Lao Peasants after Socialism

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Abstract

Grant Evans argued that socialist collectivization in Laos had failed because peasants did not change their patterns of thinking and acting overnight. This paper tries to show that the argument is valid even today. At the same time as peasant habitus persists, however, modernization takes place. Peasants are transformed into labourers and commercial farmers and the role of agriculture generally decreases. But in Laos, just like in Europe, the story of modernization has come to an end. Members of the most "modernized" social groups become agricultural professionals catering for niche-markets. They do not return to the past but invent a new version of peasantry. All three tendencies exist side-by-side in contemporary Laos. The paper gives an overview of the tendencies and tries to explain them sociologically.

Introcuction

Lao peasants have experienced a roller-coaster ride. They saw the first attempts to commercialize Lao agriculture under French colonial rule, then suffered destruction and resettlement during the Indochinese Wars, they became heroes during the revolution and were forced into collectives after the revolution, before witnessing a return to commercialization. Ever since, they have been considered underdeveloped and backward. They seem to be doomed as a social group, while Lao agriculture is bound to become commercialized, before it will be reduced to large-scale agro-industry. Modernization presumably transforms the peasantry into blue-collar workers, service sector employees and a few agro-capitalists.

The fate of Lao peasantry may be more complex and more enduring than this account suggests. Grant Evans (1990) has argued that collectivization in Laos had failed because older patterns of behaviour were too persistent to be changed within a couple of years. He demonstrated that older peasant cultures were transformed by social and political changes but not erased. Does this argument still apply after 30 years of "New Economic Mechanism" or marketization? I wish to show that it does. And I will add that peasantry will even experience something of a resurrection, albeit in an entirely new shape.

This argument has to be set against the background of the global transformation of agriculture under capitalism. In a first shift, peasants are transformed into commercial farmers producing for the market. This shift has occurred in several historical periods and in various places, even in Southeast Asia before colonial rule (Lieberman 2003). However, systems of commercial farming always disintegrated when larger systems of exchange were struck by crisis. This is – not yet – true for the Western capitalist world-system, which caused a second

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transformation of agriculture. Commercial farmers are replaced by large-scale agro-industry. At the same time, however, as huge specialized estates cater for the consumption of large populations, sometimes on a global scale, we see the emergence of a different type of agricultural professional, namely the artisan professional producing high-quality products, such as gourmet oils, superb wines or organic vegetables.

The paper argues that Laos experiences all these shifts as well as the persistence of earlier patterns of peasant behaviour at the same time. Agriculturalists are no uniform or amorphous mass of peasants but consist of different groups rooted in social formations corresponding to different historical times. The first part of the paper outlines the standard narrative of agricultural development and its anachronism with regard to Europe. In the second section, I summarize in which way the population of contemporary Laos is rooted in different historical times. The final part demonstrates that Lao agriculturalists today span across the entire spectrum of social groups and agricultural possibilities and will not be transformed in a uniform manner.

Peasants, Farmers, and Professionals

According to modernization theory, we just have to look at Europe's past to see what will happen to Laos in the near future. There is some truth to this, since Western capitalism is spreading across the globe and, at the same time, modernization theory is applied as a normative instrument by international organizations. Against this background, a brief look at Europe will actually contribute to our understanding of the similarities and differences between Laos and already "modernized" countries. After the Second World War, European peasantry was increasingly replaced by commercial farming, which in the end developed into agro-industry. This is the story of modernization theory. In the last decades, however, the ecological costs, community imbalances and lack of sustainability of this process were discovered in Europe. Agrarian specialists began to emerge who combine the care for landscape with a desire for a revival of community life and healthy agrarian products. This is at once a step behind and a step beyond modernization theory.

