From de-to repeasantization: The modernization of agriculture revisited
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In this article I aim to re-examine the modernization project that has deeply changed most of European agriculture since the 1950s. In doing so I will focus on the intellectual project that underpinned it. This specified how farming practices and the identity of those involved were changing (and this coincided with the way in which they were supposed to change). Underlying the representation of these changes (and translating them into something that was presented as the beacon of the future) there was a dichotomy that was as clear as that between day and night – at least for those who were, at that time, involved. Pre-modern agriculture (i.e. the agriculture that was to be modernized) was understood as peasant agriculture and the transition that was taking place (or to take place) was perceived as a definitive adieu to both peasant practices and peasant identities. Modernization would give birth, it was thought, to entrepreneurial agriculture (a new and differently structured practice) and to agricultural entrepreneurs (an identity that sharply differed from that of the peasants). This shift was clearly outlined by the great intellectuals that helped to shape modernization (e.g. Hofstee, 1953; Mendras, 1967 and Mansholt (in Merriënboer, 2006)). In more general terms modernization was summarized and theoretically specified by e.g. Hayami and Ruttan (1985) and more recently by Ioris (2016), whilst it even became a yardstick for historians as Mazoyer and Roudart (2006).

Of course, modernization was far more than just an intellectual project. It coincided with a major politico-economic transformation that was designed to more closely align agricultural processes of production with the dynamics, needs and rhythms of the accumulation processes of capital. Modernization strongly build in several ways on the heritage of World War 2 that proceeded it (and without which it probably would have been impossible or at least totally different). In its turn the modernization of European agriculture became the laboratory that later informed and shaped the Green Revolutions and Programmes for Integrated Rural Development that swept most of the Global South. Modernization was a manifestation of changes that had already been germinating for some decades (since the 1930s) in agricultural sciences, which, in retrospect, can be understood as the shift from classical agronomy to a new, technocratic approach (van der Ploeg, 1987). Finally, agricultural modernization coincided with new forms of governance (new agricultural policy regimes) that, in turn, merged into new transnational schemes and became the basis of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union (EU) and, later, the arrangements of the World Trade Organization (WTO), to cite the two most well-known ones. Within this complicated and multi-layered context, modernization as intellectual project played a strategic role: it tried to specify the changes that were thought to be necessary. It sought to make sense of the ongoing and often chaotic post WW2 transitions. And, finally, the modernization project elaborated guidelines to consolidate, accelerate and legitimise these changes. Philip Lowe (2010) argued that modernization undoubtedly underlined the performativity of social sciences (which by then were already a crucial part of agricultural sciences). Nonetheless, it also left important ‘black holes’. While the modernization project created much new knowledge, it also resulted in large and new areas of ignorance.

The intellectual project that was at the core of agricultural modernization is of specific interest here (i.e. in the context of current debates on agriculture and, more specifically, in this special issue) in that it sought to draw a clear delineation between the past and the future, between peasants and agricultural entrepreneurs. It informs not about theoretical constructions but about the historical categories that were supposed to be relevant (if not guiding) at a time that a major ‘mega project’ (Scott, 1998) was being initiated and brought to its full unfolding. The intellectual project that I re-examine here was, in short, about de-peasantization: a process that was perceived as part of the natural order of ‘progress’ and which was actively encouraged from the 1960s onwards. It is not, in the first place, about de-peasantization as analytical category only. It is about de-peasantization as intellectual category that nurtured, aligned with, and represented (at least initially) de-peasantization as a material process.

Reviewing the empirical processes of de-peasantization that
occurred in Europe in, say, the 1955–1995 period is especially interesting (and theoretically challenging) in as much as these processes gave birth to new forms of re-peasantization. These new forms had been already germinating, as I will discuss, for quite a while, but they gained momentum after 1995. From then on, re-peasantization (at farm level) translated into wider processes of rural development that had, and continue to have, a strong impact strongly on the countryside today, on urban-rural relationships and the structuration of agricultural practices and dynamics. Although modernization in the end affected all rural areas in Europe, I will focus, in the remainder of this article, on the Netherlands. This is a special case in as far as modernization probably was implemented here in the most systematic, coherent and successful way—at least initially.

1. Modernization: the time-space context

The Second World War left Europe with starving populations and a nearly completely destroyed agricultural infrastructure. This was especially (though far from exclusively) the case in the northern part of the Netherlands, where the ‘Winter of Hunger’ (1944/45) left a terrible memory that translated, in the short term, into the urgent need to get agriculture producing again. In the longer run, there was a widely shared opinion that the country should never face hunger again. In retrospect it is interesting that the quickly realized revival of agriculture and the associated provisioning of food towards the cities occurred (and succeeded) through swiftly reconstructing (and strengthening) peasant agriculture. Labour-input was increased considerably (as a matter of fact during the 1945–1956 period the agricultural labour force steadily increased) and the principle of ‘mixed farms’ with access to a wide range of productive assets remained central to both policy and practice.

