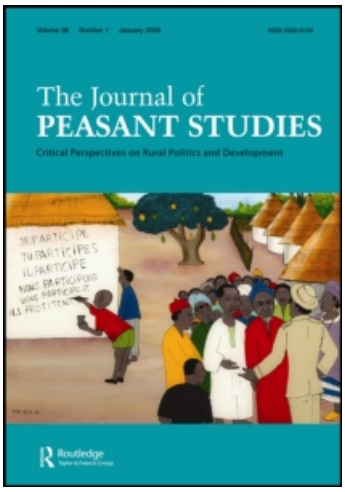

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Agrarian change and peasant studies: changes, continuities and challenges - an introduction

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Agrarian change and peasant studies: changes, continuities and challenges – an introduction

Saturnino M. Borras Jr.

Agrarian transformations within and across countries have been significantly and dynamically altered during the past few decades compared to previous eras, provoking a variety of reactions from rural poor communities worldwide. The changed and changing agrarian terrain has also influenced recent rethinking in critical inquiry into the nature, scope, pace and direction of agrarian transformations and development. This can be seen in terms of theorising, linking with development policy and politics, and thinking about methodologies. This collection of essays on key perspectives, frameworks and methodologies is an effort to contribute to the larger rethinking. The following paper introduces the collection.

Keywords: peasant studies; agrarian change; agrarian political economy; rural development; peasant movement

Changed and changing agrarian terrain

Even though there are fewer people now living and working in the rural world than four decades ago, it still matters a great deal for everyone what happens there. The dynamics of social change in developing countries during the past four decades have some features distinct from those that marked the first three quarters of the twentieth century. A brief overview of changes in the global economy and politics in general, and in the agrarian world in particular, during the past four decades partly illustrates this. Henry Bernstein (2008, 247) offers a summary:

> While controversy rages, and will continue to do so, concerning the causes, mechanisms and implications, including new contradictions, of changes in the world economy, politics and culture since the 1970s . . . there is little doubt that important shifts with far-reaching ramifications have occurred. . . . A familiar list would include: the deregulation of financial markets; shifts in the production, sourcing and sales strategies and technologies of transnational manufacturing and agribusiness corporations; the massive new possibilities attendant on information technologies, not least for mass communications, and how they are exploited by the corporate capital that controls them; the demise of the Soviet Union and finally of any plausible socialist model of development; and the ideological and political ascendancy of neoliberalism in a highly selective rolling back of the state, including the structural adjustment programmes,

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> economic liberalisation, and state reform/good governance agendas imposed on the countries of the South and, more recently, the former Soviet bloc. This is the context, and some of its key markers, that spelled the end of state-led development.

Michael Watts (2008, 276) adds that, 'one of the presumptions of new research focused on transnational processes and agrarian food orders is that the old or classical international division of labour within the agro-food system has been irretrievably altered in the past 25 years'. In examining the world food system, Tony Weis (2007, 5, emphasis added) observes that 'the origins of the contemporary global food economy could be traced back through a series of revolutionary changes, which once took shape over the course of millennia, then over centuries, and *which are now compressed into mere decades*'.

On the politics side of this transformation, the past four decades saw the tail-end of national liberation movements, revolutions and rebellions to which the rural poor had provided important contributions. During most of the recent period this type of peasant politics has been largely absent. Nevertheless, it was during this era when relatively newer types of agrarian movements, networks and coalitions emerged and gained political influence. Meanwhile, the recent convergence of various crises – financial, food, energy and environmental – has put the nexus between 'rural development' and 'development in general' back onto the center stage of theoretical, policy and political agendas in the world today.

Addressing these agendas requires some degree of clarification about critical theoretical perspectives and updated analytical tools. It is in this context that this collection of reflection essays on critical perspectives in agrarian change and peasant studies was put together. This essay introduces the collection. Section 1 provides an overview of persistent rural poverty and increasing inequality, agriculture and rural livelihoods, and rural politics as the context for and the object of the critical perspectives on agrarian change. An overview of the contributions is provided in Section 2. A discussion of common messages and implications of this collection is offered in Section 3, focusing on three key challenges to critical agrarian change and peasant studies: (re)engaging with critical theories, (re)engaging with the real world politics, and utilising rigorous research methodologies. Brief concluding remarks are offered in Section 4.

Agriculture and livelihoods, poverty and inequality

Although decreasing in relative terms, the absolute number of rural dwellers remains very significant. The absolute number of people living in urban centres had, in 2007, overtaken for the first time the number of people living in the countryside. By 2010, the estimate is that there will be 3.3 billion people in the rural world, with another 3.5 billion in urban communities.[1] The dramatic rural–urban demographic changes were quite recent. In 1970, the total world population was 3.7 billion, with 2.4 billion rural and 1.3 billion urban. The change in the agricultural/non-agricultural population was even more dramatic during the same period. In 1970, the agricultural population stood at 2.0 billion people and the non-agricultural population at 1.7 billion.

[1]Estimates by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation Statistics (FAOSTAT). Available from: www.faostat.org [Accessed 3 November 2008]. This is the same website and the date of data downloading for all subsequent FAOSTAT sourced data cited in succeeding footnotes, unless otherwise specified.

By 2010, this will be radically reversed, at 2.6 billion agricultural population versus 4.2 billion non-agricultural.[2]

Yet even as the number of urban dwellers overtakes the number of rural population, the percentage of *poor* people in rural areas continues to be higher than that in the urban areas: three-fourths of the world's poor today live and work in the countryside (World Bank 2007). In 2008 world poverty remained a largely rural phenomenon. Often, poverty is associated with hunger. By 2006, there were 820 million hungry people. This was a marginal reduction from 1990–92's figure of 823 million. Ironically, most of the hungry people live and work in the rural areas where food is produced.[3] At the height of the recent food price crisis, the FAO (2008a) announced that in order to meet the growing global food need, food production would need to double by 2050. Much of this needed increase would have to happen in developing countries where the majority of the world's rural poor live and where 95 percent of the estimated population increase during this period is expected to occur. Alarmed, the organisation called for a 'new world agricultural order' and called on governments to 'find 30 billion dollars' of new investment in agriculture and rural development, pointing out 'the amount was modest compared to 365 billion dollars of total support to agriculture in the OECD countries in 2007 and 1,340 billion in world military expenditure the same year by developed and developing countries'.[4]

During the past four decades, amid significant rural/urban and agricultural/non-agricultural demographic changes, agricultural production and trade have witnessed dramatic growth despite marginal increase in the total size of the world's agricultural land. Some key statistics are illustrative. The world's total production of cereals was 1.6 billion tons in 1979–81, jumping to 2.3 billion tons in 2004.[5] The global production of meat nearly doubled during the same period, at 0.14 billion tons in 1979–81 to 0.26 billion in 2004.[6] Production of fruits and vegetables doubled during this period, at 0.63 billion tons in 1979–81 to 1.4 billion tons in 2004. In the midst of massive promotion of export-oriented development strategies, agricultural trade increases were most dramatic during the past four decades: the total value of all agricultural exports in 1970 was $52 billion, it increased by about 12 times in 2005, or up to $654 billion.[7] Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay (2008a, 318) observe: 'The traits of accumulation have significantly changed ... In particular, the emphasis on the expansion of the home market that previously prevailed during the mid-twentieth century has been largely, but not completely, replaced by an emphasis on the promotion of an agricultural export-led strategy as the principal means of enhancing rural accumulation.' But while there had been dramatic increases in cross-country agricultural trade during the past three to four decades, the impacts in terms of food security, household incomes, and inequality within and between countries have been varied and uneven. Moreover, as Akram-Lodhi and

[2]FAOSTAT data; see note 1 for the data source information.
[3]FAOSTAT data; see note 1 for data source information.
[4]FAO 2008a. FAO calls for a new world agricultural order. Available from: http://www.ipsterraviva.net/europe/article.aspx?id=6769 [Accessed 20 November 2008].
[5]The combined output of China, India and the USA took 45 percent total share during this period.
[6]The combined output of Brazil, China and the USA accounted for half of the total output in 2004.
[7]FAOSTAT data; see note 1 for the data source information.

