

PEASANTS, POPULISM AND POSTMODERNISM



The
Return
of the
Agrarian
Myth

**TOM
BRASS**

PEASANTS, POPULISM
AND POSTMODERNISM
The Return of the Agrarian Myth

THE LIBRARY OF PEASANT STUDIES

NEW APPROACHES TO STATE AND PEASANT IN OTTOMAN HISTORY

edited by Halil Berkay and Suraiya Faroqui

(No.10 in the series)

PLANTATIONS, PROLETARIANS AND PEASANTS IN COLONIAL ASIA

edited by E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass

(No.11 in the series)

NEW FARMERS' MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

edited by Tom Brass (Preface by T.J. Byres)

(No.12 in the series)

THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

edited by Henry Bernstein

(No.13 in the series)

AGRARIAN QUESTIONS

Essays in Appreciation of T.J. Byres

edited by Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass

(No.14 in the series)

CLASS, STATE AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY IN EGYPT

Study of the Inverse Relationship between Farm Size and Land Productivity

by Graham Dyer (Foreword by Terence J. Byres)

(No.15 in the series)

TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UNFREE LABOUR

Case Studies and Debates

by Tom Brass

(No.16 in the series)

PEASANTS, POPULISM
AND
POSTMODERNISM

The Return of the Agrarian Myth

TOM BRASS



FRANK CASS
LONDON • PORTLAND, OR

First published in 2000 in Great Britain by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon,
Oxon, OX14 4RN

and in the United States of America by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
270 Madison Ave,
New York NY 10016

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

Website: www.frankcass.com

Copyright © 2000 Frank Cass & Co. Ltd

British Library Cataloguing-Publication Data

Brass, Tom

Peasants, populism and postmodernism: the return of the agrarian myth. – (The library of peasant studies; no. 17)
1. Land reform – Developing countries 2. Rural development – Developing countries 3. Peasantry – Public opinion
4. Political participation – Developing countries
5. Peasantry – Political activity 6. Peasant uprisings – History 7. Developing countries – Social conditions

I. Title

333.3'1'08863

ISBN 0-7146-4940-6 (cloth)

0-7146-8000-1 (paper)

ISSN 1462–219X

Library of Congress Cataloging Publication Data

Brass, Tom, 1946 –

Peasants, populism, and postmodernism: the return of the agrarian myth / Tom Brass.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7146-4940-6 – ISBN 0-7146-8000-1 (pbk.)

1. Agricultural laborers – Developing countries – History. 2. Agricultural laborers – Developing countries – Political activity. 3. Peasantry – Developing countries – History. 4. Peasantry – Developing countries – Political activity. I. Title.

HD1542.B73 2000

305.5'633'091724–dc21

00-020287

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher of this book.

Typeset by Regent Typesetting, London

Cover illustration depicts a mask celebrating the Eve of All Saints. The photograph was taken in England during 1938 by Edwin Smith, and is reproduced courtesy of Mrs Olive Smith.

For Amanda,
and for
Anna, Ned and Miles

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
1 Peasants, Populism and the Agrarian Myth: The Historical Background	9
1.1 The Agrarian Myth and Peasant Essentialism	11
1.2 The Agrarian Myth, Nationalism and Popular Culture	12
1.3 Populism as the ‘Other’ of Marxism	15
1.4 The Economic Discourse of Neo-populism, or Small Is Beautiful	17
1.5 The Politico-ideological Discourse of Populism, or Penultima Ratio Regum	19
1.6 Nationalism and the Agrarian Myth in the Nineteenth Century	22
1.7 Populism, Nationalism and the Agrarian Myth in the 1920s and 1930s	25
1.8 Inca ‘Communism’ and the Agrarian Myth	27
1.9 Fascism, Populism and the Agrarian Myth in the 1920s and 1930s	30
1.10 ‘Christ, not Lenin’ in Eastern Europe	32
1.11 Conclusion	35
Notes	39

PART I – Populist Peasants

2 Trotskyism, Maoism and Populism in the Andes: Latin American Peasant Movements and the Agrarian Myth	65
2.1 The Economic Background: La Convención 1900–1958	67
2.2 The Structure and Organization of the Peasant Movement in La Convención	68
2.3 The Success of the Peasant Movement in La Convención	70
2.4 The Failure of the Peasant Movement in La Convención	71
2.5 Trotskyism, Dual Power and ‘Dual Power’	73
2.6 Hugo Blanco, the Agrarian Myth and Capitalism	74

2.7	Hugo Blanco, Populism and Peasant Essentialism	77
2.8	ANUC and Populism in Colombia	80
2.9	Sendero Luminoso, Maoism and the Agrarian Myth	82
2.10	Conclusion	85
	Notes	88
3	Socialism, Populism and Nationalism: Tribal and Farmers' Movements in India	98
3.1	Socialism and Peasant Movements in the Pre-Independence Era	99
3.2	Class Struggle from Above, or the Weapons of the Strong	100
3.3	Class Struggle from Below, or the Weakness of the Weapons	102
3.4	Naxalism and Tribal Movements in West Bengal	104
3.5	Maoism, Class Struggle and the Discourse of Tribal 'Otherness'	106
3.6	The 'Newness' of the New Farmers' Movements	108
3.7	The New Farmers' Movements, the Market and the State	109
3.8	The New Farmers' Movements and Urban Bias	111
3.9	The New Farmers' Movements, Gender and Village 'Community'	113
3.10	The New Farmers' Movements and Ecofeminism	114
3.11	The New Farmers' Movements and the Left	116
3.12	The New Farmers' Movements and the Right	117
3.13	Conclusion	120
	Notes	123

PART II – Populist Postmodernism

4	Postmodernism and the 'New' Populism: The Return of the Agrarian Myth	143
4.1	Global Capitalism and 'Peasant Economy'	145
4.2	The 'New' Populism and the Flight from Socialism	146
4.3	The 'New' Populism, Devictimization and Nationalism	148
4.4	The 'New' Populism and Global Capitalist Expansion	150
4.5	The Privilege of (Academic) Backwardness or the Backwardness of (Academic) Privilege?	152
4.6	The (Post-) Modernization of the Chayanovian Peasant	153
4.7	Postmodernism, Subalterns and New Social Movements	156
4.8	Subalterns, New Social Movements, Class and Consciousness	158
4.9	Revolution, Resistance and 'New' Populist Agency	161

4.10	The 'New' Populism, Bourgeois Democracy, Socialism and the State	163
4.11	Conclusion	165
	Notes	168
5	Others Who Also Return: The Agrarian Myth, the 'New' Populism and the 'New' Right	189
5.1	From Alienated to Empowered 'Otherness'	192
5.2	Marginality and 'New' Populist Agency	194
5.3	'New' Populist Agency and Sorelian Instinctivism	195
5.4	The Agrarian Myth as Link between Postmodernism and the Right	196
5.5	New 'Right' or 'New' Right?	198
5.6	The 'New' Populism and the 'New' Right: De Te Fabula Narratur	199
5.7	The 'New' Populism and the 'New' Right: Worlds of 'Difference'	201
5.8	The 'New' Populism and the 'New' Right: A (Third) World of (Empowering) 'Difference'	204
5.9	The Agrarian Myth as a Contemporary Mobilizing Ideology	206
5.10	Conclusion	209
	Notes	211

PART III – Populist Culture

6	Popular Culture, Populist Fiction(s): The Agrarian Utopiates of A.V. Chayanov, Ignatius Donnelly and Frank Capra	237
6.1	The Return of Populist 'Community'	238
6.2	Agrarian Utopiates, Populist Fiction(s)	239
6.3	Utopic/Dystopic Discourse	242
6.4	Utopic/Dystopic Nature	243
6.5	Utopic/Dystopic Space	244
6.6	Utopic/Dystopic Time	245
6.7	Dystopic Capitalism, Dystopic Crisis, Dystopic Rulers	246
6.8	Dystopic Workers, Dystopic Struggle, Dystopic Socialism	247
6.9	Agrarian Populist Utopia as Non-technological 'Other'	248
6.10	Agrarian Populist Utopia as Oriental/Pastoral 'Other'	249
6.11	Class Structure in the Agrarian Populist Utopia	251
6.12	Conclusion	253
	Notes	254

7 Nymphs, Shepherds and Vampires: The Agrarian Myth on Film	271
7.1 Film, History and (the Agrarian) Myth	273
7.2 Plebeian Versions of the Agrarian Myth: The Pastoral	275
7.3 'I Believe in America . . .'	278
7.4 Plebeian Versions of the Agrarian Myth: The Darwinian	280
7.5 Aristocratic Versions of the Agrarian Myth: The Pastoral	282
7.6 Winning by Appearing to Lose	284
7.7 Aristocratic Versions of the Agrarian Myth: The Darwinian	285
7.8 Reel Images of the Land beyond the Forest	286
7.9 Sex, Death and Emancipation	288
7.10 From Feudal Vampire to Capitalist Batman	289
7.11 Conclusion	291
Notes	292
Conclusion	312
Bibliography	323
Author Index	360
Subject Index	369

Acknowledgements

The arguments in this book possess their origin in the late 1980s, when post-modernism was at its zenith, the height of academic fashion, and carrying all before it. Among its easier conquests were development theory and development studies, a rapid and largely unopposed colonization which took the specific form of a re-essentialization of the peasantry in postmodern analyses of the Third World. At its most cynical, the principle guiding this process seemed to be as follows: if the continued existence of class division under capitalism proves irksome, then just redefine the disadvantageous/(dis-empowering) effects of this economic process as a form of cultural advantage (= picturesque poverty) which, it can then be claimed, corresponds to a unique example of esoteric diversity that confers empowerment.