Economic literature still assumes that structural economic development is characterized by the shift from agriculture to industry and from industry to service. One may assess the structural progress of India and China, Thailand and South Africa in terms of substitution of agrarian production by industry and then by the service industry, i.e. according to the idea of tertiarization. However, the mature point of this sequence has already been reached both in Europe and in many countries of the global South. Is this the "end of history"? What will happen to agriculture in the near future? Today, agricultural goods are produced in global value chains comprising local, regional, national and transnational levels of production, distribution, circulation and consumption (Faust et al. 2004). These value chains imply fragmented production structures, monopolies of distribution and quality of consumption. In this regard, agro-food systems do not differ from industrial systems. The more global agrarian-industrial value chains are established, the more the opportunities and risks of such value chains become obvious. In many places, alternative agricultures are emerging. Peasants may become professionals without being farmers, small farmers may occupy market niches and industrial farmers may be re-discovering technological and social knowledge of the peasantry.

In the context of the environmental movement, agriculture in Europe has learned that successful farming is not only big industrial business but includes motives of peasantry. The preservation of the landscape, the contribution to community values and local organization of culture, politics, and economic associations has been revitalized by some people in some places. Urban idealists, impoverished farmers, rural property heirs and people with health problems have turned to emerging niche markets, such as organic products, high quality goods or labour-intensive specialty products. Any profession has to define what it does for human beings and for the world in general. This question may be asked by civil society to doctors, lawyers, and social workers, but increasingly this question is directed to agriculture as well. The environmental movement has in many respects asked these questions. However, it expected answers corresponding to the experience of its adherents. These are not the social groups that have actually come up with the practical answers to these questions.

This has entailed a change of generations. Young farmers, wine-makers, community managers or regular rural people looking for marriage know that their answers have to be economically valid. Economic viability is possible. Importing flowers and fruits from Africa and Southern America and producing wheat and corn in Europe is no answer. A new economic and civilizational synthesis is necessary and possible. It is now situated on the global level and at the same time answered at the local level. It will not be solved by central agencies. Even US-Americans begin to view this change not only as a reflection of European Romanticism but as a real problem and as an economic opportunity. Health concerns, environmental organizations and demand for high quality have created expanding niche-markets around the globe. Some Europeans have responded to the change and partly reversed the story told by modernization theory.

In order to understand contemporary agriculture in sociological terms, we have to distinguish the variety of forms of *work* from *labour*. As Hannah Arendt has argued, only part of human activity is performed in view of securing survival (Arendt 1958: 7). This is labour. Society also encompasses, divides and organizes activities like consumption, leisure, political action and thinking. I will subsume these activities *and* labour under the broader concept of *work*. Whereas the dividing line has been rather clear in Western capitalism, recent developments have started to blur it. This is not only due to Postfordist flexibility and self-exploitation but there is also an increasingly creative approach to labour. The change in the quality and status of labour points to the difference of labour and work. Work is something people invest in because it expresses dignity and sovereignty embedded in cultures, organizations and societies. This is the story told by ancient craftsmen as well as by qualified labour knowing that advanced industry would not survive without their enthusiasm and their skills.

However, this story can now be told by artisans of post-industrial production as well as by "reflexive peasants" interpreting the history of agriculture not as a technological change of labour but as a reinvention of agricultural *work*. Industrial sociologists analyzing the problems of modern labour markets discover the worker as an artist. The qualified labourer, necessarily independent and responsible for the process of production, is developing a certain status of sovereignty as an "industrial artist". One may argue that parts of agricultural production have moved up the value chain to become professionalized. At the same time, professionals interpret their labour partly as work, as a meaningful project.

In social structure analysis, professionals make up the highest class in the labour hierarchy (Oesch 2006). These are self-employed professionals such as medical doctors or lawyers as well as the highest salaried groups such as top business executives. These groups have the characteristic that they do not distinguish as much between work and labour as the other social groups because labour to them is part of a life project, which is a work of art. They have justified pride in their achievements and are not really familiar with the concept of leisure. This attitude has begun to return into other social groups, which we might describe as artisans rather than top-level professionals.

