



Are Peasants an Effective Political Force? A Critical Reflection

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Abstract: This paper delves into the debate on the political effectiveness of peasants in resisting and/or revolutions against their domination and exploitation. The paper contends that the significance of peasants as a potent political force, capable of resistance and revolution can be understood by aptly seeing peasants as diverse groups that are simultaneously socio-economic, political, and cultural, dwelling and working in a multiplicity of contexts. The paper foregrounds the agency of peasantries in fashioning their circumstances in ways that are routine, multiple, overt, and covert. By so doing, I challenge the Marxian limiting of their imagination of the revolutionary path to proletarianisation for failing to account for contexts that do not proletarianise. Moreover, the paper questions the Maoists for valorising the structure as an organising force for the peasantries if the peasants are to ever stage a successful revolution. The paper then concludes that peasants are effective revolutionary subjects, whose agency tends to be dialectical in the sense that they shape as they are shaped, by the same forces against which they resist.

Keywords: Peasants; political force; agency; resistance; peasant movements

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the ability of peasants to exercise agency against domination, including but not limited to, challenging their domination by the state and the market, and their landlessness. It therefore contributes to the debate on the political relevance of peasant movements as far as resisting the diversity of subordinations they experience in the contemporary global capitalist order, societal, and modern state contexts is concerned. The paper argues that the significance of the peasantry as a capable force for political change is recognisable by duly understanding peasants as diverse groups that tend to be simultaneously socio-economic, political, and cultural, inhabiting and operating in heterogeneous contexts. In the context of this paper, I refer to the peasants as a political force, to mean the ability of peasants to effectively organise, form alliances, and shape their conditions by engaging in revolutionary acts or resisting their subordination in the many forms it manifests. Thus, given that peasants form the numerical majority of the inhabitants of the world (Isaacman, 1991; Mao Tse-tung, 1926; Shanin, 1971), it is difficult to wish away the continuing relevance of the peasant question and the political power of the peasantry. In short, this paper suggests that peasants are active agents, playing a hardly negligible part in affecting their conditions.

The paper draws on a broad array of agrarian and peasant scholarship from and about the global South. It observes that several strands of thought on the resistance of peasants against their oppression, exploitation, and domination occur in the literature. However, three preeminent such strands suffice for this paper. One such strand of thought, the Maoists, holds that peasants are capable of organising a triumphant revolution if a sort of political structure guides their pursuits of challenging their domination and exploitation. Conversely, a Marxian strand of thought, core among whose thinkers are Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and Friedrich



Engels, postulates that for any viable revolution to happen, the relations between labour and capital must be fully developed to the extent that the peasantry evolves to become a proletarian class, which then is capable of resisting capitalist exploitation. Yet, a third strand of thought, key among whose proponents is Allen Isaacman, posits that the peasants have diverse clandestine and overt forms of resistance, made possible by their partial autonomy from both the state and the market forces. I suggest that whereas the Marxian theory does not account for the peasants who do not ultimately become proletarianised, the Maoists put the structure on a pedestal and by doing so, downplay the agency of the peasantries. In other words, if the Maoists essentialise the structure which subordinates the peasants, the Marxists flatten the peasantry as though the peasantries are a monolithic group, possessing a single route to resistance and revolution, that is, proletarianisation and eventual immiseration of the proletariat.

The paper develops in the following fashion. After the foregoing introduction, in the second section, I map out the definitions of peasants and reflect on how such categorisation enlightens us about the power and political relevance of peasants in their resistance to exploitation and domination. I then delve into peasants' agency, resistance, and revolutions in the third section. By doing so, I explore how we could make sense of the agency of peasants or the peasantry as a historical revolutionary subject. In the fourth section, the paper navigates the circumstances under which peasants resist exploitation and oppression by the state, the societal, and the market forces. In the fifth and final section, the paper makes some conclusions: first, that peasants are a potent revolutionary subject, whose agency tends to be dialectical in the sense that they shape, as they are shaped by the forces whose domination and exploitation they resist against. I further conclude that the category peasant eludes succinct delineation, which I deem advantageous to the peasants' political efficacy considering that aside from their being numerical majorities, one can hardly abstract them in a single conception. Having said that, I engage with the conceptions of a peasant and what these could offer us in understanding the revolutionary potential of peasants in the subsequent section.

Defining peasants and how such categorisation illuminates their revolutionary power

Scholarship on the peasantry presents us with diverse ways of conceiving what the concept of peasants could mean, outrightly putting into question their predominant depiction as a monolith. Anthropologist and Peasant studies scholar, Marc Edelman (2013) has forcefully demonstrated the plurality of conceptualisations of the concept of the peasant in historical, social research, activist, and normative contexts. Similarly, Teodor Shanin (1982) mentions six core features of peasants that are relevant to defining peasants. According to him, the core characteristics of the peasantry are (i) the peasant economy being typically an amalgam of independent working; (ii) political organisation of peasants tending to be substantively identical in several global geographical contexts; (iii) having identical norms and conceptions; (iv) similar social organising and functioning; (v) identical social dynamics and statics of peasants; and (vi) similar quintessential causes of structural transformation. Shanin (1982) also asserts that amidst some conditions, peasants are astonishingly resilient social groups, which in turn, accounts for the contemporary re-peasantisation. On the other hand, James Scott (1986) regards the mundane resistances as exclusively relevant for the peasants who are dispersed in different rural areas with numerous and significant barriers to their organised, collaborative action. Scott unmistakably shows the political effectiveness of peasant day-to-day resistances but cautions that peasants do not have a monopoly over their routine forms of resistance, be



