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**What is a peasant? What are peasantries?
A briefing paper on issues of definition**

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Introduction

In many (though not all) international human rights instruments Article 1 is used to define the rights holders. Normative definitions of this sort can be controversial (e.g., in debates over who is a “child” in the lead-up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child), as can their absence (as was the case with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). The question of how to define “peasant” and “peasantry” has a long, complicated and contentious history. Definitions of human groups arise or are created for different purposes, including social control, legal protections, social scientific analysis, collective action, and colloquial description. Such definitions may or may not overlap and coincide. Sometimes groups subject to discrimination appropriate, invert and celebrate previously pejorative labels. Moreover, cognate terms in different languages are hardly ever completely coterminous (e.g., “peasant,” “*campesino*,” “*pausan*,” “крестьянин [*krest'ianin*]”, etc). Even though normative definitions appear to fix an object in a timeless way, in practice definitions always change over time and manifest varying degrees of “strictness.”

This paper is a highly synthetic overview and for reasons of space has had to ignore or gloss over many key discussions.¹ It does not pretend to be comprehensive, nor does it purport to resolve the debates. The paper distinguishes for heuristic purposes four different kinds of definition of “peasant.” These are:

- (1) Historical definitions, such as those from societies where peasants constituted an estate-like, caste-like, corporate or subordinated social group, characterized by specific restrictions on geographical or social mobility, limited rights, and obligations to provide services and perform particular deference behaviors for superordinate groups;
- (2) Social scientific definitions from anthropology and sociology and from the interdisciplinary fields of peasant studies and agrarian studies.
- (3) Activist definitions employed by agrarian movements, particularly Vía Campesina and its constituent organizations, that self-identify as “peasants” (or “campesinos,” etc.).
- (4) Normative definitions, including those proposed by civil society organizations and by the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council.

The first two categories will be examined at greater length than the last two, which will just be the subject of brief comments. It should be noted at the outset that definitions that arise or arose in the context of one of these categories sometimes spill over into one or more of the other categories. The legal and institutional codification of “campesino” in Mexico² and in Bolivia³ in the twentieth century, for example, has in each case dimensions that are at once historical and

¹ Many of these are ably summarized in Henry Bernstein and Terence J. Byres, “From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1–56; Deborah Bryceson, Cristóbal Kay, and Jos Mooij, eds., *Disappearing Peasantries?: Land and Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 2000); Sidney W. Mintz, “A Note on the Definition of Peasantries,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (October 1973): 91–106; John R. Owen, “In Defence of the ‘Peasant’,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35, no. 3 (August 2005): 368–385.

² Christopher R Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³ María Lagos, *Autonomy and Power: The Dynamics of Class and Culture in Rural Bolivia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

normative, and these in turn influenced both social scientists and agrarian activists in the respective countries.

Historical definitions

The word “peasant” appears in English in late medieval and early modern times, when it was used to refer to the rural poor, rural residents, serfs, agricultural laborers, and the “common” or “simple” people. As a verb in that period, “to peasant” meant to subjugate someone as a peasant is subjugated. Earlier Latin and Latinate forms (French, Castilian, Catalan, Occitan, etc.) date as far back as the sixth century and denoted a rural inhabitant, whether or not involved in agriculture. Very early on, both the English “peasant,” the French “paysan” and similar terms sometimes connoted “rustic,” “ignorant,” “stupid,” “crass” and “rude,” among many other pejorative terms.⁴ The word could also imply criminality, as in thirteenth-century Germany where “‘peasant’ meant ‘villain, rustic, devil, robber, brigand and looter.’”⁵

These derogatory meanings are indicative both of peasants’ extreme subordination and of a ubiquitous elite practice of blaming peasants for a variety of economic and social ills. These included (and include) a supposed reluctance to work hard, since their consumption expectations seemed to be easily satisfied; a failure to use land “efficiently” and thus of standing in the way of “progress;” having too many children; and constituting a “dangerous” class not suitable for or capable of full citizenship. These elite imaginings were typically espoused in order to promote policies aimed at pushing peasants off the land and turning them into laborers.⁶