A telling pars-pro-toto for this period (and the then dominant paradigm) is the ‘fence rack’: a drying rack for hay. Instead of leaving mowed grass lying on the land to dry and become hay, farmers widely started to use these fence racks (see image below). These required far more labour (as the grass needed to be put onto the racks) but it resulted in fewer losses and a superior quality hay that, in turn, allowed for increases in dairy production. In short, in the immediate aftermath of WW2, labour-driven intensification, a typical strategy in peasant agriculture, brought the much required restoration and growth of agricultural production.

2. Putting grass on a fence rack

Not many years later (from the mid-1950s onwards) things had already changed considerably: the ‘fence rack’ was now seen as the ultimate expression of backwardness. It figured in applied research as a token for ‘traditional farming’. In modernized farming the process of haymaking was mechanized (and later even completely replaced by the making and use of silage) and there was no longer any place for the laborious use of the fence rack.

The very quick response to the huge needs of the immediate post-war situation was basically due to peasant agriculture and its resilience. However, this particular historic episode (and its dynamics) have been nearly completely erased from collective memory. It is, instead, the opposite of peasant agriculture, i.e. modernized entrepreneurial agriculture, that is associated with, if not seen as the sole guarantee for, ‘feeding the world’. In real life, though, it had been exactly the other way around.1 In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Mansholt Plan was promoted and legitimized by claiming, amongst others, that peasant agriculture was far too intensive (producing too much per unit of land and/or per animal) and thus contributing to the growing agricultural surpluses that started to represent a large problem by the end of the 1960s. Production on large, entrepreneurial farms was more extensive and thus seen as helping to avoid surpluses (but this would change again in the years that followed).2

The core of the agricultural modernization project centres on the thesis that farming practices (wherever and whenever located) were ‘traditional’ (meaning that they shunned the benefits of science and technology).3 This was why farmers, especially small-scale farmers, were poor.4 Consequently, the number of farms should be substantially reduced and the redundant agricultural labour force would happily move work in to urban industries. The remaining farms would be enlarged and operated with new technologies. To encourage efficiency, these farms were to specialize on producing one single product (the mixed farm was understood as an emblem of the past). In short (as is not-surprisingly said in a Chinese study on modernization that was

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5 Repeasantization means that the agricultural process of production becomes more peasant-like (see van der Ploeg, 2008); it might also imply that the ranks and files of the peasantry are growing. This includes new entrants.

6 Sicco Mansholt, who during the WW2 organized illegal food deliveries for people who went underground, became the minister responsible for this enormous task. His successful performance gained him much charisma and credibility. After having been Minister of Agriculture in the Netherlands for many years he became the first Commissioner for Agriculture of the European Commission (the then EU6). In his ‘Dutch’ years Mansholt became a prominent exponent (and driver) of the modernization project. During his years in Brussels he extended the proposal for modernization to European level, largely through the now well-known ‘Mansholt Plan’ (that was implemented from 1968 onwards) (see Merriënboer, 2006).

7 Later on this widely shared expectation – ‘never hunger again’ – translated into the goal for food self-sufficiency for the EU as a whole. In a way this was an expression of food sovereignty avant la lettre.

8 The ‘fence rack’ prominently figured in the surveys of van and van den (1956) as an indicator of traditionalism. Van den Baa became the founding father of extension studies in the Netherlands and had a strong influence on their development. For a more general discussion see Froh and van der Ploeg (1973).

9 It is telling, in this respect, that part of the Marshall Aid was used for the “intensification of agricultural production in small farms”. The Small Farm Service (DKB) that existed then was charged with maximizing peasant agriculture’s contribution to the recovery of agricultural production (Froh and van der Ploeg, 1973).

10 Later on this proved to be in vain. New technologies combined the possibility of scale increases with the possibility of (technologically-driven) intensification. A more extended discussion is given in van der Ploeg (1987).

11 “Our backward farmers are backward not only socially and culturally, but also economically and technically” (Hofstee, 1960, pp 114–115).

12 This is echoed in the Schultz’s, which de
published far later): “labour is to move out of agriculture, capital is to move in” (Ye and LeGates, 2013: 230). It was assumed that this modernization process would increase rural incomes and eliminate the drudgery that seemed to be inherent to the farm labour process.

