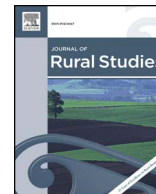




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## The (re)production of the new peasantry in Turkey

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### A B S T R A C T

The recent, neoliberal period has seen a deepening penetration of capital into agriculture in Turkey alongside mass urban migration. This would seem to imply the realisation of classical political economic theory, which argues for the demise of the peasantry. Yet, while the number of people living in villages in Turkey has declined quite dramatically in recent years, the number of smallholdings has not. We address this apparent anomaly in terms of strategies of resistance, emphasising the adaptive and creative agency of the peasantry. For this, we employ a combination of (mostly) state-produced statistics with our own quantitative and qualitative research in villages across Turkey as well as with urban migrants. We observe the development of a dual-circuit articulation that combines the farm and family as systems of commoning together with capital engagement, which means financial inputs, particularly through engagement with the market and labour relations, and which is ultimately enabled through a wide variety of living arrangements. Thus, we argue that the traditional analysis of a differentiation process in capitalist development, the bifurcation of simple and extended reproduction in which the former is squeezed out, is refuted or transcended by people motivated by a core value of holding onto their land and maintaining the family farm. The result is a broad concept of the ‘new peasantry’, one that is rooted in the family farm but nevertheless integrates capitalistic relations, is not bound by agriculture and transcends the rural-urban division of space.

### 1. Introduction

The agrarian question has been much discussed in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, the focus of this debate was on whether the structure of Turkish agriculture was semi-feudal or capitalist in character (Seddon and Margulies, 1984). The 1980s, however, changed this debate, as Turkey, along with much of the rest of the world, initiated a fundamental shift away from state-led models of economic development to that of neoliberal globalisation, along the lines of the Washington Consensus. In the early 2000s, wide-ranging and huge cuts were made in Turkey's agricultural sector, with the scaling down and termination of state production and distribution facilities (including processing and packaging plants) and marketing and market protection mechanisms (including fixed-price purchases and high import duties) (Eşiyok, 2004). In this new context, the debate about the agrarian question in Turkey took on new dimensions, related now to deagrarianisation and the absolute decline of the rural population. Indeed, village life itself seemed to be dying, and with it, the peasantry.

Particularly in the light of the earlier discussions on Turkey's

agrarian question in terms of feudalism, a preliminary word on terminology – ‘peasant’ and ‘the peasantry’ – is in order here. Although there was/is no word for ‘peasant’ in the Ottoman language or modern Turkish – the nearest being ‘*rençber*’ (poor farmer, rural labourer) and ‘*köylü*’ (villager) – this term can be applied to the Anatolian situation in its generalised meaning of smallholder/subsistence farmer, and ‘peasantry’ is a reasonable translation of ‘*köylülük*’, the abstract noun made from the word for ‘villager’ and sometimes used in scholarly work. Basically, we take ‘the peasant way’ to centre on the maintenance of a non-commodity reproduction circuit (Van der Ploeg, 2013: 29), through which smallholders assert control over the reproduction of their own farms. Beyond what is referred to as subsistence farming, however, the (new, contemporary) peasant way of production also involves a commodity circuit, and, as we show in this article, is even dependent on it.

There is an ambiguity inherent in this approach, highlighted by the fact that when the commodity circuit starts to dominate the reproduction of the farm, the farm may become structured by the logic of capital. The duality of commodity and non-commodity – or commodity

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<sup>1</sup> See also TB (2001), Boratav, K. (1981, 1985, 2009), Köymen, O. (2008), Öztürk, M. (2010, 2012), Toprak, Z. (1988).

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and commons – that is, structures a range, not a simple binary with black-and-white positions, either peasant or entrepreneur. This also implies a *struggle* to maintain control, outside of capital, and, indeed, a choice about how much to struggle. Peasant struggles, such as in Via Campesina, are very much characterised by the fight to maintain and develop autonomy through maintaining a non-commodity reproduction circuit. Furthermore, and in contradistinction to the anonymous markets of abstract exchange, the product becomes valued not only in terms of price, but also in the way it is produced. Consumer relations are not governed then by (just) low price but (also) by fair price, and the economy of exchange is turned into a moral economy. Thus, while terms like ‘subsistence farmer’ and ‘smallholder’ are essentially apolitical, the usage of ‘peasant’ today involves an engaged identification of family-scale and village-community oriented farming by reference to the capitalist hegemony, the ‘corporate food machine’ of agribusiness (McMichael, 2008). The smallholder as peasant importantly stands in contradiction to industrialising system of scale and commoditisation.

It should be noted that, from this perspective, even the agricultural marketing strategies of smallholders to maintain their farms should not necessarily be evaluated in terms of the individual decision-making processes of market actors, but may be more relevantly considered in terms of the development of different social relations of production. Thus, in contrast to the process of increased external control constituted by increasing dependency on markets, many smallholdings in Turkey have survived not simply because they are topographically unsuited to the extension of capital – important though this is in the mountainous lands of Anatolia – but also through strategies that in some way support the non-commodity circuit, yet without necessarily identifying with the politics of struggle.

