

PEASANTS, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND THE LAND WORKERS' ALLIANCE

CHRIS SMAJE digs deep.

The recently formed Land Workers' Alliance (LWA) has now joined the Scottish Crofting Federation as one of two UK groups affiliated with the international peasant organisation Via Campesina. But what does it mean to identify with the term 'peasant' in Britain today? The word sounds both pejorative and anachronistic in contemporary English, and as Gill Barron points out¹ has never really been a part of the British agricultural lexicon. To Barron's etymological and historical objections can be added a strong critique by Henry Bernstein not only of Via Campesina's peasant politics but also of the concept of food sovereignty, to which the LWA is explicitly committed². So, as the LWA begins its work, perhaps it's timely to review both the troublesome word 'peasant' and the wider 'peasant politics' of the food sovereignty movement (FSM).

'Peasants': Etymology and English History

The double meaning in the etymology of the word 'peasant' is significant in its modern usage. Derived from the Old French *peasant*, it means both an indigene, a native resident of the country (pays), and also a resident landworker of the countryside. In its original usage it therefore had a similar ambiguity to that of the modern English word 'country', referring to both the nation, and the countryside as distinct from the town.

Prior to the industrial revolution, most people in most countries lived in the countryside and worked the land, and non-landworking elites frequently coined pejorative terms to describe them. The word 'peasant' is a relative latecomer to England, not commonly used in medieval English to describe rural landworkers, although there are instances in the Anglo-French spoken by the Norman elite.³ Still, there was no lack of vernacular pejoratives for ordinary landworkers in England – churl, rustic, villein/villain and, later, boor all served this purpose.⁴ These have generally retained their negative connotations, if not necessarily their association with rural labour, to the present day.

Nevertheless, medieval England appears to have lacked a common generic word for the mass of rural labourers. Perhaps this was partly because the distinction between gentry and peasantry was so obvious and fundamental as to need little elaboration. A more important issue in everyday life was the complex distinction between servile and free labour, a key point of contention in the so-called 'Peasants' Revolt' of 1381.⁵ Thirty years earlier, the *Statute of Labourers* had attempted to shore up landholder power in the aftermath of the Black Death. This defined the peasantry by saying what it wasn't, applying its strictures to

every man and woman of our realm of England, of what condition he be, free or bond, able in body, and within the age of sixty years, not living in merchandise, nor exercising any craft, nor having all his own whereof he may live, nor land of his own about whose tillage he may occupy himself.⁶

Though the 'realm of England' was already well defined as a national entity in comparison with other parts of medieval Europe, another reason for the lack of a ready term for the mass of rural landworkers may be that medieval people were less inclined to think in terms of national populations with horizontally layered class structures than we are today. Such ideas came later, with the emergence of nationalist thinking in which notions of 'the peasantry' came to have a defining role. Every country gives nationalism its own historical twist, but a common theme invokes the peasantry in the first etymological sense described earlier as the real, authentic people of the country. High symbolic regard for the peasantry rarely translates, however, into high regard for actual peasants.

There are two specific manifestations of this 'peasantised nationalism' in England. The first is the 'Norman yoke', the idea that the invasion of 1066 imposed a hierarchical feudal order upon a more egalitarian previous society of free Anglo-Saxons. The second is the notion that free and independent yeoman farmers constituted a backbone of English individualism which later allowed the country to throw off its feudal shackles and pioneer the economic institutions of the modern world. Both are of long pedigree, but are not convincing historically. The most significant aspect of the yeomanry for later economic history was not its comfortable position as the bedrock of English society but its economic insecurity, as the complex tenurial arrangements of medieval England were resolved into commercial rents, impelling the restlessly acquisitive fiscal drive of an emerging capitalist society.⁷

