



GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND THE FUTURE OF AGRARIAN SOCIETY

**EDITED BY
ARIF DIRLIK
ROXANN PRAZNIAK
ALEXANDER WOODSIDE**

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Part I

Introductory

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CHAPTER I



Introduction

THE END OF THE PEASANT? GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND THE FUTURE OF AGRARIAN SOCIETY

ARIF DIRLIK AND ROXANN PRAZNIAK

This volume issued from the Wall Summer Institute, “The End of the Peasant? Global Capitalism and the Future of Agrarian Society,” held over a week in late June 2008 at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of British Columbia. The Institute was followed in June 2009 by a weeklong field trip by selected participants to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to witness cooperative efforts in Henan Province, inspired by the efforts of Professor Wen Tiejun of People’s (Renmin) University in Beijing. The conclusions from the field trip were discussed in a daylong workshop at the Advanced Institute for Sustainable Development of the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at that university. The Institute discussions, the field trip, and the workshop presentations confirmed the sense of a major transformation of agrarian societies at work globally, reversing radical hopes of the post-WWII years but quite in keeping with long-term developments under the regime of capital. Whether or not this is a cause for optimism or pessimism is entangled very much in attitudes toward the capability of capitalism to solve the problems of its creation. These conflicting attitudes have a history of their own, as Alexander Woodside’s introductory chapter outlines. It remains to be seen whether present uncertainties over the future of agrarian society are merely a replay of the past or products of an unprecedented world situation.

Because of, for the most part, the organizers’ interests and areas of expertise, the transformation of agrarian society in the People’s Republic of China over the last three decades, and the sense of crisis that has enveloped that nation over the last

decade, provided the initial impetus for the undertaking. Developments over the last two decades have catapulted the PRC to the forefront of speculation over the future of capitalism and the world economy. The future of agrarian society is part of this speculation. Since the early 2000s, the Chinese leadership has openly recognized the seriousness of what is described as the “three-nong” problem, referring to *nongye*/agriculture, *nongcun*/village, and *nongmin*/peasant (or cultivator, see below). The regime has made the creation of a “new socialist village” (*shehui zhuyi xincun*) into one of its top priorities, at least in word. What this means remains unclear, as “the new socialist village” is likely to point to something quite different from the conventional understanding of the “village,” where the village is not so much a unit of agrarian society as it is an integral part of a nationwide urban network. This also has radical implications not only for the understanding of the “peasant,” but for the organization of agriculture.¹

The coverage of the undertaking was expanded almost immediately, however, to place developments in China in a comparative perspective but also to get at structural problems that are global in scope. The food crisis of spring 2008 confirmed the validity of these concerns. As Jomo Kwame Sundaram observed in his keynote address for the Summer Institute, the food crisis had many long- and short-term causes, among them price manipulation, but a structural transformation of agriculture was one of the fundamental, long-term reasons exacerbated by neoliberal policies. Different societies are placed differently in the global topography of capitalism. But there is also a great deal of commonality in the problems they face in terms of parallel trajectories of development, as well as increased interdependence in the supply of agricultural commodities. Ironically, what distinguishes China may be the willingness of the regime to recognize the problem and plan for the future, as was observed by Joao Pedro Stedile, a prominent leader of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil who was a participant in the workshop at People’s University.²

We would like to single out here three issues that emerged in the course of the discussions in the various meetings, which also guide the essays included in this volume: the long-term relationship between capitalism and agrarian society, the city and the countryside in the analysis of agrarian society, and the question of the peasant as a social category.

CAPITALISM AND AGRARIAN SOCIETY

The impact of capitalism on agrarian society does not call for extensive discussion here, because it is masterfully summarized in [Chapter 3](#) by Immanuel Wallerstein. Where agrarian society is concerned, the history of capitalism appears as one long process of “de-ruralization” and “de-peasantization,” in the words of Wallerstein, or, “de-agriculturalization,” as Gregory Guldin (also at the conference) has put it with reference to contemporary China.³ Over the last half millennium, agriculture has come progressively under the domination of the capitalist market, transforming productive relations in the countryside. The transformation has changed not only social relationships in the countryside, including labor relations, but also peasant cultural identity as

the “peasantry” has been integrated into the production and consumption practices of capitalism and the political demands of the nation-state.

In this perspective, what may be novel presently is the globalization of this process accompanying the globalization of capital: the transformation of the Global South along the trajectory traversed earlier by advanced capitalist societies. The sense of novelty is enhanced by the reversal of the emphasis on agrarian society of Third World national liberation movements of only a generation ago that not only perceived in the peasantry the key to national identity and autonomous development but promised to subject metropolitan areas globally to the rule of the countryside. While memories of national liberation continue to dynamize agrarian-inspired social movements, such as the Via Campesina, what has happened over the last three decades is the opposite: the urbanization of the countryside led by developmentalist states that have internalized a basic premise of global capitalism as the only available path to survival and prosperity. Urbanization has changed the nature of these movements as well, which can hardly be described as “peasant” or even agrarian movements, as much of their activity is conducted in urban centers. We will say more on this below.

THE CITY AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

This discussion of urbanization leads directly to the second issue: the relationship between the city and the countryside in the analysis of agrarian society. If capitalism has had a transformative impact on the countryside, the city has served as the medium and the agent of transformation. Recognition of the fundamental importance of this relationship forces two considerations, one analytical, the other political: Is it possible to understand change in the countryside without reference to the city, and, for the same reason, can the problems of the countryside be resolved without change in urban existence? And if the country and the city are interdependent in many ways, from the economic to the cultural, can the city survive the disappearance of the country?

The primacy of the city over the countryside long has been an assumption of social theory. The city is not just the center of economic, political, and cultural life but also, for the same reasons, a manifestation of civilization and an emblem of progress. Thus Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology* that “the separation of town and country” represented the “the greatest division of material and mental labour,” tracing its origins to “the antagonism between town and country [beginning] with the transition from barbarism and civilization.”⁷⁴ The city is nearly synonymous with civilization and, as such, the civilizer of the countryside as well.

It does not follow, however, that the domination of the countryside by the city is a foregone conclusion, that it has the same form and character at all times, or that the relationship between the two is of necessity an antagonistic one. Marx and Engels followed the statement above with an account that historicized the evolution of the city under different social formations, culminating with the capitalist city. Fernand Braudel would write with reference to the precapitalist city (in different forms) that “town and country never separate like oil and water because the bond uniting them neither breaks nor pulls lone way only. They separate and draw closer at the same time,

split up and then regroup.”⁵ Since Marx and Engels were interested primarily in the emergence of the capitalist city, they projected its characteristics on its genealogy, ignoring that the relationship between town and country historically was marked as much by symbiosis (not just economically but socially and culturally as well) as antagonism. In this account, cities that could not liberate themselves from the countryside suffered from rural inertia, unable to generate the dynamism that, for better or for worse, had created capitalist society in Europe.⁶

