The Class Quality of Peasantry: A Conceptual Exploration*

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> '. . . the wellsprings of human freedom lie not only where Marx saw them, in the aspirations of classes about to take power, but perhaps even more in the dying wail of a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll.'
> Barrington Moore, Jr.

1. The Problem Stated

The term 'peasantry' has been employed to characterise a wide variety of social groups. Types of social organisation among tillers of the soil are so varied, historically and in the present-day world, that it might seem unjustified trying to identify them in terms of social class. It is, moreover, doubtful whether all types of communities are at all suitable for class analysis. So even if 'peasantry' might be characterised by certain generic features, the 'class' label is not necessarily attributive to this phenomenon. The problem of the present paper, then, is to investigate how class position is relevant to the diagnosis of peasantry within the wider social framework. This problem implies the consideration of a dual relationship: (1) the position of peasantry relative to the non-peasant world, and (2) the internal differentiation of peasant status.

We are going to trace the situation of a (basically) pre-capitalist peasantry, since the problem of rural class formation in an entrepreneurial capitalist setting would transcend the analysis of a 'peasantry' as defined below.[1]

2. The Problem Justified

Even if peasant studies have become more *en vogue* lately, it is still an urgent analytical challenge to obtain a better comprehension of the peculiarities of peasant society: as a mode of production, as a type of social organisation, and through the linkages to the wider societal order. Numerous crucial questions concerning policy formation and political alignments hinge on this analysis.

It has often been argued that socio-economic class analysis is not adequately geared to the study of peasant life.[2] Peasantry is frequently – and most explicitly so according to the ethnographic tradition[3] – characterised as 'another

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world', a rustic community with particular localistic features separating (village) folk from (urban) sophisticates.[4] These socio-cultural qualities indicate the character of the local community as such, but they also imply that partial departures from the local setting (e.g. peasant participation in the wider socio-political order) are encumbered with primordial peculiarities such as kinship affiliations or patronage.[5] This generic quality of peasanthood – if it is so – does not, of course, automatically preclude 'class' analysis, but it definitely requires qualifications as to the specific character of the peasant world.

Nevertheless, it is a historically contingent fact that the peasantry has been placed within a generalised system of status. Pre-industrial society employs political and legal criteria to localise peasantry as a (rather subordinate) societal *estate*. But an estate is primarily a juridical category. It does not display mutual interaction like the generative mechanisms of an organised social *group*. It does not even necessarily indicate an aggregate of any shared 'real' characteristics. Estate boundaries are defined by legal assignment of political rank and authoritatively clear-cut principles of social classification. They are not, unlike conventional class delineations, derived from a 'gradual' classification of an aggregate of individuals.[6]

The relevance of estate boundaries dwindles during the transition towards a liberal capitalist society. The well-defined peasant Estate is thus – in this respect – a remnant of an earlier social formation: 'the world we have lost'. This is even more true since a society of estates might quite well be combined with an agrarian society based on corporate peasant communities. These communities are not interconnected by social or organisational linkages of a horizontal kind, but are primarily integrated at the national level by formal criteria which are employed by the dominant non-peasant world. The peasantry of an estate society is, ordinarily, either too localistic or too split by segmentation and patronage to be capable of concerted action over the whole area of society. Such action is the privilege of landlordism or the bourgeois-bureaucratic segment.[7]

In general, the application of the class concept can be said to be governed by certain general characteristics:[8]

First, class analysis is preoccupied with contradictions or cleavages within the wider socio-economic system itself. It does not identify specific alien 'little worlds', but takes interest in such worlds only so far as they might be said to be placed within a generalised scheme of classification. The connection to a general principle of classification might be specified in terms of economic interest, power politics, or whatever. In this respect classes are large-scale entities, beyond the corporate local community.

Second, classes are – as indicated above – constituted by an aggregate of individuals rather than being cohesive social 'groups'. Nevertheless, 'group' interaction by the class body is *possible,* and might even be said to give it a more 'genuine' or stable quality.[9]

Third, class structuration is concomitant with the dissolution of clientelism and personalised ties of obligation. Formally, class structure is based on impersonal, contractual relationships.[10]

Fourth, classes are – unlike social 'estates' – based on 'open' membership governed by anonymous mechanisms. They are not determined by inherited position sanctioned by law or recognised custom.

These characteristics of the notions of social class are sufficiently different from the general position of peasantry to justify the problematique of the present paper. The more specified extent to which some concept of class, then, is applicable to peasant studies, depends upon the conceptual features of the phenomenon itself.

