

Reflections on Critical Agrarian Studies in Sri Lanka

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In this essay, my aim is to reflect on the situation in Sri Lanka's agrarian sphere, through the gaze of 'critical agrarian studies'.^[i] I begin with a glance at related discourses during the 1970s and early 1980s with their emphasis on the 'peasantry'. I then turn to the present, arguing that the contemporary moment poses new challenges to the field of agrarian studies – challenges that require more nuanced theoretical approaches.

I will illustrate this around just two points: the understanding of the 'peasantry' itself; and how to understand the role of the 'State' in agrarian change. I conclude by thinking about what insights gained through contemporary critical agrarian studies could contribute normatively to the search for progressive policies.

In principle, agrarian studies, then and now, engage with the "continuous struggle over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products" (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9), a struggle that is structured through social relations, which in turn are characterised by the involved actors (from the household to the village to the State and beyond) having different interests, influence, and power. This engagement, though, has changed over the last decades.

Therefore, while comparing earlier studies on the peasantry with the present context, I focus on three interlinked dimensions, i.e. (a) the changes in *theoretical* underpinnings through which the agrarian was/is studied; (b) the implications of these changes on *methodological* approaches; and (c) the (changing) *normative* thoughts that emerge from such critical inquiries.

Regarding the theoretical underpinnings, I will show that earlier studies in Sri Lanka – exemplified by Newton Gunasinghe – drew heavily on Marxist political economy to understand the challenges faced by the peasantry. However, diverse theoretical approaches within social sciences began to critically engage with

social relations and their transformations over time, and thus addressing unequal power relations and their consequences on agrarian households as well. Gradually, these approaches – some based in Marxism, some not – began to influence the field of 'peasant studies'.

This increasing range of theoretical entry points is also visible in the flagship journals around agrarian studies. From 2001, when Tom Brass took over the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, the journal focused on strict Marxist political economy, disqualifying all other research on the peasantry as "a-historical, cultural essentialism of postmodern theory" (*Journal of Peasant Studies* 2000: 1). The *Journal of Agrarian Change* (started in 2001 by Bernstein and Byres) followed political economy as well, but argued for the need to go beyond its orthodox reading, searching for "alternative approaches to understand agrarian structure and change" (Bernstein and Byres 2001a: 8), based on a "broad interdisciplinary framework, inspired by theory" (Bernstein and Byres 2001b: ii). They argued that such approaches would allow a more refined analysis of the complex social relations within and beyond the peasantry. And in 2009, Borras, the new editor (since departed as of end 2022) of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* reiterated the need for critical theories beyond the de-politicising mainstream, but with much more attention to the "interplay between structures, institutions, and actors that is a key element in agrarian change" (Borras 2009: 20f). Finally, a few years ago, the notion of critical agrarian studies emerged to encompass this broader field of nuanced studies. The broadening of theoretical perspectives also led to more differentiated methodological procedures, and as I will argue, also complicated the normative thinking on how to address unequal power relations.

Looking back – Marxist Agrarian Studies in the 1970s and Early 1980s

Before late 1977, the Sri Lankan State's policies and interventions into the life of agriculture-based households and the rural space were different, and so

was the subject with which agrarian studies had to engage. As Peiris (1996: 151) writes, the 1950s to 1970s saw “periodic policy shifts” between what he labelled a “conservative paternalistic approach” and a more “radical reformist approach”.

The first did not include radical changes in production relations, but focused more on extending the frontier of agriculture into the Dry Zone, based on a family farm model (also influenced by a specific, nationalist reading of history); and extensive support to farmers and settlers through input and marketing support, and technical advice. The “radical reformist approach” included institutional reforms as well, such as land reforms, measures against exploitative production relations (especially tenancy), and experimenting with cooperative farming. Though in reality, the actual practice of these policies showed many overlaps, depending on who was in power, and on political needs to maintain the dynamics of party coalitions (Peiris 1996: 147f).

Against this backdrop, Marxist agrarian studies (or peasant studies) began to flourish, and is best represented in Sri Lanka by Newton Gunasinghe. In his study on the Kandyan village he called Delumgoda, he found an increasing stratification into different classes of rural households, i.e., semi feudal landlords, petty bourgeoisie, middle peasants, poor peasants, urban workers, and rural labour. For this typology, “nuclear families were taken as units of analysis and the production relations maintained by the head of the household were given emphasis” (Gunasinghe 1975: 138).