Kay (2008a, 325) remind us: 'the impact of rural accumulation on poverty should be examined separately from the impact of rural accumulation on inequality'. Indeed the neoliberal globalisation has resulted in increasing inequality within and between countries in the world (see, e.g., Borras 2007a). Edelman and Haugerud (2005, 9) explain that, 'Global economic inequality increased dramatically between 1960 and 1990: in 1960, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population received 30 times the income of the poorest 20 percent; in 1997, the richest 20 percent received 74 times as much'. They add: 'By the late 20th century, the world's 200 wealthiest individuals had assets equal to more than the combined income of 41 percent of the world's population; the assets of the three richest people were more than the combined GNP of all least developed countries' (Edelman and Haugerud 2005, 9).

Although agriculture remains quite important to the livelihoods of more than three billion people, evidence suggests that rural households have increasingly diversified their ways of earning a living, as partly discussed by Ian Scoones (2009, 171–96, this collection; see also Bernstein 2007, De Haan and Zoomers 2005, Ellis 2000, Kay 2008). Labour has become more mobile and in many settings casual. Labour migration has taken multiple directions and character: rural–urban, rural–rural, urban–rural, in-country and international, permanent and cyclical. Many of these migrant jobs are casual and living conditions inhuman, both those based in urban and rural spaces (Davis 2006). Bernstein (2008, 250–51) explains that the fragmentation of the classes of labour

> signals the effects of how classes of labour in global capitalism, and especially in the South, pursue their reproduction, through insecure and oppressive – and in many places increasingly scarce – wage employment, often combined with a range of likewise precarious small-scale farming and insecure informal-sector ('survival') activity, subject to its own forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity ...

He adds that, 'many pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment' (see also, Davis 2006, 250–51). Furthermore, the corridors of labour flows have also brought with them multidimensional socio-cultural changes including those involving information and communication technology, resulting in previously isolated rural communities, or at least some portions of these communities, now having access to dozens of international cable channels, internet access, text messaging and audio-video conferencing free of charge between people separated from each other by thousands of miles.

Agricultural technology has continued to break new ground, some aspects of which are contested and controversial, and not so different from the previous Green Revolution package of technology and agenda (Ross 1998). Much discussion today centres on a new Green Revolution, primarily for Africa, promoted by multilateral agencies and private institutions such as the Gates Foundation. Genetically modified crops have been aggressively promoted amid increasing opposition from some high-profile organised agrarian and environmental movements (Scoones 2008, Newell 2008, Otero 2008). Satellite mapping techniques have been put to wide use, largely to expand and standardise state maps and cadastre records. There are efforts directed at harnessing the potential of information and communications technology in creating and improving rural livelihoods. Nevertheless, the same package of technology remains generally beyond the reach of poor peasants and controlled by a few

transnational companies and their local distributors and retailers (Jansen and Vellema 2004).

Moreover, there are alarming environmental and climate-related problems facing the rural world today. If temperatures rise by more than three degrees, yields of major crops like maize may fall by 20–40 percent in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America (FAO 2008b). McMichael (2009, 139, this collection) points out that 'global agriculture is responsible for between a quarter and a third of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions'. There is a similar dilemma in confronting the energy crisis via biofuels: we would need to convert 25 percent of the current global cropland to biofuel production in order to reduce only 14 percent of our current fossil fuel consumption (FAO 2008b, 21). The question is that if global agricultural production needs to double by 2050 to feed the growing population, take nearly one billion people out of hunger, and at the same time fuel the transport and manufacturing sectors, how will this task be carried out without putting further pressure on the already fragile environment, without aggravating climate-related problems, without putting the task under the monopoly control of greedy corporate giants, and without causing massive dispossession of the rural poor?[8]

Rural politics

The dynamic changes in the agrarian world briefly described above have been politically contested by the rural poor both via 'everyday politics' and with the emergence of radical agrarian movements in different parts of the world.[9] This necessarily brings our discussion to the politics of agrarian change, and questions of agency of the rural poor. The 'rural poor' is understood here as a highly heterogeneous social category, and they include the peasantry with its various strata, landless rural labourers, migrant workers, forest dwellers, subsistence fishers, indigenous peoples, and pastoralists. This heterogeneity as well as the recent structural and institutional transformation explained above partly influence the character of rural politics. As Edelman (2008, 83), in the context of Central America, explains:

> Like the migration to which it is related, the growing 'pluriactivity' of rural households and the increasing inter-penetration of city and countryside complicate the question of *campesino* identity in ways that have ramifications for how people view their struggles and their participation in collective efforts for change.

He adds: 'The first thing to acknowledge is that the *campesino* of today is usually not the *campesino* of even 15 years ago' (Edelman 2008, 83).

The discussion of rural politics will follow the typology offered by Ben Kerkvliet (2009, 231, this collection): official politics, everyday peasant politics, and advocacy politics. Official politics 'involves authorities in organisations making,

[8]As of this writing, there are numerous negotiations between countries for land sales, long-term land leases or contract farming for food production: South Koreans in Madagascar, Saudi Arabia in Sudan, China in southeast Asia, Libya in Ukraine, and so on (GRAIN 2008).
[9]See, Le Mons Walker (2008) and O'Brien and Li (2006); and Petras and Veltmeyer (2001, 2003), Veltmeyer (2004), Edelman (1999), Moyo and Yeros (2005), Rosset, Patel and Courville (2006), Wright and Wolford (2003).

implementing, changing, contesting, and evading policies regarding resource allocations … Authorities in [state and non-state] organisations are the primary actors.' 'Everyday politics occurs', according to Kerkvliet (2009, 232), 'where people live and work and involves people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct'. Advocacy politics 'involves direct and concerted efforts to support, criticise, oppose authorities, their policies and programs, or the entire way in which resources are produced and distributed within an organisation or a system of organisation'. It also includes actions that openly advocate 'alternative programs, procedures, and political systems'. Kerkvliet explains that 'advocates are straightforwardly, outwardly, and deliberately aiming their actions and views about political matters to authorities and organisations, which can be governments and states but need not be'. Elaboration on each is offered below.