Political Neo-Peasantries

That acquisitive drive has been remarkably successful, at least if 'success' is measured by the virulence of an economic system able to replicate itself globally and subordinate other kinds of economic order to its own logic. For that reason, there are few peasantries of the feudal kind in the world today, and certainly not in the UK. But peasantries do exist, generally not as backward remnants of some premodern world but as a result of, or a response to, incorporation into the modern global economy. This is true of the 'reconstituted' peasantries of the Caribbean after slavery⁸, of the subsistence cultivators in postcolonial countries wracked by colonial surplus extraction and incorporated dependently into the contemporary global economy⁹, and of family and new entrant farmers in Europe and the USA attempting to engineer a resilience to buffering global food prices.¹⁰

Dutch scholar Jan Douwe van der Ploeg describes these "new peasantries" as a response to the contemporary global food system.¹¹ In Europe, he identifies a process of 'repeasantisation' occurring within family farming at the same time as an ever greater industrialisation, as family farming moves in to fill the void created by the ultimately self-defeating attempt of capitalist agriculture to achieve continuous productivity improvements.

The fundamental difference between peasant or family farming and capitalist farming is that, in the former, the farmer is oriented first and foremost to the survival and long-term flourishing of the farm and the wider community sustaining it, not to maximising fiscal returns or productivity. As van der Ploeg suggests, perhaps the wealth of European family farmers relative to peasants elsewhere arises in some measure because they are more easily able to protect themselves from the vagaries of the global food market. In this sense, they may be more 'peasant-like' than the archetypical small peasant farmers of many low income countries.

To identify with the term 'peasant' in the UK today via the LWA, Via Campesina and the FSM, is partly to identify with a particular agronomy, a way of doing farming. But it's also to identify strategically and in solidarity with other farmers around the world pursuing a similar agenda. Instead of complicity with a food system that pits farmer against farmer in a global race to the bottom, the FSM constitutes itself as a global movement in which producers recognise common interests, not only narrowly for themselves but more widely for the local, national and international communities of which they are a part. Via Campesina's definition, recently adopted by the UN's Human Rights Committee, captures something of this idea:

"A peasant is a man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, relying above all on family labor and other small scale forms of organising labor. Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities and they take care of local landscapes and of agro-ecological systems.

"The term peasant can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts related to agriculture, or a related occupation in rural areas. This includes indigenous people working on the land. The term peasant also applies to the landless."¹²

So while Barron is probably right to argue that the LWA would have been tactically naïve to adopt 'the peasant way' as its moniker in a contemporary Britain that would be baffled by the term, there are good reasons for the organisation to associate politically with a neo-peasant identity in solidarity with others globally. Part of the LWA's goals must surely be to help rehabilitate the term in contemporary English.

Where Does the Peasant Way Take Us?

Perhaps the preceding arguments rescue a usable conception of the peasantry from the frying pan of English history and etymology only to see it plunge immediately into the fire of sociological critique. That, at any rate, is the implication of Henry Bernstein's broadly Marxist 'skeptical view' of the FSM and Via Campesina's political ambitions. Bernstein detects within the FSM and Via Campesina's 'peasant way' merely a



"Progressive Utopianism" contrasts a backward past with a perfectible future. This Irish scene, entitled "Poverty" (despite three fat pigs) is intended to portray backwardness.

Landseil 1843

new version of an older populist politics in which a simplistic notion of 'the peasantry' is proffered as an idealised basis of social and political activism. Essentially, Bernstein poses three questions:

- Can 'the peasant way' unify politically in view of the wide net cast by its peasant definition and thus its enormous diversity?
- Can a food system underpinned by 'the peasant way' feed a populous planet in which the majority of people are now urban non-producers?
- If the present food system is unacceptable, what would its replacement look like and how would it be realised?

These questions cannot be answered satisfactorily in one short article, and indeed part of the answer is probably that no single answer exists. But it's worth providing an outline of how the FSM might address them, in order to provide a context for the LWA's work.

One point of rapprochement between the FSM and Bernstein's critique is that Bernstein professes "considerably more interest in, and sympathy for, [the FSM's] agroecologists, their empirical knowledge of what farmers do and their activities as practitioners, than for its aspirations to 'grand theory' and its feel-goodism".¹³ Wise agronomic practice informed by agroecology is indeed a key starting point for the FSM, and it is in this light that I read the 'direct and special relationship with the land and nature' in Via Campesina's peasant definition, which might otherwise seem a mystical essentialism of the farmer and the soil.

