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Peasant-driven agricultural growth and food sovereignty
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The concept of food sovereignty presents us with an important theoretical and practical challenge. The political economy of agriculture can only take up this gauntlet through improving its understanding of the processes of agricultural growth. It is very difficult to address the issue of food sovereignty without such an understanding. Developing such an understanding involves (re)combining the political economy of agriculture with the Chayanovian approach. This paper gives several explanations (all individually valid but stronger in combination) as to why peasant agriculture results in sturdy and sustainable growth and also identifies the factors that undermine this capacity. The paper also argues that peasant agriculture is far from being a remnant of the past. While different peasantries around the world are shaped and reproduced by today’s capital (and more specifically by current food empires), they equally help to shape and contribute to the further unfolding of the forms of capital related to food and agriculture. It is important to understand this two-way interaction between capital and peasant agriculture as this helps to ground the concept of food sovereignty. The article argues that the capacity to produce enough food (at different levels, distinguishing different needs, and so on) needs to be an integral part of the food sovereignty discourse. It concludes by suggesting that peasant agriculture has the best potential for meeting food sovereignty largely because it has the capacity to produce (more than) sufficient good food for the growing world population and that it can do so in a way that is sustainable.

Keywords: peasant agriculture; food sovereignty; intensification of land use; San Nong

Introduction
Food matters. It rallies people and it often induces unexpected changes in society. Food is contested and can be the object of ‘food wars’ (Lang and Heasman 2004). Food shortages and food riots show that the quantity and availability of food do matter to people, just as food scandals and associated scares make clear that the quality of food also concerns people a lot. Abruptly imposed limitations on exports in some major food-exporting countries and scarcities (or at least the fear of them) have once again put the origin of food production on the agenda: where does our food come from and how secure is its supply? Of equal importance are questions of whom and how: what is the identity of the producers and what is their style of farming? These questions cover a wide range of

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issues that include gender relations, food safety, animal welfare and the attractiveness and accessibility of the countryside.

While there are a number of urgent questions that concern consumers, the same is also true for the producers of food. These questions emerge from, and contribute to, diverging agricultural development trajectories. They include what is to be produced, by whom, for whom and where, how, under what conditions, who gets the benefits and what is done with these benefits? Some food producers are arriving at solutions that are quite at odds with the conventional wisdom and this is leading them to structure their farms differently. At the same time new coalitions with consumers are emerging (e.g. farmers producing for local peasant markets and consumers who prefer zero-miles food, and so on).

Questions about the direction, nature and impact of agricultural development are also disputed at national and international levels. The questions being asked include: how, and to what extent, can agriculture contribute to economic growth; how can it increase employment, contribute to the generation of income and, consequently, strengthen the domestic market; and how can it contribute to the preservation of landscapes, cultural heritage, the maintenance of biodiversity and counteract climate change? A short glimpse at the agenda of say the Committee of World Food Security (CFS) of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations quickly shows how multidimensional the current food question is (see, for example, HLPE 2013).

All this clearly indicates that there are serious misgivings among producers, consumers, national and international communities, about the efficacy of ‘the market’ as a co-ordinating principle. There is widespread concern about the outcomes that result from the ‘free’ functioning of today’s markets for agricultural and food products (Weis 2010).

In this context the notion of food sovereignty (FS) is emerging as a strategic counterpoint. Food sovereignty is coming to be seen as a far better guiding principle for the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food than the market. FS is, as yet, not completely crystallized. It is more of a concept ‘under construction’. One of the most prominent features of this process of construction is the central involvement of grass root organizations (International Commission 2013). Despite its ‘infancy’, FS shows the potential for becoming an overarching concept that is capable of strongly mobilizing people around the world. This is largely because it shows the promise of integrating a wide range of issues, including the quality, quantity, availability and origin of food, the identity of the producers and the style of farming. Food sovereignty offers food producers the prospect of regaining their dignity and improving their livelihoods. Another strength of FS is that it promises to address, in a coherent way, different levels, including those of national and international communities. The concept might also contribute to a rethinking of agriculture’s role in wider issues such as the nature and rhythm of economic growth, levels of employment, climate change, etc.

The concept of food sovereignty, as it has been developed so far, is also important in that it (1) helps to build bridges between urban consumers and farmers; (2) triggers active food democracy by inviting and stimulating local actors to co-design their food

1The notion of counterpoint has been developed by Wertheim (1974), who linked it to the genesis and growth of social movements. A counterpoint is a value, probably not yet very explicit, that contrasts with the dominant values and can become the starting point of a process of contestation. The term originally stems from music, where a counterpoint signals the beginning of a new rhythm or a new melody.
systems; (3) strengthens (as opposed to atomizing) social relations; (4) helps reduce the insecurity, instability, volatility and dependency created by global commodity markets; and (5) helps agricultural producers to pursue more agroecological production methods.\(^2\)

This paper explores one of the many aspects of the notion of FS: the interrelation between agricultural development and FS. I specifically ask what type of agricultural growth best fits with FS? This question does not just concern the quantities of food produced – but also affects issues of food quality, democracy, sustainability and resilience.

The dominant discourse (‘we need to double world food production’) increasingly translates the need for agricultural growth into a programme centred on capital and technology. This can only lead to a further industrialization of agricultural production processes and also assumes a continuation of existing dietary patterns. These two phenomena are almost seamlessly interwoven with the current food regime. Yet it is obvious that such a programme is intrinsically unsustainable (Tittonell 2013). It will result in the opposite of what it claims or pretends it will achieve. However, in rejecting such a programme, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The banner of agricultural growth (and associated themes such as rural poverty, food prices and food distribution) should not exclusively belong to the dominant discourse. Such questions are not a ‘nettles that FS prefers to avoid’ (Bernstein 2013, 25). When re-thought, re-modelled and re-dimensioned, such issues can play an integral and coherent part in the FS discourse. Attention to production and growth does not imply that issues such as redistribution, a reduction of losses, changes in dietary patterns and bio-energy are of secondary importance. A focus on the former will strengthen the latter. However, to adequately address food production and agricultural growth some obstacles need to be removed.

Some obstacles to understanding the concept of food sovereignty

The political economy of agriculture and food, as it stands today, critically lacks a set of concepts (a sub-theory) for studying, analysing and explaining processes of agricultural growth. In this respect there is an ‘intellectual deficit’ (Bernstein 2010, 300). I think this deficit resides in a series of conceptual handicaps that together have far-reaching consequences that cannot be remedied simply by resetting some of ‘the limits of inherited conceptions’ (Bernstein 2010, 300). I briefly discuss some of these handicaps below. These relate to the type and origins of agricultural growth, as well as the level on which it is realized.

First, we have to take into account that agriculture needs to be understood as co-production, i.e. the ongoing interaction, intertwinement and mutual transformation of humanity and living nature. Consequently, concepts such as growth, development, productivity and increases in productivity cannot be reduced, without a clear specification, to notions that reflect just one side of the complex mechanics of agriculture. For example, when talking about productivity it is crucial to specify whether one is referring to labour productivity, the productivity of land (or, more generally, the productivity of the natural resources implied in the agricultural process of production) or the productivity of all these resources taken together (i.e. total factor productivity). This is important, especially since these different types of productivity are not necessarily aligned with each other. Increases in one type

\(^2\)I am strongly indebted to Olivier de Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, who introduced these points in his opening address of the Yale Conference on Food Sovereignty, held on 14–15 September 2013 at Yale University.
might very well be detrimental for another. The same applies to growth. Agricultural growth may result in an increase of the total amount of food and other agricultural products being produced (this notably occurs when the agricultural frontier moves forward and/or when physical yields are improved, i.e. when the productivity of land is increased). But agricultural growth might equally occur alongside a stagnation or even a reduction of the total amount being produced (this is the case when growth mainly or solely materializes as increases in labour productivity and associated increases in profits). It goes without saying that the trajectory that agricultural growth (or the development of productive forces) takes is crucial for any debate about food sovereignty. This point highlights a major weakness of agrarian political economy. As pointed out by Bernstein (2010, 302), attention is generally strongly focused on ‘increases in the productivity of labour’ (emphasis added) and ‘economies of scale’, and the latter are thought to be the only possible vehicle for attaining the former. Thus, when the debates on food sovereignty (and the need to greatly increase the total amount of food being produced on the global level) raise the issue of the specific agricultural development trajectory (i.e. the form or type of agricultural growth), it is clear that the political economy of agriculture is particularly ill-equipped for addressing this new and major issue.

The concept of land productivity is complex and difficult to define and measure. The choice of one measure (say money) may favour the capitalist farm, while the use of another (say calories) may favour the peasant farm. In the most general sense, land productivity refers to the wealth produced per unit of land. This of course critically depends on the perception of social wealth. Does it just refer to the marketed production or does it include production that is re-used in the farm (or consumed by the farming family and/or shared with others who assisted in the harvest and/or left for those who come to reap remnants and leftovers)? Is it expressed in monetary terms or in terms of gross or net nutritional content produced per hectare? How to include the heat produced by cattle (in many parts of the world this is used for heating the peasant’s house)? Often physical yields (e.g. production per hectare in kilogram) are used as a measure to assess the levels of, and differences in, land productivity. Under ceteris paribus conditions this might be adequate; mostly, however, there are structural differences that make such straightforward comparisons misleading. In smallholdings, mixed cropping is the rule (the

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3 Increases in labour productivity may run counter to increases in land productivity (although this is not necessarily the case). Equally, increases in land productivity may translate into increased or decreased labour productivity. The specific combinations have varied historically and geographically (Hayami and Ruttan 1985) and their effects depend strongly on prevailing politico-economic conditions. Important examples are discussed in Geertz (1963).

