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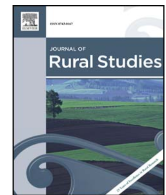

# From de-to repeasantization: The modernization of agriculture revisited

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In this article I aim to re-examine the modernization project that has deeply changed most of European agriculture since the 1950s. In doing so I will focus on the intellectual project that underpinned it.[1] This specified how farming practices and the identity of those involved were changing (and this coincided with the way in which they were supposed to change).[2] Underlying the representation of these changes (and translating them into something that was presented as the beacon of the future) there was a dichotomy that was as clear as that between day and night – at least for those who were, at that time, involved. Pre-modern agriculture (i.e. the agriculture that was to be modernized) was understood as peasant agriculture and the transition that was taking place (or to take place) was perceived as a definitive *adieu* to both peasant practices and peasant identities. Modernization would give birth, it was thought, to entrepreneurial agriculture (a new and differently structured practice) and to agricultural entrepreneurs (an identity that sharply differed from that of the peasants). This shift was clearly outlined by the great intellectuals that helped to shape modernization (e.g. Hofstee, 1953; Mendras, 1967 and Mansholt (in Merriënboer, 2006)). In more general terms modernization was summarized and theoretically specified by e.g. Hayami and Ruttan (1985) and more recently by Ioris (2016), whilst it even became a yardstick for historians as Mazoyer and Roudart (2006).

Of course, modernization was far more than just an intellectual project. It coincided with a major politico-economic transformation that was designed to more closely align agricultural processes of production with the dynamics, needs and rhythms of the accumulation processes of capital. Modernization strongly build in several ways on the heritage of World War 2 that proceeded it (and without which it probably would have been impossible or at least totally different).[3] In its turn the modernization of European agriculture became the laboratory that later informed and shaped the Green Revolutions and Programmes for Integrated Rural Development that swept most of the Global South. Modernization was a manifestation of changes that had already been germinating for some decades (since the 1930s) in agricultural sciences, which, in retrospect, can be understood as the shift from classical agronomy to a new, technocratic approach (van der Ploeg, 1987). Finally, agricultural modernization coincided with new forms of governance (new agricultural policy regimes) that, in turn, merged into new transnational schemes and became the basis of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union EU) and, later, the arrangements of the World Trade Organization (WTO), to cite the two most well-known ones. Within this complicated and multi-layered context, modernization as intellectual project played a strategic role: *it tried to specify the changes that were thought to be necessary*. It sought to make sense of the ongoing and often chaotic post WW2 transitions. And, finally, the modernization project elaborated guidelines to consolidate, accelerate and legitimise these changes. Philip Lowe (2010) argued that modernization undoubtedly underlined the performativity of social sciences (which by then were already a crucial part of agricultural sciences). Nonetheless, it also left important ‘black holes’. While the modernization project created much new knowledge, it also resulted in large and new areas of ignorance.

The intellectual project that was at the core of agricultural modernization is of specific interest here (i.e. in the context of current debates on agriculture and, more specifically, in this special issue) in that it sought to draw a clear delineation between the past and the future, between peasants and agricultural entrepreneurs. It informs not about theoretical constructions but about the historical categories that were supposed to be relevant (if not guiding) at a time that a major ‘mega project’ (Scott, 1998) was being initiated and brought to its full unfolding. The intellectual project that I re-examine here was, in short, about de-peasantization: a process that was perceived as part of the natural order of ‘progress’ and which was actively encouraged from the 1960s onwards. It is not, in the first place, about de-peasantization as analytical category only. It is about de-peasantization as intellectual category that nurtured, aligned with, and represented (at least initially) de-peasantization as a material process.[4]

Reviewing the empirical processes of de-peasantization that

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[1] There are several other approaches of studying agricultural modernization and assessing its significance. I have tried out several of these in other publications. Here I will specifically focus on modernization as an intellectual project and look, especially, at the questions that were not asked and if asked remained without satisfactory answers.

[2] “[S]cientists do not just describe the world; they also contribute towards bringing about the realities they describe” (Lowe, 2010:312).

[3] Ammunition industries were converted into fertilizer industries, factories for armoured vehicles started to produce tractors, laws and regulatory systems developed for war-time remained in place and much of the logistical experience obtained in the grand campaigns was re-used in the modernization project. See Visser 2010 for de detailed account.

[4] Depeasantization is a twofold process that involves there being less farmers and agriculture being less peasant-like.

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occurred in Europe in, say, the 1955–1995 period is especially interesting (and theoretically challenging) in as much as these processes gave birth to new forms of re-peasantization.[5] These new forms had been already germinating, as I will discuss, for quite a while, but they gained momentum after 1995. From then on, re-peasantization (at farm level) translated into wider processes of rural development that had, and continue to have, a strong impact strongly on the countryside today, on urban-rural relationships and the structuration of agricultural practices and dynamics. Although modernization in the end affected all rural areas in Europe, I will focus, in the remainder of this article, on the Netherlands. This is a special case in as far as modernization probably was implemented here in the most systematic, coherent and successful way-at least initially.