According to anthropologist George Dalton, “Peasants were legal, political, social, and economic inferiors in medieval Europe. The structured subordination of peasants to nonpeasants was expressed in many ways, *de jure* and *de facto*, from restraints on their physical movement to sumptuary restrictions on what kinds of weapons, clothing and adornments they could wear and use, and foods they could legally consume.”⁷ As late as the eighteenth century in British-ruled Ireland, Catholic peasants were legally prevented from renting land worth more than thirty shillings a year and from making a profit from land of more than one-third of the rent paid.⁸ In Russia until 1861, peasants constituted a “social estate,” bound to landlords’ properties with no right to geographical mobility (and those in serfdom directly to the state were only emancipated in 1867).⁹ Analogous forms of bondage existed in Japan and China.¹⁰ In much of Latin America, *de jure* and *de facto* systems of debt peonage and unpaid labor persisted until at least the mid-twentieth century (called “*huasipungo*” in Ecuador, “*colonato*” in Bolivia and Central America,

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, “Peasant, N. and Adj.,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2005, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139355?result=1&rskey=F232n4&>.

⁵ Jacques Le Goff and Edmund King, “The Town as an Agent of Civilisation, C. 1200-c. 1500,” in *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla (London: Collins/Fontana, 1972), 71.

⁶ Jim Handy, “‘Almost Idiotic Wretchedness’: A Long History of Blaming Peasants,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 325–344.

⁷ George Dalton, “Peasantries in Anthropology and History,” *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 3–4 (October 1972): 391.

⁸ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 34.

⁹ Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class; Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society: Russia 1910-1925* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 19.

¹⁰ Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

“*yanacónaje*” in Peru, “*inquilinaje*” in Chile, and “*cambão*” in Brazil).¹¹ In some cases, in a particularly grotesque display of patriarchal power reminiscent of the medieval European practice of *jus primae noctis*, Latin American peasants were required to provide their daughters for the sexual pleasure of the landlords.¹²

Social upheavals and economic changes in the twentieth century ended many of the more egregious forms of unfree labor and obligatory service, although these persist in some regions of South Asia and elsewhere.¹³ Nonetheless, even the Russian and Chinese revolutions, which sought to upend the old order, reinstated restrictions on the geographic mobility of rural residents, in effect legally tying most peasants to particular production units in the countryside and thus according them second-class citizenship. In both cases, residence restrictions persisted even following decollectivization. Especially if they migrate to other regions without permission, rural residents in these societies have few labor protections and diminished rights to social services, housing and education.¹⁴

Other twentieth-century social revolutions created less onerous but nonetheless specific categories for “peasants” that distinguished them from the rest of society. Following the Mexican Revolution, for example, the term “campesino” achieved a new salience and widespread use as a self-ascribed marker of political identity, even among rural people skeptical of aspects of radical agrarian ideology. By the 1930s, peasants

were insisting that it was possible to be a campesino *and* Catholic, or a campesino *and* indigenous, or a campesino *and* a resident of such and such a village.... They undermined the proposition that campesinos have a unidimensional social essence based solely on their economic interests and replaced it with a hybrid sense of campesino-ness that accommodated multiple and sometimes cross-cutting cultural values.¹⁵

In Bolivia, similarly, following the revolution of 1952, “campesino” became an official governance category, with the creation of a Ministry of Peasant Affairs. The term substituted for and came to mask an understanding of the highly diverse and overwhelmingly indigenous nature of the rural population.¹⁶ Importantly, however, the reassertion of indigenous identity in the 1990s and after occurred largely alongside and not in opposition to “campesino” identity.¹⁷

¹¹ Solon L. Barraclough and Arthur L. Domike, “Agrarian Structure in Seven Latin American Countries,” *Land Economics* 42, no. 4 (November 1966): 399; Gerrit Huizer, *Peasant Rebellion in Latin America: The Origins, Forms of Expression, and Potential of Latin American Peasant Unrest* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), 9.

¹² Huizer, *Peasant Rebellion in Latin America*, 9.

¹³ Karin Kapadia, “Responsibility Without Rights: Women Workers in Bonded Labour in Rural Industry in South India,” in *Disappearing Peasantries?: Rural Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, ed. Jos E. Mooij, Deborah Fahy Bryceson, and Cristóbal Kay (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 2000), 247–261.

¹⁴ Ira N. Gang and Robert C. Stuart, “Mobility Where Mobility Is Illegal: Internal Migration and City Growth in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Population Economics* 12 (1999): 117–134; Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes,” *China Quarterly* 160 (1999): 818–855.

