

Capitalism and Peasant Farming: Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu by John Harriss, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1982, xviii + 358 pp.

The debate on modes of production in agriculture is not over by any means. It has become protracted, and the issues raised keep expanding constantly. Among its varied implications the debate has compelled many social scientists to return not only to the classics for more critical reading, but to do new empirical research as a basis for further creative theorization. It has also led some into an esoteric realm of "theoretical practice" which in the name of rejecting empiricism rejects empirical research itself. There are still others who have become virtual prisoners of their own mechanistic formulas which do not allow them to make any theoretical advancement. The work of John Harriss on capitalism and peasant agriculture falls into the first of these three groups. It is a product of a painstaking exercise in which theory grapples with reality at a concrete level. As Marx said, there is no royal road to science, and only those who are prepared to endure the fatigue of its steep climb will ever see its luminous summits. How far has the author succeeded in his project? Rather than rush to pass any definitive judgment, I will limit myself to some comments on Harriss's main theses.

I

In the words of the author the book is "about the development of capitalism and the 'peasant' agriculture of a part of South India and about the economic, ideological and political conditions which are associated with it" (p. 1). Harriss's project is mainly an enquiry into the impact of post-independence agrarian policies, more precisely the introduction of the "new technology" and the institutions associated with it, on a "traditional economy" with its own inner dynamic of self-reproduction. A certain degree of development of the productive forces, and hence accumulation and capitalization, has been made feasible by the package of new technology. To that extent there has been an objective differentiation of the peasantry along class lines. The beneficiaries of this differentiation are the members of the dominant class who own larger farms and have adequate financial resources. But the limits of the new technology have been reached within the existing agrarian structure itself. The changes are processual and not structural. They are accompanied by a reinforcement or consolidation of preexisting non-capitalist relations as the "expanded reproduction of capital in agricultural production is subordinated to that of merchant and finance capital" (p. 9). It is contended that the economy initiated by the new technology is dependent on forces that are external to the local economy for its reproduction.

The process of commoditization, which had already set in, became widespread during the colonial period and underwent further intensification in the rural economy in the post-independence period. This intensification led to the "compulsive involvement" of all categories of peasants in the market under the impact of the new technology as its adoption greatly increased the cash needs of the cultivator. This deepening of commodity relations in the peasant household economy meant greater dependence upon commodity production. This however did not lead to a total capitalist transforma-

tion. In fact capitalist development has been "blocked" and "distorted" by the hegemonic presence of merchant and usurer forms of capital.

In this situation exploitative class relations are "embedded" within an ideology of caste, and power relations are perceived and expressed through an idiom which is not the basis of those relations (p. 295). This ideological distortion needs to be understood in order to "comprehend how people participate in their own repression" (p. 216). The ideology of patronage that surrounds class relations and the growth of cultural chauvinism have served to effectively block any development of class consciousness. Caste seems to precede class and a nationalist political ideology has cemented a broad alliance and helped mobilization across caste/class boundaries. All this has served the interests of the dominant classes. "There is no remorseless, inevitable logic of history" says the author, "which will transform this situation." He concludes with an impassioned call for change through "conscious human action" (p. 300).

A Tamil Nadu village with the pseudonym "Randam" forms the milieu of Harriss's empirical investigation. The main points outlined above and their related issues are analyzed by the author in the context of the realities of Randam with the aid of conventional Marxist, Leninist, and, to some extent, what may be termed "non-Marxist" conceptual and analytical tools. Thus we find that with Marx, Lenin, Kautsky, and Marxian scholars, Chayanov, Chayanovians, and several others, including anthropologists, enter the scene of analysis and discussion. What is termed new technology includes a package of irrigation facilities (tube wells and pump sets), high-yielding varieties (HYV), fertilizers and agro-chemicals, and tractors.

The agrarian situation in Randam as described by Harriss conforms to one general pattern of change and stagnation in the countryside. That some pre-capitalist or non-capitalist relations are consolidated and reproduced along with the new elements that signify a capitalist evolution is not a new finding; nor does Harriss make such a claim. Some major issues discussed in the book pertain to the constraints on the capitalist transformation of peasant agrarian structures like that of Randam. The crucial factors that stand in the way are identified in terms of the peculiarities of agriculture, the behavior of capital itself, and certain superstructural/institutional factors. The agro-ecological specificities of the area studied have been reasonably documented and analyzed with regard to how they impinge upon the economic life of the peasantry through their effects on production.

