

Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg 2008, *The New peasantries: struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of Empire and Globalization*. London, Sterling, Earthscan, 356p. ISBN 978-1-84407-558-4

Facing the empire of agro-food industry: the peasant principle

The last book of Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg (2008) analyzes the situation, role and significance of the peasantry in an era of globalisation, particularly of agricultural markets and multinational agro-food industries, the new “empires”. The argumentation is based on three longitudinal studies (over 30 years) in Peru, Italy and the Netherlands, which offer an original material of contrasted situations in terms of rural development and evolution of agrarian structures.

The author shows how family agricultures in the North and in the South, confronted with increasing dependence of globalized markets, adopt or update forms of resistance or distantiation to the capitalist production logic.

These various resistance practices characterize, according to the author, a process of repeasantization, including in industrialized European countries where the peasant societies as described by anthropology (Wolf, 1966) or sociology (Mendras, 1976, 2000) have disappeared.

In addition, Ploeg considers that this phenomenon constitutes one of the alternatives to the economic, social, food and ecological crises to which the capitalist globalisation of markets and agricultural production systems inevitably leads.

This repeasantization which, at first sight, seems anachronistic and paradoxical can be explained by several factors. But it seems important to understand a first paradox: why has this process been ignored by science (pp18-19), as if it were hidden (Martins, 2003) or invisible (Sabourin, 2007a)?

Ploeg suggests several explanations. First, agriculture is increasingly, but “virtually”, assimilated as an economic sector like the others (trade and industry) ignoring the reflexions of Polanyi (1957) on the limits of soil and labour commoditization (p 20).

On the contrary, Ploeg notices that:

- There exist limits to the transition from the peasant mode of farming to the agricultural entrepreneur model because of essential differences (generally denied or ignored) between economic theory and the practices required by the biological - but also social and human - nature of the agricultural activity.
- Fundamental contradictions between these necessary practices and the recent identity of agricultural entrepreneur have led to deviations compared to economic modernization theories;
- The fact that these deviations, interpreted like temporary imperfections, are systematically ignored by theory, has resulted in creating virtual realities and a virtual farmer model (Ploeg, 2003). Thus public policies, designed on “virtual realities” bases, are unable to adapt to concrete situations and not very relevant for farm development.

The second explanation comes from the limits or shortcomings of “peasant studies” (p21) because of:

- the artificial separation between an “underdeveloped” self-subsistence marginal peasant systems and a “developed” entrepreneurial farming system integrated to the capitalist market

(and the application of separate theories and concepts) whereas both systems evolve in dynamic interaction and present commonalities;

- the super-valorisation of the peasant society model has led to neglect the study of the practices which are specific of the peasant way of farming (technical, institutional and symbolic systems);

- the focus given to peasant subordination rather than to its capacities of resistance and organization (of agency) in the North as in the South;

- the difficulty of the Marxist analysis just as the neo-classic approach to integrate the modernization capacity of the peasant way of farming adapting to various categories of markets, pluri-activity, valorising multidimensional and multipurpose activities (Losch 2004, Groupe Polanyi, 2008).

- the difficulty of apprehending peasant systems as dynamic processes characterized by heterogeneity and thus, various “*degrees of peasantness*”. (p 36)

Ploeg insists on the need for a positive and substantive definition of peasants, “*according to what they are and not as a negation of what they definitively are not*”.

He suggests to define the *peasant condition* with six characteristics: a relation of joint-production (coproduction) with nature (p 24); construction and maintenance of a self-controlled and autonomous resource base (land, fertility, labour, capital) (p25-26); differentiated relations with diversified markets and the outside world allowing for autonomy (p27); pursuit of livelihood and resistance related to the reproduction of the family unit (p30); pluri-activity (Schneider, 2003); cooperation and relations of reciprocity (p 48) (Sabourin, 2007 a & b).

