

*Peasant Poverty and Persistence (PP&P) in the 21st Century*

(Edited by Julio Boltvinik and Susan Archer Mann)  
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**An overview of the book**

# Linking poverty and persistence: a distinguishing feature of this book

- Although peasants are a majority of the world's poor, there has been little effort to bridge the fields of peasant and poverty studies.
- *PP&P* provides a much-needed critical perspective linking three central questions.
  - Question 1 (Q1), the century-old 'agrarian question': Why has the peasantry persisted as a non-capitalist form of production, whereas other areas of non-capitalist production have been wiped out?
  - Question 2 (Q2), : Why is the vast majority of peasants poor?
  - Question 3 (Q3), how are the first two questions related?
- Structured replies to Q1 & Q2, constitute theories of peasant persistence (**PPe**), and of peasant poverty (**PPo**), respectively. Some authors in this book reply to Q3 stating that the same theory explains both Q1 & Q2 as **PPo** is regarded as a condition of **PPe**. For others, two separate theories are required.

## Structure of *PP&P*

- *PP&P* is divided in 3 parts. Part 1, “Introducing the Book” comprises the *Prologue* (Meghnad Desai) and the *Introduction* (Julio Boltvinik & Susan Archer Mann). Part 2, “Papers” comprises the Background Paper (BP) and 10 papers presented in the Seminar. Part 3, “Closing the book”, is formed by Chapter 12.
- Part 2 is divided in 4 Sessions. # 1 has a theoretical emphasis. It includes:
  - The BP (Boltvinik, Chapter1), “Poverty and persistence of the peasantry”.
  - Chapter 2 (Armando Bartra), “Rethinking rustic issues: contributions to a theory of contemporary peasantry”
  - Chapter 3, “From field to fork: labour power, its reproduction, and the persistence of peasant poverty” (Gordon Welty, Susan Mann, James Dickinson & Emily Blumenfeld), and
  - Chapter 4, “Baroque modernity and peasant poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Luis Arizmendi)

## Authors & chapters, their central object(s). First Part

**M. Desai (*Prologue*):** Contextualises PPe by discussing transitions between modes of production and today's persistence of other non-capitalist forms of production; discusses theoretically if the peasantry is a functional part of capitalist agriculture; discusses Marx theory of surplus value, pointing out some of its problems. Its central object of discussion, using Marxian categories, are Boltvinik's and Bartra's explanations of PPe and PPo.

**J. Boltvinik and S.A. Mann (*Introduction*).** Narrates the origins of the book and describes its structure; discusses the concept of poverty; criticises IFAD's rural poverty data, based on WB's poverty data and procedures; situates this volume in the history of peasant studies, emphasizing the Marxist/Narodnik debate on the 'agrarian question' at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as its revival in the early 1970's, situating the debates in this book within these historical debates; discusses diverse definitions of the peasantry, a concept that does not fit the categories of the social sciences, including the distinctions between peasants, family farmers and smallholders; lastly, the introduction describes the contents of chapters 1 to 12 .

## Authors & chapters, their central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 1

**J. Boltvinik, BP (*Chapter 1*)** argues that **PPo** is caused by unequal labour demands in agriculture, concentrated in sowing and harvesting (seasonality), and by the fact that prices only incorporate (as costs) wages of days truly worked. As peasant producers are price takers in the same markets as capitalist firms, prices of their products only reward them for days worked, absorbing the social cost of seasonality and living in poverty as errant proletarians in search of additional income. This also explains **PPe**, as agricultural capitalism (AC) can't exist without peasants' supply of cheap seasonal labour: without peasants, AC would be impossible: there would be (virtually) no one prepared to work only during the sowing and harvesting periods. Hence, **PPe** is functional and necessary for the existence of AC. But peasants will be forced to sell their labour seasonally (and cheaply) only if they are poor: rich family farmers in the USA can (and do) spend off-season periods in idleness. AC has to exist in symbiosis with poor peasants. A theory that explains **PPe** should also explain **PPo**. The BP paper also: examines the nature of agricultural production by contrasting it with industry, emphasising seasonality; discusses diverse theoretical positions on **PPe**, in particular the Mann-Dickinson-Contreras thesis, showing that it disregards the equalisation of the rates of profit; argues that Marx's theory of value does not apply to discontinuous processes of production, like agriculture, and proposes a general theory; proposes subsidies for third world peasants to compensate their absorption of seasonality costs.

