

CEPAL Review

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UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA
SANTIAGO DE CHILE / APRIL 1982

CEPAL

Review

Number 16

Santiago, Chile

April 1982

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The principal schools of thought on the peasant economy

*Klaus Heynig**

The great problems of the Latin American countries, which are manifested most clearly in the poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and underemployment of a considerable part of the population, have made it necessary to rethink the role of agriculture in the process of development. Despite the accelerated urbanization and the loss of relative importance of the agricultural sector in the generation of the national product, this sector continues to occupy a strategic place in the majority of Latin American countries. After a phase of almost exclusive attention to the medium-sized and large producers, in recent years the intellectual debate has concentrated particularly on small producers, with limited access to land and other productive resources, and who depend for their subsistence largely on family labour. The main subjects of discussion refer to the functioning and logic of family-type agricultural production and their significance and prospects under the current styles of development in the region; however, despite the topical nature of the debate, many of the arguments used are explicitly or implicitly based on approaches or theories developed in Russia at the beginning of this century.

This article tries to offer a brief critical synthesis of the principal approaches to peasants, grouping them into anthropological approaches, 'modernizing' or neoclassical approaches, Marxist approaches, Chayanov's theory of the peasant economy and other aspects of the contemporary debate in Latin America. In the final part it presents some observations aimed at providing some suggestions for orienting future work on peasant agriculture.

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Introduction

This work proposes to offer a critical synthesis of the different theoretical approaches proposed on the subject of peasant agriculture in Latin America.

Naturally, the presentation of the approaches and their main spokesmen is not free of some arbitrariness in selection, a certain sketchiness and the inevitable oversimplifications. Nor do we claim to have absolute neutrality in our evaluations of given approaches; we are not attempting to add a new one to the numerous existing approaches and interpretations on the subject, since more questions are raised in this article than answers. What we do seek to present is a critical summary of the principal elements in the debate, in the hope that this will be a contribution to the research on the current state of the peasant sector in Latin America.

The study consists of a brief presentation and discussion of the anthropological and modernizing approaches, followed by analyses of the classical Marxist concept, Chayanov's theory of the peasant economy, and some more recent studies. For two reasons it seems justifiable to us to pay particular attention to Chayanov: (a) he is the only one who has offered a coherent theory of the phenomenon of small-scale peasant production as regards its internal structure and its capacity for survival in a capitalist system: a fact which may explain, at least in part, his attractiveness for the current debate; and (b) the presentation of his work allows us to discuss the principal categories which, in one way or another, appear in almost all the studies on the subject and are essential for the analysis of the peasant economy.

The use of the term 'peasant economy' may of course involve a wide-ranging debate, since not only are the definition and characteristics of this 'form' of production the subject of vigorous argument, but also its very existence is controversial, to the point that some deny the existence of a peasant sector in Latin America. The bibliography refers to a variety of concepts used in attempts to conceptualize the agrarian structure and small-scale peasant production and to define what is meant by 'peasant', locating the question within the process of transformation of the economic and social structures.

In the 1960s, the latifundio-minifundio dichotomy—used in the works of CIDA on land tenure—was coined. This characterizes peasant production as a form of subsistence agriculture, defined exclusively by the size of the operation and linked to the latifundio by extra-economic ties. R. Redfield, one of the main representatives of the anthropological approach, places the peasant between the small, isolated community and the farmer, the latter being “characterized by an intimate and reverent attitude towards the land, by the idea that agricultural labour has a much higher value than commerce, and by the emphasis on labour as a primary virtue”.¹ In the ‘dualist’ approaches stress is placed on the dichotomy between a modern sector, the bearer of progress, and another sector which is traditional, backward, and excluded from development: a description applied to the small peasant production sector.² Among the Marxists, there are some who affirm that in the countryside the remains of a feudal mode of production persist, whereas in the cities the capitalist mode of production dominates. Others, who have greater weight in the argument, start from the assumption that various modes of production can co-exist simultaneously, and that this can even be a permanent situation. These modes of production, it is claimed, are articulated with each other under the aegis of a dominant mode of production: capitalism.

For some, the peasantry is a conservative social group, but for others it is an agent of change and a revolutionary subject. All agree, however, that peasant production is based on the exploitation of family labour. It is clear that

this approach, as a single criterion, is insufficient to raise small peasant production to the level of a homogeneous category and a specific form of production, however.

The above concepts constitute only a small sample, but they demonstrate the difficulty of defining a term which adequately characterizes peasants. To speak of ‘peasants’ without other specification, as if this were a generic term, abstracting it from the historical and social framework, does not help at all to explain the reason for being, functioning and differentiation of the peasant economy. When, in this phase of the study, we use the expression ‘peasant economy’ it is in the technical sense of the term, and we are not seeking to identify ourselves with the school of thinking which has limited the concept to family exploitation as a theoretical unit of analysis, and this position has led us to develop a general theory of the peasant economy. The expression in itself is not as important as its meaning in the different contexts being considered here, without denying the ideological background of certain terms and their political implications, which, in many cases, have been harmful to the peasants of Latin America, since they continue to form the largest numerical group and also the poorest.

A key question underlying all the concepts presented here and which has not yet received a conclusive response seems to be the following: “Why does capitalist development, whose interest is directed towards lowering the costs of reproduction of industrial labour, continue to maintain, through various sources (mainly governmental) support, large groups of ‘inefficient’ small producers in the rural areas? What specific function do these small producers fulfil in the capitalist economy?”³

¹See A. Solarí and R. Franco, *Teoría, acción social y desarrollo en América Latina*, Mexico City, Ed. Siglo XXI, 1976, p. 383.

²See G. Germani, “Stages of modernization”, in *Latin America - The Dynamics of Social Change*, S.A. Halper and J.R. Sterling (ed.), New York, Saint Martin’s Press, 1972.

³R. Alvaay, “Alcances metodológicos sobre el concepto de ‘economía campesina’ en Chile”, in *Boletín de Estudios Agrarios*, No. 1, July-September 1978, GEA, Santiago, Chile, p. 18.

I

Anthropological approaches

Anthropology has traditionally directed its efforts towards the study of primitive populations living in isolated or tribal forms, attributing to them a special culture conceived as an independent and self-sufficient system, an 'autonomous cultural system', which does not require any other system for its permanent functioning. Since the 1940s and 1950s, anthropologists have increasingly been studying peasant communities, introducing the expression 'peasant' as a generic term to designate a group whose economic behaviour is explained by its cognitive attitudes, values and systems. Peasants are considered to be inserted in a traditional peasant culture where the cultural content and values are transmitted verbally. From the observation and description of small tribal communities, anthropologists have arrived at a better comprehension of the fact that "the processes of production and distribution in 'uncivilized lands' are not necessarily governed by economic interests but have to do with 'non-economic' factors such as kinship, mythology, etc."⁴ From this perspective, the anthropological approach appears to be opposed to the economic one, since it explains the economic behaviour of peasants by their attitudes, values and cognitive systems. Before the term 'peasant' became a generic category in anthropology, it had historical, cultural and economic connotations, having to do with medieval European life. Contemporary anthropologists, however, consider peasants as persons whose lifestyles show certain structural, economic, social and personality similarities in contrast to other basic forms of groupings such as primitive society and industrial society, independently of the geographical location and era. The formal recognition of the peasantry as an important type of structure in society came later, mainly in the work of A.L. Kroeber. According to this author, in his 1948 work *Anthropology*,

"peasants constitute part-societies with part-cultures. They are definitely rural, yet live in relation to market towns; they form a class segment of a larger population which usually contains also urban centers... They lack the isolation, the political autonomy and the self-sufficiency of tribal populations; but their local units retain much of their old identity, integration and attachment to soil and cults"⁵.

This frequently cited definition already contains the principal aspects of what were later to be the central elements of anthropological analyses on peasants. The value of Kroeber's definition is that it recognizes the importance of the relations of the peasants with the urban sector and their integration into society as whole. The peasantry was no longer considered an isolated and self-sufficient cultural group, but became a class segment dependent on the nation as a whole and vice-versa. Robert Redfield, one of the main representatives of the anthropological approach, points out that the peasant community must be studied as a part of the State and civilization in which it is inserted. In his study *The Folk Culture of Yucatán*,⁶ Redfield tried to explain how the growing urban influence in the countryside led to destruction of the traditional life styles and a 'cultural disorganization' due to the more individualistic behaviour and a greater secularization of the peasant community and its members following contact between the two. The final result of this process is modern society. The main source of change is the city, since Redfield held that the existence of the peasant requires the presence of a city, and the surviving primitives who are not related to a city are not peasants; that is to say, the city is necessary in order to distinguish between

⁴T. Shanin, *Naturaleza y lógica de la economía campesina*, trans. H.C. Trejo, Barcelona, Ed. Anagrama, 1976, p. 10.

⁵Quoted by George M. Foster, "What is a Peasant?", in *Peasant Society - A Reader*, J.M. Potter, M.N. Díaz, G.M. Foster (eds.), Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1967, p. 2.

⁶Robert Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatán*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1941.

peasants and primitive societies. The predominant role of the city implies that the peasants have very little control over the conditions of their form of production and over their life in general.