they slander or character assassination despite these forms exerting some control over the conduct of the rich. However, Scott asserts that any theory of peasant politics that shows peasants as makers of history must foreground the mundane forms of resistance because he deems peasant political movements ineffective as political forces (Scott, 1986). My claim here is that Edelman (2013) and Shanin (1982) offer us insights into the plurality of what the category peasants could connote to which the elusiveness of defining peasants is attributable. This in itself confers on the peasantries advantages that bolster their political efficacy in the sense that it is inconceivable that such diverse categories of people who would not suit a singular description of a peasant can be completely shattered. Yet, Shanin's astonishment that the peasantry is resilient and his reference to the peasants as traditional reveal his contempt for the peasantries as revolutionary subjects because had he regarded them as revolutionary subjects, he would not have been shocked that they have so far managed to circumvent their domination. Further, Scott commendably foregrounds the exercise of agency by peasants against their subjugation on a self-help basis, thereby illuminating the day-to-day material life of peasants' negotiation of subordinating conditions against them. Thus, the revolutionary potential of peasants is hard to gainsay because even when they sometimes seem invisible, they tend to mount effective hidden mundane forms of resistance against their subordination and exploitation.

Neoliberal capitalism is implicated as one of the main influences that have so far undermined the peasantry. In an analysis of the South African context, Colin Bundy (1972) contends that the rise and fall of peasant farming was integral and shaped by the progression of capitalist development in South Africa. Moreover, he asserts that generating an African peasantry in South Africa was inextricable from transitioning from a countryside population of cultivator-pastoralists to a countryside people of land-based subsistence migrant labourers and that the rise and fall of the peasantry was an inevitable element of capitalist development in South Africa. Consequently, Bundy vehemently challenges the perspectives that characterise the peasantry in South Africa as culturally, politically, and economically primitive peoples for overlooking the foregoing historical reality. As he sketches the economic forces that undermined the flourishing of peasant farming and jeopardised the peasant autonomy or their ability to compete in the market, Bundy postulates that the limited peasant access to land was the principal such force. In a similar vein, Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009) posit that transnational rural social movements are trying to build a more equitable future for farmers and rural labourers around the globe in a bid to challenge development policies that cannot mitigate nor eradicate poverty in the countryside. For Akram-Lodhi and Kay, a peasant is a farming labourer whose occupation is chiefly hinged on accessing their own or hired land, and mainly personally working or having other household members work the land. They assert that peasants depend largely on crop cultivation and flourish or starve depending on whether the land, upon fulfilling their production expenditure, avails sufficient produce for the family's sustenance of a sufficient quality of life and, possibly, some of the produce stored as excess for the market or preserved for consumption in the future. According to Akram-Lodhi and Kay, peasants hardly enjoy life in the countryside with their living conditions unsympathetic, life expectancies brief, and profoundly shaped by factors beyond their control. I claim that as both foregoing texts have alluded to, neoliberal capitalist development is a major threat to the perpetuation of peasants. Whereas Bundy through a political and political economy analysis, defensibly accounts for the state and capitalist imperatives in the production of a marginalised peasant life in neoliberal capitalist South Africa and repudiates characterisations of peasants as backward, Akram Lodhi



and Kay, through a historical materialist analysis, overlook the contribution of the state to keeping the peasants at the periphery of society and in dire conditions of living. However, both Bundy (1972) and Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009) foreground peasant agency, with Bundy showing the agency of peasants as they navigate dominating conditions, and Akram and Kay showing the necessity of a sort of structure to organise peasants. Specifically, Akram-Lodhi and Kay foreground the expression of peasants' exercise of agency against their subordination through joining transnational peasant social movements. I also deem apt Bundy's commendation of the peasants in South Africa for adapting to dire neoliberal capitalist and political conditions by deviating from the then-conventional economy to stay afloat. Hence, if peasants can form transnational social movements against their domination, it is hard to deny their political efficacy as revolutionary forces.

Peasant studies are also replete with ambiguities about who a peasant is and are ambivalent about the subjugation of peasants owing to their resilience. For instance, Deborah Bryceson (2000a) shows that although an expansive period during the second millennium of Europe was majorly shaped by peasant social and economic spheres, in western Industrial cultures, the concept of the peasant is mostly related to a manner of living that is antithetical to modernisation. She adds that only in the latter quarter of the second millennium when the industrial revolution took root did peasants begin to lose their grip on the popular culture in Europe. In effect, the concept of the peasant has been restored to its reproachful undertones of the dictionary rendition (Bryceson, 2000a). Yet, the resilience of peasants has produced remarkable scholarship which is significant to contemporary times as peasants still inhabit Asia, Latin America, and Africa in significant numbers, dominating politics, economies, and cultural spheres of their respective countries (Bryceson, 2000a). That said, Susana Narotzky (2016) posits that scholars attempted to delve into the uncomfortable location of peasants during the period between the 1960s and 1980s. She further notes that whereas the debate about peasants waned, it was not necessarily resolved, with many considerations appearing in the restored scholarship on the peasantry. She asserts that the concept of the peasant embraces a multiplicity of social relations of production, such as small and medium landed producers, sharecroppers, landless farm workers, artisan-peasants, and peasant-labourers. Narotzky also emphasises land and household labour as now central to the delineation of the peasantry. She asserts that the ambiguity of the concept of a peasant, its intricate relations with the state and capital as well as its ideological changeability accord it fresh attention. Specifically, Narotzky states that the core element of the definition of the peasantry is the equivocal relationship of dependence and independence, a position that gradually permeates the lives of several peoples. She also proposes that immense insights can be drawn from discussions interrogating the way the livelihoods of farmers are enmeshed with several versions of capitalist accumulation and political subjectivity. One notices that the two authors demonstrate the persistence of contemptuous characterisations of peasantries amid a stubborn resilience that has hitherto been difficult for capitalist exploitation and state domination to obliterate. Moreover, I suggest that Bryceson (2000a) and Narotzky (2016) offer incisive shared arguments that the malleability and ambiguity in the delineation of peasantries is in itself a strength that explains their fortitude in the face of subordination, exploitation, and domination. Consequently, contrary to the thesis of classic Marxists, the resoluteness of peasants amidst domination is a mark of their indelible revolutionary potential, without which they would otherwise have already vanished. Simply stated, why would scholars still be grappling with the peasant question in the 21st century if the peasants were not a capable political factor?



