the billions of non-competitive peasant producers? They would be inexorably eliminated in a short period of time, a few decades. What would happen to these billions of human

beings, most of them already the poorest of the poor, but who feed themselves, for better and/or for worse—and for a third of them, for worse? Within a time horizon of 50 years, no industrial development, more or less competitive, even in a farfetched hypothesis of a continual annual growth of 7 per cent for three-quarters of humanity, could absorb even a third of this labour reserve. Capitalism, by its nature, cannot resolve the peasant question: the only prospects it can offer are a planet full of slums and billions of ‘too many’ human beings.

We have therefore reached the point where, to open up a new field for the expansion of capital (‘the modernization of agricultural production’), it is necessary to destroy—in human terms—entire societies. Fifty million new efficient producers (200 million human beings with their families), on the one hand, and three billion of excluded people, on the other. The creative aspect of the operation would be only a drop of water in the ocean of destruction that it requires. I thus conclude that capitalism has entered its phase of declining senility: the logic of the system is no longer able to ensure the simple survival of humanity. Capitalism is becoming barbaric and leads directly to genocide. It is more than ever necessary to replace it by other development logics which are more rational.

So, what is to be done?

It is necessary to accept the maintenance of peasant agriculture for all the foreseeable future of the twenty-first century. Not for reasons of romantic nostalgia for the past, but quite simply because the solution of the problem is to overtake the logics that drive capitalism and to participate in the long, secular transition to world socialism. It is, therefore, necessary to work out regulation policies for the relationships between the ‘market’ and peasant agriculture. At the national and regional levels, these regulations, specific and adapted to local conditions, must protect national production, thus ensuring the indispensable food sovereignty of nations—in other words, delinking the internal prices from those of the so-called world market—as they must do. A gradual increase in the productivity of peasant agriculture, which will doubtless be slow but continuous, would make it possible to control the exodus of the rural populations to the towns. At the level of what is called the world market, the desirable regulation can probably be done through interregional agreements that meet the requirements of a development that integrates people rather than excludes them.

There is No Alternative to Food Sovereignty

At the world level, food consumption is assured, through competition for 85 per cent of it, by local production. Nevertheless, this production

corresponds to very different levels of satisfaction of food needs: excellent for North American and West and Central Europe, acceptable in China, mediocre for the rest of Asia and Latin America, disastrous for Africa. One can also see a strong correlation between the quality and the levels of industrialization of the various regions: countries and regions that are more industrialized are able to feed their populations well from their own agricultural produce.

The USA and Europe have understood the importance of food sovereignty very well and have successfully implemented it by systematic economic policies. But, apparently, what is good for them is not so for the others! The World Bank, the OECD and the European Union try to impose an alternative, which is 'food security'. According to them, Third World countries do not need food sovereignty and should rely on international trade to cover the deficit in their food requirements, however large. This may seem easy for those countries which are large exporters of natural resources (oil, uranium, etc.). For the others, the 'advice' of the Western powers is to specialize their agriculture, as much as possible, in the production of agricultural commodities for export (cotton, tropical drinks and oils, agrofuels in the future). The defenders of 'food security' (for others, not for themselves) do not consider the fact that this specialization, which has been practiced since colonialism, has not made it possible to improve the miserable food rations of the peoples concerned, especially the peasants. Nor is the above-mentioned correlation taken into account.

Thus, the advice to peasants who have not yet entered the industrial era (as in Africa) is not to engage in 'insane' industrialization projects. These are the very terms utilized by Sylvie Brunel, who goes so far as attributing the failure of agricultural development in Africa to this 'insane' option of their governments! It is precisely those countries that have taken this option (Korea, Taiwan, China) that have become 'emerging countries', as well as able to feed their population better (or less badly). And it is precisely those who have not done so (Africa) that are sunk into chronic malnutrition and famine. This would not appear to embarrass the defenders of the so-called principle of 'food security' (more accurately, 'food insecurity'). There is little doubt that, underneath this obstinacy against Africa committing itself to paths inspired by the success of Asia, lies more than a touch of contempt (if not racism) towards the peoples concerned. It is regrettable that such nonsense is to be found in many of Western circles and organizations with good intentions—NGOs and even research centres!

Bruno Parmentier (2007) has clearly demonstrated the total failure of the 'food security' option. Governments who thought they could cover

the needs of their poor urban populations through their exports (oil, among others) have found themselves trapped by the food deficit that is growing at an alarming rate as a result of these policies. For the other countries—particularly in Africa—the situation is even more disastrous.