The power of decision lies outside the village. Peasants are not only poor but also have no power, and the lack of effective political control leads them to seek other resources, almost always individually or in relation to the family, in order to improve their scarce opportunities for survival. Patronage and fictitious kinship or *compadrazgo* are the two most important types of relationships which allow the peasant to strengthen his position in the community and society. Redfield saw the relationship between peasant societies and the city as a relationship between the great tradition of those few who think, within a civilization, and the small tradition of the many who, in general, do not think.⁷ Like other anthropologists, he has frequently described the peasant society as an intermediate or transitory form, a passage from the traditional to the modern. The resistance to change attributed to peasants is due to their cultural lag which keeps them in a position opposed to change and attached to their traditions. With the closing of this cultural gap between the country and the city, thanks to the advance of industrialization, the disintegration of peasant society is accelerated until it disappears. It is evident that this 'lag' always seems to be measured in relation to urban dwellers, the "few who think within a civilization". From his studies of primitive society in Mesoamerica, Redfield concluded that "in every part of the world, generally speaking, the peasantry has been a conservative force in social change, a curb on revolution, and a limitation on the process of social disintegration which frequently occurs with rapid technological change".⁸

Redfield proposed a typology of isolated communities—peasants and farmers—, characterizing as peasants those who have a control of the land which allows them to carry on in

common a traditional way of life closely integrated with agriculture, but not as an economic investment to obtain profit.⁹ Those who practice agriculture as commerce and consider land as capital and merchandise are not peasants but farmers. The peasant is thus located between the isolated community and the farmer; he represents "the rural dimension of old civilizations", a half-society with a half-culture, characterized by an intimate and deferential attitude to the land, by the idea that agricultural work is worth much more than commerce, and by the emphasis placed on work as a primary virtue.

A large part of the debate among anthropologists has centered on the definition of a peasant, in most cases emphasizing their cultural specificity, with their values and perceptions. The importance of the culturalist approach is largely due to the methodology applied by anthropologists, stressing community studies. This has stimulated many empirical studies, where the individual, with his systems of values and norms, appears isolated from society, governed solely by the internal dynamics of the community or village, and separated from external political and social forces. According to some authors, this persistence of the culturalist explanation is partly due to the desire of some western scientists to reject Marxist theory, which in turn leads them to relegate to a secondary plane the role played by economic aspects and the concept of social classes and to favour an approach which places greater emphasis on the importance of culture, values and norms.¹⁰

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the literature on peasants received a considerable stimulus from the works of Julian Steward and his disciples, among them Eric Wolf, who stressed the labour aspects of the peasantry. "Peasant agriculture was shown to be a special type, and the cultural characterization of the peasant community became weaker in relation to the attention given to the agricultural econ-

⁷George M. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁸R. Redfield, quoted in A. Solari, R. Franco, J. Jutkowitz, *Teoría, acción social y desarrollo en América Latina*, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

⁹R. Redfield, *The Little Community: Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 19.

¹⁰J.S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics and Revolution*, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 22.

omy of the peasantry."¹¹ In an article published in 1955, E. Wolf uses economic criteria to define the peasantry: agricultural production, control over the land and production for subsistence.¹² In 1966, however, Wolf opted for a different concept which brings out the production of a fund of rent and the role of the State. "It is this production of a fund of rent which critically distinguishes the peasant from the primitive cultivator..." and "it is crystallization of executive power which serves to distinguish the primitive from the civilized..."¹³ With these definitions, Wolf rejects the idea of Redfield and others that the city is the key to understanding the peasantry, considering power relations instead as the 'central variable'.

Powell mentions a third tendency in the literature on peasants, one which stresses the activities of the dominant élite (Wittfogel) and sees the distinction between peasant and non-peasant as lying in the differences between the governed and the governing, which "determined and structured both the access of the peasant to land—his status as landholder—and the distribution of the agricultural product of the land which his labour yielded".¹⁴

While recognizing the valuable contributions of anthropology in explaining the internal operation of the family unit and the peasant community, our criticism is directed against the generalizations by some authors on peasant social organization and culture. Economic behaviour and ideologies depend on so many factors that it is difficult to conceive of them as a simple function of cultural values. Some supporters of the anthropological approaches frequently describe the peasants as irrational beings, lacking in motivation, only interested in social goals, and suspicious of the oppor-

tunities presented to them. They are also described as attached to their traditions and slow to change their patterns of behaviour; as individuals resigned to their fate and fearful of the world, and hostile in their interpersonal relationships. Most of the limitations attributed to peasants are centered on the characteristics and values which are opposed to our stereotyped image of western economic man, for whose service our development strategies are designed. The common factor in these studies is the importance attributed to psychological variables in the determination of the socio-economic structure of peasant life. The high degree of subjectivity of these studies rather reflects the attitude of the authors towards given values that they perceive as 'typically' peasant. In the generic descriptions of the personality of the peasant, the phenomena are considered as essentially static, opposed to the introduction of changes. It is assumed that the traditional and modern systems are mutually exclusive and that there is a permanent conflict between them. With growing economic development, it is felt, the new social and economic structures will destroy and replace the old forms. Modernization and development are synonymous for the culturalist approach, and the characteristics of the peasant personality represent the main cause of underdevelopment. Many of these studies on the peasant personality arose as a response to the question of why the diffusion of technology by the assistance programmes was different according to societies and regions. Instead of considering the political and economic limitations, it was decided to track down the causes by analysing cultural, psychosocial and psychological variables.

Despite the available evidence which shows that certain 'traditional' values and relations are perfectly compatible with development, many anthropologists preferred a simpler approach to change. "The research problem lies either in demonstrating the rupture of traditional institutions under the influence of the forces of modernization or, if this were not possible, in demonstrating that the persistence of the traditional institutions constitutes the principal obstacle to modernization."¹⁵ The

¹¹J.D. Powell, "Sobre la definición de campesinos y de sociedad campesina", in Charles Wagley and others, *Estudios sobre el campesinado latinoamericano. La perspectiva de la antropología social*, trans. Celia Nova, Buenos Aires, Ed. Periferia 1974, p. 50.

¹²E. Wolf, "Types of Latin American Peasantry", cited in S. Silverman, "The Peasant Concept in Anthropology", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, October 1979, pp. 62-63.

¹³E. Wolf, *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 10 and 11.

¹⁴J.D. Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁵M. Singer, cited in N. Long, *An Introduction to the*

conceptual framework of this approach is limited largely to the familiar distinction between the so-called 'modern' and 'traditional' systems.

This approach is reflected in the design of the development policies of the 1960s. Since the peasant societies were considered as anachronistic, then the process of development or modernization should produce the transformation of the classic peasant societies into new modern ones. For G.M. Foster, the eminent anthropologist, this transformation can be achieved "by creating economic and other opportunities that will encourage the peasant to abandon his traditional and increasingly unrealistic cognitive orientation for a new one that reflects the realities of the modern world".¹⁶ Growing participation in the market will transform the traditional peasants into "farmers, or agricultural business men, whose activities become a business for profit".¹⁷

It is clear that our criticism is not directed against anthropology in itself, a science which

we consider indispensable for explaining certain attitudes and reactions of peasants which do not fit into the interpretive framework of those who wish to submit all phenomena rigidly to a presumed economic rationale. However, we are criticizing certain approaches which have given a distorted picture of peasants and have contributed to the formulation of policies which in many cases, instead of improving their living conditions, have led them into greater poverty. Although anthropology has already left behind certain attitudes and has arrived at a more complete and realistic understanding of the peasantry, thus making some very valuable contributions, some erroneous ideas still persist, both in the academic discussion and on the political plane. Apparently this persistence is due, among other reasons, to the political convenience of these ideas for certain sectors which were the main beneficiaries of the policies designed to modernize agriculture.

II

'Modernizing' approaches

The 'traditional-modern' dichotomy also appears to be a basic concept in the theories of modernization formulated by neoclassical economics. As in some anthropological approaches, in the modernizing ones a perception of economic dualism prevails. For these, the underdeveloped countries contain two separate and fundamentally different sectors: the modern sector—capitalistic and industrial, receptive to change, oriented towards the market and pursuing the maximization of gains in its behaviour—, and the traditional sector—agricultural and stagnant, based on subsistence production, with scant surpluses for marketing,

with a significant preference for a lazy life and little interest in making profits. A high degree of unemployment is assumed in the agricultural sector, disguised as underemployment. Production in the traditional sector is considered to be a simple function of land and labour, due to the lack of any significant accumulation of capital. The only connexion of any importance between the two sectors is the flow of labour from agriculture to industry and the transfer of a small surplus of agricultural products which feeds the population in the urban centres. This concept, elaborated in its classical form by W.A. Lewis in 1954,¹⁸ is based on a fundamentally closed economy, which grows by transferring labour from agriculture to in-

Sociology of Rural Development, London, Tavistock Publications, 1977, p. 30.

¹⁶G. M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good", in *Peasant Society - A Reader*, op. cit., p. 304.

¹⁷J. M. Potter, "Peasants in the Modern World", in *Peasant Society - A Reader*, op. cit., p. 380.

¹⁸W. A. Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour", in *The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, May 1964.

dustry. Finally, the disguised unemployment is eliminated and a shortage of labour occurs in the rural sector, which leads to a process of rapid economic modernization, through more efficient use of modern technology and changes in economic attitudes. Thus, economic development in rural areas would depend primarily on the transfer of technology from the modern sector, that is, technological diffusion would be the main determining factor for economic development.