The scientists outlining this transition became increasingly aware (if only because of the many difficulties it encountered)\(^{13}\) that the modernization project required considerable socio-cultural changes if it were to be effective. New identities were needed and new ways to link farming with the new institutional context. Thus, new dichotomies emerged in which the ‘stubborn’ peasant, unwilling to accept change was presented as the antithesis of the new agricultural entrepreneurs who were eager to accept and apply innovations and thus free themselves from the ‘backwardness’ that strangled the countryside.

One feature of the agricultural modernization project, that underlay its strength, was that the proposed changes intertwined very well with the (changing) politico-economic context – at least temporarily, as I will discuss later on. The loss of Europe’s colonies meant that several European capital groups were looking for new opportunities for capital accumulation grounded in internal markets. This was especially true for the Netherlands where the agricultural sector promised to offer such opportunities – at least if it were actively and sufficiently ‘modernized’. Modernization would provide ample demand for new technologies, new inputs, new services, and ‘improved’ genetic material that could be produced and commercialized on a significant scale by new industries and service agencies. The required spatial reorganization offered another opportunity. The availability of cheap food would also suppress the wage demands of urban workers. It was also assumed that producing cheap food required large farms because their scale would allow for a reasonable farm income. Simultaneously it applied that growing agricultural exports could help to create a positive trade balance that allowed industry to import the needed machinery and raw materials. The logistical experiences from the allied campaigns during WW2 offered the tools, instruments and belief for the state to organize the modernization of agriculture in an almost military fashion. The geopolitical context (in which the ‘red danger’ seemed to be omnipresent) encouraged western European states to bring ‘benefits’ to the countryside to avoid the possibility of any coalition of peasants with workers (this was especially prominent in the Mediterranean basin). There are some interesting commonalities, as well as dissimilarities, here with the history of Eastern Europe (especially Russia). The communist regimes over there had seen and treated their peasantry (exceptions apart) as adversaries and as major obstacles to change – just as would occur later on in the West when ‘traditional agriculture’ was perceived as main hindrance for change. But in contrast to the collectivization that the Bolsheviks imposed in order to eliminate the peasants, the Western European elites decided that the ‘The End of the Peasants’ (the title of a well-known book) would occur through modernizing them into agricultural entrepreneurs. Another difference (that has thus far escaped the attention of historians) is that Eastern European Marxists (especially the Leninists) thought of peasants as being-too-close-to-capital (and thus representing a permanent counterrevolutionary danger), whilst ‘bourgeois science’ and liberal elites in the West saw peasants as being at odds with the exigencies of capital. History sometimes moves along bizarre trajectories. Nonetheless, both trajectories sought and brought about de-peasantization, albeit for very different motives.

3. De-peasantization as an intellectual project

Agricultural modernization as outlined in the 1950s and 1960s (in innumerable policy documents, scientific studies, applied research, records of parliamentary sessions, agricultural journals, etc.) explicitly entailed a twofold process of de-peasantization. It was hypothesized, in the first place, that peasants would disappear - partly through leaving the agricultural sector and partly as who remained in agriculture metamorphosed into agricultural entrepreneurs. This was reflected in a new classification scheme that oriented agricultural policies and interventions (van der Ploeg, 2003). The scheme categorized farmers into three groups: ‘stayers’ (those likely to stay in farming and able to ‘move’ into the future), ‘leavers’ (whose destiny was to stop farming) and ‘the ones in between’ who just tagged along: they had either to follow the road taken by the ‘stayers’ or share the fate of the ‘leavers’. There were different modalities of this model, each with a slightly different emphasis. Some focussed on the farms and distinguished farms as being ‘economically viable’ or ‘economically unviable. Other schemes centered on the farmers themselves. They were represented as being distributed along a dimension that went from traditional to modern. In this analysis ‘cultural repertoire’ was decisive. Farmers were judged on their acceptance or aversion to innovations and were categorized as either laggards, ‘in-between’ farmers or progressive developers.

The reduction in the number of farmers was just one dimension of the proposed de-peasantization. A second and equally important dimension concerned the organization and development of production. Agricultural production was to become less peasant-like and more entrepreneurial. Peasants were farming in a way that was thought to be utterly outdated, out of tune with ‘modern times’. Peasants were “backward” as the leading Dutch rural sociologist, Hofstee (1953), wrote and this was reflected in the way they organized and developed agricultural production. The social division of labour was understood as a key feature of modernization and agricultural production of the new, ‘modern’ type was to be grounded on the use of new resources produced by the industrial sector (instead of being mostly grounded on resources produced and reproduced in the farm itself).\(^{14}\) At the same time, agricultural production was to be specialized: with each farm producing just one commodity. Thus peasant agriculture (with its typical autonomy) was to give way to another, type of farming structured in a highly different way and far more dependent on outside resources (technology, seeds, breeds, fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and capital).

