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# The Great Commodification and its Paradoxes. A Historical, Comparative and Global Perspective on Land Regimes and Land Reforms

*Hanne Cottyn and Eric Vanhaute*

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)  
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# The Great Commodification and its paradoxes. A Historical, Comparative and Global Perspective on Land Regimes and Land Reforms

Hanne Cottyn and Eric Vanhaute

## Abstract

*This presentation applies a comparative and global perspective to regional trajectories of land reforms and rural change within a globalizing world (18th -21st centuries). The struggle over the allocation of (rights over) resources between owners of the land, users of the land and state structures acts as a centripetal force behind the intertwining of the rural areas with global processes of capitalist incorporation. The commodification of land is shaped by and has shaped different though connected regional histories of incorporation for about five centuries now. This process intersects with other historical developments, such as economic transformations in view of increasing resource competition, ecological changes, increasing state control and the social reorganization of peasant livelihoods, in which peasant and indigenous peoples appear as active negotiators rather than mere objects of assimilation or segregation. New public regulations pertaining to land use have been a primary tool for opening access to labour and commodity production. State-induced land reforms have acted as a crucial instrument in the deepening and widening of centralized land regimes and can be adopted as revealing research entries for historical, comparative and global analyses of trajectories of rural transformation. Bringing the regional trajectories of rural transformation into dialogue enhances our understanding of how shifting regulations of access and property rights over land mould into interconnected, “uneven” and intensely negotiated trajectories.*

## **Introduction: Linking the Global Paradoxes of Land and Peasants.**

This is a working paper that discusses work in progress. It presents outlines of a research framework for the analysis of regional trajectories of peasant change and land rights transformations from a historical, comparative and global perspective. It aims to foster and participate in ongoing debates regarding processes of commodification and the fate of rural societies in the past and today. Thereby, it seeks to contribute to the building of transdisciplinary bridges across the overlapping fields of world history, political economy, rural development and peasant studies.

The presented work explores two interconnected global paradoxes of ‘the great commodification’: the coexistence of commodifying land regimes and resilient communal land tenure systems (the land paradox), and the persistence and re-emergence of peasantries in a world that has known 500 years of capitalist incorporation (the peasant paradox). From a global unilinear perspective, the persistence of communal land tenure regimes seems an inconsistency of a seemingly inexorable expanding system that seeks to encapsulate local forms of land management within a frame of standardized land regimes. We claim that from a global and multi-scaled perspective, however, those divergent land regimes appear as the outcome of differentiated but interconnected regional trajectories of land rights transformation moulded by both global commodifying pressures and local processes of change and resistance. The dialectics of commodified and communal spaces that shape the apparent land paradox is captured by this unevenness in the historical formation of land regimes. In this paper, we argue that the key to grasp that unevenness is in local societal forms of organization at ‘the edge’ of expanding systems and the way they mould commodifying pressures into a ‘negotiated incorporation’.

More in particular, we focus on the trajectories of incorporation and differentiation of peasantries in relation with the land question. Here, the second paradox comes into the picture, that of “surviving” peasant communities. We do not argue for coinciding paradoxes, as communal land tenure systems are not exclusively in hands of peasant societies nor do peasants necessarily rely on communal land tenure. What we do argue for is an interconnected approach in which locally developed strategies for subsistence and resistance produce a ‘feedback’ effect that deviates the classically assumed inevitability of peasant ‘evaporation’. We thus propose peasants and land as revealing research entries towards understanding the essential, overarching contradiction or paradox of capitalism; it pushes for the commodification of everything and therefore constantly needs societal structures free from commodification (Moore 2015).

The central conceptual tool that is put forward to make sense of the dialectics between integration and independence is the notion of *frontier*. Frontiers are understood as the processes of incorporation and differentiation of people and places –such as peasants and their lands- into commodified structures (Vanhaute and Cottyn, forthcoming). Frontiers redefine the socio-ecological relations between humans and nature and are the sites of appropriation of new supplies of nature, land and labour. Frontiers also create zones of negotiation, alliance and resistance, and are vital nodes of social change. This triggers a multiplicity of regional trajectories of transformation. We capture these patterns of social change in a set of evolving and changing regimes, which can be seen as the social time/space fixes of frontier processes. These regimes form the structuring element in the processes we examine and are understood as the framework that fixes economic, social, political, cultural and ecological forces into regulating structures and as shaped by exogenous and top-down as well as endogenous and bottom-up pressures. Next to land regimes and labour regimes, this paper puts forward peasant regimes as a tool to contextualise how peasantries in a certain time/space are (internally) organised and (externally) embedded, and how these social fixes change over time.

Structure of the paper:

- 1) Situating the paradoxes: peasant change and land rights transformations.
- 2) The land question and the fruits of its property.
- 3) The peasant question and the fruits of their labour.
- 4) The Great Frontier and the community: negotiated incorporation.
- 5) Towards a global and comparative research strategy for changing peasantries and transforming land rights.