One of the most prominent exponents of the neoclassical interpretation, T.W. Schultz, affirms that in traditional agriculture there is an equilibrium which has been consolidated from ancient times, while modern agriculture is characterized by a disequilibrium in chronic movement.¹⁹ Although recognizing that traditional agriculture has an essentially rational form of economic behaviour, similar to the behaviour of any businessman seeking to maximize his profits, Schultz concludes that, due to the low rate of yield of investments, traditional agricultural production grows very slowly. "Traditional agriculture is not capable of offering a cheap contribution to economic growth because it has exhausted the economic opportunities presented by the state of the technologies on which it depends."^{20, 21}

When the problem is analysed in this way, the logical consequence is an appropriate policy for promoting economic development: the introduction of new factors into the productive process, the transfer of capital, and the generation, adoption and diffusion of modern technology.

This approach presents in the final analysis, an ahistorical conception of the coexistence of two sectors: a capitalist sector and a traditional non-capitalistic one, each independent of the other and with its own individual dynamic within the economy. Nor does it consider all the aspects of social relations nor the way in which these determine the processes of production.

¹⁹T. W. Schultz, *Modernización de la agricultura*, trans. by L. Barinaga, Valencia, Ed. Aguilar, 1968.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 62.

²¹On the neoclassical interpretation, see D. Astori, *El proceso de desarrollo agrícola en América Latina - Algunas interpretaciones*, Rome, FAO, 1978.

From the static nature of traditional agriculture and its relative unreceptiveness to economic stimuli, it is concluded that investments, technical assistance, etc., should be directed to medium and large-scale enterprises; meanwhile, the conditions of life and production of the small cultivators is presented rather as a social problem, with little relevance for the process of economic development. This is why the transfer of capital and technology have formed the backbone of the modernization policies which were at their height during the 1960s under the sponsorship of the Alliance for Progress and international organizations. What the developed countries could offer the underdeveloped world was capital and technology to combat poverty; consequently, as J. K. Galbraith put it, the causes of poverty were derived from the possibilities available: poverty was considered a result of the shortage of capital and the lack of technical skills, and the remedy included the diagnosis: since smallpox vaccine is available, then let us diagnose smallpox.²² Some theoreticians and development planners believed it possible to transform the traditional peasant properties into family farms or enterprises, as it was assumed had happened in the industrial countries.²³ In addition, within the strategies for productive modernization mention should be made of the so-called Green Revolution: a form of technology apparently developed to increase productivity on units of any size, but which was turned into a discriminatory form of promotion favouring the interests of the owners of large and medium-sized farms; this type of technological innovation could be called 'land expanding', since they achieve an increase in the productivity of the land.

The mechanization of agriculture, widely promoted, was considered from the very beginning as an input for the modern sector and not for the small farmers, and this form of modernization further increased the existing gap between small peasant production and entrepreneurial agriculture.

²²J. K. Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979, p. VI.

²³R. Weitz, *De campesino a agricultor*, trans. by Esther Guilón, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973.

The agrarian reform programmes promoted in the majority of Latin American countries during the 1960s did not concentrate so much on the influence of economic stimuli, but rather on the agrarian structures governing land tenure. In the CIDA reports on seven countries, the analysis was centered above all on the problem of land tenure, identifying the great inequality in land distribution—the latifundio-minifundio complex—as the main factor in underdevelopment.²⁴ To get out of this predicament, then, it was considered necessary to redistribute the land so that the institutional framework, which is what determines the scantily productive rationale of the big landholder, will disappear. The differences between the different strata of productive units were established only as a function of quantitative information such as land size and use. This current could be considered as 'critical continuism': "Continuism in the sense of not questioning the basic premises of the general model of production... and critical, in the sense that all its sources lay stress, from different points of view, on the insufficiency, inequity and inefficiency of the current agrarian structure..."²⁵

The modernizing or development approach in Latin American agriculture basically pursues two objectives:

1. To expand the domestic market for the sale of the products of national industry through the incorporation of the peasant mass into monetary demand. This presupposes a change in the precapitalist relations in which the remuneration of labour is carried out through the granting of land or payment in kind;

2. To cut down on the pressure on land through agrarian reform and colonization programmes which will alleviate social and political tension.

The Alliance for Progress promoted a development model which was oriented only towards economic growth (i.e., towards the possibility of obtaining a certain rate of accumu-

lation and increase in the per capita product), and an agrarian reform model which only sought to modernize the latifundista structure and bring about a limited redistribution of land. In the final analysis, its objective was limited to improving the conditions of operation of dependent capitalism. Even so, the opposition encountered by the redistributive character of the agrarian reform proposed led to its paralysis in most of the countries.

There then arose renewed interest in the technification of agriculture, the introduction of agricultural technologies, and the improvement of the supply of food and thus agricultural productivity: a concept encouraged by the so-called Green Revolution. Next came the classic concept of rural development—in neoclassical terms—which assumes a series of support policies for agricultural production, without touching the aspects of land ownership and redistribution in agriculture. An attempt was made to alleviate the pressure on the land by developing agricultural colonization plans, thus displacing the conflict—geographically and politically—to regions farther away from the circuit of accumulation of capital in the urban centres.

To speak of 'agrarian reform', of 'agrarian transformation', or of 'agricultural modernization' is a problem which transcends terminology: the development of rigid economic structure was determining increasingly restricted limits on the attempts at reform carried out through State economic policy. The short-term vision of the national oligarchies and their lack of understanding of their own long-term interests reduced the reform attempts to mere attempts at agricultural modernization. The agrarian transformation projects proposed modifications in the agrarian structure without modifying its essence: they proposed an agrarian transformation without simultaneously facing up to an industrial and/or financial transformation, etc. It is not surprising, then, that according to a recent FAO study the majority of poor peasants do not benefit from rural development programmes.²⁶

²⁴Solon Barraclough and Juan Carlos Collarte, *El hombre y la tierra en América Latina*, Santiago, Chile, Ed. Universitaria, 1971.

²⁵CEPAL, *Economía campesina y agricultura empresarial: tipología de productores del agro mexicano*, CEPAL/MEX/1037, January 1981, p. 29.

²⁶FAO, "Participation of the Poor in Rural Organizations", mentioned in *Ceres*, No. 73, Vol. 13, No. 1, Rome, January-February 1980.

III

The classic Marxist approach

Practically all those who have studied the peasant question refer to Marx, and particularly to Lenin, either to demonstrate and denounce the obsolete character of Marxist theory, to apply more or less mechanically to real situations the positions expressed by classic Marxist theory, or to give Marxist theory a creativity capable of explaining the position and function of small agricultural producers within the process of capitalist development. We will present here a brief summary of the ideas of Marx and Lenin on the peasant, which, according to Bartra, are an indispensable point of departure for understanding the Latin American situation.²⁷

1. Marx

Various studies which present or claim to present Marx's thinking on peasants point out his derogatory attitude towards small-scale agricultural production, when he refers to peasants as 'rural idiots', as representatives of 'barbarism within civilization' or 'the height of backwardness'. Mitrany, in his book *Marx against the Peasant* (1951) draws the conclusion that "Marxists were against the peasants because of the original dogmatic beliefs of Marx".²⁸ In fact, Marx's works on the peasantry are characterized by a certain ambiguity which corresponds to some extent to the peasant character as he saw it. As the owner of the means of production he is a capitalist, and as a worker he is his own employee. Considered from this point of view, the peasants combine in a single social group the two basic categories of capitalist society: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The relatively small importance attributed by Marx in his work to the peasants is due to the fact that he considers them, in the world historical process—present and future—, as a residual

category. Since the peasants in Europe were identified with small-scale private ownership, Marx supported the progress of the relations of capitalist property in order to liberate the peasants from 'rural idiocy' and so that they might consider themselves as members of the proletariat or, in some cases, of the bourgeoisie.

Often Marx's writings were wrongly interpreted, and this may be explained by the confusion existing with regard to the historical context within which the peasants are inserted. In his *Grundrisse*, Marx analyses the peasants in precapitalist societies (i.e., those preceding capitalist production) and divides them into three main types: Oriental, Ancient Classical and Germanic, all of which are fundamentally agricultural societies. His main purpose was to show how these previous forms of production were all incompatible with capitalism, and how the latter could only be built up by destroying them. By dissolving the property of the workers of the land, he claimed capitalism would create the conditions for its full expansion.

In other writings, Marx refers to the relationship between the peasants and capitalism in three different countries: England, France and Russia. In them, Marx alludes to concrete situations occurring in the development of capitalism in the respective countries, and this prevents a simplistic application of his observations to peasants in other historical, social and geographical contexts.

In the third volume of *Capital* Marx offers some explanations, based on the British example, of the birth, development and peculiarities of capitalist agriculture. His main thesis is the universalization of the relations of capitalist production or the elimination of small holdings by the incorporation of the capitalist mode of production in the agrarian sector, and he considers the form of production on such small holdings as a necessary transitional phase for the development of agriculture. The key category of his analysis is the capitalist rent of the land, which is essentially a permanent excess

²⁷Roger Bartra, *Estructura agraria y clases sociales en México*, Mexico City, Ed. Era, 1974, p. 13.

²⁸Michael Dugget, "Marx y los campesinos", in *El Trimestre Político*, Vol. 1, No. 4, April-June, Mexico City, 1976, p. 3.

profit, specific to agriculture, appropriated by the landholder. The fact that the land is a non-produced and relatively non-produceable means of production determines a certain specificity in the development of agricultural production in contrast with that of industry, while the fact that there is an extraordinary gain in agricultural activity has determined the development of capitalist relations in the countryside and the expropriation from the peasants of their means of production. According to Marx, usury, the tax system and the sale of land require production for the purpose of exchange and, in this way, they force the destruction of rural domestic manufacture. As natural disadvantages of smallholding production compared to capitalist agriculture he mentions the gradual impoverishment of the land, the reduction in agricultural prices as a result of the competition of agricultural capitalism, and the impossibility of raising the productivity of the land. He analyses how, in the case of England, the capitalist methods of cultivation have destroyed the English peasantry, and points out the fact that through the process of 'primitive accumulation' the peasants are separated from their means of subsistence and are thrown out onto the labour market as free proletarians. Marx considers this expulsion of the peasants as a necessary condition for the development of capitalism.