4 Although this is not necessarily the case. There may be negative feed-back effects, such as increased production in one place triggering marginalization somewhere else.

5 Excluding some worthy recent contributions, especially from political ecology (e.g. Jansen, 1998; Feuer, 2012).

6 This raises the question of what is to be done. Asking this question does not preclude us from asking equally important questions such as where, and how and by whom this is to be done. In reality the ‘what’ question presumes the other questions. One characteristic of the hegemonic discourse is that it does not pay much attention to the questions of how, where and by whom. The hegemonic discourse simply translates the need to increase food production into the need for more capital investment and more patentable scientific innovation.

7 But even then the devil might be in the detail. When different varieties of the same crop are used, small but important differences might be overlooked, making the comparison unsatisfactory. Compared with peasant agriculture, large scale farms often use varieties that have a higher water content, which contributes to higher yields. A further difference might be that in peasant agriculture
Mexican *milpa* being exemplary for its biophysical and nutritional value), in large holdings monocultures dominate. For each single crop, then, the yield might be lower in the smallholder plot. However, when all crops are taken together and assessed in calories or in energy units then one hectare with mixed cropping might render far higher results than one hectare of specialized farming. This means that if a high-yield corn monoculture displaces a traditional milpa landscape, the yield goes up, but the productivity of the land goes down. The time dimension should also be taken into account. Over time the productivity of single monoculture crops may decline greatly (due to an exhaustion of natural resources). However, this effect might remain invisible when input use is continuously increased or production is relocated to, as yet, unexhausted areas. It goes without saying that all these complexities can considerably complicate the debate on the ‘inverse relationship’ (which I will briefly address later in this text). In this paper I will use yields as the main, though not the only, yardstick, but I do so with all required precautions.

Secondly, political economy basically perceives agricultural growth (in whatever form) as being a *derivate* of processes of technological development that originate in science and which are transmitted towards the agricultural sector through extension and/or the activities of agro-industries. Thus, the origins of growth are considered to be exogenous to the agricultural sector: they reside elsewhere. By the same token, factors *internal* to the agricultural sector are seen as impeding growth, or even blocking it completely. Examples of such thinking include assumptions about the ‘backwardness of peasants’, the nature of intra-sectoral relations (e.g. the *latifundio-minifundio* complex), the relations between a large-scale agro-export sector and a subsistence sector that contributes to ‘structural involution’ (Geertz 1963), the urban bias that shapes agrarian policies (Lipton 1977) and the ‘law of diminishing returns’. Such views reduce the perceived role of farmers to that of *adopting* technological progress developed elsewhere and embodied in specific commodities being supplied by upstream agro-industries and/or in new insights and ideas propagated by rural extensionists. Their only role in this *schema* is to slow down and minimize the potential for growth by being uncooperative in realizing the potentials entailed in the technologies that have been designed for them to adopt. Hence, just as we need to introduce the centrality of *land productivity* into the current debate, we also have to introduce (and to theoretically substantiate) the possibility that farmers *themselves* may very well develop the ‘productive forces’ – as they have done throughout the ages (Mazoyer and Roudart 2006).

A third handicap resides in the complex micro-macro relations that characterize the agricultural sector. Single units of production (located at the micro-level) might grow considerably, whilst the agricultural sector as a whole (the macro level) stagnates or even regresses. This might occur when, for example, the expansion (or growth) of these single units occurs through the take-over of other units that have higher levels of land productivity. This may appear to be, at first sight, an irrelevant technicality. However, it is at the core of the food sovereignty issue. It is also critically related to

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stalks, leaves, and even the roots might be considered as the relevant part of total production, whilst in large scale farming only the kernels count.

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8That is, increases in the productivity of natural resources which simultaneously translate into increases in labour productivity. Following Hayami and Ruttan (1985) this trajectory is often referred to as the ‘Asian model’ (as opposed to the ‘American model’). The trajectory of agricultural development in China, over the last 40 years, highlights the potentials of this ‘Asian model’ – which is far from exhausted. Recent developments in China are discussed later in this paper.
the land grabbing issue. To clarify this point it is important to recognize that being embedded in (and subordinated to the overall logic of) capitalism does not imply that all agriculture is capitalist agriculture. In capitalist agriculture all the resources, including the labour force, are commodified: the heart of the process of production is based on capital-labour relations. Alongside this model there is peasant agriculture (producing commodities for the downstream markets, but grounded on low levels of commoditization of the main resources) and entrepreneurial agriculture (grounded on a far-reaching commoditization of the main resources, but not of the labour force). Generally, peasant farms have lower levels of total production (for the farm as a whole) than entrepreneurial and capitalist farms. This is largely due to them being of a far smaller scale, but is also related to differences in their internal logic. However, when looking at land productivity – the most important lens from the perspective of environmental sustainability – peasant farms generally achieve higher levels of production per unit of land than capitalist or entrepreneurial farms. This translates into more wealth (more value added) being generated per labour object (per hectare, per animal, etc.) in peasant agriculture than in entrepreneurial or capitalist agriculture. This is also the case because the cost structures are different and the differences would be even more pronounced if the externalized costs of different farming systems were accounted for. If considerable portions of peasant agriculture are taken over by expanding entrepreneurial and/or capitalist units of production (or swallowed up by newly created units), then the expanding or newly created units may record a considerable growth in production, but the agricultural sector as a whole might experience a decline – because the high level of land productivity achieved by the peasant units has been replaced by the lower levels achieved by the entrepreneurial and capitalist farms. This is precisely what has occurred in Europe over recent decades, where the reallocation of milk quotas from small and low cost peasant units towards large, entrepreneurial farms led to the total income (realized with these quotas) declining by at least 21 percent (van der Ploeg 2003, 307, 2008, 123). Similar shifts from peasant to entrepreneurial agriculture are now being envisioned as the way forward for the Global South (as will be discussed later).

Historically, differences in land productivity have been central in the debate on what is known as the ‘inverse relationship’. This debate focuses on two interrelated questions. First, is there an empirical relation that runs from highly intensive smallholder agriculture to extensive, large scale agriculture? Second, can such a difference, if it exists, be

9This point of view has been largely absent in Anglo Saxon peasant studies, but has had an influence on the political economy of agriculture and the views of the radical left elsewhere. In the Mediterranean area this point of view was widely accepted and developed as early as the 1930s and 1940s. Emilio Sereni, one of the organic intellectuals closely related to the Italian peasantry, noted in his thoughts developed in the years of armed resistance that ‘for peasant producers [resources such as] manure are to be considered as a means of production, and not as capital’ (Sereni 1956, 76). ‘Manure is produced within the farm and it is normally re-used within the farm without circulating in the market – hence, it never assumes the form of a commodity’ (Sereni 1956, 75). He also noted that: ‘a further proliferation of the commodity nature of agriculture occurs through and implies a growing dependency on the market’ (Sereni 1956, 77).

10I consider peasant agriculture to be an expression of Petty Commodity Production (PCP), and entrepreneurial agriculture as an expression of Simple Commodity Production (SCP).

11For a recent contribution see Larson et al. (2012). Whether or not peasant agriculture can unfold its productive potentials greatly depends, as I will argue in the following section, on politico-economic conditions and the nature of technologies. It is not an ontological issue: it is time, as I will argue later, to move the debate beyond the ‘inverse relationship’.
translated into calls for egalitarian land reform that redistributes land from large holdings to landless people and smallholders? There have been some excellent contributions to both these questions. These range from the pioneering studies of the Comité Interamericano de Desarrollo Agrícola (highlighted in CIDA 1966 and 1973 and summarized in Feder 1973), via the meticulous synthesis of Berry and Cline (1979), to the recent work of Larson et al. (2012). By contrast Sender and Johnston (2004) and Woodhouse (2010) argue that much of the observed inverse relationship is the result of misinterpretation and that redistribution of the land to smallholders would have highly negative consequences.

The debate on the ‘inverse relationship’ clearly intersects with the current debates on food sovereignty and the possible contribution of peasant agriculture. The problem with the historical debate is that it has frequently evolved into polarized and fixed positions that imbue the different sides of the equation with ontological properties. One camp has attributed peasant agriculture with an intrinsic superiority. The opposite position views peasant farming as intrinsically backwards. The dialectical relation between reality and potentiality (between ‘what-is’ and ‘what-can-be’) has been neglected by both camps. Equally, the social relations of production have generally been ignored: relatively little attention has been paid to questions of what makes one form of farming more productive than others at some times (and less productive at other times)?

The current hegemonic discourse proposes the need for ‘small’ and ‘large farms’ (read peasant and corporate farms) to coexist alongside each other (e.g. IFAD 2010). The need to greatly increase total food production is used to argue that both ‘small’ and ‘large’ units need room to develop and to contribute, as much as possible, to ‘feeding the world’. In reality, this proposed ‘coexistence’ legitimates a situation in which entrepreneurial and capitalist farms are crowding peasant farms out of the market. As a consequence, the growth of total production (at the macro level) is slowing down. This runs diametrically counter to food sovereignty. Hence, a conceptual framework is needed to deal adequately with the complex relations between the micro and macro level and the associated aggregation problems.