'Official politics' has been evolving in the neoliberal era. Taking politics seriously in critical scholarship requires consistent interrogation of this type of politics. This means confronting the issue of the state (nature, character, role, class composition, and so on) in one's analysis. Nation-states in developing countries have experienced a triple 'squeeze': globalisation, (partial) decentralisation, and the privatisation of some of their functions. Central states remain important in development processes, but have been transformed in terms of the nature, scope, level and direction of their development intervention (Evans 1997a, Ribot and Larson 2005, Keohane and Nye 2000, Gwynne and Kay 2004, Kay 2006). In this context, the recent convergence of various crises, including food, energy, climate and finance, is likely to re-emphasise, not devalue, the role played by nation-states and state authorities in the politics of agrarian transformation. International development and financial institutions continue to play a part in (re)shaping national and local policies for rural development in developing countries, despite the popular lament about the reduction of overseas development assistance for agriculture in developing countries during the past three decades.[10] Multilateral institutions, like the World Bank, continue to be instrumental in promoting neoliberal policies, such as those related to land.[11] Some of these institutions have been the target of protests by organised agrarian and environmental movements, ranging from demands for accountability (Fox and Brown 1998) to efforts at delegitimising some of these agencies. Locating one's analysis of the state in multiple levels, i.e., local, national and international, is an important challenge (Kay 2006).

'Everyday peasant politics' is the type of politics that remains almost invisible to researchers, policymakers, and agrarian movement activists, but can be very powerful in transforming national policies, as demonstrated by Kerkvliet in the case of Vietnam's agricultural policy during the past three decades (2009, see also Kerkvliet 2005). Such low-profile actions can lead to high-profile actions depending on changing political opportunities favouring peasants, as explained by Shapan Adnan (2007) in the context of Bangladesh. Some variations of the latter are also

[10]'The US contribution to [total overseas development assistance] fell sharply – from over 60 percent of the total in the mid-1950s to 17 percent by 1998 … In 1947 … US foreign aid as percentage of GDP was nearly 3 percent, while by the late 1990s it was a mere 0.1 percent.' (Edelman and Haugerud 2005, 10).

[11]See, for example, World Bank (2003), but refer also to Borras (2007b) and Rosset *et al.* (2006).

explained by Kathy Le Mons Walker (2008) in an analysis about 'overt everyday peasant resistance' and by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li (2006) about 'rightful resistance' in contemporary rural China, where abusive acts by local state officials usually around decisions on land use and control have been met with increasingly defiant and confrontational actions by peasants and villagers. While this type of politics has gained appropriate attention in agrarian studies during the past couple of decades or so, thanks to the compelling works by James Scott and Kerkvliet, among others, there remains a major challenge as to how to systematically integrate this perspective into the studies of 'official' and 'advocacy politics', as well as in development practice and political activist work.[12] We will return to this issue later.

Despite the usual ebb and flow from one setting to another through time, agrarian movements have been among the most vibrant sectors of civil society during the past four decades. Most of these movements are indeed rural workers' and peasants' and farmers' movements in the global south and small and part-time farmers' groups in the north. This period has also witnessed the emergence of other rural-based and rural-oriented social movements, including indigenous peoples' movements,[13] women's movements,[14] environmental movements and anti-dam movements,[15] anti-GM crop movements,[16] fishers' movements, and rural–urban alliances.[17]

The co-existence of threats and opportunities brought about by neoliberal globalisation has prompted many rural social movements to both localise further (partly in response to state decentralisation) and to 'internationalise' their actions (in response to globalisation). The seemingly contradictory social-political pressures (of globalisation and decentralisation) that are having such an impact on the nation-states, are also transforming rural social movements: more horizontal solidarity linkages, the rise of 'polycentric' rural social movement, and the emergence of radical agrarian movements that are, in a variety of ways, linked together transnationally via networks, coalitions or movements.[18]

There are distinctly new features in the current generation of agrarian movements that are important to point out as the context for and the subject of critical scholarship: (i) greater direct representation of the rural poor in (sub)national and international official and unofficial policymaking arenas,[19] (ii) more extensive scope

[12]See, for example, the issues raised by Malseed (2008) in the context of everyday peasant politics among the Karen people of Burma.
[13]See, for example, Yashar (2005) and Assies, van der Haar and Hoekema (1998).
[14]Refer to Deere and Royce (forthcoming) and Stephen (1997).
[15]See, for example, Peluso *et al.* (2008) and Baviskar (2004).
[16]Refer to Newell (2008), Scoones (2008) and Otero (2008).
[17]See Veltmeyer (2004).
[18]For an excellent discussion about the differences and possible connections between networks, coalitions and movements, refer to Fox (forthcoming).
[19]Before the existence of Via Campesina in the early 1990s, the only existing transnational agrarian movement (TAM) that had made a significant representation of the world's rural poor was the International Federation of Agricultural Producers or IFAP, which is an organisation of middle and rich farmers mainly based in the north. The politics of IFAP and most of its affiliate organisations tend to be conservative. In contrast, Via Campesina represents the solidarity of poor peasants and small farmers with class interests and politics different from those of IFAP's.

and scale of political work and issues taken up,[20] (iii) deployment of information and communication technology in movement building and collective actions to an unprecedented degree,[21] (iv) more systematic and coherent 'human rights' issue-framing and demand-making perspective and stretching citizenship rights claim-making beyond the conventional national borders,[22] (v) more assertion of the movements' autonomy from actual and potential allies.[23] Overall, contemporary radical (trans)national agrarian movements have been important actors in provoking or inspiring research agendas for critical perspectives on rural development in some ways similar to what peasant-based revolutions, national liberation movements and rebellions did during the most part of the twentieth century.

In sum, historically, the agrarian world has witnessed continuity and change in terms of general patterns of accumulation, appropriation and dispossession for capitalist development, as well as socialist construction (and later, 'de-construction') (see, e.g. Wood 2008). What has been emphasised earlier in the discussion, however, is the fact that the past four decades of the era of neoliberal globalisation have witnessed important changes in the nature, scope, pace and direction of agrarian transformations within and between countries. This can be seen in the general patterns of changes in property relations, labour, appropriation and distribution of

[20]The scale of Via Campesina's transnational movement or network, and the scope of its political work and influence have been unprecedented. This is despite the fact that the organisation remains absent or thin in many regions of the world (Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008, Le Mons Walker 2008, Malseed 2008).

[21]The use by TAMs of the latest information and communications technology (internet, email, electronic conferences, mobile phone, texting) is something new in the agrarian movement world. It has led to faster and relatively cheaper ways to access and exchange information, and to plan for and carry out simultaneous political actions, overcoming important traditional institutional and structural obstacles to movement building and collective actions.

[22]Radical TAMs' issue-framing and demand-making perspective is not totally new. Edelman (2005), for example, explains how most TAMs employ arguments drawn from the moral economy perspective (Scott 1976). However, TAMs have also embraced a relatively recent way of framing development discourse, invoking 'human rights' that include political, social, economic and cultural rights (Monsalve *et al*. 2006). In some ways it invokes a notion of 'global citizenship rights' by holding international institutions accountable, something that did not exist in any systematic way in the agrarian movement world before (Borras and Franco 2009, Monsalve *et al*. 2008, Patel 2006). More broadly, Via Campesina and other rural-oriented global agrarian justice movements attempt to reframe the very terms of development discourse by putting forward new (alternative) concepts such as 'food sovereignty' and 'deglobalisation' (see McMichael 2008, Bello 2003) and by developing alternative knowledge-building movements and knowledge networks such as the transnational agroecological movement in Central America (Holt-Gimenez 2006).