From an ecologically sensitive contemporary perspective, the “modern” city appears instead as a betrayal of the premodern city’s promise of a more ecologically sound and sociable relationship between the city and the countryside. Making an unconventional distinction between city (or town) and the urban, Eco-Anarchist social theorist Murray Bookchin writes that “born of the city, urbanization has been its parent’s most effective assailant, not to speak of the agrarian world that it has almost completely undone.”⁷ Bookchin, who idealized the classical city, viewed “urbanization” not simply as “citification” but as the defining characteristic of the modern city that distanced the city from the countryside, followed by the urban “engulfing” of “the agrarian and natural worlds,” which in turn created the conditions for the city turned in upon itself to “devour . . . city life based on the values, culture, and institutions nourished by civic relationships.” A symbiotic relationship between town and country, in other words, was turned into an antagonism between town and country that would result not only in the erasure of the countryside but the end of the city itself as the location for political and cultural sociability. “Even if we think in the old terms of city versus country,” he continues, “urbanization threatens to replace both contestants in this seeming historic antagonism. It threatens to absorb them into a faceless urban world in which the words ‘city’ and ‘country’ will essentially become social, cultural, and political archaisms.”⁸

Bookchin surprisingly left out of his analysis the relationship between democracy and slavery in the classical city he admired, but that is not a pertinent issue here.⁹ Two aspects of his analysis are important for historical and critical reasons. His distinction between the urban and the city (or town) has important analytical implications: if capitalism has had a transformative impact on agrarian society, it has done so through urbanization of both town and country, rendering the urban into the indispensable referent (or even, context) in any analysis of agrarian society. Urbanization here becomes a feature of the “modern” (capitalist) city, rather than a referent for all city formation. The transformation of the countryside also requires the transformation of the city, so that the analysis of one is inextricably entangled in the analysis of the other. Within the context of the Global South presently, urbanization would mean, by implication, the transformation of existing cities and towns along trajectories demanded by global capitalism, in the process also bringing the countryside under the hegemony of capitalist relations of production. Conversely, the transformation of the rural areas of the globe has an impact on cities in both the developed and the developing worlds, if only in the form of migrant labor from the “countryside”—hence Bookchin’s conclusion that the city/country distinction itself is on its way to becoming “archaic.”

The second important aspect of the analysis is its normative but analytically relevant suggestion that the end of the country also means the end of the city. Marxists,

and Marxist-inspired analysts such as Braudel, exhibit ambivalence toward the city that has come to pervade most social science analysis: the city as a realm of contradictions, of both freedom and creativity, and alienation and self-destruction. Such contradictions are clearly visible in contemporary analyses of what have been designated “world” or “global” cities, especially as they assume “mega-” sizes, as realms both of transnationalist cosmopolitanism and ethnic segmentation and parochialism.¹⁰ Bookchin’s criticism of urbanization as the death of the city forces another mode of thinking. As city-city relationships over long distances come to overshadow the relationship of the city to its hinterland, they distance the one from the other, rendering a symbiotic into an antagonistic relationship in which the countryside is the first casualty. But it is not the only casualty, because the city itself becomes subject to forces beyond its control, and the management of those forces takes priority over modes of governance that are intended to enhance the sociability that is its very reason for existence. The city is transformed into a location in a network of locations through which capital and its auxiliary services move and serves as such as a link in the process of capitalist production. As a recent Marxist analysis observes, cities provide the ideal spaces for the accumulation of capital, which in turn transforms the city on an ongoing basis in the process of its production and reproduction: “Capital accumulation and the production of urbanization go hand in hand.”¹¹

The logical conclusion here is that the grounding of capital in the city simultaneously off-grounds the city from its ecological setting by yoking it to the motions of capital. Fernand Braudel, explicitly in agreement with Marx, wrote pessimistically that,

It is the inequalities, the injustice, the contradictions, large or small, which make the world go round and ceaselessly transform its upper structures, the only really mobile ones. For capitalism alone has relative freedom of movement. . . . Faced with inflexible structures . . . it is able to choose the areas where it wants and is able to meddle, and the areas it will leave to their fate, incessantly reconstructing its own structures from these components, and thereby little by little transforming those of others.¹²

The statement successfully captures what may be distinctive about the forces driving the modern capitalist city, confirmed daily in our time by the globalization of urban forms. Neither limitations on the motions of capital nor urban and rural struggles to ground it in accordance with local needs is sufficient to refute that city and country alike have been integrated into its domain. The distancing of the city from the countryside means only that the city is now shaped by forces beyond the local, not that there is a literal separation between the two. On the contrary, as Bookchin suggests, the integration of the country to the city may be more thorough presently than ever before in history. It is also marked by its own peculiar contradictions. Cities continue to consume the countryside. The countryside strives to become citified, to partake of the promises of globality, even as it also resists appropriation by the city. But cities in their expansion bring the countryside into their midst (whether as fields or as people), so that global forces and forces of the immediate hinterland play out their antagonism in the city. At the same time, the emptying out of the countryside into the city raises the questions of what agrarian society might mean under the circumstances and what

is to become of all those activities associated with it, most crucially but not just food production. It is impossible to address the dynamics of one without also referring to the dynamics of the other, more so for the country than for the city as it is drawn into the force field of urbanization, but by no means unidirectionally.

Regardless of where they stand on issues of capital and classes, or space and place, most of the outstanding works on contemporary urban formations share one shortcoming: a seeming obliviousness to the relationship of world-cities to the countryside. Whether out of a sense of an academic division of labor, or an ideological fascination with urban networks, there is little discussion in these works of world cities' changing relationship to their hinterlands (including lesser urban configurations), extending to and possibly beyond national boundaries. This omission may be more the case with those who stress the global over the transnational, and spaces over places, but it is difficult to find, in these works, any sustained analysis of urban-rural relations that received far greater attention in approaches based on "central places." Where the countryside comes into analysis, it is in the guise of "transnational villages," rural settlements in some distant location in some other nation that have come to gain a foothold in world-cities. Analyses of migration rarely attempt to account for migrations within nation-states that swell the rapidly growing slums of world-cities, especially in countries of the Global South.¹³

It is as if world-cities are off-grounded from their concrete environment, and their relationship to one another renders invisible any relationship to the countryside. Some analysts, such as the advocate of borderless globalization, Kenichi Ohmae, go so far as to celebrate the distancing of the world-city from its environment as a condition of efficient development.¹⁴ The result, as Riccardo Petrella of the European Union has noted, is a portrayal of world-cities as a "wealthy archipelago of city regions . . . surrounded by an impoverished *lumpenplanet*."¹⁵

The "disappearance" of the countryside from theorizations of the city may be attributable to actual changes globally. More than half the world's population presently resides in urban areas (not all of them world-cities), and the figure is expected to rise to 60 percent over the next two decades.¹⁶ If the evacuation of the countryside into the city has been underway since the origins of capitalism half a millennium ago, what we are witnessing presently is the latest phase of this development in which problems of urbanization in the Global South have moved to the center of attention.¹⁷ In some instances, such as in the People's Republic of China, the forces of political economy are reinforced by actual state policy that perceives in urbanization in megaurban complexes the resolution of problems of agrarian society as well.¹⁸ The urbanization of the rural population is also expected to contribute to further agricultural development by replacing the family farm with "agricultural production that mimics the agribusiness management techniques of North America."¹⁹

