

Setting the Scene¹

Introduction

As chaotic and disordered as it may appear at first sight, worldwide agriculture is today clearly characterized by three basic and mutually contrasting development trajectories: a strong tendency towards *industrialization*; a widespread, though often hidden, process of *repeasantization*; and, third, an emerging process of *deactivation*, especially in Africa. These three processes each affect, albeit in highly contrasting ways, the nature of agricultural production processes. By doing so, they place a specific imprint upon employment levels, the total amount of produced value, ecology, landscape and biodiversity, and the quantity and quality of food. They interact in many different ways and at several levels, thus contributing to the overwhelming impression of chaos and disorganization that currently seems to characterize world agriculture (Charvet, 1987; Uvin, 1994; Brun, 1996; Weis, 2007).

These development trajectories interlink with a certain segmentation of agriculture, which I argue may be conceptualized as three unequal but inter-related constellations (see Figure 1.1). The first is that of peasant agriculture, which is basically built upon the sustained use of ecological capital and oriented towards defending and improving peasant livelihoods. Multifunctionality is often a major feature. Labour is basically provided by the family (or mobilized within the rural community through relations of reciprocity), and land and the other major means of production are family owned. Production is oriented towards the market as well as towards the reproduction of the farm unit and the family.

In the second constellation an entrepreneurial type of agriculture may be distinguished. It is mainly (though not exclusively) built upon financial and industrial capital (embodied in credit, industrial inputs and technologies), while ongoing expansion, basically through scale enlargement, is a crucial and necessary feature. Production is highly specialized and completely oriented towards markets. Entrepreneurial farmers actively engage in market dependency (especially in markets on the input side of the farm), whereas peasants try to distance their farming practices from such markets through a multitude of often very clever mechanisms. Forms of entrepreneurial farming often arise from state-driven programmes for ‘modernization’ of agriculture. They entail a

partial industrialization of the labour process and many entrepreneurs aim at a further unfolding along this pathway.

Third, there is the constellation composed of large-scale corporate (or capitalist) farming. Once having nearly disappeared, among other things through the many land reform processes that swept the world, it is now re-emerging everywhere under the aegis of the agro-export model. The corporate farming sector comprises a widely extended web of mobile farm enterprises in which the labour force is mainly or even exclusively based on salaried workers. Production is geared towards and organized as a function of profit maximization. This third constellation increasingly conditions major segments of food and agricultural markets, although sharp differences can be noted between different sectors and countries.

It is often thought that the main differences between these three constellations reside in the dimension of scale. Peasant agriculture then would represent the tiny and vulnerable units of production, the relevance of which is only of secondary importance. Opposed to this would be corporate farming: large, strong and important – at least, that is what is generally assumed to be the case. The in-between situation is represented by entrepreneurial farming, moving along the scale dimension from small to larger units. If entrepreneurial farmers are successful, they might, it is argued, join the ranks of corporate farmers – which is precisely what some of them dream of achieving.

There are undoubtedly empirical correlations between size and scale of farming and the different modes of farming. The point is, though, that the *essence* of the difference resides somewhere else (i.e. in *the different ways in which the social and the material are patterned*). Peasants, for instance, create fields and breed cows that differ from those created by entrepreneurs and corporate farmers. Also, the *mode* of construction differs between the three categories. And beyond this, peasants *relate* in a different way to the process of production than do the other two categories, just as they relate in a contrasting way to the outside world. Regardless of size, they constitute themselves as a social category that differs in many respects from those of corporate farmers and entrepreneurs.

As I will show throughout this book, these different modes of patterning deeply affect the magnitude of value added and its redistribution, as well as the nature, quality and sustainability of the production process and the food resulting from it.

Equally important is the time dimension. Normally, it is assumed that the peasantry and peasant farming belong to the past, while entrepreneurial and corporate farming represents the future. Here again, in essence, it is all about *patterning*. Within the peasant mode of production, the past, present and future are linked in a way that sharply contrasts with the social organization of time entailed in entrepreneurial and corporate farming (Mendras, 1970).