¹⁵ Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*, 44–45. Original italics.

¹⁶ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Apuntes para una historia de las luchas campesinas en Bolivia (1900-1978),” in *Historia política de los campesinos latinoamericanos: Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, Paraguay*, ed. Pablo González Casanova, vol. 3, 4 vols. (México, DF: Siglo Veintiuno, 1985), 146–207.

¹⁷ Xavier Albó, *Movimientos y Poder Indígena En Bolivia, Ecuador y Perú*, Cuadernos de Investigación 71 (La Paz: Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado-CIPCA, 2008), 40.

Social scientific definitions

During the 1960s and 1970s, peasants excited new interest among social scientists. Over the previous half century, peasant wars and revolutions—in Mexico, China, Algeria, and Vietnam, among other places—indicated that peasantries had become important political protagonists.¹⁸ Development imperatives in what was then widely termed the “Third World” required in-depth understanding of rural populations. East-West geopolitical competition and spreading anti-colonial struggles also fueled concern about the peasantry, which was at the time and by almost any definition the majority of humankind.

Anthropologists’ early efforts to define peasants emphasized that peasantries emerged in order to provision the first cities and market towns. The category “peasant” was thus only meaningful in relation to a larger society that included non-peasants. Such definitions tended to be ample, often including rural artisans, fisherfolk, pastoralists and small-scale miners in addition to agriculturalists. Some scholars emphasized generic cultural or “folk” characteristics of peasants,¹⁹ while others, notably Eric R. Wolf, sought to delineate social structural “types,” based on whether they had secure land rights or, alternatively, were tenants, sharecroppers or resident laborers on large properties. “Peasants” tended to be distinguished from “farmers,” since the former were said to aim at “subsistence” and produced cash crops primarily for survival and to maintain their social status rather than to invest and expand the scale of their operations, as was allegedly the case with the latter.²⁰ In several widely separated zones of the world, such as in much of Latin America and Indonesia, peasants were found to be living in territorial “corporate communities” that barred membership to outsiders, held exclusive rights to land and systematically redistributed surplus wealth through obligatory ritual expenditures. Indeed, as David Mosse points out, “[a]lmost every region of the world that experienced colonial rule had some form of ‘government through community.’”²¹ These “closed” communities contrasted with others elsewhere in which residence was more open, property and market relations more fluid, and cash crop production more extensive.²² Wolf further argued that peasants characteristically had to produce a “replacement fund” that provided a caloric minimum and assured biological reproduction; a “ceremonial fund” to support weddings, community festivals and other social responsibilities; and a “fund of rent” that consisted of wealth in labor, produce or money transferred to superordinate sectors, such as landlords, moneylenders, intermediaries, religious specialists, and tax collectors.²³

¹⁸ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

¹⁹ Sydel Silverman, “The Peasant Concept in Anthropology,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 7, no. 1 (1979): 49–69.

²⁰ Eric R. Wolf, “Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 3 (June 1955): 452–471.

²¹ David Mosse, “Collective Action, Common Property, and Social Capital in South India: An Anthropological Commentary,” in *The Contested Commons: Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists*, ed. Pranab K. Bardhan and Isha Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 83.

²² Eric R. Wolf, “Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1957): 1–18; Eric R. Wolf, “The Vicissitudes of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community,” *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 2 (May 1986): 325–329.

²³ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

Teodor Shanin, another leading peasant studies scholar, defined peasantry as having “four essential and inter-linked facets”:

The family farm as the basic multi-functional unit of social organisation, land husbandry and usually animal rearing as the main means of livelihood, a specific traditional culture closely linked with the way of life of small rural communities and multi-directional subjection to powerful outsiders.²⁴

In addition, Shanin recognized the existence of “a number of analytically marginal groups which share with the ‘hard core’ of the peasantry most but not all of its major characteristics.”²⁵ These included the “agricultural labourer lacking a fully-fledged farm, a rural craftsman holding little or no land, the frontier squatter or the armed peasant who at times escaped centuries of political submission along frontiers or in the mountains,” as well as pastoralists and “peasant-workers in modern industrial communities.”²⁶