That the peasant concept is elusive is a recurrent bother among peasant scholars. Whereas some scholars posit that to attempt a singular definition of peasants is to strip them of history, others foreground the labour process as central to peasants' negotiation of and resistance to power and domination. Bernstein (1979) regards efforts at delineating peasants as misguided. For him, countryside-based farmers loosely referred to as peasants have inhabited several societies and dispensations, such as feudalism in Europe and Japan, precapitalist epochs in Asia or in several global Southern countries for whom colonialism was the core historical variable shaping peasantries with peculiar features. As a result, an all-encompassing delineation of the peasantry is ahistorical and is simply descriptive (Bernstein, 1979). He further asserts that defining the peasant as a producer in the countryside who sustains themselves by depending on family work and household land depicts what production by a peasant entails but fails to accord the concept its historical and social particularity. Bernstein's quarrel is with the failure of a broad definition to facilitate distinction of the social difference among peasants in medieval Europe whose surplus was extracted by feudal lords and peasants in contemporary Africa whose exploitation occurs via relations of production and transaction of commodities restricting them to a global economy of capitalism.

Similarly, Isaacman (1990) states that the peasants are a vague social group, being hardly delineable, with their political conduct subverting the majority of generalisations. He adds that the debates on the concept of a peasant were replicated in African studies with finally, a wider political economy approach to peasants prevalent, and holding that peasants were present as an exploited class, beginning in the colonial period. However, the agreement hardly tackled the intrinsic challenge of encompassing the multiplicity of peasant relations and realities in one concept (Isaacman, 1990). He postulates that Africanists have endeavoured to address the conundrum by getting preoccupied with the notion of the development of penetration into the rural, the rise of commodity production, development of alternating peasant labourers (Isaacman, 1990). Isaacman argues that such analyses have helped us transcend the idea of a uniform peasantry to extend our comprehension of the intricacies of agrarian change, connecting them to localised, national, and transnational forces. Yet, their insights notwithstanding, such African studies have not sufficiently focused on the organisation of labour (Isaacman, 1990). For Isaacman, labour was central in shaping the rhythm of the day-to-day life of peasants, the way they connected with the natural order, organisation of production and consumption by various social groups, and long-run social reproduction processes, let alone the scheduling of core "social events and religious ceremonies" (p.2). In other words, the particular structure of the peasant labour process deeply shaped the material and cultural life of the peasantry (Isaacman, 1990). I posit that Bernstein makes a cogent argument against producing an all-encompassing definition of the peasantry and his insistence on understanding the historicity of peasantries in different temporal and spatial contexts points to the different ways peasants act to resist their domination thereby acting as a political force. This notwithstanding, by seeing the concept of the peasant as devoid of analytical power, he fails to appreciate that an operative definition of a peasant in each context is necessary for one to somewhat come to grips with peasantries and their revolutionary potential. I maintain that by emulating his seemingly unreserved disparage for the concept peasant, Bernstein endorses the indefensible perspective that the peasant question is no longer relevant. In contrast, Isaacman incisively foregrounds the peasant labour process and maintenance of local, national, and cultural contexts of peasants' exercise of agency, let alone their partial independence from



the state and the capitalist relations as central to their resistance against domination and exploitation. Isaacman's analysis also helps enlighten us about the dialectical nature of class relations and the revolutionary power of the peasantries in whatever subjugating situations they find themselves. That said, in the next section, I explore the ability of peasants to exercise agency, resist power, and ultimately their revolutionary potential.

Peasant agency, resistance, and revolution

The Maoist scholars of the peasantry are characterised by two major tendencies. On the one hand, some Maoists privilege the political strategy and organisation viewpoint as a basis for the peasants' participation in revolutionary action. On the other hand, there are Maoists who repudiate the extent to which a revolutionary party, independent of the cultural and contextual realities of the peasants can execute a successful revolution. Mao Tse-tung (1926) argues that since every revolution triumphs by a revolutionary party leading the masses in the right direction, distinguishing actual allies from actual foes and analysing the economic status of each of the classes in Chinese society is indispensable to understanding the stance of each class towards the revolution. For Mao Tse-tung, among the plurality of classes in China, the lumpen-proletariat class (constituted by the peasants dispossessed of their land and the handicraftsmen who fail to get to work) has the greatest revolutionary potential since they live perilous lives, are courageous, and astutely damaging once guided by the revolutionary party. On the other hand, Yuan (1997) stresses that in southern countryside China under Mao's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, there were many contending social groups and institutions having their own autonomous sets of values to execute collective action. Consequently, local dynamics of contestations, rather than top-down initiatives were crucial (Yuan, 1997). He emphasises that the dynamic identities of peasants, equivocation, and insistent loyalties produced peasant resistance in places controlled by the communist state. Yuan also states that Mao utilised the Hakka and southern peasants as a strategy to connect peripheral constituents against the many to compound class contestations between the peasantry and the gentry and gain more supporters but he hardly triumphed due to the unrelenting "power of corporate lineage" (p.38). I propose that if Mao privileges the structure in shaping peasants' agency in challenging their exploitation and domination, Yuan nuances his analysis of the revolutionary power and agency of the peasantry by foregrounding the intervening variables in peasants' exercise of agency or participation in a revolution, whether or not coordinated by a revolutionary party. For instance, Yuan accounts for contextual realities and the influence of cultural and kinship ties of different peasantries which aided peasants' resistance in Southern China when Mao's regime tried to subjugate them. Consequently, by illuminating the power of peasant contestations organised from below rather than from the top, Yuan's analysis exposes the lacuna in Mao's emphasis on the revolutionary party as activator and organiser of the revolutionary potential of peasants. Thus, it is difficult to ignore the political potency of the peasantry as a revolutionary subject.