It is thus the diversified expression of the heterogeneous nature of this *peasant condition* which leads to various peasant ways of farming, built around common characteristics: a close relation with natural resources, which are limited (ecological capital); intensification of labour and valorisation of reciprocal mutual aid; an institutionalized *distantiation* from the capitalist market rules associated with a capacity of autonomy from the capitalist world.

However the main interest of the book is that, based on this theoretical reflexion and methodological criticism, with the three case studies, Ploeg manages to build the foundations for an enriched *peasant principle*, by looking further into the theoretical bases suggested at the beginning. This enrichment is enabled by the case studies which are extremely documented with richly detailed material analyzed on a long time scale, especially of peasant practices and the reasons or justifications of these practices facing the transnational food industry system.

This *peasant principle* corresponds to a rustic social and economic project, although robust because tested by several millennia of practices and resistances. In this sense, it can orient the concept of *peasant condition*: « *The peasant condition assumes agency in order to realize the choreography ...It is only through active and goal-oriented involvement that the peasant condition will progressively unfold* ». (p 274)

Ploeg opposes this continuity and robustness of peasant systems to the fragility or precariousness of the system of agro-food industry empires which in a few decades have destroyed most agrarian natural resources of our planet. The author shows how the Parmalat Empire has also destroyed the value of peasant labour and the added-value of co-operatives or human size food industries (pp.98-99).

This *peasant principle* translates into a series of answers of farmers defending the peasant condition. The first of answers is the capacity of coordination and co-operation in order to resist to the Empire (collective & community fights, defending common natural or identity inheritances, cf p 265 and Scott, 1976 and 1986). Indeed, the Empire causes new aggressions, therefore new resistances which lead to rebuild forms of peasantry by fighting, as for example the small irrigation producers of Piura in Peru or the Landless Movement in Brazil (p 277). In several case studies, resistance is not limited to defending production factors but also identity and the symbolic relationship with land, which sometimes need to adopt skirting strategies via pluri-activity or migration.

Among the “new” or modern answers, the *peasant principle* counts with endogenous technological innovations like agro-ecology or institutional innovations like the territorial co-operatives in Friesland, peasant-seed networks or citizens markets. These numerous initiatives are “interdependent”, bringing visibility to peasants (who create name and prestige, as in the case of product qualification) on the contrary of the Empire’s structures which maintain peasants anonymous, invisible and exploited (p 269).

The *peasant principle* is also associated with higher performances of the peasant way of farming compared to those of corporate agriculture in terms of efficiency of resources use (water, land, labour), of quality of products, life quality and social inclusion (p 276 and following).

The characteristics of the peasant project for the third millennium, rigorously synthesised by Ploeg across the three cases, invariably comes back to two main types of relation: co-operation and reciprocity on the one hand, resource sharing on the other hand, which can be considered, because of their recurrence, as social and economic structures of the peasant worlds.

All case studies also refer to a series of shared values:

- community values in Catacaos (Peru) (p 61): unity and indestructibility of the community, democratic responsibility of all members, equal rights and duties, access to wealth through labour, priority to the satisfaction of elementary needs for all, class solidarity;
- shared values in Friesland (The Netherlands) (p 190): force of the community, unity between man and nature, responsibility for natural resources, the territory and future generations, efficiency in the use of resources and quality of products, trust between partners and resiliency of co-operative organizations, solidarity, quality of life and friendship - “*with satisfaction and joy*” (p191) -, or esthetical values - “*the beauty of being engaged in farming*” (p 275).
- moral economy of small agricultural entrepreneurs and peasants of Parma (pp 140, 144, 163): quality of well done work, quality of products, quality of life, references to tradition and to ancestral knowledge or skills, respect of norms and of contracts (including market ones)...

These values have of course a direct incidence on production, marketing of products and on the wellbeing of families, but they also constitute emotional, moral, and ethic values.

Does the diversity of places, history, socio-political contexts and forms of peasantry reveal a link between the maintenance of these shared ethical values and the peasant way of farming? What would be the common key point?

For me, the common point can be encountered in the social and economic relations associated to these values.