Concurring with the overall thrust of Wolf’s and Shanin’s definitions, Sidney Mintz noted “the fact... that peasantries nowhere form a homogeneous mass or agglomerate, but are always and everywhere typified themselves by internal differentiation along many lines.”²⁷ He also pointed to “the need for middle-range definitions of peasantries and of peasant societies: definitions that fall somewhere between real peasant societies ‘on the ground,’ so to speak, and the widest-ranging level of definitional statement, adequate to describe all of them.”²⁸ “Definitions or typologies of peasantries,” he asserted, “will have to deal with different ‘mixes’ of peasant classes, or of ethnic groups, in different societies.”²⁹ Despite this recognition of the heterogeneity of peasantries, Mintz was reluctant to define “landless, wage-earning agricultural workers” as peasants, since they were inserted in very different kinds of economic relations. He nonetheless qualified this skepticism in acknowledging the “simultaneous participation of large groups of people in activities associated with” both rural wage labor and small-scale agricultural production.³⁰

The Inter-American Committee for Agricultural Development, which carried out land tenure studies in seven Latin American countries in the mid-1960s, classified farms as “subfamily,” “family,” multi-family medium,” and “multi-family large.”³¹ This typology—based on census data on farm size and on what extension could sustain a household at a culturally acceptable standard of living—remained extremely influential in the social sciences in Latin

²⁴ Teodor Shanin, “The Nature and Logic of the Peasant Economy 1: A Generalisation,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (October 1973): 63–64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶ Teodor Shanin, “Introduction,” in *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, ed. Teodor Shanin, Penguin Modern Sociology Readings (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971), 16.

²⁷ Mintz, “A Note on the Definition of Peasantries,” 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

³¹ ICAD was created by the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Economic Commission for Latin America, the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Sciences, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Barraclough and Domike, “Agrarian Structure in Seven Latin American Countries.”

America and beyond.³² Numerous subsequent studies have echoed ICAD's finding that smallholdings used the factor land much more productively and efficiently than large farms.³³ The ICAD study employed the term "campesino" to refer to indebted laborers who were bound to large estates, but it also used "smallholder" and "farm owner" interchangeably to describe agriculturalists in possession of the smaller categories of farms. This marked a significant conceptual difference with the anthropological and sociological frameworks of Wolf, Mintz and Shanin, which tended to view "peasant" and "farmer" as contrasting categories, with different economic logics.

In recent decades a growing number of social scientists have sought to incorporate a gender dimension into understandings of "peasant" and "peasantry." They point out, for example, that the peasant household or family farm, which Shanin viewed as a quintessential element of peasant economy, is typically characterized by a gender division of labor and gendered internal power relations, that in many world regions women are the primary agriculturalists, and that women's participation in small-scale agriculture and non-farm rural activities appears to be increasing, in part as a result of growing male migration.³⁴ These analyses constitute an important corrective to the implicit male bias of many earlier efforts to define "peasant" inasmuch as they insist on and document both the significant participation of women in rural agricultural households and their frequent invisibility in discussions of "peasantry" and related issues such as agrarian reform.

It is worth acknowledging that several currents of scholarly thought, particularly (but not only) those influenced by traditional cultural anthropology, orthodox Marxism or postmodernism, rejected the possibility of defining "peasants." Some cultural anthropologists in the 1960s insisted that most rural African cultivators were "tribals" rather than "peasants," although by the 1970s there was a strong social scientific consensus that these groups fit the criteria for peasants outlined by Shanin and others.³⁵ Henry Bernstein, arguing from a Marxist perspective, asserted that the terms "peasant" and "peasantry" were only useful in considering "pre-capitalist societies, populated by mostly small-scale family farmers... and processes of transition to capitalism." Under capitalism, he suggested, peasants differentiate into classes of

³² Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara, *Anthropological Perspectives on Rural Mexico* (London: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1986), 123–128; William Roseberry, "Beyond the Agrarian Question in Latin America," in *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, ed. Frederick Cooper et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 321–333.

³³ IAASTD, *Agriculture at a Crossroads: Global Report* (Washington, D.C.: International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development & Island Press, 2009), [http://www.agassessment.org/reports/IAASTD/EN/Agriculture%20at%20a%20Crossroads_Global%20Report%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.agassessment.org/reports/IAASTD/EN/Agriculture%20at%20a%20Crossroads_Global%20Report%20(English).pdf); Robert McC Netting, *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993).

