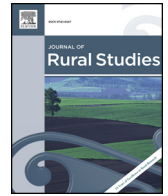


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Editorial

De-/re-agrarianisation: Global perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue that is dedicated to a critical inquiry of the deagrarianisation and depeasantisation theses. It sets the scene for the contributions that are included in the special issue and sketches the themes that are covered. An analysis of this kind is important because ultimately, it is concerned with key agrarian questions about the future of family farming, food security and sovereignty, land-based livelihoods and rural areas as a whole.

The contributions to this special issue explore ways of conceptualising agriculture and the rural. For some, a leading question is whether and how processes of repeasantisation and re-agrarianisation are relevant to robust agrarian pathways. Other contributions prefer relational approaches and analyse transformation processes using concepts like ‘territory’ and ‘(re- and/or de-)territorialisation’, ‘landscape’ and ‘assemblages’ to examine processes of change in the rural domain. They share the premise that it is worthwhile exploring the underlying dynamics of these processes as real and representing agrarian pathways that hold the promise of a dynamic agrarian future and vibrant countryside. The articles also agree on the need to go beyond understanding development as unilinear and dichotomous. They all engage critically with the rather predominant view that deagrarianisation and depeasantisation are inevitable, evolutionary outcomes of the ongoing processes of agrarian transformation.

1. Setting the scene: the deagrarianisation and depeasantisation theses and the future of the rural and the agrarian

Processes of deagrarianisation and depeasantisation are theorised as inevitable outcomes of past and contemporary processes of agrarian transformations. Global, capitalist expansion has restructuring effects on farming, the way farming is practised, the composition of the family and the provision of (family) labour; the intergenerational transfer of farm assets; urban-rural interactions; the natural environment and landscape; and the supply and provisioning of food. Scholars predict the demise of what is referred to in the policy and scholarly literature as ‘small-scale’ or ‘smallholder farming’, ‘family farming’ or ‘peasant farming’¹ (Bernstein, 2001, 2016; Rigg, 2006; Araghi, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1994). Globalisation and neoliberalism are said to work against or at least complicate sustainable agrarian pathways that revolve around family farming (Suess-Reyes and Fuetsch, 2016; Woods, 2014; Escobar, 2010; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2009). The expansion of capitalism on a global scale continuously (re)shapes agricultural production and reproduction processes and investment and consumption patterns, affecting the forces at work at the level of the farm, family and rural and land-based livelihoods to the extent that the reproduction of family farming is jeopardised. As a result, family farming and any non- or pre-capitalist forms of production are on a linear path to extinction

and destined to be subsumed by capital (Bernstein, 2001). Some even call for rural development pathways that no longer place small-scale agriculture at the centre (Sender and Johnston, 2004; Bernstein, 2016).

Deagrarianisation is broadly referred to in the scholarly literature as a process producing social, material and biophysical conditions that are not conducive to the reproduction of agrarian and land-based livelihoods. Strictly agriculture-based modes of livelihood will become rare in the near future (Bryceson, 1996, 2002a; 2002b). Agriculture increasingly provides insufficient income and employment opportunities, pushing rural people to work off-farm, to migrate to the cities in search of work, and/or to engage in marginal ‘subsistence’ agriculture which is doomed to render enduring rural poverty from which people only wish to escape. Deagrarianisation manifests in an occupational shift, ultimately resulting in a further reduction of the share of small-scale or family farming in total agricultural production. The roles and functions of family farming in the further development and enrichment of the landscape diminishes similarly in scale and intensity. *Depeasantisation*, on the other hand, manifests in situations where farming is predominantly becoming organised by corporate entities (i.e. plantations) or by medium-scale, commercial, entrepreneurial forms of farming. Depeasantisation entails the disappearance of the peasantry whose livelihoods are tied to the land, or their being dispossessed and replaced by outgrowers and contract farming schemes, or corporate large-scale

¹ ‘Small-scale’, ‘family farming’, ‘smallholder’ and ‘peasant’ farming are used interchangeably in this introductory text. Despite their respective differences in the potential to describe or to analyse, these notions convey that rural production is predominantly organised through employing family labour on family land.

farming operations. Depeasantisation also means that the resource base of (any form of) farming is increasingly disconnected from the locality, from activities on- and off-farm and the immediate natural environment. Capital (i.e. agribusiness companies) increasingly structures agrarian relations, determining how farming is and should be done, what resource-use efficiency is, how added value is distributed and how rural incomes are constituted.

The confluence of deagrarianisation and depeasantisation processes offers substantial scope for critical engagement with the underlying conceptualisation of agrarian transformation processes. This allows, in turn, possibilities for alternative frameworks and an exchange of ideas about more optimistic and robust scenarios of what the future could hold for the rural and the agrarian. Is there, indeed, little place and scope for family farms and peasant forms of farming in the future? Is indeed agriculture and the practice of farming increasingly modelled according to agro-industrialism and associated interests? What scope is there for new relations between production and consumption, producers and consumers; will the agrarian landscape be progressively subjected to neoliberal policies; will rural livelihoods always be severely stressed and is the opportunity for a full-time involvement in agriculture open to a few only?