To challenge or criticize this trend, let alone to point out its epistemological and political affinities with similar ideas in vogue some sixty years earlier (all of which I did while teaching at Cambridge from the late 1980s onwards) was at that time regarded as tantamount to academic heresy, and a confirmation of the intellectual irrelevance of those who continued to be unrepentant Marxists. For this political intransigence, some (myself among them) have paid the price of academic exclusion: despite a public rhetoric about the desirability of political and theoretical plurality, it seemed that exponents of postmodernism in the academy were all following a different practice.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the following: Lydia Linford of Frank Cass Publishers, who with her usual editorial skill saw this book through production; those members of the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* who contacted me in late 1998 to offer support and encouragement; Graham McCann, for encouragement by example; and the Managers of the Smuts Memorial Fund at Cambridge University, for grants which enabled me to present earlier versions of some chapters to conferences and/or workshops in the Netherlands, India and Spain. My thanks are extended to them all.

The cover photograph depicts a mask made to celebrate the Eve of All Saints, when in rural areas the spirits of the dead are said to walk again. It conveys succinctly the themes and concerns outlined in the book. The photograph was taken in England during 1938 by Edwin Smith, and is reproduced here by kind permission of Mrs Olive Smith.

My greatest debt remains, as always, the one I owe to the members of my family: to Amanda, and also to Anna, Ned and Miles. This book is dedicated

to them.

Much of [Chapter 2](#) first appeared in ‘Trotskyism, Hugo Blanco and the Ideology of a Peruvian Peasant Movement’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.16, No.2 (1989), and [Chapter 3](#) draws on materials from ‘The Politics of Gender, Nature and Nation in the Discourse of the New Farmers’ Movements’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.21, Nos.2/4 (1994). Most of [Chapter 4](#) has appeared in ‘Moral Economists, Subalterns, New Social Movements, and the (Re-) Emergence of a (Post-) Modernised (Middle) Peasant’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.18, No.2 (1991), and [Chapter 5](#) in ‘The Agrarian Myth, the “New” Populism and the “New” Right’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.24, No.4 (1997). [Chapter 6](#) was first published as ‘Popular Culture, Populist Fiction(s): The Agrarian Utopiastes of A.V. Chayanov, Ignatius Donnelly, and Frank Capra’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.24, Nos.1/2 (1997).

T.B.

September 1999
Richmond, Surrey
(e-mail: tom@tombrass.freereserve.co.uk)

Introduction

“It is proved,” [Dr Pangloss] used to say, “that things cannot be other than they are, for since everything was made for a purpose, it follows that everything is made for the best purpose.” – An observation by Candide’s tutor [Voltaire, 1947: 20].

Tracing the way in which the agrarian myth has emerged and re-emerged over the twentieth century in ideology shared by populism, postmodernism and the political right, the argument in this book is that at the centre of this discourse about the cultural identity of ‘otherness’/‘difference’ lies the concept of an innate ‘peasant-ness’. In a variety of contextually-specific discursive forms, the ‘old’ populism of the 1890s and the nationalism and fascism (= the ‘old’ right) in Europe, North and South America and Asia during the 1920s and 1930s were all informed by the agrarian myth. The postmodern ‘new’ populism and the ‘new’ right, both of which emerged after the 1960s and consolidated during the 1990s, are also structured discursively by the agrarian myth, and with it the ideological reaffirmation of peasant essentialism.

Although the economic breakdown of traditional agrarian structures (= depeasantization) in the Third World by post-war capitalist development has been accompanied by a discursive re-essentialization of the peasantry, it is argued that perceptions concerning the kind of political action (resistance-not-revolution) undertaken by peasants have changed. Following the rediscovery of ‘popular culture’ by postmodern theory, there has been an analogous shift in development debate about agrarian transformation, from ‘peasantness’-as-economic-alienation to ‘peasantness’-as-cultural-empowerment, leading in turn to an epistemological fusion between ‘new’ populist and ‘new’ right discourse.

In considering the combined influence of the agrarian myth plus a resurgent populism and nationalism on theoretical and political debate about agrarian change in the Third World, this book follows a doubly unfashionable path. First, it constitutes an attempt to reassert the value of a Marxist analysis of the peasantry, as set out in the agrarian question. And second, it utilizes a comparative framework that stresses certain similarities between some recent agrarian mobilizations in Latin America and India, when the trend nowadays is in the opposite direction: that is, towards an absolute relativism which stresses the complexity and uniqueness (almost, even, the autonomy) of the

individual subject in terms of ideological formation, social composition, and (thus) political interest and disposition. Although the argument fundamentally concerns the agrarian myth and not the agrarian question, therefore, it is the latter which by implication is defended against the former.

Following an initial consideration of nineteenth and early twentieth-century versions of the agrarian myth (Chapter 1), the rest of the book is divided into three parts. The first examines the respective roles of the agrarian myth, populism, socialism and nationalism in a number of grassroots rural mobilizations which occurred in Latin America and India during the latter half of the twentieth century (Chapters 2 and 3), while the second charts the rise of the 'new' populism and the 'new' right over the same period, together with the reasons for this, its implications for development theory in general, and the analysis of agrarian change in particular (Chapters 4 and 5). The way in which the agrarian myth structures specific forms of 'popular' culture (literature, film) is considered in the final section of the book (Chapters 6 and 7).

Chapter 1 outlines the constituent elements of the agrarian myth, its historical background and its political outcomes. The discourse-for of the agrarian myth endorses 'natural'/harmonious rural-based small-scale economic activity (peasant family farming, handicrafts) and culture (religious/ethnic/national/regional/village/family identities derived from Nature). By contrast, the discourse-against of the agrarian myth expresses opposition to urban-based large-scale economic activity (industrialization, finance capital, the city, manufacturing, collectivization, planning, massification) and hostility towards its accompanying institutional/relational/systemic effects (class formation/struggle, revolution, socialism, bureaucracy, the state). All the latter are perceived as non-indigenous/inauthentic/'alien' internationalisms imposed on an unwilling and mainly rural population by 'foreigners', and therefore as responsible for the erosion of hitherto authentic local culture, traditions and values.

An 'a-political'/'third-way' discourse that is simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-socialist, populism is a 'from above' attempt to mobilize the rural grassroots on the basis of the agrarian myth, thereby obtaining support among peasants and farmers opposed to the effects of industrialisation, urbanization and capitalist crisis. In the context of economic depression, therefore, the invocation of anti-semitic/anti-foreigner sentiment or the town/country divide permits landowners and/or rich peasants to deflect, distort or displace class consciousness by emphasizing loyalties not antagonistic to capital (and thus compatible with the continued process of accumulation). Politico-ideologically, the resulting 'peasant-ness' – which populism claims is culturally innate and unchanging – comes to symbolize the 'nation' itself, and depesantization becomes synonymous with deculturation and the erosion (or

loss) of national identity. It was this task which the ‘old’ populism of the 1890s, the 1920s and 1930s sought to effect by merging the agrarian myth with ‘popular’ culture.

The rise of agrarian populism during the early twentieth century was an almost universal national response to the capitalist crisis of that period. In the face of what was perceived as a double threat (an ‘alien’/international finance capitalism ‘from above’ and an equally ‘alien’/international socialism ‘from below’), therefore, the resulting merger between the ‘old’ populism and the contextually-specific variants of its agrarian myth (*nohonshugi*, ‘Merrie England’, *strapaese*, *narodnichestvo*, *volks-gemeinschaft*, the pioneering frontier spirit, *heimat*, *indigenismo*, etc.) was linked not just to nationalism (as in the United States, Russia, India, and Peru) but also to fascism (as in Germany, Japan, Italy, and some Eastern European contexts). Throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, moreover, the innate ‘peasant-ness’ which structured the golden age visions of the agrarian myth also became part of a specifically nationalist anti-colonial discourse.