The so-called 'English way', always according to the Marxist system, contemplates three classes in agriculture: those of the landholder, the capitalist and the agricultural worker.

As regards the discussion among Marxists on the peasantry as a class and peasantry as a mode of production, it should be noted that Marx, in *Formen*, considers 'the small free property' as a mode of production located at the same level as the 'primitive community'. However, in the great majority of Marx's writings on peasants, the latter are analysed as a class whose position fits into the concrete process of the class struggle, in a given social formation.²⁹

The economic characteristics of the peas-

antry as a social class, inserted in a capitalist social formation, present it as a class which is exploited, but by different mechanisms from those of the working class. The differences in these forms of exploitation determine a different ideological attitude in the peasantry from that of the working class. "Capable of violent uprisings, it also dreams of a 'saviour' from the bourgeoisie, and chooses this saviour among the reactionary elements of the dominant class."³⁰ The contradictions between small property and capitalism will continue to grow, since the former will be incapable of developing labour productivity because of its reduced scale of production and the development of modern techniques. According to Marx, there is only one alternative for the peasantry: either to join an alliance with the organized proletariat for the overthrow of the bourgeois order or to stagnate, going from crisis to crisis, until it is expropriated and replaced by vast capitalist units of production.

2. Lenin

The basic contribution of Lenin to the Marxist concept of the peasantry has been his analysis of peasant disintegration in his classic study on the development of capitalism in Russia, where he states "that the basis of the formation of the internal market in capitalist production is the process of breaking up the small farmers into agricultural bosses and workers"³¹ The proletarianization of the peasants creates a market, especially for consumer goods, while their transformation into bosses, into the rural bourgeoisie, primarily creates a market for the means of production. As a result of this 'descampesinización' process there occurs the radical destruction of the 'old peasantry' and new types of rural population arise. "These types are the rural bourgeoisie (usually 'petty') and the rural proletariat, the class of the producers of goods in agriculture and the class of agricultural wage-earning workers."³²

²⁹Pierre Beaucage, "¿Modos de producción articulados o lucha de clases?", in R. Bartra, *Modos de producción en América Latina*, Mexico City, Ed. Cultura Popular, 1978, pp. 47-72.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 64.

³¹V.I. Lenin, *The rise of capitalism in Russia* (Spanish version), Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950, p. 48.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 159.

"The disintegration of the peasants, which increases their extreme groups at the expense of the average peasant, creates two new types of rural population, the common feature of the two being the mercantile, monetary character of the economy."³³ One of these types is the rural bourgeoisie, or well-off peasants, and the other is the rural proletariat, the class of wage-earning workers. This second category includes both the poor peasants who still have some land and those who do not have any at all. For Lenin it is a fact "that the majority of the 'peasants' have already occupied a perfectly well-defined place in the general system of capitalist production, namely, the place of agricultural and industrial wage-earners".³⁴ However, he notes "that our studies often include in an excessively rigid manner the theoretical thesis that capitalism requires a free, landless worker. This is perfectly true as a basic tendency, but in agriculture capitalism penetrates especially slowly and through extraordinarily diverse forms".³⁵

The 'depeasantization' and differentiation of small-holding production is determined by:

—the capitalist penetration of the market and competition in agriculture through commercial agriculture;

—the eventual destruction of small-holding production and the impoverishment of the old type of poor peasants due to the natural advantages which large-scale exploitation will have over them, once rural production is made subject to competition and the capitalist law of value.

For Lenin, on the concrete economic basis of the Russian revolution, there are two possible paths in the capitalist development of agriculture:

(a) *The 'Junker' path*: the old land-holding economy, linked to the right of servitude, is preserved by being slowly transformed into a purely capitalist, 'Junker'-type economy;

b) *The 'Farmer' path*: the destruction by revolution of the 'landholders' property and all the main pillars of the old corresponding 'superstructure' makes way for the development of

the small peasant hacienda, which in turn will gradually continue to disintegrate with the development of capitalism.

Each of these ways leads to a process of 'depeasantization' and the replacement of the system of payment by work with that of payment of wages, making possible the formation of an agricultural proletariat. At the same time a process of capital accumulation and concentration of production occurs, based on wage labour.

After this very summary presentation of some central ideas of the thinking of Marx and Lenin on peasants, we feel it necessary to stress that Marx and Lenin do not consider the evolution towards capitalism to be a simple matter. They do not postulate the existence of a unilinear path towards capitalism: on the contrary, at each step they contemplate the possibility that there may arise social relations which are different from capitalist ones. Throughout his principal work, *Das kapital*, Marx points out the obstacles to capitalist penetration in agriculture, which does not occur lineally. Lenin, for his part, stresses that "naturally, the most varied combinations of the elements of one type or another of capitalist evolution are possible, and only incorrigible pedants would claim to be able to resolve the peculiar complicated questions which arise in these cases solely by citing one opinion or another of Marx referring to a different historical era".³⁶ This statement by Lenin seems to us to be a response to and a categorical rejection of many 'Marxists' who take literally what Marx calls the 'classic' conditions of the development of capitalism and who understand the type of development which occurs in England and Europe as capitalism; they thus confuse the situation of the dependent countries with the 'classic' type presented by Marx, rather than analysing the concrete manifestations of the general laws of capital.

This is not the appropriate place to reopen the debate on the possible usefulness of the concepts of Marx and Lenin for understanding small-scale peasant production, its characteristics and prospects. However, we do wish to

³³*Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.

ask several questions here which are at the centre of the debate:

1. Lenin's thesis that the penetration of capitalism in rural areas leads to peasant disintegration at the expense of the average peasantry and to growing differentiation is fully recognized in the Latin American context. In studies carried out on Chile and Mexico the same conclusion was reached.³⁷ The development of capitalism has not given rise to only two classes in the sector, capitalists and proletarians, however. There are relations of different agricultural producers with capital which are not the same as those of the plain wage-earners. Despite the modernization process and the growing capitalization of agriculture, wage-earning work has not become the general rule in Latin America.

2. The majority of authors accept the thesis of the universalization of capitalist production relations in the rural areas of Latin America; but the elimination of the individual small holdings, which for Lenin represented a basic and fundamental trend of capitalism and which went along with the formation of an internal market, has not occurred. There are authors who maintain that "capitalism does not appear to need a rural internal market for its expansion in these very urbanized societies".³⁸

Depriving the peasant of his means of production and throwing him out onto the

labour market as a free proletariat do not appear to be necessary conditions for the development of capitalism in Latin America. In the agricultural sector, the labour freed by mechanization is (as long as the total available land is cultivated), fundamentally superfluous; this is also true for capitalist production as a whole. Capital does not require this labour force for its measured valuation needs. These workers make up the stagnant part of the reserve industrial army, because peasant underemployment is greater than the needs of the reserve industrial army.³⁹

3. Marx and Lenin consider peasant production to be "a residual anomaly in the process of elimination", as an obsolete form which is blocking the full expansion of capitalism.⁴⁰ According to Lenin, small-holding production loses its internal logic once it is linked to the capitalist market, and thus there is no reason to study the conditioning factors of peasant production within capitalism nor the specific form in which it is articulated, nor the possibilities of survival of this form of production. In the agricultural sector a new relationship is not necessarily established between the wage worker and capital: there are other possible paths of capitalist development in agriculture which were considered, according to many interpretations, as being pre-capitalist or transitional forms.

IV

Chayanov's theory of the peasant economy

1. Introduction

The rediscovery of the works of A. V. Chayanov by Daniel Thorner and their translation and publication in English in 1966 had a considerable repercussion on the debate on small-scale

peasant production.⁴¹ It was Thorner who, inspired by Chayanov's work, proposed in 1962 the concept of the peasant economy at a meet-

³⁷Sergio Gómez, "Descomposición campesina: análisis de los asignatarios de la reforma agraria", Santiago, Chile, PREALC/ILO, January 1980, p. 8 (mimeographed).

³⁸David Lehmann, "Proletarización, movimientos sociales y reforma agraria: de las teorías de ayer a la práctica de mañana", Santiago, Chile, PREALC/ILO, January 1980, p. 10 (mimeographed).

³⁹Bennholdt-Thomsen/Boeckh, "Problemas en el análisis de clases del sector agrario en estados con reproducción dependiente del mercado mundial. Un nuevo enfoque: el caso de México", Working Documents, No. 10, August 1977, p. 11, Universitaet Bielefeld, Federal Republic of Germany.

⁴⁰Kostas Vergopoulos, "Capitalismo disforme", in Amin/Vergopoulos, *La cuestión campesina y el capitalismo*, trans. Gerardo Dávila, Mexico City, Ed. Nuestro Tiempo, 1977, p. 197.

