

# EMPIRE AND THE PEASANT PRINCIPLE

(paper presented at the plenary session of the XXI Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology, Keszthely, Hungary, August 22-26)

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world we are witnessing the emergence of a new, powerful mode of ordering, that implies a far reaching re-patterning of both the social and natural worlds. Following Hardt and Negri (2002), Chomsky (2005), Stiglitz (2002, 2003) and others, I will refer to this new mode of ordering and the associated forms of governance as 'Empire'. In politico-economic terms the emergence of Empire strongly associates with the sharply increased mobility of enlarged flows of capital over the globe. Central to Empire as form of governance is control and appropriation. For Empire as mode of ordering the creation of controllability is central; this often requires a far reaching reordering of the social and the natural.

Empire is exerting its effects in both town and countryside. However, due to the particularities of the rural, these effects are especially visible in the countryside, where they often turn out to be counterproductive and sometimes even highly destructive. Worldwide, but also within the enlarged European Union, Empire is reshuffling social geography. New modes of assembly, governed by Empire, not only link *poor places of production* to *rich places of consumption* but, such places, and their dissimilarities are increasingly *produced* (and reproduced) by, and through, Empire.

Building upon James Scott (1998) who describes 'mega projects' as "tragic episodes of state-initiated social engineering", we could refer to Empire as the generalization of mega projects<sup>[1]</sup>.

I will argue that, at the level of theory, the emergence of Empire, and the associated re-patterning of the rural, calls for a reconsideration of the peasant mode of production. Firstly, because the peasantry is an important pocket of resistance, thus constituting an element of 'multitude'. Secondly because, at the level of practice, a widespread process of re-peasantization<sup>[2]</sup> is occurring throughout Europe. This process is partly triggered by Empire, and simultaneously constitutes an actively constructed response to it. And thirdly because we note, throughout our societies an intriguing 'traveling' of the peasant principle.

*Autonomy* is a main dimension in the multiple encounters, and emerging contradictions, between Empire and the newly emerging peasantry within Europe. At the same time I will try to indicate that the associated struggles not only affect the directly involved actors but are important for society as a whole.

In formulating some elements for the future research agenda for rural sociology I will therefore focus particularly on the issue of autonomy.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> In this respect the four conditions developed by Scott remain highly relevant: 1) an administrative ordering of nature and society, 2) a high-modernist ideology, 3) an authoritarian state, "willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring the high-modernist designs into being" and 4) a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist.

<sup>[2]</sup> I do not understand re-peasantization to be a simple quantitative process. Repeasantization is in the first place a qualitative shift in the way agriculture is organized. It might be accompanied by an enlarged number of people involved as peasants, but this is not necessarily the case. The same applies for de-peasantization.

## 2. *EMPIRE*

It is, as yet, impossible to present a fully-fledged and integral definition of Empire as mode of ordering – the more so as it pops up in domains as diverse as universities, public health, state apparatuses, private enterprises, NGOs and nature conservation. Simultaneously it applies that Empire, as empirical reality, represents a dazzling and confusing mix of old and new elements, which makes it extremely difficult to develop a clear, well delineated and theoretically grounded representation of it<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, I will limit myself here to briefly presenting some of its most striking features, especially those that are visible in the domains of countryside, food industry and the associated regulatory schemes.

Empire is a coercive form of governance, characterized by a high degree of centralization and formalization. Through a widespread application of ICT Empire is strengthening its already tight grip on those domains that it controls. Within and through Empire there is a mutual penetration and alignment of state and economy. The relations between state apparatuses and civil society are increasingly constituted as a market (hence, many functions of the state are delegated to market agencies), whilst corporations increasingly obtain extra-economic power, which is used to order the economy in a particular way. Thus, the modes of ordering provided by the State and the Market no longer counterbalance each other, even partially. In and through Empire these ordering principles are now aligned and fused into a comprehensive technology for regulation – a technology that exerts a disembodied but seemingly irresistible expression of power over nature and society.

Empire rules through all-embracing and quickly expanding regulatory schemes, that specify required codes of conduct, and that also govern the (re-)allocation and use of resources. Yet, Empire is also a contradictory form of governance. On the one hand it refers to (and promises) a beautiful, efficient, clean, sustainable and safe world – on the other hand, it establishes a chaotic mess. Whilst safe food is suggested (we are told all the time ‘how food has never been as safe as it is now’), food scandals, often of major dimensions, are continuously being produced, whilst food engineering poses increasing dangers, now and in the future. Commercially suggest beauty all around us while at the same time ugly ‘outcasts’ are being created all over the place. Behind its virtual façade, Empire is both contradictory and schizophrenic. The case of African paprikas contaminated with Aflatoxine and legally presented and sold as Hungarian ones – thus potentially destroying the livelihood of many Hungarian producers – emerges as a perfect example of the contradictions of Empire.

Empire is not only a particular form of governance, it is equally a mode of ordering. It reshapes the social and the natural worlds into tightly organized ‘systems’, which are

---

<sup>[3]</sup> Similar difficulties arise when seeking to relate this theoretical concept, with its new multi-faceted empirical constellations, to its theoretical antecedents. Empire partly reflects center-periphery relations as elaborated theoretically from the 1960s onwards. Empire entails globalization. Empire contains many elements of the authoritarian state, just as it is about multinational corporations. Empire is about formalization (and thus builds on TATE theory among others, see Benvenuti, 1975). However Empire is, at the same time, much more than all these separate lines. It is in the first place the nearly seamless combination, co-penetration and co-evolution of these different lines of thinking and the associated empirical phenomena and tendencies. Simultaneously, it is firmly rooted in two major breakthroughs. One is the development and widespread application of ICT, which revolutionized the administrative ordering of many, so far ‘uncaptured’ domains, phenomena and processes. The other consists of the world wide liberalization of markets, which allows for the elaboration of linkages that until recently seemed impossible

subjected, and organized according, to severe and all-encompassing cycles of planning and control. That is to say, Empire imposes an administrative ordering on both nature and society. Yet it is a foolish illusion to think that everything (and everybody) can be planned and controlled. Thus, the introduction of formalized planning and control procedures (and the elimination of autonomy and responsibility) provokes a widespread and strongly institutionalized slow-down. The negative effects of this slowdown are, however, externalized upon ‘the others’ –those who are increasingly converted into outcasts.

As mode of ordering, Empire is *superimposed* on the available ones (State, Market and Civil Society), aligning them and introducing new contradictions and development tendencies that, until now, have been unknown to mankind.

Empire does not have a single origin. It partly stems from big multinational corporations and their networks of transport, communication, assembly and control. It is partly rooted in the possibility of transferring enormous amounts of capital from one side of the globe to the other within seconds. But Empire also resides in state apparatuses and in supra-national arrangements. Beyond that, Empire is highly interwoven with new centralized, but far stretching, modes of organization (that heavily build on ICT) and with specific modes of knowledge production. It is the intertwining, steadily constructed coherence and mutual strengthening of these different ingredients that is currently rendering Empire extremely powerful<sup>[4]</sup>.

