Hum Ecol
DOI 10.1007/s10745-010-9372-9

Van der Ploeg, Jan Douwe: *The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization*

London and Sterling, VA: EARTHSCAN, 2009. xx + 356 pp., maps, photographs, tables

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In the preface to this innovative, theoretically rich and provocative new book, Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg remarks that "much attention was given to the peasantry during the grand transformations of the last two centuries, and many of the resulting theories centred on the peasant as an obstacle to change and, thus, as a social figure that should disappear or be actively removed" (xiii–xiv). A professor at Wageningen University in The Netherlands, one of the foremost centers worldwide of critical agrarian studies, Van der Ploeg contrasts "the manufactured invisibility" of peasants with the their striking "omnipresence"—there are now more peasants than ever before in history and they still constitute some two-fifths of humanity.

The argument of *The New Peasantries* is straightforward, even though the exposition is complex and at times a bit convoluted (the copious flow charts often help to clarify the sometimes prolix prose, though in a number of them—as in parts of the text—it's easier to see the trees than the forest). For heuristic purposes Van der Ploeg distinguishes peasant, entrepreneurial and large-scale corporate or capitalist modes of agriculture. The boundaries between these three ideal types are, he acknowledges, blurry, since peasants increasingly engage in market-oriented production and entrepreneurial farmers, if they succeed, do so in large measure through expanding the scale of their operations and assuming corporate forms. He points to three key processes that shape the contemporary countryside: the industrialization of agriculture; repeasantization or the retreat of non-peasants or former peasants into "defensive" or "autonomous" peasant-like forms of production oriented significantly around subsistence; and "deactivation," which refers to the "containment" or breakdown of any of the three main modes of agriculture and its disappearance or partial or complete transformation into one of the other modes.

The "peasant condition" or "principle," as Van der Ploeg understands it, consists of various interrelated elements that permit survival in a hostile environment; these include a "self-controlled resource base," "co-production" or interaction between humans and nature, cooperative relations that allow peasants to distance themselves from monetary relations and market exchange, and an ongoing "struggle for autonomy" or "room for maneuver" that reduces dependency and aligns farming "with the interests and prospects of the… producers" (32). He is appropriately appreciative of the tremendous heterogeneity of peasant farming, noting that "the big divide between capitalist agriculture (large scale, extensive) versus peasant farming (small scale, intensive) is repeated—in a miniaturized way—within peasant farming itself" (125).

Three longitudinal case studies undergird Van der Ploeg's analysis, one in Catacaos on the northern coastal plain of Peru, another in Parma, Italy, where Parmalat milk and parmigiano-reggiano cheese are produced, and a third in the Frisian Woodlands of The Netherlands. In the Peruvian case, the 1970s agrarian reform divided large cotton plantations into cooperative

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Published online: 12 January 2011

farms, resulting in dramatically increased equity in landholding, growth in the area under cultivation, expansion of irrigation, rising incomes and yields, and "an impressive process of labour-driven intensification" (60). Community organization permitted timely delivery of water, credit, inputs and machinery services. Nonetheless, since the mid-1990s the state divided the cooperatives into individually owned parcels and disbanded the agrarian development bank. These measures led to a "repeasantization" characterized by increased efforts to maintain autonomy in the face of the market, to augment non-money forms of obtaining inputs and labor, and to increase both subsistence production and non-farm income.

Van der Ploeg's Parma study is the most remarkable of the three cases, and the most persuasive as regards his argument that "Empire"—incarnated here by the Parmalat corporation—never produces value but simply reorganizes production processes in order to appropriate value produced by others. Concretely, he describes how Parma dairy farmers, who historically produced milk for cheese and only received payment after the cheese had aged for 18 months, assented to providing "consumption milk" to Parmalat and to receiving payment after 180 days, an arrangement that would have been unacceptable to dairy farmers anywhere else in Europe. This delayed payment system gave Parmalat a huge fund of working capital—really others' capital. Van der Ploeg details how Parmalat built a major world food conglomerate in large part through creative financing schemes and impression management that allowed it to garner increased market share and attract investors, fueling a speculative bubble that eventually burst. Probably the most shocking piece of the story is how following Parmalat's crash, the corporation reemerged with a product called "*latte fresco blu*" ("blue milk") engineered from low-quality Polish and Ukrainian milk, which it then represented as high quality fresh milk and sold at a high profit margin in the Italian market.

The Netherlands case study reports on a striking process of "peasant-driven rural development" that began with an inventory of local assets (a manure surplus, abundant forest) and led to the introduction new small-scale bio-waste energy generation technologies. This permitted the study village to become a supplier of biogas, heat, and electricity to local and national networks. These new sources of livelihood were, however, integrally connected to farming and served to bolster and sustain the autonomy of rural households. Van der Ploeg also provides a very useful account of efforts to "scale up" the autonomy of the peasant household via the formation of territorial cooperatives among some 900 members operating in an area of approximately 50,000 hectares—a large extension in the intensively cultivated Dutch countryside.

Van der Ploeg is one a small number of contemporary researchers who, like this reviewer (Edelman 1999, 205–207), have called attention to processes of repeasantization, which he suggests "is, in essence, a modern expression of the *fight for autonomy and survival in a context of deprivation and dependency*" (7, original italics). His arguments about repeasantization are developed at much greater length and with more detail and empirical data than those of any other scholar who has addressed this phenomenon. In Europe, in particular, he maintains that repeasantization is "massive and widespread" (178), a "far-reaching shift" (155) that combines "old" activities (e.g., milking cows, growing vegetables) with new ones (e.g., direct marketing, landscape management, on-farm processing). Importantly, he links this part of his analysis to the much more widely discussed phenomenon of "pluriactivity," sometimes also termed "the new rurality" (Kay 2008). But in contrast to the many other scholars of agrarian change who suggest that pluriactivity is a sign of the disappearance of the peasantry, Van der Ploeg indicates that it is frequently associated with wellbeing and with efforts to generate non-farm income for investment in farming. Similarly, he argues that repeasantization could be "a politically and economically appropriate way out of underdevelopment in many developing world countries" (54). Frequently, it involves minimizing monetary costs and, in a reprise of age-old peasant practices, it is also associated with crop diversification that reduces economic and environmental risks. Multifunctional farms that emerge from processes of repeasantization, Van der Ploeg suggests, also generate new networks that thicken social capital and deepen the development process.

The only significant disappointment in this otherwise fine work is the author's constant invocation of "Empire" as a catchall category with immense agentive power that explains everything from powerful producers appropriating irrigation water and land to their construction of barbed wire fences to the Dutch state's regulations about manure. Enlarging on the analysis in Hardt and Negri's (2000) influential but turgid tome *Empire*, Van der Ploeg maintains that for "Empire" capital is relatively unimportant, since its main objective is to reorganize production processes and seize existing or potential wealth "according to its own logic" (71). This "ordering principle" (262) of "Empire" somehow reshapes social relations, economies and landscapes. The problem with this, as with all overly capacious categories, is that it includes too much and explains too little. It renders the complexity and the contingency of actually existing social relations obscure or even invisible and thus unavailable for political analysis and action. Even

so, Van der Ploeg's discussion of resistance to "Empire" is a richly detailed catalog of the diverse, interrelated stratagems that the peasants of the early twenty-first century employ to increase their odds of surviving and prospering in the countryside. Few, if any, other scholars in the critical agrarian studies tradition have produced such a wide ranging and convincing analysis of the key forces and trends affecting contemporary peasantries in the developed and developing worlds.

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