These diverse classes emerged through the differentiation of production and exchange relations and the capacities to extract surplus and thus to accumulate. In conclusion, he found these processes working in one direction only: “an inevitable expansion of the proportion of rural workers who would increasingly depend on selling their labour for sustenance” (1975: 139).

His conclusion was in line with larger theoretical debates beyond Sri Lanka, in which the central question was: whether capitalism-induced social differentiation of the peasantry would lead to a dominant class of larger peasants, with small peasants having to give up farming and earning their living through selling their labour; or whether small peasants would continue to survive as a class of their own, for example through the exploitation of unpaid family labour?

This dispute was part of an even larger and contested debate on the need of ‘freeing’ rural labour as a precondition for industrialisation and national growth. This debate is often labelled as the ‘agrarian question’, which engages with changes in the agrarian sphere from a long-term, historical, and normative position (i.e., the desirability of certain ways of transformation) – a debate that goes back to the writings of Lenin and Chayanov (see Bernstein 2010). This theorising on larger structural changes over time and space is an important component of agrarian studies, but I will, in the following, focus more on their relevance to understand challenges faced by rural people.

Returning to Gunasinghe, the analytical categories used, and the conclusions drawn, reflect his Marxist theoretical position. He, for example, considers class as an “objective reality” (1975: 117). His research interest was to understand how the larger processes of capitalism (understood as originating from the West and expanding into the pre-capitalist periphery) impacted on, and transformed, rural households. Gunasinghe perceived rural households as still located in pre-capitalist modes of production, or having “pre-capitalist elements within capitalist formations” (1975: 117). One core transformation he found is that “class is acquiring the position of the dominant mode of stratification” (1975: 116), thus replacing the importance of the pre-capitalist system of caste.

The above hints at Gunasinghe’s theoretical and methodological approach. What about his normative thinking, on how to improve the lot of marginalised rural people? After all, the government coalition of the early to mid-1970s included the leftist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party. Could one expect him to agree with, and share their development paradigm regarding the agrarian sphere?

In his study on Delumgoda, Gunasinghe speaks of the “current period of monopoly and state capitalism” (1975: 139). In his study on land reform, he basically rubbishes the United Front regime’s approach as “state-led land to the tiller”; a “bureaucratic procedure” which simply “remoulds existing agrarian relations”, without overcoming them (Gunasinghe 1979: 50). In contrast to that, an “agrarian revolution relies on the forcible seizure of large landholders’ land by the peasantry”, and only such a revolution would end structures of dominance. These few quotes suggest that Gunasinghe’s normative position was a radical (in the sense of revolutionary) one.

Beyond Marxist Agrarian Studies

Gunasinghe is a key representative of what we can call Marxist agrarian, or peasant studies. But as mentioned in the introduction, from the early 1980s, concerned researchers with other theoretical positions (partly inspired by Marxism) began as well to critically engage with the “continuous struggle over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products” (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9). While most of the contributions in the Social Scientists’ Association (SSA) published volume on *Capital and Peasant Production: Studies in the Continuity and Discontinuity of Agrarian Structures in Sri Lanka* (Abeysekera 1985) follow Marxist political economy, those in the book on *Agrarian Change in Sri Lanka* (Brow and Weeramunda 1992) display a broader range of theoretical approaches, spanning from Marxist to (what I call) critical social science approaches.

There were other important publications that went beyond Marxist approaches. I shall recall only two of them. In his study on the Gal Oya settlement scheme, Harriss (1984) focused on the “social organisation of production”, but he studied the relation between peasants and low-level bureaucrats. He found that the emergence of inequality (or differentiation) was also supported by the nexus between wealthier farmers and these low-level bureaucrats. On the one hand, this ensured privileged access to State services, but on the other hand, the bureaucrats also feared being assaulted, as farmers dissatisfied with water supply would mobilise their political representatives, prompting “interventions by politicians who have to respond to appeals from groups of their supporters in order to maintain their own position” (1984: 322). I consider this study important, because it gives more nuanced attention to the range of actors involved, beyond generalised notions such as the ‘State’ and the ‘Peasants’. Harriss also illustrates what others have called “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985).