One global rallying point for peasant farmers is their keen appreciation that to farm as if there is no 'special relationship with the land' – as if technological improvement will continuously improve the extraction of agricultural value with no external costs – involves mounting ecological problems that can probably only be deferred temporarily. Another is that the suffering of peasant farmers often results from the 'grand theory' of others, typically through the pursuit of such abstract notions as progress and efficiency. Whether these rallying points will

ultimately prove enough to overcome the many differences (of region, gender, class, land tenure etc) within the global peasant movement may be debatable. There's certainly no room for complacent assumptions that recycle the old nationalist myths about the authenticity of peasantries, any more than the old Marxist myths about the authenticity of the industrial working class. Although Via Campesina goes to great lengths to build consensus from the grassroots, neo-peasant solidarity in the FSM can only ever be a starting point, not an endpoint.

Nevertheless, it's a starting point that seems worth trying, given the extremely poor job that the existing food regime is doing in properly feeding the vast global population, particularly of urban non-producers, that it has itself largely created. (Malnutrition – under- or over-nutrition – now affects over a quarter of the world's population).¹⁴ How the FSM can deliver an improved food regime is a challenge indeed, and one that I certainly can't resolve here. But it's likely to go about it in three ways that Bernstein doesn't sufficiently address:

- Emphasising producerism over consumerism: defending and extending productive peasant, family or small-scale farming; supporting urban self-provisioning; critiquing the skewed assumptions of labour and land productivity in conventional agricultural economics; shifting terrains from food prices to food livelihoods.
- Emphasising the almost certainly unsustainable ecological rent involved in existing development models, and reconstituting a peasant ethics of frugality and self-reliance.¹⁵
- Developing multiple, specific, local, grassroots responses to food supply problems, within broad universalist principles of sustainability and social justice, rather than technocratic responses geared to global food security and accompanying centralised industrial technologies of production and distribution.

This approach can hopefully avoid both the *Reactionary Utopianism* of contrasting a perfect past with a degenerate present (as in various forms of right-wing peasant populism), and the *Progressive Utopianism* of contrasting a backward past with a perfectible future (as in various currents of contemporary thought, including neoliberalism, Marxism and 'eco-pragmatism').

There are difficult issues of political theory to surmount here, but it seems more urgent at present to develop a convincing agroecological basis to contemporary peasant farming, and to support it in its unequal battles with the existing global

food regime, than to be developing 'grand theory'. The time for grand theory may come, and the chances are it won't rely on a single grand idea such as the authenticity of the free market, the proletariat or indeed the peasantry, as a passport to a better future. But for now it must suffice simply to deflect the predictable charges of naïveté or romanticism aimed at the FSM from the progressive Utopianisms of Marxists and free marketeers.

To do so, it's tempting to cast the movement as a neo-peasant neo-agrarian neo-populism. Neo-peasant, in that contemporary peasant farming is a broad patchwork of responses to the contemporary global food regime, not a throwback to past orders. Neo-agrarian, in that while much can be learned from traditional practices, the FSM is guided by contemporary agroecological insights in the context of the grave

ecological problems associated with large-scale agro-industry. Neo-populist, in that while there's little of lasting value in the anti-peasant 'modernisation' logic of either Marxist or capitalist ideology, nor is a naïve essentialism of the 'authentic peasant' persuasive.

But perhaps with more self-confidence we could drop the 'neo-s'. Nobody expects today's free marketeers or Marxists to follow Adam Smith or Karl Marx to the letter. Likewise, why not rally around a peasant agrarian populism as a contemporary solution to contemporary problems, which can learn from but is not reducible to the peasant struggles of the past? Our task is to build that vision, and that movement.

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"Reactionary Utopianism" contrasts a perfect past (as in this pleasantly industrious Irish landscape) with a degenerate present.