At the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the Izmir Economy Congress initiated a major programme of modernisation intended to bring the new nation's agricultural practices ‘up to date’. The state's concern was no longer the mere extraction of produce (for landowners, as taxes), but the development of agriculture as a nationally important economic sector – until, by the 1930s, a surplus of production for the market had been facilitated. Following economic crises and World War II, however, capitalist market relations remained little extended and commoditisation still very limited with technology not yet introduced. Then, from the 1950s, progress favoured the entrepreneurial farmer.

Spurred by the Marshall Plan (1948) supporting technological development through the import of tractors, tractor numbers nationally rose from 1800 in 1948 to 40,000 in 1955, and the expansion of cultivated land, together with high world food prices, a (further) concentration of land ownership ensued accompanied by an upswing in the rural population and agricultural employment. Thus began the penetration of capital into agriculture. Then, with the development of industry in the 1960s came another major shift as wage differentiation saw the beginning of mass urban migration. The geographical expansion of agriculture slowed down markedly as the limit of new land easily brought under cultivation was approached, but agriculture was given protection from foreign competition and agricultural inputs were centrally subsidised – state support that was more beneficial to larger enterprises (Köymen, 2008: 144). Income from agriculture continued to rise through the 1960s and 70s, partly through the green revolution – intensive agricultural technologies flourished with the use of fertilisers, high-yielding seeds and irrigation – which again favoured enterprise and supported the process of agricultural capitalisation. In addition to financing further mechanisation and inputs, the increased income from farming was used to support migration and education, as family members moved to the city and children were sent to high school.

Here, it is important to emphasise the peasant family as acting as a whole; all family members work on the farm (including children), income (from farming and elsewhere) is aggregated in the rural family budget for agriculture, consumption and education. In this period, until the 1980s, not only the poor and non-landed but also middle and higher

income rural families migrated to cities, from where they generally endeavoured to keep village and family ties and maintain their agricultural assets and activities. As a result, most rural families had educated, adult members working in the cities nowadays, some with a good income. This generation helped the (extended and nuclear) rural families; rural-urban material solidarity was usual, irrespective of income level, which made family farms more resistant to unexpected shocks and the squeeze of market relations.

The direct implementation of neoliberal policies in agriculture by the government of Turkey in the early 2000s, however, facilitated and enforced by international organisations like the World Bank, IMF and EU, resulted in a historically unparalleled squeeze on farming. Initiated with a 1980 Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and eventually, after a financial crash in 1999, leading to the Agricultural Reform Implementation Project (ARIP) of 2001 (see Senşes, 1991; World Bank, 2001), this effected a major state withdrawal from its previous support of agriculture. Price liberalisation resulted in lower returns and increased insecurity, and the privatisation, diminishment and liquidation of state-institutions that had underpinned agriculture through low-priced (subsidised) inputs (e.g. fuel, fertilisers) and crop-based support systems (e.g. for sugar beet, wheat) left farmers highly vulnerable in their relations with commercial trading organisations, retail chains and industrial corporations. The net return to small-scale farmers was thus further tightened as world market logics came to dominate the market for agricultural goods, inviting the introduction and large-scale extension of industrial agricultural practices, such as intensive, industrialised chicken rearing. The sector was penetrated by retail chains (e.g. supermarkets determining the variety and price paid for potatoes to be converted into crisps [potato chips]), and monopolistic structures came to dominate and determine agricultural input and product prices, e.g. in seeds and pesticides (Öztürk, 2012).

In Turkey, as elsewhere, this ongoing drive toward market law and private profit over state planning and public regulation has led to a growing oppositional and alternative movement with overt, often direct political action. The consumer demand for healthy, ‘organic’ food products has gathered strength, the introduction of GMO is widely rejected and a new peasant-farmer confederation and Via Campesina member, *Çiftçi Sen* (Farmer Union), has accrued some 40,000 members. The oppositional dynamic has entailed a response, with capital operating both directly and through the state and its disciplinary of legislation. Thus, for example, a 2006 law made the sale of uncertified seed subject to a heavy fine, effectively favouring well-capitalised institutions with the technical, administrative and financial resources to secure registration – but which, in turn, boosted gift and barter systems of seed exchange, which now extend to transactions through Internet sites and involve urban market gardeners.

In this article, though, we are not concerned so much with this conscious opposition as with the strategies of *structural resistance* deployed by peasants to the neoliberal squeeze of capital. Further to withholding – a kind of *resistance*, which involves maintaining the peasant tradition of self-sufficiency and abstaining from commoditisation of the farm and social relations – the first *active* strategy of resistance is, paradoxically, the *direct* one of engaging in market integration. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including family-based mobilisation of independent (unwaged) labour and the development of novel production strategies. The second response is an *in-direct resistance*, the seeking out and utilisation of out-of-farm (financial) transfers, such as by farming family members gaining paid work. This moves primarily through income differentiation (the value of the financial compensation from labour sold is greater than that gained from labour used on-farm), and, since rural employment opportunities tend to be limited, it tends to involve urban migration, which results in a diminishment of the peasantry – except and to the extent that the urban income feeds back into the village economy (first, through remittances and later, through return migration).

Although these responses may appear contradictory – they comprise

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