The case of China is particularly important in illustrating the dramatic shift that has taken place from Maoist policies of self-sufficiency and self-reliance that presupposed the priority of national surfaces over city networks, to an export-oriented transnational economy that has marginalized the countryside and reduced the peasantry to second-class citizenry. It is arguable that while Maoist policies placed a premium on agriculture, they, too, helped "de-peasantize" the countryside through collective

organization that mimicked industrial organization (see below). Those policies were also responsible for the *hukou* (household registration) system that divided the city and the country. Megacities, rather than resolve this problem, are more likely to bring the urban-rural bifurcation into the structure of urban complexes, as has happened already in cities like Beijing.²⁰ The system of hereditary registration in place of birth, moreover, has rendered the urban-rural division into a caste-like system, denying rural migrants to the city full citizenship in their inability to access basic needs like education and health.²¹ In this regard, they are not all that different in the difficulties they face from the so-called illegal immigrants that are flowing into cities around the world.²²

These developments hardly justify the neglect of the countryside. On the contrary, the absorption of the countryside into urban areas presents problems of long-reaching significance: the disappearance of the peasantry as a source of labor power; uncertainty over the future of agricultural production, which already shows signs of crisis in chronic food shortages; the ecological consequences of the redistribution of population from the rural to the urban; and the psychic costs of the concentration of populations in enormous megacities.²³ No less important are the political consequences that include new challenges in urban governance and have led already to increased surveillance of populations, proliferation of instruments of repression in anticipation of possible urban disorder, and, internationally, intensified competition for resources necessary for the sustenance of national populations. Jane Jacobs argued in her influential book *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* that the relationships of cities to their hinterlands have been of great importance in determining the welfare of either and that this also was of consequence in shaping transnational urban relationships. The latter may be quite effective in generating wealth and security for classes and groups that are its beneficiaries, but its distancing from the former raises serious questions of sustenance and sustainability in the long run for the urban populations at large.²⁴

The continued insistence in China on “socialist” planning in a market economy makes it especially interesting in offering glimpses into the imagination of the future relationship between the countryside and the city. The incorporation of the countryside into the city, initially through “townization” (village becoming town) due to market pressures from both the city and the countryside, in recent years has become part of planning into the future. “Townization” was, in the early 1990s, restricted mostly to the coastal areas and was a product as much of local initiative as of the forces of global capitalism refracted through the major urban sites of “reform and opening” such as Guangdong and Shanghai.²⁵ While agricultural change in the 1980s served as the motor force of development, a decade later agriculture was in trouble as the countryside lagged behind the cities in development. The “three-nong” problem was so serious that it led to renewed attention to agrarian society, not to reproduce but to urbanize it. Changing “property regimes,” discussed in [Chapter 9](#) by Pitman Potter, are one instrument utilized to this end. Even more significant may be changes envisaged at the macro level of urban planning. These plans include the building of megacities that will serve as magnets in their respective areas and turn villages into towns, as more efficient means of providing jobs to increasingly superfluous rural populations, concentrating the production of resources, and establishing more effective controls over environmental damage. The countryside, in the meantime, will be available for more

efficient modes of agricultural production. What is at work is planned obsolescence of the urban/rural division of the past.

PEASANTS INTO URBANITES?

The third issue is the peasant in the conventional sense, which the disappearance of the countryside has made into an endangered species. The conventional image to which we refer is that of a tiller of the land, who lives in a village surrounded by fields, and with the help of family labor, produces mainly for subsistence, marketing the surplus in exchange for the few items beyond the ability of the household to produce. How close this image was to the historical reality of so-called peasant societies has always been an issue of contention. Different societies named “peasants” differently, emphasizing one aspect or another of their existence (countryperson, villager, tiller of the land, farmer, etc.). Be that as it may, modernity in its globalization has called into question the reality of the image and the possibility of what it represented, if only with differences in the depth and pace of change in different locations.

The conversion of the peasant into a producer for the market, and, politically, into the citizen of the nation-state, has followed inexorably the appropriation of the countryside into the urban spaces of capital and the nation-state.²⁶ This has been as true of socialist as of capitalist modernization. As we noted above, with reference to Maoist policies, socialist collectivization, too, sought to remake the peasantry in the image of the factory worker and to relocate agricultural labor from the family and the village in state-enforced collective organization. The enforcement was made possible by the hukou (household registration) system, which introduced a caste-like *division* between the urban and rural populations that is the legacy of collectivization to the present. While the peasantry was “de-peasantized,” the division guaranteed the persistence of agriculture. The present seems set to complete the task by abolishing the distinction altogether as the rural is inexorably drawn into the urban, or is remade in the latter’s image. As the essays by Alexander Day and Pitman Potter suggest, present-day conceptions of the peasant seek to transform both the peasant and agriculture. The proletariat as the model for the peasantry has been replaced by an image of the peasant as successful entrepreneur in the marketplace. And agriculture is reconceived as one more aspect of an economy dominated by the productive relations of capitalism. The increased porosity of the nation-state with the globalization of the political economy further permits, if it does not encourage, the transnationalization of the “peasant.”²⁷

Alexander Day’s discussion in [Chapter 4](#) of the post-1978 Chinese discourses on the peasant shows clearly that neither the naming of the “peasantry” nor the evaluation of its consequences is politically innocent. Recognition of the consequences of capitalism or the city for the countryside does not require surrender to its inevitability or to its self-image of progress. The peasant as the symbol of an alternative mode of existence continues to inspire the search for an alternative to the capitalist transformation of the city and the countryside. Potter’s discussion of disagreements over “property regimes” indicates that the issue remains to be settled among Chinese leaders. More eloquent is the resistance of the peasantry to forced incorporation in the international division of

labor, as discussed for China, Latin America, India, and Africa in the essays by Wen Tiejun and Dong Zhenghua, Alejandro Rojas and Fabio Cabarcas, Utsa Patnaik, and Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros.²⁸ The issue in these cases is not just a romantic attachment to the image of the peasant, but the association of the figure of the peasant with essential human needs, chief among them food security.²⁹ Rojas's argument is particularly interesting in its insistence that even if the peasantry disappears, it is important to preserve "peasant knowledge," which may be crucial to overcoming the ecological difficulties the world faces. The "peasant," albeit a very different kind of peasant, continues to stand for an alternative to the surrender of the most basic human needs to corporate agriculture and a new kind of accommodation between the city and the countryside.

FINAL REMARKS

The purpose of a volume such as this one is not just to chronicle and illustrate a historical teleology but also to make some slight contribution to the imagination of alternatives to it—unless we are convinced that the world at hand is the best of all possible worlds and talk of alternatives is merely a form of intellectual mischief. The contemporary preoccupation with alternatives on a wide range of fronts may be taken itself as manifestation of a sense of crisis. The crisis of agriculture is foremost among the many crises that we face. There is no single alternative appropriate to all of the societies discussed here, not to speak of the many more that are beyond the purview of this volume. The same forces may be compelling changes globally, but what effect they have locally is a product of their interactions with the circumstances of concrete localities. As the problems differ, they also demand different solutions. To ignore this is to fall in with the universalist self-images of neoliberal capitalism, or to fall back on the similarly informed universalist prescriptions of an earlier socialism.