³⁴ Kirsten Appendini and Marcelo De Luca, "Cambios Agrarios, Estrategias de Sobrevivencia y Género En Zonas Rurales Del Centro de México: Notas Metodológicas," *Estudios Sociológicos* 23, no. 69 (2005): 913–930; Carmen Diana Deere, "What Difference Does Gender Make? Rethinking Peasant Studies," *Feminist Economics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 53–72; Shihra Razavi, "Engendering the Political Economy of Agrarian Change," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 1 (January 2009): 197–226.

³⁵ Lloyd A. Fallers, "Are African Cultivators to Be Called 'Peasants'?", *Current Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (April 1961): 108–110; Allen F. Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," in *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, ed. Frederick Cooper et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 206; John S. Saul and Roger Woods, "African Peasantries," in *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, ed. Teodor Shanin (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971), 103–114.

“small-scale capitalist farmers, relatively successful petty commodity producers and wage labour.”³⁶ Anthropologist Anthony Leeds lambasted scholars who used the term “peasant,” charging that it was “a folk term adopted into social science” and had “no precision whatsoever.”³⁷ He asserted that the concept confused “persons” and “roles,” and noted that rural cultivators constantly shifted in and out of a variety of roles, including wage laborer, squatter, job contractor and urban service worker. Other scholars, while not rejecting the “peasant” language, similarly noted that the rural poor engaged in “occupational multiplicity,” a phenomenon that was later widely discussed as “pluriactivity” or the “new rurality.”³⁸

Postmodernist theorists, such as Michael Kearney, also remarked upon the diversity of nonagricultural economic activities practiced by the rural poor and saw this as evidence that the “peasant” concept was obsolete, particularly in an era of intensifying migration and transnational household strategies in Mexico, his main empirical referent.³⁹ He proposed a neologism, “polybian,” which was supposed to denote the multifaceted identities and livelihood practices characteristic of the contemporary rural poor. Unfortunately for Kearney, his book went to press right as a major peasant and indigenous rebellion unfolded in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, led by an explicitly agrarian movement that claimed the mantle of the early twentieth-century revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. While the Zapatista uprising tended to vitiate Kearney’s argument about the obsolescence of the term “peasant,” it did point to a significant deficiency in many of the definitions of “peasant” that social scientists had debated since the 1960s. As Shanin noted, peasants “are not only an analytical construct... but a social group which exists in the collective consciousness and political deed of its members.”⁴⁰ Similarly, “peasant” could be understood not just as a role or a social structural position, but also as a form of identity and self-ascription (and not necessarily a primordial or overarching one, since it could coexist in the same person alongside multiple other identities, ranging from “indigenous” to “microentrepreneur,” “migrant,” “teacher” or “electrician.”)⁴¹ In light of this, some social scientists maintained that what was most revealing about the “peasant” category was to see when and why it was invoked and by whom. This, of course, generally involved grassroots agrarian movements, but it also at times implicated rural elites, including large landowners, who sought to euphemize their position and claimed to be “peasants” for political or other purposes.⁴²

³⁶ Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2010), 3–4.

³⁷ Anthony Leeds, “Mythos and Pathos: Some Unpleasantries on Peasantries,” in *Peasant Livelihood: Studies in Economic Anthropology and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Rhoda Halperin and James Dow (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 228.

³⁸ Lambros Comitas, “Occupational Multiplicity in Rural Jamaica,” in *Work and Family Life: West Indian Perspectives*, ed. Lambros Comitas and David Lowenthal (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), 157–173; Cristóbal Kay, “Reflections on Latin American Rural Studies in the Neoliberal Globalization Period: A New Rurality?,” *Development & Change* 39, no. 6 (November 2008): 915–943.

³⁹ Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

⁴⁰ Teodor Shanin, *Defining Peasants: Essays Concerning Rural Societies, Expolary Economies, and Learning from Them in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 69.

⁴¹ Marc Edelman, “Transnational Organizing in Agrarian Central America: Histories, Challenges, Prospects,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, no. 2/3 (April 2008): 251–252.

⁴² Marc Edelman, *Peasants Against Globalization: Rural Social Movements in Costa Rica* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 190–191.