The first section of the book looks at the effects of the agrarian myth on rural mobilizations in Latin America and India. The role of the agrarian myth in the mobilizing discourse of three Latin American peasant movements is analysed in [Chapter 2](#): FIR in the Peruvian province of La Convención during the 1960s, ANUC in Colombia during the 1970s, and Sendero Luminoso in 1980s Peru. Conjunctural and political differences notwithstanding, all three movements were characterized by a similar combination: a radical ideology - Trotskyism in La Convención, Trotskyism and Maoism in Colombia, and Maoism in the Peru of Sendero – espoused by better-off peasants engaged in the cultivation of cash-crops destined for the international market. In each case, the idioms/programme structuring the mobilizing discourse had more in common with agrarian populism than with socialism.

The main focus is on La Convención in the eastern lowlands of Peru, where one of the most important peasant movements in Latin America took place during the years 1958–62. A central paradox is that although it was led by and reflected the economic interests of an emerging stratum of capitalist peasants, its principal mobilizing ideology in the struggle against the landlord class over this period was Trotskyism. For this reason, the politico-ideological utterances of Hugo Blanco, a Trotskyist who played a leading role in the peasant movement, together with his views about the class structure, the class struggle, and class alliances, are examined in order to ascertain their class-specific acceptability.

In a period during which the price of coffee (the main tenant crop) was high, and faced with the threat of eviction from land on which to cultivate this commodity, rich peasants in La Convención who were estate tenants joined

the most radical political group, the Trotskyist FIR (Revolutionary Left Front) led by Hugo Blanco. The latter advocated expropriation of landlord class and the redistribution of property among tenants, and also direct action (strikes, land invasions, non-payment of labour-rent) in furtherance of this.

In the discourse of Hugo Blanco, however, the seemingly radical institutional framework of 'dual power' to be established following the expropriation of the landlord class turns out to be a return to the traditional peasant 'community' – not unlike the earlier Inca 'communism' of Mariátegui – and unconnected with the concept as theorized by Trotsky. The resulting idealization of both the struggle and its objective was not merely compatible with but supportive of accumulation project of rich peasants. The latter were able as a result to depict the struggle as that of an homogeneous peasant mass ranged against oppressive landlords, and its objective as the recuperation of a pre-existing and egalitarian rural 'community'.

Challenging received wisdom as to why India is not socialist, the argument presented in [Chapter 3](#) is that in both pre- and post-Independence era this is due mainly to three causes. Two of these derive from the kind of class struggle waged 'from above', by the colonial state, by landlords and by rich peasants: namely, the frequent use of physical violence against poor peasants, tribals and agricultural workers organized by the left, and the resort by the state, landlords and/or rich peasants to the divide-and-rule tactic of communalizing the agrarian struggle with the object of fragmenting the unity of their opponents. The third cause involves the kind of class struggle waged 'from below': as the example of 1970s Naxalism in West Bengal suggests, the mobilizing discourse of Maoism in India has – like its Latin American counterpart – not only invoked a 'from below' communal identity that mimics that projected 'from above' but also endorsed a peasant essentialism associated not with socialism but with populism, and equated socialism itself with a return to the golden age of the agrarian myth.

This same populist discourse structured the 'new' farmers' movements which, together with the environmental and women's movements, emerged in India during the 1980s. Although they are all viewed as part of a new and authentically grassroots form of a-political/anti-state mobilization, it is argued here that the peasant/gender essentialisms invoked in the discourse shared by the 'new' farmers' movement, ecofeminists and some sections of the left, have been those associated historically with the politics of populism/nationalism. In the the Indian context, moreover, such idioms are particularly supportive of the neopopulist/communal/nationalist discourse of the political right. One consequence of this discursive fusion has been the reproduction of a politico-ideological space that was subsequently (re-) occupied by the reactionary Hindu nationalist BJP/VHP/RSS. Another has been the demobilization of

class consciousness by diverting/distorting 'from below' struggles into an ethnic/national oppositional discourse.

The reasons for together with wider implications of such developments at the rural grassroots are considered in the second part of the book, which looks at the way in which the post-war re-emergence of the 'new' populism, influenced by postmodern theory in particular, has led not only to a displacement of socialist alternatives with nationalist objectives, and a fusion between the latter and a similarly recuperated agrarian myth, but also resulted in an epistemological overlap with the views expressed by the 'new' right.

Chapter 4 outlines the emergence during the 1980s and consolidation during the 1990s of the 'new' populism influenced by a postmodern cultural analysis – as embodied, for example, in new social movements theory, the 'everyday-forms-of-resistance' framework and the Subaltern Studies project – which not only questions the necessity/possibility of economic development ('post-development') but rejects Marxism, meta-narratives/universals, and 'Eurocentric' Enlightenment discourse ('post-Marxism'). The resulting intellectual retreat, both from the analysis of political economy and from socialist ideas, and their replacement in development theory and historiographical debate with an idealist postmodern relativism possessing epistemological roots in the innate 'peasant-ness' of the agrarian myth, has been justified in academic/intellectual circles by reference to the supposed unfeasibility/undesirability/unworkability of socialism itself.

Having abandoned socialist alternatives to a seemingly unstoppable capitalism, exponents of the 'new' populist paradigm have been compelled to seek a non-economic form of empowerment, one that is compatible with the unchanging/unchangeable nature of peasant identity and that can also be realized by non-revolutionary forms of agency undertaken by the rural grassroots. The transformation of the Third World peasantry into an industrial reserve army of labour in the course of post-war capitalist development has been accompanied in development theory by a move away from materialist analysis. Accordingly, the conceptual re-essentialization of an innate 'peasant-ness' has itself undergone a shift, from peasant-as-economic-'other' which characterized neoclassical economic theory about rural development to peasant-as-cultural-'other' which informed the 'new' populist framework influenced by postmodernism.

Also examined in this chapter, therefore, is the way in which peasant movements in both India and Latin America have been reinterpreted by the post-modern and politically revisionist project of the subaltern studies series on India and the new social movements theory on Latin America. Non-class specific categories, such as 'subaltern', which structure both the social composition of 'new social movements' and the grassroots agency of 'everyday-

forms-of-resistance', fail to recognize the extent to which this kind of agrarian mobilization/'resistance' reflects the class interests of rich peasants. It is suggested that much of the conceptual analysis embodied in these 'new' populist frameworks is prefigured in the earlier 'moral economy' approach, incorporating the middle peasant thesis of Wolf and Alavi, an epistemological lineage in which the work of J.C. Scott discharges a pivotal role. An additional claim made here is that such frameworks implicitly provide Chayanovian neo-populist economic theory with its missing politico-ideological dimension.

Chapter 5 examines how the postmodern variants of the 'new' populism, such as 'post-colonialism', inherited in turn the political legacy of Fanon and Marcuse, who had themselves combined the anti-colonial/anti-imperial discourse with agrarian myth, in the manner of 1920s/1930s nationalism and socialism. Whereas the earlier views of Marcuse and Fanon expressed fears about alienation involving the estrangement from an 'authentic' peasant selfhood, however, in the Thirdworldist discourse which the more recent and postmodern variants of the 'new' populism share with 'new' right this innate 'peasant-ness' is re-presented ideologically as the recuperation of a cultural 'otherness'/'difference' that can now be celebrated. Alienation thus metamorphoses into its 'other', 'peasant-ness'-as-empowerment.

Like the 'new' populism, the 'new' right not only emerged after the 1960s and consolidated during the 1990s, but also endorses a similar version of the agrarian myth, and with it the reaffirmation of peasant essentialism. Again like most variants of 'new' populism that are influenced by postmodernism, the 'new' right subscribes to an extreme form of relativism that de-objectifies existence; all knowledge about the latter is thereby deprivileged as necessarily subjective and hence of equal value. Not only does this delegitimize Enlightenment meta-narratives (reason, rationality, science, materialism) but it also relegitimizes a variety of 'othernesses' of Enlightenment discourse: the irrational, the mystical, the nihilistic, and – most importantly – the agrarian myth.

For both the 'new' right and postmodern variants of the 'new' populism, therefore, every political tradition is as valid as any other, and all political traditions are consequently acceptable. Like postmodernism, the 'new' right subscribes to ecological beliefs (since these confirm the sanctity of Nature) and endorses pluralism (religious, national, ethnic) in the name of cultural 'difference'. In this shared discourse rural poverty in the Third World accordingly ceases to be a product of capitalism (= economic difference) and – as the presence in such underdeveloped contexts of an unchanging/eternal peasantry confirms – becomes instead evidence for the existence of cultural 'otherness' rooted in Nature. The twofold difficulty faced by this postmodern 'new' populist epistemology, however, is that such relativism not only banishes

capitalism as a problem but also licenses precisely those elements (Sorelian instinctivism, the innateness of ethnic identity) which – subsumed under the rhetoric of cultural ‘otherness’ – are the central ideological emplacements of the ‘old’ as well as the ‘new’ right.

The final part of the book examines the different and seemingly contrasting forms taken by the agrarian myth in the domain of popular culture. Whereas the existence of a connection between the agrarian myth and literature is well documented, the presence of a similar connection in the case of film is less well known. The argument here is not just that important elements of the agrarian myth and of populist discourse continue to pervade film, but also that they both inform a number of seemingly unconnected genres (film *noir*, horror film, science fiction).