But neither should local particularities be allowed to conceal the forces at work globally. Local interactions have been at work all along. We need also to uncover what is novel about the forces that are giving them a new power and direction, for the same tendencies would seem to be at work globally, regardless of local variations due to social, political, and cultural circumstances. The problems of China and Bolivia may be quite different, but they also have a commonality: the disappearance of the countryside under the force of a relentless urbanization, itself empowered by the global motions of capital. The disappearance of the countryside evacuates rural populations into urban areas, while opening up rural areas to more efficient modes of production, which inevitably under the hegemonic corporate paradigm favors size and corporate management over small-scale family farming. The result is more evacuation. Local differences are not inconsistent with parallel trajectories, as the following statement suggests:

For most peasant farmers in Mexico, Asia has always seemed literally and figuratively a world apart. But when Uthai Sa Artchop of Thailand described how transnational corporations sought to patent and control their varieties of rice seed, Mexican peasants realized that the Thais' rice was their corn. When Indonesian farmer Tejo Pramono spoke of how remittances from sons and daughters working in Hong Kong and the

Middle East subsidize a dying countryside, Mexican farmers thought of their own relatives forced to migrate to the United States.³⁰

Commonalities are not restricted to such parallel developments. As the market dependency that “de-ruralizes” agrarian societies becomes globalized, societies around the world face critical new risks. Rural areas no doubt may flourish with increased access to urban markets, as some economists argue (as one of the participants in the Institute, Ashok Kotwal, did). But the globalization of agrarian products brings with it new uncertainties and risks. Dependency on long-distance urban markets makes rural livelihood subject to fluctuations in demand in faraway places and other unforeseeable contingencies.³¹ The commercialization of production most importantly creates uncertainties in access to food, as food production is commercialized and subject to global circulation like any other agricultural commodity. The disappearance of peasant farming in a country like China leaves commercial farming as the most likely outcome (discussed in [Chapter 7](#) by Dong Zhenghua). Urban encroachment on farmland (through communications requirements and real estate development) reduces already meager arable land. On the other hand, agricultural activity is “exported” as China obtains land in Africa and South America to supply food needs, and maybe even to compete on the global food market. The ecological consequences of this activity are highly uncertain. So are the social consequences. Already, the provision of male workers to urban development has depleted villages of adult males, with debilitating consequences for both family and village structure. Such separation, needless to say, also takes place on a global scale. The “de-peasantization” of the countryside is accompanied inevitably by the “peasantization” of the city and the burdens it imposes on urban management and sustainability. For now, as Mike Davis has argued, rural population has no choice but to pour into growing slum populations around the globe. Some countries like China have managed to avoid slum growth through social controls, as well as the legacies of organization that enable self-organization among migrants. That, too, presents new challenges to urban governance.³² Advocates of globalization cannot have it both ways. The globalization of the economy brings in its wake the globalization of its problems, which have acquired serious dimensions with the urbanization of agrarian societies.

Given these circumstances, efforts to resolve these problems can no longer be restricted to the defense of agrarian society, but need to confront issues across the full spectrum of the urban-rural nexus. This is indeed the case with social movement organizations such as Via Campesina. Responding to critics who view “peasant mobilization” as nostalgic reaction to “modern society,” Philip McMichael has written that organizations like Via Campesina seek to transcend “conventional peasant politics, reframing its ontological concerns via a critique of neoliberalism, and reformulating the agrarian question in relation to development exigencies today.”³³ The exigencies that have received the greatest attention from contemporary rural social movements include massive destitution in the countryside and its extension into city slums, ecological issues raised by urbanization as well as the commercialization of agriculture, the dangers of genetically modified crops, the plight of women and indigenous peoples, breakdown of social institutions, cultural dissolution, and, as keys to the solution of all of the above, food sovereignty and the

right to land.³⁴ Many of these, it needs to be underlined, are problems not just of the countryside but also of the city—and the global political economy of which it is at once producer and product. The resolution of these problems at their most fundamental will require overhauling the global political economy and the direction it has taken with the globalization of neoliberal technocratic principles.

If decline is reversed and the countryside once again is recognized as the crucial location for the solution of not only rural but also urban problems, it will likely have a spatial organization quite unlike that of the village or the individual family farmer. The peasant, too, is not likely to resemble any social subject associated with that term. To say what the outcome may be in either case would be difficult. The only thing possible to say with some certainty presently is that the subjection of the countryside to the rule of the neoliberal market economy is likely to produce more of the problems that threaten welfare not only in the countryside but also in the city. People's struggles to overcome this threat quite appropriately have brought together urban and rural activists united in a single struggle, which draws its inspiration from long-held beliefs in the countryside as a source of welfare and contentment but promises an alternative future that is very much refracted through the realities of the present. Top-down projects of "the ecological city" or "rurbanisation," referred to above, are also most likely to be successful only in alliance with these struggles from the bottom, and not against them in accordance with the dictates of placeless global capital.

NOTES

1. See Dong Zhongtang, *Jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcunde lungang* [An Outline of the Construction of the New Socialist Village] (Beijing: People's Daily Press, 2005), for an example of many publications on the issue. The plan offered includes "integration of town and country" (*chengxiang yitihua*, literally, "becoming one body") as well as transformation of the peasant.

2. For more on the part the manipulation of grain indices played in the crisis of spring 2008, see Frederick Kaufman, "The Food Bubble: How Wall Street Starved Millions and Got Away with It," *Harper's Magazine* 321, no. 1922 (July 2010): 27–34.

3. Gregory E. Guldin, *What's a Peasant to Do? Village Becoming Town in Southern China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), *passim*.

4. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited with an introduction by R. Pascal (New York: International Publishers, 1947).

5. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 376–377.

6. Some Chinese Marxist historians attributed to domination of the city by the countryside the abortiveness of capitalist development in China. For a discussion, see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), [Chapter 4](#). Another explanation was political: domination of the city by the state, which Braudel also has used to explain the different fates of cities in Europe and elsewhere. See Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, 440.

7. Murray Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987), 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

9. Braudel, by contrast, perceived in the medieval town in Europe the freedom that created capitalism, not the top-down capitalism of which he was critical, but the democratic small-scale capitalism of the individual entrepreneur.

10. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002).

11. David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 22.

12. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 445.

13. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

14. Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

15. Riccardo Petrella, official forecaster for the European Union, cited in J. V. Beaverstock, R. G. Smith, and P. J. Taylor, “World-City Network: A New Metageography?,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 2000): 123–134.

16. Brian C. O’Neill and others, *Demographic Research: A Guide to Population Projections*, Vol. 4, Article 8 (June 2001): 203–288.

17. See [Chapter 3](#), Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Return of the Peasant: Possible? Desirable?” For a discussion of over- or hyper-urbanization in the megacities of the Global South, see J. D. Kasarda and E. M. Crenshaw, “Third World Urbanization: Dimensions, Theories, and Determinants,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 467–501.

18. See Andrew Moody and Lan Lan, “Focusing on Future Urbanization,” *China Daily*, March 22, 2010, 13, for the development of megacities that are expected to resolve questions not only of poverty and urban-rural differences but ecological problems as well. Some Chinese advocates of urbanization may have been influenced by the work of Paul Romer, who has emerged as the most recent prophet of alleviating poverty through urbanization. See Quentin Hardy, “Postcolonialism: An Economist’s Plan to Save the World’s Poor; New Cities Built Around Profits,” *Forbes*, September 21, 2009, 38. If this report is to be believed, Romer’s “charter cities” seem to differ from Ohmae’s “region-states” mainly in his concern for alleviating poverty and his proposal to internationalize city governance (hence, postcolonialism). One recent study proposes Shanghai during the pre-1949 colonial period as a model for a new Hanseatic League appropriate to the globalized world. See Geoffrey Bracken, “The Shanghai Model,” *IIAS (International Institute for Asian Studies) Newsletter* 52 (Winter 2009): 4–5. For a contemporary example of labor export to cities to relieve poverty, see “Work Dries Up in Rural Areas,” *China Daily*, April 1, 2010, 4. On occasion, forced urbanization is intended to undercut peasant mobilization for politics, as is argued in [Chapter 11](#) by Abidin Kusno, “Peasants in Indonesia and the Politics of (Peri)Urbanization.” The absorption of villages into urban areas is discussed in [Chapter 8](#) by Leslie Shieh, “Awaiting Urbanization: Urban Village Redevelopment in Coastal Urban China.” For peasants as “management problem,” see Alexander Woodside, “The ‘End of the Peasantry’ Scenario: Dream and Nightmare,” [Chapter 2](#) in this volume.