Probably the most significant recent social scientific effort to theorize the notion of “peasant” and “peasantry” is Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg’s 2009 book *The New Peasantries*.⁴³ Van de Ploeg locates “peasant farming” on a continuum—rather than as a contrasting category—with “entrepreneurial farming.” Key features of “the peasant condition” include minimizing monetary costs, crop diversification to reduce economic and environmental risks, cooperative relations that provide an alternative to monetary relations and market exchange, and a struggle for autonomy, which includes non-money forms of obtaining inputs and labor. Importantly, Van de Ploeg sees these elements as central not only to peasants in developing countries, but also to the many multifunctional farms in Europe and North America that rely on the same principles to assure survival in a challenging economic environment. Finally, Van der Ploeg contrasts “the manufactured invisibility” of peasants with their striking “omnipresence”—there are now, he maintains, more peasants than ever before in history and they still constitute some two-fifths of humanity (see Appendix 1 below).⁴⁴

Activist definitions

“Peasant,” “campesino,” “paysan” and similar terms are longstanding identity markers that have served to inspire the collective action of diverse kinds of rural movements. With the rise in the 1990s of transnational agrarian organizations such as Vía Campesina, “today arguably the world’s largest social movement,”⁴⁵ peasants have a heightened global political profile and the “peasant” label has newfound contemporary resonance.⁴⁶

In defining “peasant,” the imperatives of social movements—and transnational ones, in particular—are different from those of social scientists. Activists typically seek to attract the maximum number of adherents and allies by casting a wide net, while at the same time bounding their movement so as to exclude sectors unsympathetic or opposed to their objectives. In the case of “peasants,” the transnational agrarian movement Vía Campesina includes national organizations that represent quite varied constituencies, from rural workers and small and medium-size cultivators in developing countries to small and medium-size commercial farmers in the developed North. The process of grouping these diverse sectors under a single tent has involved highlighting common concerns (e.g., economic vulnerability in globalizing commodities markets, heightened risks resulting from climate change) and deemphasizing possible areas of discord or divergent interests (e.g., developed-country farm subsidies that disadvantage developing-country agriculturalists). Boundary maintenance for the movement has meant limiting affiliation to organizations that share certain minimum principles. Many large farmer organizations are in effect excluded from Vía Campesina, not because of the size of their members’ holdings *per se* but rather because of their support for unfettered trade liberalization, industrial chemical-intensive agriculture and genetically engineered crops.

⁴³ Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization* (London: Earthscan, 2008).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv; Tony Weis, *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 25.

⁴⁵ Claire Provost, “La Via Campesina Celebrates 20 Years of Standing up for Food Sovereignty,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/jun/17/la-via-campesina-food-sovereignty>.

⁴⁶ Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., Marc Edelman, and Cristóbal Kay, “Transnational Agrarian Movements: Origins and Politics, Campaigns and Impact,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, no. 2/3 (April 2008): 169–204.

The umbrella concept central to Vía Campesina's definition of "peasant" is "people of the land." This hews closely to the original meaning of terms in Latin languages, such as "campesino" and "paysan," which literally refer to people from the countryside, whether or not they are agriculturalists. Contemporary agrarian activists insist on the commonalities of "peasants" and "farmers," adducing arguments much like Jan Douwe Van de Ploeg's reflections (cited above) on the "peasant condition" of economic vulnerability combined with a quest for autonomy. Today's activists often use "peasant" and "farmer" interchangeably—in conversation, in written analyses, and in their movements' names (the European Farmers Coordination and the Coordination Paysanne Européenne, for example, referred to the same organization). As Nettie Wiebe, a Vía Campesina activist and past president of the National Farmers Union of Canada, remarked in an interview,

If you actually look at what 'peasant' means, it means 'people of the land'. Are we Canadian farmers 'people of the land'? Well, yes, of course.... We too are peasants and it's the land and our relationship to the land and food production that distinguishes us.... We're not part of the industrial machine. We're much more closely linked to the places where we grow food and how we grow food, and what the weather is there... The language around this matters. It begins to make us understand that 'people of the land'—peasantry everywhere, the millions of small subsistence peasants with whom we think we have so little in common—identifies them and it identifies us. They're being evicted from their land, and that decimates their identity and their community. And we're also being relocated in our society—it's as undermining for us as it is for them. The language? As long as you keep us in separate categories and we're the highly industrialized farmers who are sort of quasi-business entrepreneurs and they're the subsistence peasants, then we can't see how closely we and all our issues are linked.⁴⁷

Vía Campesina—a coalition or movement with member organizations in over 70 countries—has been the main force advocating for a new international instrument on peasants' rights. The "people of the land" focus is evident in Article 1 of its 2009 proposed draft declaration on peasants' rights:

A peasant is a man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, rely[ing] above all on family labour and other small-scale forms of organizing labour. Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities and they take care of local landscapes and of agro-ecological systems. The term peasant can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts-related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. This includes Indigenous people working on the land.