Given the current resurgence amidst the capitalist crisis of attempts by non-Marxist social theory to construct an ‘a-political’ concept of ‘community’, [Chapter 6](#) examines previous attempts – also in the context of capitalist crisis – to construct an ‘imaginary’ alternative to capitalism and socialism, as projected in the ‘community’ (= the golden age of the agrarian myth) constructed over a 50-year period by agrarian populism in three literary/filmic texts: *Caesar’s Column* (1890) by the North American populist Ignatius Donnelly, *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* (1920) by the Russian neo-populist A.V. Chayanov, and the 1937 film by Frank Capra of the book *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (1933).

It is argued that all the latter share a common utopic/dystopic vision based on a series of symptomatic oppositions. The discourse-against of agrarian populism identifies the dystopic (or absence of ‘community’) as dark, unnatural, and western, where large-scale technified production controlled by finance capital in an urban setting is linked discursively to the threat of socialism and chaos. Its discourse-for, by contrast, identifies utopia (= ‘community’) as a realm of light that is harmonious, natural and orientalist, in which neither finance capital nor proletariat exists, and which consists instead of small-scale artisan and peasant producers.

The focus of [Chapter 7](#) is on the contrasting representations (plebeian/aristocratic, pastoral/Darwinian) of the agrarian myth on film, and in particular how apparently different themes (‘Nature under attack’/‘the death of Nature’) exhibit the same nostalgia and an accompanying sense of loss for a vanishing landscape, the locus of enduring rural values. The peasant or ‘from below’ version of the agrarian myth is termed here the plebeian, while the second or ‘from above’ landlord version is the aristocratic form. Both the plebeian and aristocratic versions subdivide in turn into two further categories.

First, each possesses both a pastoral and a ‘red-in-tooth-and-claw’ or Darwinian variant. Thus the plebeian pastoral version of the agrarian myth

includes films such as *Witness* and *City Slickers*, while *Arachnophobia* is an example of the plebeian Darwinian version. Films like *Nosferatu* and *The Wicker Man* correspond to the aristocratic Darwinian version of the agrarian myth, while the pastoral includes not just *Gone With The Wind* and *The Music Room* but also *The Leopard* and *1900*, as well as the Tamil films of M.G. Ramachandran, in which landlordism is depicted as passive, almost harmless. And second, both have a discourse about 'Nature under attack'/'the death of Nature', in which Nature is depicted as passive (= the object of agency), and also about 'Nature on the attack'/'the revenge of Nature', in which Nature is projected as active, and engaged in struggle to protect itself.

Peasants, Populism and the Agrarian Myth: The Historical Background

‘Nations are products of Nature: History is merely a progressive continuation of animal development.’ – An observation by Alexander Herzen [1956: 178], in ‘The Russian People and Socialism: An Open Letter to Jules Michelet’, 1851.

‘The road to the peasant leads through nature.’ – A programmatic observation made during 1936 by Ferenc Szalasi, Hungary’s leading National Socialist, in ‘The Way and the Aim’ [Weber, 1964: 157].

‘A myth that corresponds to certain interests or traditional customs can always wield a great power in a class society.’ – A critical observation at the same conjuncture by Leon Trotsky [1936: 165] about the reasons for the durability of myth.

This chapter considers not just the epistemological and historical overlap between the agrarian myth, populism, neo-populism and nationalism but also the kind of political outcome this generates. The first part analyses the components of the agrarian myth, an historically enduring form of rural organicism/romanticism. Generally speaking, the agrarian myth is a discourse about the desirability/feasibility and ‘naturalness’ of small-scale economic activity (peasant family farming, artisanry) in the countryside. It is also supportive, therefore, of rural cultural forms/institutions based on this economic activity: namely, the family, village, regional, ethnic and religious identities which are perceived as being derived from Nature.

By contrast, the agrarian myth expresses opposition to all forms of large-scale economic activity (collectivization, massification), particularly those which are urban-based (finance capital, industrialization, planning). It is similarly hostile to their accompanying institutional, relational and systemic effects (class formation/struggle, revolution, socialism, bureaucracy, the state). All the latter are depicted in the discourse of the agrarian myth as non-indigenous, inauthentic and ‘alien’ (= non-natural) internationalisms imposed on an unwilling and mainly rural population by ‘foreigners’ and/or their repre-

sentatives within the context affected, and thus as responsible for the erosion of hitherto authentic local traditions and values.

The second part of the chapter examines the fusion of the agrarian myth and populism, the latter being a mobilizing discourse arising from the former. Like the agrarian myth, populism is an ideology that has a long history, and one which projects itself in terms of a 'a-political'/'third-way' discourse-against that is simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-socialist. In a variety of guises and forms, populism and neo-populism have emerged and re-emerged periodically as a reaction by (mainly, but not only) peasants and farmers to industrialisation, urbanization and (again, mainly but not only) capitalist crisis: first in the 1890s, and subsequently during the 1920s and 1930s.

The final section of this chapter focusses on the political forms generated by an historical overlap between populism and the agrarian myth. The fact that the rise or resurgence during the 1920s and 1930s of agrarian populism was a characteristic not just of Central Europe but also of such countries as Italy, the United States, Japan, Germany, India and Peru, suggests that it was an almost universal national response to the capitalist crisis of that period. In many of these contexts, therefore, the resurgence in the face of a double threat (an 'alien'/international finance capitalism 'from above' and an equally 'alien'/international socialism 'from below') of populism and the contextually-specific variants of its agrarian myth (*nohonshugi*, 'Merrie England', *strapaese*, *narodnichestvo*, *volks-gemeinschaft*, the pioneering frontier spirit, *heimat*, *indigenismo*, etc.), was in turn linked not just to nationalism (as in the United States, Russia, India, and Peru) but also to fascism (as in Germany, Japan, Italy, and some Eastern European contexts).¹ Equally unsurprising is the fact that significant elements of the agrarian myth structured 'popular culture' in most of these countries.

I

Any consideration of the economic and political discourse of populism must necessarily begin by addressing three interrelated issues. First, the way in which the idealization of peasant society/culture, combined with a suspicious/condemnatory attitude towards science/urbanism/industrialization, has occupied a crucial historical role in the agrarian myth. Second, the centrality of the agrarian myth itself, and in particular fears about the de-essentialization of the peasantry (= cultural erosion, alienation), to ideas about nationhood. And third, the long-standing debate between populism, neopopulism and Marxism about categorization of the peasantry and consequently the possibility/desirability of transforming the existing agrarian structure.

1.1 The Agrarian Myth and Peasant Essentialism

A potent form of ruralism with roots in romantic and conservative notions of an organic society, the agrarian myth is an essentialist ideology which in most contexts is defended with reference to a mutually reinforcing set of arguments to do with the innate aspects of 'peasant-ness', national identity and culture. The first of these was about economics, and entailed a discourse ('peasants-as-the-backbone-of-the-nation') in which agriculture was presented as the historical and continuing basis of social organization, peasant farming as the source of national food self-sufficiency, and the peasantry as the source of military personnel – and thus the defence of the nation. The second argument concerned politics, and advanced claims about the peasantry as upholders of the existing hierarchy, and thus as a bulwark against the spread of socialist ideas and the guarantors of political stability. The last and perhaps most powerful component of this discourse was about culture: this entailed a critique of industrialisation, urbanization and modernity based on nostalgia for a vanishing way-of-life, linked in turn to perceptions of an idyllic/harmonious/folkloric village existence as an unchanging/unchangeable 'natural' community and thus the repository of a similarly immutable national identity. Linked to the latter was the view of the countryside generally as the locus of myths/legends, spiritual/sacred attributes, non-commercial values, and traditional virtue.

Many of the diverse, and seemingly distinct, anti-scientific/anti-modern views which inform the agrarian myth possess their origin in the conservative reaction to the spread of Enlightenment ideas. Historically, the politico-ideological object of conservatism has been the legitimization of an existing or rapidly vanishing social order by the attempted ideological naturalization of what are perceived by the ruling class to be its core institutional elements: religion, family, gender, ethnicity, nation, hierarchy, and Nature itself. All the latter have been – and are – perceived/presented by those on the political right as 'naturally-occurring' phenomena, and thus the immutable bases of social existence (= 'being').² By elevating 'thinking' above 'being', however, Enlightenment rationalist thought de-essentializes the 'natural'; in the process of challenging what is (or what ought to continue to be), such philosophy has been perceived by a variety of conservative social forces as licensing change, and thus the precursor of revolution.