These three handicaps jointly lead to one central conclusion: the political economy of agriculture fails to positively identify the factors located within the agricultural sector itself that induce, sustain and/or strengthen (and thus explain) the process of agricultural growth. Equally, it fails to provide the conceptual tools needed to distinguish and explain different levels of agricultural growth. This applies to both capitalist and peasant agriculture – the two realities on which the political economy of agriculture centres most of its attention. And it is particularly applicable when we take into account relations with nature and the possibility of drawing on agroecology. While the search for profits (increasing the return on investments) is central to capitalist agriculture, this does not result per se in steady and ongoing increases of total agricultural production, since this search may well involve a relentless exploitation of man and nature. It is neither clear (nor theoretically explained) why this search for profits sometimes goes in one direction (increasing yields, for instance), and at other times, in a different one (e.g. increases in scale). The same applies to peasant agriculture: there is no capacity to theoretically explain how, when, why, under what conditions and to what degree peasant agriculture can materially engage in enlarging the total amount of food (and other agricultural products) being produced. To date, the political economy of agriculture has failed to theoretically explain the (potential) sustainability of peasant farming compared with the often destructive mechanics of capitalist farming. Equally it has, as yet, not elaborated the conceptual instruments that can positively identify the factors that make peasant agriculture more capable of sustaining growth and thus
contributing to the rising needs of a growing world population that is increasingly located in large metropolises.

Five reasons that explain the productive potential of peasant agriculture – and how its materialization is sometimes frustrated

Growth is intrinsic to peasant agriculture (but it can get blocked)

Peasant farms tend to continuously and persistently expand their production. Creativity, long-term experimentations, aggregated knowledge and its exchange through extended networks result in yield increases, more intensive cropping schemes, improved soil management, etc. The search for emancipation meant to improve their own livelihood and that of the next generation, translates into, and partly occurs through, continuous and persistent increases in total production. Peasant agriculture is not only a system for value creation; it is also a system that tends to permanently enlarge the amount of created value.

Peasant farms develop their production because this is the way in which they can fulfill their emancipatory aspirations. The mechanisms on which peasant-driven agricultural growth is grounded basically come down to a continual upgrading of the natural and social resources used for agricultural production and a constant improvement in the ‘technical efficiency’ of the process of production. The latter means that the ratio between resources used and production realized increases: i.e. the input-output ratio is improved.

Craftsmanship, peasant knowledge and the quality of the resources are the decisive factors here.

Although, under specific conditions, peasants may acquire the property of some of their neighbours, systematic take-overs of the land and other resources are not part of peasant communities and they do not generally figure in processes of peasant-driven agricultural growth. Thus, growth at the level of the single peasant farms translates positively into agricultural growth at the macro level, i.e. into an increased supply of food (and other agricultural products). This represents a strategic difference with entrepreneurial agriculture, where growth occurs as much through take-overs as through technological progress. This means that the individual agricultural enterprise may expand considerably, but that in the sector as a whole growth can be zero (or even negative). The same also applies to capitalist farming: the aim of which is to achieve increases in the rate of return, which could even translate into extensiﬁcation.

In order to be able to develop production at the farm level peasant families need the means and the ‘space’ (Halamska 2004) to do so. Space refers to the politico-economic room needed to successfully develop production and translate the results back into an effective improvement of one’s own livelihood. More speciﬁcally, we can conceptualize this space as being

12 Later in this text I characterize such elements as being part of the constructive capacity of the peasantry.
13 Improved livelihoods, improved prospects to face difficult circumstances whenever these emerge, more opportunities for the children, more cattle and especially ‘beautifully bred’ animals that will enlarge the status of their owner, abundant amounts of high quality seed to exchange with others, etc.
14 ‘Technical efﬁciency’ (see Yotopoulos 1974 for an extended discussion), is a widely used concept in agrarian sciences. However, it critically overlooks the dimension of time. It would be better, therefore, to use a notion as ‘ecological efﬁciency’ that includes the sustainability of resource-use.
15 Evidently, the possibilities for take-overs depend very much on the economic and institutional environment in which farms are located. The same applies for proﬁt-maximization and the way it relates to total output at farm level.
composed of the reigning social relations of (and in) production. If the means and space are available an ongoing (if not persistent) agricultural growth will be the outcome. However, peasant-driven agricultural growth might also slow down, get blocked or even be reversed. This will usually be due to external reasons which, on the whole, have been very well documented and analysed in agrarian political economy. But regression might be also be triggered by internal reasons, i.e. highly authoritarian relations between fathers and sons (as beautifully exemplified in the novel of Giovanni Ledda about Padre Padrone (1975)) which may provoke the desertion of young men. Oppressive gender relations (often coupled with religious fundamentalism) may have similar effects: they cause mothers to advise their daughters ‘to marry anyone other than a peasant’. In many rural parts of the Mediterranean area this has led to considerable social desertification. Exploitative gender relations can also lead to very negative connotations about farming among women, as in many African examples of women doing the farm labour and men controlling the farm income (de Schutter 2013).

Thus far I have identified sets of elements that respectively regard: the translation of emancipatory aspirations into increased levels of production; the mechanisms that materially allow for and sustain such increases and the required space (and means, etc.) to effectively do so. I will now briefly illustrate each of these sets. By developing them further I think that they can constitute the basis of the much needed theory to explain agricultural growth (especially the peasant driven type). Such a theory would also contribute to further strengthening the food sovereignty discourse.

The best possible way to theorize the translation of emancipatory aspirations into increases in production (i.e. to understand resistance and cultural repertoire as drivers of agricultural production) is to seriously re-examine the work that A.V. Chayanov did in the early twentieth Century (Chayanov 1966). The nucleus of this work is illustrated in Figure 1. The uninterrupted lines represent ‘utility’, i.e. the possibility to satisfy needs and aspirations (this utility diminishes per unit of product as the total level of production grows) and ‘drudgery’, i.e. the energy and hardship needed to realize a particular level of production (this drudgery increases with the further growth of total production). At point E1 the two lines are in equilibrium. This point determines the level of production P1. Now, if utility is enlarged beyond the immediate consumption needs of the family (for example to include the creation of a more productive farm that is more able to meet the needs of the farming family), a new utility curve is defined (the dotted line), leading to the establishment of a new equilibrium (E2) and, consequently, a new level of production (P2). This allows the family farm to move beyond satisfying its members’ immediate consumption needs, and to engage, for instance, in capital formation (i.e. creating the ingredients of the more productive farm). Thus, the aspiration for emancipation translates into, and occurs through, enlarged production and material improvements to the resource base. This might also result from a redefinition of drudgery. A farmer knowing that his or her current production might open up the possibility, in the near future, of working according to an improved balance, will probably find the drudgery as less burdening and troublesome. Thus, a new ‘drudgery line’ emerges that defines a new equilibrium and corresponding level of production. It is also possible that utility and drudgery might both be perceived differently, creating the possibility of E3 and P3.

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16 Here there is an interesting link with the earlier work of Chayanov. The development of productive forces, including substantial yield increases, often will require new, additional space. In this respect Chayanov (1988, 142) argued that increases in yields de facto require ‘new relations of production’.

17 This is just one balance taken out of a far wider series of balances (both internal and external to the peasant farm) that are discussed in van der Ploeg (2013).
In everyday life, complexities such as the ones shown in Figure 1 are governed through cultural repertoires (consisting of values, norms, shared beliefs and experiences, collective memory, rules of thumb, etc.) that specify recommended responses to different situations. Put differently: the active assessment and re-assessments of ‘Chayanovian’ balances involve judgements based in the moral economy (Scott 1976). These are decisive. The moral economy is not external to the ‘economic machine’: it is essential to the ‘machine’s’ performance.

From an analytical point of view, the mechanisms used to enlarge production at the farm level, and which contribute to increase net productivity per unit of land\(^1\) come down to the following:

- The application of more working hours, more inputs and improved tools\(^2\) per object of labour (i.e. per unit of land, per animal, per fruit tree, etc.).
- The fine-tuning of the agricultural process of production (i.e. bringing different growth factors in line). This involves experience, constant observation and interpretation, local knowledge, etc.
- The systematic improvement of resources (especially the objects of labour): augmenting soil fertility, building irrigation and drainage systems, breeding better cows, selecting plants to obtain higher yielding varieties, strengthening the complementarity between species, making better manure, building new and better buildings, obtaining more knowledge, joining existing or creating new networks, etc.
- Innovativeness, i.e. the searching for and development of new insights, new practices, new seeds, new machinery, etc. Here, goal-oriented experimentation, an

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\(^1\)For Chayanov (1988, 144) the increase of yields was part of the ‘development of productive forces’; he perceived yield increases as ‘a progressive phenomenon’.

\(^2\)The latter two, inputs and tools, are often summarized and presented as (part of) ‘capital’. This is acceptable as long as one recognizes that we are not talking here about capital in the Marxist sense.
open eye for deviations and an overall ordering of the farm as a ‘patchwork’, allowing for unexpected interactions and surprises, are important prerequisites.

- A specific calculus that moves peasant agriculture to yield levels that are higher than the ones that result from, and are compatible with, the search for the highest rate of return that characterizes entrepreneurial and, especially, capitalist agriculture.

Together these mechanisms result in and sustain continual increases in land productivity (and as an effect of this, labour productivity may rise as well). These mechanisms are central (although not exclusive) to peasant-driven agricultural growth. In other trajectories (e.g. entrepreneurial agriculture), other mechanisms (such as the integral application of exogenous technological models – exemplified by the Green Revolution package – and the take-over of neighbouring farms) are central, whilst the working time per object of labour is typically reduced and the ‘chaos’ needed for novelty production is avoided. Technologies that strongly increase labour productivity and which standardize as much as possible the labour process are at the heart of the dynamics of capitalist agriculture (Weis 2007). Thus, different technologies are developed and used (as convincingly discussed by Bray 1986) and the productive forces (land, labour, knowledge, animals, machineries) implied in each constellation are moulded in concrete phenomena that are distinctively different (van der Ploeg 2008).

