

CAPITALISM AND THE PEASANTRY: A REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

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This survey of the literature has three goals. First, it reviews various definitions of the peasantry, and distinguishes those which follow cultural notions and those which link the concept to economic conditions. Second, the survey elaborates a definition of the peasantry based on the family labor farm theory, and uses this definition to establish the linkage between the peasant economy and the external economy. Third, it concludes with a discussion on capitalism and the peasantry, and suggests an analysis along the lines of their specific articulation at particular historical conjunctures.

The Concept of Peasant Economy

Peasantry as a conceptual category has been used loosely in the literature. The sociological tradition of the 19th century viewed peasant culture in cultural terms, as the extreme pole of such typologies as Durkheim's organic versus mechanical solidarity or Tonnies's distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. The cultural emphasis in the definition of peasants also held true among anthropologists. Contrasting peasant society from primitive tribal society, Redfield stressed the centrality of the relationship between the peasant and the wider society in which the former is but a residual category dependent on modern urban culture while exploited by it. Within an evolutionary framework, he considered peasant society to be an intermediary stage between primitive and modern society, to be drawn into the Industrial Revolution by the dynamism of the city. Thus, in Redfield's view, the peasant as a cultural human type is inferior to the urban man.

The recent revival of peasant studies has demystified the purely cultural content of the term peasant. At least three trends indicate a shift in emphasis away from the cultural. First, research efforts have been oriented towards describing and understanding the political and economic logic of peasants. The

underlying motivations of these studies are as diverse as the scholars and institutions undertaking research. Increasing labor productivity in agriculture and understanding political stability and instability in the face of massive poverty are among the research purposes.

Second, studies which describe the cultural normative context of peasant behavior base their explanations explicitly on the nature of peasant economic life. James C. Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* is a good illustration. Writing about peasant behavior within a pre-reform agrarian structure where landlord-tenant relationships prevail, Scott argues that the overriding concern for a secure subsistence is at the heart of the technical, social and moral arrangements in peasant societies. Subjected to the vagaries of nature, market and state policies, peasants usually live close to the margins of subsistence. Living in this manner gives rise to a 'subsistence ethic,' the main assumption of which is that all community members have a presumptive right to a living within the limits of local resources. Scott further asserts that the landlord-tenant relationship revolves around this ethic. This relation takes the form of patron-clientelism in which the duties and obligations of the landlord are understood and expected just as much as the percentage of the harvest the

tenant has to forego in rent. The subsistence ethic determines both the degree of exploitation of peasants by landlords as well as the possibility of peasant rebellions. Exploitation in Scott's theory relates to the interaction between the economic condition of the peasant and the reciprocal understanding with the landlord. A landlord extracting 70 percent of the peasant's surplus may be perceived as less exploitative than one extracting 20 percent if the latter is appropriating the surplus of a tenant living close to the subsistence threshold. A breach of the subsistence ethic, which usually occurs with the growing commercialization of agricultural production, violates the moral economy of the peasantry and may, in turn, lead to rebellion.

The third factor which accounts for the erosion of the cultural content of the term peasant is the growing popularity of household economics. This perspective has focused attention on the way peasants allocate their time to maximize the benefits obtained from the production process.

In light of recent developments, attempts to define the peasantry stress group characteristics as these relate to the nature of peasant economy. Within this view, there are at least two approaches used in defining peasant/peasant economy. One abstracts the characteristics of peasants from the empirical generalizations of peasant studies. Another distinguishes the peasantry as an observed entity from the theoretically expected and observed characteristics of simple commodity producers. The significance of the second approach will be more apparent in the succeeding sections. It allows us to view peasants against existing theoretical concepts within political economy. It also facilitates the theoretical formulation of the link between the peasant economy and the wider economic system.

In this approach, the term "peasantry" is made to denote a unifying idea derived from

findings of comparative researches in rural areas. Based on the use of inductive procedures to define the concept, two characteristics have found wide acceptance: 1) the importance of the peasant household as an agricultural labor unit with some degree of control over the means of production and 2) the existence of asymmetric relations with outsiders within the social formation.