In so far as 'reason' constitutes the antithesis of the 'natural', which it problematizes and historicizes, therefore, conservatism is necessarily an anti-rational/anti-Enlightenment philosophy. By contrast, since the political right essentializes traditional institutional social forms as 'natural', the latter concept is as a result not only equated with 'being' itself but also (and therefore)

constitutes the basis of conservatism generally and the ideology of counter-revolutionary romanticism in particular.³ It was precisely because they challenged 'natural' institutions that were specific to national culture (individualism exercised in a particularistic form within a 'given' locality), and threatened to supplant them with new (= 'alien'/'foreign') forms imported from (French, Russian) revolutionary contexts, that conservatism generally has been opposed to the notion of universal (= international) socio-economic categories/processes.⁴

To this conservative pantheon of 'natural' categories can be added the concept 'peasant' which lies at the centre of the agrarian myth. Historically, the opposition of the landlord class to science/urbanism, and the aristocratic reaction against industrialization generally, derives in part from the ways in which these combine to break its power over the peasantry. Thus science/machine-based industrial development offers estate tenants not only alternative (and perhaps better-paid) employment in towns but also the possibility of urban residence, both of which challenge the economic and political dominance landlords traditionally exercise over tenants through the control of land, employment and housing in rural areas. Moreover, once it has migrated to town an erstwhile peasantry, hitherto the embodiment of all the 'eternal'/'natural' rural/national/cultural/religious values associated with the agrarian myth, becomes transformed into an urban proletariat (= 'the mob in the streets'), now potentially/actually non-/anti-religious and part of an international working class. In the process it is also reconstituted as a political threat, not only to means of production in the town/city itself but also – and more importantly from the view of the rural landowning class – to property relations in the countryside.

1.2 The Agrarian Myth, Nationalism and Popular Culture

In this connection it is perhaps salutary to recall that 'popular culture' emanating from the agrarian myth is also associated historically with the emergence of nineteenth century European nationalist movements. Hence the importance to the latter of 'reinventing' traditional folkloric concepts linking an ethnically-specific homogeneous 'people' to a particular territory, thereby establishing a politico-ideological claim to its own rightful place/space and simultaneously denying any rival claims to this made by a 'foreign' occupying power. Moreover, in the European context the ideology of ethnic 'primitivism' and 'purism' is essentially 'a label for the assumption that "the people" really means "the peasants"'. As Herder once put it, "[t]he mob in the streets, which never sings or composes but shrieks and mutilates, is not the people". The

peasants were seen as the true People because they lived close to Nature and because they were unspoiled by new or foreign ways'.⁵ Popular culture, the agrarian myth, and the discourse of nineteenth and early twentieth-century nationalism are each structured by an idealized/folkloric image/sound of an undifferentiated peasantry, the repository of national culture (embodied in music, language, songs, dress, customs, traditions) and thus emblematic of people/nation/Nature, all of which is counterposed to the proletarian/urban 'other'.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the de-essentialization (= alienation) of the peasantry becomes a metaphor for other kinds of loss: the erosion of cultural and national identity.

The concept of alienation discharges a crucial role in the discourse which the agrarian myth shares with populism where, unlike Marxism, for which alienation is a specifically materialist phenomenon linked to the reproduction of labour-power, it refers generally to a process of cultural marginality/estrangement and in particular to the impact of the latter on the peasantry (and through this on national identity). Broadly speaking, alienation corresponds to a process of transformation that constitutes de-essentialization, whereby a particular phenomenon in effect becomes its 'other'. In the specifically materialist analysis of Marxism, alienation is an effect of the development of private property and the division of labour, an historical transformation that leads to the objectification of human labour-power as living labour is embodied in the forces of production and becomes dead labour, to be deployed increasingly against the worker him/herself.⁷ In this way, alienation entails the reification/mystification of the social relations of production, whereby commodities manufactured with labour-power are endowed with a false concreteness. The value appropriated by capital from labour in this process generates a multiplicity of contradictions (between private ownership and the social nature of production) that lead in turn to the class struggle from which arises the possibility of a fundamental systemic transition.

The theoretical and political difficulty with alienation-as-estrangement-from-selfhood and concepts of marginality to which it gives rise is that de-objectification and re-subjectification can be either a materialist or an idealist project. Accordingly, the very notion of becoming/being-other-than-oneself is premised on the existence of an innate 'selfhood' that is a-historical and unchanging, a 'natural' identity from which the self has been estranged and hence transformed into something 'alien' (= 'other'). Moreover, this definition of 'selfhood' can extend from the individual through the group to the nation: the result is an all-encompassing concept of 'estrangement' that includes not just the alienation of labour and its reification as commodity but also Rousseauesque/Wordsworthian versions of conservative nationalism, varieties of 'marginal'/'abnormal' identity declared rationally/socially 'other' by

Enlightenment discourse, and an 'authentic' national/ethnic/peasant identity declared culturally/spiritually 'other' by colonialism.

The potentially conservative political linkages between marginality/alienation/estrangement on the one hand and Rousseauesque/Wordsworthian versions of nationalism on the other are not difficult to discern. According to Rousseau, the origin of inequality lies in a debasement of human goodness, an instinctual behaviour from which humanity had become estranged/alienated and which for him was to be found in its 'natural' form in Nature itself. The object, therefore, was to return to this 'natural'/'primitive' state which had been lost, and with it an innately democratic form of existence based on subsistence.⁸ Both this belief in and the necessity of recuperating the 'natural' goodness of humanity was not merely shared by the Romantic poet Wordsworth, but formed the basis for his conservative theory of nationalism.⁹

Like Rousseau, Wordsworth maintained that humanity was essentially 'good', but that this 'pure state' had now been lost due to the imposition of an 'artificial' (= 'alien'/alienating/alienated) existence based on hierarchy. To recover this lost state of 'goodness', therefore, it was necessary to re-establish the context in which it thrived, when humanity was closer to Nature. Since the latter was also a context in which an equally pure form of 'general will' (= absence of hierarchy) was exercised, this state of Nature for Wordsworth also constitutes the basis for the presence of an authentic and benign National identity. A consequence of recuperating this 'natural' state, therefore, when a 'naturally good' humanity exercised a political will that was equally 'pure' and (hence) benign, would be to bring into being a 'natural', 'virtuous' and thus 'authentic' national spirit/identity. The importance of this specifically benign source/form of nationalism for conservative theory is that it invites popular consent and thus confers legitimacy on action(s) exercised in its name. The same point about the tradition-invoking ideological role of ethnic and/or peasant marginality/alienation/estrangement can be made with regard to populism and neo-populism.

II

The reaffirmation of peasant essentialism which lies at the heart of the agrarian myth is also central to populism and neo-populism. Combining the ideologically potent 'natural' categories of land and family, populism maintains that an homogeneous peasantry composed of petty commodity producers constitutes a pan-historical socio-economic category the defining characteristic of which is subsistence cultivation. In contrast to Marxism, the economic discourse of neo-populism denies the existence of depeasantization, and maintains instead that the economic reproduction of each individual peasant family

farm is governed by its demographic cycle. The political role of populism is to mobilize the grassroots on the basis of non-class forms of consciousness.

1.3 Populism as the 'Other' of Marxism

Combining the economic theory of petty commodity production and the politics/ideology of nationalism, both populism and neopopulism are in many ways the mirror image of Marxism (see Table). Thus the historical subject of the agrarian question is the proletariat, the economic identity of which is linked historically to the development of large-scale industry in the urban sector; its political identity is an international one based on class, and struggle is aimed at systemic transformation (= revolution). By contrast, the historical subject of the agrarian myth is an homogeneous peasantry, the economic identity of which is linked to small-scale family farming in the village community; its non-economic identity is mainly ethnic/cultural/national, and agency (= resistance) is not designed to achieve systemic transformation. As will be seen in the chapters which follow, most variants of populism – 'new' as well as 'old' – subscribe to some or all of these oppositions.

The epistemological divide between on the one hand a materialist/rationalist emphasis on the objective necessity of internationalism, socio-economic change and industrial development, and on the other an idealist/irrationalist commitment to the maintenance/reinvention of an 'imagined community', composed of a peasantry wherein reside indigenous national/cultural/religious values, is itself at the root of the Marxist/neopopulist polemic.¹⁰ All Marxists regard the peasantry as a socio-economic form that fragments into a rural bourgeoisie and a rural proletariat, and for this reason does not itself form a class but is internally divided along class lines.¹¹ Differentiating the peasantry into rich, middle and poor peasants, Lenin argued that capitalist penetration of agriculture converted the former into a rural bourgeoisie and the latter into rural labour, while the middle peasantry (or petty commodity producers) disintegrates.¹² Whereas a few middle peasants join the rich peasant stratum and become agrarian capitalists, the majority join the poor peasantry and become agricultural workers. This process was accompanied and accentuated by an increase in the utilization of machinery and wage labour, the concentration of landownership, and the displacement of small-scale by large-scale production. Consequently, Lenin concluded, in Russia the village community (*mir*) was already disintegrating into its opposed class elements, thereby simultaneously providing capitalism with both a proletariat and a home market.

