INTRODUCTION

Critical agrarian studies is predicated upon developing theory and empirics that emphasize the social dimensions of rural identities and power relations. Thus, rural behaviour can reflect a continuum of possibilities, from the rigid dictates of social structure and the ways in which this can socialize individuals, to the social autonomy of the person. However, in actually-existing rural worlds power is asymmetrical and relational, and thus the social dimensions of identity are reflected in sources of social power. While assets, incomes and their distribution may be an important determinant of power, critical agrarian studies stresses intersectionality, in terms of gender, generation, ecology, space and landscapes, among others, and in so doing does not exclusively focus upon assets, incomes and their distribution as the sole basis or expression of power in each and every instance.

Agrarian Marxism is an important current within critical agrarian studies. Agrarian Marxism refers ‘to over a century of work in the Marxist theoretical tradition on the “agrarian question”’ (Levien et al. 2018, 854), which consists of three interrelated issues: the terms and conditions by which capitalism does or does not transform agricultural activities by subsuming them to the market imperatives of the capitalist mode of production; the contribution of agriculture in facilitating the emergence and consolidation of capital accumulation both within and beyond the sector; and the impact of these processes on the political agency of rural peoples (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010). As such, it approaches issues of structure and agency in a way that is consistent with critical agrarian studies, but from within a specific theoretical tradition and a unique methodological perspective. ‘Classical’ agrarian Marxism focuses upon the ground-breaking insights into the agrarian question offered by Marx and Engels and the development of these insights in writings by Kautsky and Lenin in the late nineteenth century. It also uses the wide variety of theoretical, methodological and empirical innovations developed in the Soviet Union during the 1920s that explicitly drew upon earlier understanding of the agrarian question. The literature that emerged in just over 50 years is voluminous, but what is especially striking about it is the breadth and depth of rigorous intellectual creativity that can be found within it, the substantive diversity of the arguments that can be identified, as well as the pluralism that was central to its creative diversity. Thus, many of the central concerns of contemporary critical agrarian studies have their origin in classical agrarian Marxism: processes of enclosure, class formation and fragmentation, the challenges facing rural labour, the social origins of difference, the drivers of rural growth and social change in the countryside and the political responses of rural peoples. Therefore, this contribution will offer a selective summary of the key arguments made by some of the central theorists in the classical agrarian Marxism tradition. It will demonstrate that classical agrarian Marxism did not identify unilinear social processes but rather diverse, dynamic and recurrent manifestations of multifaceted and contradictorily changing patterns of social and economic relations that continually and complexly reconfigured rural labour regimes subject to multiple determinations and contin-
gencies. As such, classical agrarian Marxism remains remarkably theoretically and empirically coherent, providing the analytical tools and sensitivity necessary to understand continuing and ongoing processes of agrarian change in the contemporary world. For this reason, many within critical agrarian studies continue to rely upon the theories, methods and evidentiary techniques of classical agrarian Marxism.

MARX AND ENGELS

Marx’s analysis of the agrarian question was principally concerned with how agriculture did or did not facilitate the emergence of capital and hence capitalism in the rural world and beyond. Thus, as Henry Bernstein (2006) emphasizes, his focus was on the agrarian question of capital. To do this, as early as the *Grundrisse* and the notes that comprised the third volume of *Capital*, Marx carefully considered the relationship between small-scale pre-capitalist peasant farming and small-scale peasant production that is subsumed to capitalism. In particular, Marx focused upon how, through the transformation of the former into the latter, the emergence of agrarian capital took place (Marx 1973 [1939–1941]; Marx 1981 [1894]). In this reading, historical and contemporary peasants can be analytically approached as female and male agricultural workers whose livelihoods are primarily but not exclusively based on having access to land that is either owned or rented, who have diminutive amounts of basic tools and equipment and who use mostly their own labour and the labour of other family members to work that land. So, allocating small stocks of both capital and labour peasants are ‘petty commodity producers’, operating within capitalism as both a petty capitalist of little consequence and as a worker with little power over the terms and conditions of their employment (Bernstein 1991; Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985).