⁴⁷ Interview with the author, 22 November 2002, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, quoted in Marc Edelman, "Transnational Peasant and Farmer Movements and Networks," in *Global Civil Society 2003*, ed. Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, and Marlies Glasius (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 187, <http://www.gcsknowledgebase.org/wp-content/uploads/2003Chapter8.pdf>.

The term peasant also applies to landless. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization..., the following categories of people are considered to be landless and are likely to face difficulties in ensuring their livelihood:

1. Agricultural labour households with little or no land;
2. Non-agricultural households in rural areas, with little or no land, whose members are engaged in various activities such as fishing, making crafts for the local market, or providing services;
3. Other rural households of pastoralists, nomads, peasants practicing shifting cultivation, hunters and gatherers, and people with similar livelihoods.⁴⁸

This definition shares with the social scientific definitions examined above an emphasis on the household or family farm and embeddedness in a community as essential characteristics of the peasant condition. Like the social scientific definitions, it includes diverse rural livelihoods that, strictly speaking, are not agricultural, such as fishing, pastoralism and artisanal crafts production. It includes some categories, such as hunters and gatherers, which would not be included in most social scientific definitions.

Normative definitions

A few existing international norms are likely relevant to the any deliberations that the Working Group might have on defining the rights holders. For example, Article 14 §1 and 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states,

1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
 - (a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;
 - (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counseling and services in family planning;
 - (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;
 - (d) To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;
 - (e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self employment;
 - (f) To participate in all community activities;

⁴⁸ Vía Campesina, “Declaration of Rights of Peasants - Women and Men,” 2009, <http://viacampesina.net/downloads/PDF/EN-3.pdf>.

- (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
- (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.⁴⁹

In its General Recommendation No. 16 from 1991, CEDAW refers to “unpaid women workers in rural and urban family enterprises.” It notes that “unpaid work constitutes a form of women’s exploitation that is contrary to the Convention” and recommends, among other things, that States parties “include in their reports to the Committee information on the legal and social situation of unpaid women working in family enterprises.”⁵⁰

Part I, Articles 1-6, of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, similarly, provides a detailed consideration of how to define the rights holders. The inclusiveness and specificity of this language could serve as a model for an International Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Living in Rural Areas. Several of the articles overlap to a significant degree with the definition of “peasants” proposed by Vía Campesina and quoted above. It is notable that in several respects the Vía Campesina definition echoes the CEDAW language, which has, of course, already been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

In 2010 the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council issued its “Preliminary Study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on Discrimination in the Context of the Right to Food,” which included as an appendix the Vía Campesina draft text quoted above.⁵¹ Two years later it released the “Final study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the Advancement of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.” This contained the Committee’s own text, which accepted verbatim the definition in the Annex to the Preliminary Study.⁵² At this point, according to Advisory Committee member José Bengoa, the Vía Campesina draft text—and by extension its definition of “peasant”—became “an official document of the United Nations.”⁵³ This hardly means, however, that the draft definition in these UN documents is “written in stone.” The challenge for the Working Group is to debate and refine the definition of rights holders so that it is significantly inclusive of the very wide variety of vulnerable, oppressed and discriminated rural populations in the world today. To some extent, the phrase “and other people living in rural areas” promises to accomplish this. At the same time, the Working Group ought to be attentive to the possibility that once identity categories become

⁴⁹ CEDAW, “Text of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,” 1979, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>.

⁵⁰ CEDAW, “General Recommendations Made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women,” accessed June 12, 2013, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recom16>.

⁵¹ UNHRC Advisory Committee, “Preliminary Study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on Discrimination in the Context of the Right to Food A/HRC/13/32,” February 22, 2010, 32, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/13session/A-HRC-13-32.pdf>.

⁵² UNHRC Advisory Committee, “Final Study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the Advancement of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas A/HRC/AC/8/6,” January 23, 2012, 6, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/advisorycommittee/docs/session8/A.HRC.AC.8.6_en.doc.