With the change of government in late 1977, the Sri Lankan State’s policies and interventions into the life of agriculture-based households changed. One indicator is the enormous growth of donor-supported projects that not only focused on the construction of new infrastructure, but also on fostering the link between peasants’ production and markets. All this came together especially in the emerging Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project – and this triggered a whole array of critical studies. Many were published in the People’s Bank’s journal, the *Economic Review*, and in the *Lanka Guardian*.

S. S. A. L. Siriwardena wrote on “emerging income inequalities and forms of hidden tenancy in the Mahaweli H area” (1981a; b). He asked, “why (when ostensibly all settlers begin their settlement life on an equal footing, with an equitable distribution of resources) within a period of few years income disparities and concomitant social stratification occurs” (1981a: 26).

His case study consisted of villagers that had to give up their traditional (*purana*) structure, and were resettled in System H. He finds that soon after having received 2.5 acres of irrigated and 0.5 acres rain fed land, most of the settlers began to give their land to others through share-cropping tenancy arrangements (*andē*). The settlers often received only 25% of the product; thus, the “majority of the settlers could hardly survive” (1981a: 29; a finding against the grain, as many researchers elsewhere found the sharecroppers to be disadvantaged). For a livelihood, they worked as agricultural wage labourers (often for the lease cultivator and on their own land).

Siriwardena highlights especially two causes for this dynamic. One is that many settlers lack the capital required for cultivation. The second is that many of the poorer settlers (being used to the social relations of the *purana* village) find it extremely difficult to handle the increasingly monetised (or commodified) agricultural economy of the Mahaweli scheme – hiring tractors, buying all the inputs from seed to fertiliser to chemicals, hiring labour for harvesting and threshing, buying livelihood needs from the market, etc.

In sum, he finds increasing income disparities, as many peasant settlers are going for casual wage labour, leasing out their land at unfavourable terms, and the presence of others (often with good connections to local officials of the Mahaweli project) “with sufficient production assets, capital and improved production techniques ... willing to cultivate their land on a hidden tenancy basis” (1981b: 25).

Normatively, that is to counter these processes of social differentiation, Siriwardena does not invoke the need for revolution, but demands more progressive variants of existing strategies: “It is apparent that future policies would have to be more precisely aimed to reach the disadvantaged groups, who are in the process of being marginalised” (1981b: 26).

As does Harriss, Siriwardena focuses on grassroots-level power relations among diverse actors and their relative role in social differentiation. Beyond that, his study points at a prominent research strand during that

period. Briefly: agrarian studies critical of the mainstream modernisation approach were concerned with processes of social differentiation and the production of inequality. These processes are conceptualised as ‘agrarian change’, that is the transformation of earlier forms of social relations and production towards more capitalist forms of organisation. The ‘agrarian question’ would then debate the desirability of one or the other form of agrarian change.

Earlier forms of social relations and production are often described as pre-colonial, traditional, embedded in local culture, or village-based smallholder production geared towards subsistence. The social relations structuring this peasant economy included communal or cooperative forms of land ownership and labour sharing, free labour provision to authorities, and caste relations. However, these structures underwent sweeping transformation through the spread of capitalist forms of organisation, “as defined by the expanded use of wage labour and the re-orientation of peasant production from subsistence to the market”, and their “incorporation into wider circuits of economic, political and cultural relations” (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9f).

Many studies in Sri Lanka were informed by this take, arguing that colonialism led to capitalist penetration, and then destruction, of traditional (pre-colonial) village structures perceived as having been more egalitarian and communal; thus, the notion of the ‘disintegrating village’. I read Siriwardena’s study along such lines, as he describes the settlers’ familiarity with their earlier *purana* social relations, and contrasting them with the new market-dominated realities in System H.

I posit that a contemporary re-engaging with agrarian studies also requires a critical reflection on such concepts and notions that informed the 1970s and early 1980s debates (especially the notion of the ‘peasantry’), and I will come to that further below.

The Absence of Critical Studies on Agrarian Contexts after the Mid-1980s

Indeed, studies that questioned the dominant development practices, and that focused on the production of inequality flourished in the 1970s to the early 1980s in Sri Lanka. They were based on a range of theoretical positions within and (increasingly) beyond Marxism.