Marx identified three ‘paths’ of transition from pre-capitalist farming to peasant farming subsumed to capitalism (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2016). The first and most fully developed analysis of the development of capitalism in agriculture is that which was published in the first volume of *Capital* (Marx 1976 [1867]). There, the so-called ‘primitive accumulation’ that was witnessed in England used dispossessory enclosures by predatory feudal landlords, later supported by the state, to reconfigure the relations of production in order to physically expel a relatively prosperous rich peasantry from land that they did not own. This created a property-less class of rural waged labour that faced a class of capitalist tenant-farmers, beneath the dominant landlord class (Byres 2009). For decades this ‘landlord-mediated capitalism from below’ (Byres 2009, 57) was seen by many as the sole analysis offered by Marx of the development of capitalist agriculture, but it was not. In the third volume of *Capital* Marx identified a second ‘path’ of agrarian transition, namely peasant class differentiation, which is witnessed when:

> the custom necessarily develops, among the better-off rent paying peasants, of exploiting agricultural wage-labourers on their own account … In this way it gradually becomes possible for them to build up a certain degree of wealth and transform themselves into future capitalists. Among the old possessors of the land, working for themselves, there arises a seedbed for the nurturing of capitalist farmers, whose development is conditioned by the development of capitalist production. (Marx 1981 [1894], 935)

Thus, peasant petty commodity producers can stratify into distinct classes based upon their position as buyers or sellers of labour-power, a process that is driven by the market imperatives
of capitalism to exploit labour, improve productivity and cut the costs of production (Wood 2009).

Finally, the third path of agrarian transition was identified by Marx late in his life in a reply to a letter from Vera Zasulich (Shanin 2018). This path would witness the peasant community collectively slowly transforming itself into ‘an element of collective production on a national scale’ (Marx 1983 [1925], 106). For this to occur, land would have to be held in common, all community members would have access to the land necessary to produce their subsistence, membership of the community would not be based solely on kinship and collectivism would have to be capable of overriding private property. In such settings, peasant communities witnessed ‘dualism’ (ibid., 104) between, on the one hand, land that was owned in common, such as pastures and forests, and on the other hand individual peasant plots. With the emergence of capitalism communal areas were being encroached upon, and it was this that the peasant community could collectively prevent. As a result, the third path had a set of social relations that unevenly combined the progressive features of capitalism with a set of features derived from historically adaptable peasant social relations. Conditional on the emergence and introduction of new technologies that developed the forces of production in a way that sustained the position of small-scale peasant farming, and conditional on state support for small-scale peasant farming, cumulatively these social relations would allow the community to ‘reap the fruits with which capitalist production has enriched humanity without passing through the capitalist regime’ (ibid., 112).

Marx therefore argued that processes of capitalist development could, in agriculture, create ‘peasant dispossession by displacement’, or enclosure, ‘peasant dispossession by differentiation’, or sustain a ‘hybrid’ form of peasant subsumption to capital that maintains and sustains peasant communities where collective tendencies dominate because ‘smallholding and petty landownership … production … proceeds without being governed by the general rate of profit’ (Marx 1981 [1894], 946; Araghi 2009, 118). Moreover, Marx’s third path of transition demonstrated the highly political character of his analysis, in that collective political agency could transcend the structural processes facilitating the development of capitalism in agriculture.

A decade and a half after Marx published the first volume of Capital Friedrich Engels turned his attention specifically to this. In The Peasant Question in France and Germany, Engels (1950 [1894], 381) argued that cheap grain imports into Europe in the last 20 years of the nineteenth century had undermined rural livelihoods and created an agrarian crisis that was resulting in the slow dissolution of most European peasannies. For Engels, the only possible response to the agrarian crisis was a political one; however, ‘the doomed peasant (was) in the hands of his false protectors’—big landowners that ‘assume the role of champions of the interests of the small peasants’ (Engels 1950 [1894], 382). It was therefore necessary for urban working-class parties to become a ‘power in the countryside’ by producing a political programme that reflected the needs of the peasantry and, in so doing, create the foundations of a peasant-worker alliance. Engels’ emphasis was thus that the agrarian question must ultimately be about the position of labour and the expression of its agency. His concern was not with the issue of the emergence of agrarian capital, rural capital accumulation or capital more generally, as had been Marx’s central concern. These more structural concerns were however taken up by Vladimir Lenin and Karl Kautsky in the late 1890s.
LENIN AND KAUTSKY