19. Gregory E. Guldin, “Desakotas and Beyond: Urbanization in Southern China,” *Ethnology* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 265–284, 268.

20. For an illuminating and critical study, see Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). On the other hand, the new category of “peasant-worker” (*nonggong*) also suggests the possibility of some integration, which presently has taken the path of “the urbanization of the countryside,” by force if necessary, which is quite often. For a discussion of urban-rural becoming “one body” (*yiti*) in the Chengdu “model,” see Ni

Pengfei et al., *Zhongguo xinxing chengshihua daolu chengxiang shuangying: yi Chengdu wei anli* [New Urbanization Path of China: Urban and Rural Win-Win—Take Chengdu as a Case] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2007).

21. Dorothy Solinger has documented this in depth in *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*. For an up-to-date report, see “Millions of Chinese Rural Migrants Denied Education for Their Children,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2010. A more optimistic assessment is offered in Yu Keping, “The New Migration Movement, Citizenship, and Institutional Change at the Global Age: A Political Understanding of Large-Scale Urban Migration of Rural Workers Since the Reform in China,” unpublished paper (2010). Yu believes that marketization, globalization, and efforts to equality of migrant workers themselves have created forces for democratization that will lead to eventual resolution of this problem. We are grateful to Dr. Yu for his willingness to share this unpublished paper with us. For migrant struggles to overcome their status, see “Unlike Parents, Young Migrants Won’t Take Their Fate Lying Down,” *China Daily*, March 23, 2010.

22. The internal migrant population in Chinese cities is presently estimated at around 160 million. For an interesting discussion of the internal organization of one migrant community that shaped up as an urban enclave beyond the formal city government, the “Zhejiang Village” on the outskirts of Beijing, see Li Zhang, “Migration and the Privatization of Space and Power in Late Socialist China,” *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 1 (February 2001): 179–205. Whether or not this kind of organization can achieve permanence against the high-tech visions of the regime is an open question in a society in rapid transformation where governance itself is subject to ongoing experimentation.

23. Richard York and others, “Footprints of the Earth: The Environmental Consequences of Modernity,” *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 2 (April 2003): 279–300. For the city as both ecological problem and ecological solution (presently more the former than the latter), see Mike Davis, “Who Will Build the Ark?,” *New Left Review* 61 (January/February 2010): 29–46. Chinese planners meanwhile are working toward the “ecological city.” See Wu Haifeng, *Shengtai chengshi dai jianshe yu quyu bantiao fazhan* [Construction of Ecological Metropolis and Coordinated Development of Regions] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2009). Possible urban food shortages as a result of the destruction of the countryside, with the most serious implications for the urban poor, have become not just a social but security concern. For a recent discussion with reference to ASEAN, see Paul Teng, Mely Caballero-Anthony, Margarita Escaler, and Paul Khan Khup Hangzo, “Ensuring Urban Food Security in ASEAN,” Policy Brief, Food Security Expert Group Meeting, Singapore, 4–5 August 2010. The authors offer what they describe as “rurbanisation” as a possible solution (and an alternative to the “Western” model of development).

24. Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

25. Gregory E. Guldin, ed., *Farewell to Peasant China: Rural Urbanization and Social Change in the Late Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1997).

26. For nation-building and peasant resistance to it, see Roxann Prazniak, *Of Camel Kings and Other Things: Rural Rebels Against Modernity in Late Imperial China* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

27. See Harry Bernstein, “Farewells to the Peasantry,” *Transformation* 52 (2003): 1–19, for the incorporation of the peasantry into an international division of labor through nationalism and colonialism. For a study of “transnationalism,” see Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

28. While most such resistance has been peaceful, as with Via Campesina, or restricted to localized acts of violence, there are also instances of the resurgence of armed struggle, as in the case of the Maoist-inspired Naxalite uprising in India that draws on tribal populations,

or the recent confrontations in Thailand, that display all the characteristics of class struggle in which urban/rural divisions and inequalities created by globalization play a determinant part. For recent reports on the Naxalite uprising that point to these issues, see Arundhati Roy, *Broken Republic: Three Essays* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), and Robert M. Cutler, "Naxalites Drill Away at India's Wealth," *Asia Times Online*, May 20, 2010. Available: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LE20Df02.html.

29. See also, Philip McMichael, "Peasants Make Their Own History, But Not Just as They Please . . .," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, no. 2–3 (April and July 2008): 205–228.

30. Laura Carlsen, "Via Campesina Sets an International Agenda," *ibid.* (2007): 221–222.

31. As we write these lines, the Internet is full of stories on the economic impact of the volcanic eruption in Iceland that has brought airline transport to a stop, with problems of food shortage in Europe and producers' problems in faraway places from Kenya to India with products that cannot be shipped out. For one example, see "Flight Ban Could Leave UK Short of Fruit and Veg," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2010. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/april/16/flight-ban-shortages-uk-supermarkets>.

32. Li Zhang, "Migration and Privatization of Space and Power in Late Socialist China," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 1 (February 2001): 179–205.

33. McMichael, "Peasants Make Their Own History," 207.

34. Via Campesina, "The Tlaxcala Declaration," International Conference on the Via Campesina, Tlaxcala, Mexico, April 18–21, 1996.

CHAPTER 2



The “End of the Peasantry” Scenario: Dream and Nightmare

ALEXANDER WOODSIDE

In the second half of the twentieth century, global planning elites made an unprecedented effort to reconceptualize the whole nature of farming. This elite reconceptualization of farming, along much more industrial, more purely commercial lines, was never just an empirical recognition of what was actually happening in some, if not all, countrysides. It was also an attack on the past history of human farming, driven by science-worshipping norms and a salvationist gospel of economic efficiency.

Neoclassical economics were usually thought to be the source of this gospel. For example, the Via Campesina, a global movement of farm leaders from around the world, was founded in 1993 in explicit rejection of liberalizing economic policies that were impoverishing far too many farm workers. The Via Campesina leaders demanded that the World Trade Organization itself withdraw from agriculture and that increased liberalization of the international trade in food be halted.¹ But neoclassical economics are only part of the story. The twentieth century, with its two world wars, was a century of managers, not just of neoclassical economists. As Peter F. Drucker, one of the most famous “fathers of modern management,” put it in 1988, the Germans were the better strategists in World War II, but the Allies won because of their management prowess.² However dubious this sweeping claim might be in whole or in part, the claim itself suggests the uncompromising ambition of the professional ideology behind it and the self-interested nature of the new management experts’ disdain for the millions of small family farms all over the world that, until recently, lay outside their reach.