Among the most salient characteristics of Empire are the following:

- a. Empire represents conquest and expansion. It is about gaining increasing market shares, about mergers, fusions and the subsequent subordination of increasing spheres of society to just a few loci of control. Important here is that expansion basically proceeds through mortgaging the already available enterprise units in order to obtain new ones.
- b. Empire appears, in whatever domain, as a centralization of planning and control of large segments of social and natural life. Hence, Empire assumes, and generates, hierarchy and a formalization of procedures. In order to operate and to extend itself, Empire requires controllability<sup>[5]</sup>. This is reached through a far-reaching penetration of the segments to be controlled. It appropriates activities and processes that are then simplified and standardized, in order to become quantifiable, calculable, manageable and controllable. The widespread application of ICT is a central and indispensable feature of this process. Only after such reorganization (which may considerably distort the activities and processes concerned), does controllability emerge as a generic and material feature.
- c. From an economic point of view Empire embodies the appropriation and centralization of value added, produced at lower levels of aggregation. Empire is, as such, just a *cupola*<sup>[6]</sup>, and

---

<sup>[4]</sup> In my own intellectual journey, the STS concept of ‘socio-technical regime’ (understood as a “grammar or rule set comprised in the coherent complex of scientific knowledge, engineering practices, production process technologies, production characteristics, skills and procedures, ways of handling relevant artefacts and persons, ways of defining problems – all of them embedded in institutions and infrastructures”) has been very helpful to arrive at a better understanding of Empire (see Wiskerke and Van der Ploeg, 2004).

<sup>[5]</sup> Control and controllability are of strategic, if not decisive importance, precisely because through and within Empire enormous capital flows are invested in whatever domain. These are to be repaid in the near future. Thus control over the conditions within which the required profitability is to be realized, becomes crucial.

<sup>[6]</sup> Instead of using more neutral terms as ‘centre of control’, or Head Quarters, I opt here for the Italian concept of *cupola*. Literally that refers to a kind of overpowering centre of command and control. At the same time it expresses that such centre is somewhat hidden, probably even because it is embellished. In Italy the term is normally used to refer to the top of the Mafia.

in itself is barely productive. Instead, it has a vampire like relationship to the economic activities that it controls. The mechanics of Empire often imply that social wealth, as a whole, is being reduced whilst the part accumulated within the cupola is growing.

- d. This does not imply that Empire is omnipotent. The accumulated resources are used to engage in an ongoing, and often accelerated, process of expansion. Thus power is accompanied by a considerable fragility, as has been testified by Enron, Worldcom, Parmalat, Albert Heyn and many other expressions of Empire.
- e. By increasingly subordinating the world to an external prescription of goals, quantified outputs and means to be used, as well as to the formalization of procedures, tight controls and prescription of outputs to be produced, Empire is provoking nearly everywhere an institutionalized ‘slow-down’ (an overall sclerosis), and blocking innovativeness.
- f. Empire operates at a worldwide scale, frequently linking places of poverty to places of richness. In this as well as in other respects, Empire represents and organizes a very “intelligent geography”.
- g. In order to do so Empire ‘denaturalizes’ nature, food and gender, as well as landscapes, hydrological systems, etc.
- h. Empire creates massive exclusion, new *damnés de la terre*.
- i. The dynamics of Empire give priority to the future. Empire represents a ‘battle of the future’. It is future market shares, future shareholder value, and future levels of profitability that matter. And power resides increasingly in those circles and mechanisms that are able to outline, and to impose, a particular path toward that future.

Within Empire, the State and the Market (understood as ordering principles) flow together. Empire is the mutual co-penetration, interchange and symbiosis of State and markets. State apparatuses and the relations with their ‘clients’ are increasingly structured, ordered and organized as a market (e.g. public health, safety, education), whilst at the same time state functions are transferred to market agencies. Markets are increasingly moved away from being governed by an “invisible hand” and becoming centralized under new loci of control, which exert different forms of extra-economic control. Markets are increasingly ordered and structured through networks, with obligatory points of entry, conversion and release. At the same time the economy is subordinated to all embracing cycles of planning and control (as has occurred within State bureaucracies). This latter feature is, evidently, related to the accelerated rates of expansion, which occur through a massive mortgaging of available assets. *Future* profitability and *future* shareholder value thus become strategic for *current* operations. The rationale and justification of any given activity no longer rests in that activity (and the specific place and time associated with it) but are, instead linked to, and therefore dependent upon, their (assumed) contribution to the profitability and expansion of Empire. Precisely for this reason, tight cycles of planning and control are imposed. The new symbiosis of State and Market is penetrating deeply into, and simultaneously reordering, civil society, subjecting it to external controls, prescriptions and planning. Autonomy, responsibility and trust – three important vehicles of civil society are increasingly eliminated and replaced by procedures, rules and protocols.

## 2.1 A FIRST EXAMPLE: CATACAOS

Catacaos is a large peasant community in the North of Peru. It was known for its fierce and massive peasant struggles that earned it, nationwide, the name of *heroica villa* (the heroic village) (Cruz Villegas, 1982). During the land reform process these struggles resulted in a clear alternative for the organization of agricultural production. Within communal production

units, a man-land ratio was established that was far superior to the ones in the cotton producing *haciendas* and the state controlled co-operatives. The sharply increased employment levels were accompanied by considerably higher yields, thus allowing for income levels that exceeded those in the haciendas and co-operatives (van der Ploeg, 1977). Over time, these struggles resulted in a remarkable *re-peasantization*: both in an absolute and a relative sense. The presence of peasants in Catacaos is far higher than in the surrounding areas. Another remarkable outcome of the struggles is that the community of Catacaos was able to express its “moral economy” (Scott, 1976) into 10 well articulated values or ‘*principios de lucha*’, the first of which refers to the centrality of *autonomy*.

Currently, Catacaos is being confronted with an ugly form of Food Empire. The water running to the Lower Piura Valley, in which Catacaos is located, is increasingly being tapped by and diverted (re-routed) to newly created corporations, which creates a new spatial division. The land of the community is converted in dry deserts, whilst the properties of the corporations turn green and even contain large artificial lakes. The emerging Food Empires are growing a range of new crops (especially high value crops) such as onions, peppers, grapes, paprika’s, asparagus, organic sugar, and, in the lakes, river crab. All these products are exported directly to Europe through two channels. One channel takes products in frozen form to Gdansk, where they are proportioned and used in convenience foods, such as ready-made pizzas, after which they are frozen again and exported to Western Europe. The second channel transports fresh produce by air. Peruvian asparagus is available in Dutch markets for the incredible price of one Euro for half a kilogram. Thus, places of poverty and misery are linked to places of richness. However, these newly created links do not result in any development whatsoever. By shifting the water (which can be done because Empire exerts considerable power over local and regional authorities, controls capital, energy and the circuits for international transport and commercialization and monopolizes the *motif* of development<sup>[7]</sup>) Empire produces here a double *exhaustion*. There is an evident socio-economic exhaustion: although sometimes up to 1,500 casual workers are engaged in just one enterprise (working for a daily wage of 2 dollars), whilst far more productive employment in Catacaos has been destroyed: the *comuneros* are increasingly turned into ‘outcasts’: ‘waste’ products of our time (Bauman, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Beyond this, the huge profits are re-allocated elsewhere. For a similar case<sup>[9]</sup> it has been calculated that gross profits constitute some 60% of GVP!

