
1. An introduction to the *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*

A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Kristina Dietz, Bettina Engels and Ben M. McKay

When Marc Edelman and Wendy Wolford (2017) published ‘Introduction: Critical Agrarian Studies in Theory and Practice’, it represented a significant intervention to seek to realign a number of heterodox strands of rural development theory and practice. Strikingly, none of the references in their article actually contained the phrase ‘critical agrarian studies’. The phrase itself has its most direct origin in the creation, in 2009, of the Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. The Initiative describes itself as:

a community of like-minded critical scholars, development practitioners and movement activists from different parts of the world who are working on agrarian issues. It responds to the need for an initiative that builds and focuses on linkages, and advocates a mutually reinforcing co-production and mutually beneficial sharing of knowledge. (ISS n.d.)

This description, however, does not actually state what is meant by critical agrarian studies. In this light, Edelman and Wolford’s paper represents the first attempt to map out the meaning of the field and, as such, it ambitiously seeks to shape the future of a pluralist field of study, action and advocacy rooted in peasant studies and the broader field of critical development studies (Veltmeyer, this volume). Critical agrarian studies represents a field of research that unites critical scholars from various disciplines concerned with understanding agrarian life, livelihoods, formations and their processes of change. It is ‘critical’ in the sense that it seeks to challenge dominant frameworks and ideas in order to reveal and challenge power structures and thus open up the possibilities for change. Claiming to combine research and activism, it is ‘an institutionalized academic field, and an informal network (or various networks) that links professional intellectuals, agriculturalists, scientific journals and alternative media, and non-governmental development organizations, as well as activists’ (Edelman and Wolford 2017, 962).

Edelman and Wolford (2017) stress that ‘critical frameworks ... call into question dominant paradigms’. In international development studies, the dominant paradigm remains, still, modernization theory, which emerged in the 1950s. It is predicated on a dualism: that ‘traditional’ small-scale subsistence-oriented agriculture must be transformed into ‘modern’ capital-intensive market-oriented agriculture, and that this requires that the bulk of farmers eventually seek out off-farm livelihoods as waged workers or entrepreneurs in manufacturing and services. This approach to rural development remains predominant within the management of the World Bank; it is implicit within some strands of the United Nations such as divisions of the Food and Agriculture Organization; it lies behind the contemporary teaching of agricultural economics in most universities around the world; and in many countries, it is the

foundation upon which ministries of agriculture and their ‘partners’ from bi- and multilateral donor agencies operate. Scholars from critical agrarian studies do not accept this paradigm, suggesting that it is predicated on the need to subsume everything to the market, to transform labour, natural resources, the means of production, goods and services into commodities, based on taken-for-granted principles of private property rights, money and competition—in short: capitalism (van der Linden 2016, 256f.). These values and principles are, in mainstream development theory and politics, associated with modernity, but are historically such recent social constructions that they are a dramatic ‘break with the past’ (Edelman and Wolford 2017, 961), in that the forms of knowledge they promote are not open-ended but rather closed-off. Closed bodies of knowledge make historically constructed social structures and institutions appear to be the inevitable way societies must be ordered. As opposed to this, the identification and analysis of biases within dominant paradigms in social science is done in order to construct ‘alternative forms of knowing and of acting in the world’ (Edelman and Wolford 2017, 962). This is the overarching purpose of critical agrarian studies.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we review the emergence of critical agrarian studies vis-à-vis its relationship with peasant studies. We then discuss the relationship between agrarian political economy and critical agrarian studies. Finally, the concluding section presents the structure of this *Handbook*.

FROM PEASANT STUDIES TO CRITICAL AGRARIAN STUDIES

As a field of study, the origin of critical agrarian studies lies in peasant studies, which as a distinct field of investigation emerged during the 1960s and early 1970s, rooted in various complementary but distinct epistemological approaches: theories of agrarian change derived from the classical analysis of the agrarian question (originally tracing back to Kautsky 1899; see Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010; Watts, this volume); agrarian Marxism (Levien et al. 2018; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, this volume); the Indian ‘mode of production’ debate (Patnaik 1990); quantitative analysis of agricultural data sets that featured in the analysis of the Organization and Production School (Chayanov 1986 [1925]); and the finely grained, intimately detailed ethnographic analysis that featured in the work of anthropologists who often took their initial impetus from the work of such luminaries as Eric Wolf, Maurice Godelier, Jack Goody and Sidney Mintz. In the field of peasant studies, Marxist agrarian political economy or radical agrarian populist lenses often framed central research questions and empirical knowledge was generated drawing on various research approaches and methods from sociology, political science, economics, human geography and social anthropology. Cumulatively, manifold insights into and analysis of social change in rural societies around the world were established in the peasant studies literature.