On top of this, the economic crisis initiated by the financial collapse of 2008 is already aggravating the situation—and will continue to do so. It is sadly amusing to note how, at the very moment when the crisis underway illustrates the failure of the so-called food security policies, the partners of the OECD (such as the EU institutions) cling to them. It is not that the governments of the Triad (the USA, Europe and Japan) do not ‘understand’ the problem. This would be to deny them the intelligence that they certainly possess. So can one dismiss the hypothesis that ‘food insecurity’ is a consciously adopted objective? Has the ‘food weapon’ not already been implemented? Thus, there is an extra reason for insisting that without food sovereignty, no political sovereignty is possible.

But while there is no alternative to food sovereignty, its efficient implementation does, in fact, require the commitment to the construction of a diversified economy and, hence, industrialization.

Land Tenure Reform Is at the Heart of the Choices Concerning the Future of Peasant Societies

The main issue of the debate on the future of peasant agricultures concerns the question of the rules governing the access to land. The necessary reforms of land tenure systems in Africa and Asia must be made with the perspective of a development that benefits the whole of society, in particular the working and popular classes, including, of course, the peasants. It must be oriented towards reducing inequalities and radically eliminating ‘poverty’. This development paradigm involves a combination of a mixed macroeconomy (associating private enterprise and public planning) based on the double democratization of the management of the market and of the state and its interventions, and the option for a development of an agricultural system based on peasant family cultivation.

Implementing this set of fundamental principles—the special ways and means of each country and phase of development having to be worked out—constitutes, in itself, the construction of the ‘alternative’ in its national dimensions. This must, of course, be accompanied by evolutions that can support it, both at the required regional levels and at the

world level, through the construction of an alternative globalization, negotiated and no longer imposed unilaterally by dominant transnational capital, the collective imperialism of the Triad and the hegemony of the USA.

The regulations governing access to the use of agricultural land must be conceived in a perspective that ‘integrates and does not exclude’, that is to say, which enables cultivators as a whole to have access to the land, a prior condition for the reproduction of a ‘peasant society’. This fundamental right is certainly not enough. It has also to be accompanied by policies that help the peasant family units to produce in conditions that help maintain the growth of national production (guaranteeing, in turn, the food sovereignty of the country) and a parallel improvement in the real income of the peasants involved as a whole. A collection of macro-economic proposals and forms for appropriate policy in managing them has to be implemented, and negotiations concerning the organization of international trade must be subordinated to them.

Access to land must be regulated by the status of its ownership. The terminology utilized in this field is often imprecise, because of a lack of conceptualization. In English, the words ‘land tenure’ and ‘land system’ are often used interchangeably.

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish two families of land tenure systems: those that are based on the private ownership of land and those that are not.

Land Tenure Systems Based on the Private Ownership of Land

In this case, the owner disposes of, to use the terms of Roman law, the *usus* (right to develop), the *fructus* (ownership of the products of this exploitation) and the *abusus* (the right to transfer ownership). This right is ‘absolute’ in that the owner can cultivate his/her own land, rent it out, or even keep it out of cultivation. Ownership can be given or sold, it is part of a collection of assets deriving from the rights of inheritance.

This right is no doubt often less absolute than it appears. In all cases, usage is subordinated to laws governing the public order (prohibiting its illegal use for growing drug-producing crops, for example) and increasing numbers of regulations concerned with preserving the environment. In certain countries that have made an agrarian reform, there is a fixed ceiling to the size of the property of an individual or a family.

The rights of tenant farmers (length and guarantee of lease, the amount of land rent) limit the rights of the owners in different degrees, to the point of giving the tenant farmer the greater benefit of protection by the state and its agricultural policies (as is the case for France). The freedom to choose crops is not always the rule. In Egypt, the state agricultural services have always imposed the size of the plots of land allocated to the different crops in accordance with their irrigation requirements.

This land tenure system is modern in the sense that it is the result of the constitution of 'really existing' capitalism, starting from Western Europe (first in England) and from the colonies of European extraction in America. It was set up through the destruction of the 'customary' systems of regulating access to the land in Europe itself. The statutes of feudal Europe were founded on the superimposing of rights on the same land: those of the peasant concerned and other members of the village community (serfs or freedmen), those of the feudal lord and those of the king. The assault on these rights took the form of the Enclosures in England, imitated in various ways in all the European countries during the nineteenth century. Marx very soon denounced this radical transformation that excluded most of the peasants from access to the use of land—and who were destined to become emigrant proletarians in the town, or remain where they were as agricultural labourers (or sharecroppers)—and he classified these measures as primitive accumulation, dispossessing the producers of the land and the use of the means of production.

Using the terms of Roman law to describe the statute of modern bourgeois ownership imply that it dates from time immemorial, that is, the ownership of the land in the Roman Empire, and more precisely the slave-labour land ownership. In actual fact, these particular forms of ownership, having disappeared in feudal Europe, make it impossible to talk of the 'continuity' of a 'Western' concept of ownership (itself associated with individualism and the values that it represents) that has never existed.