Secondly, there is a far reaching and multi faceted ecological exhaustion: Land is irrigated, but is not well drained. Thus, salinization will inevitably occur. Apart from that, a lot of water is wasted through leakage whilst Catacaos is turned into a dustbowl.

From a sociological point of view the new kind of Empire emerging here is nothing but an *assembly* of resources that are already locally already. Dry desert land, electricity, large pumps, drip irrigation, a cheap and disorganized labour force, seeds, fertilizer, refrigerated containers, transport lines to Europe, capital, political support<sup>[10]</sup>, etc., are all locally available. Empire is not *adding* anything whatsoever. It is doing nothing else than combining the available resources into a specific socio-technical network. It can do so because at some crucial points it obtained *access* and established *control* (i.e. over international marketing

---

<sup>[7]</sup> Central in political rhetoric in Peru is the notion of neoliberal policies, within which agro-exports play a crucial role as trigger of overall development. This strongly echoes the development discourse of the 1950s. The strongly raised production and export of asparagus currently is an important logo for the ‘success’ of this model.

<sup>[8]</sup> Evidently, this type of Food Empire equally results in a considerable squeeze on European producers, who specialize in the same products.

<sup>[9]</sup> This similar case regards rice cultivation in the neighbouring Chira Valley

<sup>[10]</sup> Currently, this type of enterprise is strongly favoured since it seems to underpin and to justify the choice for the ‘agro-export model’ made by the Peruvian government.

channels, the capital market), whereas access is denied to other crucial players, such as the peasant communities (which, with the same access could very well organize corresponding and even superior socio-technical networks). From these *privileged points of access*, control can be exerted over all the other resources, and the produced value can be routed to other destinations.

Echoing the words of some inhabitants of Catacaos, one cannot but conclude that Empire is manifesting itself here (as it does in many other places) as a *Vampire*. It drains both Value Added and development potential from the area. It also drains dignity and hope. It does so without *adding* anything to the area, without *contributing* anything to its people. It can do so simply because it *controls*: it has nearly full control over the available resources and over the capacity to interlink and use these resources. This feature is also central to the second case I want to introduce.

## 2.2 A SECOND EXAMPLE: PARMALAT

My second example concerns Parmalat<sup>[11]</sup>. It is an outstanding example of expansion and conquest. It equally underlines the aspect of fragility. These two characteristics are intrinsically related. Expansion is not based on a further unfolding of already available resources, on the development of new technologies nor on reinvestment of profits and earnings. Expansion basically occurs by mortgaging the available assets in order to acquire new assets, which in turn are mortgaged, and so on. Through remissions on stock markets this scheme became somewhat enlarged and complicated. Thus a complex global network was created, with the main objective of achieving a growing share in the dairy market. Since not all take-overs turned out to be that profitable, this scheme transformed in what the French call *une fuite en avant* (a forward escape). The market had to be enlarged in order to obtain, in the near future, sufficient control, elevated levels of profitability and a high shareholder value. Future benefits would justify and remunerate the costs incurred in the present. Thus, investments are not made on the basis of historically created profits, but are, essentially, future dependent. This is exactly the same strategy that nearly brought about the complete demise of Ahold (Smit, 2004).

In order to bridge the gap between enormous debts, created for and by the accelerated expansion and the required level of profitability, Parmalat developed a strategy little known outside Italy. It is one that was not only central to the *Parma crack* (Franzini, 2004), but, in my opinion, is characteristic of the whole nature of Empire. The project centred on *latte fresco blu*, i.e. blue fresh milk. Blue fresh milk was seen as a way to link places of poverty to places of richness: in this case Eastern European countries (where milk is produced for less than half of the average price in Western Europe) with the Italian market for liquid milk where, due to specific historic circumstances, relatively high prices are paid. However, to do so large distances in time and space had to be bridged. That was exactly what *latte fresco blu* was meant to do. Technically speaking, fresh blue milk is based on breaking milk down into different elements, treating these elements in different ways and several times<sup>[12]</sup> and then recombining them, thus constructing, as it were, a new 'artefact': *latte fresco blu*. This newly assembled artefact is highly *denaturalised* if compared to really fresh milk (this denaturalization equally implies a degrading of the qualities of milk). So great are the

---

<sup>[11]</sup> This section is based on Van der Ploeg et al, 2004 and Franzini, 2004.

<sup>[12]</sup> An interesting detail is that through all these elaborations the traceability of the product is completely lost.

differences between the two that, to avoid legal problems, a new description had to be created for the new artefact: “fresh *blue* milk”<sup>[13]</sup>.

More important though, when examining Parmalat as an expression of Empire, is the economic side of the equation. If successful, the project would have rendered an additional cashflow of 1 billion Euro per year to Parmalat, which was badly needed to counter the enormous debts (that later turned out to be some 14 billion Euro). This expanded cash flow, then, might be understood, in a broader analysis, as a massive shift of Value Added (from Italian farmers, Eastern European farmers and consumers) towards Parmalat. Seen thus, Empire represents a massive expropriation and reallocation of social wealth. Through such expropriation the totally produced social wealth might even shrink considerably, but what is seen as mattering is that the part centralized in Empire increases.

An intriguing aspect of Parmalat is that Empire reappears here again as being void. It did not have any capital of its own, it did not have any self-developed technologies and, contrary to what is suggested by its name, it did not have any major connection with Parma. Parmalat was simply an ‘assembly plant’; an industry that only assembled elements produced elsewhere and by others. It took different elements, such as TetraPak technology from Sweden, milk from Italian, German and, later on, Polish producers, the logo of Parma, etc., in order to reassemble them into dairy products and juices for consumption. Through this tightly controlled assembly process, social wealth could be appropriated and transferred. *Latte fresco blu* provides a good metaphor: already existing technologies (pasteurization, microfiltration, etc) and products (milk from Eastern Europe) were combined to assemble a ‘carrier’ to move value from one place to another. Parmalat itself did not produce any additional value whatsoever. The astonishing fact is that assemblage could be continued even after Parmalat had cracked. This literally shows that as destructive as it is, Empire is equally superfluous.