Indeed, if one examines the recent proposals of the theory of reciprocity (Scubla, 1985; Temple, 1998 and 2003, Godbout, 2004 and 2007), there truly exists a link between the relations of reciprocity (mutual aid, co-operation, resource sharing, heritage transmission), the structures in which they are developed (family groups, communities, associations & cooperatives, markets of proximity and reciprocity, social control of short chain and of diversified proximity markets) and the nature of the ethical values which are associated to them...

The question is to understand where these values come from, similarly to the questions on the origins of social capital (see Portes, 1998)? Ostrom (1998, 2003, 2005) qualifies them as “attributes of the users groups”...but how are they attributed and by whom?

According to the theory of reciprocity, these ethical values are not culturally given or innate. They are built, socially and politically, insofar as they are generated and reproduced by certain forms of reciprocity. They correspond to the relation of symmetrical reciprocity (in opposition to unequal or asymmetrical forms of reciprocity).

These relations are developed in structures which can be binary and bilateral (*compadrio*, fraternity, mutual aid), ternary and unilateral (patrimonial, inheritance & solidarity transmission between generations), ternary and bilateral (responsibility or resource sharing). Structures of generalized or multilateral reciprocity can also be encountered (Gardin, 2006) in the case of markets of reciprocity (typical of Andean or African systems) where the creation of price or of equivalence between the products is socially controlled according to the community's needs and possibilities.

If these relations of reciprocity have maintained themselves across centuries, being rebuilt and updated by peasants, it is because they give special importance to the ethical and emotional values that they produce, besides material or immaterial values. Lastly, these values contribute to the reproduction of reciprocity cycles. But we can also consider that peasant communities defend, around these values, an economical project, a project combining production and a way of life, which cannot be separated from a social and human project.

In fact, this is the direction the author invites us towards in the conclusion of the work, with the concept of “peasant principle”. For Ploeg, the peasant principle must be considered as the capacity of the peasant condition to project itself into the future, by defending its values - material but also ethical and moral -, to defend a social project.

Among the characteristics of the peasant principle, the author mentions alternative “conversion mechanisms” (p269). Such devices allow peasants (and consumers), through relations of reciprocity (p 270), to avoid or to limit the relations of capitalist exchange in which the Empire transforms any good and any relation into a market exchange value.

The expression “conversion mechanisms” takes on its full meaning in the light of the theory of reciprocity. In fact two main devices appear. On one side, mechanisms based on relations of symmetrical reciprocity (mutual aid, resource sharing and mutualisation of services) associate production or circulation of material values to the production of ethical values. On the other one, “conversion” or interface devices allow to link the market exchange system and the system of reciprocity. It is the case for direct sales (direct relationship between producers and consumers), for product qualification (which protects from the competition of the capitalist exchange system and creates identity), or for hybrid forms combining market exchange and reciprocity, like the Slow Food movement (p 270).

In conclusion, among the main contributions of this work, I would like to point out three key elements:

- The criticism of “peasant studies” shows that the end of peasant societies does not automatically mean the end of peasants and their conversion into agricultural or family entrepreneurs in the North as well as in the South. This can be compared to the case of an Indian of the Andes, forced to emigrate to the *barriadas* of Lima, who does not inevitably become a proletarian mobilized in class struggles.
- The construction of the concept of peasant condition and the update to the context of the third millennium of the peasant way of farming as the antithesis to the agro-industry empire: “*Did Parmalat ever produce value?*” (p 96)
- The outline of a peasant principle, which allows, amongst other contributions, to dialogue with the principle of reciprocity.

I will finish by highlighting that this book is written like a novel with different facets. Each chapter tells a story: stories of peasants, entrepreneurs, companies...and the analysis is illustrated with detailed data and testimonies of actors.

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Eric Sabourin, CIRAD, Département Environnement et Sociétés, UPR Politiques et marchés
Universidade de Brasília, Centro de Desenvolvimento Sustentável
sabourin@cirad.fr

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