3. Peasantry Defined

It is redundant for the purpose of this paper to make a thorough examination of the controversy on the 'peasant' concept.[11] It is sufficient to note that the conceptual debate is marked by different theoretical traditions, that no non-controversial definition so far exists, and that there has even been a tendency to dispute the very existence of peasantry as a valid concept. While a certain ethnographic tradition concentrated most effort on the identification of the shared cultural features of peasant life, another anthropological school – with *Kroeber* and *Redfield* as distinguished representatives – pointed out the partial, non-independent, fractual quality of the peasant community in relation to the greater urban world.[12] Students with more outspoken economic inclinations have stressed the economic or technological peculiarities of peasant agriculture, while 'class' analysts have noted the political subordination of peasantry relative to power groups with a claim on the economic surplus.[13]

Several of these elements are combined in definitions which run like *Shanin's:*

> The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power.[14]

The last point in Shanin's definition states that the peasant is always exploited by someone else, i. e. that peasantry is subject to an asymmetrical power relationship which implies an unfavourable charge on his produce. This position is also favoured by influential writers like Eric *Wolf* and Daniel *Thorner.*[15] It might seem, however, to be unnecessarily restrictive, since relatively autonomous agriculturalists, who are not directly dominated by urban betters or by a class of rural lords, could be excluded from the very notion of peasantry. Empirically, it is probably more fruitful to employ a less restrictive criterion, admitting the relatively low position of peasantry within a hierarchical economic and political order: peasants are – unlike 'primitive' tribesmen – politically integrated by territorial state power. Legally, their status may be that of either land proprietors, tenants or sharecroppers, who may or may not be subject to a rural aristocracy.

The crucial characteristic is rather the situation of peasants as rural cultivators

based on a family household economy and producing mainly for subsistence, even if a certain surplus has to be transferred to the non-peasant population.[16]

This implies three basic traits:

1) Land husbandry, as the main means of livelihood, is employed with low technology, i. e. independent of equipment which only can be supplied by industrial manufacture.
2) The familial household unit of production is sustained without – or with only marginal – hired hands.
3) Peasant farming aims at subsistence rather than reinvestment and accumulation of profit. The market is thus a rather marginal institution as mediator of simple commodity production.[17]

Peasantry, as a genuine socio-economic entity, is thus distinguished from tribesmen and pastoral nomads on the one hand, and from collective or capitalist farmers and rural wage labourers on the other. Their general social position is between the great rural aristocracy and the landless rural proletariat. Numerical intermediate groups, sharing only some of the 'peasant' characteristics, might be indentified. These are – with a misnomer – 'quasi-peasants' relative to the hard core types.[18]

Peasantry has – and this is implicit in our previous argument – a peculiar dual character at the level of the individual household: the peasant family household is the unit of production, and the same household is also the unit of consumption; i. e. the peasant farm is both an enterprise and a unit of domestic economy.[19] This is, however, an organic unity which is based mainly upon family labour. As clearly demonstrated by *Chayanov,* the family labour product cannot be decomposed into wages and other factors.[20] This implies that a calculation of net profit is impossible and indeed meaningless. The economic peculiarity of peasantry thus makes it a specific non-capitalist phenomenon that does not respond like an ordinary business enterprise to the fluctuations of the market: peasantry is inclined to produce less when prices rise, and correspondingly more when they fall, since *consumption* needs are weighted against the drudgery of labour. The peasant (household) economy is then extremely competitive compared to a wage labour enterprise, since it is able to reduce consumption and work longer hours in conditions where an enterprise – like a capitalist farm – would go bankrupt. On the other hand, the peasant economy undermines itself on the market by reacting in a way which aggravates a price depression. Nevertheless, the orientation towards production for the market may be a strategic option to uphold the balance of livelihood even if accumulation is not the primary aim of exchange. The market might be utilized to obtain a surplus for taxes, duties and non-agricultural goods, and it thus serves the basic subsistence orientation of peasant action. Rather than aiming at self-sufficiency in a 'natural economy', peasantry is thus characterised by a double orientation towards both market and production for immediate needs.[21]

The progressive differentiation of peasantry into 'farmers' and rural labourers

is conditioned by changing relationships with the dynamic non-peasant world. The professionalised mercantilisation of agriculture – where commodity exchange aims at reinvestment and accumulation of profit rather than at consumption – implies a growth of the entrepreneurial component and a weakening of the family character of farming. Conceptually, this process should be identified as a 'de-peasantisation' of the socio-economic entity, although the specific character of the transition lies outside the scope of the present paper. Our intention here has been to indicate, *first,* how peasant agriculture should be regarded as familistic and consumption-based, and *second,* how this peculiarity marks it off from other managerial groups within the societal order.

We should then – from the viewpoint of peasant quality – take a closer look at the various structural notions of this order in terms of social class.

4. Peasantry and Class Structuration

Very different criteria have been employed to identify the class structure of society. In a now classical examination of the various representations of 'class', *Ossowski* demonstrates how these imageries are characterised by a spatial metaphor, with society as a vertical order of strata piled upon each other.[22]

The major types of this metaphor, in Ossowski's analysis, are *dichotomic* conceptions, schemes of *gradation,* and *functional* schemes:

1) The dichotomic conception, with a polar division between two major social classes, is a very old representation which has occurred in different modes: the exploiters vs. the exploited, the labouring producers vs. the non-working consumers, the rich vs. the poor, the rulers vs. the ruled. The last dichotomy is also revitalised in *Dahrendorf's* definition of social class, according to which it is seen as conflict groups emerging from the distribution of power in society: class position refers to possession of, or exclusion from, authority.[23] These modes are often found together in dichotomic conceptions, and certain 'middle classes' are sometimes recognised in such schemes, although they are merely represented as secondary groupings and appendices to the major categories. It should be noted that this conception has very definite consequences for the problem of identification of peasantry, since peasants are likely to disappear into the diffuse category of the 'ruled' or the 'exploited' or the 'populace', together with other subject groups in society.