## 1 Situating the Paradoxes: Peasant Change and Land Rights Transformations

Ever since early village systems, peasants have been a major social force in world history. Not only did they feed the world, they supported states, kingdoms and empires, they overthrew existing powers and changed the course of history, and they fuelled economic and social expansion. The peasant has been a central actor in world history for millennia. Households and villages are the basic social units and gateways to the wider world. Rural communities organise themselves in response to the pressures of encroaching societal entities. They develop strategies for survival and resistance in response to the expanding impact of state powers, market relations, class struggles and ethno-cultural identity conflicts. Over time, the scales upon which these social power relations are expressed have not only been widening and multiplying, they have also become increasingly interdependent. The 'long twentieth century' capitalist food regime expanded through successive waves of imperialist and neo-liberal intensification, globalising the North Sea geo-model of a core of capital intensive market production with peasant-based export cum survival zones at the edges. These edges embody several paradoxes that are illuminating for the way in which capitalism attempts “*to divert or attach itself to other kinds of energy or logic*” (Gidwani 2008: xix). Two insightful and interconnected paradoxes of which these ‘edgy’ zones give testimony is how resilient communal land tenure systems coexist with commodifying land regimes and how peasantries survive and re-emerge in a world that has known 500 years of capitalist expansion.

The *land paradox* relates to a latent social question at the start of the 21st century, that of approximately 1.5 billion people living on land that is controlled by customary community-based tenure systems. An estimated 65 percent of the world’s land area continues to be managed within indigenous and peasant community structures, containing different constellations of common and individual/family entitlements (Alden Wily 2011; LandMark 2015). This significant number contrasts with processes over the last five hundred years, of land commodification that have effectively pushed the management of land and natural resources in many localities out of customary and communal control and under statutory laws that structure dualist and exclusivist land regimes (Richards 2009; Engerman and Metzger 2004: 17; Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010: 12; Wilusz 2010). Today, the position of communal systems is undercut by weak or lacking recognition by the central state, materializing in the adjudication of formal land titles (Rights and Resources Initiative 2015). However, their weakness is not so much a product of the lack of those rights as it is of the pressure to allocate them within a particular state-controlled standardized framework.

The strength and forms of land rights allocated by communal regimes vary widely between regions and countries, with the Andean countries as an exemplary case for indigenous and local community property rights recognition (ibid: 6-8). The global gap and the regional variations in communal land tenure security are the outcome of historical trajectories forged through 500 years of capitalism. The transformation of land rights constitutes one of the most essential driving forces of historical capitalism, enabling the extraction and free circulation of resources (Wallerstein 2012; Beckert 2014; Linklater 2013), yet producing a less homogeneous outcome than commonly envisioned.

The *peasant paradox* relates to an old question which at the start of the 21st century reappears from never been gone: is there a future for peasants? Urbanization, migration, industrialization and related vectors of “modernity” seem to obtrude themselves as the incontestable answer to that question. However, the restructuring and intensification of core-periphery relations has created new divergences in the rural economy and in peasant societies. Even though today more people live in urban spaces than on the countryside, peasant responses must be essentially understood in terms of differentiation. The disappearance of peasantries in Europe, the forced neutralisation of rural societies in China, and the struggle to formulate new peasant responses to peripheral positions in Africa and Latin America are all part of the changing global geo-system in the early twenty-first century. This change is translated in intensifying and interconnected processes of de-peasantisation and re-peasantisation.

Over time, the combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of *peasant regimes*. Peasant regimes diversify according to their location and timing in the capitalist world-system. Examples include capitalist core zone expansion, capitalist settler zone expansion, capitalist plantation zone expansion, capitalist peasant

zone expansion, and contemporary neo-liberal expansion. These regimes reflect divergent historical roads of peasant incorporation: core-making processes by decomposition (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; old core regions); core-making processes by settlement (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; new core regions, settler economies); periphery-making processes by alienation (creating a system of core-oriented plantation agriculture); periphery-making processes by adaptation (creating a system of core-oriented peasant agriculture); and periphery-making processes by inheritance (incorporating 'independent' peasant agriculture; e.g. China). Non-capitalist societies include village societies, city-states and agrarian empires. They range from 7000 BCE (village societies), 3000 BCE (agrarian empires) to well into the second millennium CE. Early village societies, city-states, and agrarian-imperial expansion frame the first types of peasant regimes. Despite huge differences in time and space, these regimes are mostly defined by gradual peasant incorporation, indirect political control and coerced extraction of land and labour surpluses via taxes, tributes, rents and confiscations (Barker 2006; Bellwood 2005). The invention of private property and the commodification of the countryside mark the beginning of capitalist expansion, which accelerated in the long sixteenth century. Within capitalism, peasant regimes are premised on new forms of enclosure of land and labour. Direct incorporation thoroughly alters ecological relations and changes the rules of the game. This results in a greater diversification of systems of access to nature, land and labour, of systems of production and reproduction, and of survival and coping mechanisms. Uneven incorporation and uneven commodification cause intensified social and spatial differentiation through divergent processes of de-peasantisation and re-peasantisation, and a concurrent diversification of peasant livelihood diversification.