For most scholars, the first characteristic constitutes the chief distinguishing feature of the peasantry. Galeski (1972) asserts that family labor determines the operation of the peasant farm. Furthermore, the family farm as a commodity producing establishment is simultaneously identified with the 'domestic economy' of the family household (i.e., with the production of use values to satisfy the subsistence needs of household members). Shanin (1971) reiterates the view that the peasant farm is a small economic unit whose production is a function of family consumption needs. Thus, while the peasantry may produce commodities for a world market, it is still primarily concerned with subsistence production. In a similar vein, Chayanov (1966), whose theory influenced scholars like Shanin, Thorner and Galeski, claims that the family as a unit of work and consumption is the constitutive feature of peasant economies. He developed a consistent theory of the logic of peasant economies on the basis of this assertion.

Family Labor Farm Theory

Chayanov begins with the observation that the social phenomenon of wages and the capitalist category of profit are absent in peasant economies. Peasant production is based on family labor, not on wage labor and the satisfaction of subsistence needs takes precedence over profit maximization. Chayanov further maintains that the peasant family labor household is neither in the process of becoming capitalist nor of disintegrating into working class households. These households constitute a specific

economic system which is self-defining and self-perpetuating — like feudalism, capitalism and socialism. It is constantly in the process of reproducing itself. Because the peasant family labor farm has its own principles of organization, it can be studied in isolation from the external conditions of peasant agriculture e.g. international and interregional trade and expansion. Chayanov's theoretical project focused on the discovery of the underlying principles which explain the persistence and rationality of the peasant farm. Note, however, that Chayanov does not deny the existence of a relationship between the peasantry and the wider economy.

If we were to set ourselves the task of analyzing the peasant farm as a national economy phenomena, we would undoubtedly have to review it dynamically in connection with the historical setting in which it exists and to do it as a historical and not a logical category. We have not yet set ourselves this task. We are not concerned with the fate of the peasant farm nor its historical and national economy conception nor even the historical development of economic systems . . . we simply aim at understanding what the peasant farm is from an organizational viewpoint . . . we are interested not in the system of the peasant farms and forms of organization in their historical development but rather in the mere mechanics of the organizational process (Chayanov 1966:44).

Chayanov's model of the organization of the peasant farm is as follows. Abstracted from external relations, the peasant farm, operated by unpaid family labor, is the unit of production, distribution and exchange. Every household has a balance of needs and resources. The former consists of present and future consumption needs while resources are mainly labor supplies which are determined by the size and composition of the family. Utilizing the means of production at their disposal, family members cultivate the soil, receiving a bundle of goods as a result of a year's work. Since there is no wage labor in

the farm, the only possible category of income is the family labor product obtained by deducting the material expenditures during the year from the gross annual product. One cannot decompose the labor product analytically into wages or profits. Hence, Chayanov refers to it as a single labor income.

If profit is not the object of production, what then determines the amount of labor product? Using the logic of utilitarian individualism, Chayanov maintains that the labor product is determined by six factors: the demographic structure of the family, particularly the worker-consumer ratio (or the ratio of working to nonworking members), the productivity of the labor unit, the quality of the soil and the relation of the farm to markets, the availability of means of production, and, more important, the degree of the family labor's self-exploitation. The degree of self-exploitation, in turn, depends on the balance or equilibrium between the family's consumption needs which are a function of its size and composition and the drudgery of labor needed to produce for the subsistence. As long as the labor expended is considered insufficient for the satisfaction of consumption needs, the peasant family continues to labor. The labor-consumer balance, or the necessary equilibrium between family expansion and the self-exploitation of labor is at the core of Chayanov's theory. He uses it to show that peasants intensify their labor when prices of agricultural products decline in order to obtain the necessary amount of labor product, a behavior contrary to that of capitalist entrepreneurs during crisis situations. Moreover, land prices, rents and interests on credits in the rural sector are also based on the need to achieve a balance between consumption demands and the drudgery of labor. Even the surplus labor in the agricultural sector is seen as voluntary unemployment implying that "peasants eat and work as much as they need to."