II

Many economists and sociologists, even those who call themselves political economists, who study agrarian relations often tend to pay little attention to the technical and ecological peculiarities of agriculture. Marx recognized the peculiarities imparted by nature to agricultural production in his discussions of the barriers to a quicker capitalist transformation of agriculture. Many Marxists, however, have disregarded or remained unaware of Marx's insightful comments. They have continued to base their interpretations on the "progressist"¹ thesis of the Manifesto, thereby often ending up with erroneous conclusions. There was a seeming theoretical impasse as a result of this type of "Marxist" interpretation of agrarian situations in the countries of the Third World. This has served as an indirect stimulus to the revival of the Chayanovian school in varied forms as a theoretical alternative. However recent Marxist scholarship

¹ Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review*, No. 104 (1977).

on the subject has not only "unearthed" and developed Marx's insights and ideas but has shown a critical attitude towards the earlier approaches claiming to be Marxist. A more careful study of Lenin's and Kautsky's writings on the capitalist development of agriculture has been of immense value in helping many to discard the progressist notion. The author of this book shows a familiarity with contemporary theoretical developments in this regard. Harriss's effort to integrate certain crucial physical and ideological factors into a framework of political and economic analysis is certainly desirable. However, if he has succeeded in showing the role of some key ecological variables within a given set of agrarian relations, he has not adequately developed his arguments on the behavior of capital in its different forms. The table on "Average Rate of Profit in Sectors of the Agrarian Economy" (p. 193) offers the key to an understanding of the predominance of capital in the so-called unproductive spheres at the expense of productive investment. The hegemony of merchant and usurer's capital serves as an explanatory factor at one level of analysis, but as we proceed further it becomes a factor to be explained. How the class structures that perpetuate this situation are formed and reproduced is a question that is only partially answered in this book. This deficiency is probably related to the absence of any discussion on the most crucial aspects of the class relations of power at the state and central governmental levels that determine policies.

With the advent of the new technology, a critical stage is reached in commoditization as the means of production become increasingly monetized. Commodity relations make a deep inroad into the natural economy at this point, and this has been an accomplishment of the green revolution. Harriss's *Random* also typifies this transition. It seems that the author, who makes repeated references to this critical point, has not pursued it in sufficient depth theoretically. Commoditization of the means of production signifies the collapse of whatever resistance subsistence farmers may have offered to monetization by withdrawing into use-value production. It shows the triumph of exchange value over use value but not necessarily capitalist relations replacing non-capitalist relations. This raises the question of the applicability of the theory of value to these conditions. The main problem in this regard is that under self-proprietorship (or tenancy), the product of labor exchanged also consists of the non-commoditized, private labor-time of the producer. From this viewpoint, Harriss's calculation of surplus value for all categories of farms (p. 190) is debatable.

Historically agriculture has always lagged behind industry in its transformation. Petty commodity production still persists even in the most advanced capitalist countries. The explanation lies to a great extent in the peculiarities of agriculture which keep capital away. It is worth recalling a statement of Marx from the *Grundrisse* on the consequences of the gap between production time and labor time for capital:

This interruption in the production phase already signifies that agriculture can never be the sphere in which capital starts; the sphere in which it takes up its original residence. This contradicts the primary fundamental conditions of industrial labour. Hence agriculture is claimed for capital and becomes industrial only retroactively.²

Thus, part of the answer to the question of non-transformation lies in the capitalist transformation of industry and the pace, and perhaps more decisively, the direction of technological revolutions. Looking at the advanced countries we may safely argue

² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin Books, 1973), p. 669.

that capitalism does not seem to require a totally capitalist agriculture. It has reached its "highest stage" without agriculture becoming totally capitalistic in the heartlands of capitalism. True, a considerable part of agricultural production goes on along capitalist lines, but what is left under petty commodity production is considerable too. Then, what hopes are there for a capitalist transformation of agriculture in countries which have a very slow pace of industrialization? Harriss sees the presence of rich farmers, new technology, wage labor, marginal farmers, a caste hierarchy, and a deferential and accommodating meaning system as an integrated totality. The objective class contradictions inherent in this unity do not find a conscious social expression. The dominant class has revived an ideology that serves as a powerful cementing force. We shall return to this point soon.