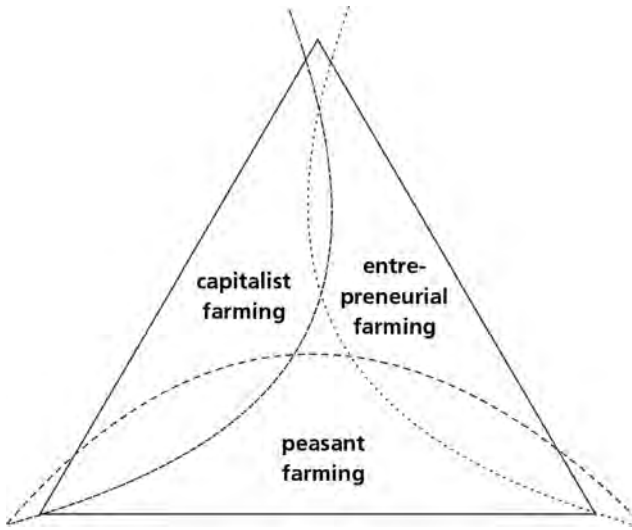


Figure 1.1 *Different but interlinked modes of farming*

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Although the differences between the three constellations are manifold and often quite articulated, there are no clear-cut lines of demarcation. At the interfaces there is considerable overlap and ambiguity, and ‘borderlines’ are crossed through complex moves both backwards and forwards. Several of these border crossings (e.g. from peasant to entrepreneurial farming and vice versa) will be discussed at some length in this book. The ‘outer borders’ of the constellation summarized in Figure 1.1 are, likewise, far from being sharp and clear. Peasant farming flows through a range of shades and nuances, frequently summarized as pluriactivity (compare this notion with that of *polybians*² discussed by Kearney, 1996; see also Harriss, 1997), to the situation of the landless and the many urban workers who cultivate plots for self-consumption. Industrial entrepreneurs might also invest in agriculture (and vice versa), thus constituting themselves as a kind of ‘hybrid’ capitalist farmer. Hence, confusion is, it seems, intrinsic to all these borderlines.

The interconnections between the three agrarian constellations and society at large are patterned in many different ways. However, we can distinguish two dominant patterns. One pattern is centred on the construction and reproduction of *short and decentralized circuits* that link the production and consumption of food, and, more generally, farming and regional society. The other highly centralized pattern is constituted by large food processing and trading companies that increasingly operate on a world scale. Throughout the book I refer to this pattern as *Empire*. Empire is understood here as a mode of

ordering that tends to become dominant. At the same time, Empire is embodied in a wide range of specific expressions: agribusiness groups, large retailers, state apparatuses, but also in laws, scientific models, technologies, etc. Together these expressions (which I refer to in the plural as *food empires*) compose a regime: ‘a grammar or rule set comprised in the coherent complex of scientific knowledge, engineering practices, production process technologies, product characteristics, [enterprise interests, planning and control cycles, financial engineering, patterns of expansion, and] ways of defining problems – all of them embedded in institutions and infrastructures’ (Rip and Kemp, 1998; see also Ploeg et al, 2004b).³ On the one hand, this regime is, indeed, continuously made coherent, while, on the other, it is equally an arena in which internal struggles and contradictions are omnipresent. Authoritative hubs of control mutually contest for hegemony, while specific carriers of Empire as an ordering principle might emerge, become seemingly powerful, then erode or even collapse. Hence, Empire is not only an emergent and internally differentiated phenomenon; it is, above all, the *interweaving* and *mutual strengthening* of a wide range of different elements, relations, interests and patterns. This *interweaving* increasingly relates in a *coercive* way to society: single projects (of individual and collective actors) become aligned, at whatever level, to the grammar entailed in Empire. Indeed, to a degree, Empire is a disembodied mode of ordering: it goes beyond the many sources from which it is emerging; it also goes beyond the many carriers and expressions into which it is currently materializing. These carriers might crack or collapse (later I describe and analyse several cases of this); however, through such episodes, Empire as a mode of ordering might even be strengthened.