This changed, though, with the escalation of the violent conflict after the ‘Black July’ pogrom in 1983. The war began to dominate everyday lives of all people in the North and East, and in the rest of the country as

well, creating suffering for so many. The violent conflict called for attention by researchers, many of whom struggled to understand and explain the causes of the turmoil.

A few tried to search for answers through Marxist political economy (including Gunasinghe 1984a; b; c). This, though, has been critically assessed (e.g. Moore 1990); and most researchers applied more cultural theories to engage with nationalism, identity politics, processes of othering, and later reconciliation. This stream of inquiries began to dominate academic engagement with Sri Lanka for many years. As a result, attention to political-economic dimensions of contested rural life disappeared.

Institutions such as the Agrarian Research and Training Institute (now HARTI), though, continued their studies on agriculture and related fields, producing valuable information. Some claim that the quality of the work has declined, but I rather think that with the shift of research agendas, the interest for ARTI’s political economy studies simply reduced. Still, I have the impression that for almost 30 years, critical political-economic studies on agrarian contexts are rather few (with exceptions such as Bastian 2010 and Kadirgamar 2014).

What flourished, though, were mainstream economic studies associated with the now dominant post-1977 discourse of development through liberating market forces. As a matter of fact, what was considered in the 1970s and early 1980s (by radical researchers) as creating inequality and under-development (that is the penetration of rural life by capitalist market forces), was now perceived (by mainstream researchers) as the solution.

This discourse was operationalised, among others, through a flood of donor-dominated interventions in the rural space. Piles of consultancy reports emerged that studied rural conditions, and evaluated the progress of development. But they studied these conditions through their very specific theoretical gazes. One of them continues to perceive rural society as communities of farmers facing similar challenges – challenges that were to be tackled through community-based development. The other, more dominant one, centred around farmers as rural entrepreneurs, whose capacity to expand their entrepreneurial production activities required market-led modernisation (see the description by Siriwardena on Mahaweli System H).

These were not critical studies, because they rarely addressed power relations within ‘farmer communities’, and they rarely addressed the risk of intensified market

relations becoming exploitative. After all, these were research on contract, meant to serve the intentions of the modernisation project.

Let me cite just one example from among many. Around 2003, the World Bank financed a huge ‘North East Irrigated Agriculture Project’ (NEIAP), and among others, studied the feasibility for modernisation of the Vammiyadi Kulam in the Thirukkivil Divisional Secretariat Division of the Ampara District. In our study on land conflicts in the East, Shahul Hasbullah and I had a close look at contestations (at times violent) between paddy cultivators and livestock herders around access to land and this tank’s water (Hasbullah and Geiser 2019: 153). A careful reading of the World Bank’s report (2004) revealed not a single mention of this conflict. It instead speaks, in typical discourse, of “small farmers” and the “local community”, and their needs for “development”.

Thus, analytically, these studies lack a critical perspective that would address power relations and (potential) processes of differentiation and marginalisation. And normatively, they continue to be embedded in the modernisation project, with their recommendations limited to suggestions for minor adjustments in this endeavour.

It required the present economic and political crisis to demonstrate the urgent need for renewed and critical attention to the agrarian sphere. This crisis is nested in larger political-economic processes within and beyond Sri Lanka up to the global level.

Challenges for Contemporary Critical Agrarian Studies

In what follows, I continue to concentrate on Sri Lanka’s agrarian space and its grassroots, where the present crisis was triggered by the post-war spread of micro-finance loans in the North (itself nested in the massive post-2009 inflow of capital; see the debate on financialisation in Kadirgamar 2013); the sudden decision to ban chemical fertilisers and to immediately switch to organic only (with the related problems of producing food in the first place); and the enormous challenges of access to food and other items associated with the drastic increase in prices.

This crisis – coupled with the problems created by the war and the State’s (rather, ruling regime’s) post-war economic strategy with its obsession to invest in huge infrastructure – has created realities that differ from those the researchers were studying in the 1970s and early 1980s. Just think of the last decades’ waves

of development interventions on a scale never seen before, the enormous inflow of foreign capital, and the important role of donors (including their paradigms on how to develop the rural). And last but not least, Sri Lanka’s population in the early 1980s was 14-15 million people, whereas today it is around 22 million.