There are difficulties with Chayanov's

theory of peasant organization and the labor-consumer balance principle. Littlejohn (1978) argues that Chayanov's analysis assumes a proportional relationship between earnings, expressed in the annual labor product, and the physical effort of family members, such that one can speak of labor units on which the peasant family can base its evaluation of the labor consumer balance. The assumption holds only if labor units do not vary considerably from year to year, allowing peasants to estimate the work required to produce a given labor product to satisfy consumption needs. If harvests are erratic, as is often the case, because of the vagaries of nature, the peasant is left with no basis for deciding on the degree of self-exploitation and the labor consumer balance is not determined by the peasant family, a point contrary to the theory.

One way out of this predicament is to claim that peasant families have established labor units from experience despite year to year variations. However, even if labor units are roughly equivalent each time, the labor product cannot be assumed constant. The proportion of the traditional factors of production in political economy — land, labor and capital — may change and with it the productivity of labor and the labor unit itself. As a counterpoint, Chayanov argues that the peasant family as an economic subject is capable of adjusting factor proportions. When one factor, say capital or land, is short, a proportionate drop in the other factors may ensue inducing a decline in the size of the farms. This tendency may be offset by an increase in the intensity of labor. Moreover, if increased intensity of farm work is not sufficient, the labor consumer balance may be maintained with the employment of family members in the nonagricultural sector.² When there is a surplus of capital or land, on the other hand, Chayanov's theory is unable to handle accumulation and the expansion of economic activity by hiring nonfamily labor. He presumes that once peasant family needs are met, further work for expansion or

accumulation by family or nonfamily labor is pointless.

Chayanov's theory has also been criticized for its failure to link theoretically the subjective motivation of peasants to the structural constraints posed by the wider society (Littlejohn 1978, Harrison 1977). The isolation of peasant family farms which are subject to the labor-consumer balance principle from the rest of the economy within the theory is an implicit division of the economy into a "sector determined by the subjective perception of actors" (the family as a collective actor) and a residual sector, the national economy, which is structural entity "irreducible to the actions of economic subjects." These two sectors represent two modes of determination. Chayanov considers the peasant sector the realm of subjective decision-making although he acknowledges the effect of the structure in the generation of categories of economic calculation. In acknowledging the role of the wider economy in shaping these categories, economic action is not considered an effect of the peasant's psychology but of the categories made available to him. Despite the allusion to the structural effects of the external economy, Chayanov still gives primacy to the subjective mode of determination by leaving the structure of the wider economy untheorized, and by concluding that the categories of economic calculation available and actually used by peasant families can be found in any economic system. This conclusion implies that the wider economy must always be consistent with the principles governing peasant economies. In other words, the wider economy, whatever its structure, must be compatible with the continued existence of the subjectively determined peasant economy. Changes in the economic structure which may transform the peasant economy by undermining the formation of categories for calculating the labor-consumer balance are beyond the scope of the theory. Hence, the overemphasis on subjective determination to the neglect of peasant links to the wider

economy. Had Chayanov conceptualized the labor-consumer with its relation to the wider society as the starting point, he may have arrived at a conclusion similar to Kautsky's observation that the self-exploitation of labor is not a natural characteristic but is the outcome of the need for money as the household is integrated into the market economy. Chayanov's theory, therefore, is less useful in analyzing the peasantry in relation to the development of capitalism in agriculture.

The detailed discussion of the internal organization of the family labor farm illustrates a level of theorizing which starts off from the empirical observation that the family household is the basic unit of agricultural production, and family labor the main operators of the farm. At this level, the link of the peasantry to the outside world is not discussed. The second widely accepted empirical characteristic of peasants, which is the subject of the next section, however, focuses on the existence of asymmetric relations with the nonpeasant sector of the social formation.