I am aware that the representation of Empire as a disembodied whole implies a considerable danger of reification. I also think that there is no semantic solution for such danger: it is only when resistance, struggles and the creation of alternatives are systematically included in the analysis that such a danger of reification can be avoided.

The creation of *disconnections* is a key word for understanding the *modus operandi* of Empire. Through Empire, the production and consumption of food are increasingly disconnected from each other, both in time and in space. Likewise, agricultural production is decontextualized: it is disconnected from the specificities of local ecosystems and regional societies. Currently, Empire is engaged, as it were, in a fierce endeavour to conquer and control increasing parts of food production and consumption on a world scale (although it should not be forgotten that some 85 per cent of food production in the world is channelled through short and decentralized circuits).⁴

There are no simple one-to-one clear-cut relations between these two mutually contrasting patterns of connectivity and the three agrarian constellations. All three constellations interact with and are, in a way, constituted

through the different mechanisms that link them to wider society. However, corporate and entrepreneurial farming are mainly linked (as illustrated in Figure 1.2) through large-scale food processing and trading companies to world consumption, while peasant agriculture is basically, though far from exclusively, grounded in short and decentralized circuits that at least escape from *direct* control by capital (though indirect control is, of course, considerable and far reaching).

Industrialization

Corporate farming is the main laboratory and Empire the main driver of the process of industrialization, although parts of the entrepreneurial segment also provide significant contributions. In the first place, then, industrialization represents a definitive disconnection of the production and consumption of

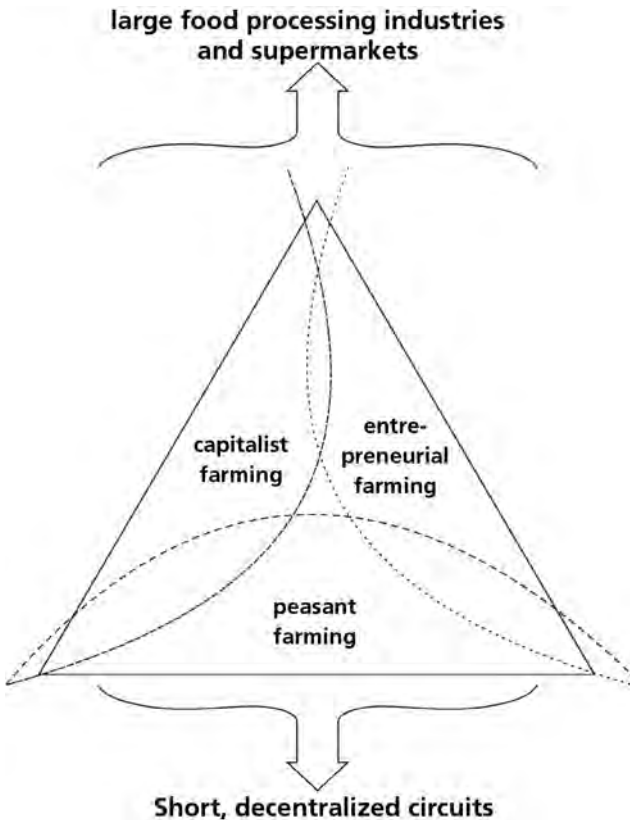


Figure 1.2 *Patterns of connectivity*

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food from the particularities (and boundaries) of time and space. Spaces of production and consumption (understood as specific localities) no longer matter. Nor do the interrelations between the two. In this respect food empires may be said to create 'non-places' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p343; see also Ritzer, 2004, for a provocative discussion).

Second, the industrialization of agriculture represents an ongoing move away from 'integrity'. This is a triple-layered process of disintegration and re-composition. Agricultural production is 'moved' away from local ecosystems. Industrialization implies, in this respect, the superimposition of artificial growth factors over nature and a consequent marginalization and, in the end, probably a complete elimination of the latter. Beyond that, the once organic unity that characterized the agricultural production process is broken down into isolated elements and tasks that are recombined through complex and centrally controlled divisions of labour, space and time. The well-known 'global chicken' (Bonnano et al, 1994) is, in this respect, a telling metaphor. And, finally, there is the disintegration and recombination of food products as such. Food is no longer produced and processed – it is engineered. The once existing lines between fields, grain and pasta, or, for that matter, gardens, tomatoes and tomato sauce to be poured over the pasta, are being broken. This has given rise to what we now know as the 'food wars' (Lang and Heasman, 2004).