The need for ‘Critical Agrarian Studies’

All this suggests that one needs to recall and learn from the older debates (e.g. from ‘peasant studies’), but that these debates need to be critically reflected upon, and made more nuanced – regarding underlying theories (e.g. the understanding of pre-colonial social relations and the notion of class); methodologies (e.g. the focus of data collection on the head-of-household); and the normative (e.g. the meaning of radical or progressive politics).

This is the case not only in Sri Lanka. To further underline the potential of this turn to a “broad interdisciplinary framework, inspired by theory” (Bernstein and Byres 2001a: ii), the notion of critical agrarian studies has only recently emerged (Edelman and Wolford 2017). Recalling what Bernstein, Byres, and Borras had advocated earlier, Akram-Lodhi *et al.* (2021: 1) write: “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”.

As discussed above, such contemporary critical agrarian studies are still rare in Sri Lanka, and the present crisis seems like a warning call that this field of research urgently requires deeper attention. For now, I can just touch upon two of the many dimensions that call for this attention. One circles around the notion of the peasantry. The second is concerned with the increasing number of State, as well non-State, organisations to which rural households are exposed.

The Peasantry and the Complexity of Livelihoods

The notions of the peasant or peasantry were important entry points for studies in the 1970s and early 1980s. Many perceived the peasantry as a homogenous group, sharing a common history, and being exposed in a similar way to agrarian change through penetration by capitalism. Bernstein (2003) labelled this approach as “peasant essentialism”.

Others made efforts to understand the effects of agrarian change on differently endowed groups of peasants, which led to stratification. Gunasinghe for example (as mentioned above) found in his case study in the Kandy region, a differentiation into several classes:

- Petty bourgeoisie – i.e., people who earn a regular salary (e.g. teachers), but still own some land, which they rent out for sharecropping.
- Middle peasants – who “spend their labour or the labour of their nuclear families without exploiting others”. They are “not compelled to sell their labour to supplement their income” (Gunasinghe 1975: 136).
- Poor peasants – they own land, but the “land they own or possess is absolutely insufficient for them to keep their body and soul together. Hence, they are compelled to sell their labour” (1975: 137).
- Rural workers – who are “totally alienated from all the means of production”, and therefore completely depend on wage labour; and who spend most of their time “looking for work” (1975: 138).

To reflect on this classification and the normative conclusions drawn from it, it is important to reflect on the methodology on which it is based. As stated above, Gunasinghe took the nuclear family as unit of analysis, and noted the “production relations maintained by the head of the household” (Gunasinghe 1975: 138). With this, the production relations of the head of household became those of the family – thus a class of rural workers, i.e., families/households that depend entirely on wage labour; or a class of middle peasants, i.e., families/households that can make their living from working their land. He then suggests that some of these classes have a certain degree of class consciousness, in the sense of sharing common interests; the middle peasants, for example, “are conscious of their distinct position which separates them from the poor peasants and rural labourers” (1975: 137).

How far can this theoretical and methodological approach help to understand today’s realities? Just recall Jazeel’s (2014: 95) remark that: “Whatever else theory is, it is a key optic through which the world is made present and imaginatively constituted at one and the same time”.

In our study in the East, Hasbullah and I found a highly heterogeneous peasantry – paddy farmers, cattle breeders, sugarcane cultivators, etc. – all of them having their very specific interests in land; interests that often

lead to conflicts among them. All these types of farmers included middle peasants, but they had conflicting production interests, and lacked a class consciousness (Hasbullah and Geiser 2019). On top of that, many peasant households (across the board) were pushed to diversify their income sources, some because they could afford it, but the majority because they lived under conditions of severe distress.

Therefore, I posit that a methodological focus on the head-of-household does not suffice. Instead, an understanding of family or household-internal dynamics becomes crucial. Recently, I came across peasant households in which different members were engaged either in cultivating the little land they had (often permit land), some of them leasing in additional land, others leasing their land out, other household members going for casual labour within agriculture, or searching off-farm labour opportunities (close-by, or in urban areas), some having to mortgage land for micro-finance organisations, or (some members) even having to migrate abroad.