## Authors & chapters, their central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 1 (continued)

*Bartra (Chapter 2)* theory of **PPe** argues that as demand grows, additional production has to be derived from less fertile (marginal) land that produces at higher costs. “Differential rent is unavoidable when the same goods with different costs are regularly sold at the same price”. This would be the case if marginal lands were cultivated by AC, but when exploited by peasants, as they usually are, ‘peasants can be forced to work below average profits and, on occasions, at the simple point of equilibrium’. Thus, peasants are essential as a buffer mechanism for land rent, which damages non-agricultural capitalism, and this helps explain **PPe**. Bartra accepts Boltvinik seasonality theory as a secondary cause of **Ppo**. He points to unequal market exchanges as the basis of **Ppo**. He argues for diversified farming, rather than government subsidies, as a more viable way to reduce **Ppo**.

*G. Welty, S. Mann, J. Dickinson & E. Blumenfeld (Chapter 3)* sustain presently, despite criticisms received, the validity of the Mann–Dickinson thesis as a theory of **PPe**, which argued that a non-congruence of production time and labour time impeded or even prohibited the articulation of full-blown capitalist relations of production in agriculture. In this chapter they complement it by exploring uneven development from the point of view of labour, looking at peculiarities in the production and reproduction of labour power (which remains largely non-capitalist) that have implications for the structuration of global poverty, emphasising the role of unpaid work by women. They criticise Boltvinik’s theory, particularly his analysis of the natural characteristics of agriculture and their contrasts with industry, and his proposal for subsidising peasant as a “no longer ripe idea”.

## Authors & chapters, their central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 1 (concludes)

**Arizmendi (Chapter 4)** sustains that the myth of progress mistakenly associates **PPo** with the persistence of pre-modern, pre-capitalist forms, evading capitalist domination as its basis. Indeed, capitalism's 'rule' is that the wages received by rural workers 'will never be adequate for satisfying their needs', which forces peasants to combine petty commodity production with wage work. 'Baroque modernity' refers to this peculiar combination of modern and pre-modern forms aimed at resistance in times of adversity. For Arizmendi, the best approach for deciphering the relationship between the capitalist and the peasant economies is as a relation of domination in which the first absorbs, penetrates and polices the second at its service. To understand this complex relationship, Arizmendi develops Marx's concept of *subsumption*. For peasants, 'seasonal time wages' represent the *specific formal subsumption* of labour power, while 'unequal exchange' represents the *non-specific formal subsumption of labour by capital*. Both externalise annual reproduction costs, leaving them in the hands of peasant producers.



## *Authors & chapters, their central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 2*

Session 2, “Historical and empirical approaches” includes 2 chapters: Chapter 5 (Henry Bernstein) “Agriculture/ industry, rural/urban, peasant/workers: some reflections on poverty, persistence and change” and Chapter 6 (Araceli Damián and Edith Pacheco), “Employment and rural poverty in Mexico”.

**Bernstein (Chapter 5)** applauds Boltvinik’s focus on the reproduction of rural households for broadening what too often are capital-centric arguments about ‘obstacles to capitalist agriculture’, where **PPE** is treated simply as residual. He synthesises in a table the distinctive features of agriculture vis-à-vis industry as described in the BP. He finds problematic the highly abstract nature of the BP, in which abstractions are not grounded in theory as history, nor is the theory tested empirically. He proposes an alternative/complementary approach that is both historically and empirically informed. Bernstein questions whether poor peasants should be considered “peasants” or more accurately wage workers, thus denying PPE. He also: argues that ‘one cannot conceive of the emergence and functioning of agriculture in modern capitalism without the new sets of dynamics linking agriculture and industry, and the rural and urban; highlights the high levels of commodification that exist in many rural areas of the globe that undermine any notion that existing production units are pre-modern or pre-capitalist; argues that capitalism has successfully penetrated the countryside, depeasantising it; he also rejects farm subsidies as a solution to rural poverty.



## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 2 concludes)*

- **Damián & Pacheco (Chapter 6)** discuss the findings of empirical research on **PPo & PPe** in Mexico, providing a detailed analysis of two surveys. From an income and expenditure survey that is carried out in Mexico every two years they calculate rural poverty in Mexico concluding that most rural inhabitants (around 95%) are, and have remained, poor since 1984. From the Agricultural Module (AM) of the National Employment Survey carried out annually from 1991 to 2003, and which uses as a reference period the previous 6 months (instead of last week as almost all employment surveys do), given the seasonal character of agriculture they identified one million more workers in it than those identified using a one-week reference period. As they point out: “This result constitutes the first evidence of the high level of intersectoral occupational mobility of agricultural workers in Mexico in a context in which the seasonality of production plays a central role”. The authors also found that: ‘very few rural households were able to live exclusively off the land, since only 8.3 % had all household workers engaged in agricultural activities’; that fewer than one in six agriculturally engaged persons belonged to households able to live exclusively off the land; that the broad participation in agricultural activity in rural contexts (only 24.6 % cent of the labour force lives in households that are totally non-agricultural) points to **PPe**; and that widespread peasant multi-activity ‘is largely due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work’.

## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 3*

Session 3, “Environment, food crisis and peasants” includes Ch. 7 (Enrique Leff), “From **PPe** persistence of the peasantry to the environmentalism of indigenous peoples and the sustainability of life”; Ch. 8 (Elma Montaña), “South American peasants and poor farmers facing global environmental change”; and Ch. 9 (Kostas Vergopoulos) “Financialisation of the food sector and **PPe**”.

**Leff (Chapter 7)** argues that a shift from Marxist to eco-Marxist explanations is required to better address the issues of political ecology and environmental sustainability and to show how **PPo** is also the product of a historical process of entropic degradation of their environment/livelihoods. Leff argues that the main problem of the Marxist theory of value is not that it fails to include the discontinuity of work in seasonal production processes, as argued in the BP, but ‘that nature is not valued’ and ‘does not determine value’. Eco-Marxism is praised by Leff for highlighting the 2<sup>nd</sup> contradiction of capital: the destruction of the ecological conditions for its own social reproduction. Future **PPe** will depend on envisioning and constructing a sustainable mode of production, one based in the *negentropic* potentials of life. This implies enhancing the principle of life: the process of photosynthesis.

## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 3 (Continued)*

**Montaña (Chapter 8)** reports research findings on the vulnerability of rural communities in watershed basins of Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. She maps out the adaptive strategies undertaken by capitalists, large landowners and poor peasants in response to dwindling water supplies, as well as the strikingly different government policies of these countries: Chile's neoliberal agenda, Argentina's welfare state and Bolivia's policies to revitalise indigenous communities. She notes how expected changes in climate and hydrology are likely to affect the availability of drinking and irrigation water, exacerbating the disadvantages of small producers. She highlights the social divisions created by water access, quoting a popular saying that captures the political economy of these hydraulic societies: 'Water flows uphill towards money.' This social inequality is driven to its extreme in Chile, where water is transformed into a commodity by the prevailing neoliberal, pro-market, public policy. Water and poverty are linked by scarcity and she distinguishes physical scarcity, produced when water is limited by nature, and economic/ political scarcity, which occurs 'when people are *barred from accessing an available source of water*' as a consequence of political subordination'.

## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 3 (Concluded)*

**Vergopoulos (Chapter 9)** examines the relationships between the following elements: the present financial and economic crises; financialisation in general and the financialisation of the agro-industrial food circuit in particular; the generalised increase in food prices; **PPo** & **PPe**; and recent policies to enhance both food security and family-based agrarian production. He qualifies the quick acceleration of food prices combined with decreasing production and the breakdown of productivity in the world food economy as a 'food tsunami'. Going beyond the conventional causes of increases in food prices (lower productivity, speculation on food commodities), adding the structural penetration of capitalism into agricultural production as an additional cause. He identifies the root of the problem as 'structural mutations created by the extension of capitalism into the agri-food sphere'.

He examines why food security policies and the return to family-based forms of food production are being encouraged by the both the WB and the FAO. He argues that the family mode of production permits a maximisation of the agrarian product while minimising prices and production costs. Hence, the poorer peasants are, the more competitive they become. As such, **PPo** and **PPe**, far from being relics of the past, are simply inexpensive safety nets for capitalist food crises. He adds that, under capitalism, the supply of the 'special' commodity labour power, must be ensured through a non-capitalist (read: family labour) production process in order to keep its price substantially, structurally and permanently low.

*Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 4. Contents*

Session 4, “Policy, self-reliance and **PPo**” comprises:

Ch. 10 (Farshad Araghi) “The rise and fall of the agrarian welfare state: peasants, globalisation, and the privatisation of development”, and

Ch. 11 (David Barkin & Blanca Lemus) “Overcoming rural poverty from the bottom up”.

## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 4. Ch. 10*

**Araghi (Ch. 10) analyses** 'agrarian welfare systems', or food regimes that managed labour and food supplies in different historical epochs. For him, it was the success of the Soviets in linking national and colonial questions with the peasant question that put the 'Third World and its development on the agenda of the US', forcing it to promote a 'market-led national developmentalism', designed to 'placate postcolonial peasant movements by putting their land hunger within a market-led framework', and to unlink them from urban nationalist/socialist movements. In his view *'peasantisation and depeasantisation are neither unilinear nor mutually exclusive national processes'*. *Depeasantisation was relative between 1950 & 1970, and absolute afterwards, produced by capital's counterrevolution, capital's withdrawal from reformist social compacts, and by the retreat from development* which sought to reverse the protection of society from the market. Asymmetric power relations, argues Araghi, forced millions of petty producers in the South to compete with heavily subsidised transnational corporations in the North. The inability to compete led in turn to massive peasant dispossession by displacement. This dispossession is exacerbated by the global land grab taking place.



## Authors & chapter's central object(s). 2nd Part. Session 4. Ch. 11

**Barkin and Lemus** adopt a heterodox position that focuses on the market itself as the principal obstacle to peasants escaping the poverty imposed on them by their participation in the capitalist circuit of accumulation. The authors argue that millions of rural denizens have adopted different strategies for confronting their structural weaknesses using communal principles of collective action and traditional organisation. Their collective commitments to an alternative framework for production and social integration, based on the principles of autonomy, solidarity, self-sufficiency, productive diversification and sustainable management, offer a realistic but challenging strategy for local progress.

A major thrust of this paper is its critique of the notion of progress where well-being is measured in terms of economic growth or other objective indicators. They suggest alternative measures of well-being, such as an index of 'gross domestic happiness'; emphasise *degrowth* and good living (*sumak kawsay*); and embrace communality, which includes direct or participatory democracy. Near the end of their paper they say that it might be that much of the poverty to which most of the literature is addressed has its origins in the individualism and alienation of the masses whose behaviour is embedded in the Western model of modernity, a model of concentrated accumulation based on a system of deliberate dispossession of the majority by a small elite.



