

# Impact of Economic Development on Peasants

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Peasants are smallholder farmers who have been incorporated into the polities and economies of large-scale societies. Found throughout Latin America, Asia, Africa, and in parts of Europe, peasants are oriented toward villages rather than cities and towns. Though most commonly associated with Europe of the Middle Ages, peasants have been around for thousands of years, since the origins of the state. It may be safe to assert that a majority of the world's peoples could still, in some way, be considered peasants.

Compared to the capital-intensive, highly mechanized operations of large-scale farming in industrial societies peasants utilize relatively simple technology and labor-intensive production methods. The family is the basic unit of production and consumption. Saul and Woods (1987) state that peasants are those whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in their having certain rights in land and in the labor of family members on the land, but who are involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider system which includes the participation of non-peasants.

The terms of their incorporation into this wider system are mostly disadvantageous. Peasants grow food that supports urban dwellers and their taxes sustain the government; however, they usually do not receive commensurate rewards in return. Generally, peasants have not benefitted from development efforts thrust upon them by governments, multinational corporations, and international agencies (Barker 1989; Richards 1985). In the 1960s the *Green Revolution*, which began decades earlier with the discovery of new, higher yielding varieties of grains (e.g., wheat, rice, and maize) was heralded as the chance to solve the developing world's food-related problems. Tremendous success occurred initially on experimental agricultural stations in Mexico and the Philippines, followed by their dissemination to parts of India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Although overall yields doubled and in some cases tripled, it was not long before skeptics began questioning the value of the Green Revolution for peasants. Major criticisms of the Green Revolution included that: 1) it is dependent upon the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation, and other inputs that poor peasant farmers cannot afford, thereby exacerbating inequality; 2) it may be ecologically harmful (e.g., chemical contamination of groundwater) as well as promoting monocultures and hence contributing to a loss of genetic diversity. Franke (1974) examined the Green Revolution's effects in central Java and found that, despite potential yield increases of up to 70%, in the village he studied only 20% of farming households joined the program. The chief beneficiaries tended to be farmers who were already better off, and who owned most of the land and had adequate water supplies. The poorest families did not adopt the new "miracle" seeds. Instead they made do by working part-time for the well-off farmers who lent them money to buy food. Furthermore, because they were afraid of losing their supply of cheap labor, richer farmers prevented their part-time workers from adopting the new seeds. For their part, poor farmers feared that if they cut themselves off from their patrons, they would have no one to turn to in cases of sickness or drought. Franke concluded that the theories behind the Green Revolution were really rationalizations for elites who were achieve economic development without engaging in the social and political transformation their societies needed.

More recently, *structural adjustment policies*, multifaceted programs designed to correct decades of mismanaged centralized economies and mandated by the *International Monetary Fund* and *World Bank* as conditions for continued loans, have taken a high toll on peasants. Their effects have been especially devastating on women (Gladwin 1991). As both producers and consumers, peasants suffer doubly the minimal producer prices once assured by grain/cereal boards have disappeared as have price caps on purchased staple consumer goods such as flour and cooking oil.

Among urban elites, even in the developing nations in which they are encapsulated, derogatory stereotypes about peasants abound, e.g., peasants are inordinately conservative, bound by tradition and superstition, lazy and stupid. An alternative view is that peasants, by virtue of their relative lack of power, are forced to adapt to risky circumstances, most of which are out of their control. As such, they behave in ways that are very different from people who hold greater degrees of political and economic power.

As a result of the unfavorable terms through they have been incorporated into state systems, peasant communities often chose to bind together, in what Wolf (1966) termed *closed corporate communities*. These groups emphasize community identity and discourage outsiders from settling within by restricting land-use to village members and prohibiting the sale or lease of property to outsiders. Often the community, not the individual, has ultimate control of land. Parts of the Valley of Oaxaca in southern Mexico exemplify closed, corporate peasant communities. Peasants there are often seen as economically conservative, suspicious of

change, and pessimistic about the future. George Foster (1967), who studied the village of Tzintzuntzan, called this view the *image of the limited good*, by. This position sees all good things in the world as existing in limited supply and an individual's success occurs only at the expense of others, who soon become envious. Even those who are moderately successful experience social pressures to share the wealth. This comes in the form of sponsoring lavish *fiestas* to honor the patron saint that each village has. Fiesta sponsorship rotates among the people of the village and individuals take great pride in doing a good job of sponsorship. These fiestas, sometimes referred to as the *cargo system*, along with exchanges of labor and goods across households, act as *leveling mechanisms* and function to lessen wealth differentials. Rather than see these kinds of practices as inhibiting progress, anthropologists like Foster and Wolf have generally concluded that, given their lack of capital and lack of political power, these types of customs are adaptive practices that help to enhance group solidarity and insure cooperation in the face of uncertainty.