All of this raises questions on how we understand, and generalise, rural life. After all, the way we do this influences the conclusions we draw, and the recommendations we come forward with. Gunasinghe for example differentiates a class of rural workers (living entirely from casual labour) from a class of urban workers, having regular employment, and thus are easier to mobilise (Gunasinghe 1975: 138). My point is that members of rural households also go to urban areas for work, and that this urban work can be casual as well. Gunasinghe also observes that middle peasants “spend their labour or the labour of their nuclear families without exploiting others”, but overlooks the exploitation of family labour (an important strategy for small farmers to survive). Attention to intra-household dynamics would also force attention to issues of gender (a marker of identity I miss in Gunasinghe’s writing). Class can be an important category, but what does class mean today? Statistically, we might be able to draw differences between “classes of themselves”, but how can they be “classes for themselves” (to invoke another important conceptualisation) when considering today’s complexities (see Herring and Agarwala 2006)?

Two points to conclude this section: (a) I argue that the struggle to earn a living has led, over the last decades, to much more complicated interrelations between production on land, and earning income from non-land-based income sources – wherever they are found. And (b): as is well known, the notion of the peasantry is also used in Sri Lanka for ideological purposes

by sections of the political elite, who justify their interventions into the rural space by invoking the image of a 'traditional peasant culture' that needs support and protection. Contemporary agrarian studies need critical introspection to clarify their own ideological position in this debate.

The Enormous Local Presence of State and Non-State Actors

The above thoughts on the peasantry engaged with our understanding of rural households and their complex livelihoods. These households are exposed to the dynamics of capitalist penetration, deepening inequality, and this process is at the core of critical agrarian studies. But who are the actors that drive this process, that operationalise capitalism and market forces? And how do these actors engage with each other to produce the forces that are capable of impinging on rural households?

To put it simply: capitalism and market forces are not actors by themselves, but processes. There is no space here to deconstruct this nexus, but I argue that contemporary critical agrarian studies must engage with this theme. As indicated above, I am sympathetic to Borras (2009: 20f) in his call for a more differentiated analysis of "how key actors engage each other, leading to political change within the state, in society and within state-society channels of interactions". After all, the "interplay between structures, institutions, and actors ... is a key element in agrarian change".

A few initial thoughts. Of course, it is the State that creates the conditions for market forces to operate. Critical research, though, shows that the State is a highly complex thing, and that outcomes of State action are not uniform, but can be contradictory; and so too policies towards the agrarian space.

When Hasbullah and I (2019) tried to understand how the State's land policies reach the grassroots, we realised its highly fragmented nature at the local level. In Eastern Sri Lanka, we found that this State is split into a whole array of different departments, each following its own policy. People must contact the *Grama Niladhari* (village officer), the Land Officer, the Forest Guard, the Irrigation Engineer, the Agricultural Instructor, or the staff at the *Pradeshiya Sabha* (Divisional Council) or the Divisional Secretariat. Although all these officials are linked to the same State, they represent its different branches. Our study shows that these branches often have independent lives, and more often than not, operate in splendid isolation from each other, without any coordination. This affects

policy implementation as well, and thus the manner in which (differently positioned) rural people experience the plethora of State agencies.

Similarly, civil society, or the non-State sector, has become complex, and contradictory at times as well. Involved actors have increased since the late 1970s; just think of the networks of regional, national, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). If you check for their foundation year, many emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. And many more came with, and after, the 2004 *tsunami*. I have yet to come across agrarian studies from the 1970s and early 1980s that thematised the role of non-State actors in Sri Lanka (Gunasinghe 1975 critically engages with co-operatives). But the growth of the non-State sector, and its enormous presence in the rural space, now requires detailed attention. As a colleague studying credit co-operatives in the North recently mentioned, such co-operatives had, earlier, only to compete with the village moneylender; today, so many NGOs (besides the private sector) too are involved in credit, setting most diverse conditions for lending.

Rural households are exposed to this enormous density of State and non-State actors at the local level – despite all the talk on the 'neo-liberal downsizing of the State'. It seems to me that Sri Lanka is strikingly different from other countries in South Asia. I have also worked in Pakistan and parts of India, but never seen this huge a number of actors in rural areas.

Progressive Policies

This brings me to the final part of my reflections. The SSA seminar invitation notes that critical agrarian studies not only want to analyse agrarian realities, but also to transform them, searching "for alternatives to the dominant paradigm". This is a crucial qualification for critical agrarian studies, one though that poses its own challenges.