As indicated above, one key feature of modernization, both in theory and practice, was the construction of a number of dichotomies. These included the dichotomy between peasants and the new entrepreneurs, between laggards and early adopters, between tradition-alism and modern culture, between peasant farming and entrepreneurial farming, between small and inefficient farms and large and efficient ones, to mention but a few. Time played a key role in all this and was understood as a unilinear force. History could only move in one direction: from traditional to modern, from small to large, from peasants to entrepreneurs. Such processes were so clearly self-evident, inevitable and desirable that no further justification whatsoever was required. But what exactly was peasant agriculture? And, what exactly was (and is) entrepreneurial agriculture supposed to be? No answers were formulated –because they were not needed.\(^{15}\)

The French scholar Henri Mendras probably came the closest to providing such answers. He did not define peasant and entrepreneurial agriculture as such, but probed instead into what he and others perceived as the main differences between the two. Mendras identified 5 key areas (see also Table 1). Let us briefly examine each of these.

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\(^{13}\) These are well documented in the large literature on the ‘diffusion of innovations’ (see e.g. Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971).

\(^{14}\) Here we are talking about feed and fodder produced in the farm itself as opposed to industrial concentrates, manure as opposed to chemical fertilizers, tractors as opposed to horses, seeds reproduced in the farm as opposed to ‘improved’ seeds and mixed cropping as opposed to monocultures, etc. etc.

\(^{15}\) Help!

\(^{16}\) Nothing and no one could escape from that. Yet, despite this view modernization was actively promoted by the state (and other partners) as without such intervention agriculture, and the national economy, would be under threat.

\(^{17}\) See also Mendras 1967, 1970.
Firstly there was the relation with the land. Peasants were tied to the land. They loved their land, but sometimes also hated it. The land was testimony to their (and their ancestors’) blood, sweat and tears, of their ongoing efforts to improve soil biology and soil fertility. Peasants knew their land, every corner of it. They themselves had made the soil into what it was, it was their pride, sometimes their curse. And they were definitely knowledgeable about it. According to Mendras the ‘entrepreneur agricole’ had a very different relation with the land as he could make ample use of chemical fertilizers and the findings of applied soil science. Thus the umbilical cord that united the farmer and his soil was cut. Secondly, the new entrepreneur faced the need for, and challenge of, new investments. Throughout agrarian history there have always been labour investments, but now the tractor, the combine, and new buildings required huge financial investments: New technologies had to be acquired and this made for a third change: credit was needed to finance the new technologies. In the Dutch tradition, headed by Hofstee and van den Ban the fear about, or acceptance of, credit was the line of demarcation between the two groups of farmers: peasants avoided credit as much as possible, while entrepreneurs embraced it and made it the main tool for farm development. The ample use of credit brought a fourth change. It obliged farmers to become ‘entrepreneurs’. They had to “jouer le jeu économique moderne” (Mendras, 1984 p.171). This implied a new calculus, that fundamentally differed from that of the paysans, summarized as “être libre, manger son pain et respecter la nature” (Mendras, 1984 p. 171). For Mendras, this attitude absolutely did not imply that the peasantry represented stagnancy. The good peasant, he wrote, “disposes of the required means of production, works very hard and achieves progress” (Mendras, 1984 p. 181, italics added).

A fifth change, according to Mendras, related to the context in which farmers operated. Peasants were subject to a suppressive moral economy that dominated peasant communities – by contrast the new entrepreneurs were supposed to be free, unbound and able to make rational decisions. If these 5 key areas are analysed in retrospect one cannot but conclude that the assumed changes indeed occurred – and they occurred in a massive and seemingly convincing way. The use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides expanded enormously. Technological change turned into an ongoing and partly self-propelling process. Credit became the main lever for farm development and farm accountancy is now a widely accepted practice and a central tool for farm decision making. And finally, many peasant communities definitely disappeared. However, if each single change is scrutinized in more detail than in each case we find that there is a huge variability around the average trend and, secondly, that none of the described modifications brought untramelled benefits and successes. They may have solved some problems, but they have created many others.

There is a clear temporal aspect to all this as well. The more modernization proceeded and matured, the clearer it became that it brought its own, intrinsic and self-generated limits. Thus, as the script of agricultural modernization continued to unfold, it increasingly ran against these inbuilt limits. This started to become very clear from the mid-1990s onwards as the self-generated limits resulted in a new and comprehensive agrarian crisis.