This differentiation of the peasantry licenses not only class formation but also class struggle. According to Lenin and Trotsky, the peasantry discharges

MARXISM Agrarian Question		POPULISM Agrarian Myth
	<i>Historical Subject</i>	
Proletariat		Peasantry
	<i>Political Identity</i>	
Class		Ethnicity
Economic		Cultural
International		National
	<i>Political Action</i>	
Revolution		Resistance
Struggle		Accommodation
	<i>Sytemic Effect</i>	
Socialism/Communism		Pre-capitalism/ Capitalism
	<i>Economic Discourse</i>	
Conflict		Harmony
Change		Stasis
Progress		Tradition
Political Economy		Nature
Production		Consumption
Manufacture		Handicrafts
Largescale		Smallscale
Surplus		Subsistence
Collective		Individual
Planning		Market
	<i>Politico-Ideological Discourse</i>	
Rationality		Instinct
Science		Religion
History		Myth
Politics		A-Political
State		Village Community
Urban		Rural
Industry		Agriculture
Internationalism		Nationalism

a twofold role in the process of revolutionary transformation.¹³ The first stage occurs in the course of the transition to capitalism, and entails a process whereby an economically declining feudal landowning class is challenged and overwhelmed by a peasant movement reflecting the interests of a rising and economically dominant rich peasantry (= rural capitalists). The second stage occurs under capitalism itself, when a rural mobilization led by poor peasants and agricultural workers in turn challenges and overthrows the capitalist peasantry which successfully led the movement against the landlord class. On the agenda at this stage, therefore, is the possibility of a transition to socialism, in that poor peasants and particularly agricultural workers will demand the

further socialization of the means of production, and specifically the collectivization of all rural property.

The middle peasantry is not involved in – let alone leads the peasant movement – in either of these two stages, for the simple reason that in Lenin's model this particular stratum is 'depeasantized' in the course of capitalist development. In general terms, classical Marxism has always questioned the revolutionary potential of an undifferentiated peasantry composed of an homogeneous middle peasantry, allocating to it a subordinate political role in a worker/peasant alliance. Some have advocated merely the political neutralization of the peasantry (Lenin, Kautsky), while others regarded it as actively counter-revolutionary, maintaining that once they became proprietors, peasants would resist any further attempts to socialize the means of production (Trotsky, Luxemburg).¹⁴

Inverting the Leninist framework, populists maintained that an undifferentiated peasantry reproduced itself regardless of the wider economic system; the uniqueness of Russian development was consequently attributed by them to the presence of a subsistence-oriented rural economy which deprived capitalism of a market. Instead of going down the capitalist path, therefore, populists sought to avoid this altogether, in the process conserving the 'natural'/god-given form of petty commodity production, and with it the ancient cultural traditions of what they regarded as the instinctively egalitarian village community.¹⁵ And whereas Marxists insisted that capture of state power was a necessary aspect of the revolutionary process, neo-populists by contrast advocated non-confrontation with the state, a form of indirect political action known as the 'theory of small deeds'.¹⁶

1.4 The Economic Discourse of Neo-populism, or Small Is Beautiful

Unlike populism, which was grounded in a liberal critique of the dehumanization and inequality associated with nineteenth-century capitalist development, neo-populism is a twentieth century phenomenon opposed not so much to capitalism as to socialism, and in particular to large-scale industrialization and state collectivization of peasant smallholders in the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The most influential exponent of this view was A.V. Chayanov, the prominent theoretician of the Organization and Production School in Russia at the beginning of this century.¹⁸ Just as sociological theory generally can be described as a confrontation with Marx, so the study of agrarian change is similarly a dispute between Chayanov and Lenin. Conducted via their respective frameworks – the agrarian question and the agrarian myth – this dispute involves not just the issue of peasant differentiation *per se* but rather its implications for the role played by rural mobilization in the transition to socialism. The hostility of

neo-populism to the latter is embodied in the theoretical opposition between Chayanov and Lenin concerning both the socio-economic differentiation and the politico-ideological disposition of the peasantry.

In contrast to Marxism, therefore, Chayanovian neo-populism views the peasantry as an undifferentiated *sui generis* economic category ('peasant economy', 'peasant mode of production') which both reproduces itself regardless of and simultaneously resists all social systems. According to Chayanov, not only is peasant economy itself a specific mode of production, but the reproduction of the peasant labour farm is determined endogenously, by the consumption needs of the family that works the land. Claiming that in pre-Revolutionary Russia cyclical mobility prevented consolidation of the means of production (land, livestock, horses) by wealthier peasants, and thus the emergence of rich peasant stratum, Chayanov argued that the partition of village lands by the commune prevented the occurrence of economic differentiation, the result being not polarization into classes (capitalist producers, landless workers) but a process of economic levelling.¹⁹ Accordingly, output on the peasant farm was in his view determined not by external factors (such as rent, taxation, or the extraction of surplus labour by those who own/control the means of production) but rather by the motivation of its individual members. Denying that capitalist penetration of agriculture entailed 'depeasantization', he argued instead that the economic reproduction of each individual peasant family farm was governed by its demographic cycle. Landholding size, food output, and work motivation (= 'self-exploitation') by an economically undifferentiated petty commodity producer was for him based on a specific combination of factors: family size, the ratio of working/non-working household members, and the necessity of having to provide all the latter with their subsistence requirements (the drudgery of labour).

Designated the producer/consumer balance, this 'natural' equilibrium constitutes a 'natural' limit to the output of peasant cultivation. From this analysis it follows that substantial capital accumulation and class differentiation cannot occur either in peasant agriculture or in a society organized around the latter. Critiques of Chayanov's theory of peasant economy point out that it conflates rich and poor peasants, it is an historically static entity abstracted from the national and international economy, it embodies a subjective concept of value, it overlooks the operation/effect of land/labour markets and capitalist competition, and ignores class divisions between/within peasant farms together with a differential capacity to utilize technology.²⁰ In the neo-populist vision of Chayanov, therefore, petty commodity production reproduces itself in the form of the family labour farm, regardless of the presence/absence of feudalism, capitalism or indeed socialism. Unlike Marxist political economy, for which peasant differentiation into small capitalist producers and an

agrarian proletariat licenses class-specific revolutionary action designed to capture state power that prefigures a transition to socialism, neo-populism in general and Chayanovian theory in particular reconstitutes the peasantry as an undifferentiated category that resists socio-economic change, a politically conservative position which does not involve a transition to socialism, entails no expropriation/redistribution of existing property, and hence presents no threat to the continued rule of capital.²¹

*1.5 The Politico-ideological Discourse of Populism, or Penultima Ratio Regum*²²

Populist discourse has also discharged an important political role as a mobilizing ideology, operating at the level of consciousness where it serves to deflect discourse from class to non-class identity; the importance of this aspect of populism is evident from the many texts which label it as rhetoric, or a class consciousness displacing discourse-about.²³ Hence the frequent invocation by populism of a necessity for an ‘above-politics’ or ‘a-political’ grassroots movement suggests the presence of a class-specific ideology without seeming to be one.²⁴ The effectiveness of populism as a mobilizing ideology accordingly depends ultimately on its capacity to project class-specific interests as if this were not so; that is, by representing the ideas of a particular class, but in a way that disguises this fact and thus the socio-economic origin of this discourse. That populism frequently eschews the explicitly political, and tends therefore to insist on regarding itself (and being regarded by others) as a ‘common-sense’ or an ‘a-political’/‘above-politics’ discourse, is precisely because this element of being ‘non-political’ is central to the very process of appearing not to be class-specific.²⁵

This in turn gives rise to a second important political characteristic: because of its epistemological roots in the discourse of the agrarian myth, popular culture and nationalism, populism has also discharged a unique role in mobilizing grassroots support for conservatism. Unlike other texts which categorize variants of populism as compatible with the politics of either the left or the right, therefore, populism is associated here only with the political right.²⁶ In short, populism is not an autonomous theory/practice that occasionally (and accidentally) overlaps with a largely unconnected conservative theory/practice; much rather it *is* the right, mobilizing or mobilized politically. The reason for eschewing this duality, and classifying populism as a conservative mobilizing discourse is that, although individual socialists/Marxists may on occasion espouse populist views and endorse populist aims, socialism/Marxism as a political programme is in fact not only incompatible with populism but – as the oppositions set out in the Table above confirm – its

'other'. To the degree that it has been – or indeed remains – compatible with populism, therefore, the political theory/practice of what (erroneously) passes for the left cannot be considered socialist/Marxist.²⁷

Although it shares with Marxism a discourse-against that attacks big business, political injustice, and the effects of capitalism generally, populism does this not in the name of the common ownership of the means of production (as does Marxism) but rather in the name of individual, small-scale private property. Since it downgrades/denies the existence of class and accordingly essentializes the peasantry, populism also perceives smallholding proprietors as socio-economically undifferentiated and thus casts them all in the role of 'victims', uniformly oppressed by large-scale institutions/monopolies located in the urban sector (the state, big business and 'foreign' capital). As many Marxists have pointed out, the political anxiety that structures the discourse-against of populism is an underlying fear of socialism rather than capitalism. For this reason, the populist discourse-against is directed not so much at capitalism *per se* as at its large-scale monopoly/('foreign') variant which gives rise to the very conditions that lead in turn to socialism.