With the globalization of capitalism and of environmental destruction, conservative European farmers and environmental movements are forced to discuss their problems on the same level as peasants and farmers from the global South. This configuration is entirely new. It entails the idea of global professional farming different from industrial farming as well as the idea of rural preservation. Commodification, inner colonization, central planning and industrialization are no longer the guiding themes. And tourism, natural and cultural heritage sites, resistance to globalization and nationalism are no longer the answers.

Lao peasants have hardly begun their transition to commercial farming before being integrated into the framework of global value chains and environmental destruction. It is almost entirely certain that they will not re-live European history. The idea of the agricultural professional is located beyond the scope of modernization theory. Now, this idea is spreading in Laos even before the European sequence has been completed or even come to a full start. We observe a wide variation of realities anchored in different historical times co-existing in one society.

Lao Sociocultures

Half of the Lao population is still classified as peasants (National Statistic Centre 2005). At the same time, ecological crisis has begun to haunt Laos just like other countries: climate change, rubber plantations, deforestation and pollution. The general framework of institutions and issues does not seem to differ much from Europe but the sociocultural conditions do. What does it mean to be a peasant in a globalized world? How does the rural population adapt to globalization? How do people become agricultural professionals in a peasant environment?

These questions have to be set against the background of the structure of Lao society. To become a peasant or a professional is not an individual choice but is conditioned by one's social environment. In Laos, social environments differ enormously. All contemporary social environments are heirs of earlier structures. They are anchored in earlier historical times. I refer to these persisting structures as "sociocultures" (Rehbein 2007). In Laos, structures even from precolonial times still persist today. Contemporary Laos unites elements of the precolonial *muang*, socialism and influences of colonialism with current capitalism and globalization. Agricultural environments can be rooted in any of these elements. Therefore, a brief overview of these sociocultures will clarify the social roots of contemporary peasants, farmers and professionals.

Most Lao up to this day dwell in villages. The village has a pretty clear social structure, which is mainly determined by kinship. It comprises a hierarchy according to age, sex and specific abilities. Usually, most of the villagers are relatives (Potter 1976: 52). Their respective social position and power is hardly disputed. One's father

always remains one's father. As the relative social position is tied to the respective person, one could speak of a *personal social structure* based on kinship. Much of this is implied by the Lao term for "village", which is *baan*. The term semantically refers more to the social organization than at the physical setting.

Village culture could be described as *subsistence ethics*, a term coined by James Scott (1976). He had studied peasants in densely populated areas – which Laos is not. However, many of the characteristics he found still apply to many Lao peasant villages. Their interest is focussed on having enough until the next harvest, not on having as much as possible. They achieve this by mutual aid (reciprocity), by reinforcing family ties and traditionalism (Evans 1986: 12). Peasants are interested in survival and security, not in affluence and profit. I would subsume reciprocity, family orientation and traditionalism under the term subsistence ethics in order to characterize mainland Southeast Asian village culture in general. Family orientation in some ethnolinguistic groups refers mainly to nuclear families (e.g. Lao), in others (e.g. Hmong) mainly to extended families (Sprenger 2006: 58).

The Southeast Asian village dates back many millennia. It has certainly changed a lot during this time. Subsistence ethics and personal social structure most likely have been defining characteristics all along, however. Sedentary villages were usually founded at important nodes of communication and/or places with valuable resources, such as salt, metal or fish (Higham 1989: 234). These often lay in the valleys. The valleys also allowed for a more productive generation of food, especially wet-rice. Some villages developed into translocal market-places and eventually into towns, much as most everywhere around the globe.

As the town usually was the market place and increasingly hosted a local ruler, social differentiation mainly took place in the towns, which corresponded to an increasing division of labour (cf. Grabowsky 2004). Any superior tried to accumulate as many bonds of loyalty as possible to enhance his position whereas inferiors tended to look for superiors who could guarantee security. Just as subsistence ethics characterized the economic culture of the village, *patrimonialism* was the prevalent economic (and political) culture of the *muang*. Ernst Boesch (1970) used Max Weber's term patrimonialism to describe the relationship between inferior and superior in Thailand. I would prefer an indigenous term, which is linked to the *muang*, and suggest the expression *phu-yai*-culture.