There is a lot more to be analyzed and derived from the Parmalat case. The point to which I will limit myself here is that expansion is inherent to Empire and that this expansion increasingly a risky (re-) engineering of nature, food and life (Lang and Heaman, 2004; Schlosser, 2001). Whilst time-and-space boundedness is intrinsic to the latter, going beyond these inbuilt boundaries – also by means of genetic modification - is strategic for Empire, since this permits the required jumps in (expected) profits and shareholder value, which are crucial for further expansion. Empire and the engineering of life, food and nature (an engineering that in the end results in an awkward standardization, degradation and in a multiplication of risks) are, for the foreseeable future two sides of the same coin.

### **2.3 A THIRD EXAMPLE: THE GLOBAL COW<sup>[14]</sup>**

There is seemingly nothing more local than the well tuned balance of cows that have been bred to fit with locally available pasture lands and fields that have been developed, over time,

---

<sup>[13]</sup> To be more precise: a new category, allowing for this kind of blue freshness, was introduced into the law after heavy political lobbying from Parmalat. However, the law was again changed soon afterwards. As a result Italy is the only European country with a law that specifically prohibits this artificialization of milk. European regulations simply states that the freshness of a product is defined by the manufacturer and that their only obligation is to stick to it

<sup>[14]</sup> In rural sociology, the notion of the ‘global chicken’ is a well known point of reference (Bonnano et al, 1994). It refers to the world wide division of labour in meat industry and to the interrelated movements of inputs and (parts of) outputs over the globe. The point I want to make here is that ‘*non travelling*’, locally bounded issues, items, animals, artefacts, fields, etc. are also increasingly subjected to global parameters, relations and control.

to meet the nutritional needs of the available cattle. The only problem is that such balances (and the practices through which they are created) cannot readily be controlled, by outside agencies that apply prescribed formulas. This is not only due to the *uncapturedness* of the involved farmers but also to the large *heterogeneity* of the created balances.

Ironically, this ‘only problem’ turns out to be the *major* problem within the context of current agro-environmental schemes, especially since the latter are increasingly unfolding as part of Empire. Empire requires controllability. Thus, the well-balanced unity of fields, farmer and cattle emerges as a monstrosity – regardless of the level of sustainability that is realized.

The resulting impasse is resolved in an Empire-like way, i.e. by abstracting completely from local specificity and the entailed balances. All (worldwide) flows of nitrogen related to the Dutch dairy farming sector as a whole are summarized and recalculated as a national surplus of nitrogen. The surplus is divided by the total number of dairy cows, resulting (after a few additional corrections) in the so called “Nitrogen-excretion per cow”. This cow however is an abstraction, a virtual or a *global cow* – and similarly the calculated level of N-excretion is merely an *average*, a *global standard*, that will more often than not *deviate* from concrete situations.

Nonetheless, it is precisely this *global cow* that emerges as the main instrument for control. Having assessed a maximum level per hectare for nitrogen from cattle, control comes down to simply counting the number of animals in order to know whether a farmer is within or beyond the centrally defined levels of sustainability. Through computerized data systems (obligatory for all dairy farmers), the required control can thus be realized from one, remote locus of control. The same applies to other elements of the related regulatory systems, i.e. the ones specifying the application of manure to the fields. A *helicopter* is enough<sup>[15]</sup>.

The imposition of standardized criteria, such as those entailed in the *global cow*, produces a range of social and material effects, the combination of which imply a considerable distortion as well as an ‘institutionalized slow down’. Firstly, generic criteria as entailed in the *global cow* are at odds with the local specificities that occur in a heterogeneous sector. Thus frictions emerge, which often translate into a coarsening, or in the loss of practices that previously were the object of a meticulous fine-tuning. Secondly, all those farmers that actively created specific balances entailing high levels of sustainability (e.g. high levels of N-efficiency) are negatively affected and sanctioned<sup>[16]</sup> Thirdly, the created system for accountability and control spurs, ironically enough, an *increased* use of chemical fertilizers, industrial feed and fodder and, in the near, future probably of BST as well. Thus, whilst a *virtual* sustainability is suggested, *real* sustainability deteriorates: ways of attaining the latter become lost, as does the knowledge to do so. Fourthly, any stimulation for farmers to improve real sustainability is taken away<sup>[17]</sup>, if not completely criminalized. The only thing that matters is whether farming is done according to the imposed, global rules. Thus the practice of farming is indeed changed into an ‘institutionalized slow down’. Novelty production and so called ‘disembodied technological change’<sup>[18]</sup> (which crucially depends on local crafts and skills) are ruled out. It goes without saying that this again is highly detrimental for the creation of extra Value Added as well as for the quality of work. The farmer is “tailored” into a Fordist system. Even when the farmer remains independent – in the formal sense of the word – his or her use of resources is materially controlled by Empire.

---

<sup>[15]</sup> In the Netherlands control in agriculture is increasingly based on, indeed, helicopters and GPS. All practices at odds with such a ‘control at a distance’ are increasingly forbidden by law.

<sup>[16]</sup> As compared to the *global cow* they simply have too many cattle.

<sup>[17]</sup> Novelty production (Wiskerke and Van der Ploeg, 2004) is increasingly being blocked.

<sup>[18]</sup> Salter, 1966; see also Saccomandi, 1998



## 2.4. *EMPIRE: A SYNTHESIS*

According to Jose Carlos Mariátegui (1925), a rural sociologist *avant la lettre* from Peru, it is no problem when things change. The only thing that matters is that the new should be better than that what is replaced<sup>[19]</sup>.

Empire evidently is a *new* mode of ordering, currently being imposed upon large portions of the social and the natural world. However, whereas increases in productive employment<sup>[20]</sup> and in the value added produced are needed, Empire results in abrupt reductions of both. Where development is needed, Empire creates places whose main quality and *raison d'être* is enduring poverty – and if considerable value added is produced Empire moves it away. The same applies to sustainability and quality of food, life and work. Empire only produces *virtual* sustainability and only *virtual* qualities. By prescribing, controlling and severely prescribing the work of millions of people (through the allocation of resources and, especially, through the authorization of their praxis by means of strict cycles of planning and control), production is, as it were, 'frozen'. Dynamics, innovativeness and heterogeneity are ruled out. To slightly paraphrase Knorr-Cetina (1981), one could argue that "social order is not anymore that which comes about in the mundane but relentless transactions of individual wills – [under Empire] social order increasingly is the outcome of a monolithic system which regulates individual action and controls individual wills" (1981:7). Associated with this, there is a second, deeply troubling feature: Empire creates dependency; yet also represents turbulence and insecurity. The investments of Empire in Peru, for instance, are such that 'sunk costs' are avoided. Empire is a hit-and-run phenomenon. Thus, on the one hand "the network of interdependence caused by the growth of specialization widens" (North, 1990), which makes "institutional reliability essential [especially] because it means [...] that we can have confidence in outcomes that are necessarily increasingly removed from our personal knowledge" (ibid.). At the same time, though, Empire destroys institutional reliability as much as it assumed by it.