2) Schemes of gradation do not define social classes in terms of their dependence upon each other, but in terms of a descriptive ordering of criteria. This rank ordering of classes may be based on one criterion, like income, with uniform gradations on a single scale, or a synthetic combination of criteria may be applied. This image of class is also unable to account for the specific quality of peasantry, since monetary income and other gradual 'universals' (education or whatever) are most likely very inadequate standards in peasant life.

3) The functional scheme of division implies that a plurality of classes ('professionals', 'white collar workers', 'skilled workers', etc.) are interrelated by a functional division of labour. The classes are thus neither antagonistic forces nor

rankings on a (uniform or synthetic) scale. They build an interdependent whole which is integrated by complementary functions. In so far as peasantry is diagnosed as a semi-autonomous entity based on quite distinct principles of communal integration, this sociological imagery does not quite apply. It should be noted that the same Durkheimian tradition which stresses the functional character of the division of labour, also underwrites the dualistic character of the peasant-and-urban world in terms of different types of solidarity and cohesiveness.

These types of class conceptions converge on one important point which is crucial to the problem of this paper: Peasantry seems to fade away as a qualitatively distinct social entity.

This argument even applies to the more purely economic definitions of 'class'. Max *Weber,* as we know, stated that 'class situation is . . . ultimately market situation'.[24] Common economic interest and destiny are thus conditioned by market relationships. Economic classes are differentiated according to specific kinds of property, trade, and industry, or services offered in the market. It should be noted that this identification of class position with market position opens up an almost unlimited analytical division of society into small subgroups. This multiplicity of *economic* class situations might, however, cluster together by unifying ties which create specific cores of socio-economic interchange, and thus condition wider configurations of *social* class. This Weberian conception was closely tied to a model of rising capitalism, and left no explicit room for a distinctive notion of peasantry among the major categories: the working class, the propertyless middle class, and the propertied upper class.[25]

So far as market position is a point of departure for class configurations, this perspective is also, correspondingly, inapt for the specification of a social entity to which the market economy might be rather marginal.

Our discussion so far has, rather conspicuously, left out *Marxism.* This omission is quite deliberate, since the Marxian view of peasantry should be treated in some detail: *First,* because the position of peasantry within the class structure has been a headache in Marxist writings – and political strategy – for nearly a century, and *second,* because Marxist class analysis employs – in principle if not in every manifestation – a coherent theory based on strands from each of the three modes of class structure which were discerned by Ossowski.[26]

The general Marxian criterion was, as we know, the relationship to the means of production. The peasantry in a capitalist society would thus probably qualify for a rather anonymous place among the highly amorphous 'middle classes', or 'petite bourgeoisie'. Even here peasantry fades away as a distinct entity. But there is a longer way to go.

5. Peasantry in the Marxian Scheme

In most of his writings on classes and class conflict Marx employed these concepts fairly freely, without any explicit provision of a formalised definition. The famous fragment on 'classes' at the end of the third unfinished volume of *Capital* is the

first provision of a formal discussion, although it breaks off – alas – before the criteria are specified in a concise statement.[27]

The basic perspective in this fragment, however, is the division of capitalist society into *three* major classes:

a) The *labourers,* who are sustained by *wages.*
b) The *capitalists,* who extract *profit* from the surplus value created by the former.
c) The *landowners,* who base their existence on *ground rent.*

This division is also anticipated in the historical analysis of the class struggle in France, where the bourgeoisie is conceived as split between two major interests: landed property and capital.[28]

Marx, further, conceptualises this tripartite class division merely as an outspoken *tendency,* which allows for various intermediate types and transitional stages in the historical development towards full-fledged capitalist relationships. We should consider the implication of this contingency within the abstract paradigm.

As noted above, the Marxian structuration of class employs different modes of class imagery. The dichotomic conception is primarily outspoken in political writings, such as *The Communist Manifesto,* which intend to stimulate revolutionary class consciousness. Increasing polarisation is also, however, connected to the analysis of the progressively emerging bourgeois-capitalist order.