Villages and towns sometimes became part of a larger political structure, especially if they lay close to a ruling court. These principalities implied loyalties of minor entities to major entities, i.e. of villages to towns and of towns to a court – and sometimes of courts to a king or even an emperor. Jana and Oliver Raendchen (1998) have used the indigenous terms *baan-muang* to characterize the structure of Tai social entities. In the *baan-muang*-structure, the lesser entities – the *baan* – preserved some independence, especially if they were geographically remote from the centers – the *muang*. The main character of the relation was exchange of tribute and manpower against security. Loyalties shifted frequently according to the ability of the center to guarantee security and stability.

The Buddhist order was partly integrated into the structure with each monastery having the rank of the social entity of its location, while it partly formed a parallel organization with its own hierarchical structure and culture. *Muang* structures were hierarchical and closely resembled family relations. In a *muang*, most people were not really related, however, they were just loyal to one person that had some authority, like a father in the social structure of the village. This is a *stratified*

social structure.

There have been trade relations and some specialization between villages, which might have been on equal terms for some time. However, there has always been an unequal relation between sedentary and moving groups continuously shifting their location (Higham 1989: 59). There also emerged an inequality between valley and mountain peoples (cf. Leach 1970). Not all villages were integrated into a *muang*. Many were too difficult to reach. Others constantly shifted allegiance or paid tribute to various overlords at the same time. The Akha, for example, seem to define themselves as not having and not being part of a *muang* (Tooker 1996: 329). *Muang* were loose configurations rather than closed territorial states. They included some villages in a given region, while others remained independent, especially if they were nomadic and/or dwelling in the mountains.

Colonialism had a short and selective but nevertheless lasting impact (Pholsena 2006). The territory of contemporary Laos was covered by several *muang* and many more or less independent *baan*. The nation state of Laos was constructed by the French colonial rulers. They integrated the *muang* into a state with territorial borders, a market economy and a bureaucratic state. The French also attempted to codify a national language on the basis of the former *muang*-languages, to define what was to be considered orthodox Buddhism, to introduce a bureaucratic administration and to integrate the mountain dwellers against much resistance (Gunn 1990). After the Second World War, they lost control of their colonial empire in Southeast Asia and were superseded by the USA, who tried to stop the advance of communism – in vain. After decades of war, Laos gained its final independence in 1975, when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) seized power.

The war had an even broader impact than colonialism. Due to the migration of about a third of the population, the physical damage and the large amount of money pouring into the country, the social structure of the towns changed considerably during the Second Indochinese War. At least ten percent of the population affected by this change left the country after the socialist takeover in 1975. These included much of the skilled urban population. Most of the citizens of the socialist nation state Laos after 1975 were subsistence farmers living in kinship structures controlled by an all-encompassing party organization that reached practically every village. That is, Laos now was an integrated nation state with mostly precolonial sociocultures and few economic and intellectual resources. It seemed as if the precolonial structure of an elite, a small group of city dwellers and the peasantry along with the Buddhist order was reproduced. However, the top families of the original structure were gone, much of the *muang* population had left the country and a lot of *baan* people had moved up into the elite through the LPRP. Furthermore, the old structure was complemented by the party itself, which is a specific, hierarchical structure.

This is the society studied by Grant Evans in his seminal book on *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990). The book argues that the socialist leadership had to increase production to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency and control of the population. According to Evans, the attempt to force peasants into collectives was bound to fail as collectives presuppose a completely different rationality than peasant life, namely organization and surplus production instead of subsistence ethics. The Lao leadership recognized this after only a few years, liberalized agricultural prices and began decentralizing the economy after 1979. Very soon after this, Laos introduced a market economy in coordination with the Soviet Union (Jullien 1995).