Third, industrialization coincides with (and is an expression of) an increased and direct 'imperial' control over food production and consumption. The search for elevated levels of profitability, the associated conquest and the imposition of an overarching control become new and dominant features that reshape agricultural production, processing and food consumption on a global scale.

The current process of industrialization of food production and consumption is expressed in and carried forward by a well-defined agenda: globalization, liberalization, a fully fledged distribution of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and the claim that the world has never had safer food at its disposal than now are key elements of that agenda. It is equally claimed that this same agenda contains promising prospects for poor peasants in the developing world. In fact, the industrialization agenda claims that there is no alternative except further industrialization.

Repeasantization

Throughout the world the process of agricultural industrialization introduces strong downward pressures on local and regional food production systems, whatever their specific nature. A dramatic strengthening of the already existing squeeze on agriculture is one of the most visible consequences: although we

see temporary upheavals, off-farm prices are, on the whole, nearly everywhere under pressure. This introduces strong trends towards marginalization and new patterns of dependency, which, in turn, trigger considerable repeasantization – whether in the developing world or in industrialized countries. Repeasantization is, in essence, a modern expression of the *fight for autonomy and survival in a context of deprivation and dependency*. The peasant condition is definitively not static. It represents a flow through time, with upward as well as downward movements. Just as corporate farming is continuously evolving (expanding and simultaneously changing in a qualitative sense – that is, through a further industrialization of the processes of production and labour), so peasant farming is also changing. And one of the many changes is *repeasantization*.

Repeasantization implies a double movement. It entails a quantitative increase in numbers. Through an inflow from outside and/or through a re-conversion of, for instance, entrepreneurial farmers into peasants, the ranks of the latter are enlarged. In addition, it entails a qualitative shift: autonomy is increased, while the logic that governs the organization and development of productive activities is further distanced from the markets.⁵ Several of the time- and place-bound mechanisms through which repeasantization occurs are discussed in this book. In the same discussion I will make clear that repeasantization occurs as much in Europe as it does in developing world countries.

Deactivation

Deactivation implies that levels of agricultural production are actively contained or even reduced. In several instances, deactivation translates into an associated sub-process: the resources entailed in agriculture are released (i.e. converted into financial capital and invested in other economic sectors and activities). Equally, the necessary labour may flow, permanently or temporarily, out of agriculture. Deactivation (which is not to be confused with de-peasantization)⁶ knows many specific causes, mechanisms and outcomes. A dramatic expression is presented by sub-Saharan Africa. While throughout history, demographic and agricultural growth went together – the former being the driver of the latter – contemporary Africa has already shown for decades an ongoing and dramatic decline in agricultural production per capita. Deactivation translates here directly into widespread de-agrarianization (Bryceson and Jamal, 1997). Hebinck and Monde (2007) and Ontita (2007) provide an empirically grounded critique of the assumptions of de-agrarianization.

So far, deactivation has occurred in Europe only on a minor scale. While Eastern European agriculture was temporarily deactivated (due to the demise of the socialist regime and the transition to a neo-liberal market economy), this was