The functional and gradual representations are, as pointed out by Ossowski, employed in Marx's more analytical studies, where a plurality of social levels has to be introduced to arrive at a more accurate descriptive assessment of class relationships. This modification has been particularly urgent in the study of pre-capitalist historical societies, where the dominant mode of production may not (yet) have produced a single antagonistic polarity.[29] In more specific terms, this implies that more complicated class divisions are produced by the intersection of two or more dichotomous class cleavages: Ancient Rome was not only characterised by the polarity between free man and slave, but also between patrician and plebeian; feudal Europe knew not only the opposition between landed aristocracy and dependent peasantry, but also between lord and vassal, and between guild burgher and journeyman.[30]

It might be concluded – as to the Marxian conception – that a dichotomous class division provides the *major* axis in the social structure, and that this axis is *simplified* with the dominant antagonism between labourer and capitalist, between proletariat and bourgeoisie, in the course of the development of capitalism.[31]

The main problem in this schematic representation is the undeniable existence of social groupings outside the major axis. These socio-economic groups are often conceptually qualified as two categories of 'classes' and one 'marginal' category:[32]

First, there are those 'transitional classes' which are in the process of forma-

tion within the old (increasingly obsolete) society, such as the rising bourgeoisie and the growing urban proletariat within feudalism.

Second, there are those 'transitional classes' which – on the contrary – represent social groups that are constituted by superseded modes of production, i. e. remnants of a declining structural composition, such as the feudal aristocracy in the early stage of capitalism.

Third, there are those 'quasi classes' which have common economic interests, but which remain marginal relative to the dominant class divisions within the society of which they constitute a part. The peasantry in Antiquity may qualify for this position.[33] So may the independent peasantry in medieval and post-medieval Europe, – i. e. those marginal rural groups who were not bound to the landed lords by serfdom or villeinage.[34]

These transitional or marginal categories thus modify the notion of a dichotomous class structure to the extent that they exemplify the existence of 'middle classes' between, or outside, the main social axis. Since the major classes also might be differentiated into sub-groups, the middle classes are thus either social categories of the transitional type (the bourgeoisie in feudalism) or segments of the major classes (the 'petty bourgeoisie' in capitalism).[35]

The abstract scheme of class formation does not, however, tell us to which category the peasantry as such belongs. There is in Marxism, as we suggested above, a tendency to let the peasantry disappear into the amorphous middle classes, being only slightly identifiable as a transitional remnant of pre-capitalist society. But historico-political analyses necessarily have had to qualify this conceptual indistinctiveness. The outcome should be given a short consideration.

6. 'A Sack of Potatoes'?

The peasantry does not quite fit into the tripartite scheme of labourer–capitalist –landowner, which was discussed at the beginning of the previous section. From one point of view, the peasantry as such is none of these entities, even if substantial *segments* of the peasant population may qualify for a position as proprietors of land. From another point of view, the peasant may be *all* these types, since he might be said to contribute 'rent' to himself as landowner, to pay 'wages' to himself as a (self-employed) rural labourer, and to reserve the 'profit' for himself as a capitalist. We need not here go into detail about the peculiar nature of peasant farming: This strange composite phenomenon demonstrates fairly clearly that the categories are rather misleading.[36] Since Marx's discussion of agriculture and ground rent in the first and third book of *Capital* is mainly confined to rural *capitalism* on the English model, this inadequacy is not astonishing.

The insufficient theoretical specification had serious consequences for the Marxist political strategy towards peasanthood and agrarianism. *Mitrany* recollects the remarks on 'the idiocy of rural life' in the *Communist Manifesto,* and asserts frankly that:

> Marx and his disciples ... paid attention to the peasants only because they looked upon them with a dislike in which the townsman's contempt for all things rural and the economist's disapproval of small-scale production mingled with the bitterness of the revolutionary collectivist against the stubbornly individualistic tiller of the soil.[37]

From the communist viewpoint, peasantry has been a somewhat perplexing phenomenon. It was a subordinate – and often indolent – mass in the development which made the industrial proletariat into a revolutionary vanguard. The red-green alliance, though, was often necessary – for tactical reasons – in the first phase of revolutionary mobilisation, as *Lenin* realised in Tsarist Russia.[38] Peasant individualism would eventually, however, become a brake on revolutionary fulfillment. So the proletarianisation of peasantry was both economically inevitable and – in the longer run – a political necessity: Marxism blended political strategy with the application of a general law of economic concentration, whereby industry and peasant agriculture were envisaged as being subject to similar trends.[39] Thus peasantry was not, as Mitrany correctly stated, analysed from the angle of social organisation, where the peculiarity of peasant farming relative to the capitalist economy would have been more clearly visible.[40]

The peasant masses, moreover, did not welcome the eventual advancement of socialism by way of their own proletarianisation, and rejected the dominant socialist parties around the turn of the century. This rural failure of the proletarian movement brought about the crisis of the 'Agrarian Question', which troubled international communism for several decades.[41] The agrarian movement, particularly in Eastern Europe, was more ideologically affiliated to the early Russian Narodnikism.[42] This populist tradition employed the slogan 'not Capitalism, not Socialism', and envisaged the collective advancement of peasantry directly from the communitarian institutions of the villages.[43] It is effectively argued by *Georgescu-Roegen,* however, that Agrarianism employed a rather vague intuitive approach to the specificity of agriculture, and failed to develop an adequate analytical theory of peasant economy.[44] Chayanov had been an influential heretic in the debate on agrarian economics during the first three decades of the century within Russia itself. But in 1930 he was arrested under the accusation of being a pro-kulak ideologist. Peasantry remained a weak link in Marxian theory and practice, and the perspectives of Chayanov played an equally insignificant role within the orbit of organised Agrarianism.