The proponents of modernization dismissed the connection between man and the land as irrelevant. Nowadays, however, we are witnessing a massive and worrying decline of soil fertility in many places of the world (this decline is also often accompanied in a huge reduction in the water contention capacity of the soil). Soil fertility cannot be maintained by only using chemical fertilizers: soil biology is also crucial. Soil was not given to us in days of the Book of Genesis. As Sonneveld (2004) argues, it is a phenoform: it is the outcome of co-production, the ongoing interaction between man and living nature. Consequently, knowledge of the soil cannot be standardized and encapsulated in general categories. Only those who work the soil can fully understand it.

New technologies generate path dependency: investments in new technologies are no longer the outcome of farmers’ decisions – technologies impose, instead, increasingly their own programme and logic (Saccomandi, 1991). The technologies resolve specific problems, but simultaneously create new ones which, in turn, require additional technologies, after which the same cycle repeats itself. Another, connected problem is the scale on which most new technologies need to be operated to make them economically viable. Thus, adoption of new technologies often requires investment in farm expansion. This explains why, in practice, the combination of scale-increase and technological renewal does not result in the textbook solution of cost-reduction. In today’s entrepreneurial farming it implies increases in cost price levels.

Critically, these many new investments in technology and expansion require credit. We now know the huge risks that come with financialization. Dutch agriculture has amassed a total debt (with banks) that is in excess of 30 billion Euros. That is 10–15 times as much as the total agrarian income in normal years.

Today we know far more about the dangers of ‘le jeu économique moderne’. Farming, especially in its entrepreneurial forms, has become, almost a kind of gambling. And it is a game that definitely comes with a hefty price tag. Polanyi’s dictum that: “leaving the fate of man and the land to the market is tantamount to annihilating them” (1957:131) is as relevant today as when he originally wrote it. And entrepreneurial farm enterprises themselves are only too aware of the dangers of exclusively following the logic of the market. Nicole Eizner (1985) notes that it is those farmers who have done everything according to the prescriptions of state, science and agro-industry (institutions that articulate the logic of the market to farmers) who often turn out to be the most disappointed and embittered.

The fifth main difference between today’s situation and that identified some fifty years ago by Mendras, is best explained by the work of Bruno Benvenuti, an Italo-Dutch sociologist, who, in a meticulous way has spelled out how the new entrepreneurs are bound by a Technological-Administrative Task Environment (TATE) that prescribes and sanctions their choices. Benvenuti (1990) noted that entrepreneurship in agriculture was far from being a ‘free’ and ‘rational’ praxis. The free entrepreneur clearly was fictitious: a ‘virtual farmer’ constrained to implement practices prescribed by scientists, agricultural policy makers, bankers and the agro-industrial complex. One of Benvenuti’s earlier works, an inquiry into entrepreneurship (1983) was entitled “a la ricerca di una fantasma”, which translates as ‘searching for a ghost’.

If one takes into account the environmental, economic and socio-political crises that characterize modernized agriculture some 6 decades after the beginning of modernization one cannot but conclude that the modernization project failed precisely in those fields where it was supposed to make the decisive difference. This applies in all the five key areas we have discussed.

There is irony in this history. Scientists and policy makers dismissed the importance of caring for and having a strong linkage with the soil and considered that farmers who were reluctant to take on high debts

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**Table 1**

Five key areas of agricultural modernization (according to Mendras, 1984)²⁷.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key areas</th>
<th>Peasants</th>
<th>Agricultural entrepreneurs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Bound to the land</td>
<td>Disconnected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investments</td>
<td>Labour investments</td>
<td>Financial investments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>Aversion</td>
<td>Used as a primary resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calculus</td>
<td>Follow a local repertoire</td>
<td>Follow the logic of the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral economy</td>
<td>Bound to local rules</td>
<td>Free and rational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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²⁷ That is to say that loans within the family are not included here.
would doom themselves to economic irrelevance. This allowed them to write-off, at least conceptually, the peasantry. However, the entrepreneurial model, which promised to render the peasant redundant, failed precisely where it was thought to be superior. As a result we now need the peasantry once again, and more than ever: not yesterday’s peasantry, but peasants of the 21st Century (Ventura and Milone, 2007). Their care for, and knowledge of, the soil and their prudence in dealing with the capital market are much needed ingredients in today’s agriculture.

4. Going beyond modernization: re-peasantization

Since the mid-1980s it has become increasingly clear that, in the praxis of farming, new ways forward had to be forged to move beyond the cul-de-sac that the comprehensive agricultural modernization of the previous decades has left us in. In the following three decades these new ways forward have become increasingly intertwined and have become the ingredients of a new tendency that surprises many: a sturdy process of re-peasantization. These new ways include, among others, a regrounding of farming on the available natural resources (i.e. on local ecology), being soil fertility a crucial part of it; a return to the mixed farm (that embraces alongside the cultivation of grain, potatoes and the like also animal husbandry and possibly vegetable and fruit production as well; the (re-)introduction of multifunctionality; and the (partial) engagement in newly constructed local markets (see Van der Ploeg, 2008, p151-157 for an extended discussion). I will focus here on one aspect: the regrounding of farming on local ecology.