In the past 25 years, this thread of theoretical and methodological approaches has, to a degree, unravelled. Rural research framed by the central concerns of the agrarian question has declined as social science orthodoxies tend to marginalize critical analysis, particularly in undergraduate university programmes and in policy-oriented research by think tanks, consultancies and international agencies. The agrarian question is fundamentally concerned with whether and to what extent capitalism is emerging in farming and agriculture, and the forms by which it does or does not emerge. However, in much of orthodox social science, capitalism is now taken for granted. The quantitative analysis of large data sets has now become the pre-

serve of resolutely neoclassical economists, who have shaped statistical tools to reflect their concerns, in ways that can seriously compromise the reliability of the data that are collected and the resulting analysis that is produced (Akram-Lodhi 2010, 570–571; Oya and Pontara 2015). Many contemporary ethnographers are less interested in the rural, and those that are face significant personal, professional and financial constraints if they want to engage in the serious long-term work of understanding the detailed nuances of a rural social formation and the processes of change within which it is enmeshed (Greco, this volume).

The emergence of critical agrarian studies as a field of study is a response to the unravelling of the diverse approaches that have constituted peasant studies. With the latter, it shares Marxism as one of its common theoretical grounds, and thus engages with the processes, implications and limitations of pervasive capitalist insinuation into the agricultural sector; i.e. its transformation from subsistence and small-holder to capitalist production, including the separation of labour and the means of production, and its effects on class structure (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010, 179). Class is a key, though of course not the only, category of social structure and identity. How agrarian classes are historically and contemporarily formed, reproduced, transformed and cease to be is a central component of the analytical framework of critical agrarian studies. Class analysis is clearly more nuanced if it is multidimensional, identifying and exploring the cultural, ecological, social, political and economic factors and forces that facilitate or impede class formation.

Critical agrarian studies often combines micro- and macro-level analyses, connecting individual and local dynamics with the global political economy, and by embedding its analysis and findings within the context of global processes such as the ecological, climate and energy crisis, financialization, COVID-19 or geopolitical transformations (see Hunsberger; Clapp and Isakson; Akram-Lodhi, Oliveira and McKay, all in this volume). In providing this macro and global context, critical agrarian studies goes significantly beyond the terrain of peasant studies as it developed in the 1970s. It connects the local to the global, in terms of both structures and agency, incorporates a plurality of perspectives and this, in an era of neoliberal globalization, allows it to ask a broad set of questions that point toward alternatives (see Bush; Dietz and Engels, this volume).

Critical agrarian studies starts from a critique of ‘peasant essentialism’ that was widespread, including among critical scholars, in the 1970s and 1980s. Peasants do not form a homogenous class, nor are rural populations limited to peasants. Rather, the livelihoods of people living in the countryside build on animal husbandry and pastoralism, fisheries, paid labour in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, both formal and informal, crafts, trading, artisanal mining and many others. Analyses of agrarian structures and change reveal how the peasantry relates to other social classes in terms of property relations, capital–labour relations and rural–urban relations (Bernstein and Byres 2001, 8). Whereas historical debates on agrarian questions were based on a much sharper line between the city and the countryside, it has now become a key assumption of critical agrarian studies that the rural and the urban are mutually constitutive of each other, in particular concerning patterns and linkages of production, distribution and consumption that increasingly transcend national borders.

FROM AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY TO CRITICAL AGRARIAN STUDIES

Scholars in critical agrarian studies often analyse agrarian change through an agrarian political economy lens by focusing on patterns of accumulation; on processes of production, i.e. the distribution of the means of production, technological changes and labour commodification; and on how agrarian politics interact with processes of accumulation and production. As defined in the mission statement of one of the leading journals in the field, the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, agrarian political economy investigates ‘the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, property and power in agrarian formations and their processes of change, both historical and contemporary’ (Bernstein 2010, 1). Henry Bernstein, in his fundamental ‘small’ book on *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, summarizes this focus through four guiding questions (Bernstein 2010, 22–24): Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it? These four questions align with changes in: access and control over resources; agricultural production, most notably the distribution of assets, the capture of the benefits of technical change by social forces, and processes of commodification; the accumulation that emerges out of changing technical coefficients of production; and the political implications, across a myriad variety of forms, of changing patterns of production and growth. Cumulatively, these changes may or may not facilitate the rural transformation that is the object of knowledge among scholars and the purpose of action among advocates. However, the analysis of actually existing rural societies cannot limit itself to what was, within the agrarian question literature, an evaluation of the political economy of production, distribution, accumulation, consumption and the structural and institutional governance of these stocks and flows, but must also, critically, integrate within its arguments the socio-cultural dimensions of these processes.

Critical agrarian studies has a broader approach to agrarian questions, reflective of its more open and pluralist lines of inquiry. More recent contributions to the field emphasize the importance of ‘local and national dynamics’ (Bush and Martiniello 2017, 200). These studies investigate the respective histories of social struggles related to the economic valuation of agriculture under different systems (colonialism, capitalism, socialism) and the historical production of the social world. They look at the various dimensions of structural change in the countryside, and at human–nature and nature–culture relations (see Nightingale and Harcourt; Copeland, this volume). They go beyond rural–urban linkages by exploring ‘nature in the city’ and similar planning logics in urban and rural settings (Edelman and Wolford 2017; Watts 2009; Tornaghi and Halder, this volume).