The managerial bias in world development, like the urban bias, deserves more emphasis than it usually gets. A Chinese State Council research office leader said in 2003 that the World Trade Organization and the “internationalization” of Chinese

farming were good for China because they would enable the elite to deepen Chinese village reforms, promote the development of a pan-Chinese “agricultural regulation” system, and enhance the “management levels” of Chinese farm businesses through fewer, bigger, more scientific farms.³ Optimists assumed, until recently, that the world food supply as a whole would benefit from such “internationalized” reforms.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF FARM PRODUCTIVITY

The Chinese commentary on the relationship between industrialization and agriculture has a long genealogy. As early as 1907, the famous Chinese anarchist Liu Shipei alarmed his readers by predicting that industrialization in China would lure debt-ridden peasants out of farming in the Chinese countryside into factories in cities like Shanghai. Urban populations would increase, the price of cereals would soar, and poor people would not be able to afford enough to eat.⁴ Yet when rising rice and wheat prices in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, caused in part by the conversion of cereals into biofuels and by the increased costs of chemical fertilizers, triggered food riots in the spring of 2008, the establishment news media in the West expressed surprise at the sudden possibility of global food shortages.

If Liu Shipei’s grim premonitions were ignored for over a century, the main reason surely lay in the extraordinary rise in the productivity rates of the world’s farmland between 1950 and the 1980s. Indeed, most of the twentieth century appeared, at first glance, to be a golden age of agriculture, if not of politics. The world’s population more than doubled in size between 1950 (2.5 billion people) and 2000 (6.1 billion people). Yet global food output increases, until the late 1980s at least, exceeded the population increases.

Three technologies, one very old and two fairly new, facilitated the great expansion in farmland productivity. The old technology was irrigation, traceable back several millennia and crucial to the farming connected to Asia’s big river systems (the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers, the Mekong and the Irrawaddy, the Brahmaputra and the Ganges). Between 1950 and 1978, global per capita irrigated acreage for farming expanded by almost one-third. The two newer technologies were the application of chemical fertilizers to nutrient-poor soil (the volume of such fertilizers used in world farming increased ninefold between 1950 and 1998) and the use of genetic engineering in plant breeding. Its origins lay in the discovery of the laws of plant genetics in late-nineteenth-century Europe.⁵

The expansion of farming growth rates was accompanied by a sharp decline, in some parts of the world, in the numbers of farming people, thanks to urbanization. This decline reinforced an already strong faith, among global planners, in the universal applicability of the patterns of the world’s earlier industrial revolutions, beginning with the British one. As early as 1851, townspeople outnumbered country people in Britain for the first time in British history.⁶ Other Western countries followed. As late as 1930, the United States had 2.5 million farms that were less than fifty acres; but it had only 500,000 such small farms by 1992. Close to 40 percent of the French labor

force was engaged in agriculture in the 1950s but less than 3 percent by 2004.⁷ Even in backward Fascist or communist European states with no interest in democracy, the farming population shrank drastically after 1950. One worker in two was employed on the land in Franco’s Spain in 1950, but only one in five Spaniards still remained in agriculture in 1971. In Nicolae Ceausescu’s Rumanian police state (which deliberately attacked peasant society and moved peasants into concrete agrotowns), only 28 percent of the labor force worked the land by 1986.⁸

Even the post-1945 eastern Asian experience seemed to confirm the global appropriateness of the decline of farming people in the British industrial revolution. As one Chinese Central Party School economist put it in 2006, the rapid shrinkage of the Japanese and South Korean labor forces engaged in farming after 1945 suggested that the percentage of farming people in labor forces in all industrial revolutions ought to fall from 50 percent to about 10 percent within twenty-five to thirty years, given the right policies of modernization.⁹

Dramatic farm productivity increases, at the same time as a reduction in the number of farming people, inevitably stimulated end-of-history projections of the usual utopian kind. In 1995, E. J. Hobsbawm proposed that the “death of the peasantry” was the single most far-reaching change in the history of the post-1945 world. As recently as the 1930s, “the refusal of the peasantry to fade away” had been used “as an argument against Karl Marx’s prediction that they would.”¹⁰ Yet even before Marx, for centuries the peasantry had been regarded in stereotyped fashion as enemies of human progress, or at least as symptoms of a lack of progress. In the 1700s, American Jeffersonian democrats flattered themselves that the new U.S. republic’s food growers were civilizing, frontier-taming farmers; food growers in the monarchical, despotic Europe, on the other hand, were peasants.¹¹ Chinese intellectuals before 1949 inherited this partly ideological tendency. If they thought that China had already entered the more progressive capitalist stage of history, they would call Chinese farming people farmers; if they assumed that Chinese society was still feudal or semifeudal, they would call them peasants.¹²

Economic development literature after World War II demonized the peasantry as a “primitive community” whose limited wants as consumers jeopardized economic growth. W. Arthur Lewis, a Nobel prize winner in economics (1979), even went so far as to picture non-Western economies in dualistic terms as having a dynamic “capitalist” sector and a static “subsistence” sector. In the former lived highly Westernized “trousered natives” who gloried “in Beethoven, Mill, Marx, or Einstein.” In the latter could be found “the great mass of their countrymen who live in quite other worlds.”¹³ Anthropologists followed in the wake of such economists in seeing the peasantry as a psychologically antimodern cultural system. In 1966, for example, Oscar Lewis decided that the rural communities he studied in the Caribbean suffered from a “culture of poverty”; they were not poor because of political and economic exploitation but because they chose to be poor, conditioned by their self-isolating negative cultural characteristics.¹⁴

Not everyone accepted this prejudiced characterization of small food producers with limited educations as “peasants,” especially if the purpose of such an act was

to stigmatize them as wants-free economic primitives. As a leading anthropologist recently put it, dichotomous conceptions and related evolutionary models that assume that tradition, stasis, subsistence orientations, and general backwardness are natural features of non-Western villagers must be considered “both theoretically moribund and empirically unsupported.”¹⁵ Chinese small farm households have been involved in various market economies for centuries; Indonesian upland villagers sold the “New World” crops they grew (maize and tobacco) in lowland markets as early as the 1600s; Balkans mountain shepherds, who had to pay cash taxes to the Ottoman empire, sold their livestock and related products to lowland merchants also by the 1600s, if not before. The term “peasantry” will nonetheless be used here precisely because of the need to illuminate global ideological practices that arbitrarily marginalize large numbers of rural people in order to deny them political and social rights. The peasant-bashing language games of the national and international elites who rule such people may or may not be a threat to our food supply, but they certainly threaten our understanding of what human rationality is in transhistorical and transcultural terms.