While the economy follows the model of Western nation states, the political sphere

still follows the model of a one-party state. Therefore, at least three levels of social structure coexist, *baan-muang*, socialism and the market. They comprise various sociocultures: subsistence ethics (*baan*), *phu-yai*-culture (*muang*), (formal) egalitarianism, and capitalism – possibly augmented by Buddhism as a separate socioculture. The nation state and capitalism have a greater historical depth than socialism but the communist party and its culture reach into every village. Socialism has left no Lao untouched.

Lao Agriculture and Globalization

In Laos, globalization began with the exchange of raw materials between village and forest dwellers and increased with the production of manufactured goods. Even today, Hmong or Akha provide Lao with forest products, while Lao provide them with manufactured goods and rice. This segmentary division of work was based on an unequal exchange with sedentary groups dictating the terms (Leach 1970). This was less so with the exchange of goods between sedentary villages. There had been an intensive trade in raw materials among Southeast Asian villages long before colonialism (Bayard 1984).

Wallerstein (2000: 56) has argued that this form of division of work could not be regarded as a predecessor of contemporary globalization because goods were not produced for a market and until the emergence of capitalism all of the exchanged goods were luxury items; only the capitalist world system created a supraregional unity on the basis of economic relations. This argument does not have much value with regard to Southeast Asia. We know that goods have been produced for supraregional and even global markets long before European capitalists ventured into the area (Reid 1993; Lieberman 2003: 22). Even if we do not accept the argument that the almost global trade between China, India, Southeast Asia and the Middle East before Wallerstein's long sixteenth century was a capitalist market economy and almost a world system, we have to accept that exchange between Stone Age villages in mainland Southeast Asia involved more than luxury goods. In fact, the bulk of trade consisted of necessary or everyday items like salt, metal, pottery, and food (Higham 1989: 228).

The segmentary division of work between sedentary and shifting villages, between mountain and valley dwellers and between town and country has survived colonialism and the introduction of nation states in Laos. This is true for the personal social structure and subsistence ethics as well. The introduction of socialism in Laos failed mainly because the leadership disregarded cultural and historical factors (Evans 1990). However, colonialism, capitalism and socialism altered Laos fundamentally. While the three levels of sociocultures correspond to different historical layers of society, they have to be distinguished from the contemporary division of work, which is increasingly transnational or even global, and the social structure of capitalism, which is the distribution of socially relevant resources (Rehbein 2007: 19). To a certain degree, globalization continues the trends of colonialism and its socioculture has begun to merge with it. Therefore, I will not distinguish between colonial and capitalist socioculture in contemporary Laos.

Social resources are closely linked to the ability to use them – or to patterns of action. Patterns of action are incorporated in specific social environments. Actions bear a certain regularity or form a pattern, which is partly due to the fact that they are incorporated and partly due to the stability of the social and natural environment.

Even though human beings have to learn most of their practices, these vary little because one tends to act the way one has learned to act. Our ways of walking, talking, joking and writing do not vary at random but remain rather stable over time – and may improve a little at best. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has subsumed the acquired predispositions to act according to a specific pattern under the term "habitus". The habitus comprises tendencies to act that were acquired in the life-course. It is an embodied tradition, an embodied socioculture. This also implies that forms of action and traditions persist even after society has fundamentally changed.

People's habitus is rooted in one socioculture more than in others and people's social cohesion extends to persons with a similar habitus much more than to others (Bourdieu 1984). People with similar habitus also bear similarities in the composition of their resources and therefore in the forms of life they have access to. We may conceptualize the configuration of social groups as a space which is structured by sociocultures, contemporary division of work and distribution of resources. People are placed in this space according to their habitus. The distribution will show clusters due to similarities in the habitus. These clusters should be considered as social groups or *milieus*.