The dynamic livelihoods and difficulty in tracing the invisibility of most of the modes of resistance of the peasants confer on them political efficacy, and by so doing, explain the continuing significance of the peasant question. Moyo, Jha, and Yeros (2013) indict the classical agrarian question perspective in Marxian political economy for maintaining the façade of industrialisation as the fundamental goal of transformation because such a perspective conceals the historical pertinence of the national question and its land and peasant elements,



which cannot be regarded as industrialisation. Moreover, reviving national sovereignty to its due position in the classical agrarian question, Moyo et al. (2013) insist that national sovereignty is the bedrock of every other element of the agrarian question, including gender justice and ecological sustainability. On the contrary, Bryceson (2000a) asserts that having pluralised livelihoods and subsistence mechanisms due to the socio-political and economic pressures and chances that peasants have hitherto grappled with, they have turned into more indefinable people than ever before. Bryceson (2000a) also posits that a definitional puzzle of the peasantries stems from the way peasants' relation to land has changed, as they engage in multiple economic activities, overlap town and countryside, and are swamping labour markets. Yet, the powers of the state and market have infiltrated peasant societies and in effect, vastly changed the character of the peasant household or countryside community (Bryceson, 2000a). Given such a condition of swift fluidity, peasants vanish and resurface as though in a magical fashion (Bryceson, 2000a). For Bryceson (2000a), the peasantries are dynamic forces whose resilience is baffling in the neoliberal capitalist order. I suggest that the peasants' feature of eluding succinct delineation in all spaces accords peasants potency as revolutionary subjects. As such, the two texts demonstrate the persistent significance of the peasant question, despite the prevalence of efforts against it. Also, whereas Moyo et al. (2013) deploy an interdisciplinary perspective to understand the peasant and agrarian questions, Bryceson (2000a) deploys Marxist and sociological lenses to foreground the malleability of the peasantries. Nevertheless, Bryceson (2000a) fails to appreciate that rather than disappearing, peasants merely retreat and engage in mundane forms of resistance during times when they are hardly noticeable. This puts into question her thesis of peasantries' intermittent and continuous periods of disappearance and reappearance in perpetuating cycles. Therefore, as illustrated above, because of the difficulty in tracing the resistance mechanisms of peasants, their dynamic livelihoods, and subsistence mechanisms, let alone the continuous relevance of the peasant question, I argue that the peasants are an efficacious political force.

In some scholarship, peasant movements have been framed as farmer movements to undermine the continuing relevance of the concept of peasants (peasantries) as well as the peasants' ability to organise social movements. Bernstein and Byres (2001) argue that peasant essentialism recognises that peasants' relationality with other social categories and entities, is seen as subjugating and exploitative relations, shaping peasant subjectivity and producing the politics of peasant agency. They posit that methodologically at stake with peasant essentialism is its claim or presupposition that the main constituents of peasant society, that is, family, relatives, community, and locality, generate a unique intrinsic dynamic be it cultural, sociological, or a mix of sorts. Consequently, peasants' relationships with dominant others are several forms of extraction and oppression exterior to the interior dynamic of peasant survival, which can prosper, let alone outlive their dissolution (Bernstein & Byres, 2001). Bernstein and Byres assert that despite the relative paucity of conventional forms of peasant movements, class and mass struggles in the countryside, engaging various landscapes and manner of collaborative action occur, specifically farmer movements, class contestations of agrarian workers' politics, and electoral politics instead of peasant movements. Conversely, Blackey (1974) suggests that revolutions in Africa ought to be conducted based on the circumstances in Africa, yet these circumstances tend to be difficult to infer let alone the fact that distinct investigations of these circumstances cannot be identical. Blackey argues that the subjugated people ought to mobilise every one of their resources since the struggle is both absolute and entire. He also posits that by recruiting supporters by making a case for local grievances, revolutionists widen the



anticipation of a desirable future in which more abstract notions might be integrated. What I draw from the two texts is that peasants are not a monolith and therefore should the analysis of their resistance and revolutionary efficacies. Bernstein and Byres commendably object the essentialisation of peasants for its deterring the possibility to recognise them as diverse. Yet, Bernstein's and Byres' insistence that peasants have dissolved and that the peasant question is no longer relevant is challenged by concrete realities of persistent peasant life around the globe. Thus, their disregard for the potency of peasants as a political force is conspicuously indefensible. That said, Blackey's call to organise revolutions anchored in the conditions in Africa is tenable insofar as it accounts for the role of dialectics in shaping resistance, revolutions, and revolutionary subjectivity.