That is why the concept of de-peasantisation has to be 'historicised' as a multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It reflects the increased difficulty of combining subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organisation based on family labour and village community settlement. Due to the marginalisation of a growing number of the world's population, mixed income and survival strategies have become more important than ever. This century may witness a new turning point via a re-emergence of peasant-like survival systems. One of the signs that points towards this is the fact that farming is increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way in many regions in response to the agrarian crisis of the last few decades (see e.g. Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau and Justin Myers 2009). These regionally diversified processes have greatly strengthened global inequality. Contrary to the urbanised and semi-urbanised labour forces in the North, rural workers of the global South increasingly have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious, small-scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including small and marginal farming. Peasant livelihood strategies related to land and labour remain a central part of twenty-first century global capitalism.

This paper will further elaborate on the marginalization and reproduction of peasant communities, starting from a particularly crucial asset in organizing peasant worlds, land. First, the process through which more and more land is being structurally embedded in supra-local regulation frameworks is discussed. This process is presented as a frontier process, materializing in the constant recreation of frontier zones of land control. In this constant recreation, peasants play a key role. Hence, we shift the focus to peasant worlds.

## **2 The Land Question and the Fruits of its Property**

Throughout world history, land has been a major source of wealth, cooperation and conflict, both from the perspective of local communities and of global power groups and institutions. The question of land, understood as a multidimensional livelihood asset, is basically a question of rights, in the first place the right to self-determination. The question of land is intrinsically linked to sustainable development and human rights. While the UN Millennium Development Goals combined the fight against poverty with the eradication of hunger, the new Sustainable Development Goals explicitly link the end of hunger with food security and sustainable agriculture. They stress the importance of "*secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment*" (United Nations 2015). In that respect, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food (2008-2014) made a strong call for bottom-up food

democracy, arguing that the human right to food requires respect for smallholder farmers' access to land and productive resources (De Schutter 2014).

Rural peasant and/or indigenous groups usually maintain communal rather than individual claims to land, territory and resources (ILC 2013). This collective control over the land is interdependent with a larger 'package' of rights that allow them to secure a margin for territorial, economic, political and legal autonomy as self-organized group. The persistence of communal land tenure systems supports households to intervene in the public sphere in the form of reciprocal mechanisms, authoritative bodies and collective actions. These regulatory structures determine and allocate rights among community members; *"there are no commons without communities within which the modalities of access to common resources are negotiated, [...] there is no enclosure of commons without at the same time the destruction and fragmentation of communities. Common resources and empowered communities are two sides of the same coin."* (De Angelis 2009).

In the context of state expansion and market integration, the rights upheld by and within these communities have become seriously undermined by commodifying pressures to delineate, endorse and extend *"a systematic legal basis for what is called title to the land"* (Wallerstein 2012: 7). In order to enforce a minimal degree of loyalty and obtain the necessary revenues to uphold centralized power, a homogeneous institutional framework for land ownership, use and transaction needs to be created, provided of property deeds and cadastres to make society 'legible' (Ubink, Hoekema and Assies 2009: 11; Richards 2009: 58; Scott 1998). The commodification of land rights corresponds to a legal-economic intervention that reshuffles labour, legal, fiscal and spiritual ties of the people that live from the land, those living from the property of the land and state structures to the land and amongst each other. Time and again, these ties have been reformulated and debated in the context of shifting economic conditions and emergent political ideologies, fuelling an ideologically coloured, power-attributing and hence highly disputed transition process that pretends to put the future of 'civilization' at stake (Engerman and Metzer 2004: 17; Cole and Ostrom 2012).

The expansion of global capitalism is the expression of a fundamental transformation of land rights (Linklater 2013). While the forms that this transformation took were complex and varied across time and space, four central features can be distinguished: the transformation of a complex system of customary rights to land usage and to legal and written titles to land ownership; the transformation of the concept of property from jurisdiction and ambiguously defined areas to concretely defined, and possibly enclosed, physical spaces; the rationalisation of the use of such demarcated landed property as a form of capital; and increased privatisation of the earth's surface through dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous populations (based on Araghi and Karides 2012). Several phases can be distinguished in that process. Symbolically starting in 1492, the trajectory of land rights commodification and related processes of privatization, displacement and depeasantization lead to a secular growth in the concentration of land property through expropriation and accumulation (Araghi and Karides 2012: 2). Since 1850, the intensification of commodified land rights has been fuelled by colonial (a massive land grab transforming communal and peasant land rights), developmental (state-sponsored collectivisation schemes including expropriation and displacement), and neo-liberal (global enclosures, massive contraction of land rights and accelerated de-peasantisation on a world scale) globalisation projects (McMichael 2012; Araghi 2010). A global land grab, unprecedented since colonial times, is currently underway as states and speculative investors acquire millions of hectares of land through the purchase of land in the global South (Scoones et al 2013).