⁴¹A.V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. D.

ing of historians and economists in Aix-en-Provence.⁴²

To gain a better understanding of why the works of a Russian agronomist and economist dating from the period 1910-1930 could have exercised such an influence on current theories, it is worth noting the historical circumstances of Russia at that time, from the turbulent pre-war period, through the war itself, the revolution and up until the first years of the socialist transformation. In Russia, the crisis of 1880-1890 had called into question the viability of the large agricultural estate, based on an extensive system of exploitation of cheap labour. A debate began between the populists, legal Marxists and revolutionary Marxists on the merits of small-scale peasant production, in which the social democrats and social revolutionaries held that the only solution to the agrarian question was the nationalization or socialization of land by way of a political revolution. Another group, from which came the so-called organization-production school, stressed the transformation of the organization of peasant economy in order to raise agricultural production, without anticipating any political changes. The main problem faced by this school was to explain how the advanced technology of the western capitalist countries could be adopted by a peasant economy based on family labour and only partly oriented towards a monetary economy. They rejected the usefulness of the concepts of rent, added value and gain as ways of understanding the peasant economy, a position which in turn resulted in a heated debate with the Marxists. Chayanov, trained in this school, became its principal and most brilliant representative.

Thorner, B. Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith, *The American Economic Association*, Illinois, 1966. This edition contains two of Chayanov's works: *On the Theory of Non-capitalist Economic Systems* and his principal work: *Peasant Farm Organization*, originally published in 1925 in Moscow.

⁴²P. Vilar, "La economía campesina", in *Historia y Sociedad*, Segunda Epoca No. 15, Mexico City, 1975, p. 6. D. Thorner, "Peasant Economy as a Category in Economic History", in *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Teodor Shanin (ed.), Penguin, 1973, pp. 202-218. Thorner uses the term 'peasant economy' for complete economies with given characteristics and not in the same way as other authors who apply this term to describe the functioning of the individual family holding.

After the revolution of February and March 1917 there arose a conflict between Lenin on the one hand, who demanded the immediate expropriation of large estates in order to transform them into model farms and the nationalization of all land, including that of the peasants, and, on the other hand, the League for Agrarian Reform, which proposed the transfer of all land to peasant units. This League was a group of economists and agronomists of different political persuasions, and Chayanov was one of the members of its Executive Committee. His position increasingly ran up against the criticisms of the Marxists and, in 1930, accused of counter-revolutionary conspiracy, he died a victim of Stalinist prosecution.

This brief historical sketch of Chayanov shows that the main areas of debate on the agrarian question in Russia, in which he took such a distinguished part, are still very valid today in the discussion of the problems of the peasantry in Latin America.

We will now try to present, although very briefly, the ideas of Chayanov on the peasant economy, and then proceed to a discussion of the principal elements of his theory.

2. Chayanov's theory

Basically, Chayanov's theory, as formulated in his work *On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems*, consists of a criticism of the modern theory of the national economy because it only includes all the economic phenomena exclusively in terms of the capitalist economy.⁴³

All the principal categories of the classic theory, such as rent, capital, prices and others, are based on an economy whose constituent elements are wage work and the tendency to maximize gains; all the other non-capitalist categories of economic life are considered to be insignificant or on the verge of extinction. Despite the predominance of capitalist forms of production, however, in most countries a type of peasant farming prevails in which wage work is not applicable and whose operation cannot

⁴³A.V. Chayanov, *op. cit.*, p. 1. (All further references to A.V. Chayanov are from *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, *op. cit.*)

be analysed by using the classic economic theories and the modern theories derived from them. The absence of the category of wage worker implies, according to Chayanov, that the peasant farms based on family labour belong to an economic structure which is fundamentally different from the capitalist enterprises, and thus a different economic theory is needed. Chayanov therefore concludes that the peasant economy is a non-capitalist form of production; that there exists a peasant mode of production which is different from the capitalist mode of production and which does not operate in terms of profit, wage or rent; and that moreover the absence of these categories means that it is impossible to determine the respective return from the factors of production: capital, labour and land. In the capitalist mode of production the value added is what determines the allocation of resources and the dynamics of the production process; but for the peasant mode of production it is necessary to seek another mechanism to explain its functioning and rationale. Chayanov developed his model by concentrating on the family farm as the central unit of the peasant economy, based on the labour of the producer himself and his family, in which little or no use is made of wage labour, and the only income taken into consideration is that coming from the activities within the unit.

The decisions on production and consumption are interrelated with the family farm, i.e., there is an equation between labour and consumption. Whereas the capitalist enterprise produces exchange values, the peasant produces use values, mainly for self-consumption. But this difference between the objectives of capitalist and peasant production in no way means that there is no production for the market on the part of the peasants. Peasants have indeed entered the monetary and merchandise circulation systems, but at the level of a simple mercantile system, that is, an exchange of use values to obtain the essential products they cannot directly produce themselves, as opposed to the capitalists who sell their products to obtain a profit; thus, "we take the motivation of the peasant's economic activity not as that of an entrepreneur", affirms Chayanov.⁴⁴ For him, the peasant's labour is

aimed at satisfying his needs, i.e., subsistence, as defined culturally. And it is the peasant himself who determines the time and intensity of the labour. "The logic of the mode of production is thus translated to the fallacious level of individual decisions. The principle of explanation is centered on the behaviour and attitudes of producers and consumers."⁴⁵ Individual motivation is the 'modest pre-requisite', the central axis of Chayanov's system. "The whole originality of our theory of peasant farm organization is, in essence, included in this modest pre-requisite, since all other conclusions and constructions follow *in strict logic* from this basic premise and bind all the empirical material into a fairly harmonious system."⁴⁶ The key to the problem, for Chayanov, consists of the confrontation of two hypotheses: on the one hand, the ambivalent concept of the peasant, who combines in his person both the character of a worker and that of an entrepreneur (Marx's concept); or, on the other hand, the concept of the family farm as the individual motivation for the peasant.

Chayanov rejects Marx's concept because in his opinion Marx only uses categories which correspond to the capitalist system. The family farm, as Chayanov conceives it, may also occur in other systems of the national economy, i.e., this kind of productive unit with its given characteristics is not limited exclusively to the agricultural sector.

What determines the product of the family labour is the intensity of that labour, or, in other words, the degree of self-exploitation of the family labour force, stimulated by the consumption needs of the family: "... the degree of self-exploitation of labour is established by some relationship between the measure of demand satisfaction and the measure of the burden of labour".⁴⁷

When the demands of family consumption have been satisfied, which is the final goal of

⁴⁴A.V. Chayanov, "Peasant Farm Organization", in *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴⁵V.M. Moncayo and F. Rojas, "Producción campesina y capitalismo", Bogotá, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), 1979.

⁴⁶A.V. Chayanov, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 81.

the peasant, a balance is produced between labour and consumption. "The output of the worker on the labour farm will remain at this point of natural equilibrium, since any further increase in labour expenditure will be subjectively disadvantageous. Thus, any labour farm has a natural limit to its output, determined by the proportions between intensity of annual family labour and degree of satisfaction of its demands."⁴⁸

The balance between labour and consumption, which expresses the principal thesis of Chayanov's theory, is none other than the concept of the maximizing of profits in the marginalist theories of the Austrian school. "It is from this kind of reasoning that Chayanov interprets theoretically, for example, an inexplicable empirical finding in Russian agricultural history: the fact that with each decrease in prices there follows a significant increase in production. This type of response by the peasants is, so to speak, typically non-capitalist, since what a capitalist enterprise of this type normally does in these situations is to reduce production."⁴⁹

The level of this equilibrium is determined by the size of the family, the proportion of family members who work or do not work, and the area and quality of the land. From the evolution of the internal structure of the family, Chayanov deduces a particular dynamic of the differentiation of the peasant economy, which he calls 'demographic differentiation' as opposed to the class differentiation on which Kautsky and Lenin had already insisted.⁵⁰ Supported by statistics on the evolution of peasant farms and family size, Chayanov shows that there is a clear dependence between the development of the peasant family and the area cultivated by it.⁵¹

As for the important category of land rent, which, "according to the usual school definition ... is the part of income which the entrepreneur pays to the landowner for using the

land", Chayanov states that this phenomenon corresponds to special social relations which do not occur in farms based on family labour. "The sole general economic realities in the family farm system are: (1) the farm's gross income; (2) sums spent from it on capital renewal; (3) the family personal budget; and (4) savings not invested in own farm."⁵² Chayanov shows, moreover, that the price of the land is not the equivalent of the capitalization of the rent (which does not exist) but rather that of the labour necessary to satisfy the needs of the family to reach the labour-consumption equilibrium.⁵³

The decision on the part of the family farm to introduce innovations depends on the effect these will have on the balance between labour and consumption. According to Chayanov, in conditions of relative shortage of land, a family which needs to increase its product because of its size will improve its technology beyond that which would be economic for a capitalist enterprise.⁵⁴

"Frequently, the family farm's internal basic equilibrium makes acceptable very low payments per labour unit, and these enable it to exist in conditions that would doom a capitalist farm to undoubted ruin", which means that the peasant can accept remuneration so low as to deprive capitalist agriculture of all its competitive power.⁵⁵ This explains the enormous capacity of resistance of the peasant economy with respect to capitalist competition: a phenomenon already observed in Russia at the end of the past century.

To conclude our exposition of Chayanov's theory, let us note some fundamental elements which have resulted in strong and controverted criticism, whose principal arguments are found in the next paragraphs.

1. Chayanov considered the economic behaviour of the peasant economy in an abstract manner, in isolation from the economic and social relations which surround it and of which it is merely a part. He specifically excluded from his objectives the theme of articu-

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁹E. Archetti and K.A. Stoeblen, *Explotación familiar y acumulación de capital en el campo argentino*, Mexico City, Ed. Siglo XXI, 1975, p. 113.