We can meaningfully define milieus in Laos on the basis of sociocultures and resources for the capitalist division of labour (Rehbein 2007). I wish to distinguish between three milieus mainly rooted in the *baan*, two rooted in the *muang*, four in socialism and four in capitalism (cf. table). Each milieu is defined by its habitus, which again in most cases is rooted in one socioculture and tends to generate a specific culture. In the socioculture of *baan*, I would distinguish between non-*muang* milieus (which are mainly ethnic minorities), a subsistence milieu with little or poor land and a subsistence milieu with good land. The patrimonial urban groups and the patrimonial elite are rooted in the *muang* socioculture. On the socialist level, one can distinguish the rural party structure from the lower officials, the established party representatives and the political elite. On the capitalist level, I distinguish between farmers, migrant labourers (including informal labourers), the urban middle class (small entrepreneurs, self-employed people, returnees, urban adolescents and students) and the economic elite (mostly Chinese and returned exiles).

Table 1: Milieus in Laos

	Baan-muang	*Socialism*	*Capitalism*
Elites	Patrimonial elite	Leadership	Rich entrepreneurs
Established milieus	Urban patrimonialism	High officials	Middle class
Rural milieus	Wealthy subsistence	Lower officials	Farmers
Marginalized milieus	Poor subsistence	Rural party	Migrant workers
	Non-*muang*		Beggars

To a large degree, the social structure develops along the lines suggested by modernization theory: people migrate – physically and socially – from the left to the right of the table. The poor rural groups become unskilled labour, wealthy peasants become commercial farmers, and the old middle class transforms into the new middle class. However, contrary to modernization theory, the older sociocultures, both *baan-muang* and socialism, continue to exert an influence. And older ways of life do not simply disappear but partly persist and are, in some cases, re-invented by rural and urban dwellers.

Peasants largely retain a subsistence ethics, while the numerically small urban elites either retain or revive *phu-yai*-culture. Within the party, egalitarianism and a

hierarchical bureaucracy go hand in hand. In the classic urban setting of capital and labour, a competitive market culture emerges. This is only the case where capital and labour are not part of older patrimonial structures. In other social environments, capitalism is re-interpreted according to older sociocultures. Peasants interpret capitalism according to occasionalism – whenever they need money, they enter the market. Many city dwellers interpret capitalism in a patrimonial way, while corruption emerges where patrimonialism and global capitalism meet.

We have to understand peasant sociocultures in order to determine peasants' place in social structure and to arrive at a meaningful construction of social structure in the first place. Contemporary peasants partly and often largely follow a subsistence ethics, as argued by Scott (1976). Even if they are integrated in a nation state and a market economy, their primary goal is security, not profit or wealth. They organize work largely in view of this goal. And within the village, social structure is – at least partly – determined by kinship.

Surveys in Laos clearly showed that peasants who grew up as subsistence farmers do not have a capitalist habitus (Rehbein 2004: 204). In fact, this group comprises the majority of the population. Even people working in capitalist enterprises or engaging in business themselves cannot be considered capitalists in the Western sense. They strive for security or for taking care of their family and entourage (Hanks 1975). These two goals are partly contradictory and derive from different sociocultures, the second being linked to Lao urban culture. However, both aim at the immediate future and do not involve rational calculation and accumulation (Rehbein 2004: 131). When asked what they would do with money won from a lottery, 50 percent of my Lao respondents in the capital city of Vientiane said they would spend it with the immediate family, 30 percent would put it into a bank and only 13 percent responded they would invest it. In rural areas, everyone would spend it on rice and/or throw a party and no one would invest it in a capitalist sense (ibid.: 132, 220).

Almost all contemporary milieus have their roots in peasant cultures. More precisely, practically all Lao who became adults before the market economy really took hold in the late 1990s, actually grew up in peasant settings. They acquired the habitus of a peasant defined by subsistence ethics and personal social structure. It is evident any casual visitor to Laos that even high-ranking officials never feel completely ease in a formal urban setting. In this sense, peasant culture persists in the habitus of the overwhelming majority of the Lao population. Even under a drastic transformation, it would take decades to wipe it out.

