

REVIEW ARTICLE

The peasant is dead, long live the peasant!

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Edelman, Marc. 2024. *Peasant politics of the twenty-first century: Transnational social movements and agrarian change*. Cornell University Press.

Gill, Navyug. 2024. *Labors of division: Global capitalism and the emergence of the peasant in colonial Panjab*. Stanford University Press.

With the rallying cry of “No Farmer, No Food”, the cultivators of northern India farmers launched a massive protest in 2020, rising up against proposed agricultural marketing laws which, they believed, would re-regulate the country’s agricultural markets in favor of agri-business. A few years later and halfway across the world, European farmers raised the very same slogan in demonstrations across major cities in early 2024. Like the farmers of India, they too were grappling with intersecting crises of crippling debt, extreme weather, declining prices, and cheap imports. What, if anything, do these blockades have in common? Can these groups really be called “peasants”—and does this label matter? In an era when 90 per cent of global grain trade is controlled by five corporations, do these struggles constitute the last breath of the (forever dying but never dead) peasantry, or a resurgence of its revolutionary potential?

Two recent books take up these questions in distinct ways and with an ethnographic sensibility, even though neither are traditional ethnographic monographs. The first, Navyug Gill’s *Labors of division* (2024) is an ethnographically

informed history of caste and agrarian capitalism in colonial Panjab, while the second, Marc Edelman’s *Peasant politics* (2024) is a collection of essays (written over more than two decades) on transnational social movements and agrarian change from fields in Central America to the halls of the United Nations.

Both books make important interventions into foundational debates in peasant studies, including the classic “agrarian question”—associated with thinkers such as Vladimir Lenin, Karl Kautsky and Alexander Chayanov—of how capitalist accumulation transforms agrarian relations of production and shapes the differentiation of the peasantry. Many of these questions found a new lease of life in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of peasant-led revolutionary struggles and in the twenty-first century, in light of global land grabs and the expansion of racialized plantation production (for useful overviews, see Akram-Lodhi et al. 2021; Bernstein and Byres 2001; Edelman and Wolford 2017; Sajadian 2020).

Since its inception, a core element of peasant studies literature has been the question of peasantry itself: do peasants constitute a distinc-



tive social type, a category relevant to diverse contexts, and with certain essential qualities? As a term, the peasant has referred variously to the rural poor, serfs, “simple” or rustic people, and subjugated groups. The category is—analytically, empirically, and politically—overflowing with meaning, at once castigated, romanticized and revered.

In the social sciences, a crucial distinction was made, for instance, between “peasants” and “farmers” with the former oriented toward basic subsistence and survival rather than accumulation and expansion—these were viewed as “contrasting categories, with different economic logics” (Edelman 2024: 221). Prominent peasant studies scholar Teodor Shanin (1973) defined the peasantry as a group based on the unit of the family farm, a traditional culture, and land-based livelihoods—even as he recognized the existence of other marginal groups who share some but not all these characteristics. Although economic and political dimensions have been most central, the assumption of shared cultural attributes—a community “way of life”, traditional culture, and so on—has often been implicit within these discussions (Silverman 1979). At the broadest level, the peasant category has always been imbued with essentialized ideals of subsistence, autonomy, and land ownership (Watts 2002: 24). But did such a transhistorical peasantry really ever exist?

In his theoretically ambitious book, Gill answers in the negative, instead tracing “how the actual categories of political economy were in fact formed out of contingent circumstances that nevertheless acquired the explanatory force to describe vast swathes of human society” (2024: 19). The category he is referring to here is that of the peasant, “a general if not generic figure traced backward from the contested origins of modernity to the recesses of primordial times” (idem: 6). Unlike in western Europe where the peasantry was imagined as a unified homogeneous category, Gill argues that the Panjabi peasant only emerged in relation to new agrarian hierarchies in colonial India. In doing so, his book historicizes the unique South Asian

social formation of “peasant castes”—wherein the occupation of farming is sutured to hereditary and immutable caste identity. According to Gill, the figure of the caste-based peasant—so central to Panjabi society and indeed, to South Asian political economy—was never a relic of the past but a “product of the distinctive yet entangled forces of colonialism and capitalism” (idem: 220).¹

Through revenue settlement, census reports, and land laws, the colonial state ossified the heterogeneity and fluidity of rural society into distinct caste-based occupational groups such that certain castes newly identified as “peasants” emerged at the top of a new agrarian hierarchy while others were consigned to the bottom as “landless laborers”. To give one example, in a classic move of “colonial benevolence” the colonial government reorganized the Panjab land market to control land alienation to moneylenders. It proclaimed—through rather circuitous logic—that agricultural land was to remain only with those deemed to be agriculturalists (“non-agriculturalists” could sell but not buy agricultural land, and “agriculturalists” could only sell to each other). The question of “who is a peasant” was therefore answered through an enumeration of agricultural tribes—to the exclusion of those classified as non-agricultural, including a vast number of groups who were also working the land. Cultivation thus came to be conflated with caste and land ownership, congealing diverse understandings of agriculture into a fixed definition of a peasant or *kisan*. If the European peasant has always been understood in relation to its other, the industrial worker, as Gill writes elsewhere, the figure of the farmer is shadowed by the figure of the *mazdoor*, or laborer whose exertion in the field is premised on their landlessness (2022).