[23]A partly similar global advocacy on behalf of poor peasants and small farmers had actually existed and been used before. It was not carried out by agrarian movements themselves, but by intermediary NGOs. When Via Campesina was established in the early 1990s, one of the first things it did was to define its 'universal' identity (i.e., 'people of the land') and partly, and perhaps more implicitly, its class composition (i.e., poor peasants and small farmers), clarify its representation claims (i.e., 'non-mediated') and preferred form of actions (i.e., 'direct' combining confrontation and negotiation), and declared that intermediary NGOs should stop representing poor peasants and small farmers. This demand is broadly within the global civil society popular saying, 'not about us without us'. Indeed, these radical TAMs have created a distinct 'citizenship space' at the global level that did not exist before that in turn would alter the 'political opportunity structure' for their affiliate movements at the local, national and international levels (Borras and Franco 2009, see also Tarrow 2005, Borras 2008, Edelman 2003, 2008, Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2008, Desmarais 2007, Biekart and Jelsma 1994).

agrarian income and wealth, and the ways in which agrarian surpluses are disposed and invested, among others.[24] As Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2008a, 317) explain, neoliberal globalisation has 'altered the land-, labour- and capital-intensity of production, reconfiguring the rural production process in ways that may, or may not, affect processes that expand the commodification of labour and alter the purpose of production from production for use to production for exchange.' This is a highly dynamic, but uneven process from one society to the other. Meanwhile, persistent poverty and increasing inequality are among the outcomes of neoliberal globalisation, and inequality tends to be de-emphasised if not completely ignored in mainstream development discourse largely because, as O'Laughlin (2007, 42) argues, 'Inequality is difficult to conceptualise within the neoclassical language of prescriptive commodification and individual choice.' The rural poor have actively engaged such transformations in a variety of ways, ranging from quiescence to resistance. Just as the agrarian transformations themselves are politically contested, so are the interpretations of and the political strategies to influence these transformations. The development policy and academic world do not have consensus about the causes and consequences of such agrarian development processes. This has provoked recent vibrant debates and discussions within and between broad theoretical camps, e.g., materialist political economy,[25] sustainable livelihood approaches,[26] and mainstream development policy circles.[27]

Stepping back and taking a longer view, we see two broad positions that are discernible among the various important theoretical perspectives on rural development today, and according to Bernstein (2007), these are 'residual' and 'relational'. The former is based on the belief that the cause of poverty of the rural poor is their being excluded from the market and its benefits; the solution is to bring the market to the rural poor, or the rural poor to the market. The latter is founded on the belief that the cause of poverty is the very terms of poor people's insertion into particular patterns of social relations; the solutions therefore are transformative policies and political processes that restructure such social relations.[28] For *critical* perspectives in agrarian change and peasant studies, it is important to always locate one's analysis of agrarian transformation within a *relational* perspective. It is this perspective that holds together the contributions to this collection.

Introduction to the collection

The essays in this collection follow the general theme of continuity, change and challenges in critical perspectives in agrarian change and peasant studies. It is not exhaustive in terms of thematic coverage. But as the reader will soon discover, the

[24]See, for example, Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2008b), Ramachandran and Swaminathan (2003), Bryceson, Kay and Mooij (2000), Rigg (2006), and Spoor (2008).
[25]See, for example, the excellent volume edited by Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2008b).
[26]See, for example, De Haan and Zoomers (2005). Scoones (2009) offers an excellent critical reflection in the context of sustainable rural livelihoods approach.
[27]See, for example, the World Bank's *World development report 2008* (World Bank 2007) which is more eclectic than a usual neoliberal policy framework on this subject.
[28]In a similar fashion, Bridget O'Laughlin (2008, 199) argues that, 'Southern Africa's agrarian crisis is rooted not in what it does not have – liberal economic and political institutions – but in what it does have: a history of integration into global markets and the class relations of capitalism through violence and colonial domination.'

present collection covers substantial ground in the field. The nine contributions are authored by leading scholars in agrarian studies.

The first contribution provides us with a macro, historical perspective about national agrarian transformation, peasant differentiation and class struggle using a political economy method in the best tradition of great agrarian comparative scholars such as Barrington Moore Jr. (1967). *Terence J. Byres* examines three different paths of capitalist agrarian transition, namely, those that occurred in England, France and Prussia. These three countries represent what Byres calls 'landlord-mediated capitalism from below', 'capitalism delayed', and 'capitalism from above', respectively. He argues that 'the character of the landlord class and of class struggle have determined both the timing of each transition and the nature of the transition'. He explains that the state has always played a critical part in any transition. He also argues that 'the differentiation of the peasantry is central to transformation: it is not an outcome but a determining variable'.[29] Differentiation of the peasantry feeds into and interacts with the landlord class and class struggle, these three being critical to the eventual outcome.

After Byres' discussion about broad patterns of agrarian transition to capitalism, highlighting class struggle and peasant differentiation, among others, the collection presents an essay by *Henry Bernstein* on V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov, picking up on some of the issues discussed by Byres, focusing on some aspects of the 'Lenin–Chayanov debate' on differentiation, and reflecting on the legacies of two of the most influential thinkers in agrarian studies. Bernstein outlines the differences (and similarities) between Lenin and Chayanov on a number of issues, including their works on agrarian issues, explanation of agrarian change, ideas about productivity, model of development, and legacies. He explains that these 'are offered in the hope of clarifying and stimulating consideration of patterns of agrarian change today: how they differ from, and might be illuminated by, past experiences and the ideas they generated.' Meanwhile, *Teodor Shanin's* essay focuses briefly on the key ideas of Chayanov before elaborating on what he calls the 'treble death' of Chayanov and his 'resurrection' in post-Soviet social sciences. In doing so, Shanin offers a concise discussion of the specific context of each period ('when Chayanov died'), examining the struggles between Chayanov's ideas on peasant economy and development on the one hand and those who oppose them on the other.

The first three essays deal directly with the classic debates in agrarian political economy involving ideas by Marx, Lenin and Chayanov, among others, and the ways in which these have influenced rural development in theory and practice, past and present. The next contribution, by *Cristóbal Kay*, transitions from this set of classic thought and jumps to the 1970s–80s (now classic) debate around the 'urban bias' thesis that was largely provoked by the 1970s work of Michael Lipton (1977), and criticised by several scholars; see, for example, contributions to Harriss (1982). Kay re-examines the debate between 'agriculture first' versus 'industry first' positions (see also Saith 1990). His essay 'reviews some of the main interpretations in development studies on agriculture's contribution to economic development.' The

[29]The social differentiation of the peasantry, as elaborately argued and explained by Lenin (Lenin 2004; original 1899), has been one of the most debated topics in agrarian studies. Despite, or perhaps because of this, there is some confusion in many of the studies and debates about this subject that Ben White (1989) has earlier pointed out. He offers a useful analytical framework for carrying out research inquiring into this question.

agrarian transformations that occurred, and the development strategies pursued, in East Asia and Latin America are examined from a comparative perspective. His main argument is that 'a development strategy which creates and enhances the synergies between agriculture and industry and goes beyond the rural–urban divide offers the best possibilities for generating a process of rural development able to eradicate rural poverty.'

Philip McMichael provides a 'food regime' analysis, which is a specific analytical framework that was originally conceptualised by Harriet Friedmann (1987) and later developed by her and McMichael. It is a perspective that explains 'the strategic role of agriculture and food in the construction of the world capitalist economy.' McMichael explains that this particular framework 'identifies stable periods of capital accumulation associated with particular configurations of geopolitical power, conditioned by forms of agricultural production and consumption relations within and across national spaces.' He argues that 'contradictory relations within food regimes produce crisis, transformation, and transition to successor regimes.' The essay 'traces the development of food regime analysis in relation to historical and intellectual trends over the past two decades, arguing that food regime analysis underlines agriculture's foundational role in political economy/ecology.'