In order to translate the longing for an improved livelihood through the indicated mechanisms into increased production (that renders more value added, which will help to satisfy a greater range of needs), peasants need the means and space to do so. It is here that the political economy of agriculture, as it stands today, is important. To put it bluntly, if nearly all the extra value that results from yield increases is taxed or appropriated by others, there is little sense in strongly developing production (to engage in, for example, the drudgery of improving soil fertility). If the flow of water is diverted by landlords or neighbouring corporate farms, the search for improved plant varieties becomes pointless. The same applies to the means. If farm gate prices are so low that no savings can be generated (and banks are unwilling to provide credit on acceptable terms) then the means to acquire diesel, or a tractor, or to have the old tractor repaired, are lacking. A lack of space and scarcity of means often go together: an increased volatility in markets (and insecurity about demand) is likely to translate into negative prospects that do not justify the peasant investing in the farm.

Taking these different arguments and considerations together we can conclude that peasant agriculture contributes more (just as it potentially can contribute far more in the decades to come) to total agricultural growth and, consequently, to the provision of food, than other mode of agricultural production. However, this only applies if, and when, sufficient space and means are available. If the required space and means are lacking, this potential for growth and increased supplies of food becomes blocked.  

China is an intriguing, albeit contradictory, example of peasant-driven agricultural growth. Here the peasantry has been re-establishing itself since the beginning of the 1980s and has achieved impressive agricultural development (Gulati and Fan 2007).

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20Collectivization is one of the most drastic mechanisms for reducing, if not completely eliminating, such space. The prominent communist peasant leader and intellectual Emilio Sereni wondered ‘whether the productive structures of soviet agriculture, just as the ones of other socialist countries, always and everywhere contribute to the dynamic requirements of the productive forces in agriculture’ (Sereni 1967).
During this period China has witnessed an impressive reduction of poverty, and agricultural production has continuously grown. This is in stark contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, which has seen a stagnation of agricultural production and an absolute increase of people living on or below the 1 dollar a day poverty level (see Li Xiaojun et al. 2012). Although some aspects of China’s agricultural growth are highly problematic (e.g. the elevated use of chemical fertilizers, the rise of ‘pig factories’ and the soaring importation of soy beans as discussed in Schneider 2011 and Weis 2013), peasant driven growth is the main driver of rural development in China (Ye et al. 2010). The centrality of peasant agriculture also defies the models used in the West (be it the neo-classical or the ones of the radical left) to explain the presumed backwardness of peasant agriculture. Previously, the question of ‘Who will feed China’ (Brown 1995) was widely discussed in the West. The answer is now abundantly clear. So far it has been the nong min, the peasants from China and they are doing a remarkably good job of it (van der Ploeg et al. submitted). To understand and explain this impressive result, we have to build a better understanding of peasant-driven agriculture into our theories.21

**Peasant agriculture embodies resilience (although in the end it may be broken)**

Peasant farms are often located in remote, inhospitable or marginal areas that are completely unattractive to entrepreneurial and capitalist farms.22 They also often face difficulties and adverse conditions and are able to continue to produce when the others have long before capitulated.23 In short: peasant farms are far more resilient and more shockproof than capitalist and/or entrepreneurial farms. This makes them a far better vehicle for guaranteeing food sovereignty than other modes of agricultural production.

The resilience of peasant farming is due to the way it is structurally rooted in wider society. Peasant farms are essentially grounded on natural and social resources that are controlled by the peasant unit itself. They are relatively autonomous from the main upstream markets (van der Ploeg 2010) – a feature that is currently being strongly promoted by agroecological and peasant movements. This structural feature allows peasant farms to produce for the markets, without being completely dependent on them. In terms of food sovereignty this is a strategic feature. By contrast, entrepreneurial and capitalist farms are to a large extent, or even completely, grounded on commodities. Consequently, they are run as a financial operation. They are basically about getting money in order to acquire the needed resources, which are transformed into products to be sold. Entrepreneurial and capitalist farming are essentially about converting money into more money and often degrade the foundations of production in the process. This is in sharp contrast to peasant farms that use the available, self-owned and controlled, natural and social resources for production and

21The argument that peasant agriculture has considerable developmental potential is also supported by the Brazilian and India experiences (Schneider and Niederle 2010, Cunningham 2009). Other important cases are cotton in West Africa (Tschirley et al. 2010), rice in Vietnam (Jaffee et al. 2012) and specific groups of Africa’s rural poor (Hazell 2004, Fraser 2009)

22As for example in the inhospitable baldios in the North of Portugal, the tropical rice polders in Western Africa (locally called bolanhas) or, more generally, the hilly and mountainous pasture lands in considerable parts of the world. Not only is it too costly (too labour intensive) for capitalist and entrepreneurial farms to operate here, they also cannot exert sufficient control (let alone control-at-a-distance). ‘The art of not being governed’ (Scott 2009) perfectly describes this incompatibility of control and peasant farming in complex and difficult eco-systems.

23Europe witnessed this during the agricultural crises of the 1880s and the 1930s (Bieleman 2010).
then sell the marketable surplus to obtain money. If the benefits of operating an entrepreneurial or capitalist farm turn out to be lower than the costs, the farm enterprise will be deactivated – if possible.\textsuperscript{24} By contrast in such a situation the peasant farm will resolutely continue.

Volatility is inherent in the world market for food and agricultural products, the more so as this market comes to be increasingly controlled by food empires. This volatility is generating a new set of unexpected effects.

Recently Oostindie et al. (2013) analysed the 2007–2010 period for a constant sample of 1000 dairy farms taken from a data set of all dairy farms maintained by Alfa, one of the agencies responsible for elaborating farm accountancy records. The data describe the farms, their economic structure and performance over time. In the second half of 2008 and in the first half of 2009 all these farms faced a dramatic decrease of the prices paid for the milk, from an average level of some 35 to less than 25 €/100 kg of milk. However, the impacts of this sudden shock were highly differentiated. Some farms could absorb this shock relatively easy. In 2009, 25 percent of the farms showed an average margin between benefits and costs of $+14.55 \text{€}/100$ kg of milk: others faced a negative cash flow, with 25 percent having an average margin of $−9.70 \text{€}/100$ kg of milk.

The authors identified the group that was able to fare reasonably well through the period of low milk prices as peasant-like farms, whilst the group that experienced negative cash flows showed the features of entrepreneurial agriculture. The first group was far more multi-functional than the second: their farms did not depend on one single market but had diversified. Equally, the peasant farms were, on average, smaller than the entrepreneurial ones; they used less external inputs and invested less in new technologies: their level of depreciation was 5.61 €/100 kg of milk as opposed to 14.25 for the entrepreneurial farms. Finally, the peasant farms were far less indebted: they paid 2.19 €/100 kg milk as interest on loans versus €7.15 for the entrepreneurial farms.\textsuperscript{25} In normal years (with good milk prices) the peasant farms realized family incomes more or less equal to those of the (larger) entrepreneurial farms. In bad years (2008 and 2009) however, they were the only ones with a positive income while the entrepreneurial farms were confronted with a negative income. The latter were unable to meet their obligations to the banks and other providers, the more so since they hardly had any reserves.

This huge problem was resolved by the banks who decided to refinance the debts and to provide additional credit to resolve the most immediate concerns. However, in 2012, volatility hit again. This time this was not due to a decrease in milk prices but a consequence of sharp and substantial increases in the prices for feed, fodder, energy and fertilizers. In the meantime banks faced the need to recapitalize themselves as formalized in the Basel III agreements. Consequently, it was no longer possible for them to refinance debts in 2012 and many large dairy farms had to be de-activated. They are currently for sale.

The study by Oostindie et al. (2013) highlights an important reversal and shows a range of unexpected effects that might occur on a wider scale in the future, which could have serious consequences for food sovereignty. For a long time it has been thought that

\textsuperscript{24}It might be possible that delivery contracts or obligations towards the banks coerce the farm to continue anyway.

\textsuperscript{25}The highest liabilities-to-assets ratio was found in farms in Denmark and the Netherlands, with 56\% and 36\% respectively’ (European Commission 2010, 4). The total debts of Dutch farmers amount to some €38 billion. This is roughly 19 times as high as the sector’s total yearly income. Debts are distributed in a highly unequal way – the highest levels (both absolutely and relatively) are found in the entrepreneurial pole of Dutch agriculture.
large, entrepreneurial farms were more able than smaller peasant units to compete on world markets. This was indeed the case so long as the regulatory schemes entailed in agrarian policies gave strong support to this segment – through, for example, price support and protection – whilst environmental costs could be externalized. However, in deregulated markets that are controlled by food empires and show high levels of volatility, this is no longer the case. Ironically, it is the peasant farms that are more able to face, and respond, to high levels of volatility and the associated insecurities and risks.

This discussion has three main implications for food sovereignty. First, the possibility of the sudden elimination of parts of the productive capacity is an immediate and considerable threat for FS, although in the longer term it might turn out to be an opening for FS. Secondly, peasant agriculture is better placed to face up to and deal with high levels of price volatility. Thirdly, the proposal to extend entrepreneurial farming across large zones of the Global South (as articulated by food empires and multilateral organizations) is ludicrous. It poses a very real threat to food sovereignty.

Does resilience come with a price? According to some observers the price to be paid for this resilience based on distantiation is high: ‘It seems hard […] to avoid the conclusion that new peasants’ “autonomy” from markets […] is to be achieved by relative poverty of income’ (Woodhouse 2010, 418). This ‘unavoidable’ conclusion rests on the misinterpretation of two facts that I discussed several years ago in The new peasantries (2008). First: ‘if all resources used on the farm had to function as capital (i.e. generate at least the average level of profitability) and all labour was to be remunerated as wage labour, then nearly all Dutch farms […] would go broke’. Second: ‘40 percent of Dutch farming families derive less than the minimum income from farming’ (van der Ploeg 2008, 448).