However, disparities in local land right security denote far from a uniform trajectory between and within world regions as property regime changes are not deployed in a vacuum. Rather, they are enveloped in powerful dichotomist discourses. The expansion and contraction of land regimes materializes through successive land reforms designed to convert land into a tradable commodity, reflecting the perception of land as a frontier of capitalist expansion (Weis 2007: 48-50; see also Hertel 2010). This is a state-driven process of incorporation by which customary systems are positioned on a continuum of tenure security (extensive-limited, short-long term, real-perceived, de jure-de facto, etc.) that suggests the superiority of private property arrangements (Lund 2000; Ubink, Hoekema and Assies 2009: 13-5; Ostrom and Schlager 1996; Ostrom and Hess 2007). Failing or refusing to grasp the value and 'normality' of the pluralist character of most land systems and the

responsiveness of the people managing them, the co-existence and overlap of private and public, open and exclusive rights is being substituted by an improbable uniformism. This allows for the imposition of (alienable/private) “*principles true in every country*”, achievable through capital, and superior to deviant (inalienable/collective) principles (Mitchell 2002: 54-79). By intervening in local relations to the land, state actors mould and categorize those relations as ‘legible’ and hence extractable, contributing to the construction of a land system that is functional to state power (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010: 367). The portrayal of alternative (spiritual, informal, communal, non-European) forms of access in terms of dichotomy and anomaly has been used to justify and further nurture the global trend in the incorporation and formalization of customary property relations into dualist and exclusivist frameworks (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010: 12).

Regulations pertaining to land use have been a primary tool for opening access to labour and commodity production, albeit in very different ways. These tools, implemented through land inspections and cadastral mapping, are negotiated between peasants, elite and broker groups, state institutions and the forces of nature. Reproduced and accelerated under post-colonial regimes, this colonially initiated trajectory took shape ‘in the process’ an ‘on the ground’, interspersed with counter-enclosures, revolutions and alliances. Hence, commodifying operations rarely produce a homogeneous property regime nor foster the desired social effects. The outcome is a hybrid and ‘uneven’ institutional control over territory with important achievements and bitter setbacks for communal and indigenous land rights in relation to fluctuations in natural resource demand (Benton 2009).

This unevenness is still poorly understood, and attests for the durable dominance of the erroneous equation between privatization and ‘development’ (Engerman and Metzger 2004). The endurance of plural, community-based land rights systems in which individual and collective access co-exist is hence perceived as testimony of an anachronism desperately searching the way out to ‘progress’. On the contrary, abundant but generally overlooked evidence from local cases of resistance against privatization pressures counters the belief that private property entails the promise of long-term balanced social power relations.

It is only “*when all else has failed*” that the pluralist principles sustaining the reproduction and reinvention of such complex systems are given up (Ghosh 2010). The abandonment of and local struggle over principles of collective rights and inalienability stems from the inability to secure one’s economic survival and should not necessarily be read as the ‘disappearance’ of peasants or indigenous groups (Johnson 2004). It is the erosion rather than the persistence of such systems that reinforces trajectories of marginalization and impoverishment. In that sense, communal ownership has been put forward as “*the most fundamental challenge to capitalism, (...) because it denies the overarching dominance of private property rights*” (Fenelon and Hall 2009: 6; Bromley 1991; Hanna et al 1996). The local struggles of self-organized resource communities are thus not against individual ownership *an sich*, but question the ‘absoluteness’ of private property arrangements because it negates that land is an intrinsic part of the landscape. In a globalising world in which diversity appears to be absorbed by seamless homogeneity, “peripheral” struggles are not a call against a particular form of relation to the land, but the call for pluralism and respect for communal management mechanisms.

The question of land can be understood as a central point of friction, a systemic difference, between peripherally located groups and the development of a capitalist world-economy. In essence, this is a question of rights, of bundles of rights over the access, withdrawal, management, exclusion and alienation of land that are allocated to both individuals and groups and by land regimes. Land regimes are the manifestation of shifting world-historical processes - the process of the commodification of land in particular. Understood as a frontier process, commodification follows an uneven trajectory, fuelling and fuelled by partial incorporation of customary tenure systems. The process of land rights commodification can be regarded as a concrete –and possibly “the single most important”- frontier that has shaped the historical trajectory of capitalist expansion (Araghi and Karides 2012: 1). Despite having nurtured powerful historical transformations, processes of commodification have not paved the way for the clear-cut and ‘neutral’ commodification of communal land rights systems. It has shaped new zones of contestation and regulation – what Peluso and Lund call frontier (zones) of land control, containing a “*zone beyond which further expansion is possible ... so long as there remains uncommodified land*” (Moore 2000: 412). Specified as “frontiers of land control”, Peluso and Lund



understand these zones as “*not sites where ‘development’ and ‘progress’ meet ‘wilderness’ or ‘traditional lands and peoples’*”. They are sites where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies are (sic) challenged by new enclosures, territorializations, and property regimes” and hence constantly recreated (Peluso and Lund 2011: 668). The variety created through that territorial and normative restructuring brings us to the combined strategies of integration and independence of peripheral groups. In this paper, we focus on those strategies from the perspective of peasants.