The general class position of peasantry did not become settled, therefore, in theoretical terms. Within the socialist movement, the agrarianist testimony of Marx was subject to equivocal interpretations. His famous answer to the uncertainty of Vera Zasulich was, alas, rather undecided, and the celebrated phrases on peasantry in the *18th Brumaire* labelled them a 'sack of potatoes'; an unorganised reactionary potential and – in actual fact – a social basis of Bonapartism. This point deserves closer attention as being highly relevant to the problem of the present paper.

The peasant masses were, in Marx's conception, a partly inarticulate remnant of pre-capitalist society, a 'bag of potatoes' not yet class, but gradually becoming so:

> In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these smallholding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.[45]

From the angle of a common mode of production – different from the non-peasant order – these smallholding *Parzellen-Bauern* did constitute a class. From the angle of internal social organisation they did not. Ecological isolation, backward technology, and lack of experience contributed further to their relatively low degree of 'classness' – subjectively 'for itself' as well as objectively 'in itself'. But in these qualities they were a rather specific socio-economic entity in mid-19th century France. Whether they were representative of other peasant communities would be a matter of historical contingency to which the formal Marxian scheme gave, as we have seen, very inadequate clues.

Moreover, it would be highly misleading to regard peasantry as a homogenous entity. The peasants are nowhere a single undifferentiated mass, but constitute a conglomeration of varying social groups; they are often divided by conflicting interests – originating from land tenure and distribution of property – to justify a general perspective on 'classes of peasants' rather than 'peasantry as a class'. Accordingly, crucial distinctions have had to be made by Marxian leaders working in primarily agrarian settings. Thus Lenin as well as Mao Tse-tung identified at least three major groups of peasantry:[46]

- the poor peasants, comprising sharecroppers and semi-proletarians with too little land to be able to make a living only on their own farm.
- the middle peasants, comprising smallholding peasant proprietors who employed family labour only.
- the rich peasants, comprising semi-feudal landlords and capitalist farmers who were dependent upon hired labour.

Even if further distinctions have often been employed – particularly in Mao's writings – these three 'classes' were conceived to constitute the major political forces in the countryside. It should be noted that they do not constitute an ordering along a single dimension: The 'middle peasants' are not conceptualised as standing between the 'rich' and the 'poor' ones, but rather belong to another category in the agrarian economy.[47] This follows from Lenin's definition of peasant classes by relations of production; i. e. the 'feudal' relationship, which comprised the landlords and the sharecroppers; the 'capitalist' relationship, which comprised the *kulaks* and the rural proletariat; and the 'communal' relationship,

which comprised the 'middle peasants' of the *mir*. The rural class structure then emerges as a composite of groups from different modes of rural economy, even if Shanin's recent examination of the period in question demonstrates the notable *mobility* between different peasant categories.[48]

Lenin's major concern, of course, was the revolutionary potential of the various peasant classes. It is sufficient to note here that while he first regarded the classes of the capitalist sector as forces for the dissolution of feudalism – eventually with the *kulaks* as the vanguard of the bourgeois revolution – he later realised the mobilising potential of the communal 'middle peasants' in the revolutionary process. In a more clearly non-capitalist setting Mao primarily focused on the 'poor peasants', while he recognised the important role of the 'middle peasants' in revolutionary practice.[49] This experience has led students like Alavi and Eric *Wolf* to formulate a theory about the particular militancy of the 'middle peasants', based on the tactical mobility which these groups possess through land ownership or peripheral location, relative to more dependent peasants. Some degree of structural autonomy in relation to lord and market and management of plot is thus regarded as a necessary prerequisite for rebellious action.[50] The transformation of a peasant 'class' from an economic category to a political group should, then, be briefly considered.[51]

Alavi (1973) argues that this transformation is mediated by primordial ties like kinship, ethnic identity, or other pre-existing institutions. This implies that the vertical cleavages of peasant society – cutting across class lines – have to be broken down into horizontal political cleavages *along* class lines through the mediation of primordial loyalities. Vertical alignments of economic dependence are intrinsic to many peasant societies, and the typical conflict groups are thus organised as vertically integrated segments – *factions* – on the basis of patron-client relationships. The transformation concerns the change of this factional structure into horizontal alignments and cleavages of class. The Wolf/Alavi theory stresses the mobility of relatively autonomous peasant groups in the initial phase of such transformation.