Considering global tendencies in the agriculture and rural development process, we cannot, realistically, deny that deagrarianisation is a real trend; nor can we refute that processes of rural livelihood diversification occur, or that the continuity of (family) farming is challenged. There are many processes at play that push rural people off the land to a marginal life in cities. The concentration of corporate power up- and downstream from the farm is increasing. There is thus no doubt that capitalist expansion poses new threats and continuously forces us to rephrase existing sets of agrarian questions (McMichael, 2013; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2009, 2010a; 2010b; Lang, 2010; Bernstein, 1997, 2004; 2010b) and that it simultaneously generates multi-faceted agrarian crises that challenge the continuity of farming and the strengthening of rural livelihoods (Van der Ploeg, 2006, 2010a; Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2012; Patel, 2007; Woods, 2007, 2014). Do we agree, however, with the *éminence grise* of agrarian political economy Henry Bernstein that the original agrarian question of capital has been solved, but that the agrarian question of the reproduction and quality of life of (rural) labour has largely been left unresolved?

This special issue calls such and related interpretations of agrarian transformation processes – and the images these hold for the future – into question. These transformations and the emergence of new crises (i.e. environmental, financial, enduring poverty) urge us to be both alert to and critical of how the global expansion of capitalism and associated trends of globalisation impact on (family) farming and rural development, and more specifically, the view that deagrarianisation and depeasantisation are indeed the inevitable structural outcomes of development. We are in the happy circumstance that the rather bleak future of a deagrarianised rural sector and depeasantised agriculture is not widely experienced. Rural people continue to live and work in the rural domain, actively (re)assembling their lives and social and natural resources to maintain the vitality of their countryside and living in accordance with locally and culturally embedded strategies. They do this by interacting in many different ways with their (trans)local environment, attempting to create markets they themselves can control and enriching resources relatively autonomously. The contributions to this special issue are all vibrant testimonies of the struggles and attempts to rework the said restructuring effects of capitalism, globalisation and neoliberalisation. For many practitioners (Wegner and Zwart, 2011; Samberg et al., 2016), activists (Borras, 2016; Rosset et al., 2006) and academics (Van der Ploeg, 2008, 2016; De Schutter, 2011) and to a degree also policymakers, family or peasant farming is worth supporting, worth fighting and arguing for. Peasant or small-holder farming continues to represent an agrarian pathway that would secure a viable and dynamic countryside. The majority of these farms are located in the global South and continue to be important in the

global North as well (Hazell et al., 2010; Wegner and Zwart, 2011; Lowder et al., 2016). The quantitative and qualitative importance of family farming is significant, supporting roughly one-third of the global population (Samberg et al., 2016). Recent Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimates indicate that about 53% of all agricultural land is part of family farms (Graeub et al., 2016; Lowder et al., 2016). Due to their labour intensity, family farms provide employment to much larger numbers of people per unit of farmland than larger scale capital-intensive farming units. Family farmers are arguably also more resource efficient and productive per unit of farm land when compared with corporate farming (Lowder et al., 2016: 2; Van der Ploeg, 2008, 2017). Accordingly, family farming presents considerable scope for the expansion of employment in agriculture and the rural economy (Milone and Ventura, 2010), underlining the quantitative and qualitative significance of family farming from a global rural livelihood and wellbeing perspective.

The continuity of family farming and the rural development processes that are driven by family farming, despite the said global tendencies of deagrarianisation and depeasantisation, raises a number of questions about whether these processes are inevitable, evolve linearly and manifest globally in similar ways and with similar intensities. Or do we simultaneously witness, next to and in contrast with deagrarianisation and depeasantisation, processes of re-agrarianisation and repeasantisation? If so, is family or peasant farming sufficiently robust, resistant and innovative to counter these global trends and rework their effects by creating new, more vigorous forms of resource utilisation, depending on what kinds of interaction between the social and natural resources rural people have at their disposal (Woods, 2014; Van der Ploeg, 2013, 2008; Snipstall, 2015; Suess-Reyes and Fuetsch, 2016)?

This special issue brings together a number of original, research-based articles debating these questions. Some contributions revolve around analyses of peasantry, peasant farming and repeasantisation. Other contributions prefer relational approaches and analyse transformation processes using concepts such as ‘territory’ and ‘(re- and/or de-) territorialisation’, ‘landscape’ and ‘assemblages’ to examine processes of change in the rural domain. What the contributions have in common is the premise the premise that it is worthwhile exploring the underlying dynamics of these processes as real and important for robust agrarian pathways that hold the promise of a dynamic agrarian future and vibrant countryside.

This introduction continues with a brief depiction of how four major global trends playing a ‘(re)structuring’ role in agrarian transformation do so in such a way that deagrarianisation and depeasantisation are among the outcomes. I then present a condensed summary of the various theoretical positions and the kinds of critical question that these raise for further scrutiny. I then work towards summarising the major themes addressed in this special issue.

2. Global tendencies and agrarian questions

There is consensus that the interplay between four major global trends (re)shapes processes of agriculture and rural development, leading in turn to new agrarian questions calling for new analytical perspectives: (1) family farming is under pressure; (2) the ‘squeeze on agriculture’ is intensifying; (3) agriculture is increasingly industrialising; and (4) there is an intense competition and struggle for land.

2.1. Family farming dynamics

Globally, the share of family farming in the agricultural use of land has historically been declining gradually, but persistently (Hobsbawm, 1994; Araghi, 1995; Bernstein, 2010a,b). This decline is associated with the emergence of a global agricultural division of labour. Spurred by the worldwide expansion of capitalism and the development of capitalist agriculture in the form of plantations and mega farms, a world

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