The rhetoric of the capitalist discourse—the 'liberal' ideology—has not only produced this myth of 'Western continuity'. It has produced another myth that is still more dangerous: that of an 'absolute and superior rationality' of the management of an economy based on the private and exclusive ownership of the means of production, which include agricultural land. Conventional economics does, in fact, claim that the 'market', that is, the alienability of the ownership of capital and land, ensures the optimal usage (the most efficient) of these 'factors of production'. According to this logic, therefore, land must be turned into 'a commodity like the others', which can be alienated at the price of 'the market' to guarantee that the best use is made of it for the owner

concerned and for the whole society. This is only a miserable piece of tautology, but it is what the whole discourse on which the bourgeois economy is based. This same rhetoric thinks it can legitimize the principle of ownership of the land by the fact that it alone gives the cultivator who invests to improve the yields per hectare and the productivity of his work (and of those that he employs, if this is the case) the guarantee that he will not suddenly be dispossessed of the fruit of his labours and savings.

This is not true at all, for other forms of regulations on the right of land use can produce the same results. Finally, this dominant discourse extends the conclusions that it believes to draw from the construction of Western modernity, to propose them as the only 'rules' necessary for the progress of all other peoples. Giving over the land everywhere to private ownership in the current sense of the term, such as that practised in the centres of capitalism, is to apply to the whole world the policy of the Enclosures—in other words, dispossessing the peasants. This is not a new process: it was initiated and continued during the centuries preceding the world expansion of capitalism, particularly in the colonial systems. Today, the World Trade Organization (WTO) actually proposes to accelerate the movement, whereas the destructions that this capitalist option involves are increasingly foreseeable and calculable. For this reason, the resistance of the peasants and the peoples involved can make it possible to build a real alternative, one that is genuinely human-oriented.

Land Tenure Systems not Based on the Private Ownership of Land

This definition, being negative, cannot apply to a homogenous group. For, in all human societies, access to the land is regulated. But this is done either through 'customary communities', 'modern local authorities', or the state. Or, more precisely, and more often, by a collection of institutions and practices that concern individuals, local authorities and the state.

The 'customary' management (expressed in terms of customary law or so-called customary law) has almost always excluded private ownership (in the modern sense) and has always guaranteed access to the land to all the families (rather than individuals) concerned—that is, those who constitute a distinct 'village community' and identify themselves as such. But it hardly gave 'equal' access to the land. First, it usually excluded

‘foreigners’ (very often what remained of the conquered people) and ‘slaves’ (of various status); it also unequally distributed land according to membership of clans, lineage and castes, or status (‘chiefs’, ‘freedmen’, etc.). So it is inappropriate to indiscriminately praise these customary rights as is done by numerous ideologues of anti-imperialist nationalism. Progress will certainly require them to be questioned.

Customary management has almost never been that of ‘independent villages’, which were in fact nearly always integrated into some sort of state, stable or shifting, solid or precarious, but seldom absent. The usage rights of communities and of the families that composed them have always been limited by those of the state that received tribute (which is the reason why I described the vast array of premodern production modes as ‘tributary’).

These complex kinds of ‘customary’ management, which differ from one country and epoch to another, now only exist, at best, in extremely degraded forms, having suffered from the attack by the dominating logic of globalized capitalism for at least two centuries (in Asia and Africa) and sometimes five centuries (in Latin America). The example of India is probably the most striking in this regard. Before British colonization, access to land was administered by the ‘village communities’ or, more exactly, their governing castes, excluding the inferior castes—the *dalits*—who were treated as a kind of collective slave class, similar to the helots of Sparta. These communities, in turn, were controlled and exploited by the imperial Mogul State and its vassals (rajahs and other kings), who levied the taxes. The British raised the status of the *zamindars* (whose responsibility it was to actually collect the taxes) to becoming ‘owners’, so that they constituted a kind of allied large land-owning class, regardless of tradition. On the other hand, they maintained the ‘tradition’ when it suited them, for example excluding the *dalits* from access to land! Independent India did not challenge this heavy colonial inheritance, which is the cause of the unbelievable destitution of most of the peasantry and, thus, of its urban population (Amin, 2006, ch. 4).

The solution to these problems and the building up of a viable peasant economy of the majority thus requires an agrarian reform, in the strict sense of the term. The European colonization in Southeast Asia and that of the USA in the Philippines have had similar consequences. The regimes of the ‘enlightened’ despots of the East (the Ottoman Empire, the Egypt of Mohamed Ali, the Shahs of Iran) also mostly supported private ownership in the modern sense of the term for the benefit of a new class (incorrectly described as ‘feudal’ by the main currents of historical Marxism), recruited from the senior agents of their power systems.