### **3 The Peasant Question and the Fruits of their Labour**

Agrarian change refers to historical and interrelated processes of absorption of agrarian-rural worlds within wider geographies and different sectors, and to the acts of negotiation, adaptation and resistance of agrarian-rural peoples. We call this the peasant question (McMichael 2006; Araghi 1999). In capitalism these confrontations are intensified by processes of commodification, ‘through which the elements of production and social reproduction are produced for, and obtained from, market exchange and subjected to its disciplines and compulsions (Bernstein 2010, 102). These processes are never absolute or complete.

Peasants are the workers of the land. They live in rural, agricultural households who have direct access to the land they work, either as common users, tenants or smallholders. They are organized in family bonds, village communities and social groups, which we call peasantries. These bonds pool different forms of income and meet a major portion of their subsistence needs via networks of production, exchange, credit and protection. Most of the time peasantries are ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus either via rents, via market transfers, or through control of state power (taxation). Differences between peasants, market-driven farmers and industrial or entrepreneurial farming must be understood on a continuum, with household labour and local control networks as defining variables. Peasants organize themselves as such around the securing of the means of farming, including access to land, labour, tools and seeds. Historically, the principal social units for the management of these means are the rural household and the village household system, both varying greatly in size, composition and social relations through time. Surplus production from the land is a precondition for large-scale societal change, which triggers the agricultural producers to group into peasantries. Agricultural-based economic systems facilitate vaster communal units and extended village networks. This provokes profound changes in the structure of social relations, population growth and village and supra-village institutions. Peasantries make societies, societies make peasantries. Their autonomous strategies for subsistence and protection convert peasantries into reserves of cheap labour, which links them to broader frameworks of production and control. Founded in the contested allocation of land and labour, peasantries constitute a social process (Shanin 1987, 6).

Peasant’s history is the history of the struggle over the fruits of their labour. Social relations in agricultural societies are built on the returns of the land to support and reproduce institutions and norms that define new rules of ownership, inheritance, transmission and control. Peasants gain a substantial part of their income from direct access to products resulting from input of their labour on the land, any loss implies a notable decline in their living standards. Peasantries not only feed civilisations, empires, states and economies, they support their ecological and social resilience and fuel their expansion. Farming societies develop a new, more intrusive and aggressive attitude to the resources of nature, land and labour. The expansion of plant and animal husbandry presumes a more radical exploitation of diverse ecosystems and the development of new tools, new modes of clearing and renewing fertility, and new modes of cultivation and animal breeding. These have an increasing impact on labour-nature relations, in the first place resulting in massive worldwide deforestation. The gradual incorporation of external ‘free’ goods discloses new supplies of labour, land and nature, which are mobilised in new production processes (Moore 2010: 245; Barbier 2011: 7).

Capitalism’s tendency towards generalised commodity production has created immense disparities on a global level; uneven or semi-commodification has always been at the heart of historical capitalism (Wallerstein 1995: 13-43). For example, the densely populated and highly urbanised regions around the North Sea Basin initiated strongly commercialised agriculture, an interregional and intercontinental trade system and intensive industrial production starting in the twelfth century. This triggered transformations in surrounding rural societies, thereby generating strong regional

differentiation. Capitalist agricultural zones, dominated by commercial farms and wage labour, developed in regions bordering the North Sea. These zones are bound by peasant societies. Some combined small-scale family farming with an expanding proto-industry, thus creating export commodity production. Further, but still integrated in a regional division of labour, we find more autarchic peasant zones with a significant labour surplus (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010; Vanhaute, Devos and Lambrecht 2011; Brenner 2001: 1-2). The first global food regime arose in the 1870s. The expansion of grain and meat production in settler economies and the expansion of tropical export crops in colonial Asia and Africa coincided with massive de-agrarianisation and de-peasantisation and more diversified, capital-intensive farming in Europe (Friedmann 2005). The globalisation of farming and food consumption in the twentieth century also had highly differential impacts on societies in the North and South, shaped by new international divisions of labour and trade in agricultural commodities. The commodification and marginalisation of peasant subsistence in the South coincided with the expansion of export crops like coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, cotton and palm oil, the promotion of high-value commodities like horticultural products and the expansion of large-scale production of soy, sugar and grains. The working poor of the South are increasingly forced to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious small scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including marginal farming. Moreover, livelihoods are pursued across different spaces of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment (Bernstein 2010, 87, 111).