Woodhouse’s reasoning is based on a strange reversal. Since peasant farms in the Netherlands are indeed distantiated from the main upstream markets (meaning that buildings, animals, machines, etc., do not have to function as capital, labour is not remunerated as wage labour and no rent or lease is paid on the land) – they do not go broke. They function very well, provide an income that is often acceptable and they are better equipped (as discussed above) to face adverse circumstances. But they would go broke if they had to pay for all the factors of production and non-factor-inputs – as does a capitalist farm. In short: distantiation from the upstream markets does not come with a price. It does not lower the farm income. Rather, it helps to increase and to sustain the farm income. Then the second observation: it is true that 40 percent of Dutch farmers derive less than the legal minimum wage from farming. Is this intrinsic to peasant farming? Is it the price to be paid for autonomy? Among this 40 percent there is a considerable sub-group that actively opts to have a small farm and to combine this with another job. Then there are entrepreneurial farmers who face very high financial burdens that almost completely ‘consume’ the available income. And finally there are many peasants who do have incomes that are too low. The point though is that without distantiation their income would be even lower than it actually is. Said differently: without distantiation it would not be just 40 percent, but say 80 percent, of Dutch farmers whose income would be below the legal minimum wage. As said before, agrarian political economy is not always helpful for understanding peasant realities. Peasants do not ‘pay’ for autonomy (and the resilience it brings), they benefit from it.

This issue is both theoretically pertinent and of huge political importance. Institutions such as the World Bank, development NGOs, universities and the main food empires are currently developing and disseminating classification schemes that have, regardless of the many minor differences, one central point in common. They view agricultural development as a unilinear and selective process – as a ladder to modernity (see Figure 2, developed by the Syngenta group, which reduces development to ‘incremental stages of agricultural
intensification’). This selective process favours a minority of farmers who have access to more resources than others and excludes the majority of smallholders (see, for example, Zhou 2010, Berdegue and Fuentealba 2011). This latter group is assumed to move (or to be moved) to the cities whilst their resources are used to strengthen the smaller group. The process is also selective in the sense that development for the minority group that stays on the land, consists of taking over the package sold to them by the different food empires. This makes them into ‘advanced farmers’.

The problem with classification schemes like these is that they do not necessarily have to be ‘true’ in order to be applied and implemented. Such models currently structure the agrarian policies of nation states, the credit policies of banks, the pricing policies of agro-industries and the mechanics of bargaining by farmers’ unions. When systematically applied (and/or imposed) they can do considerable damage (van der Ploeg 2003).

**Peasant farming continuously reinvents itself, especially in periods of crisis (but it might prove too burdensome to rebuild it)**

Apart from resisting difficult periods, peasant farmers also have the capacity to reinvent and materially rebuild farming in a way that helps to immunize themselves against the circumstances and relations induced during and by a crisis. Peasants can carve, together with others, pathways that help them to survive and go beyond a crisis that otherwise would destroy the agricultural sector. They do so by materially rebuilding the practice of farming and by changing the patterns in which this practice is embedded.

A well-known example of this phenomenon is the deep European agricultural crisis of the 1880s that was provoked by massive imports from cheap grain from Canada and, especially, the USA. This crisis was met, notably in the north-west of Europe by a large-scale switch from growing grains towards new forms of cattle, pig and chicken raising.
that were based on the cheap imports (Bieleman 2010). Thus, an initial threat, cheap imports, was reversed into a benefit although the tying of livestock feeding to transatlantic shipments of industrial grains did sow the seeds of a future crisis. Another important response was the development of farmers’ cooperatives. These could, of course, not change the markets, but they definitely changed the relations between farming and the markets.26 The agricultural crisis of the 1930s eventually resulted in another re-patterning of the set of relations in which farming was embedded. The first forms of national agricultural policies were agreed upon and progressively implemented. These were the forerunners of what would become the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), although the process of getting there was far from uninterrupted.

As a consequence of the current agricultural crisis (that has been partly induced by the general economic and financial crisis and partly caused by internal mechanisms) farms can no longer reproduce themselves solely through the markets. This is especially the case for large, specialized farms producing for the main commodity markets (see Figure 3). They produce for the market but reproduction through the market is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for them. Prices are, on the whole, too low, whilst their costs are too high. Their main outlets (both internal and export markets) have suffered considerable contractions; volatility means that prospects are insecure and investments are increasingly risky and often not possible, especially, since banks have reduced the amount of capital they are prepared to invest in agriculture.

At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of a new constellation that consists of redesigned and materially rebuilt farms that are able to escape from the crisis and are laying the foundations for a new, post-crisis agriculture (see Figure 4). These are multi-functional farms, which mainly base themselves on the use of their own resources (new forms of cost reduction play an important role here). They are creating new services and new products which are increasingly sold through new, nested markets – often actively and jointly constructed by farmers and consumers (van der Ploeg et al. 2012). Pluriactivity (also known as multiple job holding) is another common feature, chosen not only for economic necessity but also because it brings social benefits.

In analytical terms this implies a major change: instead of being built on just one circuit for reproduction (a main commodity market), farming is now increasingly grounded on several circuits for reproduction. These additional circuits not only reduce reliance on global markets, which offer less attractive prospects than before, they also sustain new ways of farming that include biophysical and socio-economic realities that differ greatly from those of specialized farming, which is solely tuned to the world market. In the

26It is telling that in the Mediterranean parts of Europe (where the peasantry was marginal and latifundia types of agriculture dominated the scene) another response emerged: a massive outmigration.
context of FS it is interesting that the newly created markets are mostly (but not exclusively) domestic ones. This helps to shift agriculture away from the stifling export-orientation encouraged by neo-liberal policies. The domestic market has increasingly become an important arena for generating growth in the ‘smallholder’ sectors of agriculture (HLPE 2013).

A theoretically important aspect of this is that the turn towards multi-functionality (and the associated emergence of new products, new services and new markets) is being driven by the constructive and creative capacity of the peasantry. Peasant agriculture is not just about producing products, nor does it just involve the endless repetition of routines that result in such products. Peasant agriculture entails a constructive capacity: it includes mechanisms that are used to make agriculture grow, face adverse conditions, and regenerate and even enhance the biophysical basis of production. And when the ‘normal’ level of resilience does not suffice, this constructive capacity is employed to re-design and materially rebuild agriculture through the development of new products, services and markets.27

The creation of new processes of production within and by peasant agriculture is a slow but constant process – but this accelerates in periods of crisis. At such times there is a more urgent need to jump over the crisis-induced limitations by designing and building new processes of production that are superior (more productive, generating more value added, allowing for more control by the direct producers, more flexible, etc.) to the existing ones. Theoretically, the creation and further unfolding of such new, superior, processes of production equates to the development of productive forces. For the peasants involved in this process this evidently implies a considerable burden. Thus, we encounter another Chayanovian balance at the level of peasant agriculture as a whole: a balance between burden and benefits. The burden is felt now, whilst the benefits are still to come (i.e. they are anticipated benefits). Thus, the balance spans a period of time. If the time span becomes too long, the burden may start to become too stressful. And if benefits are too low for the burden involved, it could also go terribly wrong. However, despite these potential traps it is peasants who develop the productive forces, doing so according to Chayanovian balances that link them, and others, to the politico-economic and ecological conditions under which they operate.

27In terms of STS (Science and Technology in Society) we are talking here about ‘architectural innovations’ that reconfigure an existing system (see, for example, Henderson and Clark 1990).
Peasant agriculture builds on, and enriches nature (but sometimes there is no space to do so)

Peasant agriculture can deal with, and builds upon, biodiversity. By doing so it manages and further enriches agro-biodiversity. This has been abundantly and convincingly documented in the rapidly expanding literature on agroecology (for recent examples see Altieri et al. 2011, Altieri and Toledo 2011). It is important to note that the surge in agroecological practices is not limited to the Global South – it is equally widespread in the Global North (although often known under other names such as farming economically, low external input agriculture, natural cycle farming, permaculture, regenerative agriculture, and so on). The shift towards agroecological practices is not a one-off step, but an ongoing process that proceeds progressively. Agroecological farming is neither static, nor does it (necessarily) show lower yields than conventional farming. It is also not necessarily subject to diminishing returns.28

The re-grounding of farming on resources located in local ecosystems and controlled by peasant producers themselves (or by communities of peasant producers) entails a re-introduction of nature into the agricultural production process. Agriculture is, literally, being re-grounded on ecological capital (Guzman Casado et al. 2000). This re-grounding implies many different steps and possibilities. These include the development of ecological structures at micro and meso levels (i.e. within the farm and at local/regional level; Visser 2000). Such an ecological structure might be an existing (and probably extended) pattern of hedgerows, ponds, small pieces of fallow land between meadows, all of which contain specific natural values. But it might also be created anew, in a goal-oriented way (Primdahl 1999). Another aspect is the revitalisation of food webs, that is the intricate ‘web’ of micro-organisms, worms, herbivores, parasitoids, insects, moles and birds – that provide ‘a network of consumer-resource interactions among a group of organisms, populations or aggregate trophic units’ (Smeding 2001, 84). Such food webs improve and sustain productive capacity by, for example, enhancing the nitrogen delivery capacity of the subsoil, suppressing pests and increasing resilience against diseases. But they may also sustain a range of ‘higher order natural values’, such as birds of prey. In his discussion on food webs Smeding argues that

one important solution […] for agriculture in the industrialised countries could be the development of farming systems that are economically based on [the] utilisation of biodiversity and that also harbour conservation worthy species. (Smeding 2001, 131, see also Altieri 1999, Almekinders et al. 1995)

Healthy and well-developed food-webs, embedded in robust ecological structures can also considerably strengthen the resilience of plant-animal production systems, and reduce the levels of stress, which pose a major problem in today’s agricultural production systems. In synthesis, through extended re-grounding, agricultural production is (once again) based on the local ecology. Re-basing agriculture on ecological capital restores the relation with nature, rebuilds agricultural cycles that enlarge sustainability, and (re-)produces a wider array of specific natural values. The production of ‘green services’ (landscape, natural values, a healthy environment, clean water, mitigation of global warming,
etc.) and the production of agricultural commodities are no longer separated (or at best ‘positioned alongside each other’), but become mutually reinforcing, with one being a condition for the other and vice versa (Gerritsen 2002).