⁵⁰A.V. Chayanov, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, Chap. 1, pp. 53-69.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 89.

lation and concentrated on the 'Mechanisms of the organizing process' of the peasant farm. Chayanov proposed to make a 'morphological study' or a 'static organizational analysis'.⁵⁶

2. For him, the peasant economy is a mode of production (although he did not explicitly use the term 'peasant mode of production') which is at the same level as the slave, feudal or capitalist modes of production.

3. The fundamental elements of his theory are the peasant family unit and family labour stimulated by individual motivation. The peasant's *raison d'être* is the satisfaction of needs, culturally determined, and he seeks this through a balance between labour and consumption. There is no accumulation in the peasant economy; for Chayanov, the peasant ceases to work when he produces enough to be able to acquire what he needs.⁵⁷ He markets only a part of his product, since most of it is used to satisfy the needs of the family. "Chayanov concentrates on the internal mechanisms which prevent the production of a greater surplus."⁵⁸

4. Chayanov claims that a comparative advantage is to be seen when peasant production is compared with capitalist production, and that this advantage explains the survival of the peasant economy and even its increasing strength in given circumstances, that is to say, the great 'viability and stability' of small-scale production.

3. Critique of Chayanov's theory

The interest in Chayanov's theory is explainable by the lack of any other consistent theory on small-scale peasant production. Both the neoclassic and classic Marxist approaches consider the peasants as an obstacle to the development of capitalism, although they have very

different interests, and both these approaches show little concern for the internal functioning of peasant production or its future development. The lack of a consistent theory on small-scale peasant production thus explains the interest in Chayanov's theory; but is the discovery of Chayanov "a scientific attitude or an ideological illusion, as instinctive, existential classist reaction?"⁵⁹

The importance and political implications of Chayanov's proposals justify the animated discussion and numerous publications which analyse them. Let us look at some of the most significant aspects of the debate.

As we have seen, one of Chayanov's central theses is the characterization of the peasant economy as a family, not a capitalist mode of production, belonging to the simple mercantile mode of production. Although his theses are limited merely to the analysis of family farms, their generalization would mean that his theory could be extended to all the units of production which share similar relations of production. Thorner, in his presentation of Chayanov's work, writes that "he saw his exposition of the peasant economy as a particular form of a larger doctrine —the theory of family economy".⁶⁰ His theory is a theory of enterprises centered on the mechanisms of the process of organization of the peasant farm in its economic aspects, whereas the concept of the mode of production is a global concept stemming from a study of historical reality. Mode of production is not only the way of producing (and still less the way of exchanging), because it is at the same time a technical complex of a certain level, a system of legal and social relations related to the type of requirements of this technique and a set of institutions and ideological convictions which ensure the functioning of the general system. However, according to Chayanov, 'peasant economy' is a clearly descriptive category, a grouping of individual and separate units of production —the family farm— which are all identical. "Such a model may be an aid to description and perhaps explanation

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁷"This discovery has been called by Sahlins 'Chayanov's law' and is formulated in the following manner: in the community of domestic groups of production, the more the capacity for work of each group, the less its members work, or in other words, the intensity of labour in a domestic production system varies inversely with the relative capacity of each unit of production." Cited by E. Archetti and K.A. Stoehlen, *Explotación familiar...*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁵⁸A.V. Chayanov, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

⁵⁹Pierre Vilar, "La economía campesina", *op. cit.*

⁶⁰Daniel Thorner, "Chayanov's Concept of Peasant Economy", in A.V. Chayanov, *On the Theory of Peasant Economy*, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

of partial mechanisms, but it is very doubtful that it can clarify the origins, crises and destiny of a society."⁶¹ According to Vilar, there is a peasant way of life but it is an element of social analysis; there is not, however, a peasant mode of production (or a peasant economy) midway between feudalism and capitalism, with a peasantry capable of escaping from both feudal coercion and the 'law of the market' (selection, concentration, expropriation of the weakest). For Maffei "there can be no doubt ... (that) it would be erroneous to consider the peasantry as a different mode of production with its own characteristics, for it is inserted within and is part of a determined social formation".⁶² On the other hand, Bartra, in his "invitation to the reading of Chayanov" supports the argument of the latter when he states that "the durability of the peasant economy comes from the fact that it is a mode of production different from the capitalist mode, and not a transitional economy".⁶³ He does not see a possible synthesis between Chayanov and classic Marxist theory in this aspect, but does say that it is a secondary mode of production which, by its very nature, cannot be dominant.

It is not possible in this article to probe deeply into the question of the mode of production, which is a central category of Marxist theory and has provoked highly controverted debates. It is clear that this is in no way a strictly intellectual discussion. Very different political positions are implied in either considering the peasants as a stratum which is not a class in itself and which falls between two class positions (as in Marx), or considering them as a class in itself, with a 'peasant economy' which, despite its articulation with the capitalist system, maintains its unity and has its own laws and trends (as in Chayanov).

The object of Chayanov's study is the peasant family farm, which he considers indepen-

dent of the system in which it is inserted. Although family labour is an element common to all the historical settings where the participation of peasants is observed, it does not provide enough basis for characterizing an entire social formation and "hides the fundamental feature of small peasant production ..., its mercantile character". For Chayanov, no other group outside the family farms exists within the peasantry; rich or semi-proletarian peasants simply do not exist, or at least remain outside his analysis. The peasantry, for Chayanov, exists economically on family farms without further differentiation and without considering the relations of production, either between family farms or between peasants and latifundios. For him there is no economic differentiation; yet this picture did not reflect the real situation of Russia at that time, and still less that of the Latin American countries of today.⁶⁴ The equilibrium between labour and consumption, this 'modest pre-requisite' which constitutes his basic premise, implies that the peasant determines for himself the time and intensity of his labour; individual motivation decides the dynamics of consumption, which in turn stimulates the dynamics of production. This premise expresses the static and historical nature of Chayanov's theory. It is difficult to imagine a family farm maintaining itself in equilibrium through time because "any continuous or temporary deficit which is too great means a risk of elimination of the unit of production and of labour. In contrast, any substantial or continued surplus will increase the size of the farm at the expense of its neighbours, or will lead to the marketing of the product outside the peasant economy".⁶⁵ It is obvious that consumption has an impact on production, and this relationship appears in all periods. But, as Marx stated, although consumption does influence production, the factor which 'preponderantly' influences consumption is production, and it does so in three ways: "1. by creating the goods to be consumed; 2. by determining the mode of con-

⁶¹Pierre Vilar, "La economía campesina", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁶²Eugenio Maffei, "Algunas consideraciones sobre el campesinado minifundista latinoamericano, la agricultura de subsistencia y el concepto de economía campesina", in *Estudios Rurales Latinoamericanos*, Bogotá, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 125.

⁶³Roger Bartra, "La teoría del valor y la economía campesina: invitación a la lectura de Chayanov", in *Comercio Exterior* (Mexico City), Vol. 25, No. 5, May 1975, p. 522.

⁶⁴Utsa Patnaik, "Neo-populism and Marxism: The Chayanovian View of the Agrarian Question and its Fundamental Fallacy", in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, London, Vol. 6, No. 4, July 1979, p. 378.

⁶⁵Pierre Vilar, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

sumption; 3. by stimulating in the consumer the need for products which it has created originally as objects. Consequently, it influences the object of consumption, the mode of consumption and the stimulus for consumption".⁶⁶

In order to avoid the static view of his theory, Chayanov incorporates the 'demographic differentiation' opposed to the Marxist concept of the differentiation of classes in agriculture. The family farm does not remain static but grows as the number of members in each family grows. The differences observed in the size of the units are attributable thus to differences in the number of family members. Chayanov argues that the variations in the size of the farms are a cause of the variation in the size of the families, and he cites as proof the correlation between the two factors; but a correlation does not necessarily mean a cause.

As there is no accumulation in Chayanov's peasant economy, because the peasant ceases to work when he produces enough to buy what he needs, this means the virtual absence of "the omnipresent trade activity in peasant economies" and the innumerable ties it creates between peasant production and centres of peasant accumulation.

The comparative advantage attributed by Chayanov to peasant production, which according to him, explains the survival of the peasant economy, appears to us to be another critical aspect of his work. Although the survival and the persistence of small peasant production is an irrefutable fact, this is not due to a supposed technological superiority, but mainly to the fact that the family unit can carry self-exploitation to an extreme which allows it to exist in conditions which would lead to the certain ruin of a capitalistic farming unit. It is true that in conditions of underemployment in the rural area and the lack of sufficient alternatives for employment in non-agricultural activities, small peasant production may subsist, but only in miserable and overexploited conditions of life and work. The 'viability' and 'stability' of the peasant economy in these conditions would

have to be considered as a reaction of peasants to a very unequal distribution of the means of production, combined with a lack of alternative ways to obtain income, and not as a superior and advantageous form of viability. By ignoring the unequal distribution of the means of production, Chayanov's theory leads to justifying the conditions in which small peasant production operates. For this reason Patnaik's observation appears fully justified: "any concept which begins by assuming equality of property and continues thereafter rationalizing existing phenomena by employing subjective terminology necessarily leads to similarly apologetic conclusions".⁶⁷

The last aspect we would like to mention is 'voluntary' unemployment. Price reductions suffered by peasants in the markets, minimal consumption as an additional restriction, and the difficulty of replacing labour with capital and land, prevent total employment of the family labour on the small farm. Basing himself on the premise of the equilibrium between labour and consumption which, he claims, occurs as a result of the individual motivation of the peasant, Chayanov defines surplus labour on the family farm as voluntary unemployment. This implies that the peasants eat and work as they wish; as a result, if the peasants satisfy their subsistence needs, and if this is what they desire, there is nothing that would call for the nationalization, socialization or collectivization of agriculture.⁶⁸

Our observations probably do not satisfactorily reflect the complexity of Chayanov's work, nor do they justify a simplistic condemnation of it. Chayanov has observed and discovered, with great precision, phenomena in small-scale peasant production which contribute to understanding the operation of the family farm from within. The strength of his work lies in the descriptive part, but the usefulness of his theory of the peasant economy to explain the characteristics and perspectives of small-scale peasant production in Latin America (or any other region) is open to question. His at-

⁶⁶Cited in Manuel Coello, "Caracterización de la pequeña producción mercantil campesina", in *Historia y sociedad* (Mexico City), Segunda Epoca, No. 8, 1975, p. 12.