Lenin (1964 [1899]) argued that the capitalist industrialization of Russia was breaking the historical interrelationship of rural agriculture and rural petty manufacturing as cheaper capitalist commodity manufactures for the rural economy created a need for money that could only be met by commodifying subsistence production. As subsistence food crops were commodified the disciplines of capitalist competition were introduced into rural society. Notably, as more was produced to be sold, the need to sell resulted in increasing specialization as a means of controlling costs, which further heightened dependence upon the market even as those producers that sought to sustain their market competitiveness found that markets could provide the basis of agrarian accumulation if the principles of capitalism were followed: expansion, innovation and a lowering of unit costs through scale economies. By way of contrast, those peasants unable or unwilling to compete in markets found that attempts to use markets to sustain or increase consumption while not being able to be competitive generated cash deficits which were only reinforced by the distress sales of output and the accrual of debt. In order to meet the costs of increasing market dependence deficit households would therefore increasingly engage in waged labour in an effort to avoid immiserization, which was performed both for the more dynamic agrarian producers and for industrial capital.

As agricultural commodity production expanded, peasants became subordinated to product and labour markets even as some producers produced for the purpose of accumulation. The result was the emergence, as Marx had indicated, of qualitatively distinct types of rural holdings which differed in their purpose of production and in their technical coefficients of production. One group produced for markets and for accumulation, while the other strove to maintain subsistence in increasingly arduous and tenuous circumstances. Accumulating peasant households sought to increase their control over productive assets in order to give a further impetus to accumulation. Deficit peasant households were eventually forced to liquidate their assets by selling them to more dynamic producers, in order to be able to cope. So a change in the distribution of productive assets—both means of production and labour-power—took place. For Lenin, petty commodity production would be torn asunder as the development of capitalism in agriculture proceeded with the emergence of capitalist exploitation, defined in its strict sense as the appropriation by capital of the surplus value produced by classes of rural waged labour. However, Lenin also recognized the substantive diversity that can be witnessed in processes of agrarian change, writing that ‘a theoretical economic analysis can, in general, only deal with tendencies’ and as such cannot uncover ‘a law for all individual cases’ (Lenin 1964 [1899], 111, 117). Lenin himself identified two paths of transition to agrarian capitalism. One, capitalism from above, saw the process of differentiation and the emergence of rural classes being driven by rural dominant classes as landlords transformed themselves into capitalists and forced tenants to turn themselves into waged labour. The other, capitalism from below, saw the process of market-mediated differentiation driving the emergence of rural classes of agrarian capital and waged labour in a process of peasant social differentiation.

It was in fact Kautsky who first coined the phrase ‘agrarian question’, enquiring ‘whether and how capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones’ (1988 [1899], 12). Herewith, he wanted to get a better understanding of ‘the role of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist forms of agriculture in capitalist society’ (ibid., 3). Kautsky emphasized a point made by Marx: family-based petty commodity farm production could depress living stand-
ards by working longer and harder, and in so doing could use underconsumption to sustain an ability to compete with agrarian capital driven by market imperatives. In such circumstances, according to Kautsky, capital need not wholly transform agriculture in a capitalist direction. Rather, agro-industrial capital could restrict itself to food processing, farm inputs and rural financial systems, using science, technology and money to subsume smallholder petty commodity production to the demands of agro-industrial capital while at the same time sustaining the persistence of petty commodity production. Indeed, the state might intervene to specifically support petty commodity production because of the political importance of rural interests, as the slow extension of the democratic franchise took place. For Kautsky (ibid., 59–197), this could be sustained over time, and would facilitate the persistence of the peasantry, notwithstanding the emergence of capitalism across the economy as a whole. Thus, the place of peasants in processes of social change need not be immutable; it was contingent.

CHAYANOV AND KRITSMAN

Given this contingency, Soviet debates in the 1920s on the place of the peasantry in the process of social change pivoted around two prevailing approaches. The first was the theory of the peasant household developed by A.V. Chayanov and the Organization and Production School. The second was the approach associated with Lev N. Kritsman and the Agrarian Marxists. Both men were theoretically informed and empirically minded agrarian political economists who sought to understand the realities of the Soviet countryside. Although Chayanov was not a Marxist, there is no doubt that part of his analysis derived from the insight of Marx (and Kautsky) that peasants could depress the rate of return to their work in order to sustain the survival of the farm; Chayanov called this ‘self-exploitation’. Nor is there any doubt that in his writing Chayanov explicitly argued that he was developing insights originally found in the writings of Marx and Lenin.