Peasants have historically afforded to form or join international social movements as well as challenged their domination and exploitation to reclaim their cultural elements and assure autonomy from the state and capital. Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010) point out that La Via Campesina is a transnational coalition of peasant and family farmer organisations in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Europe. They note that La Via Campesina categorises nationally or regionally-based organisations to collectively contest based on shared concerns at a global scale and the independence of member organisations is thoroughly observed. La Via Campesina is also an international social movement based in Latin America but has managed to generate global peasant debate and identity commensurate with the epoch but did not construct a political party structure (Martinez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). Martinez-Torres & Rosset also tell us that La Via Campesina has built from below and autonomously from the state, funders, political parties, NGOs, and non-peasant special interests. This contrasts Yuan's objection to (a) the political strategy and organisational perspectives and (b) the moral economy explanations of the revolutionary movement. Yuan illuminates that in southern countryside China, there were many contesting social groups and institutions having their own autonomous sets of values to execute collective action, with local contestation dynamics pivotal to how the revolution panned out in that context. Aside from Yuan's impressive illumination of the efficacy of peasants as agentic forces when they execute bottom-up initiatives to challenge their domination, Martinez-Torres' and Rosset's foregrounding of La Via Campesina compellingly demonstrate the ability of peasants to form robust international, interregional, inter-ethnic alliances and social movements. Yuan's argument cogently shows the exercise of dialectical agency on the part of the peasants, shaping and being shaped by the structure. However, Martinez-Torres' and Rosset's peasants and family farmers in the transnational social movement might be compelled to operate in contexts of compromise, dialogue, and accommodation of some state and capitalist interests as they negotiate the intricate transnational terrain and allyship to resist their subjugation and marginalisation. Overall, the above analyses speak to the revolutionary subjectivity of peasants, with or without an organising structure, and indeed reveal the social movements as a structure to be somewhat limiting the extent of peasants' ability to organise effective resistances.

There is also a debate on whether peasants join wider social movements or resist in covert forms. Eric Wolf (1966) asserts that peasants join alliances with their counterparts to thwart the discriminatory burdens they all grapple with and to offset the demands they face on a personal basis, more so if the demands arise from people who wield more economic, political, and military potency. He states that peasant alliances might be characterised by both peasant-peasant relations as well as those between peasants and non-peasant higher-ups. As they join



an alliance, the household is unable to promise more than they can deliver and as they work in an alliance, the households demonstrate a predisposition to submit greater, long-run aspirations to smaller, short-run ones (Wolf, 1966). Such an amalgam of characteristics has been comprehended evidently by the modern political characters who appreciate “the potential power of the peasantry” once provoked to collective action, yet they are correspondingly cognisant of its incapability to stay organised during the resistance action and in its aftermath (Wolf, 1966). Wolf’s thesis echoes Mao Tse-tung’s insistence that peasants can only pull off a revolution if directed by a revolutionary party, which foremost, identifies actual allies and adversaries. However, stating that peasants occupy a peculiar position as they enjoy relative independence from the state and the market, Isaacman posits that the new perspective sees peasants as a political factor helping to shape their history. Isaacman adds that such relative independence connected to the labour process helps us explain the peasants’ tendency to take part in clandestine protests instead of wider social movements. Because the state and the appropriating classes attempted to regulate instead of destroy the peasantry, the major form of contestation was about the magnitude of this relative independence (Isaacman, 1990). Isaacman calls upon analysts to focus on the multiplicity of peasants’ voices who await to be listened to if they are to further the analysis of rural politics. Such oral documents, having several and usually latent connotations provide an insider perspective of rural experiences, without disregarding their equivocations and inconsistencies (Isaacman, 1990). Through a complete connection between “what peasants thought, or even what they think they thought,” and the actual experiences of their living, their conception of this experience is no less crucial than the structures of oppression that constrained their choices and activities (Isaacman, 1990, p.59). The diversity of critical reflections will widen how Africanists see agrarian change and countryside social protest (Isaacman, 1990). As an expression of doubt in the political relevance of peasants, Wolf privileges their participation in social movements as organisation structures, which would, in turn, confer political efficacy to peasantries and he laments that peasants habitually short-circuit revolutions as long as they receive land since landlessness is their only motive for resistance. In this sense, Wolf has reservations about the political efficacy of the peasants. Also, one could rebut that when peasants ally with non-peasant groups, the peasants’ potency for a revolution is enhanced, but I would respond that whereas illuminating the peasants’ abilities to join social movements seems to foreground their agency, it reproduces Mao Tse-tung’s assertion that only after a revolutionary party organises peasants would they be an effective political force. Nevertheless, Isaacman commendably foregrounds the agency of peasants in the labour process, in their cultural materiality and day-to-day lives against their oppression and exploitation. By so doing, he takes into account their latent and routine forms of resistance, the partial autonomy of peasants from the state and the market as the chief strength of the peasants hence their potential as a robust political force.

