

An examination of this question allows a better understanding of agrarian change within the context of the overall economy. A central concept in this examination is that of surplus appropriation. However, before dealing with surplus appropriation in the production process, a brief reiteration of other forms that have been discussed in more detail earlier is useful.

The first form of surplus appropriation outside the production process was agricultural taxes. I showed how these different taxes represented a major burden on the peasants. The extent of this burden is not to be judged by the share it contributed to government revenue, which declined with time, but by what proportion they represented of peasant income and the impact that had on the livelihood of the peasant. Regardless of its size, agricultural taxes represented a transfer of surplus from the peasantry to other classes of society and sectors of the economy.⁹

The second form of surplus appropriation was that of usury. Given the limited resources of the majority of peasants, they had to turn to moneylenders when crops failed to meet their consumption needs, to pay taxes now paid in cash, and to cover production costs for the next season. The dependence on moneylenders because of the lack of alternative sources of credit led, in the context of the increased commoditization of land, to the loss of land by many smallholders, who were forced to sell their land to pay their debts.

⁹On this and the regressive nature of taxation, see Asad, "Anthropological Texts."