followed by widespread repeasantization and a surge of entrepreneurial and corporate farming (the latter two mostly based on migration from Western Europe). Close by large and expanding cities there is often deactivation: speculation in land becomes more attractive than agricultural production. There is also deactivation imposed by state apparatuses and the European Union. Set-aside programmes, the McSharry reforms (that introduced a deliberate extensification of agricultural production), quota systems, as well as several spatial and environmental programmes all contain or even reduce agricultural production. It is to be expected, however, that in the years to come, deactivation will go far beyond the levels realized so far. Globalization and liberalization (and the associated shifts in the international division of agricultural production) will introduce new forms of deactivation that will no longer depend upon state interventions, but which will be directly triggered by the farmers involved. In Chapter 5 (when discussing the major trends in Italian dairy farming) I offer evidence of such deliberate deactivation. Within entrepreneurial farming, in particular, deactivation might become a 'logical' response. When price levels decrease so much that profitability becomes illusory, opting out and reorienting invested capital elsewhere become evident expressions of entrepreneurial behaviour. Processes of suburbanization, development of recreational facilities, the creation of 'nature reserves' and new forms of water management will further accelerate this movement.

Interrelations between constellations and processes

It is my impression that, at this moment, the two main developmental processes are industrialization and repeasantization. Deactivation has been, so far, a less prominent process; but it might in the future be triggered and thus also provoke a considerable imprint upon rural areas. The three processes are evidently interlinked. Since industrialization, for instance, proceeds as the takeover of market shares, entrepreneurial economies will enter (slowly or abruptly) into crisis, their reproduction possibilities being reduced through deteriorating terms of trade. Hence, new degrees, forms and spaces for autonomy are sought and constructed. This is how repeasantization is triggered. In order to reduce cost levels, a part of entrepreneurial farming will be re-patterned into more resistant peasant-like forms of production. However, it is equally possible that deteriorating terms of trade will be countered from within the entrepreneurial constellation through a further industrialization and/or through deactivation. Within peasant agriculture itself, further repeasantization might also emerge. The 'peasant condition' is not static. 'Like every social entity, the peasantry exists only as a process (i.e. in its change)' (Shanin, 1971, p16).

There are many other interlinkages between the developmental trajectories mentioned above, of which several are explored in this book. Together they

compose a highly complex panorama. We are confronted with the simultaneity of three mutually opposed, but interlinked, transitional processes. Within this panorama, at least one of the three is explicitly searching for hegemony – in this case, the industrialization process rooted in corporate farming and Empire. At the same time, its fragility is omnipresent, although highly camouflaged.

The three transitional processes are located in a complex and changing way in the three constellations outlined earlier (see Figure 1.3). The practice and prospects for further industrialization are clearly located in corporate farming and – to a lesser degree – in entrepreneurial farming. Through industrialization, parts of the entrepreneurial constellation are moving towards and becoming reconstituted as integral parts of the corporate sector.

Deactivation basically stems from and resides in the domain of entrepreneurial farming, although it could be argued that engagement in pluriactivity – a frequent feature of peasant agriculture – also represents a kind of deactivation. Repeasantization, in turn, appears within Figure 1.3 in a manifold form: it occurs through an inflow of, for example, urban people into agriculture as represented by the impressive case of the landless people's movement in Brazil, the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST) (see Long and Roberts, 2005, for a convincing specification of the theoretical significance of this case). It likewise occurs through the less visible creation of new microscopic units in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. It may also arise as an important reorientation within entrepreneurial farming itself: in order to face the squeeze imposed by falling

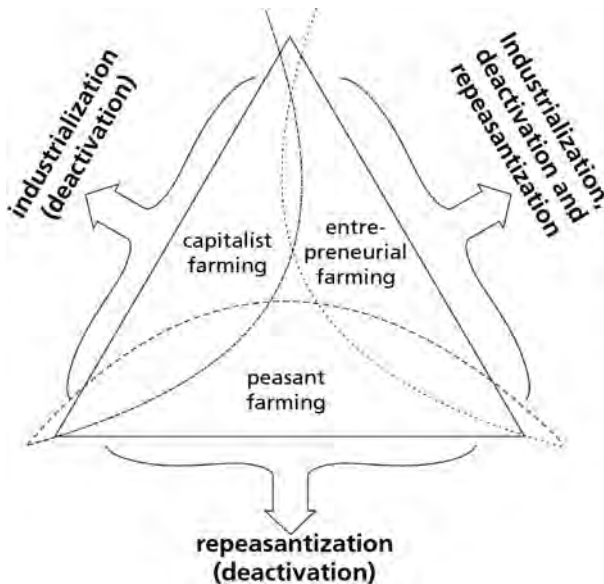


Figure 1.3 *Transitional processes*

prices and rising costs, such farming increasingly switches over to peasant-like modes of organization. And, finally, repeasantization occurs within the peasant sector itself, which often shows a *further unfolding* of the peasant mode of farming.⁷