The highly increased use of chemical fertilizers and the manure surpluses that resulted from the massive imports of feed and fodder (notably soy beans from Brazil and the USA) not only created a gigantic environmental problem for society as a whole – they also had negative consequences within the farms. Soil fertility decreased and fertilizer use (meant to compensate for decreases in natural fertility) became in-consequences within the farms. Soil fertility decreased and fertilizer use is one of the ingredients of re-peasantization – and can be reinforced when it is intertwined with other complementary changes that point.

The main technological trajectory (ever larger machines, the mechanization of more and more tasks that form part of the labour process, automation, etc.) also started to show clear shortcomings in the practice of farming (compaction of soils, increased vulnerability, etc.) For some farmers this provided yet another reason for accelerating the process of technological change within their farms (‘une fuite en avant’ as the French called it), for others it triggered a search for other options that pointed in a different direction. ‘Farming economically’ became the motto for many such farmers. Farming economically describes a style of farming in which monetary expenditure is reduced to the lowest possible levels. It includes the ‘low external input use’, discussed above, but it embraces far more. Opting for second-hand machinery, balancing the economic life-span to the technical life-span and extending the latter by good maintenance and repair (done by the farmer himself), building new sheds, stables and other buildings with one’s own labour (and making ample use of the social networks and the skills available in them) are but a few ingredients here. ‘Farming economically’ (as opposed to the ‘vanguard farming’ of agricultural entrepreneurs) represents, in more general terms, a substitution of capital by labour. It restores the centrality of labour that characterized the peasant producers of the past – but it does so in completely new ways. It reduces cost price levels that, for fifty years or more, have been driven upwards by the modernization project. In all these respects ‘farming economically’ is clearly another ingredient of current re-peasantization.

The contrast between ‘farming economically’ and ‘vanguard farming’ was clearly and convincingly demonstrated by long-term research conducted by the National Centre for Applied Research in Dairy Farming in Lelystad (Kamp and Haan, 2004; Evers et al., 2007). In the second half of the 1990s a comparison was made between running a farm in a ‘low-cost’ peasant-like way and doing so in an entrepreneurial-like ‘hi-tech’ manner. Both farms were designed to obtain a level of income comparable to the urban average and both were designed to be run by one person. Those were the similarities. In all other aspects the two farms differed significantly: the technological level, the animal breed, input use, etc., were all different. In fact, these differences reflected the empirical differences between the peasant-like and entrepreneurial styles of farming in the Netherlands. The outcome was amazing: both farms produced the same income but the entrepreneurial farm needed a quota twice as high as the one of the peasant-like farm (800,000 versus 400,000 kg of milk per year) in order to do so.18 Currently, the dependency on credit and the highly elevated debt-levels are being by-passed, at least in a part of the agricultural sector, through a range of old and new mechanisms. An example of the former is pluri-activity (in which the farmer and/or his wife obtain part of their income from economic activities outside of the farm).19 This, again, is a wide-spread phenomenon on both small and large farms and it is often used to generate savings that can be invested in the farm, thus making credit redundant (at least partially). The same applies to labour investment: this is an ‘ancient’, but now renewed practice that helps farmers to regain, and maintain, their autonomy. New mechanisms include the selling of part of the farm in order to pay off outstanding loans and then continuing the down-sized but now debt-free farm in new, often multi-functional ways that, together with farming in sensu

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18 This comparison might well lead us to conclude that entrepreneurial agriculture is a very expensive option. While it may be an attractive option for banks, agro-industries and large retailers, for the farmers involved it often turns out to be a reality that fails to live up to their expectations.

19 Currently, on 80% of Dutch farms the man and/or the wife earns an additional income outside the farm. On average this covers 30% of the family income.
stricto, generate a net income that is often superior to that of a larger, but indebted, farm (Oostindie, 2015). Finally, there is a range of CSA mechanisms (CSA standing for Community Supported Agriculture). Although only a few farms actively engage in these, their results are being followed attentively by many other farmers.

What applies to the relation with the land (or more generally, with living nature), investments and credit, also applies to the remaining key areas (see also Table 2). Through new multi-functional activities that are combined with farming, farms and farmers are again reconnecting to new, and wide communities of their peers and, more importantly, with other social groups. They are actively moving beyond specialization on just one commodity (delivered as a raw material to agro-industries) and engaging in a wide range of often intimately intertwined activities that link them directly to other people and other cultural repertoires. This is often accompanied by considerable changes in decision making.