In certain historical contexts, most conspicuously 20<sup>th</sup> century examples such as Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba, peasants have openly rebelled (Hobsbawm 1963; Wolf 1969), leading to massive social upheaval, if not genuine social change. However, perhaps more commonly exhibited are what Scott (1985) called *weapons of the weak*, everyday forms of resistance that are manifested by individual social actors in both symbolic and material ways, such as feigning confusion, work slowdowns, pilfering, performing shabby work, tampering, lampooning, sarcastic mimicry, or work evasion.

Peasants produce primarily for subsistence and household maintenance rather than for profit. This *subsistence first economic orientation* is not necessarily the product of an inherent anti-market bias; rather it derives from the reality that in most cases peasants are fortunate simply to break even. Peasants must use part of what they produce to feed themselves, but there are other uses to which any surplus must be put. Eric Wolf (1966) identified these as: 1) *the ceremonial fund*: that portion of the budget which is allocated to social and religious activities; 2) *the replacement fund*: that portion of the household budget that is allocated for repair or replacement of materials depleted by wear and tear; 3) *the rent fund*: that portion of the budget which must be allocated for payment of rent for the use of land and/or equipment. Hence, in general by the time all of these expenses are met, the peasant household has little left over to invest in profit making enterprises.

Johnson (1971) found that Brazilian sharecropper peasants face *multiple sources of risk* emanating from both the physical environment (e.g., rainfall variation, pests, illness) and economic environments (e.g., uncertain land tenure, externally controlled market prices). In response they engage in a number of practices that may help reduce this uncertainty. First, accumulation of subsistence needs first, tilling of multiple small, scattered plots rather than one larger consolidated field, careful experimentation with new crops and methods, creation and maintenance of inter-household dyadic relations between equals and with patrons, and further diversification through off-farm sources of employment (Johnson 1971; also Ortiz 1973; Barlett 1980). Entrepreneurs, business people who are able and willing to take risks in new economic ventures, do not fare well among the sharecroppers Johnson studied. In Zinacantan, Mexico, Cancian (1972) found a curvilinear relation between rank and risk taking, with the middle class being especially conservative during the early stages of change, when uncertainty is greatest. On the other hand, those at the top and at the bottom were more willing to endure the risk associated with adopting changes. In Nigeria, Berry (1985) found that, among Yoruba farmers, the tendency to diversify was very strong and that people engage in a number of activities besides farming to generate income. Trained as an economist, Berry goes on to claim that there is no inherent conflict between safety-first orientation and profit maximization. It seems imperative, therefore, to try and understand peasant economic systems on their own terms first before implementing changes.

After decades of studying peasants firsthand in Europe (Switzerland) and West Africa (Nigeria), Netting suggested that there are clear reasons why the smallholder peasant farming mode of production, and the various social formations that accompany it, persist across space and time.

Smallholders are not as rich as landed aristocrats, the higher officialdom of government, the commercial elite, or urban professionals... What they do have in their experience, their fertile land, their livestock, and their diversified production strategies is a set of defenses against the uncontrollable vagaries of weather, prices, and war. Smallholders may not always live well, but they are seasoned survivors. They may moonlight as craftsmen, petty traders, field hands, or factory workers, but they do not keep one foot on the farm out of sentiment or stupidity. And the society that dispossesses smallholders in favor of factory farms, plantations, or socialistic communes simultaneously risks a decline in agricultural production, rural unemployment, and ecological deterioration (Netting 1993).

The course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the deleterious consequences resulting from the dispossession of smallholders by large-scale plantation agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean and socialist/communal farms in Europe and Asia. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the dispossession of smallholders by factory farms proceeds around the world, even in North America with agribusiness. What long-term repercussions will ensue from these processes and how will governments deal with them?

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**Cross References:** Green Revolution; International Monetary Fund; Rural Development; Structural Adjustment Programs; Subsistence Living; Sustainable Development; World Bank (?).

### ***Further Reading***

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