These transitional processes also connect up with Empire. Empire triggers and reproduces corporate farming, especially in the current conjuncture. Empire also builds on entrepreneurial farming since it subjects agriculture, wherever located, to an ‘external squeeze’ that translates, especially in respect to entrepreneurial farming, into an ‘internal squeeze’ (the details of which I discuss in Chapter 5). Peasant agriculture is also submitted to Empire, albeit partly through other mechanisms, although, at the same time, the peasantry represents resistance to it, sometimes in an overt and massive way, but mostly in hidden, tangible ways of escaping from or even overcoming the pressures. In this respect, (re)assessing short and decentralized circuits that connect producers and consumers independently from Empire frequently play a decisive role.

The coming crisis⁸

Whatever its location in time and space, agriculture always articulates with nature, society and the prospects and interests of those directly involved in farming (see Figure 1.4). If a more or less chronic disarticulation emerges in one of the defined axes, then one is faced with an agrarian crisis.

The ‘classical’ idea of agrarian crisis centres upon the interrelations between the organization of agricultural production and the interests and

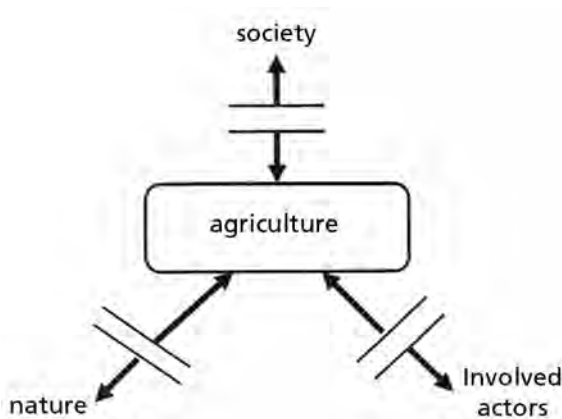


Figure 1.4 *An outline of the coming agrarian crisis*

Source: Adapted from Ploeg (2006a, p259)

prospects of those directly engaged in it.⁹ This is the form of crisis that throughout history has triggered massive peasant struggles and often land reform. However, mankind has also witnessed (especially in recent times) agrarian crises that concern how agricultural and livelihood practices interrelate with nature. When agriculture becomes organized and develops through a systematic destruction of the ecosystems upon which it is based and/or increasingly contaminates the wider environment, an 'agro-environmental crisis' is born. And, finally, there is the relation with society at large in which the quality of food is an important, though not the only, relevant feature. The current range of food scandals (notably BSE, or mad cow disease, and the public outcry following containment of animal diseases such as foot and mouth, avian influenza, swine fever and blue tongue disease) are expressions of the crises emerging on the axis that links agriculture with society at large.

Currently, a crisis is looming that for the first time in history concerns:

- All three axes contained in Figure 1.4: it concerns the quality of food and the security of food delivery; it concerns the sustainability of agricultural production; and it is associated with a far-reaching negation of the emancipatory aspirations of those involved in primary production.
- For the first time, it represents a global crisis whose effects are felt throughout the world.
- Finally, this many-faceted and internationalized agrarian crisis increasingly represents a Gordian knot in the sense that alleviation of one aspect at any one particular moment and place only aggravates the crisis elsewhere at other moments and/or transfers to other dimensions.