Here, the agrarian question comes in: to progress, create employment, income, profit, and food for all, can Sri Lanka follow a strategy of commercialised agriculture, globally interlinked and export-oriented, with heavy involvement of national and international business, based on large-scale capitalist farming which replaces smallholder agriculture (with the industrial and service sectors absorbing all the labour thus 'freed' from agriculture)? Or should the strategy aim at 'food sovereignty', based on autonomous small-scale family farming, linked through co-operative arrangements to keep profits with the producers (see Jansen 2015)?

A quick glance at the experiences of the last decades suffices to disqualify the first approach: just look at the present fundamental crisis. The second option, therefore, invites attention. But then, today's rural reality is still characterised by the massive lack of meaningful employment opportunities outside the cultivation of land. This mainly affects rural youth, who get stuck between the lack of access to land and lack of access to off-farm jobs (again an issue that needs critical analysis). I simply doubt that a food sovereignty strategy can absorb the masses of rural youth. Add to this the many rural youths do not necessarily aspire (I assume) to work in muddy paddy fields.

Thus, to reflect on strategies for the agrarian within Sri Lanka's national policy (i.e., the agrarian question) requires careful and innovative thinking. And as in the case of analysing the ground realities and challenges of differentiation that rural people face, the search for progressive policies (to address these challenges) needs to be based on analysis as well. It can learn, for example, from the experiences of already existing policy processes at the grassroots.

Looking at recent debates in Sri Lanka I sometimes get the feeling that debates around progressive policies focus more on what could be, or *should be* (such as 'workers-peasants solidarity'). Such debates are not really based on empirically grounded insights into *what is there*. For instance, analyses of current problems in Sri Lanka's rural sphere may conclude that class-based interventions are required to solve problems in agricultural production and marketing, in addition to land reform. But how relevant or useful would it be if there is no reflection on what 'class' might mean today; or on lessons to be learnt from earlier land reform experiences? Likewise, occasionally there are suggestions to foster collective farming, but without hint of what to learn from such attempts in the 1970s (see Peiris 1972).

So, what do I mean by 'searching for progressive policies'? I assume that within the enormous range of State and non-State actors' interventions in the rural sphere, not all will be geared towards the "incorporation [of peasant production] into wider [capitalist] circuits of economic, political and cultural relations" (see Brow and Weeramunda above). Just think of the various efforts over the last decades to foster co-operatives, or other policies that might resonate with at least aspects of the food sovereignty discourse, or even resistance against policies that hinder food sovereignty. What policy-lessons can be learned from such experiences?

So far, I have not come across a critical study that, for example, carefully addresses the role of non-State actors in the recent crisis around chemical versus organic

fertiliser. Did non-State actors intervene? Were they involved (or not) in mobilising the farmers' protests that emerged? How, then, did these farmers' protests get organised? Can such insights give hints at possible progressive policies?

Nor have I seen an analysis that (critically) studies (not just blames) the array of local-level State agencies; one that analyses their mandates, the practices they use to implement the policy prescriptions they are tasked with, the challenges they face in having to work in a field where many other organisations are active; and then contrasting these insights with how differently positioned rural households experience, and interact with these grassroots-level bureaucrats: how they collaborate, or resist them, etc. (an exception being Uyangoda's 2012 study on *Pradeshiya Sabhas* and Divisional Secretariats).

Finally, unemployment is a crucial challenge for rural households (even for those who have land, though very little). Thus, it is an issue to be addressed by critical agrarian studies as well. What were earlier, or present, strategies by State and non-State actors to address this issue (traveling through the countryside one sees many centres for vocational training); what can be learned from their experiences; and can such experiences inform the thinking about progressive strategies?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

As I said at the outset, these are reflections – some more evidence-based, others more thinking aloud. Recalling Brow and Weeramunda (1992), it is as valid now as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, for scholars and activists to engage critically with the continuous struggle in rural society over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products, a struggle that is structured through social relations, which in turn are characterised by the involved actors having different interests, influence, and power.

The theoretical underpinnings informing the analytical categories for such studies, the methodologies used, and the normative reflections emerging from them have evolved over the past decades through better and better insights into '*what is out there?*'. These insights also complicate the normative debate, and make easy recommendations difficult. But the challenge to engage with struggles over rural livelihoods is more urgent than ever before.

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Notes

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