This process of re-grounding can be understood as a further extension of the defence mechanisms discussed above. But whilst pluriactivity and farming economically are basically an endeavour to disconnect agricultural production from financial capital and the circuits controlled by it, extended re-grounding takes this process further by firmly re-establishing ecological capital as the bedrock for agricultural production.

Extended re-grounding can result in a range of mutually re-enforcing economic benefits. The more that agriculture is grounded on food webs, the more variable costs (especially those related to fertilization and crop protection) can be reduced. This allows a further unfolding of the style of farming economically, whilst maintaining levels of productivity (for an exemplary case see Brussaard et al. 2003). Increased resilience and reduced stress in the plant and animal systems generally translate into fewer harvest losses, diseases and pests and a reduction in expenditure on herbicides, pesticides, veterinary services and medicines. Equally, there is generally a positive effect on the longevity of livestock, which is in considerable contrast with the accelerated ‘turn-over time’ of animals in entrepreneurial and capitalist farming. An extended longevity also contributes to increased benefits and reduced costs, together with a significant improvement in food quality. Thus, through making a turn towards agroecology, peasant agriculture is consistently increasing the contribution it makes to food sovereignty.

A theoretically important point here is that living nature, as shaped and re-shaped within and through the process of co-production, comes to the fore as a major productive force. It is a productive force that can be moulded in different (and partly contrasting) ways and directions (Visser 2010).

In many instances, however, the rebuilding of peasant agriculture on nature is blocked by the many regulatory schemes that are tuned to industrial types of farming and at odds with the dynamics of peasant agriculture (Marsden 2003).

Peasant agriculture can contribute to society at large (but its capacity to do so might be weakened)

Although any estimation is seriously hindered by conceptual problems and by inadequate databases, it is not too bold to claim that there are, on a world-scale, some 0.6 billion peasant units of production. In OECD countries their number is declining (although large interregional disparities might be noted); in developing countries the absolute numbers are increasing and many people depend partly or even completely on peasant agriculture.

China alone has at least 200 million smallholder units (Dan 2006, FAO 2010, 2012), a small part of which is currently engaged in up-scaling towards larger, often co-operative, enterprises. Although these Chinese peasant farmers only utilize 10 percent of the total amount of the world’s agricultural land, they produce 20 percent of all food in the world. This is an important indication of the productivity that can be realized through smallholder agriculture.

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29 IFAD (2010) indicates that, worldwide, some 450 million small-scale farmers provide a livelihood to around two billion people. However, it can be argued that IFAD’s definition of a smallholder is too limited as it only includes units of production of two hectares or less.
Brazil, another major agricultural powerhouse, has a dual agricultural structure. Alongside large holdings (capitalist and entrepreneurial units) there is an extensive smallholder sector consisting of nearly 4.4 million peasant units (some 85 percent of the total farm units). Brazilian agricultural census data shows that, between 1996 and 2006, the number of smallholdings increased by some 400,000 units (MDA 2009). These newly-created peasant farms cover a total area of 32 million hectares, ‘which equals the total agricultural area of Switzerland, Portugal, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands taken together’ (Cassel 2007, 4). In Brazil, peasant units cover 24.3 percent of the total agricultural area, while the large corporations control 75.7 percent. Despite this, the smallholders produce 38 percent of the total value of production. Expressed in absolute terms corporate agriculture produces an average of 358 Reais per hectare per year and smallholder agriculture 677 Reais/ha/year. Moreover, such smallholder agriculture makes a strategic contribution to food security, producing 58 percent of all milk, 50 percent of all chicken and 59 percent of pork. They also grow 38 percent of the country’s coffee, 46 percent of its maize, 70 percent of the beans (an important popular dish) and 87 percent of the cassava (MDA 2009).

Evidently, the data from China and Brazil cannot be generalized to other countries. In other countries and regions quite contrasting constellations might exist. When it comes to agriculture and food production, heterogeneity is, both between, and within, countries, overwhelming. Nonetheless, when it comes to numbers, productivity and contribution to food sovereignty smallholder agriculture repeatedly emerges as a significant reality that should not be ignored.

Peasant agriculture can also contribute considerably to overall economic growth; directly through increases in production and productivity and, indirectly, by forming a large (part of the) internal market, especially in developing countries (Delgado 1997, Mazoyer and Roudart 2006). When producing sufficiently and achieving higher incomes peasant farmers will considerably spur the sale of the ‘wage goods’ produced by urban industries. In periods of economic crisis this is a strategic feature. If, alongside the need to increase total agricultural production, there is also a considerable need to enlarge rural employment and/or to raise rural incomes then peasant agriculture definitely has more potential than entrepreneurial and capitalist forms of agriculture. For Brazil, for example, the peasant sector (which only uses 24 percent of the available land) generates 74 percent of all agricultural employment.

Peasant-driven agricultural growth can also be ‘the engine of rural non-farm growth’ (Haggblade et al. 2007). The Chinese experience is a case in point (Zhang et al. 2006, Mohapatra et al. 2007). The different growth linkages (the mechanisms that link agricultural growth and overall development) are strong in countries where peasant agriculture dominates. It has been shown that ‘estate-led agricultural growth’ generates the weakest ‘consumption linkages’ (Haggblade and Hazell 1989, Janvry and Sadoulet 1993), but that these linkages are strong in peasant agriculture.

The role of peasant-driven agricultural growth in poverty alleviation has already been mentioned (in the comparison of China and Africa). Worldwide there are 1.4 billion poor people (living on less than US$1.25 a day). Seventy percent of them are located in the countryside and are dependent, in one way or another, on farming (IFAD 2010). The amelioration of their situation represents a moral duty in itself. Beyond this, substantial improvements in these rural people’s purchasing power can significantly act as the engine of growth for the internal market and thus help to alleviate the effects of the current economic crisis. The performance of China is again a case in point.
When smallholder agriculture plays a central role in contributing to the required increases in overall production, it simultaneously makes an important contribution to poverty alleviation and the consolidation and strengthening of internal markets.

Smallholder agriculture is, on the whole, more energy-efficient than other forms of agricultural production (Netting 1993, Pimentel 2009a, 2009b). The following figures, which translate the consumption of carbon energy into calories, illustrate this point. ‘Peasant type’ smallholder agriculture generates 4–10 calories of food for each calorie of energy consumed. In ‘Green Revolution type’ smallholder agriculture the figure is 2–5 calories of food per calorie of energy consumed. By contrast, large-scale corporate agriculture of the ‘hi-tech type’ only produces 1/10th to 1/20th calorie per calorie consumed (Rajesware S. Raina 2011, Table 1). These figures are supported by earlier studies that compared energy-use efficiency in meat production in Italy (Ventura 1995) and water-use efficiency in the north of Portugal (van den Dries 2002).

Peasant agriculture is, in many places, essential for natural resource management and, in other places, it makes a significant contribution to the maintenance of natural resources (soil productivity, landscapes, water, biodiversity, carbon-capture, and so on). Under the right conditions it does so in highly efficient ways. These characteristics can contribute to avoiding major geo-hydrological problems (land or mudslides), can help to mitigate climate change and preserve sweet water reserves.

One of the major ecological distortions linked to the current organization of agricultural production at the global scale is the abandonment of meadows and pasturelands for extensive grazing in hills and mountains, coupled with the use of fertile arable land to produce grains for fattening cattle, concentrated in large feedlots and for feeding chickens and pigs in factory farms (Weis 2013). The concentration of cattle in these feedlots (and the use of cheap grains) exerts competitive pressure on smallholder herdsmen, provoking the abandonment of meadows and pastures. Supporting these peasants would help remove such a distorted structure.

Alongside the (classical) points discussed so far, there is a new generation of benefits created by today’s peasantry. These cannot easily be grasped in economic terms – they mostly relate to the way society is patterned and they afford the promise of attractive and resilient alternatives to the regulatory systems imposed by state apparatuses, supranational bodies and large corporations. Take today’s markets. These are extended and rigid systems for making commodities flow in specific ways. The major features of these market systems include articulated centre/periphery relations, command centres that exert control-at-a-distance over extended spaces and large areas of social life, multiple sets of dependency relations, and a centralized appropriation of the generated value added. In contrast to these features, the nested markets that are emerging in many places represent an emerging alternative that goes far beyond their current mechanics and impact. Nested food systems are the equivalent of smart grid systems, which offer a promise for de-centralized and democratically governed energy production and consumption. Nested food systems are locally centred but can be mutually connected whenever the need to do so arises. They are also flexible, have low losses and high efficiency levels. Above all they offer the promise of including and benefiting more than just small minorities of producers and consumers (as is currently the case). They have the potential to include all producers and all consumers.

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30I have illustrated some of these features in my analysis of the Parmalat empire (now part of the French Lactalis group) (van der Ploeg 2008, chapter 4). See also Russi (2013) and Clapp (2012).
Secondly, it is also important to note that new forms of peasant agriculture and the newly emerging nested markets are, to a degree, ‘self-governing spaces’ that are able to disentangle themselves (at least partly) from the impact of stifling regulatory schemes. They allow the actors involved far more space to realize their aspirations in a more fully fledged way. With a further unfolding of peasant agriculture the possibilities for self-government might be rolled out over far larger areas of social life (just as, in the past, the networking capacities of Italian mezzadri ‘travelled’ to other sectors of the economy).

