

Peasant agriculture

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Extracted from Jan Brunner, Anna Dobelmann, Sarah Kirst and Louisa Prause (eds), *Wörterbuch der Land- und Rohstoffkonflikte*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 180 - 188.

Peasants as an analytical category have been understood in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most classic analysis of the characteristics of peasants is that of Wolf (1966). The two editions of *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (1971, 1988), edited by Shanin, offered a number of ways of conceptualizing peasants, and Ellis (1993) offered a clear exposition of the economic characteristics of the peasantry. From these varied sources, peasants can be thought of as female and male agricultural workers whose livelihoods are primarily but not exclusively based on having access to small amounts of land that is either owned or rented, who mostly have diminutive amounts of basic tools and equipment, and who use mostly their own labour and the labour of other household members to work that land. From this it is clear that peasants are not agricultural waged labourers that rely exclusively on their wages to sustain their livelihood. Peasants engage in both ecologically-based and market-driven interactions between labour and living nature, which leads to the mutual transformation of both, in order to productively enlarge the value created per unit of labour. Peasants produce to meet the reproductive consumption needs of the household, which can be defined in a variety of ways, as well as meet their obligations to those that hold political and economic power. In this way, the peasant household and farm are multi-dimensional units of social organization that bring together decisions over production and reproduction simultaneously.

Peasant farming takes one of two forms. The first is swidden, which is also known as slash-and-burn agriculture. This is a system of farming in which the vegetation on a piece of land is cut down and then cleared, usually by burning, to create a field called a swidden that can then be farmed. Swidden lands use rain as their principal source of water and are cultivated, often using rudimentary technologies, over a series of cropping cycles that gradually denudes the soil of micronutrients. They are then left fallow for a much longer period of time, in order to restore the health of the soils. With significant amounts of land being fallowed at any one time peasants undertaking swidden require access to relatively larger amounts of land. Multiple crops for food, fibre and fuel are grown simultaneously on individual plots of land and this, along with its attention to the soil, means that swidden agriculture usually maintains high levels of biodiversity.

The second form of peasant farming is called settled agriculture. Settled agriculture farms an area permanently and continuously, which therefore requires good soils and access to reliable water that can sustain soil micronutrients. Settled peasant farming operates on a variety of technological frontiers: from hoes and dibble sticks to sophisticated farm machinery running on hydrocarbons; from local landraces to transgenic seeds; from the use of human and animal fecal matter as fertilizer to the use of purchased chemical fertilizers; and from the use of crop combinations to manage pests to the use of purchased chemical pesticides and herbicides. Settled peasant farming can grow multiple crops, intercrop two different crops, or indeed grow only a single crop on individual plots of land.

Early peasant farming developed what James C. Scott (1976) has called a subsistence ethic, a social