THE RETURN OF AGRARIAN CATASTROPHE THEORY

The world’s peasantries, of course, have not died. Even Hobsbawm had to admit that, at the time of his writing in 1995, the global “regions of peasant dominance”—Africa, South and Southeast Asia, China—“still represented half the human race.”¹⁶ The Chinese debate about this is instructive. For China, the best evidence for the possibility that peasants might someday disappear was the official statistic that their numbers had dropped from 849.9 million people in 1992 (roughly 72 percent of the population) to 745.3 million people in 2005 (57 percent).¹⁷ But as one senior Chinese agrarian economist warned, in terms of household registration status, China’s agrarian population was really 949 million people in 2005; another 200 million peasants were living a precarious life in Chinese cities without having evolved into officially urban people. Chen Xiwen went on to assert that the vast scale of China’s rural population was historically unprecedented. Chinese elite planners could not find proper precedents for their policy-making anywhere in the past human experience of industrialization. Yet the conviction that they could was damaging the Chinese countryside. Some 20,000 natural villages were vanishing in China every year, as their lands were requisitioned for non-farming purposes, or their inmates were otherwise forced to flee as a result of natural disasters or expropriation for the construction of dams and reservoirs.¹⁸

China has never been a “typical” non-Western agrarian society. Compared to another big industrializing country like Brazil, for example, China has a worse ratio of people to available cultivable farmland, lower state investment in agriculture, and far weaker permitted mobilization (so far) of the rural poor to defend their own interests. Yet both China and Brazil have witnessed the growth of urban slums that are characterized by poverty, violence, and repression. Masses of slum-dwelling peasants with few citizenship rights live in such slums, into which they have been driven or enticed. In this sense, China may be regarded as a global trendsetter.

Elite planners and the social scientists who study their work accommodate the formation of these "postmodern" slums by referring to it as "quasi-urbanization" (*zhun chengzhenhua* in Chinese) or "peri-urbanization" or "de-peasantization."¹⁹ Such terms often merely disguise a failed economic vision. The planners who employ these terms resemble portrait painters who can no longer bring themselves to paint completely idealized portraits of their ugly subjects but remain reluctant to paint their subjects as they really are, warts and all.

Others have not been so reticent. An historical catastrophe theorist, Mike Davis, published a horrifying book in 2006, *Planet of Slums*, which portrayed the alleged "death of the peasantry" as a nightmare, not as a development ideal. Davis wrote that gigantic increases in urbanization in Africa, Latin America, and Asia were nothing but "over-urbanization" promoted by the reproduction of poverty, not by the supply of jobs. Periurban poverty was simply "the radical new face of inequality." It led to a "grim human world largely cut off from the subsistence solidarities of the countryside" yet decoupled from genuine industrialization.²⁰ A tour of multiple hells, Davis's book compelled its readers to visit such sufferers as the one million poor people who used the tombs of Cairo's City of the Dead for their "prefabricated housing." Significantly, Davis proposed parallels between nineteenth-century colonialisms and the contemporary neoliberal globalization that turned rural poor people into urban squatters "surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay."²¹

Davis's book takes its place as an event in the more general advance, in the early twenty-first century, of what has come to be known as agrarian catastrophe theory. Simply put, the catastrophe theorists suggest that, by the year 2050, there will be nine to ten billion people on the planet, and it will be necessary to feed them on the basis of less farmland, less water, less energy (at least of the present kind), and fewer chemicals. Among other things, such population increases mean that the global per capita availability of fresh water is likely, in 2050, to be only about one-quarter of what it was in 1950; numbers of underground water aquifers, from the Americas to North Africa to the Middle East to north China, are declining. And from the late 1980s, the global food output increases that exceeded population growth after 1945 have begun to show signs of lagging behind them.²²

As Davis suggests, the rates of consumption of resources like grain or rice are affected by changes in class privilege, nationally and globally. The world could support a population of nine or ten billion people in 2050 if those people's grain consumption rates resemble present-day Indian ones, but only two and a half billion people if all of them consume grain at the rate of contemporary Americans. The presumed link between consumption rates and class privilege is hardly new. At the dawn of the industrial age, a thinker of some importance wrote that the society he knew best was endangering itself by food and clothing consumption rates that it could not sustain; what was needed was for the elite of this society to control themselves better, by practicing greater consumer restraint. The thinker in question, who sounds not unlike the contemporary American catastrophist Lester Brown, was actually Hong Liangji (1746–1809), a Chinese scholar official of the Qing dynasty. In the West, catastrophe theory can be traced back to the Bible; but perhaps its time has arrived.

Land-poor countries that can afford to do so are trying to stave off food supply crises by outsourcing their agriculture. Kuwait, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and the United Arab Emirates, but also South Korea and China, have bought or leased millions of hectares of arable land in such African countries as Madagascar, Zambia, and Mozambique to allow their agribusinesses to escape the consequences of dwindling farmland and real or potential water shortages at home. Outsourcing has an obvious resemblance to an old strategy of European colonialism. As early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, English advocates of the colonization of Ireland or Virginia saw such colonies as places for crop experimentation and for the export of “people poor and seditious.” Global modernity, as Arif Dirlik has argued, does not necessarily end colonialism so much as “deepen” and “reconfigure” it.²³

Agrarian catastrophe thinkers’ grim forebodings raise questions about more than just the future security of the human food supply. Also at stake is the future of a particular dream of convergence among the world’s peoples, a “positivist theory of modernization,” traceable to the eighteenth-century Western Enlightenment. This theory proposed that all civilizations would gradually adopt the same general, rational, scientific, and liberal thought that industrialization required and would see their own future evolution by looking into a Western mirror.²⁴ Just what would happen to those parts of the non-Western world that failed plausibly to see themselves in a Western mirror was left unclear. Western critics of this convergence doctrine, at least in the 1800s, tended to be racists. One London anthropological review in 1865, calling the Chinese people a “naturally non-progressive race,” claimed that they were utterly incapable of rising to Western standards of historical achievement.²⁵

After World War II, the economist Alexander Gerschenkron reinforced the convergence dream by arguing that “backward” countries could industrialize more rapidly than their Western prototypes by borrowing the more “advanced” countries’ technologies. Gerschenkron conceded that the backward countries would need a powerful “ideology of delayed industrialization” to make the pains of industrialization easier to accept, such as “Saint Simonianism” or Marxism.²⁶ Ironically, his own theory about the history-accelerating management of borrowed technology came, in many places, to take on aspects of such an encouraging ideology.

Now, however, innovative economists in China and elsewhere, for example Wen Tiejun, are concluding that the narrow thought of Western agricultural economics cannot guide the future of China’s 50,000 township governments, 700,000 administrative villages, and millions of surviving natural villages. Worse, the faith that it could inhibits a freer Chinese experimentation with new questions and answers concerning the future of farming.²⁷ If this is true, the world faces more than just the challenge of overcoming the global vested interests whose behavior threatens to create food shortages. It also faces the challenge of how to reorient human reasoning about economic development in the aftermath of the rise of the “planet of slums.”

Such a reorientation would obviously call into question the persistence of an arbitrary and prejudiced definition of what is “modern” in human evolution. This definition, as much extraeconomic as economic, predates the industrial revolution. Ever since the 1500s, Western thinking about evolution has usually defined “modern”

as being in a necessary opposition to all sorts of exotic nonmodern otherness, variously categorized as primitive, savage, Oriental, static, or underdeveloped. Unindustrialized farm producers with limited educations have, therefore, been readily conflated with aboriginals; both groups are seen as premodern anachronisms. (A French writer named Marie-Hélène Lafon illustrated this point perfectly in 2007, when she published a novel about France's remaining peasants, explicitly referring to them in the novel's title as "The Last Indians.")²⁸ The definition could be called an ideology even, in the sense that it confuses empirical truths with normative prescriptions and hides the violence it directs toward peasants behind a front of supposed objectivity.