As a result, the private ownership of land is now applicable to most agricultural land—particularly the most fertile ones—in all Asia, except for China, Vietnam and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. There remain only the vestiges of para-customary systems, particularly in the poorest areas and those less attractive to prevailing capitalist agriculture. This structure is highly differentiated, juxtaposing large landowners (rural capitalists in my terminology), rich peasants, middle peasants and poor peasants without land. There is no peasant organization or movement that transcends these acute class conflicts.

In Arab Africa, in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya (but not in Egypt), the colonial authorities had granted their colonizers ‘modern’ private property, generally of a *latifundia* type. This inheritance has certainly been eliminated in Algeria, but there the peasantry had practically disappeared and been proletarianized or reduced to vagrancy by the extension of the colonial properties, while in Morocco and Tunisia the local bourgeoisie took over (which also partially happened in Kenya). In Zimbabwe, the revolution underway has challenged the colonial heritage on behalf partly of new owners who are more urban than rural and partly of the ‘communities of poor peasants’. South Africa, for the time being, has not taken part in this movement. The strips of degenerated para-customary systems which remain in the ‘poor’ regions of Morocco and Berber Algeria, as in the Bantustans of South Africa, are suffering from the threat of private appropriation, encouraged by elements inside and outside the concerned communities.

In all these situations, the peasant struggles (and sometimes the organizations that support them) should be identified more precisely: do they constitute movements and represent claims by ‘rich peasants’ that are in conflict with some state policies (and the influence of the dominant world system on them)? Or are they poor and landless peasants? Could they both form an alliance against the dominant (so-called ‘neoliberal’) system? On what conditions? To what extent? Can the claims—whether they are expressed or not—of the poor, landless peasants be ‘forgotten’?

In intertropical Africa, the apparent persistence of these ‘customary’ systems is certainly more visible. Because, here, the colonization model took off in a different direction known as the *économie de traite*: the meaning of this concept, which has no English translation, is that the management of access to land was left to the so-called ‘customary’ authorities, nevertheless controlled by the colonial state (through genuine traditional chiefs or false ones fabricated by the administration). The objective of this control was to force the peasants to produce, beyond their own subsistence, a quota of specific export products (groundnuts,

cotton, coffee, cacao). The maintenance of a land tenure system that did not recognize private property was convenient for the colonizers, as land rent did not have to be taken into account in calculating the price of the products. This resulted in the degradation of the soils, destroyed by expanding crops, sometimes definitively (as, e.g., the desertification of Senegal where groundnuts had been cultivated). Here, once again, capitalism demonstrates that the 'short-term rationality' inherent in its dominant logic is largely responsible for ecological disasters. The juxtaposition of subsistence food crops and exports crops also made it possible to pay the work of the peasants at levels close to zero. For these reasons, to talk about the 'customary land tenure system' is grossly misleading: it is a new regime that conserves only the appearance of 'tradition', often its least interesting aspects.

China and Vietnam provide a unique example of a system for managing access to the land which is based neither on private ownership, nor on 'custom', but on a new revolutionary right, unknown elsewhere, which is that of all the peasants (described as the inhabitants of a village) having equal access to land—and I stress the 'equal'. This is the most beautiful acquisition of the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions.

In China, and still more in Vietnam, which had a deeper colonization experience, the 'old' land tenure systems (those I have described as 'tributary') were already fairly eroded by dominant capitalism. The old governing classes of the imperial power system had taken over agricultural land as owners, or almost as private property, while capitalist development encouraged the creation of new classes of rich peasants. Mao Zedong is the first—followed by Chinese and Vietnamese communists—to have prescribed an agrarian revolution strategy based on the mobilization of most of the poor peasants, without land or other assets. The victory of this revolution made it possible to abolish the private ownership of land right from the beginning—which was replaced by that of the state—as well as the organization of new forms of equal access to land for all peasants. True, this procedure has passed through several successive stages, including the Soviet-inspired model based on production cooperatives. The limits of their achievements led both countries to return to the idea of family peasant units. Are they viable? Can they produce a continual improvement in production without freeing up too much rural labour? On what conditions? What kinds of support are required from the state? What forms of political management can meet this challenge?

Ideally, the model involves the double affirmation of the rights of the state (the only owner) and of the usufructuaries (the peasant family). The state guarantees the equal division of the village lands among all the

families and it prohibits all other usage other than family cultivation—for example, the renting of land. It guarantees that the result of investments made by the usufructuaries is given back to them immediately through their right of ownership of all the produce of their land, which are marketed freely, although the state guarantees purchase at a minimum price. On the longer term, the children who remain on the land can inherit from the usufructuaries (those who definitively leave the place lose their right to the land, which reverts to the lands for future redistribution). This is the case, of course, for fertile land, but also for the small, even dwarf-sized plots, so that the system is only viable if there is vertical investment (the green revolution without much mechanization), which proves as effective in increasing production through rural activities as horizontal investment (extension of the holdings, supported by intensified mechanization).