Ian Scoones offers a reflection essay on 'sustainable rural livelihoods approaches', a more recent perspective in rural development studies that has gained currency within the international donor agency community, among others, during the past ten years or so (see also Scoones 1998, Bebbington 1999). He guides the reader back to the origins of this particular approach, and how it has developed over time. He offers an 'historical review of key moments in debates about rural livelihoods, identifying the tensions, ambiguities and challenges of such approaches.' He has identified key challenges, such as the need to bring issues of power and class, among others, into the centre of livelihoods perspectives. He thinks that 'this will enhance the capacity of livelihoods perspectives to address key lacunae in recent discussions, including questions of knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics.'

In her paper *Shahra Razavi* explains that during the past few decades, critical perspectives on rural development have 'benefited from the insights offered by feminist scholars whose intellectual project has been to bring into the political economy of agrarian change the pervasiveness of gender relations and their interconnections with broader processes of social change.' Razavi shows some of the key contributions of feminist scholarship to agrarian studies, including that in (re)conceptualising households 'and their connections to broader economic and political structures.' But she also shows 'the extent to which these have been taken up by mainstream debates', where 'the complexities of this research have been sanitised and distorted by neoclassical economists and powerful development organisations that speak the same language', or, 'alternatively ignored and sidelined by some of the political economists of agrarian change.'

Ben Kerkvliet's essay analyses the importance of politics in agrarian transformation. He explains however that 'politics in peasant societies is mostly the everyday' type, so that if we were to look only for politics 'in conventional places and forms, much would be missed about villagers' political thought and actions as well as relationships between political life in rural communities and the political systems in which they are located.' He does not dismiss the importance of the two other types of politics, namely, official politics and advocacy politics. He makes clear, however, the differences and possible overlaps between the everyday forms and the other two

types. He concludes by suggesting that, 'in addition to better understanding peasant societies, the concept of everyday politics makes us – researchers – further aware of, and realise the importance of, our own everyday political behaviour' (see also Kerkvliet 1993, 2005).

Finally, *Marc Edelman* examines some approaches in 'analysing and managing relations between rural activists and academic researchers.' He argues that 'social movements engage in knowledge production practices much like those of academic and NGO-affiliated researchers' and that 'the boundaries between activists and researchers are not always as sharp as is sometimes claimed. These blurred boundaries and shared practices can create synergies in activist–academic relations' (2009, 245). He then examines tensions in the relationship. He also discusses 'the pros and cons ... of several models of activist–researcher relations, ranging from "militant" or "engaged" research to the contractual agreement between a movement and those involved in research on it' (2009, 245). He argues

> that one of the most useful contributions of academic researchers to social movements may be reporting patterns in the testimony of people in the movement's targeted constituency who are sympathetic to movement objectives but who feel alienated or marginalised by one or another aspect of movement discourse or practice.

The nine essays are very different from each other in terms of focus, but all of these touch on the themes of changes, continuities and challenges in theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches in critical agrarian change and peasant studies. In terms of period, there are two discernible clusters of essays in the collection. The first focuses on past and classic theoretical debates in agrarian political economy in explaining the dynamics of agrarian change. These are the essays by Byres, Bernstein, Shanin and Kay, covering key ideas by Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, Chayanov, Bukharin, Preobrazhensky and Stalin, on key concepts such as peasant differentiation, family farming, scale in agricultural production, vertical integration, rural–urban linkages, peasant politics and class struggles, agrarian transitions to capitalism and socialist construction. The second cluster is comprised of relatively more recent critical perspectives in agrarian studies that are, in varying ways and degrees, inspired, provoked and informed by past classic agrarian political economy debates. The second cluster includes those by Scoones on sustainable rural livelihoods approaches, McMichael on 'food regime' analytical framework, Razavi on gender perspectives, Kerkvliet on everyday politics in peasant societies, and Edelman on academic–activist research. Altogether, these essays provide us with excellent, multiple analytical handles for dealing with the difficult challenge of interpreting – and changing – current conditions in the rural world.

Common messages and implications

Having briefly situated this collection within the context of changed and changing global agrarian terrain, and having introduced the various contributions, we now turn to specifying some common messages and implications that can be drawn from this collection and that are relevant in critical perspectives on rural development. By common messages and implications we mean key themes which all, or a cluster of contributions have in common, and we deem important to critical scholarship today. While there are dozens of possible common messages and implications offered by the

various contributions to this collection, we have identified three central ones in particular: engaging with critical theories in order to interpret actual conditions in the rural world, taking politics seriously in order engage on questions of how to contribute to changing existing conditions in the agrarian world, and utilising rigorous and appropriate research methodologies in order to equip us with the necessary analytical tools to carry out the first two tasks.

(i) (Re)engaging with critical theories

One key message and implication for academics, activists and development policy practitioners that can be drawn from the collection is the need to (re)engage with critical theories. Some scholars observe that 'peasant studies' have faded away from academic research agendas during the past couple of decades. In our view, it is not that researchers today are uninterested in peasants and peasant societies because many researchers are indeed interested and have ongoing studies about this theme, but perhaps they are less interested in engaging with critical theories the way past scholarship has been. For example, we will find significant extent of research interests and initiatives on rural livelihood diversification, but current research initiatives along this theme do not usually engage with theories of social differentiation of the peasantry and class (re)configuration and their implications for national development. Class and class analysis, despite their relevance and explanatory power, seem to have been dropped from (dominant) rural development studies as well as policy and political practice, as pointed out by Bernstein (2007) and Herring and Agarwala (2006), among others. Theories about the state have also become scarce in dominant development studies, including in some of the progressive currents. Kay (2008, 934) has observed that in the so-called 'new rurality approach' in rural development studies, there is an absence of 'class analysis and of the political forces which shape the State.' He concludes that 'this inability to analyse the class dynamics in society and above all to appreciate the relevance of the process of peasant differentiation leads the new ruralists astray in their policy proposals' (Kay 2008, 935). Among the most important (trans)national agrarian movements today, rigorous class analytical frameworks seem to be not an important analytical tool in political practice, as pointed out by Borras, Edelman and Kay (2008). Questions of political conflict, especially class conflict, and power have never been important features of recent dominant perspectives in rural development studies, as argued by John Harriss (2002a), as admitted by Scoones (2009), and as raised earlier by Bridget O'Laughlin (2004) in the case of sustainable rural livelihood approaches (see also O'Laughlin 2008). Two common insights around the issue of (re)engaging with theories are put forward below.