⁵³ José Bengoa, “Declaración Internacional de los Derechos Campesinos,” *Le Monde diplomatique - edición chilena*, March 2012, <http://www.lemondediplomatique.cl/Declaracion-Internacional-de-los.html>.

fixed in law, there is a risk that they may generate new forms of exclusion if they fail to recognize “invisible” or stigmatized groups or if conditions shift and new vulnerable groups emerge.⁵⁴ The Advisory Committee’s definition, for example, gives little explicit attention to rural migrant workers who are not members of households, such as displaced youths, economic and political refugees, or women who have fled domestic or other violence.

Conclusions

Several conclusions may be extracted from the brief overview presented above:

- (1) The terms “peasant” and “peasantry” and their cognates in other languages have long and complicated histories that reflects both peasants’ vast presence in most societies—even today—and their political and social subordination in those societies.
- (2) The pervasive pejorative uses of these terms are also indicative of the historical and contemporary oppression of peasants in many societies and of the discrimination to which they are subject.
- (3) In many parts of the world, peasants are still second-class citizens, with legal and *de facto* restrictions on their geographical mobility, limited access to social services (healthcare, education, housing, etc.), insufficient access to land, and few labor protections.
- (4) In some countries where agrarian revolutions occurred (e.g., Mexico, Bolivia) “peasant” became a legal category intended to confer special group rights, particularly rights to land.
- (5) Social scientific definitions of “peasant” generally recognize both that the category is extremely heterogeneous and that individuals and groups in the category typically engage in multiple forms of livelihood, including agriculture, wage labor, pastoralism and livestock production, artisanal production, fishing and hunting, gathering of plant or mineral resources, petty commerce, and a variety of other skilled and unskilled occupations.
- (6) “Peasant” may be both a category of social scientific analysis and a self-ascribed identity.
- (7) As a social scientific category, “peasant” usually includes landless rural people who either work others’ land or who aspire to obtain land of their own (or both).
- (8) In some parts of the world (e.g., Mesoamerica, the Andes, Central Java) peasant communities had and have a “closed” corporate structure with hereditary membership and widely recognized territorial rights.
- (9) While early social scientific definitions of “peasant” tended to contrast the category to “farmer,” more recent analyses (e.g., by Van der Ploeg), locate peasant farming on a continuum with “entrepreneurial” or industrial farming. Peasants and small farmers share key features, particularly the constant quest to reduce economic and environmental risks by minimizing monetary costs and by diversifying crops and livelihood practices.
- (10) Activist definitions of peasantry tend to be capacious, since social movements seek to build coalitions. These definitions, such as that elaborated by *Vía Campesina*, nonetheless generally hew closely to social scientific ones and to existing international norms, such as CEDAW’s language on rural women. Many small-scale agriculturalists today use the terms “peasant” and “farmer” interchangeably.

⁵⁴ Priscilla Claeys, “From Food Sovereignty to Peasants’ Rights: An Overview of *Vía Campesina*’s Struggle for New Human Rights,” in *La Vía Campesina’s Open Book: Celebrating 20 Years of Struggle and Hope* (Jakarta: *Vía Campesina*, 2013), <http://viacampesina.org/downloads/pdf/openbooks/EN-02.pdf>.

- (11) The definition of “peasant” advanced by the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council is the same as that proposed earlier by Vía Campesina. In its deliberations, the Intergovernmental Working Group could consider broadening this definition to encompass closely related vulnerable and discriminated groups, particularly rural migrant workers who are not members of households, such as displaced youths, economic and political refugees, or women who have fled domestic or other violence.
- (12) Groups that might reasonably be classified as peasants have diminished as a proportion of the overall global population, but in absolute numbers they are more numerous than ever before in history (see Appendix 1).

Appendix 1

Estimates of the world’s agricultural population, rural population, and economically active population in agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization

Table 1: Population Estimates, 2013

	In 1000s	% World population
World population	7,130,012	100%
Agricultural population	2,621,360	37%
Rural population	3,445,843	48%
Economically active in agriculture*	1,320,181	19%

Source: FAO Faostat database, June 21, 2013.

* Economically active population in agriculture includes household heads who sustain larger numbers of non-active dependents.

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