Has this ‘ideal’ model ever been implemented? It was surely close to it, for example, during the period of Deng Xiaoping in China. Nevertheless, even if it has created a greater degree of equality within a village, it has never been able to avoid the inequalities between one community and another, which are created by the difference in the quality of the soils, the density of population, or the proximity to urban markets. No other system of redistribution (even through the structures of cooperatives and state marketing monopolies during the ‘Soviet’ stage) has managed to resolve this challenge.

What is certainly more serious is that the system itself is subject to internal and external pressures that undermine its aims and social impact. Access to credit and favourable conditions for the supply of inputs are the object of bargaining and interventions of all kinds, legal and illegal: ‘equal’ access to the land is not the same as ‘equal’ access to the best conditions for production. The increasing popularity of the ‘market’ ideology promotes this erosion: the system tolerates tenant farming (if not re-legitimizing it) and the hiring of wage labour. The discourse of the right—encouraged from the outside—repeats that it is necessary to give the peasants ‘ownership’ of the land and open up ‘the market in agricultural land’. It is very clear that those supporting this are the rich peasants (if not agribusiness), who want to increase their holdings....

The management of this system of access to land for the peasants is ensured up until now by the state and the Party together. It may well be that this is because of the village councils that have been genuinely re-elected, and it has been necessary because there is no other way to mobilize the opinion of the majority and reduce the intrigues of the

minorities of profiteers who would eventually benefit from a more marked capitalist development. The 'dictatorship of the Party' has shown that this has been largely solved through careerism and opportunism, if not corruption. The social struggles under way in the Chinese and Vietnamese countryside make their voices heard in these countries, just as they do elsewhere in the world. But they remain very much on the 'defensive', that is, attached to defending the heritage of the revolution: the equal right of everyone to land. Defence is necessary, because this heritage is more threatened than would appear, in spite of repeated affirmations by the two governments that 'the ownership of land by the state will "never" be abolished for the benefit of private ownership'! But now this defence requires recognition of the right to do it through the organization of those concerned, the peasants.

Not Only One Formula for Peasant Alternatives

'Agrarian reform' should be understood as the redistribution of private ownership when it is considered to be unequally distributed. It is a land tenure system that is based on the principle of ownership. This reform becomes necessary both to satisfy the demand (perfectly legitimate) from poor and landless peasants and to reduce the political and social power of the large landowners. But where it is implemented, in Asia and Africa after the liberation of old forms of imperialist and colonial domination, it has been carried out by hegemonic non-revolutionary social blocs who were not governed by the dominated and poor majority classes. The exceptions were in China and Vietnam where, also for this reason, there had not been an 'agrarian reform' in the strict sense of the term but, as I have said, private ownership of land was suppressed, the principle of state ownership was affirmed, and the 'equal' access to the use of land by all the peasants was put into operation. Elsewhere, real reforms only dispossessed the large landowners for the profit, ultimately, of the middle and even rich (long-term) peasants, ignoring the interests of the poor and those without land. That was the case in Egypt and in other Arab countries. The reform underway in Zimbabwe risks ending up in the same way. In other situations, reform is always on the agenda of what should be done: in India, in South-East Asia, in South Africa and in Kenya.

The progress created by agrarian reform, even where it exists as an immediate and essential requirement, is nevertheless ambiguous for its more long-term implications. For it reinforces attachment to 'small property',

which becomes an obstacle to the questioning of a land tenure system based on private ownership.

Russia's history illustrates this drama. The developments that followed the abolition of serfdom, in 1861, were accelerated by the revolution of 1905, because Stolypin's policies had already produced a 'claim for ownership' that was (finally) fulfilled in the radical agrarian reform after the 1917 revolution. And, as we know, the new small owners did not enthusiastically renounce their rights for the benefit of the unfortunate cooperatives, which were dreamt up at the time, in the 1930s. 'Another path' to development, based on the peasant family economy of the generalized small owners, would have been possible. But it was not attempted.

And what about the regions (other than China and Vietnam) where, in fact, the land tenure system had not (yet) been based on private property? This was, of course, the case of intertropical Africa.

Here we find the old debate. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Marx, in his correspondence with the Russian Narodniks (Vera Zasulich, among others), dared to say that the absence of private ownership could constitute an advantage for the socialist revolution, enabling a leap forward towards a regime for managing the access to land other than the one governed by private ownership. But he did not specify what forms this new regime should take, the adjective 'collective', correct as it was, being insufficient. Twenty years later, Lenin believed this possibility no longer existed, eliminated by the penetration of capitalism and the spirit of private ownership that accompanied it. Was this a correct assessment? I cannot say, as I do not know enough about Russia. However, Lenin was hardly able to give decisive importance to this question, having accepted the viewpoint of Kautsky in *The Agrarian Question*.