Crucial to this whole discussion is *autonomy*. Empire creates, wherever it operates and penetrates, an all encompassing regime that excludes *autonomy* at whatever level and in whatever form – precisely because *centralized control and appropriation* is the main feature and mechanism for further development. It is along these same lines that we have to rethink the peasantry – not the farming population as a whole, but precisely the part that is (re)constituted as *peasantry*.

## 3. *RECONCEPTUALIZING THE PEASANTRY*

Central to the peasant condition is (1) the struggle for autonomy, survival and progress in a hostile context that is characterized by dependency relations, deprivation and marginalization<sup>[21]</sup> (see Figure 1). This struggle aims at (2) the creation and development of a self controlled resource base, that allows for (3) forms of co-production of man and living nature that (4) interact with the market, (5) allow for survival and that (6) positively feed back into, and strengthen, the resource base, thus (7) improving the process of co-production and

---

<sup>[19]</sup> Interestingly enough the same point of view is echoed in the title of a well known public lecture of Slicher van Bath, the well know agrarian historian from the Netherlands: "The newest is not always the better".

<sup>[20]</sup> Agriculture is not only food production, it is as much production of employment and income, ref. Tudge, 2004

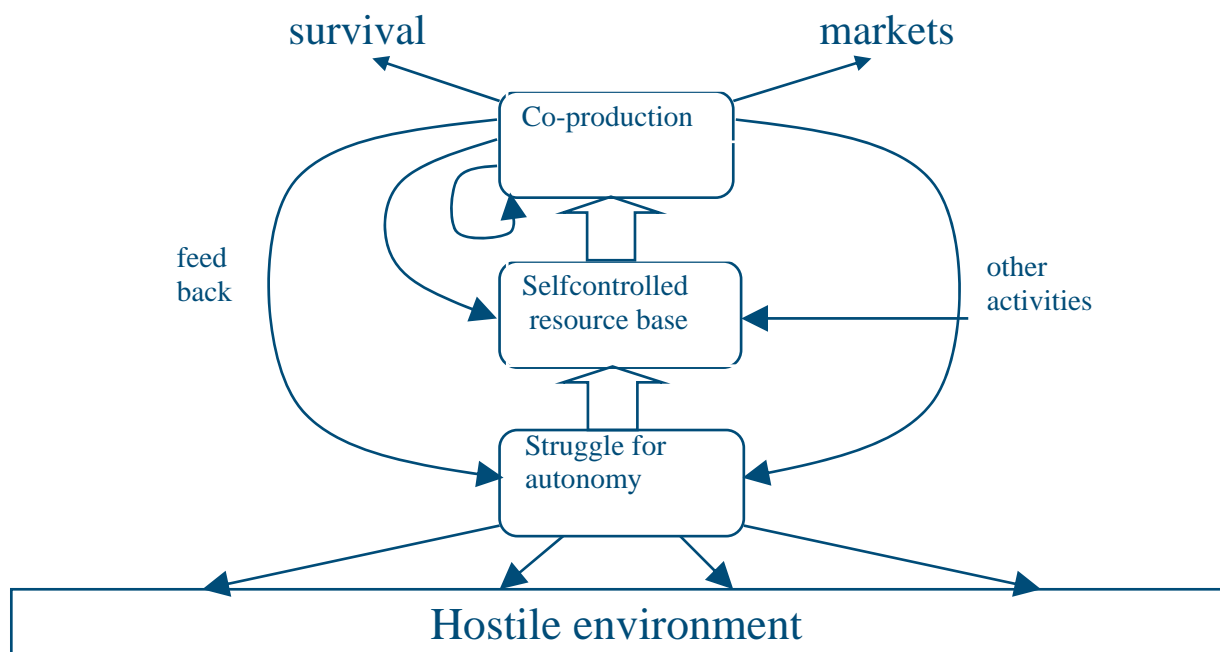
<sup>[21]</sup> It is a hostile condition which would indeed lead, if there were no actively constructed responses, to the often advocated demise of the peasantry.

(8) enlarging the required autonomy<sup>[22]</sup>. The same struggle often implies (9) being engaged in other activities as well, in order to sustain this cycle.

It is important to note, in the first place, that the peasant condition, and the peasant mode of farming it entails, is not static, nor fixed in -time. The peasant condition, essentially, *flows through time*: as an ongoing, many faceted and often multi-level process through which changing conditions are met and through which autonomy is repeatedly reconstructed. Secondly, it should be emphasised that the given definition does not entail any geographical and/or historical delineation. It covers, instead, a wide range of conditions and is a useful way of encompassing an overwhelming heterogeneity: it might be applied, to members of the Brazilian MST (Cabello Norder, 2004) as well to farmers in Western Europe and the USA, or at least, to some of them.

This leads to a third point: The given definition is not generic. Those involved in farming are not ‘automatically’ to be seen and understood as peasants. The same definition allows for the identification of development tendencies that might be summarized as constituting many

Figure 1: the peasant condition



forms of de-peasantization. These tendencies include (1) the search for system integration, which replaces the struggle for autonomy (2) a subsequent development of the resource base along the lines of market dependency and external prescription and sanctioning and (3) an increased artificialization of the process of production, which includes a growing distance from nature. Wherever such tendencies become dominant they result in the creation of entrepreneurial or corporate modes of farming, that strongly contrast to the peasant one (van der Ploeg, 2003).

<sup>[22]</sup> On each of these elements that together compose the presented definition, there is a large, rural sociological literature.

A last point to be discussed here is that the suggested definition focuses attention on what a peasant does, that is, on the *particular* way he or she is *farming* and engaging in other activities. Reviewing the rich and impressive body of literature from what was once known as ‘peasant studies’, it is remarkable that most attention is given to the social, political and cultural dimension and to the particular way of economic integration (or exploitation). Little attention<sup>[23]</sup> has been paid to what the peasant does from day to day: i.e. farming. The labour and production processes have rarely been studied in detail, let alone in diachronic sense. This omission<sup>[24]</sup> is echoed in the generalized view that the peasant is ‘intrinsically backward’, that peasant production essentially represents ‘stagnation’, that the peasantry as a whole is a major hindrance for wider development, that labour is just ‘routine’ being repeated according to the ‘agrarian calendar’, and that, in the end, peasant driven growth necessarily results in ‘involution’. Progress and development are to be induced from the outside.

A range of recent studies, however, has documented that the opposite might be true as well: peasants may very well generate progress, growth and development. What is decisive is whether they acquire or have access to the required *space* to do so, as Halamska convincingly argued in a discussion of the Polish peasantry. Yet as she notes, such a ‘space’ is “not given once and for all. It [is] in constant flux, mutable and [can] be either reduced or expanded” (2004:249).