Like Marxism, populism also combines a pessimism about the present with an optimism about the future. Unlike Marxism, however, populism fails to distinguish between a progressive/modern anti-capitalism which seeks to transcend bourgeois society, and a romantic anti- (or, as will be seen the the chapters which follow, a post-) modern form the roots of which are located in agrarian nostalgia and reactionary visions of an innate Nature. Accordingly, the pessimism which structures the discourse-against of the agrarian myth, populism and neo-populism generates an optimism which is not forwards-looking, or politically progressive, but much rather backwards-looking, and thus corresponds to an attempt to reinvent tradition in a way that has been (and continues to be) supportive of conservative, nationalist and even fascist ideology.

There is no mystery as to why conservatives value the capacity of populism and neo-populism to mobilize grassroots support on the basis of a working-class consciousness-displacing discourse. Despite claims that it is unproblematically associated with 'modernization' *per se*, populism is an ideology which tends to emerge during periods of capitalist crisis, when capitalism is most under threat from a working class mobilizing along specifically class lines.²⁸ It is precisely at this conjuncture that, from the viewpoint of those interested in its survival, capitalism requires most saving. In such circumstances, any opposition to current forms of accumulation must be prevented from becoming a challenge to the capitalist system itself, a process which requires that opposition to capitalism be permitted but must nevertheless remain under the ideological control of the bourgeoisie.²⁹ In this way,

what is potentially/actually opposition to capitalism can be defused, and transformed into 'opposition'.

As will be seen in the chapters which follow, the advantage for rich peasants in India and Latin America of a populist/neopopulist discourse is that it enables them to operate politically and ideologically on two fronts: against poor peasants and agricultural labourers as well as landlords and/or international capital. The success of this hinges in turn on the displacement of class categories, whereby agrarian subjects who are defined in terms of ownership of or separation from given means of production are redefined in neopopulist terms simply as 'peasants'/'cultivators'/'farmers', or as petty commodity producers in contexts where there is actually great variation in both relations and the scale of production. Such a discursive fusion permits agrarian capitalist producers to claim not only that all rural inhabitants experience a uniform level of suffering in the face of urban and/or 'foreign' exploitation but also that economic growth is located in and confined largely to towns/cities/industry and/or other nations. By suppressing reference to socio-economic differentiation arising from the process of capitalist development, therefore, rich peasants can challenge landlords and/or imperialism in the name of the peasantry as a whole, which permits them not merely to reinforce and reproduce in discourse shared with poor peasants and agricultural labour the mythic yet politico-ideologically potent image of an homogenous peasantry but also to claim that they represent thereby the voice of 'the people' (= the peasantry), and thus the nation itself.

Two important consequences follow from this nationalist discourse, each of which is supportive of the neo-populist camouflage adopted by rich peasants. First, that self-empowerment is effected at the expense of a foreign and not an indigenous capitalist class; and second, that 'popular culture' becomes identified unproblematically with the 'voice from below', and action based on this is accordingly deemed to constitute an authentic expression of the democratic will.³⁰ Consequently, anything and everything associated with its grass-roots manifestation automatically becomes the embodiment of democratic expression, and can now be invoked/celebrated as the utterance of the hitherto mute and dominated. The difficulty with this is that once the 'popular' is accepted as an *unmediated* construct (or the 'natural' voice of the people), it follows that what is desirable becomes whatever the 'popular' says is so; in short, a procedure that fails to ask precisely how such views are constructed, by whom, and for what political ends. Where precisely a populist grass-roots mobilization informed by a discourse combining the agrarian myth and nationalism can lead politically is evident from the historical case studies which now follow.

III

Both the durability of the agrarian myth, and its roots in nationalist discourse, can be illustrated with respect to many different contexts. In the case of English culture, for example, rural nostalgia as embodied in the pastoral has a long, powerful and enduring ideological lineage. Hence the literary invocation of the agrarian myth is the subject of infinite historical regression, stretching back at regular intervals from the 1930s to the 1370s, at each stage of which there is said to exist an image of a (vanishing-to-be-recuperated) 'golden age' constituted by the timeless agricultural rhythms of 'Old England'.³¹ Much the same is true of music, where the pastoral style has discharged a crucial role in reaffirming national identity constructed/projected in the course of the English musical renaissance over the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.³² During the capitalist crisis of the 1920s and 1930s the reaffirmation of a connection between national/regional identity and landscape extended from popular fiction to the anti-modern/anti-socialist agrarian populist views of those such as Belloc, Chesterton, and A.R. Orage, all of whom advocated distributism, or a return to a decentralized form of social organization based on the small-scale property of artisan and peasant.³³

1.6 Nationalism and the Agrarian Myth in the Nineteenth Century

Dismissed by Marxists as *kulak* ideology, the agrarian myth in Russia has a similarly extended genealogy. The polarities which structured the nationalist/populist ideology informing the Russian version of the agrarian myth were similar to those structuring the *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* framework.³⁴ Whereas *gesellschaft* entails the adoption of rationalistic/calculating (= scientific) and future-oriented universal values that manifest themselves through public opinion, *gemeinschaft* by contrast is based on religion/culture/family, its 'natural' will consequently being the expression of ancient faith, custom and folkloric tradition.

The period after 1861 was marked by an attempt on the part of the Russian populists (*narodniki*) to construct within the domain of 'popular culture' an essentialist image of the post-Emancipation peasantry as 'the people' (*narod* = people = peasants).³⁵ Like *nohonshugi* in Japan, the *narodniki* in Russia blamed the state for permitting capitalism to erode peasant economy/community. As in the other apparently historically- and contextually-specific examples considered here, therefore, the target of discourse-against of Russian populism was finance capital, and for much the same reason: embodying the doubly 'alien' otherness of 'the urban' and 'the foreign', money was blamed for undermining the economic base of peasant economy, and through this the

tradition of the 'eternal peasant' as a pristine cultural subject from which arose an equally 'natural' form of national identity.³⁶

Invoking the conservative values and traditions of pre-Petrine Russia against the 'dangerous'/'alien' views of the European Enlightenment, the polarities which structured the nationalist/populist ideology of Russian Slavophiles were stereotypically those of the agrarian myth. Because it threatened on the one hand to expand the urban proletariat and on the other to ruin the small independent peasant producer, the embodiment of traditional religious and nationalist values, Slavophile populists reacted against what was perceived as a foreign (specifically German) capitalist penetration of Russia during the latter half of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Against the 'artificial', large-scale conflict-ridden system associated with European industrialization/urbanization/bureaucracy that entailed the adoption of rationalistic/calculating (= scientific) and future-oriented universal values, Slavophiles counterposed and invoked the desirability of an a-historical, immanent concept of harmonious/organic small-scale 'community', a predominantly rural and authentically Russian institution composed of 'common people'.³⁸ Since the latter was based on religion/culture/family, Slavophile populists claimed, its 'natural' will was consequently the expression of ancient faith, custom and folkloric tradition. Backward-looking and opposed to industrialization, Slavophile populism was based on the view that each nation could not but follow its own organic laws of development.³⁹

Whereas for Slavophiles peasant identity was basically non-rational and cultural, non-slavophiles such as Semevskii, Engelgardt, Chayanov, and Kondrat'ev all saw the Russian peasant as an economically rational agent.⁴⁰ Although the distinction is not absolute, for populism it involved a dual conceptualization of peasant essentialism; on the one hand a social Darwinian peasant, the economic reproduction of which was linked to what Chayanov identified as an infinite capacity for 'self-exploitation' (= survival of the fittest), and on the other a peasant that was culturally pristine. Both identities fused to form an agrarian populist discourse about peasant essentialism, resulting in an economically undifferentiated peasantry the innate culture of which was as a result capable of surviving in any socio-economic formation. For this reason, the Russian peasantry represented for Slavophile and Chayanovian theory alike both a cultural and an economic alternative to capitalism and to socialism.