Kautsky made generalizations about the extent of the model in modern European capitalism and believed that the peasantry was destined to 'disappear' because of the capitalist expansion itself. In other words, that capitalism would be able to 'resolve the agrarian question'. While this was true (for 80 per cent) of the other capitalist countries (the Triad: 20 per cent of the world population), it is not the case for the 'rest of the world' (80 per cent of the population). History has shown that not only has capitalism not solved this question for the 80 per cent of the world population, but that, as it pursues its expansion, it cannot resolve it, other than by genocide – what a marvellous solution! It was necessary to await Mao Zedong and the Communist Parties of China and Vietnam to give an adequate response to this challenge.

The question came up again in the 1960s, when Africa attained its independence. The national liberation movements of the continents, the states and the State-Parties which it had produced received, in different degrees, the support of the peasant majorities of their peoples. Their natural tendency to populism was to imagine a 'specific ("African") path to socialism'. This could be described as very moderately radical in its relationships both with dominant capitalism and with the local classes associated with its expansion. Nevertheless, it posed the question of reconstruction of peasant society in a humanist and universalist spirit. This spirit was often very critical of 'traditions' that the foreign masters had, in fact, been trying to mobilize for their own profit.

All the African countries—or almost all—adopted the same principle, formulated in the 'eminent ownership right of the state' over all the land. I am not among those who consider this declaration to have been 'a mistake', nor that it was motivated by extreme 'statistim'.

To grasp the extent of the challenge it is necessary to study the way in which the current system controls the peasantry and how it is integrated into the world capitalist system. This control is ensured by a complex system that calls upon 'custom', private (capitalist) ownership, and the state, all at the same time. 'Custom', as we have just seen, has degenerated and only serves as decoration in the discourses of dictators appealing to what is known as 'authenticity', the fig leaf to cover their appetite for pillage and betrayal to imperialism. The tendency for private appropriation to expand has not met with any serious obstacle, apart from some resistance by the victims. In certain regions, which are more suitable for profitable cultivation (irrigated areas, market gardens), land is bought, sold and rented without any formal ownership titles.

The eminent state ownership of land, which I defend as a principle, is itself promoting private appropriation. The state can thus 'give' the land necessary for installing a tourist area, a local or foreign agro-business enterprise, or a state farm. The title deeds required for access to the areas to be developed are the object of a distribution process that is rarely transparent. In all cases, the peasant families that occupied the areas and are forced to clear off are the victims of these practices that amount to abuse of power. But to 'abolish' eminent state ownership of land to transfer it to the occupiers is not, in fact, feasible (all the village territories would have to be registered!), and if it were attempted it would enable the rural and urban notables to make off with the best bits of land.

The right response to the challenges of a land tenure system that is not based on private ownership (at least not dominated by it) should be to reform the state and its active involvement in setting up a management

system of access to land that is modernized, efficient (economically), and democratic (to avoid, or at least to reduce inequalities). Above all, the solution is not to 'return to custom', which is, anyway, impossible and which would only serve to increase the inequalities and open up the way to unbridled capitalism.

However, it cannot be said that the African states have never tried to take the path recommended here. In Mali, the Sudanese Union, just after independence in September 1961, started on what was very inaccurately called 'collectivization'. In fact, the cooperatives that were established were not production cooperatives, which remained the exclusive responsibility of the family farmers. They constituted a form of modernized collective power, replacing the so-called 'custom' which the colonial power used to support. The party that took over this new modern power was also clearly aware of the challenge and aimed at eliminating the customary forms of power—which were judged to be 'reactionary', if not 'feudal'. It is true that this new peasant power, formally democratic (the leaders were elected), was only as democratic as the state and the party. However, it did exercise 'modern' responsibilities, seeing that access to land was carried out 'correctly', that is, without 'discrimination'. It managed the credits, the distribution of the inputs (which were partially supplied by state trading) and the marketing of produce (also partially delivered for state commerce). Nepotism and extortion were certainly not eliminated in these procedures. But the only response to these abuses was the gradual democratization of the state, not its 'withdrawal', which was later imposed by liberalism, through an extremely violent military dictatorship, for the benefit of the traders (the *dioulas*).

Other experiences, like those in the liberated areas of Guinea Bissau, inspired by the theories advanced by Amilcar Cabral, in Burkina Faso during the Sankara era, have also openly confronted these challenges and sometimes produced unquestionable advances. There are now efforts to obliterate them from people's minds. In Senegal, the establishment of elected rural authorities constitutes a response that I unhesitatingly defend in principle. Democracy is a practice whose apprenticeship never ends, no less in Europe than in Africa.