Peasants have also been regarded to be politically relevant in reverse, that is, by their disinterest in the political. Engels (1894-95) articulates that the peasantry has hitherto principally exhibited itself as a political force exclusively by their indifference, traceable to their alienating life in the countryside. He elucidates that such disinterest of the vast majority of the masses inadvertently facilitates fraud in parliament in Paris and Rome as well as the dictatorship in Russia. For Engels, small peasants are the owners or tenants of a piece of land just big enough to be cultivated by the family but sufficiently small for just the family’s subsistence. Similarly, Shanin (1971) illuminates that the dominant contemporary sociology has sidestepped the traditional peasantry since seldom have sociologists promoted the peasantry from the marginal



to the mainstay. Yet, if we base on historical and social significance to decide what to investigate, scholarship on the peasantry would be countless (Shanin, 1971). Shanin (1971) further states that uncountable predicaments, economic and political, of the world refer us back to the peasantry, its conception, and misconception by the politically powerful. He suggests that strictly a multi-disciplinary approach to the conceptual and empirical exploration might enable us to tackle the perplexing limitations in understanding the peasantry, the methodological arduousness notwithstanding. Finally, Shanin (1971) notes that staggering through main routes yields more than walking through side paths. Notably, Engels and Shanin show scepticism in the revolutionary power of peasants on their own. Whereas Engels denigratingly characterises peasants as a political force in reverse due to their staying disinterested in what happens in politics and the economy as a whole in 19th century France, to the detriment of the wellbeing of all the subordinated groups, Shanin emphatically exposes his lack of confidence in the peasantry as a revolutionary force by characterising them as having short-term demands and aspirations. The two thinkers fail to account for the multiplicity of contexts of lived realities of peasants, their daily mechanisms of exercising agency, and disregard the fact that given that peasants still constitute the numerical majority of the world, a revolution would face a huge hurdle on its path to success if it does not account for the cultural materiality of the peasants and the mundane forms of resistance they tend to orchestrate. This renders untenable the predominant contempt for the peasants' revolutionary potential. Having said that, I reflect on the circumstances under which peasants resist their subjugation and exploitation in the following section.

Conditions under which peasants resist oppression and exploitation

Peasants have continually been marginalised in social studies as they navigate a neoliberal capitalist terrain. Bryceson (2000a) asks whether peasantries are practically dissolving or they are simply being erased from the Western canon of social studies. She further foregrounds the deterioration of the significance of peasant theories and the inattention of development economics to smallholder farmers commencing the 1990s. Thus, Bryceson (2000a) contends that introducing and executing the structural adjustment programme and liberalising the market globally had a disbanding consequence for the livelihoods of the peasantries. Similarly, Bryceson (2000b) notes that Africa is the only continent currently intimately associated with smallholder peasantry. The significant place of peasants in scholarship and policy-inclined scholarship disproves the insignificance of African peasants in terms of their ability to shape their future (Bryceson, 2000b). The deliberate production and enduring, perhaps inadvertent, debate on the dissolution of peasants in Africa in international trade has been challenged in a period of just 100 years (Bryceson, 2000b). One can notice that Bryceson succinctly accounts for the pre-eminent influence of neoliberal capitalism and mainstream Western social science scholarship in efforts to break the bark of the peasantry, despite their hitherto insignificant success in obliterating peasants. She also impressively demonstrates that peasants are active agents when she illuminates that peasants still dominate scholarship and policy-inclined research, which casts doubt on the argument that peasants are unable to make their history. But she fails to recognise that aside from being restricted to Africa, the peasantry still constitutes a substantive proportion of the population of Asian and Latin American countries. In short, as their numerical supremacy cannot be ignored, peasants are still an effective political force.



Peasants are also in some cases portrayed as able to mount effective resistances, and in others as a docile social group, incapable of acting to change their dire conditions. Narotzky argues that the struggle by peasants to subsist may turn into a mix of perilous chances to acquire productive resources at various junctures. In such conditions, contestations and demands to retain a bit of control over such resources are similarly pertinent for both peasant and non-peasant workers (Narotzky, 2016). She illuminates the inequality of forms of capitalist appropriation of surplus by returning to older conversations on defining peasantries and fresh concerns regarding farming in contemporary agricultural regimes. She commends the debate of the 1960s to 1980s about the peasantry for tackling an uncomfortable situation with classical Marxist surplus value theory not applicable in spaces where material conditions contradicted the proletarianisation argument. Such a debate investigated the intricate forms of appropriation of surplus value which historically occurred in societies subordinated by powerful capitalist actors by refraining from seeing the condition as a kind of natural peasant logic (Narotzky, 2016). The process of searching was never completed but its current worth is attributable to its tackling the equivocation of peasantries and their contestations (Narotzky, 2016). Finally, Narotzky suspects that the answer to the question of where the peasants have gone is that all of us are currently peasants, discussing their embarrassed position. On the contrary, Thandika Mkandawire's (2002) major contention is that to make sense of rebel movements' actions and their violence, one ought to come to grips with the elite, intra-elite contestations that generate their advocates, and the reactions of the masses. Mkandawire asserts that several post-colonial rebel movements on the African continent have subjected the peasantry to violence. For him, this kind of brutality is perplexing to many who see it as neither explicable in terms of African culture nor as a manifestation of logical self-interest. Rather, it is fundamentally urban concerns that have incited upheaval, but not necessarily pursuable in the cities where the regimes control the repressive mechanisms (Mkandawire, 2002). Yet, the countryside in Africa is on the whole, hostile to emancipation struggles since the peasantry directly controls their land, and their surplus produce is extracted via the market instead of the would-be exploiting landlord class (Mkandawire, 2002). He also points out that the circumstances in Africa also support wandering instead of immobile revolts and most of the insurgents just pass via the rural, moving to the urban centres where they pursue power. Mkandawire posits that because the insurgents have negligible commonality with the peasantry and can give it nothing, they opt for viciousness as the exclusive method of controlling the peasantry. He insists that the incomprehensible goals and vicious approaches of the revolts notwithstanding, they are a substantive apprehension that must be tackled. I propose that whereas Narotzky explicates the possibility that we have all turned into peasants because the concept of the peasants connotes a plurality of social differentiations, Mkandawire sees the peasantry in the countryside in Africa as largely a peaceable, docile group. I also claim that Narotzky defensibly illuminates the ambivalence associated with the concept of the peasant and challenges classical Marxism's proletarianisation argument that without people becoming waged labourers, a revolution would not ensue. However, why does Mkandawire denigrate peasants as people incapable of exercising agency when insurgents attack them? Perhaps his analysis would have otherwise benefitted from seeing the forces that unleash violence on peasants in the countryside as possibly capitalist, societal, or state forces, rather than merely insurgents seeking political power in the urban centres.