**Capital and labour, food empires and peasantries**

Capital and labour are mutually entwined with each other. There is not just a one-sided set of relations between capital and labour (independent/dependent, exploiting/exploited, powerful/powerless, leading/following, dominant/subordinate). Labour shapes and impacts upon capital as much as capital shapes and impacts upon labour. And what applies to capital and labour generally, applies to food empires and peasantries specifically. Food empires and today’s peasantries are mutually entwined with each other through the many interactions in which they both engage: sometimes these are cooperative, at other times they involve conflict. Capital does not necessarily have a privileged role in these encounters, nor are the peasantries merely dependent or always the losers within the equation. Instead, sometimes specific peasantries take the lead and capital has to react and try to reconquer lost terrain. Peasantries and food empires are the two opposing poles in a relationship characterized by many-sided struggles (Cleaver 2000).

Generally speaking, food empires create and reproduce peasantries: without a relatively autonomous resource base and without work being structured as a self-valorizing activity, it is impossible to produce and to keep producing under the conditions currently imposed by capital (the squeeze on agriculture, volatility, etc.). But as much as capital creates today’s peasantries, it also simultaneously tends to destroy them. More specifically, food empires currently relate to the peasantries through:

1. **The systematic disassembling of the resource base on which peasant farming is grounded.** This process has been unfolding for a long time and through different mechanisms. Seeds are currently one of the most contested foci of the disintegration of previously ‘organic’ constellations as their production and distribution is externalized from farming and new forms of control are established (Kloppenburg 2010).

2. **The intensification of extraction processes.** This indicates how the social wealth produced in the primary sector is increasingly appropriated by, and centralized in, food empires. Food processing is one of the most profitable industrial sectors, which explains why large chemical groups, such as DSM, have moved into food processing.

3. **The takeover of strategic resources, such as land, water, genetic materials, market outlets, etc.** Food empires control and condition entire markets, partly because they own the infrastructure of these markets. The points of entry, exit and of conversion

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31The operaismo tradition goes a step further by claiming that labour classes (including the peasantries) are the dynamic motor of capital; capital is just a ‘function’ of labour (Tronti 1979, Moulier 1989, Hardt and Negri 2000). My own position is that, according to historical circumstances, it is sometimes labour and sometimes capital that takes the lead.
are all controlled by food empires. Consequently, they can, through a temporary or permanent closure of one particular entry point, cut large groups of producers out of the market. The fear of this happening can be a powerful weapon influencing the relations between food empires and peasantries.

Together these relations place a constant pressure on income levels and an ongoing threat to the continuity of the farm (as discussed above, farms can no longer be reproduced solely through the markets), an elimination of the possibility to run the farm independently and a denial of the dignity of those working on the farm. Food empires induce redundancy within agriculture. Food products become anonymous, processes of agricultural production and food processing become footloose, and areas of production become interchangeable, whilst the peasantries working in them might suddenly find that they are superfluous. Instead of being proud and independent producers with an autonomous resource base, there is the real possibility of farming being reduced to a simple conversion (governed by an alien script) of purchased commodities (inputs) into commodities to be sold (produce) or even becoming completely redundant.32

Thus, food empires induce the aspirations for emancipation discussed in the previous section, which, in turn, translate into the search to (1) augment production, (2) increase resilience, (3) re-invent farming in order to face up to the crisis, (4) build upon nature, and (5) positively contribute to society at large. The aspiration for emancipation is not a ‘divine’ trait, it is not solely a subjective notion – it is an effect induced among the peasantries by capital and its influence. Ironically, this effect helps the peasantry to develop strategies to effectively counter capital.33 The redundancy, poverty and insecurity induced by capital, are denied and subsequently translated into responses. This is what John Holloway (2010, 18) refers to as ‘negation-and-creation’, which involves ‘moving against-and-beyond’ (Holloway 2010, 19). It is here that the constructive capacity of the peasantry (which I referred to in the previous section) comes to the fore and which clearly entails ‘the counterposing of a distinctly different logic here and now to the logic of capitalism’ (Holloway 2010, 26). Food empires disrupt the continuity of peasant production (through extraction, grabbing, etc.); this is countered by the peasantries, through productive increases that follow a different logic (not aiming at maximizing rates of return but more on securing their own subsistence), just as the disassembling of the resource base is countered by rebuilding farming on nature, and so on. In the words of Cleaver: ‘Many peasant struggles quite self-consciously set out to elaborate new ways of being, new relationships among people and between humans and nature’ (Cleaver 2000, 17).34

The impact of peasant struggles can be far-reaching. In Italy, for instance, in 1930 capitalist farmers (who only constituted 2.8 percent of the population actively engaged in farming at the time) controlled 53.8 percent of all land and, very significantly at the

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32This is exactly what the scheme of classification (in Figure 2) both illustrates and hides. The fear of being dismissed from farming figures here as ‘migration out of agriculture’, whilst the other fear (of losing the autonomous resource base and being reduced to just an ‘entrepreneur’) is entailed in the move from ‘semi-commercial smallholder’ to ‘advanced farmer’. The loss of the autonomous resource base figures here as the change from ‘robust seeds’ to ‘multi-trait hybrid seeds (including GMOs)’.

33This is notably the case when it comes, for example, to creating new products, services and new, nested, markets for selling them.

34Positive forms of struggle [… ] not just resist capital but [… ] create alternatives to it’ (Cleaver 2000, 18).
time, 61.4 percent of all cows (which then played a central role in providing traction power). Eighty years later (in 2010), 4.1 percent of all farms were partly run using wage labourers – but now these farms only control 9.0 percent of all the land. This remarkable change, that especially occurred in the years immediately after the second World War and continued during the decades that followed, resulted from social struggles that combined the emancipatory relations of the rural population into ‘a material force able to impact considerably on the structure of our society’ (Sereni 1956, 63).  

Bernardi recalls the nature of this struggle: ‘in an economic context characterized by frequent battles between the government and the peasant movement […] the laws of agrarian reform […] provoked, between 1950 and the midst of the 1970s, an expansion of peasant properties of 3,000,000 hectares’ (Bernardi 2007, 272). At the same time ‘the yields of the different cultures registered average increases of 30 percent’ (Bernardi 2007, 272). Sereni added: ‘although we cannot neglect the relative limits imposed by the framework and laws of capitalist society […] it is undeniable that the actions of the masses succeeded in imposing a land reform upon the ruling classes’ (Sereni 1955, 1).  

Peasant struggles can also proceed in a ‘silent’ (or ‘stealthy’) way. In this vein (Mamnova et al. forthcoming, 4) describe how the share of peasant production in total agricultural production has risen in Russia, over recent decades, from 26.3 to 45.0 percent. Just as capital impacts upon the peasantry, the peasantry impacts upon capital. According to Cleaver, ‘studies on peasants in Mexico, Nigeria and elsewhere [have] demonstrated how their unwaged work contributed to the expanded reproduction and how their struggles, often autonomous of those of waged workers, had the power to rupture such accumulation’ (Cleaver 2000, 17). This point has also been made by Friedmann who noted that social movements act as ‘engines of regime crisis and formation’ (Friedmann 2005, 229), while in the same vein McMichael refers to ‘the key role of workers and farmers in shaping […] food regimes’ (McMichael 2013, 13).  

Shaping capital, or more specifically, shaping food empires occurs at many different levels and through a range of mechanisms. I shall briefly refer to some of them here. A first, widely known mechanism centres on the takeover (and appropriation) of symbols and practices developed in peasant struggles. The early development of organic farming was, in many countries, driven by sturdy endeavours from peasants who believed it was the only way forward (Hollander 2012). They effectively developed what capital and imperial science declared to be impossible and irrelevant: farming without resort to chemical 

35The Communist Party and the mezzadri linked to it played a central role in these struggles. Antonio Gramsci suggested as early as 1924, to found an ‘association for the defence of peasants’. Emilio Sereni prepared the foundation of this ‘alliance’ (of peasants, rural workers, shareholders, etc.) during the years of resistance, but it was only in 1955 that the radical ‘Alleanza Nazionale dei Contadini’ (closely related to the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)) was actually established. Later on, Emilio Sereni (a member of the central committee of the PCI and a minister in the immediate post war years) became its Secretary General.  

36Cleaver refers here to de Rouffignac (1985) and Agbon (1985).  

37Together with other ‘autonomist’ Marxists, Cleaver proposes a broadened notion of the ‘working class’ that includes the peasantry.  

38There is a wide array of mechanisms that can be used to ‘disrupt’ food empires. These range from (1) national and international campaigns that react to contaminated or otherwise dangerous food products (as in the ‘Nestlé baby killer campaign’), via (2) demonstrations in front of factories and supermarkets and (3) building alternatives (as in on-farm processing and direct selling through farmers’ markets), to (4) the active reduction of dependency (as occurs through the agro-ecological movement).
inputs. Nonetheless, they succeeded – only to see their emblems\textsuperscript{39} increasingly taken over by large entrepreneurial farms, food processing industries and large retail organizations. Now we have ‘green’ supermarkets, and food industries process a wide range of organic products. However, without the increasingly successful sub-sector of organic peasants such phenomena would not have become a reality.\textsuperscript{40} In more general terms: the development of multifunctional farming and the associated construction of new, nested markets, constrain food empires from engaging in venomous campaigns against the emerging alternatives and the promises they entail, and copying some of its symbols and methods. This demonstrates that (1) peasant movements often have the lead and capital is obliged to follow and (2) that peasant based movements really do have the ability to pattern different socio-material realities.