Thus, the thesis I present in this book argues that it is the rise of Empire as an ordering principle that increasingly governs the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food, and in so doing contributes to the advance of what seems like an inevitable agrarian crisis. This is also because Empire proceeds as a brutal ecological and socio-economic exploitation, if not degradation of nature, farmers, food and culture. Industrialization implies the destruction of ecological, social and cultural capital. Moreover, the very forms of production and organization that are introduced turn out to be highly fragile and are scarcely adequate in confronting the very conditions intrinsic to globalization and liberalization. Thus, new, immanent contradictions emerge (Friedmann, 2004, 2006).

It is, I think, only through the widespread and possibly renewed repeasantization that this international and multidimensional crisis might be redressed and averted. In Chapter 10 I come back to repeasantization as a way out of the global agrarian crisis.

The methodological basis

Throughout I argue that peasant, entrepreneurial and corporate ways of farming are (interrelated) movements through time. Hence, the methodological grounding of the book consists of *longitudinal* studies. It is especially through such studies that movements over time may be grasped – that is, the study of long-term trends enables one to comprehend the nature, dynamics and impact of different modes of ordering. These longitudinal studies focus, in the first place, on the peasant community of Catacaos in the north of Peru, where during the early 1970s I witnessed the disappearance of corporate agriculture, partly due to the implementation of a state-organized process of land reform, but especially to the impressive struggles undertaken by the Catacaos community itself. Thirty years later (my last long stay in Catacaos was in the second half of 2004), corporate agriculture was again omnipresent, now as an expression of Empire; at the same time, processes of repeasantization had stretched far beyond what one imagined possible. This is precisely what makes longitudinal studies so important, stimulating and difficult: they underline that the many contradictions that characterize everyday life scarcely have easy, unilinear and predictable outcomes. At the same time, the Catacaos case shows how particular contradictions are reproduced over time, resulting in an evolving agenda that urges one to reflect upon the interrelations between past, present and future.

My second longitudinal study focuses on dairy farming in the area where milk is transformed into *Parmigiano-Reggiano*, or, as it is internationally known, Parmesan cheese. During the period of 1979 to 1983, together with a team of colleagues, I studied in detail a sample of cheese- and milk-producing farms in the area. Later, in 2000, I had the opportunity to carry out a restudy of exactly the same farms. On a personal level, this was as heart warming as being back in Catacaos. This revisit, however, also confronted me with considerable perplexity. What we had initially diagnosed as continuously expanding farms (i.e. those characterized as typical entrepreneurial farms) turned out, at the beginning of the 2000s, to be involved in a process of deactivation, while peasant-type farms found themselves far better placed to face and respond to the processes of globalization and liberalization *avant la lettre* that the area was confronted with. This apparent contradiction once again called for a more thorough theorization of what, in the end, the peasant, entrepreneurial and corporate modes of farming really amount to.

I was intellectually shaped in an epoch (i.e. during the 1960s and 1970s) in which the demise of the peasantry was predicted and heralded everywhere and from virtually all theoretical perspectives. I never felt comfortable with this prospect, but did not have, at that time, the elements and tools to really argue against it. Now, more than 30 years later, I understand somewhat better the

mystery of farming. Mystery is, in this context, an intriguing concept. In the English language ‘mystery’ refers to both ‘the enigma’ or ‘secret’ of farming and to the tasks required. In this sense it is like the Italian word *mestiere*, which equally refers to a job or – to put it more precisely – the capacity to realize a specific work or task in a well-executed fashion. Every job contains its secrets. Doing a job well implies knowledge, insight and experience not available to others – or, at least, better knowledge, superior insight and more extensive experience (MacIntyre, 1981, p175; Keat, 2000).

This same mystery of farming underlies my third longitudinal study, which looks at dairy farming in the Northern Frisian Woodlands of The Netherlands. Due to its particular history, this area has been, and still is, characterized by relatively small farms that operate in a beautiful man-made hedgerow landscape rich in biodiversity. During the 1970s and 1980s, the main expert systems considered that farming here was doomed to disappear. The structure of the landscape (many small to very small plots) and the relatively small-scale nature of most farms seemed to exclude any competitiveness (a concept that became very fashionable from those times onwards). However, farming did not disappear. Many farms closed down or moved to other locations; but, simultaneously, many farms remained and developed further along a highly interesting track that started to unfold from the second half of the 1980s. At farm level, a style of farming ‘economically’ (Ploeg, 2000) was optimized and, at the level of the area as a whole, a new territorial co-operative was created that turned the maintenance of landscape, biodiversity and the regional ecosystem by farmers into a new, solid pillar that now sustains the economy of both the farm units involved and the region as a whole. Apart from having been born there myself, I also came to know the area through a range of multidisciplinary studies in which I was involved. These studies commenced in the mid 1980s and still continue. In Chapter 7, I detail some of the outcomes.

