

Chapter Five

The Persistence of Sharetenancy in the Palestinian

Agrarian Economy

When I first saw the share-rent levied -- the fat smiling Lebanese landowner collecting his half of the heap of grain from the kneeling cultivator -- I remembered that it was this very thing that the peasants of the Balkans had fought to abolish for over a century, from 1803 to 1918... it seemed high time that this system should be abolished in the Middle East.

Doreen Warriner
Economics of Peasant Farming
(1964) xxxii

The system of cultivation by metayers... contributes, more than anything else, to diffuse happiness among the lower classes to raise land to a high state of culture, and accumulate a great quantity of wealth upon it... Under this system, the peasant has an interest in the property, as if it were his own...

The accumulation of immense capital upon the soil, the invention of many judicious rotations, and industrious processes... the collection of a numerous population upon a space very limited and naturally barren, shows plainly enough that this mode of cultivation is as profitable to the land itself as to the peasant.

J.C.L. Sismonde de Sismondi
Political Economy (1814)

Sharecropping, the mode of agricultural tenancy by which the tiller is remunerated for his labour by a share of the yield, has been one of the most enigmatic features of agrarian studies. It has been variably characterized by its observers as semi-feudal (Bhaduri, 1973), feudal ('Ashour, 1948), peasant serfdom (Warriner, 1964), pre-capitalist (Wolf, 1966), and partnership in cultivation (Firestone, 1975b). This chapter aims at explaining the persistence of sharecropping arrangements in Palestinian agriculture over the last half century, through a number of agrarian regimes.

In order to place this discussion in its proper theoretical context, we will attempt to relate it to structural issues raised in the recent debate on the nature of sharetenancy in Asian agriculture. In particular,