## *Authors & chapter's central object(s). 3th Part. 4. Ch. 12*

**Boltvinik** (“Dialogues and debates on **PPo** and **PPe**: around the BP and beyond”) **starts by** listing commentaries and criticisms to the BP included in 5 papers of the book; he organises his reactions (and his deepened analysis) in : 1) general clarifications (divided into 3 groups: genesis and theoretical bases of his theory; what he does not say; and what he does say in the BP paper); 2) precisions on seasonality; 3) backups for his theory (finding support for his theory in positions by Lenin, Danielson, Kautsky and Cabrera); and 4) replies to the authors in this book. Replies are organised in two groups. Short replies to non-central commentaries are presented in a table, while longer replies to Welty et al., Bernstein, and lastly Arizmendi and Leff together, are presented in a section. Salient points are Boltvinik’s discovery of a precedent to his theory in Danielson’s theory of the ‘freeing of winter time’ as the fundamental cause of **PPo**; his unveiling of a little known facet of Lenin’s work that rejects, ambiguously, the theory of the vanishing peasantry; the complementarity between Boltvinik’s theory and Kautsky’s theory on the demographic role of the peasantry; the importance of discussing: the alleged neglect of nature in Marx’s labour theory of value, the Lauderdale Paradox, or the contradiction between use value and exchange value; and, lastly, the profound insight, generated in his debate with Arizmendi, on discontinuities and the labour theory of value, that any theory of capitalism has to include its necessary coexistence and articulation with the peasantry. The chapter also includes: an extended analysis of the distinctive features of agriculture, a list of topics not covered in the book, and typologies of replies to the central questions of the BP.

## A horizontal look at the book: building typologies of replies to central questions

First, it is necessary to assess how generalised are the replies to the 2 central questions in *PP&P*, and thus deciding whether to build typologies of these replies is a good way to give a horizontal panorama of *PP&P*. Replies both by the authors of chapters themselves and by other authors discussed by them, are included. But the following topics dealt in *PP&P* are not included as they are not strictly theoretical replies to the 2 questions: the account given on definitions of poverty and the peasantry, and the historical view of ideas on Question 2 (Introduction); Arizmendi's discussion on the various modes of subsumption of the peasantry to capital (Ch. 4); Damián and Pacheco's empirical findings on rural poverty, seasonality and persistence (Ch. 6); Montaña's case studies in three countries on the impact of water scarcity on peasants according to the degree of water commodification in each (Ch. 8); and Araghi's historical analysis of food regimes that promote peasantisation and/or depeasantisation (Ch. 10). Authors' proposals to reduce poverty and/or support the peasant economy are also not included. Observing the broad list of replies to both questions, and taking into account the numerous topics not covered in these lists, one concludes that most chapters include a reply (or replies) to both questions, and/or present empirical evidence on them, or look at them historically – both the history of food regimes and the history of ideas. Thus the conclusion that central questions have a strong and generalised presence in *PP&P* follows, and the reader receives, in addition, a rich panorama beyond the specific replies (or theories). Thus the typologies give a good (but incomplete) horizontal view of *PP&P*.

## Typology of replies (theories) to the peasant poverty question

As described in Ch. 12, 3 steps were followed to build the typologies: 1) formulating a list of replies to each question in each chapter; 2) grouping them by type; and 3) summing up replies to both questions in a single phrase.

The **typology to question 1** (Why are most peasants poor?) includes five types of replies, worded as “**Peasants are poor because they**” (in parentheses, the authors in *PP&P* sustaining and discussing it, and some external authors discussed):

1. “Produce very little” (conventional reply Leff).
2. “Self-exploit themselves and/or are exploited/dominated by (subsumed to) capital”. (Chayanov; Bartra; Arizmendi)
3. “Absorb both winter and pre-harvest seasonality costs” (Danielson; Boltvinik).
4. “Subsidise capital by selling labour power cheaply” (Welty *et al.*; Vergopoulos)
5. “Live in a poverty trap due to ‘cultural’ factors” (Barkin-Lemus: individualism and alienation; Galbraith: accommodation and equilibrium of poverty; etc.).

In #1 type, the problem is *low quantity of production (Q)*, while in 2, 3 & 4 the problem lies in *low prices (P) at which peasants sell their products and/or their labour power*. In #5 the cause is not economic.

## Typology of replies (theories) to the peasant persistence (P<sub>Pe</sub>) question

1. There is no **P<sub>Pe</sub>**: landholding peasants are not peasants but proletarians. (Lenin –as usually interpreted- ; Bernstein).