We understand peasantries -peasant work and peasant worlds- as world-historical processes. The concept of peasant frontiers interrogates processes of incorporation, adaptation and opposition. The central space for organisation, self-determination, negotiation and resistance are peasant communities. At the same time, they are gateways to larger and incorporative systems. The 'peasant question' queries the role and fate of peasantries within the processes of societal transition. Frontiers and communities refer to the multileveled scales of interaction and change within a comparative, historical and global context. Peasantries make their own worlds, but they do not make them under self-controlled and self-selected circumstances. The incorporation and recreation of peasantries in larger economies turns them into part-time producers of revenues, manpower and commodities. This process of partial incorporation shapes at the same time new spaces or arenas in which they can redefine and recreate their work and worlds. These dialectics between integration and independence have created a large variety of land tenure systems and labour regimes, and differential forms of access to nature, land, labour and exchange and credit networks (Owen 2005; Bernstein 2003: 10). In order to make sense of social change in a broad time/space span, we frame social realities in a set of evolving and changing regimes. The concept of peasant regime is a tool to contextualise how peasantries in a certain time/space are (internally) organised and (externally) embedded, and how these social fixes change over time.

#### **4 The Great Frontier and the Community: Negotiated Incorporation**

The incorporation and redefinition of rural zones has continuously redefined and recreated peasant regimes. Three interlocking dimensions constitute the trajectories of peasant transformation: the constitution and reconstitution of peasant societies (household and kinship relations, village systems, regional networks), their integration within wider societal structures (trade and commerce networks, fiscal systems, power and property relations), and the changing connections between local, regional and global processes. To understand this interaction, we have to disentangle the interconnection between the social power relations within, between and above local communities, and the modes of access to nature, land and labour resources. Land and labour regimes regulate relations of property and tenure between owners of the land, users of the land and governors of the land; between landlords, peasants and governments. Property relations are tightly intertwined with social power relations; this reflects the capacity of one social group to dominate other groups. These social relations of power include the relationship between landlords and tenants, between owners and occupiers, between farmers and labourers, between owners and occupiers of land and governments, and between rural and non-rural interests. Property rights have been central to the emanation of social power relations within different types of peasant regimes. The outcome of the configuration of power relations, the social distribution of land and labour, have differed wildly over time and space.

The expansion of the 'Great Frontier' - the frontier-based development of new resources- requires a more direct intervention in peasant institutions and practices of allocation and use of land and labour. This necessitates a permanent restructuring of peasant land and labour regimes, generating significant differences over space and time. In the peasant question, land and labour rights are the prime subject of expropriation and negotiation. The combined land and peasant questions –the questions for (peasant) subsistence and (land) control- constitute prime conflict zones for the simultaneous adoption of strategies of adaptation/assimilation and strategies of resistance. Grafted on these questions are negotiations pertaining to access to labour, market and trade relations and legal-political integration.

Battles related to the contested peasant (and indigenous) claims to land, territory and resources are a central instigator. For peasantries, land has been and still is the main basis of negotiation and interaction with other sectors of society because its use has direct implications for their exchange relations (products derived from that land) and for their power relations (the regulation of access to the land). In peasant societies, the communal level is the central space for self-determination, negotiation and resistance, hence these claims usually have a communal rather than an individual nature.

When reducing the focus to the battles over communally held lands, the same double capacity and strategy of integration and independence appears. Empirical research has produced growing evidence buttressing theoretical insight into the efficiency and sustainability of communal land tenure systems (Grinlinton and Taylor 2011; Godden 2011; Godden and Tehan 2010; Cole 2002) and “communalism” in general (Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Mignolo 2011). This gives credit to their institutional flexibility and capacity to adapt to changing conditions and norms in the contemporary globalizing world as well as in the past, demonstrated by the longevity of Europe’s disappeared commons (De Moor 2007: 4). Most insightfully, comparative research across regions worldwide has shown that land regimes take shape ‘in the process’ and ‘on the ground’ (Vergara-Camus 2013) and that indigenous and local communities often combine “*customary and communal land and resource governance with elements of western systems of property, title and tenure*” (Godden 2010: 387). In the other direction, research on the transfer of European land regimes to overseas territories has equally demonstrated an important degree of flexibility (Serrão 2014).

This kind of hybridity gives credit to the capacity of local communities to simultaneously adapt and resist. Dynamic local communities generally support collective resource control and promote risk-avoiding strategies such as income pooling. They avoid increasing flows of surplus extraction, allow for a more egalitarian division of land, promote collective regulation of farming and herding, and stimulate collective use of capital goods and sustainable ecological management. The combination of autonomy and intermediation converts 'the communal' into a crucial gateway to different and independent 'local histories' and to interaction within larger and incorporative systems (Fenelon and Hall 2009; Mignolo 2011). Communities facilitate the organisation, procurement and defence of common goals, but this implies considerable costs (Mayer 2002: 41). Hence, communal structures show complex patterns and internal conflicts that make community life 'complex, conflictive, messy, and contradictory, rather like people's lives anywhere else in this world' (Canessa 2012, 11).