The barriers to a capitalist transformation of agriculture seem formidable indeed, and petty commodity production has become a functionally integral part of capitalism. In the developed economies it has been subordinated to the dictates of industrial capital at large while in the backward economies, merchant capital reigns. Harriss in his concern to explain the resistance of peasant agriculture to capitalism seems to have found Lenin and Kautsky inadequate. He may be justified, but his use of Chayanovian concepts has not added anything significant to his interpretation. The author himself is quite uncertain about the relevance of Chayanov to his analysis of a complex dynamic, although he seems to feel obliged to pay a carefully worded, yet somewhat glowing, tribute to Chayanov and his school.

The author almost promises to deal with another neglected aspect of the agrarian question but does not pursue it beyond a few paragraphs. I am referring to the discussion on laboring women. The new technology by its partial transformation of the labor process has created new imbalances in the demand for labor between the two sexes. The "pump set revolution" has greatly displaced male labor and increased the demand for female labor. It is stated that women in laboring households have greater independence and freedom of action. This point is taken up again in the appendix but only in passing and without any serious concern for analysis.

In my view the most interesting and valuable contribution of Harriss is his treatment of the role of ideology in the social and economic life of the Randam community. The author is correct in his critique of some analysts of agrarian change who are too simplistic and crude in their conception of ideology as a direct reflection of the material relations in which the actors are involved. The ideology that dominates Randam is not just a passive leftover from the past.

It has been modified and consolidated to support not only the distribution of power within the existing agrarian structure at the village level but the DMK/ADMK-type ruling parties at state level. Thus caste and ethnicity take precedence over class in the perceptions of the people. It is implicit in Harriss's analysis that the big farmers constitute the most class-conscious group in Randam. The following observation is very revealing.

The big farmers of Randam were mostly quite well informed about communist activities in Thanjavur and elsewhere in India, and they were all quite virulently anti-communist. Given that awareness and sensitivity on their part, it is not surprising if they make use of opportunities for creating links between themselves and members of the subordinate class on the basis of a shared allegiance to a political party, and the style and "ideology" of DMK/ADMK politics helps them to do this. (p. 278)

The agrarian workers on the other hand have no organization that can free them from the "ruling ideology" and change their consciousness in line with their class/caste status as the exploited and oppressed.

Tamil Nadu is one of those states of India in which the "kulak lobby" is powerful, and it was the all-India "landlord-kulak lobby" that turned the terms of trade in favor of agriculture from the early 1960s. Harriss's analysis of ideology and politics in Ramanandam shows the operations of the dominant class at the local level: the "dialectical unity of locality and state" (p. 32). The traditional structures of dominance have served a new function of vertical mobilization cutting across class and caste lines which helps to keep parties like the DMK or ADMK in power. And people lend themselves to exploitation and participate, of course quite unconsciously, in their own repression with a chauvinistic pride which has no meaning to them in reality.

This ideological consolidation is a consolidation of a false consciousness indeed, although, as Harriss would agree, it should not be "dismissed too easily." For false consciousness is only an inverted surface appearance of more deep-seated real issues. One may dismiss the issues themselves by dismissing the false consciousness. There is another implication arising out of Harriss's observation of the nonexistence of class consciousness among the exploited sections of the village. I believe that an external agent committed to practical political action and education is a necessity for the development of class consciousness among workers. Spontaneous development of class consciousness is possible only up to a point, among workers engaged in socialized production. The Marxist distinction between "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself" levels of consciousness may be useful here. The agrarian workers, however, pose even greater problems of organization because of their socially isolated and casual nature of employment in petty commodity production. Harriss's analysis and theoretical questioning lead us to these and many other important questions which call for further investigation and thinking to find answers.

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