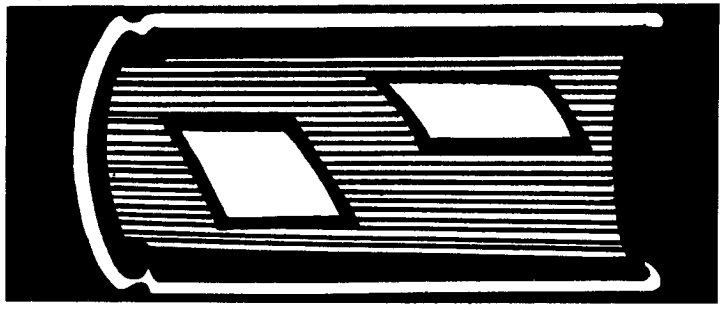
Review



FROM PEASANT TO PROLETARIAN: CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND AGRARIAN TRANSITION

David Goodman and Michael Redcliff
Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981. pp.238.

Reviewed by Robin Cohen

The principal arguments in this book centre around the historical and contemporary debates about 'the agrarian question'. In this sense, the sub-title of the book is rather more accurate than the main title, a situation perhaps not uncommon when considerations of commerce impell the primacy of alliteration rather than exactitude. That minor irritation aside, I found this book rich in erudition and spluttering with good ideas. The authors' comprehensive account of Marxist discussions of agrarian issues and their strong familiarity with a wide range of Latin American literature, is especially impressive.

The opening chapter takes us right back to the hoary issue of the disappearance of the peasantry. It is "hopelessly doomed" (as Engels believed); subject to increasing differention, with some sections linking with the proletariat (as Lenin argued); or likely to survive or persist in some form? Goodman and Redcliff provide a number of reasons why the transformation of the peasantry has been delayed, some familiar, some less so. The development of a 'second feudalism', whereby shortages of labour power compelled large farmers to concede small holdings, falls, perhaps, into the category of the familiar. But they also suggest that the modern Western European peasantry survives through a combination of additional income stemming from migrant remittances, government subsidies and non-agricultural employment.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the persistence of the agrarian sector rests largely on its maintenance of social security functions that would otherwise be borne at considerable cost to the state. While the argument for delayed transformation in Europe is generally convincing, the book contains one arresting set of statistics that suggests a rapid shift towards the original orthodoxy. In the E.E.C. countries, the number of 'economically active' people in agriculture stood at 42 million (31% of the total) in 1950. By 1970 it had dropped to 25 million (17% of the total) (p.16). The category 'economically active' should always be suspect as it usually misses the hidden women; nonetheless the decline is too great to be accounted for by sexist statistics.

Without particularly trying to explain this occupational shift in Europe, Goodman and Redcliffe plunge unhesitatingly into a discussion of contemporary theories of capitalist transition in underdeveloped areas. It is very well informed but slightly confusing as Frank, Wallerstein, Laclau, ECLA, Warren and the 'articulation theorists' are held up in quick succession to their critical scrutiny and found wanting. The hints at a first synthesis are provided

in the author's view that: "The critical problem is to incorporate in the analysis, Marxist concepts of capitalist exploitation and surplus value appropriation which do not require conditions of free wage labour and generalised commodity production" (p.54). This task sounds a bit like squaring the circle, but the authors find powerful allies in their quest to show how capital can take control of production without formally organising it or dispossessing the direct producer. Three writers, in particular, make a decisive contribution to this problem: Banaji, who argues in terms of a concealed wage relationship which lies behind the appearance of peasant production; Roseberry, whose article "Peasants as Proletarians" formalises the conception and looks at the conditions under which merchant capital *can* enter into production and create value; and Bernstein, who, somewhat more convincingly, talks in terms of the creation of wage labour *equivalents* in the countryside. As Goodman and Redcliff point out all three authors are able to show a real subsumption of peasant producers which is concealed behind the formal continuity of peasant household production and the small family farm.

The remaining part of the book elaborates the discussion by reference to empirical material drawn from Peru, Ecuador and Chile, with more detailed case studies from Brazil and Mexico. The authors deploy a distinction, first posited by Lenin, between 'internal proletarianisation', where tenants are turned into wage labourers within the confines of the estate (the *latifundia*) and 'external proletarianisation', where tenants with title expropriate the labour-power of former tenants who have lost even a tenuous control of the land, (the *minifundia*). This distinction naturally has many variants and sub-variants in Latin America, largely derived from the continent's subordinate status to U.S. capital and the mediation of the state in renegotiating the particular forms of real subscription of the rural producer to capital. The intervention of the state has been of particular interest in Brazil where it was possible to effect a class alliance between the ascendant industrial bourgeoisie and the rural landed classes, without the former demanding (or being able to secure) complete dominance. Thus, after 1964, programmes of 'conservative modernisation' subsidised technological innovation on large farms, intensified commodity relations on small farms and effected a link with the emergent agro—industry. That this process did not lead to a rupture between the dominant class allies, was predicated (I *think* the authors are arguing) on the existence of huge areas of sparsely populated or virgin land. The gains for each ally could thus be presented as a variable sum game.

The picture of the state acting as a successful executive committee in Brazil, is contrasted with Mexico, where the *Partido Révolucionario Institucional* is forced by its historical origins into at least a nominal political alliance with the *campesino*, even though in practice it has done little to prevent the intrusion of foreign capital or arrest rural impoverishment. They write: "Instead of an agriculture-led development model, the peasantry has fuelled the development of agricultural and industrial capitalism" (p.211). The Mexican case also exemplifies some of the theoretical arguments outlined earlier relating to the commoditisation of peasant agriculture. This is particularly clear in the many *ejados* that depend on external finance, technical assistance and state-supported irrigation programmes. As the authors argue, the means of production and effective decisions over the management of the enterprise have slipped so far out of the control of the rural producers that their structural position resembles that of a proleterian proper, let alone a 'wage labour equivalent'. In other places and presumably as a general statement, the formulation proposed by Bernstein has more weight.

In opening out a theoretically challenging and well informed encounter with the literature on the capitalist transformation of the countryside, the authors have provided a valuable service. I know of no other book which portrays so well the various ways in which the labour process in agriculture has been restructured by different sections of capital and the state.

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Goodman and Redcliff are also able to demonstrate – though this could perhaps be more fully elaborated – that once a process of real subsumption has been proved to exist, a lot of the arguments about the articulation of pre-existing modes of production with the capitalist mode are called into serious question. This position can also be used to undermine theories primarily located at the level of exchange on the one hand, and the various revivals of Chayanov's concept of the peasant economy on the other. Incidentally, it is a matter of some self congratulation to note that all three pathbreaking articles cited by the authors, have been published in 'alternative' journals – *Capital and Class, Critique of Anthropology* and the *Review of African Political Economy*.

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