Chayanov offered an analysis of peasant farming in which intrahousehold resource allocation was determined by a trade-off between ‘the family’s single indivisible labour-product’ (Chayanov 1986 [1925], 8) and the effort required to obtain such ‘material results’ (ibid., 41) in light of a socially determined acceptable consumption level. Chayanov wrote that ‘there comes a moment at a certain level of rising labour income when the drudgery of the marginal labour will equal the subjective evaluation of the marginal utility of the sum obtained by this labour’ (ibid., 81). Chayanov called this the household’s labour–consumer balance. Clearly, family size and household generational structure would be a major determinant of the labour–consumer balance. For larger families a higher consumer-worker ratio might require an increase in the degree of self-exploitation. The need to restore the labour–consumer balance could then necessitate the acquisition of more productive assets, and in particular more land to work with family labour, so that household consumption demand could be satisfied. By way of contrast, smaller families’ ability to achieve household consumption demand and maintain their labour–consumer balance might permit them to shed redundant land. Thus, the attempt to maintain the labour–consumer balance in the context of changing family size would give rise to changes in the productive assets held by the family. Contra Lenin, rural inequalities would not be the result of socio-economic differentiation but would be the result of the pressures of generational cycles. This is called demographic differentiation.
Unlike Chayanov, who identified a seemingly unique peasant mode of production, Kritsman and the Agrarian Marxists argued that stratification over time would result in one dominant structure of rural class relations imposing a new pattern of social and economic development. In the early stages of social transformation, however, Kritsman argued that the situation was both fluid and volatile. While peasant farm households faced different opportunities, incentives and contradictions, Kritsman believed that in the early stages of social change the majority of peasant farms found themselves entwined within simultaneous relations in which they exploited and were in turn exploited. It was therefore necessary to trace emerging dominant patterns of surplus appropriation because these cut across the contradictory class location in which many peasant households found themselves. In so doing, direct class indicators such as the hire and sale of labour-power, the rental or leasing of land and the rental or leasing of capital stock including working animals would be important to document because they reflected surplus appropriation. They would not be sufficient, however. Kritsman argued that ‘the hiring of rural wage-workers … appears … in covert form’ (Kritsman 1984 [1926–1927], 140), that ‘an index of the growth of the economic power of the capitalist part of the peasantry is the growth of rented land, relieving the poor of their land’ (ibid., 141), that stratification might be driven not by concentration of land but by concentration of livestock and that usury and trade were important channels by which surplus was extracted. In other words, Kritsman and the Agrarian Marxists sought to identify the ‘growth of hidden capitalist exploitation’ (ibid., 128) that was transforming the countryside.