But such a reorientation would also need critically to examine something else. That would be the nature of the global impact, including its unintended consequences, of a cult of managerialism, the supposed "management sciences." Ever since the American invention of that remarkable term "scientific management" about the year 1910, the world's expanding class of industrial and academic managers has had a vested interest in promoting the arbitrary and prejudiced definition of "modern" just mentioned. After World War II, the managers, both in Soviet bloc countries and in capitalist democracies, promoted the gospel of big farms, which were thought to lend themselves better to intensified techniques of farm mechanization that would economize the use of human labor. They had less interest in the obvious fact that people-land ratios differed greatly in Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America from those of the Euro-American developmental ideal.

Big farms are a manager's paradise. Small farms—especially small farming enterprises that are fragmented enough to allow the distribution of land to as many members of the community as possible—resist managers. They especially resist managers' passion for standardization, which the industrial revolution generated. Yet even W. Arthur Lewis, the great theorist of dualism, warned that small farms were not, from the view of modern economics, necessarily irrational. Small farmers cultivated the land more intensively than big farmers. They worked harder than hired agricultural workers. And by not requiring managers, they avoided wasteful conflicts between management and its employees.²⁹

ENDING THE PEASANTRY AS A MANAGERIAL DREAM

In the twentieth century, at least two different global conferences were planned simply to discuss the matter of how to get rid of "peasants" to embrace "modernity." The first conference was an imaginary one. But it was no less instructive for that. H. G. Wells, the British socialist and science fiction writer, dreamed it up in a 1930s book he wrote called *The Shape of Things to Come*. Wells said that his book was intended to be a short history of the future, from 1929 (the beginning of the world economic depression) to 2105. Wells predicted that the global "Hoover slump" would last from 1930 to 1960, causing the near collapse of many major Western institutions (Harvard University, for example, would degenerate into the condition of a medieval Tibetan lamastery, whose students would have to grow food and make clothes

for their teachers: a severe test of faculty-student relations). But Wells hoped that omniscient scientists and engineers, whom he favored, would finally triumph in the 1960s and would climax their victory by holding a conference in Basra, Iraq. Wells wrote that the purpose of this Basra conference should be to assemble “socialistic technicians” from all over the world, so that they could deal with the “primordial peasant civilization which had been the basis of all the barbaric civilizations of the past.” The conference would take up “the question of the expropriation of the peasant . . . at the point where Lenin and Stalin had laid it down, defeated.” Once peasants had been expropriated, a world state would emerge, Wells fantasized, that would be “socialistic, cosmopolitan, and creative.”³⁰

The second conference was actually held, in Babelsberg, East Germany in 1977. It amounted to something of a Soviet bloc version of Wells’s fictional Basra meeting. The members of this agricultural development conference were law professors and economists drawn from East Germany, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Vietnam, little more than a decade before the Soviet bloc disappeared. The conference stipulated that the basic principle of agricultural growth in socialist conditions was to bring the methods of industrial production to farming. Industry and agriculture should be integrated, through state-run agroindustrial management forms. This integration was not as simple as it seemed. The conference recognized that if industrial production methods were transposed to farming, typical industrial management questions that had previously been unimaginable in peasant villages would now have to be addressed. Questions such as, what sorts of wages should farming people be paid? How many hours of rest should their managers allow them? What types of recreation should they be permitted, and at what age should they be allowed to retire?

The 1977 conference concluded that the complex laws to cover these new questions, once farming was managed industrially, should be created by the councils of ministers of the Soviet bloc countries but in agreement with the ideas of the Soviet Union’s Ministry of Agriculture.³¹ Peasants scattered from eastern Europe to Vietnam’s Mekong Delta were therefore to be subject to a transcontinental legal monoculture, directed from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in which the notion that small food producers might make any creative contribution of their own to growing food, without managerial supervision, was not considered. Is this old Soviet bloc conference merely an eccentric memory from a failed and vanished world? Or is it a distorted funhouse mirror reflection of the world’s contemporary farming, with the legal monoculture of the World Trade Organization and its Codex Alimentarius Commission replacing that of the Soviet Ministry of Agriculture?

It is true that some economists have seen elite planners’ peasant bashing as little more than an intellectual mistake. In a classic work about the transformation of “traditional” agriculture, published in 1964, Theodore W. Schultz attacked his fellow economists’ assumption that one-quarter of the agricultural work force in low-income countries was redundant and should thus be available for urbanization at no cost except the costs of transfer. This “shaky” theory, Schultz wrote, originated in the “bad statistical estimates” generated by the dubious “game” of treating farming as if it

could be organized like industry, and thus offer its workers year-round employment, ten hours a day, with no regard for agriculture's peculiar seasonality.

For Schultz, this "game" had distorted elite understanding of farming as early as the global economic depression of the 1930s. Economists then had contrasted the spectacular mass unemployment they saw among Western industrial factory workers with the much less visible unemployment they saw among non-Western farming people. From this contrast, it was treacherously easy to conclude, Schultz wrote, that if non-Western peasants continued to work, at a time of mass industrial unemployment in the West itself, the farm work they were doing must have "a marginal productivity of zero value."³² Mistakes among Western economists are no laughing matter for the rest of the planet. As the specialists at a 2004 Hangzhou conference about farm management pointed out, the "central subjects of attention" of international agricultural economics are still chosen in the "developed countries" and then transmitted to researchers in the "developing world," more confirmation of Dirlik's theme of globalization as the reconfiguration of colonialism.³³

But stereotypical thought about peasants is not merely an intellectual mistake. And economists are as subject as everybody else, not just to their own "games" but to the influences of the value divisions in Western history, now spread to the rest of the world. Here, the crucial division between liberalism and socialism on the one hand, associated with Enlightenment Project rationalism and science worship, competes with romanticism and its modern derivatives, some of them pathological, on the other hand. For romanticism and its descendant movements, Enlightenment Project rationalism and the sciences that come with it may seem repressive and alienating.

Even Mike Davis's frightening book about the "planet of slums" belongs to a literary genre. It is the genre that treats the modern city as a sort of moral and economic cancer. In the 1800s, Fyodor Dostoyevsky pioneered the approach with his literary depiction of St. Petersburg as a planned monument to Enlightenment rationalism. Dostoyevsky saw it as a degenerate monument, whose streets were full of murderers, drunkards, and prostitutes. Another version of the capitalist city as cancerous, as a malignancy that devoured the countryside, might be found in T. S. Eliot's famous 1922 poem "The Waste Land."³⁴ Both Dostoyevsky and Eliot idealized the preindustrial agrarian order and what Davis revealingly and romantically calls its "subsistence solidarities." Unlike Davis, both also thought the solution to the horror of urbanization lay in a return to medieval religion, whether Russian Orthodoxy for Dostoyevsky or Anglo-Catholicism for Eliot. That was because—as the British scholar Raymond Williams put it in a classic work in 1973—such writers were predisposed to attribute the loss of meaning, as capitalist urbanization spread, to the loss of God.³⁵ How, then, do we distinguish between important wake-up calls of Davis's type, to save our slum-ridden periurbanized planet, and the literary genre of the capitalist city as hell, which rules out the possibility that some peasants at least might want to escape the countryside and move to the cities?

The confusion between developmental economics and ideology worsened in the twentieth century. Fascists, communists, and capitalist utopians pushed the old disagreements about the Enlightenment Project beyond all previous limits. Fascism