Peasants are a force for change that resists their subjugation by the state, societal pressures, and the market in a multiplicity of ways and contexts. Fittingly seeing clan members and clan



leaders in a study conducted in Uganda's Lango region as peasants, Theresa Auma (2023) argues that peasant resistance to commercialising land is inextricable from concerns with the autonomy of the political, social, and economic dimensions of society from the market and the state. She passionately questions the dominant perspective in land-grabbing scholarship which links land conflicts to large-scale land dispossession and demonstrates the mundane small-scale contentions in which rural households linked via kinship relations and/or neighbourhoods are entangled as society tries to resist the dispossession inclinations of the (land) market. Auma delves into small-scale land dispossession which seldom gets into the front pages of the newspapers despite their tragic consequences on the people whom the market robs of land. Auma vehemently questions the political economy thesis (on Uganda) that the rise and proliferation of the land market has undermined the potency of customary leaders, that is, the clan, in regulating the selling of land. She posits that, unlike other social movements, the clan (customary leaders) have enormously shown the greatest political force of resisting extension and estrangement of land through the market. Further, she postulates that the rise and proliferation of the land market under customary land tenure in Uganda has aided the rise of novel centres of power and a shift to further centralising of power in individual clan heads in an unprecedented fashion. Ultimately, Auma's study demonstrates the efficacy of the peasantry as a political force hence reinforcing the position of this paper that peasants are a political force that can hardly be ignored.

Similarly, Petras and Veltmeyer (2001) investigate the implications of polarisation in social discussions of the capability, character, and relevance of modern-day peasant and landless labour movements in Latin America. They thus object to a couple of perspectives, thereby calling for a reverting to a Marxist viewpoint. Petras and Veltmeyer repudiate two tendencies: (a) the disparaging stance regarding the political and social potency of the peasants, and (b) the predisposition to simplify peasant-championed contestations and movements in merely cultural identity terms, characteristics, and claims. Consequently, Petras and Veltmeyer contend that a reconstituted class analysis, attending to structural forces and forms of political contestation, continues to offer the most appropriate methodology for comprehending the dynamics of rural development and social change in Latin America. Petras and Veltmeyer challenge the predominant structuralist position and contend that peasants and landless proletarian movements in Latin America are vibrant modern classes rather than antiquated, contributing substantively in several settings, to the subversion of the prevalent neoliberal order. Petras and Veltmeyer also astutely posit that in the realities of the epoch, peasant and landless labour movements in Latin America were actively involved in a modern version of contestation, interspersing conventional solidarity with coping with modern objectives and tactics as well as strategically appreciating the axes of power at national and global levels. I claim that aside from impressively demonstrating the day-to-day resistance to neoliberal capitalism, state domination, and societal domination of peasants, Auma nuances her analysis by illustrating that the clan leaders sometimes resist marketisation of land out of phobia of potential and actual deprivation of customary land. By so doing, she highlights the efficacy of peasants as a political force in different contexts. Moreover, undoubtedly, clan (customary) land tends to be accessible to even female members of the clan. Yet, one wonders where the tendency of the clan leadership role to be the preserve of men leaves the concerns of women about controlling the produce and proceeds from the land who many a time tend to labour most in cultivating family land. Petras and Veltmeyer also penetratingly reveal the political efficacy of peasants by illuminating their forming and participating in social movements in several ways with vast



consequences to political organisation. Consequently, not only are peasants able to make their history in a dialectical fashion, shaping power and being shaped by the conditions dictated by the structure of power, but also constitute an efficacious political force.

There are also deliberations on which elements are the most appropriate for understanding peasant agency and the peasant question. Moyo and Yeros (2005) assert that although many political and economic variables are against the poor in the countryside, they have hitherto resisted progressively, in a substantive number of instances, and across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Peasant movements depend rampantly, but not exclusively, on widespread land occupation technique, and accord primacy to the safety of their livelihood but they expressly challenge land-based political potency, stimulate national discussion, and explicitly question neoliberalism (Moyo & Yeros, 2005). Indeed, for Moyo and Yeros, the rural is now the most crucial place of anti-imperial politics around the globe. Moyo and Yeros (2005) posit that the current deliberations regarding the destiny of the peasantry have restored the usual historical questions about the socio-economic features and political relevance of peasants in a capitalist socio-economic order. The perspectives are coarsely displayed among the people who regard peasants as economically and politically dissolving and the contenders (Moyo & Yeros, 2005). For Moyo and Yeros, the typical peasant family perpetuates itself in inherent contestations and as concurrently workers and capitalists. The mix of labour and capital is not distributed equally among the peasantry for a couple of reasons – capitalism sustains the peasantry in a ceaselessly dynamic condition, being destined for proletarianisation in its place of inception (Moyo and Yeros, 2005). However, in the core-periphery structuring, generated by the colonial order, proletarianisation is punctuated by semi-proletarianisation and repeasantisation (Moyo and Yeros, 2005). Contrastingly, in the new preface to *Citizen and Subject*, Mamdani (2017) foregrounds the necessity to place the political, that is, the native question at the centre if we are to grasp the peasant question. He opines that by doing so, we would be able to shift our attention away from the Marxian dull compulsion of market factors to extra-economic repression involving compulsory (cropping, selling, contributions, and work). I claim that both Moyo and Yeros (2005) and Mamdani (2017) cohere around the notion that the peasant question in Africa is still relevant as not only an economic question but also a political or even cultural question. Additionally, the two aforementioned texts duly appreciate the intricacy of layers of analysis to understand peasant agency and the peasant question such as the political, the political economy, as well as cultural considerations as crucial to understanding the multiple peasants' modes of resistance against domination and exploitation aside from that which pervades their relation with the state.