⁶⁷Utsa Patnaik, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

⁶⁸Mark Harrison, "Chayanov and the Economics of the Russian Peasantry", in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1975, p. 413.

tempt to discover and attribute to it an original social feature—he implies, as already mentioned, that the peasant economy is situated between feudalism and capitalism—by postulating that the rural areas hold a specific place in global society, leads him to ignore existing relationships and artificially create a social formation which does not exist as he presents it. “For these reasons”, Bartra feels, “in Chayanov’s work we do not find the explanation of the peasant economy, but we do find basic elements to help understand it.”⁶⁹

On the political and ideological level, Chayanov’s statements and his proposals for a strengthening of the peasant economy are echoed by the statements of groups who deal with the agrarian question in technocratic and populist terms without considering social relationships and the unequal and unjust distribution of the means of production, and without demonstrating any interest in changing the existing structure, which leaves the majority of peasants in conditions of extreme poverty.

V

‘Peasantization’ versus ‘depeasantization’: aspects of the current debate

In recent years a debate on the peasantry has begun at the international level, and particularly in Latin America, which deals with many of the aspects considered above. Despite the wide range of opposing arguments and interpretations brought up in this debate, we can broadly distinguish two dominant currents: the champions of ‘peasantization’ and those of ‘depeasantization’ or ‘Chayanovists’ and ‘Leninists’, to name them by the principal theorists of these two currents.⁷⁰

The first group sustains as its thesis the possibility of the survival and strengthening of the family form of production under capitalism, while the second, the ‘depeasantization’ school, expect the more or less rapid disappearance of peasant agriculture and the intensification of capitalist relations in rural areas, leading to the inevitable proletarianization of the peasant.

In view of the impossibility, within the context of this work, of even referring to the most outstanding studies and authors, we will limit ourselves to a somewhat schematic pre-

sentation of the principal arguments of the two currents mentioned.

Crouch and Janvry distinguish two groups of supporters of ‘peasantization’: firstly, those who, influenced by Chayanov’s work and by certain empirical evidence, hold that the peasants belong to a special mode of production, either a ‘smallholder’ or ‘peasant’ mode or a simple mercantile mode, and secondly, those who argue the superiority of the family agricultural unit of production, based simply on microeconomic reasoning, without any reference to historical materialism.⁷¹

Although there is a great diversity of approaches in the studies published by the ‘peasantization’ school, they apparently have in common the conviction that the subsistence of the peasants is not only compatible with the growing penetration of capitalism in the rural area, but is even a condition for its expansion. Stavenhagen, one of the main exponents of ‘peasantization’ in Mexico, referring to the situation in his country, affirms that “(in) a dependent capitalist country, (in) a peripheral and underdeveloped capitalist country, the

⁶⁹Roger Bartra, “La teoría del valor...”, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

⁷⁰E. Feder, “Campesinistas y descampesinistas: tres enfoques divergentes (no incompatibles) sobre la destrucción del campesinado”, in *Comercio Exterior*, Vol. 27, No. 12, December 1977, pp. 1439-1446 and Vol. 28, No. 1, January 1978, pp. 42-51.

⁷¹A. de Janvry and L.A. Crouch, “El debate sobre el campesinado: Teoría y significancia política”, in *Estudios Rurales Latinoamericanos*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September-December, 1979, p. 1.

existence of a small peasant economy, not totally destroyed by the capitalist relations of production, is functional to the development of capitalism itself, and not only is it functional in the sense that its breakdown is slowed down by the development of capitalism itself, but also the needs of this underdeveloped and peripheral capitalism constantly re-establish the peasant economy ...".⁷²

The theoretical supposition of this approach is that the agricultural sector poses obstacles to the full incorporation of the capitalist mode of production because the subsistence of the smallholder form of production is a necessity for satisfying capitalism's demands for agricultural goods and materials. Although they admit that there is a tendency towards economic polarization, the 'peasantization' school insist that the "traditional peasantry is not disappearing: on the contrary, it is in fact becoming more numerous in some areas".⁷³

Warman, another prominent supporter of the 'peasantization' approach, in a recent paper on the subject opposes the thesis that proletarianization and subsequent generalization of the wage relation have become the most important relation of production in the rural area, and that the peasants will thus soon be eliminated.⁷⁴ Referring to the Mexican case, he argues that agricultural workers who have been deprived of the means of production and now subsist and/or are reproduced exclusively by the sale of their labour would appear to be much less numerous than is usually claimed. What predominates are "temporary peons who, in their communities of origin, cultivate the land or form part of a unit which produces and consumes in an integrated manner". The author criticizes the simplistic identification of the presence of the wage with a process of proletarianization; although they are a vital supplement, he holds, wages remain subordinated to a

network of basically non-mercantile relations which occupy a central and strategic position for the survival, reproduction and organization of peasant productive relations.

One consequence of the theoretical supposition regarding the spacial features of peasant production is the belief of the 'peasantization' school that the reactions of the peasants are opposed to the logic of capitalism. Warman cites as an example the production of maize in Mexico, whose price "has many aspects for the peasant. It represents not only income, from the sale of its production, but also the principal consumption expenditure ... This complex relationship, in which maize is both income and cost, commercial product and subsistence product, means that this grain does not behave consistently with the laws of the capitalist market".⁷⁵ The same author holds that peasant crops depend on relations whose nature and rationale are not those of capitalism, but he then makes an important distinction: "however, the peasant's external relations of class exploitation and domination are indeed capitalist".⁷⁶

For the supporters of the 'peasantization' school, "the peasantry today is a class of rural producers which performs various productive jobs and may be categorized into four groups: production, collection and extraction of natural products, manufacture or processing of goods, handicraft activities, and the sale of labour ... it is an exploited class which creates an economic surplus which it cannot retain, and which is transferred to the bourgeoisie".⁷⁷ Warman goes on to affirm that the relations of production which characterize the peasantry allow it to be considered as a class within capitalism, and he rejects the hypothesis of its fragmentation into various factions or classes with different relations of production which separate and oppose them.⁷⁸

⁷²R. Stavenhagen, *Capitalismo y campesinado en el desarrollo agrario*, p. 670.

⁷³R. Stavenhagen, "Basic needs, peasants and the strategy for rural development", in Marc Nerfin (ed.), *Another Development: Approaches and Strategies*, Uppsala, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1977, p. 53.

⁷⁴Arturo Warman, "El problema del proletariado agrícola", in *Ensayos sobre el campesinado en México*, Mexico City, Ed. Nueva Imagen, 1980, pp. 169-184.

⁷⁵A. Warman, "... Y venimos a contradecir: Los campesinos del oriente de Morelos y el Estado nacional", Mexico City, Ed. de la Casa Chata, 1976, p. 238.

⁷⁶A. Warman, "El neolatifundio mexicano: expansión y crisis de una forma de dominio", in *Comercio Exterior*, Vol. 25, No. 12, December 1975, p. 1374.

⁷⁷A. Warman, "Las clases rurales en México", in *Ensayos sobre el campesinado...*, op. cit., p. 205.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 212.

At the other pole of the debate we find the 'depeasantization' or 'proletarianization' school, who "believe that the minifundistas are on the way out and that the elimination or extinction of the peasants by capitalism involves their transformation into landless wage workers, that is, into a proletariat in the strict sense".⁷⁹ According to Bartra, "the structural relation of the small-scale peasant economy with large-scale capitalist enterprise inevitably leads to the disintegration, pauperization and proletarianization of the former".⁸⁰

The dynamism of capitalist development "inevitably destroys all previous economies". All these strategies designed to achieve a greater incorporation of peasants into both the productive and social fields, such as agrarian reform, World Bank programmes, the Green Revolution, etc., are incapable, according to Feder, of stopping the inevitable process of destruction of the peasant economy, and he concludes: "the regeneration or resurgence of the peasant economy in the capitalist system is a romantic myth; capitalist expansion into the utmost corners of the rural sector of the underdeveloped countries, under foreign initiative and domination, must inevitably end in the displacement of the peasants and wage workers".⁸¹ Feder not only analyses a process of 'depeasantization' but also anticipates a "gradual but rapid elimination of the entire rural proletariat", in view of the forms which the process of capitalist expansion has assumed in recent years.⁸²