Bottom-up claims to participation do not back an aim for fully-fledged incorporation. On the contrary, they are often part of the strategy of safeguarding some autonomous control over vital resources and securing some involvement in broader structures. The combination of safeguarding a minimum of autonomous control over vital resources and securing a minimum of involvement in broader socio-political structures accounts for the peasant communities' multifaceted, apparently contradictory, but above all alert attitude towards incorporation processes. On the one hand, the resistant stance adopted by peasants is based on an attempt to defend a particular method of regulating access to livelihood resources. On the other hand, these groups adopt a pragmatic stance and often adapt or even assimilate to new and incorporating entities. This is reflected in the development of market and trade relations as well as in legal-political struggles. Rather than attesting to the group's openness to or craving for capitalist incorporation, the claim to participation should be assessed in relation to the survival guarantees that peasants can obtain from their 'extractors', usually in exchange for taxation and surplus production. Resistance is seldom simply 'opposition'; it is diverse in motivation, strategy and representation. This points to the peasant/indigenous communities' frontier position from where they can tap into different spheres in order to promote alternatives. So-called peasant or indigenous

resistance includes diverse response options sprouting from this 'subversive complicity' (Grosfoguel 2008, 103, Vanhaute 2014). They range from overt to covert, material to cosmologic, institutionalised to symbolic, individual to collective strategies; peasant resistance should be addressed as a nuanced continuum.

## **5 Towards a Global and Comparative Research Strategy for Changing Peasantries and Transforming Land Rights.**

The fate of rural societies in the past and today cannot be understood in a singular manner. Understanding multiple trajectories of peasant change requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term and worldwide economic and social transformations. Peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of accommodation, adaptation and resistance. The expansion of civilisations, states and global capitalism triggered different paths of peasant transformation, different processes of peasantisation, de-peasantisation and re-peasantisation. To make sense of this diversity in a comparative, interconnected and global perspective, four interrelated analytical concepts must be interrogated. *Peasant worlds* are shaped by peasant work, as a manifestation of specific labour/land/nature relations. *Peasant frontiers* map the processes of incorporation, adaptation and opposition and explain how peasantries exist through these frontiers. *Peasant communities* are the central space for organisation, self-determination, negotiation and resistance. They are also the gateway to larger and incorporative systems and the locus of the 'peasant question'. *Peasant regimes* situate and explain social change, trajectories of transformation in peasant work, peasant frontiers and peasant communities in a broad time/space context. Throughout history peasantries -peasant worlds and peasant work- have been frontiers as processes of change and communities as spaces of redefinition (Vanhaute and Cottyn, forthcoming).

The variety of land-labour relations reflects the frontier position and the communal base of peasant regimes. In general, peasant strategies related to work and income are geared towards the self-organisation of systems of land-holding and labour organisation. Which regimes existed? How were they affected by the intensifying trend of incorporation and commodification? Which differences can we discern over time and between regions? What is the impact of the expansion of new forms of agrarian civilisations and capitalist production? The strategy for researching this diverse, long-term and often interconnected process asks for a global, comparative and multi-scaled research agenda that focuses on the dynamics between social relations of power and social relations of property, and on the control of, access to and alienation from nature, land and labour in a long-term and global perspective.

Frontiers of incorporation and resilient communities refer to the multileveled scales of interaction and change within a comparative, historical and global context. This demands an appropriate research frame that converts the linear question of why communal tenure systems survive in a globalizing world into a less essentialist inquiry into how communal land systems coexist with centralized land systems and why communities were at times able to defend their communal structures for land control against privatizing pressures and at other times not. Informed by the frontier dynamics explored above, the assumptions underlying these questions is that centralized land systems and communal systems have an interrelation –they influence each other yet they don't share strictly the same logic, concepts or mechanisms- and this interrelation is questioned and shifts in the context of advancing commodity frontiers.

In order to enable a critical assessment of this interrelation that goes beyond linear and dichotomous interpretations, we put forward the notion of frontiers as a strategic conceptual tool. Understood as the processes of zones through which people and places are incorporated and differentiated into expansive systems, frontiers are instructive to understanding the unevenness and the role of 'peripheral agency' in the local-global interactions underlying incorporation processes. This implies the assumption of incorporation as a negotiated process, that is, that commodified social structures do not expand automatically but generate a response that may alter the course, which can be spatially witnessed in the creation and defence of relatively autonomous spheres. Rather than reading these disrupted spatial patterns as instances of isolation or resistance, they must be interpreted as the lever that converts incorporation into a negotiated process in which peasants and indigenous people appear as active

initiators rather than mere reactors. This assumption urges to problematize scale and agency, a call we aim to respond to by adopting a global (frontier as world-making), multi-scaled (frontier as interconnecting macro, meso, micro), comparative (frontiers as differentiating processes) and inter/transdisciplinary (frontiers interweave social, ecological and epistemological change) approach. Applying the frontier perspective to our research question, we put forward the objective of understanding the mutual shaping of global tendencies towards commodification and local patterns of community integration and recreation.