First, classic theories in agrarian political economy about agrarian transformation, peasant differentiation, peasant economy, class and class politics, class agency, family farms, 'moral economy of the peasant', and so on are foundational frameworks for critical perspectives on rural development. The various paths of agrarian transition to capitalism as explained by Byres, the key message of Chayanov in Shanin's essay, some of the unresolved aspects of the Lenin–Chayanov debate as elaborated in Bernstein's paper, the role of agriculture and food in the development of the world capitalist system in McMichael's essay, as well as the debates around 'urban bias thesis' discussed in Kay's essay, among others, offer powerful reminders that classic agrarian political economy theories remain relevant

in understanding agrarian change dynamics today. For instance, a rigorous critique of the contemporary agrarian restructuring can be strengthened if it engages with some important debates in agrarian political economy, such as the 'urban bias' versus 'rural bias' debate of the 1970s–80s, as explained by Kay (2009, 103–37, this collection). Doing so can contribute to our broader understanding of the current food crisis and biofuel debates for instance, or can critically examine problematic terms such as 'rural producers' or popular development concepts such as 'entrepreneurship', as demonstrated in Oya (2007) in the context of capital accumulation dynamics in rural Senegal. The dynamics of agrarian transformation can be understood largely by having clear grasp of the notion and actual condition of the social differentiation of the peasantry. A better understanding of the impact of development policies on the rural poor can be achieved largely by having a clearer perspective on the class structure of a particular society (and other intersecting identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste and religion – see Bernstein 2007, 11). For example a well-intentioned 'pro-poor irrigation project' may benefit not the poorest tenants but the rich farmers and landowners; or, the socially differentiated experience and use of state law by different social classes and groups around different rural issues in the midst of current popularity of 'alternative non-state justice systems', as explained by Franco (2008a). A better understanding of today's rural politics, especially on issues of political representation and accountability in contemporary (trans)national agrarian movements can be attained partly by specifying the class composition within and between movements; otherwise it will be difficult to distinguish Via Campesina from the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), or understand Via Campesina as both an 'arena of action' and as a 'single actor' (Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008, Borras 2004). It is relevant to ground current agrarian and rural development studies around these classic agrarian political economy theories, rather than dismiss such kinds of theorising as old-fashioned meta-narratives that are of no relevance and consequence to critical perspectives on rural development and political activism.

Second, there are relatively newer paradigms that inform, unevenly and in various ways, current rural development work and agrarian advocacy politics, such as political ecology, gender studies, 'everyday peasant politics', and sustainable rural livelihoods approaches. Some of these perspectives are more theoretically developed than others.[30] One of the challenges is how to determine actual or potential analytical links, or absence of these, to the agrarian political economy theoretical debates. An example of how relatively recent theorising is systematically grounded in classic agrarian political economy theoretical foundations is the 'food regime' framework by Friedmann (1987) and as explained by McMichael (2009, 139–69, this collection). Scoones (2009, 171–96, this collection) has explicitly raised the same point with regards to the sustainable rural livelihoods approaches.

[30]Compare, for example, gender studies (Razavi 2009, 197–226 (this collection), Razavi 2003, O'Laughlin 2008, Deere 2003, 1995, Deere and Leon 2001, Kabeer 1999, Tsikata and Whitehead 2003, Agarwal 1994) or the 'everyday peasant politics' (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990, Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Kerkvliet 2009, 227–43 (this collection), 2005, 1993) with the sustainable rural livelihoods approaches (e.g., Scoones 2009, 171–96 (this collection), 1998, Ellis 2000, de Haan and Zoomer 2005, O'Laughlin 2004).

(ii) (Re)engaging with real world politics

A critical approach to rural development is one that has, in Ben White's (1987, 70, emphasis in original) words, 'a continuing concern for issues of *social and economic justice* as part of our understanding of what rural development means and as an essential part of the meaning of "development" itself, however unpopular this emphasis may be in some quarters, at some times.' This implies taking politics seriously. All contributions to this collection, in a variety of ways, raised the importance of (re)engaging the real world politics of rural development.

Development research agendas are partly provoked, inspired and shaped by those who are negatively affected by a given structural and institutional condition and who struggle to recast such relations. For instance, the peasant wars during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century have partly shaped, directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly, research agendas in agrarian studies during that period (Bernstein and Byres 2001, Roseberry 1983, Scott 1976, Wolf 1969, Huizer 1975, Paige 1975, Kurtz 2000). Since the early 1980s, national liberation movements, revolutions and rebellions that marked rural politics of many developing countries during that period dissipated. In its place, a few but important unarmed but radical (sub)national peasant movements and other rural-based social movements, especially indigenous peoples' movements, have emerged and become important actors in social justice-oriented struggles.[31] By the turn of the twenty-first century, the world would witness the dramatic rise of radical transnational agrarian movements (TAMs). Radical TAMs that are based among some important (sub)national agrarian movements have, in varying ways and degrees, provoked, inspired and defined contemporary research agendas in agrarian change and peasant studies today much as peasant wars did during the most of the twentieth century. This can be seen partly in recent research agendas related to global agricultural trade and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), biotechnology, the revival of land reform, as well as in growing research interests in development concepts related to new radical alternatives such as 'food sovereignty' and 'de-globalisation'.

Important works in agrarian studies have always placed agrarian power and its role in broader agrarian transformation as a key unit of analysis. We have seen this in the works of Barrington Moore Jr. (1967), Shanin (1987), Byres (1996), Scott (1976, 1985, 1990, 1998), Gaventa (1980), and more recently and in a variety of perspectives, of Hart, Turton and White (1989), Fox (1990), Nancy Peluso (1992), Marc Edelman (1999), Amita Baviskar (2004), Anna Tsing (2005) and Tania Li (2007), among others. A similar degree of importance accorded to questions of agrarian power and politics and its relevance to broader societal transformation has been raised by the contributors to this collection.

Taking politics seriously in rural development theory and practice offers a more dynamic, not static, view of agrarian change. It is the constant *political* struggles between different social classes and groups within the state and in society that largely determine the nature, scope, pace and direction of agrarian change, as forcefully argued by Byres (2009, 33–54, this collection). This has been underscored in the great works in agrarian studies cited above, as this has been the key message of more recent important works around state–society relations in rural development and democratisation such as those by Moore and Putzel (1999) and Fox (1993, 2007).

[31]See, for example, Petras and Veltmeyer (2001, 2003), Brass (1994), Moyo and Yeros (2005), Edelman (1999), Yashar (2005).

However, with the demise of most peasant-based, armed national liberation movements in the early 1980s, which coincided with the surge of neoliberal globalisation, politics and political analysis seem to have started to fade away from more recent mainstream scholarship and development practice. More often, politics have been (re)interpreted within 'administrative' perspectives (hence, mainstream policy promotion of so-called 'good governance', decentralisation, deconcentration, and so on). Worse, 'politics' has been interpreted only in its negative side, to simply mean 'corruption' or ineptitude of the state. Altogether, these justify the call to move away from 'politics', meaning, away from state-led development approaches, towards non-state, market-based development policy prescriptions. Many recent fashionable rural development strategies have been framed within the de-politicised approaches, e.g., the 'willing seller–willing buyer market-based land reform' and formalisation of land property rights (see, e.g., Borras, Kay and Lahiff 2008) and micro-finance.

Radical scholars in agrarian studies have consistently questioned the trend towards de-politicised development research and policy practice. For example, in an important scholarly collection that he edited in 1982, John Harriss pointed out that conventional rural development policy frameworks tend

> to focus upon the analysis of the efficiency of the use of resources in production and marketing, and to treat the social and political factors which are of central importance in the practical activity of 'Rural Development', simply as *ceteris paribus* conditions (or, in other words, they are assumed to be constant). (Harriss 1982, 16)

He would then pick this up again in a major work published as a book on 'depoliticising development' via his critical interrogation of 'social capital' as promoted by the World Bank (Harriss 2002b). In a variety of ways, all contributions to our present collection have emphasised the importance of questions of power and politics in rural development processes.