This perspective definitely complicates the argument about peasant classes. There is no immediate correspondence between economic categories and political groups – between 'class-in-itself' and 'class-for-itself' – since political articulation and manifest antagonism are contingent upon strategical positions and alliance options. The argument thus leaves no general answer to our principal problem, but transforms it into a matter of historical specificity. However, this would still be a somewhat obscure – and therefore premature – conclusion, all the more so since it does not yet include the peculiarity of the peasant world among its terms.

7. The Awkward Class

We have argued that the class structuration of peasantry may show various qualities, and that class analysis – in any of the conceptual traditions outlined above – is only partly to the point. The peasantry obviously has some common interests,

sharing ultimate life situation and culture in contrast to other parts of society. Under certain circumstances, when their situation is especially precarious or changeable, peasants may cooperate in political 'class' action as a common articulation against rural overlords, urban bourgeoisie, or bureaucratic officialdom. But the structural characteristics of peasant society may be a counterveiling force to such class-like articulation: the vertical segmentation favouring a corporate loyalty to household, homestead, or estate; the localistic orientation due to ecological situation; and the atomistic fragmentation due to isolating conditions of work and geographical setting. The partial encapsulation of local community also implies that the class characteristics of peasantry are a matter of degree and of concrete historical situation; even withdrawal from market relationships, back to the closed corporate unity, may be seen as a strategic reaction to pressure from outside.[53] Shanin demonstrates clearly, moreover, how a *mélange* of kin, economic, and social relations changing seasonally and over time accounts for the low or even multiple 'classness' of peasantry.[54] His analytical summary deserves quotation:

> The main quality in the peasants' position in society consists in their being, on the one hand, a social class (one of low 'classness' and on the whole dominated by other classes) and, on the other, 'a different world' – a highly self-sufficient 'society in itself', bearing the elements of a separate distinctive and closed pattern of social relations. The peasantry is the social phenomenon in which the Marxist approach to class analysis meets the main conceptual dichotomies of non-Marxist sociological thinking; Maine's brotherhood versus economic competition; de Coulange's familistic versus individualistic; Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* or Durkheim's mechanic (segmentary) versus organic societies ... This unique duality ('class' and 'society') leads to conceptual difficulties, yet may well serve as a qualitative definition of the peasantry – especially when differentiating this entity from wider, more amorphous groupings such as 'middle classes', 'exploited masses' or 'remnants of feudalism'.[55]

This determination seems theoretically fruitful. It implies an intrinsic tension between horizontal class identity on the one hand, and vertical *verzuiling* into local communities – which are tied to the wider order as 'part-societies' – on the other. While the (more or less rudimentary) *class* character of peasantry stems from the contradictions within the wider socio-economic system itself, the *communitarian* features express the specificity of social organisation and mode of production.

The juridical assignment of *estate* bundaries around this 'other world' (cf. the second section above) may account for concerted peasant action beyond the local horizon, so far as specific conditions for organised struggle against the stigma of structured social inequality evolve. This illustrates – once more – how the transformation of corporate local groups into determined 'class' bodies of action is mediated by primordial institutional frameworks.[56]

The immediate conditions for the growing 'class quality' of peasantry are the intrusion of commodity relationships on the one hand, and the inclusion into the national polity on the other.[57] These processes of integration – in the economic and political field respectively – make the non-peasant order directly relevant to everyday peasant life, and stimulate the formation of supra-local linkages and organisation of a non-communal kind. From the viewpoint of peasanthood, however, this emancipation is a very ambiguous process. The intrusion of commodity relationships – and the concomitant individualisation of agriculture – generally split up the peasant communities, and accentuate the internal differentiation of the socioeconomic structure.[58] The growth of the market does not only imply integration in the wider society, but it implies that agriculture loses its role as the dominant field of production, and is left behind in a secondary position. Accumulation of capital increasingly takes place in the dominant industrial and financial sectors, to which agriculture becomes subordinated, but to which it provides urbanised labourers, drained off from the surplus population of the hinterland.

Technical modernisation, cultural diffusion, and integrative communication systems draw the peasantry into the national society and strengthen their possibilities for associational and political articulation at the national level. The clue to this (potentially) favoured position in an integrated nation-state is sheer numerical weight. But at the same time this emancipated position is threatened, since the technical improvement which has transformed agriculture is also diminishing the proportion of the population that is engaged in agriculture, and where industrial competition may render the peasant economically useless.[59] This process means that the increasing demand for agricultural produce which accompanies urbanisation requires greater productivity in agriculture, while this only can be attained by methods which imply a reduced number of peasants.

This paradoxical development implies that peasantry is an intrinsically ambiguous phenomenon, although the situation is not universally valid. *Boserup* argues, to phrase it moderately, that the pressure of rural population growth under certain conditions may stimulate innovations in agricultural productivity, particularly when primitive slash-and-burn cultivation is the initial technique.[60] The paradoxical trend may also be veiled and distorted when industrialisation is inadequate to absorb the surplus labour force. Still it might be concluded, regardless of historical contingency, that the increasing class structuration of peasantry is concomitant to evolutionary propensities which obliterate the generic quality of peasanthood.