To operationalize the proposed research strategy, it is to be applied and tested in emblematic regions. One example would be the Andes, a world region that has been subject to pressures for commodification and incorporated into the world economy, but simultaneously entails a significant portion of land held in communal hands. We thus search for regions that are relevant for both their historically constructed relation to the world-system, as the historically developed parallels and differentiation observed at the national and sub-national level, as for the Andes between hacienda zones, community zones and smallholder zones. Here, communal land ownership has known a long trajectory of state legalization, resulting in formal recognition of the state's non-penetration in those lands. This deliberate decision is kept in place through communal negotiation practices which build on an acquired negotiation position and skills through historical experiences of state and market interaction.

A global approach seeks to frame the commodification of land and its interlinked regional histories of incorporation in relation to other historical developments, such as economic transformations in view of increasing resource competition, ecological changes, increasing state control and the social reorganization of peasant livelihoods, fostering a more holistic understanding of the explored land and community transformations.

A comparative approach -both between emblematic world regions in space (think also of Central- and North America, Australia, Asia or Africa) and in time (think of the European trajectory) as between local cases that give more texture to those regions- can produce eye-opening case studies on the unfinished/thwarted/negotiated/abandoned nature of the frontier (the process of commodification).

A multi-scaled approach enables an analysis of internal parallelisms and differentiation in relation to regimes, in order to grasp its uneven history and spatial reach. It disentangles 'national' or 'regional' processes internally, necessarily in combination with and informed by insights from the global approach. By examining how regimes (as the macro) are interact with local communally-instigated processes of integration and resistance (micro) through 'brokering' actors, channels, instruments and discourse (meso). The focus of analysis is on the meso level, seeking to grasp the dynamics of "negotiated incorporation".

Together, these approaches constitute a methodological strategy of integrated comparison. As a method, it contrasts cases because of their historical connectedness and mutual shaping rather than their separateness (McMichael 1990). Equally, the framework within which they are compared cannot be assumed as it has a historical specificity that takes shape through the interrelation of the cases, hence cases cannot be abstracted from their spatial and temporary context (McMichael 2000: 671). The method allows for an analysis of instances of a same phenomenon across space and time, bringing together different eras of land reform, demonstrating how they integrate in a historical process of land commodification (not just as a linear chronology, but in a conceptual way that is inherent to capitalist expansion), with differential consequences for the allocation of land rights and rural community organization within expanding and transforming national land regimes. In that way, the current phase of accelerated 'land commodification' is revealed as similar to previous counter-communal reform projects in the trajectory and its manifestation in different (sub)national settings is increasingly interconnected (through supra-national policies) yet its outcome cannot be taken for granted. An "integrated comparison" of peasant regimes provides a genealogy, a framework to research and understand the divergent strategies that peasant populations have developed to defend and secure access to their essential means of production, nature, land and labour.

As a possible research entry that enables to pinpoint the process of negotiation within that structure, we propose the study of land reform. Land reform, to be understood as a process crafted by successive

state interventions, offers a research strategy to enter into historically created contradictions. Land reforms correspond to a set of instruments developed and implemented in the recurrent struggles to overcome scarcity crises in commodity frontier expansion and have proven to be a crucial tool in the expansion and contraction of land rights. This reorganization of regulations pertaining to land incites a deepening and widening of centralized land right regimes both through internal restructuring (land redistribution and rationalization) and external reallocation (invasion and seizure). This highly contested and ideologically coloured process tends to produce abundant sources for historical inquiry, including legal texts, political discourse, institutional correspondence, press coverage, oral testimonies and intangible imaginaries. However, it must be noted that this is a selective entry for being explicit political compromised products carried by state institutions and producing sources ‘in function of’ the state. Still, this could be countered through strategies to grasp how states deploy territory-and-people-ordering land reforms to optimize their capacity of “seeing like a state” (Scott). Moreover, such inquiry unveils how land reform laws declared with “one stroke of a pen” are an intensely political process often coinciding with constitutional reform and taking shape ‘in the process’ and ‘on the ground’. In that way, they are revealing instances of how “[f]rom a global perspective, a frontier [the process of land commodification] is a relatively narrow and sharp, but from nearby it is a broad zone with considerable internal spatial and temporal differentiation” (Hall 2000: 240).

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## **About the Author(s)**

**Hanne Cottyn** is a post-doctoral researcher at the History Department of Ghent University, Belgium. Her research focuses on communal land rights in the Andean peasant and indigenous communities in Bolivia and Peru and the effects of land reforms during the 19th and 20th century.

<http://www.ccc.ugent.be/hannecottyn>.

**Eric Vanhaute** is Professor Economic History and World History at the History Department, Ghent University. He has written extensively on the history of peasantries, rural societies, land regimes and famines in a comparative and global perspective. See

<http://www.ccc.ugent.be/vanhaute>.