Along the same lines of taking politics seriously, some relatively recent critical scholarship has re-politicised development discourses around 'rights' and 'empowerment' that have gained currency in development studies and development policy circles more recently. For example, by asking 'how rights become real', Ben Cousins (1997; see also Franco 2008b) has brought politics into the 'rights talk'. By putting forward the notion of 'bundle of powers', as opposed to 'bundle of rights', in the context of land access, Jesse Ribot and Nancy Peluso (2003) have reminded us of the centrality of questions of politics in the struggles to control natural resources. Politics, in this context, also mean the contestations around the very meaning of land and forest resources, and 'land as territory' in the context of indigenous peoples, as earlier elaborated in Li (1996) and Peluso (1992), among others. Meanwhile, the 'rights talk' in the context of rural development has also brought with it the question of 'empowerment'. It is quite common these days to see rural development policy documents and studies invoking 'rights' and 'empowerment', but in a very de-politicised perspective. This is, for example, the case of the Hernando de Soto-inspired initiative along the lines of 'legal empowerment of the poor' where privatisation and formalisation of property rights tends to be treated as a 'magic bullet' (Nyamu-Musembi 2007). But as Fox (2007: 335) argues, the two 'good things', i.e., rights and empowerment,

> do not necessarily go together. Institutions may nominally recognise rights that actors, because of imbalances in power relations, are not able to exercise in practice. Conversely,

> actors may be empowered in the sense of having the experience and capacity to exercise rights, yet they may lack institutionally recognised opportunities to do so.

One important challenge, in the context of our current discussion, is how to locate one's analysis of the dynamics of agrarian change in the *interaction* of the various institutional arenas of agrarian power or politics. The field of 'state–society relations' offers us this analytical possibility. In this field of analysis, we have to examine more closely how key actors engage each other, leading to political change within the state, in society and within state–society channels of interactions (Fox 2007). A state–society relations framework in the study of rural politics has the potential to cover more empirical and analytical grounds. This framework can accommodate the more conventional 'state-centred' perspective that gives premium to state institutions and actors (e.g., Grindle 1986). It can also accommodate 'society-centered' perspectives that put societal actors, such as social classes and social movements, as independent variables in one's analysis, such as those offered by most social movement scholars and activists (see also de Janvry 1981). Building on their strengths, but addressing some of their weaknesses, one can benefit by taking an interactive analytical approach around the notion of 'mutually transformative state–society interactions' (Fox 1993, 2007).[32] The literature on 'politics-oriented analytical frameworks' rejects a de-politicised version of state–society relations perspective which goes by many fashionable names, such as 'state–civil society partnerships', 'government–NGO collaboration', and so on, which are among the favourite frameworks currently used by mainstream development institutions. Moreover, bringing in 'everyday peasant politics' into the interactive state–society relations analytical framework can greatly increase the latter's explanatory power, as demonstrated in a number of recent studies, such as Kerkvliet (2005) and O'Brien and Li (2006).

Ultimately, however, critical scholarship is concerned not only with interpreting the world, but with changing it. Critical scholarship in agrarian change and peasant studies takes seriously the questions of 'agency' of peasants and other working classes; after all, peasants and other working classes make their own history, although as Marx already warned, they do not do it just as they please and under circumstances they choose (Marx 1968; see also McMichael 2008). It is beneficial for academics and researchers to engage with development practitioners and activists for a transformative and mutually empowering co-production of knowledge and mutually reinforcing dissemination and use of such knowledge; an 'activist scholarship' (Hale 2008) – a complex but extremely relevant issue that is the main theme of Edelman's contribution to this collection. Theorising without grounding in political realities: political relevance, political urgency, existing balance of political forces, and so on, maybe important academically, but in the end will not matter much to those who are actually suffering on a daily basis and to those who are at the forefront of struggles to change their conditions. Development practice and activism that are informed by rigorous critical theories are more effective and relevant, and are less likely to cause harm within the rural poor communities, than those that are

[32]The state–society relations discussion here is informed by some of the most important and relevant works, including Houtzager and Moore (2003), Evans (1997b), Migdal (2001), Migdal, Kohli and Shue (1994), Herring (1983), Wang (1997, 1999), Fung and Wright (2003), Hart (1989), Sikor and Muller (forthcoming) and Das (2007).

not. There is of course a significant difference in terms of requirements in research methods and analytical rigor between actually existing academic and activist research. But as partly argued and explained by Edelman (2009, 245–65, this collection; see also Hale 2008, Fox 2006), there are spaces for possible synergies between these camps that are likely to result in mutually reinforcing processes and outcomes.

(iii) Utilising rigorous research methodologies

Critical perspectives in agrarian change and peasant studies require complex and rigorous research methodologies. All contributions to this collection have, in varying ways and degrees, emphasised the need for rigorous and appropriate research methodologies.

One of the key messages and implications, although not always explicitly pointed out by individual contributions, is that the *interplay* between structures, institutions and actors that is a key element in agrarian change is a key unit of analysis in critical inquiry into agrarian change. However, individual contributions have different areas of emphasis, some focus on structures (e.g., Byres), others on institutions (e.g., Scoones), and still some on the actors (e.g., Kerkvliet). But each contributor examines an area of inquiry not in isolation from, but always in relation to, the others. How else can we comprehend structural processes in the absence of serious discussions about agents or actors of change, as raised in the essay of Razavi (2009, 197–226, this collection) and as asked by McMichael (2008)? How else can we comprehend the actions of key actors without slipping into a voluntaristic view if we do not embed these actors within the structures in which they are located? Norman Long (1988) himself, in advocating for actor-oriented analytical approaches in rural development studies, has argued for the importance of locating such an analysis within existing structural and institutional settings. Or, how else can we fully understand, as raised by Thelen and Steinmo (1992), the role played by institutions in the actors' confrontation with existing structures?

Moreover, all contributions have suggested that if agrarian *change* is a key area of scholarly and activist interest, then the mechanisms and processes of change are necessarily important units of analysis for critical perspectives on rural development. This implies taking seriously existing wisdom on notions such as 'social differentiation of the peasantry', as argued by Byres, but taking careful consideration of nuanced methodological issues in analysing such concepts, as explained, for example, by Ben White (1989). This method of analysis forces us to confront, not evade, the messy complex reality of the agrarian world. The explanatory power of James Scott's (1998) notion of 'state simplification' in order to render legible complex realities and its problematic consequences on humanity reminds us of the potential benefits of starting with the messy reality of the world rather than with neat theoretical grids. James Fairhead and Melissa Leach (1996) have illustrated this point in their now classic study of forests in Western Africa, as has Amita Baviskar (2004) in her study of an anti-dam movement in India. In a similar fashion, examining the political economy of land reforms in South Asia, Ron Herring (1983, 269, emphasis in original; see also Scott 1998, 49) has made a relevant observation that warrants an extended quote. He said:

> The case studies [in this book] clearly indicate change induced by land reforms, though not always in directions indicated by reform rhetoric. This structural change is of two

> kinds – apparent and real. Though it seems contradictory to write of 'apparent' structural change, the usage is meaningful. Land reforms produce important alterations in the *observable* structure of agrarian systems – land records are altered, census data collected, reports are made – all presenting a picture of the rural world that is more congruent with the needs of landed elites, administrators, and ruling politicians than with reality on the ground. Landowners have strong incentives to show that they own very little land and that there are no tenants on it; reform administrators are pressured to show progress in implementation. . . . The apparent change is important because it is this data-built facade which goes into planning documents, policy debates, reports of international agencies, and all too many scholarly treatments. The distortions become social facts, the primary sources for understanding the rural world for nonrural groups who are, after all, the primary movers of rural policy.