### 3.1 AN EXAMPLE OF RE-PESEANTIZATION: RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE

Currently, farmers throughout Europe are facing an intensification of the *squeeze on agriculture*: prices are stagnating if not decreasing, whilst costs are increasing. The classical response, of scale enlargement, appears increasingly ineffective (if not counterproductive) due to the high costs associated with further growth (quota, land, environmental space) and the dark prospects related with further liberalization and globalization. One can ask: what are farmers actually *doing* (apart from the assumed ‘textbook’ responses)? How are they *de-facto* confronting this increasingly ‘hostile environment’? How are they responding to the increased control exerted upon them by and through different expressions of Empire? (See the recent debate between Goodman, 2004 and Van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004)

I believe that two basic tendencies might be identified. The first reflects the classical entrepreneurial response, which is in line with the developmental logic of the Empire, which translates in a further race to the bottom (one could refer to this first tendency also in terms of de-peasantization). The second tendency, which involves a majority of European farmers, represents a sturdy, strong and promising, albeit contested and somewhat hidden process of *re-peasantization*. It is a process through which “space” (or autonomy) is created, an autonomy that is simultaneously converted into new forms of development, new value added, higher incomes, more employment and increased levels of autonomy.

This process of re-peasantization might analytically be explained by departing from the notion that farming always is a process of conversion (of inputs into outputs), which is based on a twofold mobilization of resources. Resources might be mobilized from the respective markets (and thus enter the process of production as commodities) or they might be produced and

---

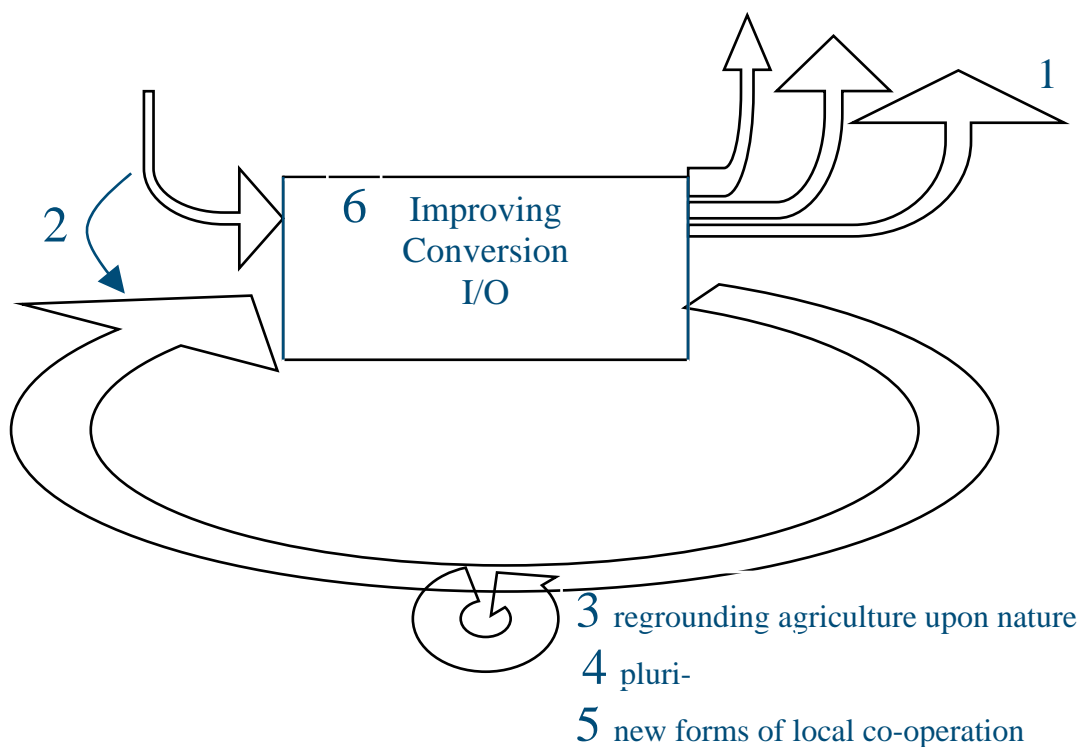
<sup>[23]</sup> The most notorious exception, of course, is the work of Chayanov

<sup>[24]</sup> This particular but persistent omission is probably due to the fact that peasant studies essentially stemmed from departments of history, anthropology, sociology and political sciences, but rarely from faculties of agronomy. The latter, mainly engaged in strictly technical studies, ignored the social relations of production. Only recently, agrarian sciences and social sciences have started to meld together in ‘rural studies’, and, especially, in ‘agro-ecology’. This has allowed for a far better understanding, and an associated reconceptualization, of the peasantry.

reproduced within the farm itself (or the wider rural community). This implies that ‘outputs’ might also be oriented in two ways: towards the output markets or towards a re-use (eventually after socially regulated exchange) within the farm.

Facing the big commodity markets, which are increasingly controlled and restructured by Empire, many farmers have started to diversify their output in a range of ways. (1): New products and services are produced, whilst simultaneously new markets and new market circuits are created (see Figure 2). Thus *multi-product firms* emerge, which contain new levels of competitiveness<sup>[25]</sup> and which entail, simultaneously, more autonomy. Parallel to this first tendency (and often neatly intertwined with it) there is (2) a shift away from the main input markets, a shift that is known as *farming (more) economically*<sup>[26]</sup>. The process of production is increasingly based upon other resources than those controlled by Empire. In the corresponding transition, (3) the *re-grounding of agriculture upon nature* is playing a central role, with the discovery of well made manure and the revitalization of soil biology (and the simultaneous reduction of fertilizer use) as inspiring theme. According to the same rationale, (4) pluri-activity and (5) new forms of local cooperation are rediscovered and further unfold. They also allow for a re-grounding and, thus, for delinking agriculture from direct

Figure 2: the choreography of re-peasantization



dependency on financial and industrial capital. Within the core of the production process there is (6) a re-introduction of *artisanality* (an organic unity of mental and manual labour that allows for direct control over, and fine tuning of, the process of production). This re-introduction is associated with the development and implementation of a new generation of skill-oriented technologies (Bray, 1986) and often results in an ongoing production of novelties.

[25] Saccomandi, 1998

[26] Internationally this is also known as Low External Input Agriculture.

These development tendencies are often referred to as ‘rural development’ and the associated creation of multifunctionality. They might equally be understood and analyzed as a process of *re-peasantization*. As argued by Marsden (2003), rural development is an evolving practice that basically proceeds as a *struggle against state apparatuses, their regulatory schemes and agri-business*. It is a struggle for autonomy and survival, rather than, as some assume, a more or less straightforward implementation of EU schemes and the associated rhetoric.