Thus important moves are being taken to move farming – both materially and symbolically - beyond the limits that have been created by the modernization project. Together, these moves, synthesized in Table 2, constitute a process of re-peasantization. They are returning agriculture to more peasant-like ways. They are once again regrounding the process of agricultural production on an autonomous, self-owned and self-controlled resource base, are restoring the centrality of labour and are (re-) integrating the farm into (new) communities. All this generates a range of socio-technical differences – small by themselves but put together they constitute a distinctively different way of farming: a more peasant-like approach. New peasant-like practices are designed, tested, improved and further developed, whilst the notion of autonomy is getting centre-stage in farmers' discourse. Empirical studies show that this also results in incomes that are superior to those of the entrepreneurial farms (Oostindie et al., 2013; Dirksen et al., 2013). In short, we are witnessing the emergence of ‘new peasants’. Not peasants of the past but ‘peasants of the 21st Century’ (Ventura and Milone, 2007): farmers who have been and are able to reconstitute agriculture in a peasant-like way.

Admittedly, at the moment this re-peasantization is only a partial process in that, firstly, only a part of the total farming population are following this path and, secondly, it is a process that is still far from fulfilling its potential. But the same was true for modernization in the early years. It also was a partial process that only involved parts of the total farm population.

Modernization sparked a wave of de-peasantization, which is now being followed by a wave of re-peasantization. The latter is solidly grounded in and, critically, stems from, the former. While both waves may seem to be ruptures, there is actually a continuity. What has disappeared in the interim period is the institutional capacity to recognize and understand peasants and peasant agriculture. The main expert-systems declared them to be vanishing as early as the 1950s and consequently abandoned the required conceptual frameworks. As a result they are now unable to perceive what is actually going on, let alone how they might be able to support, explain and represent new peasants, the newly constructed peasant agriculture and the underlying processes of re-peasantization.

But maybe this, after all, is a type of continuity as well. Peasants never have been very well understood. The experts and expert-systems at different times have been mostly too busy constructing the ‘other’. Of ‘otherness’ being opposed to being a peasant. In this regard, Arjen Kamp, a former leader of the Association of Young Dutch Farmers (NAJK) once perceptively noted “it is not so bad if the others do not understand us, as long as we understand them (i.e. the others) well”.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key areas</th>
<th>Agricultural entrepreneurs</th>
<th>New peasants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Ample use of chemical fertilizers</td>
<td>Putting soil biology centre stage; mixed farms; multifunctionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investments</td>
<td>Mechanical technologies that replace labour</td>
<td>Skill-oriented technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>Credit central in farm development</td>
<td>Own savings, labour investments, cooperation, pluri-activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Economic rationality, farm accountancy</td>
<td>Labour income, solidarity, reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with the community</td>
<td>Individualism, isolated</td>
<td>Community-orientation combined with autonomy and pride</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Rebalancing dairy production (derived from Verhoeven et al., 2003).
5. Modernization as a mega-project

We also need to look at the larger picture. The modernization project was conceived and implemented at a time when the food regime (1) experienced stable price levels, (2) had access to huge budgets that allowed for massive interventions, (3) was reliant on strong state apparatus that were willing and able to interfere in the economy and in markets, (4) had access to low-priced fossil energy and (5) was able to trade at the global level under the Pax Americana. Successful modernization also assumes (6) the presence of non-agricultural sectors able to absorb the agricultural population made redundant through modernization.

Modernization could be encouraged because stable price levels allowed for long-term planning of investments. Interventions in the markets (subsidies, tax reforms, guarantee schemes, investment support, etc.) changed the relative factor prices: capital was made cheaper, labour more expensive (thus facilitating if not strongly contributing to ‘capital entering and labour leaving’ agriculture). Applied research, extension, spatial reorganizations, etc., further facilitated the advancement of one particular form of modernization while relative disinterest from consumers allowed it to march onwards relatively undisturbed.

Today, these conditions, that once favoured modernization, increasingly do not apply. Markets are volatile, neo-liberalism has brought deregulation (and sharp reductions in state expenditure), fossil energy have risen in price and are recognised to be the source of many problems and, after many food scandals, the general public now more critically follows the production of food. Under these conditions it is almost impossible for any further modernization (at least along the lines discussed here above) to proceed. Ironically it is the newly constituted peasant-like agriculture that described in this article that is showing its resilience. It is better placed than entrepreneurial agriculture that described in this article that is increasingly do not apply. Markets are volatile, neo-liberalism has brought deregulation (and sharp reductions in state expenditure), fossil energy have risen in price and are recognised to be the source of many problems and, after many food scandals, the general public now more critically follows the production of food. Under these conditions it is almost impossible for any further modernization (at least along the lines discussed here above) to proceed. Ironically it is the newly constituted peasant-like agriculture that described in this article that is showing its resilience.