Furthermore, most of the essays in this collection have also raised a number of methodological issues that are quite relevant to critical perspectives in agrarian change and peasant studies today. These include comparative political economy, cross-disciplinary approaches, and activist scholarship.

Systematic comparative (political economy) approaches remain an important methodology in critical rural development studies. Byres, Bernstein, Shanin, Kay and McMichael demonstrate in their contributions to this collection the broad picture of the agrarian world and agrarian transformation, and in explicitly comparative framework, either cross-country or cross-regional, as in Byres' and Kay's essays, or longitudinal comparative perspective, as in Shanin's and McMichael's papers. All of these contributors have taken explicitly political economy approaches that ask at least four fundamental questions: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with the agrarian surplus? (Bernstein 2007). In short, questions about agrarian wealth and power. Great studies about the agrarian world have taken explicit comparative approaches, longitudinal and cross-national or cross-regional, as exemplified in the works of Moore (1967), Kay (1974) and Byres (1996), to cite a few. Ben White (1987, 69–70, emphasis in original) explains that:

> [T]he *comparative approach*, requiring detailed analysis of the contrasting experiences of rural development in actual societies, with recognition of the particular historical, social and political contexts at national and local level in which agrarian changes take place, in which strategies and policies have been formed and introduced and have succeeded or failed. In this way we may hope to confront and come to terms with the diversity that exists in the real world – whatever uniform tendencies some abstract theories might suggest – and to learn from it, to see the ways in which general 'tendencies' interact with specific conditions to produce particular outcomes, and to understand in this way that 'success stories' may offer valuable lessons, but not directly transferable models for other societies to follow or for external agencies to impose.

The strength of comparative inquiry is further argued by Byres (1995, 572) in the context of the agrarian question, and more generally:

> Comparison is essential. It is, in part, via comparison that one might make the relevant, sensitive judgements about performance (in the context of the agrarian question, or more generally) . . . It is, to a degree, in comparative terms that one might conceive of change in a suitably nuanced manner. How, otherwise, might one understand the nature, the scope, and the likely direction of change? Comparison, moreover, may point to the possibility of a substantive (non-trivial) diversity of outcome. It is in a comparative perspective that one might reach for possible lines of causality . . . Comparison can clarify and make more secure the analytical judgements which we

> make ... It can open analytical perspectives. It can do so, when securely based theoretically, by extending our range of criteria independent of a particular context, and so allowing theory to be more nuanced in what it can reveal.

All the contributions to this collection are, to varying extents, cross-disciplinary, demonstrating the relevance and importance of cross-disciplinary approaches to rural development studies. In arguing for cross-disciplinary approaches, Harriss (2002a, 493–94) has underscored some basic arguments, including (a) contributions of disciplines other than economics to the understanding of development processes seems evident enough; (b) rigor is not the exclusive preserve of economists or of quantitative research; (c) different disciplines have different contributions to make and that it is very far from the case that all development research has to be in some way cross-disciplinary; and (d) there is a much-to-be-desired tension between 'discipline' and 'anti-discipline'. 'Discipline' in research is productive. Without it we cannot distinguish science or knowledge from opinion and are left floundering in a sea of relativism. Harriss (2002a, 494) concludes that cross-disciplinary approaches in international development are relevant 'because research priorities should be set by the practical problems that development involves, more than by the puzzles that are generated out of theoretical speculation'.

Following the last quotation from Harriss, critical perspectives on rural development may also benefit from collaborative academic–activist research approaches. This is demonstrated in the contribution by Edelman. If, as Harriss said, 'research priorities should be set by the practical problems that development involves', then collaborative research between academics, development practitioners and activists becomes an important undertaking. Co-production of knowledge and a mutually reinforcing dissemination and use of such knowledge among academics, development practitioners and activists are likely to address some of the key weaknesses of a purely theoretical research detached from the real world, or of a too practice-oriented initiative without theoretical and methodological rigor. Edelman (2009, 245–65, this collection) has specified important areas of tensions and synergies in academic–activist research, much as has been pointed out recently by other scholars such as the several of the contributors to Hale (2008) and by Fox (2006).

Concluding remarks

> The entire world is in crisis, a crisis with multiple dimensions. There is a food crisis, an energy crisis, a climate crisis and a financial crisis. The solutions put forth ... – more free trade, more GMOs, etc. – purposefully ignore the fact that the crisis is a product of the capitalist system and of neoliberalism, and they will only worsen its impacts ... To find real solutions we need ... getting speculative finance capital out of our food system, and re-nationalising food production and reserves offer us the only real way out of the food crisis. Only peasant and family farm agriculture feed people, while agribusiness grows export crops and agrofuels to feed cars instead of human beings ... Industrial agriculture warms the planet, and peasant agriculture cools the planet ... Genuine integral agrarian reform and the defense of the territories of indigenous peoples are essential steps to roll back the evictions and displacement in the countryside, and to use our farm land to grow food instead of exports and fuels ... Only agroecological peasant and family farming can de-link food prices from petroleum prices, recover degraded soils, and produce healthy local food for our peoples. (Via Campesina 2008)

Summarised in the excerpts of Via Campesina's Fifth Congress Declaration was the global movement's reading of the current global crisis confronting the (rural) world,

as well as their proposed solutions to the crisis. Academics, development practitioners and movement activists have been, and are likely to be inspired to rally around,[33] or provoked to raise some valid critical questions on the issues raised by Via Campesina,[34] either in their entirety or at least by some components of this set of issues; or, indeed by the 'silences' in Via Campesina's official discourse,[35] as well as about what Via Campesina represents (or claims to represent) and does not represent. The reason why the excerpts of Via Campesina's recent world assembly declaration were offered as part of the concluding discussion of this introductory essay is to remind us of at least some of the 'messy and complex' realities in the agrarian world – again coming back to the point raised by James Scott (1998) – that ought to be the starting point of critical scholarship in agrarian change and peasant studies.

Whatever position one takes with regard to the official discourse and advocacy politics of Via Campesina and other contemporary (trans)national agrarian movements (TAMs), it can hardly be denied that the issues raised by these movements are compelling and their advocacy strategies are relatively effective – enough to inspire or provoke varied reactions from different quarters, conservative or radical. One thing that has been highlighted by the Via Campesina declaration is that, today, perhaps more than ever, what happens in and in relation to the rural world is critical to our understanding of the broader world and the very future of human society. Confronting the issues identified earlier in this paper, as well as the question put onto the research agendas by TAMs like Via Campesina, regardless of one's standpoint on issues at hand, will require (re)engaging with critical theories, taking politics seriously, and utilising rigorous and appropriate research methodologies. These are the common messages and implications of the various contributions to this collection in the context of a scholarship that is critical in two senses: questioning prescriptions from mainstream perspectives and interrogating popular conventions in radical thinking.

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[33]As Araghi (2008,138) declares: 'It is the outcome of this struggle that will resolve not only the peasant question, but indeed all our questions.' Refer also to McMichael (2008).

[34]Refer, for example, to some of the issues raised by Bernstein (2008, and 2009, 55–81, this collection).

[35]Refer, for example, to the relevant discussions in Borras *et al*. (2008).

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