Taken together these shifts result in a reconstruction and further strengthening of *autonomy* – which is their intent. It is important to note that these tendencies are increasingly wrought together and translated to higher levels of aggregation. This is occurring in the environmental (or territorial) co-operatives that have been constructed in the Netherlands, in the Italian wine routes, in farmers’ markets in Germany and England and in the French ‘chestnut economy’ (Willis and Campbell, 2004). The same reconstruction and strengthening of autonomy can be supported by cleverly designed regional programmes, such as the Spanish Proder and the German RegionAktiv (Dominguez Garcia et al, 2005, Knickel, 2005).

Taken together, these tendencies imply that “*l’arte dell’agricoltura*” (as Columella beautifully phrased it) is re-emerging – as an art form of an independent peasantry. The re-creation of this ‘art’ results in *superiority*, both technically and economically: The outcomes include more efficient processes of production, resulting in far less contamination, higher levels of employment and more acceptable levels of income. In addition more robustness and resilience are created. And finally, new ‘*places of attractiveness*’ are created – places that relink town and countryside.

#### 4. *SCIENCE AS PART OF EMPIRE*

Science is a Janus like phenomenon. It uncovers and produces regularities: relatively stable patterns that are, and can be, repeated. These patterns of regularity are often represented in science as *laws*. These ‘laws’ (and the algorithms, rules and technologies derived from them) are precisely what is needed at the level of Empire. Regularities and neatly delineated cause-effect relations are necessary for formalization, regulation, prescription and control. Moreover they justify and legitimate the prescriptions and rules passed down by Empire as being grounded in scientific fact, as incontestable, value free and universal knowledge. These rules and procedures are therefore assumed to reveal the best possible way to organize social and material realities.

The development trajectory entailed in the current forms of Empire clearly specifies a horizon of relevance as far as science (and especially research) is concerned. On this side of the horizon there are fields of interest, and topics that deserve further inquiry. Scientific research that focuses on these fields and topics becomes ‘relevant’ and may be financed. It also renders results that condition the following generation of research projects. Areas on the other side of the horizon, on the other hand, rarely become the object of research. They are “not relevant”, there is hardly any audience and there will probably be no money.

Through this process science and Empire become intertwined and mutually dependent and science becomes entrenched in the interests of Empire. In this way path dependency is constructed and reproduced. The world and the future are divided in two blocks: the known world, or the world of the possible and the world of the unknown - that of darkness and ignorance. Through path dependency, science produces both knowledge and ignorance – a self-reinforcing and cyclical pattern that has huge implications for development trajectories.

Science carves pathways to the future, but only to particular ones, notably those that are in line with the interests, needs, prospects and expectations of Empire.

More specifically, it might also be argued that applied scientific research not only informs policy but increasingly is directly translated into regulatory schemes (ref. the global cow) which subsequently (re-) order the social and the natural worlds. It is unlikely that the outcomes of this re-ordering will be criticized by those within the involved scientific research institutes. To do so would be to criticize, albeit indirectly, their own work. Moreover, they would put at risk any further funding. In short they would have crossed the horizon of relevance. In this way scientific institutions become even more bound to Empire, whilst the knowledge produced increasingly functions (and is simultaneously structured) as a commodity. External critique is repelled: it threatens the institutionalized interests.

This concept of path dependency can usefully be applied to understanding the trajectory of research about major animal epidemics, such as, FMD. A more detailed analysis would be highly revealing in identifying patterns of path dependency of this type. At the beginning of the 1990s it was decided (following particular recommendations derived from applied economic research) that *stamping out* would be the economically most appropriate way of handling such diseases. From then on, the inquiry into alternative strategies to avoid outbreaks or mitigate against their effects became irrelevant (if not downright morally reproachable). There is no need to signal here that stamping out proved to be a disaster –from whatever point of view. However, solid knowledge on alternative ways to tackle FMD was and remains unavailable. Thus created areas of ignorance help reproduce the specific unfolding of Empire.

There is also a second face of science. That is the inquiry into the unknown, the exploration of novelties, and the analysis that goes beyond the ‘average situation’ and tries to identify promising ingredients. It is telling that this kind of science requires carefully constructed ‘niches’, or places of relative autonomy.

## **5. THEORETICAL CHALLENGES: TOWARDS A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA**

I have the impression that the building of Empire and the associated discomfort, resistance and struggle for alternatives might be important key concepts for understanding, analyzing and representing many of the issues to be discussed in this Congress<sup>[27]</sup>, and indeed many of

---

<sup>[27]</sup> Take for example the topic of Rural Development as structured by European and National State bureaucracies. Here it is telling that many new activities and practices developed by farmers trying to enlarge their autonomy, have been ‘expropriated’ and are being ‘formatted’ within rigid frameworks developed by state apparatuses. It is equally telling that the associated programmes are increasingly structured as ‘markets’: different groups, shareholders, etc. compete in developing proposals in order to obtain support from the ‘supply side’. The same ‘market’, though, only functions according to ‘iron’ procedures and highly exclusive accountability requirements. Together these procedures and requirements compose but one of the many expressions of Empire.

Currently, the praxis of Rural Development in Europe is full of frictions, distortions, contradictions, unfulfilled promises, frustrations and regressive tendencies. This is, to a considerable part, due to the fact that state interventions into the corresponding domains is structured according to the logic of Empire. Hence the need for a thorough analysis that probes into the underlying reasons from which all these frictions, distortions and frustrations sprout. By identifying the hidden, but omnipresent, mechanisms we can, I think, help to clarify many singular situations, help to link them to similar ones and contribute to the development of new responses to counterbalance Empire.

the seemingly disparate and chaotic issues that currently dominate the debates in, and over, the European countryside.

We have to elaborate and extend our understanding of patterns of autonomy and dependency. Autonomy, and the processes through which it is constructed, enlarged and/or reduced, is crucial for understanding both the workings of Empire and the dynamics of counter movements. The point here, of course, is to understand that autonomy is not a static state, but that it represents complex and richly chequered flows through time. Yet autonomy should not be understood as the simple antipode of dependency; autonomy is mostly bounded, nested within specific dependency relations, whilst the complex borders are constantly subject to flux and flow. These theoretical lines can be elaborated in far more detail and I think that the object of rural sociology provides an excellent field to inspire and to inform such elaboration. Of course, to do so successfully, we have to liberate ourselves from asphyxiating notions of structure.

We also have to recognize that the ‘peasant principle’ operates in large domains of society – domains that stretch far beyond agriculture and the countryside. From an historical point of view this is nothing new. Over the centuries farming has been part of multifunctional practices that linked town and countryside, agriculture and other sectors, but also mountains and valleys, the Netherlands, Italy and the Baltic area, etc. in manifold ways. It was also the other way around: the earnings made through frescoing the Sistine Chapel were used to buy a farm (King, 2003) In more recent times the Italian *mezzadri* made a “jump” from agriculture to the once highly dynamic Small and Medium Enterprise sector of Central Italy. These *mezzadri* made, as it were, the peasant principle ‘travel’ to other sectors, thus contributing to “the social construction of [new] market[s]” (Bagnasco, 1988). The same applies to large parts of the ‘informal economies’ of Third World Countries and possibly to the emergence of “urban agriculture” as well.