The Peasantry and the External Economy

Peasants have been characterized as a human type embroiled in an exploitative structural relationship with various groups of nonpeasants. In his discussion of the logic and nature of the peasantry, Shanin (1973) asserts that a large proportion of the peasants' produce is used to pay rent and other obligations associated with the specific sharecropping arrangement they have with landlords. He further maintains that landlords are not the only people exploiting the peasantry. Other groups extract a share from peasant production through interests on loans, taxes, and the like. Middlemen who represent landlords (overseers) or large bureaucratic organizations (buyers or tax collectors) as well as "free entrepreneurs" are also able to extract their share by mediating between the peasant and the wider economy. Even the

"impersonal market" turns into another source of exploitation as long as the terms of trade are unfavorable to peasants. Within the perspective of the development of the world market and large scale industries, peasants have been relegated to a marginal role in the prevalent economic system and the asymmetric relations between peasant and nonpeasant societies has become an institution.

Wolf (1955) constructed typologies within the framework of structural asymmetry. His first typology, however, was built upon the way peasant surplus produce is disposed and did not necessarily entail the notion of exploitation.³ To illustrate, the first of four types of peasants for Wolf, which corresponds to Chayanov's description, practices intensive cultivation with a small amount of produce for sale to the village market. The peasant family in this category is both the unit of work and consumption. In a latter work, Wolf (1966) modified his typology. Instead of focusing on the disposition of surplus in the market, he based his typology on the view that the surplus is extracted by the ruling class. His typology, however, fails to distinguish peasants as anything other than the exploited small scale producers arranged according to power relations with non-peasants. In contrasting peasant production from simple commodity production, the next section maintains the importance of understanding the relationship of the peasantry to the wider economy while going beyond the tendency to characterize this relationship mainly in terms of exploitative power relations.

Simple Commodity Production versus Peasant Production

The previous section dealt with the defining characteristics of peasants as abstracted from empirical generalizations. A second way of defining peasant economy is by contrasting it with the category of simple commodity production (SCP). This contrast is useful in clarifying the status of the concept

of peasant production as well as in specifying the distinguishing characteristics of the peasant economy. For both simple commodity producers and peasants, the household is the unit of production and the enterprise is operated by family labor. Here the similarity between the two ends. The following discussion is an exposition of the differences between peasant production and SCP. It attempts to point to the chief characteristic of peasant production which could shed light on the way it relates to the external economy.

SCP is an abstraction which need not correspond to an actual historical stage immediately preceding capitalism. As a concept it is useful in showing the most rudimentary dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. It is also useful in understanding the economic activities of actual commodity producers which may have existed prior to the expansion of the capitalist mode and may still exist within a capitalist social formation.⁴

SCP is production for exchange without the categories of wage labor and capitalist profit. It presupposes competition, the existence of private property and the circulation of commodities in both directions, i.e., producers sell to the market and buy their inputs for economic reproduction at market determined prices. Thus, the productive enterprise is individually and completely integrated to the national factor market.

The presuppositions of SCP are shared by farmers in small capitalist farmholdings. However, the categories of wage labor and capitalist profit conceptually differentiate the capitalist farmers from simple commodity producers. The former, in competition with one another employ wage laborers, generating profits which can be invested in more intensive production. The latter, on the other hand, are limited conceptually to reproducing the productive enterprise without the help of nonfamily workers. In concrete analysis, the competition among simple commodity

producers, their ability to adopt strategies which could lower cost and to invest in large-scale production when the need arises, make SCP a very unstable mode. In the expansion of their agricultural production, it is not unlikely for initial simple commodity producers to employ wage laborers. Under this situation, they cease to fall under the SCP category. In light of this, Amin (1974) stresses that the SCP (he calls it "petty commodity mode") within capitalist social formations is slowly emptied of content as it is dominated by capitalism.

Unlike SCP, peasant production is linked to the product market only via the occasional sale of agricultural produce. The peasants' minimal links to factor markets may vary according to local conditions. The lack of generality of factor prices indicates the poor penetration of commodity relations. Peasant economies, therefore, may operate within a social formation dominated by capitalism but their weak links to the factor markets also mean weak links to the wider economy. In light of this, scholars like Mouzelis (1976) assert that unlike SCP which is completely integrated to the national market, the *main* character of peasant production is its partial integration to the market. Why it is partially integrated can be answered by the historical analysis of specific peasant economies. Further empirical analysis can also shed light on the implications of the weak link to the market. It has been suggested, for instance, that being outside the sphere of commodity relations reinforces communal and particularistic relations as reflected in reciprocal exchange of labor and agricultural involution. After all, Friedman (1980) correctly attributes the commercial behavior of simple commodity producers relative to peasants to the "individualisation of the households which accompany commodization and the resulting transformation of communal and particularistic relations into . . . competitive and universalistic ones.