Superficially, the American and Russian variants of agrarian populism are dissimilar; whereas the latter has its origins in an aristocratic landowning class, the former is rooted in Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy.⁴¹ As in Russia, however, the origins of the agrarian myth in the United States lie in a discourse-against emanating from above, and not with some form of 'grass-

roots resistance' from below.⁴² In both cases, therefore, this discourse is anti-intellectual, backward-looking, and nationalist: peasants are presented as the embodiment of national identity, whereby a folkloric peasant/yeoman appears as the bulwark against industrial/urban development, and in both Russia and America this is a discourse about an homogenous rural population of independent smallholders that hides the presence and effects of socio-economic differentiation.⁴³ Moreover, just as Chayanov supplied Russian agrarian populism with the economic arguments in support of peasant family farming, so Veblen provided its counterpart in America with an economic defence of the yeoman farmer.⁴⁴

Although associated specifically with agrarian mobilizations accompanying the rapid economic change during the 1890s and culminating in the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 presidential election, agrarian populism in America continued throughout the early years of this century to the rise of the People's Party and the Progressive movement.⁴⁵ In the context of fears about a declining rural America and the expansion of urban industrial society, populism constituted the reaffirmation of the values (homogeneity, equality of opportunity, civic morality/purity, individualism, rural-based property-owning democracy composed of independent, small-scale and self-sufficient producers) associated with an agrarian tradition based on family farming. Like its Russian counterpart, therefore, American populism in the 1890s was based on the agrarian myth: in the latter case, that of the yeoman farmer, a citizen who embodied the civic and religious values of the nation by virtue of owning the farm on which he worked together with his family.⁴⁶

Ironically, just as antebellum commercialization/mechanization of agricultural production in response to the growth of the national and international market undermined the economic reality on which this myth was based, so the crisis of overproduction during the latter part of the nineteenth century (characterized by a combination of rising costs, falling prices/profits as competition intensified) gave it a new politico-ideological life.⁴⁷ As smallholders in the southern and midwestern states of America became less independent economically, therefore, so this agrarian populist discourse became focused increasingly against the corruption of politics, as exemplified in the victimization of the family farm by an urban bureaucracy/state and large-scale corporations (= monopoly/finance capital), all of which were identified as being responsible for the land speculation that resulted in the dispossession of the smallholder.⁴⁸

1.7 *Populism, Nationalism and the Agrarian Myth in the 1920s and 1930s*

This same agrarian populist discourse resurfaced in the United States during the subsequent capitalist crisis, this time connected specifically to perceptions of southern decline. Accordingly, the nostalgic and idealized vision of a rural 'world-we-have-lost' espoused by the Southern Agrarians represented an intellectual reaction against the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁴⁹ Opposed to industrialisation, not least because mass production was aesthetically repugnant and undermined good art, the Southern Agrarians not only attempted to recuperate pre-industrial values, among them slavery, but also – and not unlike *nohonshugi* and *volksgemeinschaft* ideology – to construct thereby a common cultural identity on the basis of a shared ethnic/regional background.⁵⁰ As in the case of *nohonshugi* ideology, the rejection of progress generally and industrialisation in particular was linked to the fear of socialism and communism, each of which was seen by Southern Agrarians as the inevitable outcome of capitalist development.⁵¹ Like the Russian neo-populists, therefore, the Southern Agrarians regarded small-scale subsistence agriculture based on the individual family farm as a politically desirable, historically traditional and culturally 'natural' organizational form appropriate to the southern economy and society, the 'other' of both finance capital and socialism.⁵²

Rejecting the idea that Southern writers 'should adopt somebody else's geography and contrarily write like Northerners – at that, like Northerners made sick by an overdose of their own industrialism', the Southern Agrarians – again like the exponents of *nohonshugi* and *volksgemeinschaft* – invoked instead a specifically agrarian folkloric image of 'popular culture'.⁵³ Perhaps the best-known and most powerful projection in the realm of 'popular culture' of the antebellum rural society the loss of which was lamented in the agrarian populist discourse of the Southern Agrarians is the film *Gone With The Wind* (1939).⁵⁴

In the case of colonial India, the agrarian myth has a long lineage, and was prefigured in the views expressed not just by Mahatma Gandhi during the 1920s and 1930s but also by Acharya Narendra Deva in the late 1930s and by N.G. Ranga and Rammanohar Lohia during the early 1940s.⁵⁵ The impact of pastoral versions of nationalist discourse on the 'popular' culture of colonial India is sufficiently well-known to require much elaboration. Many of the more important actors in the Tamil Cinema of the 1930s actively participated in the nationalist movement itself, and not only was rural life endorsed but this was done with explicit actual/symbolic reference to Gandhi himself: for example, in the form of heroes/heroines returning to the village from the town in order to carry out Gandhian policy.⁵⁶

In many respects, Gandhian theory and practice in India conforms to the

classical pattern of nationalist/populist ideology and politics outlined above and below with regard to Japan, Germany, Italy, England, Russia, and the United States.⁵⁷ On the one hand, therefore, Gandhi promoted class conciliation, endorsed the notion of an ethnically-specific hierarchy (based on the Hindu caste system), and advocated a return to traditional cultural and religious values as embodied in village India by an undifferentiated peasantry; on the other hand, he denied progress/modernity, was correspondingly suspicious of all things urban (the locus of 'alien' non-Indian western values), and condemned class struggle.⁵⁸ Because of the convenient all-embracing character of this populism, in which an externalized oppression/exploitation/capitalism can be displaced onto an urban/foreign/scientific/Western 'other', the prime movers in the agrarian struggles organized by Gandhi in Bihar and Gujarat during the early part of the century were unsurprisingly the better-off peasants from high castes.⁵⁹

This was the case with regard to the *satyagraha* conducted against European indigo planters in Champaran district, Bihar, where during 1917 Gandhi mobilized tenants against rent increases (*sharabeshi*), illegal levies (*abwabs*), land transfer payments (*salaami*), and the obligation to cultivate the landlord's crops – particularly indigo – on their best land (the *tinkathia* system). The resulting *satyagraha* was led by better-off tenants composed of high caste Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Kyasthas, who were caught between rent enhancements coupled with the declining profitability of indigo cultivation on the one hand, and on the other the need to remove existing institutional obstacles to their growing the more profitable foodgrain and sugarcane crops.⁶⁰ Much the same was true of the Bardoli *satyagraha* in Surat district, Gujarat, where, because the rental value of land had increased substantially, and the British administration had decided to raise the level of land revenue, rich peasant proprietors belonging to the Patidar caste who cultivated cotton embarked on a 'no-tax' campaign during 1928.⁶¹

Although Deva, Ranga and Lohia were regarded initially as socialists of some sort, the discourse of each was – like that of Gandhi – basically populist and nationalist.⁶² Hence the exploiter is depicted by them as external, the Indian peasant is equated with Nature (= 'pure'/untainted-by-the-city) and is accordingly regarded as an uncorrupted and thus a revolutionary subject. By contrast, the urban worker is 'tainted-by-the-city', corrupted by colonialism, and thus no longer a revolutionary subject. The urban proletariat in metropolitan capitalism is in their perception doubly tainted: simply by virtue of its combined urban/colonial 'otherness', therefore, it can no longer be considered revolutionary. The latter mantle has passed instead to 'colonial toilers' in general and to peasants in particular, who in the view of populists such as Lohia would challenge and destroy capitalism.⁶³ It is perhaps not without

significance that Ranga resigned from the Congress Party in the early 1950s, accusing it of being against farmers, and went on to form first his own peasants' party, the Krishak Lok Dal, and then in 1959 the conservative Swatantra Party, of which he remained leader until the early 1970s.⁶⁴

1.8 Inca 'Communism' and the Agrarian Myth

Turning to Latin America at this same juncture, what is striking is the ideological similarity between different political movements and parties on the issue of the agrarian myth. Regarding the latter, therefore, there was – as in the case of India – little to distinguish the views of Peruvian socialists and/or communists such as José Carlos Mariátegui and Hildebrando Castro Pozo from those of Peruvian nationalists and populists such as Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre.⁶⁵ On the basis of a shared epistemology, all of them subscribed to what might be termed a specifically Latin American variant of the agrarian myth: namely, the view that the Spanish Conquest imposed an 'inauthentic' and 'foreign' (= European) feudal tenure structure on what each of them interpreted as being a materially self-sufficient and culturally 'authentic' indigenous Andean peasant community that characterized the pre-Colombian era.⁶⁶ More important was the fact that for both Mariátegui and Haya de la Torre, the discourse of the agrarian myth also possessed a programmatic status: the socialism of the former as well as the nationalism of the latter entailed building on what each perceived as being a still-viable peasant economy, a residue from the golden age of Peru that had survived colonialism.

Politically and theoretically, Mariátegui and Haya de la Torre appear to located at opposite ends of the same spectrum. Widely regarded as the most influential Marxist theorist in Latin America, Mariátegui was not only instrumental in the foundation of the Peruvian Socialist Party (the PSP or *Partido Socialista del Peru*) in 1928 and the Confederation of Peruvian Workers (the CGTP or *Confederación General de Trabajadores del Peru*), but also 'helped to produce a Peruvianized Marxism . . . [and was an intellectual whose] thinking on the agrarian question was without doubt one of his most useful contributions'.⁶⁷ By contrast, Haya de la Torre founded APRA (*Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana*) during the mid-1920s, a nationalist and populist multi-class front which aimed to represent the 'masses' or 'national majority' composed of workers, peasants, tribals, and elements of the middle class (students, teachers, small agrarian capitalists, etc.) against imperialism and its local representatives (large landlords, merchants), both in Peru itself and also in Central and South America.⁶⁸

Ostensibly structured by anti-imperialism, and strongly influenced by Spenglerian notions of Western decline, therefore, the mobilizing discourse of