The problem, though, is that (for one reason or another<sup>[28]</sup>) such ‘travelling of the peasant principle’ is not seen, nor understood as such, but repeatedly represented as yet another expression, illustration and final proof of the assumed *demise* of the peasantry. What I propose, then, is to drastically go beyond the artificial boundaries between town and countryside, and between agriculture and the rest of the economy. What we have to do is, I believe, to explore *uncapturedness*, the struggle for *autonomy* and the creation of non-controllability *wherever they emerge*.

This needs to be linked to a careful and comparative analysis of the production, distribution and use of value added. Amongst other things this will show, time and again, that the ‘peasant principle’ is far more productive than Empire ever can be.

Finally – but I am sure that most of you already anticipated this last recommendation – we should reveal how places of attractiveness are created and enjoyed. Participatory observation probably is, I think, the best method to do so.

## ***BIBLIOGRAPHY***

Bagnasco, A. (1988), *La Costruzione Sociale del Mercato, studi sullo sviluppo di piccolo imprese in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna

---

<sup>[28]</sup> Possibly as a strange, ironic reflex of modernization theory but probably also related to old fashioned disciplinary boundaries.

Bauman, Z. (2004), *Vite di Scarto [Wasted Lives; Modernity and its Outcasts]*, Edizione Laterza, Roma/Bari

Benvenuti, B. (1975), General systems theory and entrepreneurial autonomy in farming: towards a new feudalism or towards democratic planning?, in: *Sociologia Ruralis*, 1/2, pp 46-61

Bonnano, A., L. Busch, W. Friedland, L. Gouveia and E. Mingione (1994), *From Columbus to Conagra: The Globalization of Agriculture and Food*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence

Bray, F. (1986), *The rice economies: technology and development in Asian Societies*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Cabello Norder, L.A. (2004), *Políticas de Assentamento e Localidade; os desafios da reconstitucao do trabalho rural no Brasil*, PhD, Wageningen University, Wageningen

Chomsky, N. (2005), *Democrazie e Impero; interviste su USA, Europa, Medio Oriente, America Latina*, Datanews Editrice, Roma

Columella (1977), *Lárte dell'agricoltura*, reprint, Einaudi Editore, Torino

Cruz Villegas, Jacobo (1982), *Catac Ccaos: origen y evolucion historica de Catacaos*, CIPCA, Piura

Domínguez Garcia, D. X.r Simón Fernandez, A. Alonso Mielgo, J. Ramon Mauleón, G. Ramos Truchero and H. Renting (2005) [Catching Up with Europe. Rural Development Policies and Practices in Spain](#). In Gorman, M. H. Renting, J. Kinsella and D O'Connor (Eds) *Driving Rural Development in Europe - The Role of Policy. Case Studies from Seven EU Countries*. Assen, Royal van Gorcum (in press)

Franzini, G. (2004), *Il crac Parmalat, storia del crollo dell'impero del latte*, Editore Riuniti, Roma

Goodman, D. (2004), *Rural Europe Redux? Reflections on Alternative Agro-Food Networks and Paradigm Change*. *Sociologia Ruralis* 44(1), pp 3-16

Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2002), *Empire: de nieuwe wereldorde*, Van Gennep, Amsterdam

Halamska, Maria (2004), *A different end of the peasants*, in: *Polish Sociological Review* 3(147)'04, pp. 205-268

King, R. (2003), *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*, Penguin Books, New York

Knickel, K. (2005) [Agrarwende - Agriculture at a Turning Point. Rural Development Practices and Policies in Germany](#). In Gorman, M. H. Renting, J. Kinsella and D O'Connor (Eds) *Driving Rural Development in Europe - The Role of Policy. Case Studies from Seven EU Countries*. Assen, Royal van Gorcum (in press)



- Knorr-Cetina, K.D. (1981), The micro-sociological challenge of the macro-sociological: towards a reconstruction of social theory and methodology, in: K.D. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel, *Advances in social theory and methodology: towards an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston
- Lang, T. And M. Heasman (2004), *Food Wars: the global battle for Mouths, Minds and Markets*, Earthscan, London/Sterling VA
- Mariategui, J.C. (1925), *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana*, 25th edition, Amauta, Lima
- Marsden, T. (2003), *The condition of rural sustainability*, Royal van Gorcum, Assen
- North, D.C. (1990), *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge University Press, New York/Cambridge
- Ploeg, J. D. van der (1977), *De Gestolen Toekomst: imperialisme, landhervorming en boerenstrijd in Peru*, De Uytbuyt, Wageningen
- Ploeg, J.D. van der (2003), *The Virtual Farmer: past, present and future of the Dutch peasantry*, Royal Van Gorcum, Assen
- Ploeg, J.D. van der and H. Renting (2004), Behind the ‘Redux’: A Rejoinder to David Goodman, pp 231-242 in *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol 44, number 2, April 2004
- Ploeg, J.D. van der (a cura di), B. Benvenuti, E. Bussi, G. Losi, C. Piagnagnoli, C. de Roest (2004), *Latte vivo: il lungo viaggio del latte dai campi alla tavola – prospettive dopo il Parmacrack*, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia
- Saccomandi, V. (1998), *Agricultural Market Economics: a Neo-Institutional Analysis of Exchange, Circulation and Distribution of Agricultural Products*, Royal van Gorcum, Assen
- Salter, W.E.G. (1966), *Productivity and Technical Change*, Cambridge University Press, New York
- Schlosser, E. (2001), *Fast Food Nation, the dark side of the All-American meal*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston/New York
- Scott, J.C. (1976), *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Yale University Press, New Haven
- Scott, J.C. (1998), *Seeing like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London
- Slicher van Bath, B.H. (1986), *Het allernieuwste is niet steeds het allerbeste; lezing gehouden voor de Studiekring voor Ontwikkelingsvraagstukken*, Wageningen.
- Smit, J. (2004), *Het drama Ahold*, Uitgeverij Balans, n.p.
- Stiglitz, J. (2002), *Globalization and its discontents*, Penguin Books, London

Stiglitz, J. (2003), *The roaring nineties: seeds of destruction*, Allan Lane, Penguin Group, London

Tudge, C. (2004) *So shall we reap: what's gone wrong with the world's food – and how to fix it*, Penguin Books.

Willis, S. and H. Campbell (2004): *The Chestnut Economy: the praxis of neo-peasantry in rural France*, *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol. 44, number 3, pp 317-332

Wiskerke, J.S.C.. and J.D. van der Ploeg (2004), *Seeds of Transition: Essays on novelty production, niches and regimes in agriculture*, Royal Van Gorcum, Assen.

---