8. The Problem Restated

In most general terms, the conclusion which emerges from the previous discussion coincides with Giddens's opinion that:

> It should be evident that ... class ... structuration is never an all-or-nothing matter. The problem of the existence of distinct class 'boundaries', therefore, is not one which can be settled *in abstracto:* one of the specific aims of class

analysis in relation to empirical societies must necessarily be that of determining how strongly, in any given case, the 'class principle' has become established as a mode of structuration.[61]

We have analysed the class quality of peasantry from a similar perspective, but it should be added that this formulation applies to the *formal* structuration of class; as an aggregate of individuals in a similar position. Such 'quasi-groups' – in the Ginsberg/Dahrendorf terminology – are not manifest social realities, but they become so by the formation of common patterns of behaviour and articulation of interest. The quality of social class is thus accentuated by the effects of a social formation upon social relationships when the contradictions of the societal order put social entities in visible contrast to each other. This somewhat conventional view is, however, rendered rather intricate by the fact that peasant communities and households basically are genuine social *groups,* characterised by primary face-to-face interaction. Eric Wolf is thus definitely right when he states that the lack of an adequate theory explicating the relation between class and group bedevils the study of peasantry.[62]

But this problem should be taken to the core of the peculiarity of peasanthood: The question is not – at least not unconditionally – the normal one about how a 'class in itself' is transformed into a 'class for itself', but how class structuration intrinsically dissolves the communal group character of peasant interaction and thereby transforms the social entity into a different mode of being.

It also seems futile pretending to answer this question *in abstracto,* since it involves the complementary reverse of conceptual specification: the variety of peasant societies, the diversity of historical roots, the contrasts of contextual patterns. The argument is thus brought to the limits of the problem of the present paper.

NOTES

1. For a valuable analysis of agricultural enterprise and agrarian class relations, see Arthur Stinchcombe, 'Agricultural Enterprise and Rural Class Relations', *American Journal of Sociology, 67* (1961–62), pp. 165–176.
2. See, for instance, Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), and *idem.*, 'Peasantry: delineation of a sociological concept and a field of study', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie,* Tome XII, No. 2 (1971).
3. See the typology of conceptual traditions elaborated by Shanin, *ibid.*
4. Cf. Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (University of Chicago, 1956), and Clifford Geertz, 'Studies in Peasant Life: Community and Society', *Biennial Review of Anthropology 1961.*
5. See the extensive debate on clientelism in modern political science: for instance, J. A. Scott, 'Patron-Client Politics and Political Change', *American Political Science Review,* LXVI (1972), pp. 91–113; Robert R. Kaufman, 'The Patron-Client Concept and Macro-Politics: Prospects and Problems', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* vol. 16, No. 3 (June 1974), pp. 284–308; René Lemarchand & Keith Legg, 'Political Cleintelism and Development: Preliminary Analysis', *Comparative Politics,* vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1972); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Peasant Communism in Southern Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); J. D. Powell, 'Peasant Society and Clientelist Politics', *American Political Science Review,* LXIV (1970), pp. 411–425.
6. See the stimulating analysis by Ottar Dahl, 'Noen teoretiske problemer i sosialhistorien', (Norwegian) *Historisk Tidsskrift,* vol. 37 (1955).

7. About the English old regime as a 'one-class society' see Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 2nd. ed. 1971). Cf. also Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).
8. Cf. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).
9. The problem of class consciousness which is coined in the celebrated distinction between class 'in itself' and class 'for itself' is somewhat elaborated below.
10. Cf., for instance the, analysis of peasantry by Hamza Alavi, 'Peasant Classes and Primordial Loyalties', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 1973), pp. 23–62. It should be noted, then, that the class concept employed in the present paper differs from that version of Marxism which regards any society characterised by 'exploitation' – irrespective of the *means* of surplus transfer – to signify a 'class structure'. See the discussion by, for instance, Michael Mauke, *Die Klassentheorie von Marx und Engels* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlangsanstalt, 1970).
11. Cf., for instance, Shanin 1971, *op.cit.* See also Øyvind Østerud, *Agrarian Structure and Peasant Politics in Scandinavia* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, London School of Economics, 1974), ch. 1.
12. See, in the Durkheimian tradition, A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), and Redfield 1956, *op.cit.*
13. Cf. Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Prentice-Hall, 1966); Daniel Thorner, 'Peasant Economy as a Category in Economic History', in Shanin (ed.) 1971, *op.cit.*, pp. 202–218.
14. Teodor Shanin, 'Peasantry as a Political Factor', in Shanin (ed.) 1971, *op.cit.*, p. 240.
15. Wolf 1966, *op.cit.*, and Thorner, *op.cit.* See also the counter-argument by George Dalton, 'Are Peasants really exploited?', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 1974).
16. Cf. Østerud 1974, *op.cit.*, p. 27.
17. Cf. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock, 1974), on 'the domestic mode of production'.
18. Shanin (1971, *op.cit.*) labels these groups 'analytically marginal'.
19. Cf. Boguslaw Galeski, *Basic Concepts of Rural Sociology* (Manchester University Press, 1972).
20. A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Illinois: Irwin, 1966).
21. This perspective is elaborated in my article 'Nytt perspektiv på det store hamskifte', (Norwegian) *Historisk Tidsskrift*, No. 2, 1975.
22. Stanislav Ossowski, *Class Structure in the Social Consciousness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).
23. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959); cf. also Giddens 1973, *op.cit.*, ch. 3.
24. Max Weber in H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, paperback ed. 1970), p. 182.
25. See the comment by Giddens 1973, p. 41 ff. Weber's analysis of *status* affiliations, which stem from other criteria than market position, does indicate communities based on shared style of life. But this is rather a mode of group formation *alternative to* class position.
26. Ossowski (1963) notes the different angles of Marxist analysis: from the propagandist pamphlets based on the revolutionary appeal of dichotomic schemes, to the more scholarly historical writings, where the existence of several 'intermediate' classes is recognised. Cf. also Giddens 1973, p. 65 ff.
27. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, ch. 52.
28. Marx, *The Class Struggles in France* (originally written in winter 1850 and published in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*).
29. Cf. Marx, *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* (introduced by Eric Hobsbawm, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964).
30. In the Marxian conception it might be said to be *one* basic antagonism in terms of 'mode of production', while the wider framework of 'social formation' is included here.
31. See, for instance, Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, revised edition 1963).
32. See, for instance, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (MEGA, 1932); cf. also the lucid exposition by Giddens 1973, p. 30 f.
33. Giddens (1973) names the slaves of the Ancient world as an example, but this is hardly correct since slavery is basic to the Marxian conception of the Ancient mode of production, – cf. Marx in Hobsbawm (ed.), 1964, *op.cit.* The actual position of Ancient