The book’s more wide-reaching argument hinges on a provocative question: “rather than London, what if Marx had been in Lahore or Ludhiana in the mid-nineteenth century and had to explain accumulation from that vantage point?” (Gill 2024: 62). Here, Gill highlights the distinctive trajectory of capitalist transi-

tions in the Global South, which did not proceed through dispossession from the land but, curiously, through its opposite. In the colony, peasants were not forcibly removed from the land but *tied to it* in often rigid, stultifying, and exclusionary ways. Here, “accumulation was an exercise of forging various attachments” (idem: 65), rather than separations, between land, labor, identity, and rural populations.

In pointing to the modernity of the peasant, Gill makes a pointed critique of classical peasant studies wherein “the figure of the peasant appears at once ancient, backward, and always on the verge of change” (idem: 231). Rather than analyze agrarian capitalism in the non-West as the outcome of failed, incomplete, or staggered transitions to capitalism, the book insists that Panjabi modernity was founded on the birth of the peasantry, rather than its death. Put more broadly—and boldly—capitalism did not eliminate the peasantry but *produced* it. In excavating this production, Gill forces a serious reconsideration of the foundations of peasant studies: the relationship of the peasantry to capitalist modernity, which was presumed to both require the existence of the peasant and facilitate their demise.

If Gill’s text dwells on the birth of the peasantry during nineteenth-century British rule, Edelman insists on its *re*-birth in a quite different historical and political moment—the anti-globalization struggles at the turn of the millennium. While each of the book’s chapters examines distinct elements of transnational peasant organizing—from its origins to its tensions and contradictions through concepts such as moral economy and food sovereignty—the overarching narrative underscores the “*continuing relevance of peasant politics in the twenty-first century*” (Gill 2024: 12, emphasis original). In particular, Edelman notes that it is peasants and farmers—rather than organized labor—who have been at the forefront of protests against free-market policies (2024: 71). Despite pronouncements of their death, therefore, peasants have persisted. Of course, Edelman’s “peasant” is far more inclusive and expansive a category

than earlier theorizations, reflecting the broader field of “critical agrarian studies”, which recognizes the complexity of rural life-worlds that included peasants as well as large landowners, farmworkers, artisanal fishers, pastoralists, and so on.

Like Gill, Edelman too hopes to persuade readers that “the term ‘peasant’ can be eminently contemporary” (2024: 5). Rather than a category of colonial governmentality, however, here it “is a label of self-ascription and a badge of pride for millions” (idem: 5), an explicitly political subjectivity. As compared to social scientists agonizing over definitions and types, Edelman’s ethnographic research reveals that the peasant characterization is not so troublesome to “those Central Americans who assume a ‘campesino’ identity; it is not their “essential” or “univocal” identity but a central part of a spectrum of possible social positions” (idem: 123). In this way, Edelman’s emphasis on situational political identities echoes Shanin’s insistence that peasants are not only an analytical construct or bearers of certain qualities but also a “social group which exists in the collective consciousness and political deeds of its members” (1990: 69). Here, the significance of peasants as a potent political force in a neoliberal global order undercuts the argument that “from the end of the 1970s (if not earlier), it makes little sense . . . to refer to ‘peasants’ in the world(s) of contemporary capitalism” (Bernstein 2006: 453).

Even as he insists on its presence and significance, Edelman recognizes that the peasantry is no longer the same as even the 1970s and 1980s. Changes in peasant economy and politics demand a reformulation (but not a rejection) of core concepts in the field. For example, peasant conceptions of justice described by James Scott (1976) for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southeast Asia continue to be relevant to agrarian struggles today, be it demands for a “just price” or expectations from the state in times of crisis. As Edelman writes, “‘just’ behavior by the more powerful is an aspiration that still forms part of contemporary peasant activists’ implicit moral economy” (2024: 166), signaling not only

the continued significance of older concepts but also their meaningfulness across diverse contexts.