A second mechanism (now becoming increasingly more important) is the design and development of novelties that cannot be taken over. A case in point is the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), ‘a set of practices and principles (originally developed in Madagascar) in response to diverse agroecological and socio-economic conditions faced by farmers’ (Stoop 2011, 445; see also ILEIA 2013). ‘SRI emerged in relative isolation from the international mainstream of rice agronomy’ (Maat and Glover 2012, 132). Each single practice intuitively seems to be counter-productive – SRI involves planting very young seedlings, widely spacing individual tillers, alternating between wet and dry soil moisture regimes (instead of permanent flooding), the use of organic rather than mineral fertilizers and frequent weeding. However, together these changes have produced spectacular jumps in yields that are accompanied by considerable cost decreases (together these factors explain the wide dissemination of SRI, which is now practised in many countries). SRI is a disembodied technological change. It does not involve inputs that can be sold. Neither is it a script that can be standardized. Instead it requires to be intelligently adapted to local ecological circumstances. SRI differs, as do all other agroecological practices, fundamentally from Green Revolution technologies. Like agroecology, it is a definite move away from the model that views more plants per hectare and more fertilizer as the ways to achieve higher grain yields. In contrast to the varieties promoted by the Green Revolution, the cultivars used in SRI are selected according to their tillering features, with the emphasis on their ability to develop an abundant root system.\textsuperscript{41} These larger and more active root systems increase drought tolerance, as well as efficiency in nutrient uptake – and thereby reduce fertilizer use (Stoop 2011, 448). At the same time, building a healthy supply of soil organic matter strengthens the beneficial associations between the roots and soil biota. By building on nature in this way (see also the previous section) peasants have a definite effect on major food empires who face actual and potential decreases in the sale of ‘miracle seeds’, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. Peasants ‘advance’ in

\textsuperscript{39}Other emblems that have been systematically taken over are those that refer to artisanality, genuineness, animal welfare, etc. These are features that food empires cannot materially produce, but which they need to maintain their relations with consumers. As such they take these over (or ‘rob’ them, as some say).

\textsuperscript{40}I leave aside the question whether or not peasant struggles to develop organic farming have been in vain. I only note that many of the original organic peasant producers have re-invented their farms and networks (whilst continuing to produce in an organic way) and thus continued their search for emancipation.

\textsuperscript{41}This is an important contrast with the photo-insensitive short-straw cultivars that were at the heart of the Green Revolution. ‘Modern’ rice cultivation, as defined in and by the Green Revolution, involved a shift away from solar energy and human labour towards a greatly increased use of fossil energy in the form of chemical fertilizers. SRI builds again on soil biology, solar energy and local knowledge.
a way that definitively differs from the trajectory outlined in Figure 2 and by doing so they slow down accumulation by agro-industries.

A third mechanism through which the peasantry affect and partly re-shape capital might be found in the phenomenon of ‘milk-strikes’. This type of peasant struggle (not only restricted to milk but also including other food products) has been used to put pressure on the food industry to which the product was delivered and to (re-)negotiate the farm-gate price and other conditions. This type of struggle started in the late 1960s in France42 and swept across all of Europe in the following decades. It was one of several factors that triggered the search for interchangeable food production areas. In this respect, peasant struggles unwittingly contributed to the very creation of food empires. Peasant struggles, aiming to obtain better terms of exchange, can trigger new modes of accumulation that offer worsened terms, thereby triggering new struggles. Evidently, this cannot be repeated endlessly. At a certain moment the last resort will be reached.

Fourthly, new accumulation modalities might also occur through operations at the level of the (supra-national) state. The explicit objective of the Mansholt Plan (which aimed at the large-scale modernization of European agriculture) was to replace peasant farms by newly created, large-scale entrepreneurial farms. One of the underlying, but hidden, motivations was that peasant farms were considered to be far too intensive and should be replaced with large entrepreneurial farms that produced more extensively, thereby slowing down the overall growth of production and consequently reducing the financial support provided by the European Community. Thus, the high intensity of peasant agriculture triggered a policy that aimed to eliminate (or at least greatly reduce) this sector.43 Ironically, this policy failed in two respects – at least at the level of the EU as a whole. From the 1970s onwards new technologies appeared on the market that simultaneously augmented intensity levels and labour productivity. These technologies fitted very well into the newly emerging entrepreneurial farms and thus contributed to enormous overproduction. In addition, the peasantry was far too resilient to disappear. The latter feature continues to exert a major imprint on the Common Agricultural Policy.

**A few conclusions**

Empirically, peasant agriculture plays a major role in the national economy of many countries, particularly (but not only) in less developed countries. Delgado (1997, 145) notes that

smallholding farming in sub-Saharan Africa is thought at present to account for 70% of total employment, 40% of total merchandise exports, and 33% of GDP on average, although the shares are much higher in many countries of the region. One-third to two-thirds of value

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42 Earlier expressions of the phenomenon emerged in the Second World War when milk strikes were used, in for example Friesland in the Netherlands, to resist German razzias against Jewish people.

43 This same mechanism can be found in areas were the peasantry was able to gain and to combine both economic and political strength (as in Catacaos in Peru in the 1970s and 1980s and the Algarve in Portugal in the second half of the 1970s). Although impressive growth was realized in these areas (in employment, incomes, investments, production, and so on) this newly created strength was broken and the newly developed productive structures dismantled. Since then, regression and underdevelopment have been the rule – which is highly detrimental for the process of capital accumulation. The historical parallel is clear. In 1917 Chayanov wrote that ‘the peasant farm is to be the basis for the construction of a new agriculture in Russia’ (Chayanov 1988, 137). However, the Russian peasantry was nearly eradicated and Russia paid a very high price for this – until today.
added in manufacturing depends on the supply of agricultural raw material, mostly from smallholders. Furthermore, primary agricultural commodities account for large shares of total merchandise exports in the region, again mostly from smallholders. Despite these achievements, economic conditions for smallholders in sub-Saharan Africa have been especially tough.

If we turn our attention from sub-Saharan Africa to (say) Europe, we also encounter situations in which peasant agriculture is important – for a variety of reasons, most of which are different from those that exist in Africa. The same holds true in Asia, Latin America and, for that matter, in America, where there are nearly 2 million smallholdings alongside fewer than 300,000 large-scale farms. In many places, the balance between small and large holdings continues to be precarious.

If the analysis contained in the previous sections is correct then it is true that the different peasantries of this world are politically far stronger than is normally suggested and/or believed to be the case. They control, *trotzdem Alles*, significant parts of agricultural production and the food supply. This is potential power. In addition, they are, as we have seen, engaged in a struggle to enlarge their autonomy. In this respect, Cleaver refers to the ‘hitherto neglected autonomous activity of workers and peasants’ (Cleaver 2000, 15), in which ‘self-valorization’ occurs and ‘newness and otherness’ are being created (Cleaver 2000, 18).

The importance and potential strength of the peasantries of the world increasingly reside in their capacity to establish and secure food sovereignty. The stronger they become (i.e. the more they actively engage in different social struggles), the more they will be able to ensure food sovereignty. And in so doing they will transform agriculture and have a positive effect on considerable parts of society at large.

The struggle for food sovereignty is not just starting now. It has historical roots that run deep. In the years preceding the Russian Revolution, Chayanov developed, together with radical political movements such as the *narodniki*, a transitional project for Russian agriculture that had three clear objectives: (1) increase agricultural production as much as possible, thus contributing to the overall growth of the national economy; (2) strive to maximize the productivity of agricultural labour; and (3) distribute national income more equitably. In Chayanov’s view this transition critically needed to be driven forward by the peasantry itself. Nowadays this appears to be merely of historical interest.

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44 According to the definitions used by the USDA there are 1,995,000 small farms in the USA. This corresponds to 91% of all American farms. Their number is increasing (by 118,000 between 2002 and 2007). The USDA’s Commission on Small Farms stated; ‘we are convinced of the necessity to recognize the small farm as the cornerstone of our agricultural and rural economy’ (quoted in HLPE 2013, 28).

45 This expression was used by Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin to characterise class struggle, and more specifically, the relation between personal dedication and class struggle. A close literal translation is ‘in spite of everything’.

46 In the Anglo-Saxon world the work of Chayanov is known mostly through the 1966 Thorner edition. German translations of his work (from 1923 and 1924) and the highly valuable Italian edition (1988) of his work on the ‘Economy of labour’ (from 1917) have rarely been used (see van der Ploeg 2013). Here I use his work from 1917.

47 The entire future of our country depends on the rapid and energetic progress of our agriculture and especially whether or not it is able ‘to cultivate two spikes of grain wherever just one spike is growing now’ (Chayanov 1988, 154).

48 Before us there are millions of peasants, with their own habits, their own ideas about farming. These are men that nobody can command. They do whatever they do according to their own willingness and according to their own concepts’ (Chayanov 1988, 155).
However, some 90 years later China defined almost exactly the same principles in its San Nong policy (the ‘three rural principles’ that guide agricultural policy). The first principle is Nong Ye which means to produce as much as possible in order to satisfy the national needs for food. It is identical, although the wording is somewhat different, to the first objective of Chayanov’s transitional project. Improvement of land productivity is central here. Nong Ming, the second principle, refers to peasants and their incomes – incomes that are to be increased through improvements in labour productivity (i.e. objective 2 of Chayanov). Nong Cun, finally, refers to the liveability of rural villages, to the quality of rural life and it is an evident echo of objective 3: the equitable distribution of national income.

Chayanov’s transitional project is thus not only of historical interest. It is alive and kicking today in the Chinese San Nong policy (and the many shortcomings, contradictions and conflicts that accompany it). It is also present in many other initiatives located elsewhere. The struggle for food sovereignty has been a long one and it will certainly be with us for many decades to come. There will be many changes – just as in the past. But one thing will remain constant: that is, the strategic centrality of the peasants of this world. Without them there will be no food sovereignty.

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