The operation of peasant production

outside the complete control of market relations has led to the position that the peasantry is a distinct economy with a logic of its own. Chayanov's theory has been instrumental in forging this position. Based on his theory, authors like Thorner (1971)⁵ and Kerblay (1971) argue that the peasant economy is a system of production separate from slavery, capitalism and socialism. The two theorists further claim that the separate peasant economy is a unique mode of production. At different points in his work, Marx also referred to peasant production as a specific mode in which the tenants or free landholders produce their own means of subsistence using family labor. This position is similar to Chayanov's. The similarity can be explained by the fact that within Marx's texts, mode of production is used in two ways: as a system of production (i.e., the organization of the labor process or the productive forces) and as an articulated combination of forces and relations of production. He uses the first denotation in his discussion of peasants.

The notion of the 'peasantry' as defining a distinct and general type of economy has been challenged by several theorists (Ennew, Hirst and Tribe 1977, Littlejohn 1973, Friedman 1980). Using the concept of mode of production in a general sense as an economy structured by the forces and relations of production as well as by its conditions of reproduction, these theorists concur that the peasant economy cannot constitute a mode of production. If it were a unique mode, the following conditions must be met: 1) the labor process is organized around the universal identity of the production unit with the domestic group, 2) a specific relation of production (nonexploitative family and communal relations) can be deduced from the demographic and economic dynamism of the individual households, and 3) the conditions of existence of reproduction⁶ of the peasantry are entailed in the theory of the mode, i.e., the reproduction of independent peasant can occur within the mode. However, peasant relations of production cannot be derived

from the dynamism of household production. It is a historical fact that peasants in this period surrender a surplus to capitalist domination and the dynamics that explain the extraction is located outside the peasant mode (Harris 1978). Moreover, the peasantry is no longer reproduced independently of the external economy. In other words, one can no longer speak of an autonomous peasantry. Even with the proprietorship of land in recent years, peasants are not completely independent economically since the reproduction of some means of production depends on commodity prices. It should also be noted that the internal composition and division of labor within the peasant enterprise eventually becomes a function of the external relations of households to each other and to the dominant mode of production. To illustrate, a peasant family's subsistence needs may no longer be met without hiring out labor as contractual workers in urban industries. The reproduction of the peasant household in this case is partly dependent on nonpeasant capitalist industries. Thus, the argument that the peasant economy does not constitute a mode of production reduces the significance of the concept of articulation of modes of production. The theoretical problem we are left with is the articulation of the peasant *form* of production with the capitalist mode on which it depends.

Because class relations and conditions of reproduction cannot be deduced from the concept of the peasantry, one can argue for its replacement by existing concepts within a deductive logic of markets, e.g., simple commodity production (Vergopoulos 1978, Ennew, Hirst and Tribe 1977). However, the use of simple commodity production would imply that a certain degree of specialization exists, that competitive relations predominate over communal relations, and that the link to the market is almost complete. Empirically, production of commodities in peasant farms does exist (Harris 1978) but unlike simple commodity production, it involves important communal and/or class relations which limit

the penetration of commodity relations into the production process (Friedman 1980). Because the concept of the peasantry deviates from the theoretically expected characteristics of SCP, the latter cannot replace it although the concept is useful in delineating an observable sector of the economy. For purposes of this thesis, peasantry/peasant economy denotes forms of agricultural production managed to a greater or lesser extent by household units with a rudimentary division of labor based on sex and age, producing agricultural crops in varying degrees for the market but mainly to satisfy basic subsistence needs. Following Friedman, this thesis argues that the peasant form of production must be conceived as a double specification of the unit of production (household) and the social formation. In combination with the internal structure of the household unit, the social formation/external economy/capitalist mode of production determines the conditions of reproduction, decomposition and transformation of the peasantry. This double specification implies that the concept of peasant economy cannot be deduced from a general theory but is an empirical concept whose content is subject to a concrete analysis of particular historical conjunctures. The only theoretical specificity of peasants is that they produce their own subsistence in relative isolation from factor markets.