BUKHARIN AND PREOBRAZHENSKY

Chayanov’s and Kritsman’s central arguments on the extent to which peasants could be self-sufficient, producing their subsistence with their own resources, continue to resonate within critical agrarian studies. However, these arguments were embedded within the more general issue of the role of the peasantry in the process of accumulation in the new Soviet state. Nicolai Bukharin, one of the key theoreticians of the Bolsheviks, argued in the mid-1920s that a socialist transformation could only be achieved by strengthening the political alliance of the peasantry and the working class because of the agrarian character of the country (Bukharin 1982 [1925]). Generating the active consent of the peasantry to their being governed by the Soviet state in turn required improving the livelihoods of the peasantry by creating the commercial circumstances in which peasants could and would produce the agricultural food and non-food surpluses needed for the cities and for industry. Therefore, Bukharin envisaged an active role for rural markets. However, as Bukharin was well aware, this would encourage the development of agrarian capital and relations of exploitation. Therefore, Bukharin argued that democratic peasant cooperatives had to be strengthened as a means of offsetting the imperatives of rural markets, improving the livelihoods of all peasants including the poorest, and constructing political support for the Soviet state even as that state controlled key aspects of the non-rural economy, most especially finance. For Bukharin, social transformation would have to proceed gradually, by increasing balanced trade between agriculture and industry, in order to ‘guarantee first and foremost a development of the productive forces … of the peasant economy’ (Bukharin 1982 [1925], 243) so that increases in voluntary savings could serve as the basis for social transformation.
Evgeny Preobrazhensky (1965 [1926]) challenged Bukharin, developing the concept of primitive socialist accumulation, which he defined as ‘accumulation in the hands of the state of material resources mainly or partly from sources lying outside the complex of state economy’ during the period of structural transformation (ibid., 132). Primitive socialist accumulation required ‘the alienation in favour of socialism as part of the surplus product of all the pre-socialist economic forms’ (ibid., 133). In the Soviet Union in the 1920s the bulk of the surplus produced under ‘pre-socialist economic forms’ would have been produced by the petty commodity producing peasantry. So Preobrazhensky’s primitive socialist accumulation required the appropriation of the agricultural surplus of the peasantry in order to underpin structural transformation. According to Preobrazhensky this appropriation could occur in two main ways: through taxation and through the manipulation of the intersectoral terms of trade between agriculture and industry (Dobb 1966). The principal mechanism by which the intersectoral terms of trade could be manipulated was to be state trading monopolies that would buy farm products at below-market prices and sell industrial products at above-market prices; unequal exchange would capture the agricultural surplus of the Soviet peasantry for socialist development. Thus, whereas Bukharin saw peasants as the source of the political support needed for social change, Preobrazhensky saw peasants as the source of the resources needed for social change through rapid industrialization. Preobrazhensky favoured rapid industrialization so as to enlarge and strengthen the industrial working class, which he saw as the main source of political support for socialist transformation (Erlich 1960). The two, like Lenin and Kautsky and Chayanov and Kritsman, had strongly contrasting views on the place of peasants in processes of social transformation, the emergence of agrarian capital, accumulation and the political implications of such structural changes.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, classical agrarian Marxism demonstrated substantive diversity in the arguments that it developed. This diversity is demonstrated in the theoretical, methodological and empirical innovations that can be found within it, which in turn shows the extent to which pluralism was central to its creative diversity. Moreover, the central concerns of classical agrarian Marxism, of rural class formation and dissolution, accumulation and the political relationships within and between rural and non-rural classes, are those of critical agrarian studies, which suggest why agrarian Marxism is an important current within critical agrarian studies. So: in what ways are critical agrarian studies and classical agrarian Marxism different? Here, it is possible to identify two clear divides.

First, critical agrarian studies tends to understand contemporary capital as national and international phenomena, subsuming the rural and imposing processes upon rural dynamics. As a result, within critical agrarian studies the emphasis of many academics and activists is now squarely upon understanding the agrarian question of rural labour. The formation of agrarian capital, processes of exclusively rural accumulation and the role of industrialization in social transformation are the province of only a minority of those working within critical agrarian studies.

Classical agrarian Marxism offers a different perspective. It recognizes that newly emergent capital is always local, and that it is itself subsumed to sub-national capital, which is itself subsumed to national capital, which is in turn subsumed to global capital. In other words,
capital is stratified, and this has implications understanding agrarian change. While peasants and rural labour are subsumed to global capital the first site of that subsumption is usually sub-national and newly emergent local capital that arises in local towns, their peripheries and in the countryside, and thus relations of exploitation that result from local capital—labour relations continue to shape the lives and livelihoods of rural peoples around the world. In this straightforward sense, then, agrarian questions of capital and labour still need to be addressed in the countryside.

The second divergence lies within the realm of intersectionality. Intersectionality is central to critical agrarian studies, with both structures and agency being understood through the multidimensional angles of class, gender, generation, ability, ethnicity, race, social status and other markers of identity. By way of contrast, many working in the classical agrarian Marxist tradition have not seriously integrated into their analysis any other category of social differentiation but class. Yet the interrelationships between class and gender, generation, ethnicity, race and other markers of social status and identity can be integral to understanding the political economy of processes of agrarian class formation and dissolution, rural accumulation and politics. By way of example, the central issue of the role of intrahousehold social reproduction and its relationship to the political economy of processes of agrarian class formation and dissolution remains, within agrarian Marxism, far too marginal to much of the analysis that is done (Deere 1995; O’Laughlin 2009). As such, it is clear that both classical agrarian Marxism and critical agrarian studies still have much to learn from each other.

FURTHER READING


REFERENCES

The diversity of classical agrarian Marxism