The significance of specific, if not unique, politico-economic conditions also explains why agricultural modernization often failed when attempts were made to transplant it elsewhere. For example, as Abramovay’s study (1992) of modernization in Brazil shows, the budgets needed to create stable markets and to subsidize modernization at the farm level were simply not available. Modernization turned out to be too expensive. Nonetheless, partial approaches were tried out in many well-delineated regions and/or for specific crops. Programmes of the ‘Green Revolution’ type as well as programmes for ‘Integrated Rural Development’ (such as the DRI programme in Colombia) all took their inspiration from the approach to agricultural modernization pursued in the North West of Europe: adopt new technologies, provide ample credit, adopt a selective approach and, at the farm level, scale increases, specialization and technology-driven intensification. Many of these programmes failed – as none of them met the conditions set out at the start of this section.

6. The moral of the story

Processes of de- and repeasantization can be understood from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. A quantitative analysis would look at the numbers: are the ranks and files of peasants increasing or decreasing? Or, are both processes occurring at the same time, interacting in complex and often unexpected ways? I recently (van der Ploeg, 2016) analysed the simultaneity of these (quantitative) processes over the 1980–2016 period for Dutch farms with grazing animals. In the 1980–1990 period, for instance, 15,147 farms with grazing animals disappeared, but at the same time 7960 farms with grazing animals were created anew. In the same decade 3443 small farms with grazing animals developed into medium or even large farms (van der Ploeg, 2017). Thus, the analysis clearly shows that de- and repeasantization should not be conceptualized as mutually exclusive processes or as processes that only occur sequentially. The data showed de- and repeasantization to be occurring at the same time and within the same space. In short they co-exist and, even, mutually feed each other.

When it comes to the qualitative side the focus is more on the nature (the structure and dynamics) of agricultural production. Agricultural production can be structured in many different and mutually contrasting ways: there are many different styles of farming (van der Ploeg, 2003). Peasant agriculture is one of these ways. It distinctively differs from e.g. corporate and entrepreneurial agriculture (van der Ploeg, 2008). Agriculture can be more peasant-like or less peasant-like. There are ‘degrees of peasants’ (Toledo, 1995). Thus, in a qualitative sense there might equally be processes (or flows) of de- and repeasantization.

In the present text I have examined the restructuration of Dutch agriculture during the modernization process that roughly covered the 1955–1985 period. Growing parts of the Dutch agricultural sector were actively restructured to become more entrepreneurial and, less peasant-like. De-peasantization took place. This was followed, however, by a new flow towards re-peasantization that started to gain momentum in the 1990s and the 2000s. This movement (though not necessarily always formally constituted as such) involves an ever growing number of farms which in terms of their production practices and their relations with the outside world are becoming more and more peasant-like. Changes in the politico-economic context have only strengthened this tendency. I have used the ‘intellectual project’ designed, developed and applied by “engaged scientists” (Lowe, 2010) to show how, at that time, leading scientists specified the differences between peasant agriculture and its opposite: entrepreneurial agriculture. Making the transition between peasant and entrepreneurial agriculture implied depeasantization, both in the qualitative and quantitative sense. However, as time passed, this process ran increasingly counter to newly emerging boundaries (many of them being self-generated limits). This has triggered new processes of repeasantization that involve crossing the same lines of demarcation but now in reverse (Oostindie, 2015). Yet, these new processes are occurring alongside ongoing depeasantization. Thus, deeply contradictory processes are occurring at the same time.

As a result of these contradictory flows there is currently a deep, and still growing, cleavage in the countryside. One the one hand there is a large and growing peasant-like agriculture and on the other a smaller, but aggressive segment structured as entrepreneurial agriculture. The contradictions and open conflicts between the two are growing are growing ever more apparent. Such conflicts are multifaceted and multi-scalar: they take place between neighbouring farms but also occur within the farmers union and the large cooperatives and they regard issues as diverse as the multifunctional use of rural territories, the compensation for milking cows grazing outdoors, and the reduction of the national herd in order to meet environmental limits. In all such issues the distribution of benefits and costs over the more peasant-like and the more entrepreneurial farms is a strategic and hotly contested theme.

If we wish to understand these differential flows and the contradictions and conflicts they are giving rise to, we need to disintegrate and re-use the concepts that institutionalized science and the expert-systems declared redundant more than fifty years ago. Depeasantization and repeasantization are far from outdated notions – they are concepts that are now needed more than ever in order to understand the current turmoil.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.12.016.

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