Because the social formation from which the character of peasant households derive may change in a variety of ways, one cannot speak of a homogeneous peasant economy. This means that the peasant form under feudalism no longer obtains under capitalism. Furthermore, the penetration of commodity relations in agriculture has had diverse effects on the reproduction of the peasantry. At one extreme peasants are transformed into capitalist producers. At the other extreme, they are dispossessed. A heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous group evolves in the process. Between these poles lie a variation of other types of peasant households which are

determined by the relations between the household unit and external economic forces.

Capitalism and the Peasantry

The previous section ended with the note that the peasantry cannot be viewed as homogeneous because its analysis must depart from an overall social formation which changes in a variety of ways. Since the capitalist mode dominates and continuously alters the structure of peripheral societies, the theoretical problem at hand is to conceptualize the impact of capitalism on the peasant form of production. In this section, therefore, we are concerned with the literature on the *reproduction* and *transformation* of the peasantry.

Let us restate the definition of reproduction and transformation. *Reproduction* is the renewal of technical and social elements of production from one round to another such that production recommences in its previous form (Friedman 1980). Technical elements refer to means of production while the social elements refer to the laborers and those who control the means of production. Applying this definition to the peasant form of production in which the household is the unit of work and consumption, the means of production is partly in the hands of producers and the distribution of the product among the social product is divided between the renewal of the means of production on one hand and the daily maintenance or the restoration of the family's capacity to work and to reproduce physically the next generation if the household is still relatively young. Nonpeasants like landlords, merchants and the state may also establish claims on the product through control over land, credit and taxation respectively. A system of production is *transformed* if it could no longer be reproduced in its previous form. In the case of the peasantry, transformation essentially entails a change in the way peasants meet their subsistence needs.

The partial integration of isolated rural villages to the product market and the break up of feudal or quasi-feudal holdings under the impact of capitalism has transformed peasant production. The transformation outcomes have varied. At one extreme, "commodification" or the process of deepening commodity relations, measured as a proportion of goods purchased and sold at market determined prices, have occurred to the point where reciprocal ties have been severed and the renewal of means of production and subsistence has come to depend completely on

commodity relations. Peasant production in this case has been transformed to simple commodity production. At the other extreme, peasant households have continued to be reproduced in relative isolation from the market. In this case, there has been no transformation. In light of the impact of capitalism, one can say that peasant production under this situation resisted commodification. Between these polar extremes one can speak of a limited capitalist penetration in the cycle of reproduction.

Notes

¹Chayanov recognizes that peasant farms are drawn into the system of capitalist commodity production but he maintains that production would still be done in family labor peasant farms subject to the principles of peasant organization.

²This alternative is an implicit acknowledgment of the ties of the peasant family labor farm to the external economy.

³Type 2 disposes 50 to 70 percent of their produce as cash crops. The economy is partly monetized since outside capitalization is required. Although this type of peasant cannot influence prices or the system of production and distribution within peasant enterprises, they have a more or less continuous interaction with the outside world. Type 3 requires external investment since 90 to 100 percent of production is for exchange. Type 4 actually distributes the largest proportion of products to local markets. It seems that Wolf's concept of peasant economy goes beyond the family labor farm. Within this typology, peasants are not prevented from hiring landless laborers.

⁴The concept captures the American family farm which Max Weber differentiated from other farms by the economic individualism of the farmer and his quality as a mere businessman.

⁵Thorner (1970) enumerates five distinguishing characteristics of this system: about half of the total population is agricultural; more than half of the working population is engaged in agriculture; the state is territorial; towns exist and are politically, economically and socially separated from the countryside; and the family household is the unit of production with family labor growing more than half of the crops.

⁶Reproduction is the renewal of technical and social elements of production from one round to another, i.e., the renewal of the means of production and the distribution of the social product among those who labor and those who control the labor process directly or indirectly such that production commences in its previous form.

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