What the dominant discourse at the moment means by 'reform of the land tenure system' is the exact opposite of what is required for the building of an authentic alternative based on a prosperous peasant economy. What this discourse means by land reform—conveyed by the propaganda instruments of collective imperialism, the World Bank, many development institutions, but also a number of NGOs that are richly endowed—is the acceleration of the privatization of land, and nothing

more. The aim is clear: to create the conditions that would enable some 'modern' islands of agribusiness (foreign and local) to take over the land they require to expand. But the supplementary produce that these 'islands' could supply (for export or for local 'effective demand') could never meet the needs for building a prosperous society for all, which would involve the development of the peasant family economy as a whole.

Need to Define Role of the State in Land Reform

I do not exclude complex and mixed formulas, which can be specific for each country. Private ownership of the land can be accepted—at least where it is established and considered legitimate. Its distribution can—or must—be reviewed where this is the case, by agrarian reforms (for Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya). I do not even necessarily exclude the opening up of space—under control—of the setting up of agribusiness. But what the essential question lies elsewhere: how to modernize peasant family production and democratize its integration into the national economy and globalization. I have no ready-made solutions to propose in these fields. I shall just mention some of the great problems that this reform raises.

The question of democracy is the indisputable issue to be tackled in responding to this challenge. It is a complex and difficult issue that cannot be reduced to the insipid discourse of good governance and electoral multipartyism. It has, of course, a genuine cultural aspect: democracy wants to abolish the 'customs' that are hostile to it—prejudices about social hierarchies and, above all, the treatment of women. It includes juridical and institutional aspects: the construction of systems of administrative, commercial and personal rights that are consistent with the aims of social construction and the setting up of adequate institutions (elected, for the most part). But, above all, the progression of democracy will depend on the social power of its defenders. The organization of peasant movements is, in this sense, absolutely irreplaceable. It is only to the extent that the peasantry can express itself that the advances towards what is called 'participatory democracy'—in contrast to reducing it to the problem of 'representative democracy'—can clear the path (Amin, 2005).

The relationship between men and women is no less important in the democracy challenge. Those who speak of 'family cultivation' (peasant) evidently refer to the family, which up until now and almost everywhere has structures that impose the submission of women and the

over-exploitation of their labour. The democratic transformation will not take place if there are no organized movements of the women concerned.

Attention should be given to the question of migrations. 'Customary' rights generally exclude 'foreigners'—that is, all those who do not belong to the clans, lineages, and families of which the original village community is constituted—from right to the land, or their access is conditioned. The migrations caused by colonial and postcolonial development have sometimes taken on dimensions that upset the ethnic 'homogeneity' of the regions concerned. The emigrants who come from outside the country (like the Burkinabe in Cote d'Ivoire), or those who are formally citizens of the same country but of 'ethnic' origin that is foreign to the regions where they settle (like the Hausa in the Plateau state of Nigeria), have faced questioning of their rights to the land which they have cultivated by narrow-minded and chauvinistic political movements, which also benefit from foreign support. One of the most unavoidable conditions for real democratic advance is to dismiss ideological and political 'communitarianisms' and firmly denounce the para-cultural discourse that underlies them.

All these analyses and proposals which were the object of past developments only concern the status of ownership and the rules of access to land. These questions are, indeed, a major issue in the debates about the future of agricultural and food production of peasant societies and of the individuals who constitute them. But they do not cover all dimensions of the challenge. Access to land cannot be a potential transformer of the society if the peasants who benefit are unable to get access to the indispensable means of production on favourable conditions (credit, seeds, inputs, access to the markets). National policies, like the international negotiations that aim to define the framework in which the prices and incomes are determined, are another dimension of the peasant question.

We refer the reader to the writings of Jacques Berthelot (2001) on these questions. He is the best and most critical analyst of the projects to integrate agricultural and food production into the 'world' markets. We shall just mention two of the conclusions and most important proposals that we have reached.

First, it is not possible to accept that agricultural and food production, as well as land, be treated as ordinary 'goods', and thus allow them to be integrated into the project of globalized liberalization promoted by the dominant powers and transnationalized capital.

The WTO agenda must just be rejected, purely and simply. Opinion in Asia and Africa must be convinced of this, and particularly of the need for food sovereignty, beginning with the peasant organizations, but also

all the other social and political forces that defend the interests of the popular classes and those of the nation. All those who have not renounced a project for development that is worthy of the name must realize that the negotiations underway in the framework of the WTO agenda will only be catastrophic for the peoples of Asia and Africa. Capitalism has reached the stage where the pursuit of profit requires 'enclosure' policies at the world level, like the enclosures that took place in England in the first stage of its (modern) development. Now, however, the destruction of the 'peasant reserves' of cheap labour at the world level will result in nothing less than the genocide of half of humanity.