The remaining types of reply sustain that “**peasants persist because**”:

2. “Their functions of producing labour power (Kautsky; Vergopoulos) and supplying it seasonally (Boltvinik), are indispensable for agricultural capitalism”.

3. “By not requiring profits, nor rent, but only subsistence income, they become very competitive” (Chayanov; Bartra; Vergopoulos).

4. “Capitalism’s inability to overcome the obstacles present in agriculture for its development” (Mann-Dickinson; Contreras; Welty *et al.*)

5. “Peasants function as buffers for differential rents, which damages non-agricultural capital” (Bartra)

6. “Peasants attachment to land is very strong” (Leff)

## Boltvinik's commentaries on some replies to Q1 on PPO

Self-exploitation, exploitation or domination (subsumption) by capital, despite their differences, are all associated with peasants receiving low prices for their product and buying their inputs at high prices (P) through unequal exchange. This domination (subsumption) has other consequence: dispossessing peasants of their capacity to decide, that are not captured in the table. My theory that peasants are poor because they absorb the costs of seasonality (row 3) impinges on both the prices (P) at which they sell their product and the wages received for their seasonal work (W); both of these reflect only the time effectively worked, which, given seasonality, is only a fraction of the year. This has been classified in the same category as Danielson's theory (backed up by Marx and Kautsky) of the 'freeing of winter time', which relates to the *reduction in the time during which labour power can be deployed*. So both theories are complementary: peasants cannot work in the winter, nor in the non-working time of the production period, and the prices and wages they receive do not compensate these losses.

## Boltvinik's critiques to some types of replies in both typologies

As stated by Galbraith (1979: 1–22), the reply “Produce vey little” to **Ppo** involves circular reasoning, as it could also be said that peasants have small plots and use traditional technologies (thus produce little) because they are poor. In the case of dispossession (Leff), the question this theory cannot answer is why they are not dispossessed of all their land. As to Q2 on **PPe** Boltvinik's critiques are:

The competitive advantage argued in reply type 3 would explain the persistence of all simple commodity producers (artisans), which has not happened. The Mann–Dickinson and Contreras theses, which are also supported by WMDB, identify false obstacles to capitalist development in agriculture, as they *disregard the equalisation of the rate of profit analysed by Marx in Volume III of Capital*. WMDB (Chapter 3) do not counter-argue against this critique. Lastly, explaining peasant persistence by peasant's attachment to land forgets the great gap in economic, political and military power between the peasantry and capital. It also forgets that capital has not only dispossessed peasants, but in many periods and places it has allotted plots of land to them.



## What about question 3 (Q3)?

With the exception of the BP, authors in *PP&P* did not broach explicitly Q3: How are the questions on **PPo** and **PPe** related? The BP explicit reply to Q3 is that *a theory that explains PPe has to explain also PPo, as poverty is a condition for peasants to fulfil the function that has allowed them to persist: providing seasonal cheap labour to capitalist agriculture*. Nevertheless, the absence of an explicit connection in Bartra's replies to both questions, it is clear that playing the role of buffers for differential rents, which constitutes his reply to the Q on **PPe**, for playing that role *they have to sell their products below what would constitute a capitalist unit price of production*, i.e. one that includes in the price, not only incurred costs but also the average rate of profit and differential or absolute rent, thus implying that they have to be self-exploited or exploited, which is Bartra's theory of **PPo**. So, also in this case, both theories are linked. Another link, but this one not within a single author's reply, but between Kautsky's demographic theory of **PPe** and those that reply to **PPo** saying that peasants are poor because they subsidise capital by selling labour power cheaply: Welty *et al* and Vergopoulos. Nevertheless, Kautsky's theory is specific for agriculture, while the one by these authors is valid for all breeding-families. So it should predict not only **PPo** but also proletarian poverty. Kautsky perceived that rural proletarians cannot form families as they are forced to be nomad. So peasants are the only rural producers of the commodity labour power.