Two examples are a very poor slash-and-burn peasant and the village head from a village on the banks of the Nam Ngeum reservoir. The poor peasant's parents and grandparents had been poor as well. None of them had any flat land to grow rice. Even after they had migrated to their present location, their lot did not change. This is partly due to the fact that they had no relatives in the village and partly because they had no other resources – no schooling, no savings, no influence, no position in the party. The peasant is already 73 years old, his children continue to live off slash-and-burn cultivation and his only focus in life is to have enough to eat until he dies. The family of the village head, 47 years old, also migrated to the present location and his parents were peasants as well. The main difference to the poor, old peasant, is that the village head grew up in the socialist zone of Laos during the war, where he had a Vietnamese teacher, managed to complete elementary school and entered the party. He also considers himself very poor but he owns 6 *rai* of land and makes 300 USD a

year selling surplus production.

These two persons will remain peasants for the rest of their life even if they have been integrated into the socialist party and capitalism. They represent approximately half of the Lao population. Some of these peasants make the transition to commercial agriculture but do not necessarily abandon subsistence ethics. An example would be a cattle breeder, 49 years old, in the same region as the two other persons just introduced. He had inherited a relatively large piece of land, about two hectars. But he uses this land for commercial purposes because his father had a decent school education and had advised him to breed cattle. The son followed the advice and says, “nature here is very nice and suitable for cattle breeding”. However, he has no ambition to expand the business or become rich. He makes 100 USD per month, which seems plenty to him. He remains rooted in subsistence ethics.

Apart from the *baan*-milieus and commercial farmers, rural party officials and the few rural industrialists live in the countryside. These groups are not peasants but they are not urban either. They bear some similarities to European farmers and agro-industrialists. Examples for agro-capitalists would be Sinuk and Dao, who own two of the biggest Lao coffee enterprises. While Sinuk is rooted in the old patrimonial urban culture, Dao would be a new capitalist. Both cater to slightly different markets corresponding to their cultural roots. Dao is the large-scale producer and Sinuk the high-end producer. Two other important coffee enterprises in Laos are Lao Mountain, owned by an American, and Pakxong, both aiming at tourists, expats and the Lao urban population.

At the same time, the first new professionals emerge in Laos. There are environmental NGOs and organic enterprises catering for the urban populations in Laos and Thailand. In Laos, Les artisans Lao or Xaoban would be examples for high-end cosmetics, supplements and specialities. However, some NGOs have sprung up that operate entirely within the rural setting aiming at environmental sustainability and organic production. This happens simultaneously with the emergence of similar organizations in Western countries – but not after the disappearance of earlier forms of sustainability, rather as a reenforcement of environmentally friendly traditions. An interesting example is the differentiation of the rice market. The bulk of Lao rice is consumed by the producers, the peasants. Apart from this, a mass market for the regular urban population has emerged. Recently, however, organic rice has begun to appear on local markets as well as in the shops. Organic rice can be marketed as “originally Lao”, i.e. grown in remote places without modern technology and substances, or as hip and organic, sold in fancy packages to financially potent customers. An example would be Sangthong Valley Organic Rice.

Conclusion

Grant Evans (1990) has argued that peasant forms of life show a certain resilience even under conditions of rapid and forceful change. He interpreted this resilience against the background of the debates between modernization theory and Marxism. It seemed evident that these forms of life were bound to disappear in the long run, to be swept away by capitalism. We now see a revival of peasant forms of life – but not as a return to the past, rather as a re-invention by the social avantgarde. The most “modern” segments of the society call for environmental sustainability and ecological quality. In Laos, they join forces with some of those peasants that were supposed to vanish with modernization.

This configuration does not exist in Western countries. We see professionals setting up businesses as alternatives to agro-industry both in Laos and the West. But in Laos, as opposed to the West, we see the coalition of old "tradition" and cutting-edge "modernity". This coalition is complemented by all shades of grey in between: peasants in development aid projects, poor commercial farmers, mixed peasants and labourers, successful commercial farmers and agro-industrialists all belonging to different habitus groups or milieus. They make up the majority of the population and their interaction will determine part of the immediate future in Laos. Laos no longer is a pure peasant society but Grant Evans' emphasis on the understanding of peasant culture still makes sense today.

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