peasantry is discussed at length by Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), particularly chapter IV, p. 95 ff. Finley also makes a critical examination of the adequacy of the Marxian concept of 'class' when applied to the Ancient world, – *ibid.*, p. 48 ff.

34. Cf. M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), ch. 9; Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Temple Smith, 1973). See also the lucid synthetical account – even on this point – in Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974).
35. Cf. Giddens, 1973, p. 31.
36. It should be noted that the same inadequate categorisation follows from conventional economic analysis. Cf. the alternative view on peasant economy elaborated by Chayanov 1966, *op.cit.*
37. David Mitrany, *Marx against the Peasant* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1951), p. 21 f.
38. See V. J. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers,) vol. 3.
39. Lenin acknowledged, on German statistical evidence, that the number of peasants with larger farms might *increase*, so that class affiliation should be connected to the actual concentration of highly mechanised intensive farming rather than arable area.
40. Mitrany 1951, *op.cit.*, p. 23. Cf. also George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 3rd. ed. 1967), p. 274.
41. See Karl Kautsky, *Die Agrarfrage* (Stuttgart, 1899). On the non-Marxist movement in Eastern Europe between the wars, see Mitrany 1951, *op.cit.*
42. See Andrzei Walicki, 'Russia', in G. Ionescu & E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).
43. On the intriguing controversy about the necessity of a bourgeois revolution in Russia, Marx's famous letters to Vera Zasulich should be noted.
44. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *Analytical Economics* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1966), ch. 11: 'Economic Theory and Agrarian Economics', pp. 359–397.
45. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Marx & Engels, *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950), p. 302 f.
46. Lenin, *op.cit.*, vol. III; Mao Tse-Tung, 'An analysis of the various classes of the Chinese peasantry', in Stuart R. Schram, (ed.), *The Political Thought of Mao Tse Tung* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 241 ff.
47. Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', *The Socialist Register* 1965 (London: Merlin Press); and Alavi 1973, *op.cit.*
48. Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class* (Oxford: University Press, 1972).
49. Cf. Alavi 1965 and 1973.
50. Cf. Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).
51. This transformation is corresponding to the change of a 'class in itself' into a 'class for itself'.
52. Cf. note 5 above. See also Alavi 1973.
53. Cf. Eric Wolf, 'Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion', *American Anthropologist*, LVII, No. 3, 1955.
54. Shanin 1972, *op.cit.*
55. Shanin, 'Peasantry as a Political Factor', in Shanin (ed.), 1971. This essay is also printed as an appendix to Shanin 1972.
56. On the dynamic relationship between 'estate' and 'class' in empirical terms, see Østerud 1974, *op.cit.*, conclusion and passim.
57. Cf. Stein Rokkan's model of a sequence of thresholds in political incorporation – Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1970).
58. See the analysis of the Scandinavian transition towards peasant proprietorship and individual land tenure in Østerud 1974, *op.cit.*, ch. 6.
59. Cf. Wolf 1966, *op.cit.*, p. 12, and John Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History* (Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 120.
60. Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965).
61. Giddens 1973, p. 110.
62. Formulated in a review of Shanin's *The Awkward Class* (*op.cit.*), and published in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 1, No. 3, (April 1974), p. 401 ff.