## 1. Modernization: the time-space context

The Second World War left Europe with starving populations and a nearly completely destroyed agricultural infrastructure. This was especially (though far from exclusively) the case in the northern part of the Netherlands, where the 'Winter of Hunger'(1944/45) left a terrible memory that translated, in the short term, into the urgent need to get agriculture producing again.[6] In the longer run, there was a widely shared opinion that the country should never face hunger again.[7] In retrospect it is interesting that the quickly realized revival of agriculture and the associated provisioning of food towards the cities occurred (and succeeded) through swiftly reconstructing (and strengthening) peasant agriculture. Labour-input was increased considerably (as a matter of fact during the 1945–1956 period the agricultural labour force steadily increased) and the principle of 'mixed farms' with access to a wide range of productive assets remained central to both policy and practice.

A telling *pars-pro-toto* for this period (and the then dominant paradigm) is the 'fence rack': a drying rack for hay. Instead of leaving mowed grass lying on the land to dry and become hay, farmers widely started to use these fence racks (see image below). These required far more labour (as the grass needed to be put onto the racks) but it resulted in fewer losses and a superior quality hay that, in turn, allowed for increases in dairy production. In short, in the immediate aftermath of WW2, labour-driven intensification, a typical strategy in peasant agriculture, brought the much required restoration and growth of agricultural production.

## 2. Putting grass on a fence rack

Not many years later (from the mid-1950s onwards) things had already changed considerably: the 'fence rack' was now seen as the ultimate expression of backwardness. It figured in applied research as a token for 'traditional farming.[8] In modernized farming the process of haymaking was mechanized (and later even completely replaced by the making and use of silage) and there was no longer any place for the laborious use of the fence rack.

The very quick response to the huge needs of the immediate post-war situation was basically due to peasant agriculture and its resilience. However, this particular historic episode (and its dynamics) have been nearly completely erased from collective memory. It is, instead, the opposite of peasant agriculture, i.e. modernized entrepreneurial agriculture, that is associated with, if not seen as the sole guarantee for, 'feeding the world'. In real life, though, it had been exactly the other way around.[9] In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Mansholt Plan was promoted and legitimized by claiming, amongst others, that peasant agriculture was far too intensive (producing too much per unit of land and/or per animal) and thus contributing to the growing agricultural surpluses that started to represent a large problem by the end of the 1960s. Production on large, entrepreneurial farms was more extensive and thus seen as helping to avoid surpluses (but this would change again in the years that followed)[10].

The core of the agricultural modernization project centres on the thesis that farming practices (wherever and whenever located) were 'traditional' (meaning that they shunned the benefits of science and technology).[11] This was why farmers, especially small-scale farmers, were poor.[12] Consequently, the number of farms should be substantially reduced and the redundant agricultural labour force would happily move work in to urban industries. The remaining farms would be enlarged and operated with new technologies. To encourage efficiency, these farms were to specialize on producing one single product (the mixed farm was understood as an emblem of the past). In short (as is not-surprisingly said in a Chinese study on modernization that was

[5] Repeasantization means that the agricultural process of production becomes more peasant-like (see van der Ploeg, 2008); it might also imply that the ranks and files of the peasantry are growing. This includes new entrants.

[6] Sicco Mansholt, who during the WW2 organized illegal food deliveries for people who went underground, became the minister responsible for this enormous task. His successful performance gained him much charisma and credibility. After having been Minister of Agriculture in the Netherlands for many years he became the first Commissioner for Agriculture of the European Commission (the then EU6). In his 'Dutch' years Mansholt became a prominent exponent (and driver) of the modernization project. During his years in Brussels he extended the proposal for modernization to European level, largely through the now well-known 'Mansholt Plan' (that was implemented from 1968 onwards) (see Merriënboer, 2006).

[7] Later on this widely shared expectation – 'never hunger again'- translated into the goal for food self-sufficiency for the EU as a whole. In a way this was an expression of food sovereignty *avant la lettre*.

[8] The 'fence rack' prominently figured in the surveys of Ban and van den (1956) as an indicatory of traditionalism. Van den Ban became the founding father of extension studies in the Netherlands and had a strong influence on their development. For a more general discussion see Frouws and van der Ploeg (1973).

[9] It is telling, in this respect, that part of the Marshall Aid was used for the "intensification of agricultural production in small farms". The Small Farm Service (DKB) that existed then was charged with maximizing peasant agriculture's contribution to the recovery of agricultural production (Frouws and van der Ploeg, 1973).

[10] Later on this proved to be in vain. New technologies combined the possibility of scale increases with the possibility of (technologically-driven) intensification. A more extended discussion is given in van der Ploeg (1987).

[11] "Our backward farmers [are] backward not only socially and culturally, but also economically and technically" (Hofstee, 1960, pp 114–115).

[12] This is echoed in the Schultz's, which defines peasant agriculture as 'efficient but poor'. This thesis was highly instrumental in seeking to transfer the modernization project from the Global North to the Global South.

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