The availability of these three longitudinal studies allows for a comparative analysis that attempts to grasp regularities that go beyond time- and place-bound specificities.¹⁰ Are there any commonalities in the way in which farming is organized? And, if so, to what do they refer? What responses are emerging vis-à-vis the restructuring of agriculture that follows the current processes of globalization and liberalization? And, again, are there common patterns underlying these new responses and associated practices and trajectories? At the same time as identifying similarities, this comparative approach allows us to specify the uniqueness of every constellation encountered. Thus, step by step, both the general and the specific can be assessed in what otherwise remains, indeed, a confusing ‘chaos’.

Contents and organization of the book

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the ‘peasant condition’ as an ongoing struggle for autonomy and progress in a world characterized by often harsh dependency relations and (often high levels of) deprivation. To counter dependency and deprivation, autonomy is sought. Such a *condition*, of course, is basic to all simple commodity producers. It also characterizes, for instance, independent producers and artisans in the urban economy.¹¹ Specific to the peasantry, then, is that autonomy and progress are created through the co-production of man and living nature. Nature – that is, land, animals, plants, water, soil biology and ecological cycles – is used to create and develop a resource base, which is complemented by labour, labour investments (buildings, irrigation works, drainage systems, terraces, etc. – in short: objectified labour), knowledge, networks, access to markets and so forth. Thus, departing from the peasant *condition*, a peasant *mode* of farming can be specified. Other modes of farming evidently also require resources. However, as I will specify (especially in Chapter 5), the way in which resources are created, developed, combined, used and reproduced within the peasant mode of farming is highly distinctive, with sustainability being an important feature. Following Martinez-Alier (2002, pviii), I do not claim ‘that poor people [and, more specifically, peasants] are always and everywhere environmentalists, since this is patent nonsense. But I would argue that, in ecological distribution conflicts, the poor are often on the side of resource conservation and a clean environment.’

The struggle for autonomy and progress is, of course, not limited to developing world conditions. European farmers are equally involved in such struggles, although the immediate conditions under which it occurs are often strikingly different, just as outcomes may also differ. Chapter 3 then looks at the repeasantization process that has taken place during the last three decades in the peasant community of Catacaos in the north of Peru. I show how this process increasingly runs counter to emerging forms of Empire. Chapter 4 focuses on a dramatic expression of Empire in Europe: the Parmalat case.

Dealing with agriculture does not imply, of course, that we are talking about peasants alone. In Chapter 5 I focus on the differences between the peasant and the entrepreneurial modes of farming, using both Italian and Dutch data. Chapter 6 introduces and discusses processes of repeasantization that are currently taking place within Europe. The chapter also presents the results of Italian research on the quality of life in rural areas. This is followed by Chapter 7, which focuses on new forms of creating autonomy at higher levels of aggregation. The example analysed concerns the creation of a territorial co-operative in the north of The Netherlands. It is, as it were, about the creation of a new ‘Catacaos’ – albeit far from Peru where the original Catacaos is located. Here

special consideration is given to newly emerging moral economies (Scott, 1976). Then, in Chapter 8, attention shifts to the ‘global cow’ – a metaphor that refers to the schemes that state apparatuses build for implementing prescription and control in the agricultural sector. The chapter also discusses the role of science in the elaboration of such schemes. Chapter 9 attempts to knit together the different storylines that characterize Empire as a new mode of ordering. In the tenth and final chapter, I discuss the relevance of the peasant principle vis-à-vis this new imperial framework.