Second, it is impossible to accept the behaviour of the main imperialist powers, the USA and Europe, that are associated with the assaults against the peoples of the South within the WTO. These powers, that try to unilaterally impose the 'liberalism' proposals on the countries of the South, have freed themselves from the same restrictions by ways that can only be described as systematic trickery.

The Farm Bill of the USA and the agricultural policies of the European Union violate the very principles which the WTO intends to impose on other states. The 'partnership' projects proposed by the European Union, following the Cotonou Convention, as from 2008, are nothing less than 'criminal' to use the strong, but appropriate, expression of Jacques Berthelot. These powers can and must be accused in the very courts of the WTO set up for this purpose. A group of countries from the South can do this—and they must.

The alternative consists of national policies to construct/reconstruct national funds for stabilization and support for production, completed by the establishment of common international funds for basic products, enabling an effective alternative reorganization of the international markets of agricultural products. Jean-Pierre Boris has elaborated such proposals in detail.

The peasants of Asia and Africa organized themselves during the stage prior to the liberation struggles of their peoples. They found their place in the strong historical blocs which made it possible to win victory over the imperialism of the time. These blocs were sometimes revolutionary (China and Vietnam), and they then had their main rural bases in the majority classes of middle peasants and poor, landless peasants. Or, elsewhere, they were led by the national bourgeoisie or sectors who aspired to become so, among the rich and middle peasants, thus isolating the large landowners in some places and the 'customary' chieftaincies in the pay of the colonizers.

That page of history having been turned, the challenge of the new collective imperialism of the Triad will only be got rid of if historical

blocs are constituted in Asia and Africa. But this cannot be a remake of the preceding blocs. The challenge faced by the so-called alternative world movement and its constitutive components of social forums is to identify, in the new conditions, the nature of these blocs, their strategies and immediate and long-term objectives. This is a far more serious challenge than is realized by many of the movements committed to the struggles.

A Complex and Multidimensional Challenge

Is the capitalist modernization path as 'effective' as the conventional economists claim? Let us imagine that, in this way, we can double production (from an index of 100 to one of 200), but that this is obtained by the elimination of 80 per cent of the surplus rural population (the index of the number of active cultivators falling from 100 to 20). The apparent gain, measured by the growth of production per active producer is considerable: it is multiplied by 10. But, if it is seen in terms of the rural population as a whole, it is only multiplied by two. Therefore, it is necessary to distribute freely all this growth in production in order simply to keep alive the peasants who have been eliminated and cannot find alternative work in the towns. This was what Marx wrote concerning the pauperization associated with the accumulation of capital.

The challenge, which is to base development on renewing peasant societies, has many dimensions. I will just call attention here to the conditions for constructing the necessary and possible political alliances that will enable progress to be made towards solutions (in the interests of the worker peasants, of course) to all the problems that are posed: access to the land and to the means to develop it properly; reasonable wages for peasant work; improvement of wages parallel to the productivity of this work; and appropriate regulation of the markets at the national, regional and world levels.

New peasant organizations exist in Asia and Africa that are visibly activating the struggles underway. Often, when political systems make it impossible for them to constitute formal organizations, the social struggles in the rural world take the form of 'movements' with no apparent direction. These actions and programmes, where they exist, should be analysed more carefully. Which peasant social forces do they represent and whose interests are they defending? The majority mass of the peasants? Or the minorities which aspire to participating in the expansion of dominant globalized capitalism? We should mistrust quick answers to these questions that are complex and difficult. We should be

careful not to ‘condemn’ a number of organizations and movements on the pretext that they are not mobilizing the peasant majorities on radical programmes. This would be to ignore the need to formulate broad alliances and strategies by stages. But we should also be careful not to support the discourse of the ‘naïve alternative world people’ who often set the tone in the forums and fuel the illusion that the world is on the right path only because of the existence of the social movements. This is a discourse that belongs more to the many NGOs—with good intentions, perhaps—than to the peasant and worker organizations.

I myself am not so naïve as to think that all the interests that these alliances represent can naturally converge. In all peasant societies, there are the rich and the poor, who are often without land. The conditions of access to land result from different historical experiences which, in some cases, have rooted aspirations to ownership in peoples’ minds, while in others, it is to protect the access to land of the greatest number. The relationships of the peasantries to state power are also the result of different political paths, particularly as concerns the national liberation movements of Asia and Africa: populisms, peasant democracies, state anti-peasant autocracies show the diversity of peoples’ heritages. The way in which international markets are run favour some, penalize others. These divergences of interest are sometimes echoed in many of the peasant movements and often in the divergences of the political strategies adopted.

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