To Edelman, emphasizing the dynamic presentness of peasant identity necessitates grappling with its multiple complexities, particularly between static imaginaries and nuanced realities. In one chapter, he traces the biographies of three prominent peasant activist-intellectuals, showing how they engage in a fraught project of representation and claims-making to establish legitimacy and authenticity—on the one hand, as educated, cosmopolitan leaders, they deploy their networks and cultural capital to forge alliances and gain attention for their cause, and on the other hand, they shy away from the limelight in order to satisfy public imaginations of what an “authentic” peasant looks or acts like. Their life histories, Edelman argues, are “reflections of the heterogeneous composition of contemporary (and historical) peasantries and farmers”, and crucially, demonstrations of the “inadequacy of interpretations that rely on rigid essentialisms and taxonomies of social types rather than on exploring contested boundaries” (2024: 98).

At the same time, Edelman’s disinterest in definitions comes into doubt when he serves on an informal advisory group to the Bolivian ambassador to the United Nations presenting a draft declaration on peasant rights to the Human Rights Council. As the only anthropologist on the team, Edelman was tasked with defining the rights holder in the declaration, forcing him to ask: *what is a peasant as the subject of human rights?*

Activist definitions of the peasant are, for instance, more concerned with building alliances by highlighting common concerns—from heightened climate risk to vulnerability within global markets. *La Via Campesina* (Peasant Road, LVC), one of the most successful contemporary peasant coalitions, organizes around the “people of the land”, thus moving beyond distinctions based on economic strategies as well as restriction to agriculturalists alone. Not only are LVC member organizations located across the Global North and South, but LVC’s base also

includes landless peasants, farmworkers and smallholders, all united in their broad opposition to neoliberalism, focused particularly on countering the World Trade Organization and advocating for food sovereignty. Article 1 of the 2018 Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas defines a peasant as “any person who engages or who seeks to engage, alone, or in association with others or as a community, in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, and who relies significantly, though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other non-monetized ways of organizing labour, and who has a special dependency on and attachment to the land”. That the text includes a range of rural livelihoods beyond farming, indigenous peoples, and hired workers within its ambit is “evidence of a theoretical and political broadening occurring in rural movements from peasantries to rural working people” (Shattuck et al. 2023: 17).

If Gill addresses the peasant as a troubled historical category, Edelman considers the peasant as a meaningful political category—what unites both, however, is an emphasis on the specific historical conjunctures within which these social formations take shape, acquire meaning, and have material effects in the world. But rather than oppose the two—peasant as a historical category versus a political one—it might be more productive to ask how these distinct foci might complement each other. More specifically, what lessons might we draw from Gill’s historical argument to better comprehend and support rural political struggles in the present? Is it possible for agrarian movements to forge broad alliances for progressive change while continuously grappling with and addressing rural contradictions and contestations?

In different ways, both texts make a case for deep, empirical investigations of “the constitution and reproduction of peasantries through the social relations, dynamics of accumulation and divisions of labor of capitalism/imperialism, without any assumption of either anachronism or backwardness” (Watts 2002: 25).

Yet, their distinct emphases reveal crucial conceptual and pragmatic tensions. We might ask, for instance, to what extent do a settler farmer in Canada, a smallholder in Costa Rica, and a plantation worker in Indonesia share common interests? Edelman—and his interlocutors—are certainly aware of these frictions, particularly to internal class divisions within movements between those comprising small agriculturalists and those advocating for the landless and rural workers (not to mention gendered and geographic inequalities). Definitions may be necessary for the promulgation of law and the articulation of rights, and indeed for social theory, but they also produce and reproduce exclusions and essentialisms that can harm rather than aid social movements. As Gill reminds us, these classifications are never politically neutral or innocent. Rather, “who exactly counts as a farmer is implicated in a politics of knowledge and accumulation as well as divisions of caste, class and gender” (Gill 2022: 126).

During what was perhaps the largest wave of strikes in world history, another, more surprising, slogan emerged from the protesting crowds around the Indian capital of New Delhi. This battle cry—“*Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad*” (Long Live Farmer–Laborer Unity)—emphasized a rare but powerful solidarity among historically antagonistic classes of landowner–cultivators and landless agricultural workers. While it is unclear if this unity would spill out from the streets back into the fields, this moment—however contingent—was clearly significant, sowing the seeds for new visions of emancipatory and egalitarian rural futures.

Given that “[t]he agrarian question has always been political at its heart, about transcending exploitation and violence in the countryside” (Shattuck et al. 2023), grappling with these contradictions as well as convergences is vital to any progressive transformation of social relations in the countryside. As these two books illustrate in distinct ways, the question of who *counts* as a peasant in particular historical conjunctures and with what material effects continues to be a vital part of agrarian scholarship and struggle.

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Note

1. The region of Panjab is especially significant for Gill’s discussion given the centrality of the Panjabi peasant to the foundations of Indian political economy: from Green Revolution policies and legacies to “modes of production” debates and most recently, farmers’ protests around agricultural marketing laws.

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