The persistent autonomy of peasants is a central element that could explain their political efficacy and revolutionary power. Shanin (1971) shows that despite the political limitations of the peasantry in the long-term, the domination of food production, inhabiting the countryside, and numerical preponderance are the greatest political strengths of the peasantry, more so, during crisis moments for which reason it is hard to regard peasants as politically inconsequential. However, Isaacman notes that producing and controlling scanty resources by the peasantry are inextricably linked to cultural conceptions of the way labour is delineated and regarded. He shows that while some peasant communities faced a profound feeling of shame for being compelled to sell their labour power instead of working on their land, others altered tradition to adapt to labour predicaments at household level. However, Isaacman also states that the cultural element ought to be emphasised as integral to coming to grips with the material



and cultural processes. He further stresses that the distinguishing characteristics of the peasant labour process are the structure and constitution of the peasant labour force; the extent to which necessary and surplus labour are detached spatially and temporally; the extent to which peasants can operate the tools of production autonomously from the landlord, state or capitalists; the extent to which peasant work is superintended by external agents and labour mandates are secured via political-legal institutions; the extent to which peasants take the risks of production. Ultimately, the labour process gives a strategic departure into the quintessential question of the way power was shaped and exerted in the rural and the possibility for peasants to resist it (Isaacman, 1990). Though Shanin commendably acknowledges the efficacy of peasants as a political force when moments of crises arise, he maintains a condescending stance on the peasants, seeing them as archaic and politically irrelevant in the long-run. It must thus be pointed out that Shanin's regard to peasants as not politically relevant amounts to downplaying their ability to exercise agency against the conditions of domination and exploitation they face, which is antithetical to concrete experiences of peasants in different contexts of the world. Contrastingly, I deem Isaacman's foregrounding of peasants' autonomy and sustenance of their cultural and lived realities as potent forces that reinforce the agency of peasants. Indeed, Isaacman greatly illuminates the methodological lacunae in prior peasant and agrarian studies hitherto conducted in Africa, thereby contributing nuanced analyses of how to make sense of peasant resistance and agency. By way of illustrating peasant agency in the contemporary, sugarcane smallholder contract farmers in Uganda's Busoga region once resisted their domination by the state and capitalist exploitation by burning the sugarcane and voting the opposition in big numbers for the first time during the National Resistance Movement (NRM) regime in Uganda in the 2021 general elections. Also, recently, some peasants in Uganda's Busoga region have started palm oil growing instead of sugarcane growing because whereas palm oil can be harvested twice a year, sugarcane is only harvestable once a year. Nevertheless, peasants tend to express dialectical agency against their domination in which case they fashion as they are shaped by the circumstances or the structure of power that they challenge, be it the market, the state, or societal-based oppressions. That said, the next section presents my concluding thoughts on the subject under investigation in this paper.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to explore the political potency of peasants as revolutionary subjects. The paper has therefore contributed to the debate on the peasants as a political force and by extension, to the discourse on whether or not the peasant question is still relevant. It has centrally claimed that the relevance of the peasants as potent factors for efficacious resistance and revolution is comprehensible through fittingly seeing peasants as diverse socio-economic, political, and cultural groups, dwelling in and working in heterogeneous contexts. The paper has challenged the Marxian scepticism in the political potency of peasantries expressed by the insistence that proletarianisation is the (only) effective revolutionary route. Precisely, the Marxian position fails to account for contexts where revolutionary acts happen without proletarianisation becoming complete, a blind spot partly attributable to seeing peasants as both monolithic and having a singular path to resistance and revolution. The paper has also questioned the Maoist peasant scholarship for valorising the structure in their bid to illuminate the agency of peasantries as forces for socio-political economic change. By so doing, I have foregrounded the clandestine and mundane forms of resistance, reclaiming day-to-day cultural



expression and the organisation of labour as central aspects of peasants' agency and thus their political efficacy.

The paper has highlighted that studies on the peasantries offer multiple ways of understanding peasants which challenge seeing them as a monolith. The paper also highlighted that in the contemporary period, peasants largely struggle against exploitation by the neoliberal market logic, the state, and society. They could therefore resist cultural obliteration, landlessness, or other oppressions depending on the context. Conspicuously present in the literature is the elusiveness of the category peasant, which I deem advantageous to reinforcing the political efficacy of the peasantries because aside from their being numerical majorities, they can hardly be generalised in a singular conception. In short, my answer to the question: are peasants an effective political force? is yes, they are. I propose that the peasants are potent revolutionary subjects though their agency tends to be dialectical, in which case they are shaped as they shape the forces whose domination they resist, be they state domination, market exploitation, or landlessness.

Finally, the paper has modestly contributed to contemporary peasant scholarship by making efforts to signpost the routes to understanding peasants' revolutionary potential. It could thus be read as one of the many much-needed attempts at reclaiming studies whose historical subject are the peasants.

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