As Edelman and Wolford (2017, 963) put it, ‘[c]ritical agrarian studies, like the Marxism on which it draws, is not a consensus field’. However, Marxist perspectives still remain a central theoretical foundation to critical agrarian studies, though not all empirical studies in the field explicitly refer to it. As Edelman and Wolford (2017, 965) note, the ‘institutional forms’ that critical agrarian studies takes are epitomized by the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and the *Journal of Agrarian Change*. Both of these journals were founded by Terence J. Byres, who co-edited both with Henry Bernstein. Under their editorships, both journals utilized explicitly Marxist theoretical frameworks to guide the empirical studies that they published. However, when the editorship of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* passed to Saturnino M. Borras, Jr., the journal adopted a more pluralist heterodox standpoint, continuing to publish papers within a Marxist framework but also publishing work rooted in critical non-Marxist social theory, such as radical

agrarian populism, among others. However, while there are diverse analytical categories, class dynamics around land and labour remain central, as is reflected in this *Handbook*. In line with critical agrarian studies in general, the way categories are conceptualized vary depending on epistemological approaches and analytical aims. But beyond theoretical and methodological variation, scholars in the field are increasingly united by the claim that research and activism need to be linked to each other. This is equally reflected in the way Marxism is understood in critical agrarian studies: not as a theory for its own sake, but as a political intervention.

THE EDWARD ELGAR *HANDBOOK OF CRITICAL AGRARIAN STUDIES*

Critical agrarian studies is an emerging rather than an established field. Far from being a monolithic theory on agrarian issues, it is characterized by theoretical and methodological pluralism and innovation. Its internal variety, controversies and even contradictions represent its strengths rather than a weakness. This *Handbook* does not try to impose any theoretical standpoint but rather it seeks to bring together a wide range of contributions from scholars of various backgrounds and perspectives who are united by their enthusiasm for critical analysis of, and controversies about, historical and contemporary social structures and processes in agrarian and rural settings. The *Handbook* consists of 72 chapters, including this introduction. It brings together many of the leading scholars in critical agrarian studies, and attempts to lay down the key parameters of an emerging field by subdividing the chapters into six parts:

- I. Origins: although critical agrarian studies has emerged out of an encounter with peasant studies, the historical origins of both lie in the late nineteenth century, and in the evolution of a set of ideas through the twentieth century in various world regions. The evolution of the ideas underpinning critical agrarian studies demonstrates its historically innovative character, its diversity, its pluralism and its willingness to fundamentally rethink perceived orthodoxies.
- II. Concepts: underpinning the diverse theoretical approaches of critical agrarian studies lie a set of central concepts that are deployed in work that falls within it. Concepts explicitly or implicitly lie behind the analytical explanations and advocacy that are witnessed in the field of critical agrarian studies and understanding and interrogating such concepts is of central importance in evaluating the claims that are made within the field about understanding processes of social change.
- III. Methodologies: the way in which those that work within critical agrarian studies come to 'know' and understand a contemporary rural setting and the changes that are being witnessed starts from different epistemologies and disciplines and the methodologies that different epistemologies and disciplines rely upon. At the same time, however, critical agrarian studies explicitly confronts the strengths and weaknesses of the epistemologies and methodologies that are adopted in order to produce understandings and explanations of social development and change that are both stronger and more finely grained.
- IV. Regional perspectives: the central concerns of critical agrarian studies demonstrate both overlapping domains of investigation and debate and unique specificities when examined at the regional and subregional levels. This part of the *Handbook* therefore offers a limited number of perspectives from major regions and countries in order to introduce readers to

how agrarian change is playing out in both similar and different ways in important contemporary rural settings.

- V. Debates: the key areas of contemporary investigation and analysis within critical agrarian studies are wide-ranging and diverse. This part of the *Handbook* deploys both the key concepts within the field and the epistemologies engendered by such concepts to provide insights and arguments into some of the key domains of contemporary research and advocacy within critical agrarian studies. Thorough but by no means exclusive, this part of the *Handbook* will facilitate the capacity of readers to quickly come to understand a broad array of key analytical perspectives within critical agrarian studies.
- VI. Trajectories: as an open-ended field of investigation and advocacy, future developments within critical agrarian studies will emerge out of both its action-oriented research as well as an intersection with and dialogue between it and other fields of research and activism. By opening up a number of intersections between critical agrarian studies and other fields it becomes clear that the forward trajectories of it remain to be defined and as such produce a rich and often yet-to-be unearthed terrain for future research and engagement.

Many of the chapters could, indeed, fit into more than one section. However, by suggesting this structure, we hope to contribute to the systematization of an otherwise heterogeneous and exciting field of research. While we have attempted to be extensive in our coverage, there will no doubt be shortcomings and gaps as critical agrarian studies remains a highly diverse and emerging interdisciplinary field of study.

This *Handbook* seeks to provide students, scholars and activists with an overview of the field of critical agrarian studies and insights into its variety of epistemologies, methodologies, theoretical questions, empirical issues and contemporary debates. It will be suitable, we hope, as a book of reference and as a resource for teaching at all levels. It is also aimed at readers not yet familiar with critical agrarian studies—and if flipping through this *Handbook* sparks interest and motivates readers to delve deeper into the field, this joint project by a considerable number of authors will have accomplished its goal.

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