In this context, the movements and policies designed to strengthen the peasant economy are deemed antihistorical and conservative. As might be expected, the debate between the 'peasantization' and 'depeasantization' schools on the orientation of the process of agricultural development shows a great ideological diversity. Some defend the capitalist way, while others stress the need for a non-capitalist or peasant way. "The capitalist way has not only been defended by the right, as would be

obvious and natural, but has also sometimes been taken by leftist thinkers; on the other hand, the peasant way, supposedly rooted in the left, has also been adopted by reactionaries and conservatives."⁸³ In part, this debate appears to oscillate "between the hopes of capitalist productivism and sentimental nostalgia for this world we have lost."⁸⁴ The lack of analytical rigour and empirical evidence in various studies seems to reflect "a moral and ethical concern rather than an objective reality", replacing a realistic position by a vision of what 'should be'.⁸⁵ Miró and Rodríguez seem to be on the right track when they say that the intense argument among various interpretive currents of the Latin American agrarian reality is not so much about what is actually occurring but rather about what supposedly will occur.⁸⁶

Despite the differences between the two groups mentioned, the majority of authors may be included under a single ideological category: "the historical-structural or historical materialism school", as they are called in a CEPAL study on peasant economy. The following common features are ascribed to these authors:

- the significant (and in some cases exclusive) presence of conceptual categories deriving from historical materialism;
- the rejection of the various dualist interpretations;
- the adoption, implicitly or explicitly, partially or totally, of the hypotheses of the so-called dependency theory, which holds that the process of generating national agrarian structures is part of a historical process characterized by the subordinate insertion of the peripheral economies in the international division of labour;
- both the size of the units and the forms of tenure constitute only one part of the elements which influence the characterization

⁷⁹A. Warman, "Desarrollo capitalista o campesino en el campo mexicano", in *Comercio Exterior*, Vol. 29, No. 4, April 1979, p. 399.

⁸⁰P. Vilar, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁸¹"Presentación" by the Editorial Committee in *Estudios Rurales Latinoamericanos*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May-August, 1979.

⁸²See Carmen A. Miró and Daniel Rodríguez, "Capitalism and population in Latin American agriculture: Trends and recent problems", in this issue of the *CEPAL Review*.

⁷⁹E. Feder, *op. cit.*, p. 1443.

⁸⁰R. Bartra, *Estructura agraria y clases sociales en México*, Mexico City, Serie Popular, Ed. Era, 1974, p. 45.

⁸¹E. Feder, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 1444.

of the agrarian structure, and they are not the only or preponderant ones, as argued by the structuralist current (represented in the CIDA reports);

— finally, there is agreement that the State-peasant contradiction cannot be resolved in the framework of the present State, but only by radically transforming it.⁸⁷

Studies have appeared, however, which could not be classified as coming under either of the 'peasantization' or 'depeasantization' extremes, since they question the thesis of total proletarianization and suggest the existence of other modalities in the confrontation between peasants and capitalism.⁸⁸ Díaz, in his analysis of the peasant economy in Mexico, speaks of a "half-way or intermediate process of peasant disintegration". The fact that some members of the family have become partly proletarianized as a way of supplementing their income, without definitively abandoning their piece of land, does not mean that they have lost their peasant condition. Thus, Díaz speaks of a "permanent situation of semi-proletarianization", in which the "rural labour oscillates between disintegration and strengthening of the family economy".

Many authors admit the existence of the semiproletarian peasant sector, but "the 'peasantization' school claim that it is a part of the peasantry, whereas the 'depeasantization' school consider it to be a transitional phenom-

enon, or feel that the members of this sector are actually part of the rural proletariat, with simply a superficial peasant appearance".⁸⁹ Amin considers the poor peasant as 'objectively proletarianized' although he continues to be either formally or virtually, the owner of a small plot of land. On the level of his consciousness, the peasant is a small producer, but in practice he is rather a "home-based proletarian".⁹⁰ The concept of 'semiproletarian' offers a certain attraction and apparently presents a way out of the false dilemma arising from the 'peasantization' versus 'depeasantization' debate. But the use of such an ambiguous term as 'semiproletarian' and its elevation to the level of an analytical category, requires in our judgement, a prior theoretical exploration in order to be able to suggest that "this would be the most important section of the peasantry in the capitalist development of Latin American agriculture".⁹¹

The above-mentioned CEPAL/Mexico work mentions the "eclectic or mediating approach" which "not only disagrees with the existence of an antagonistic contradiction between the State and the peasants, but on the contrary upholds the feasibility of overcoming or, more precisely, significantly modifying the degree of exploitation to which the peasantry is subjected, by a sort of alliance between the peasants and the State".⁹²

VI

Some observations on the debate on the peasant economy

This last part of our study will be devoted to mentioning some observations and questions which have occurred to us during the study of

the different approaches to the peasant economy. We do not claim to offer a new approach which avoids the weaknesses of those already presented, but we do hope to offer some sug-

⁸⁷CEPAL, "Economía campesina y agricultura empresarial...", *op. cit.*, pp. 35-47.

⁸⁸John Durston, "El campesino semiproletario en América Latina" (CEPAL, draft for discussion), Santiago, May 1980; Luisa Pasé, *El Proletariado agrícola en México, ¿campesinos sin tierra o propietarios agrícolas?*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI, 1977; Solon Barraclough, "Perspectivas de la crisis agrícola en América Latina", in *Estudios Rurales Latinoamericanos*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January-April 1978, pp. 33-57; Erasto Díaz, "Notas sobre el significado y el alcance de la

economía campesina en México", in *Comercio Exterior*, Vol. 27, No. 12, December 1977.

⁸⁹John Durston, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

⁹⁰Samir Amin, "El capitalismo y la renta de la tierra", in Amin-Vergopoulos, "La cuestión campesina y el capitalismo", *op. cit.*

⁹¹John Durston, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁹²CEPAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-49.

gestions for orienting our work on peasant agriculture.

The vehemence which characterizes the discussions among scholars in this field leads us to wonder about the reasons underlying the debate. Clearly, we must take into account, on the one hand, a certain romantic attitude towards country life and, on the other, the rejection of such an 'anachronistic' form of production. But the reasons go beyond psychology, and, what seems more important, reflect the political content of the controversy. De Janvry and Crouch seem to us to be correct in stating that "the reform efforts implied in the agrarian reform and rural development programmes might seem useless if one comes to the theoretical conclusion that the peasantry is inevitably destined to disappear; on the other hand, the tendency towards the disappearance or persistence of the peasant economy has just as many programme implications for the leftist parties today as in the days of the debates between Lenin and the populist, and Kautsky and the social democrats".⁹³

The point of departure of all the approaches is the definition of a peasant. Anthropologists refer to peasants as a type of human group with certain common characteristics in all parts of the world,⁹⁴ and under the influence of the anthropologists, we find in the modernizing and neoclassical approaches a vision of a type of peasant tied to a traditional system who is an obstacle to development and is doomed to disappear with the advance of the processes of modernization. The classic Marxist approaches, although derived from a different analysis and perspective, make a similar evaluation in which they maintain that the peasantry, because of the expansion of capitalist forms of production, is disintegrating and becoming either a proletariat or a bourgeoisie. The Russian populists, represented by Chayanov, consider the peasant economy to be a mode of production governed by laws which are those of neither feudalism nor capitalism. In the studies by both the 'peasantization' and 'de-peasantization' schools definitions prevail

which are based on negations, since they take as a point of reference the capitalist producer. The absence of the profit motive as the driving force behind the activities of the small peasants constitutes for the 'peasantization' school the characterizing factor of the peasantry. The main problems which arise in giving a 'good' definition of the peasantry originate, according to Landsberger, in a dual endeavour:

"1. to classify specific groups of human beings as 'within' or 'outside' some category; and

2. to make this categorization on the basis, preferably, of one single criteria, or as few as possible..."⁹⁵

Many authors deny that a peasantry or peasant problem exists as such; what does exist, they say, is a rural society with socially differentiated peasants who, because of the expansion of capitalism, have lost the original unity of their class.

An analysis of the agricultural situation of the past three decades reveals undoubted progress in the modernization of agricultural production and considerable capitalist penetration: facts which have produced a growing differentiation in the productive process and in the rural population. There is evidence that there has also been a process of 'depeasantization' and proletarianization in Latin America, but at the same time we see the persistence and reproduction of peasant units of production, which continue to be the main source of subsistence for a large part of the rural population. To adopt a rigid position in the polarized debate between the 'peasantization and de-peasantization' schools would imply either an oversimplification of reality, or else a false dilemma. The question of whether one approach is analytically adequate also depends on the question of how far it is empirically applicable.

The agrarian reality in Latin America, considering all its historical, social, cultural and geographical differences, is characterized by a peasant class which is going through simultaneous processes—and with different degrees of intensity—of proletarianization,

⁹³De Janvry and Crouch, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁹⁴Robert Redfield, "Peasant Society and Culture", *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁹⁵Henry A. Landsberger, *Rebelión campesina y cambio social*, Barcelona, Ed. Crítica, 1978, p. 21.

'peasantization' and 'depeasantization' depending on the characteristics of the development model being used in each country. The hypothesis that capitalism needs a free, landless worker, who must sell his labour, does not preclude the additional alternative of capitalist development without increasing 'depeasantization'. The advance of capitalist enterprises in agriculture and the growing concentration of production in these enterprises does not necessarily imply a reduction in the number of small holdings nor a proletarianization of peasants. Although in the long run the tendency of capitalism is the elimination of non-capitalistic forms, in the short run these are maintained because they have been temporarily integrated by capital. This explains why it would seem just as risky to say that there is a predominant trend of generalized proletarianization in Latin America as to speak of the extinction of the peasant class as such.

The development of capitalism in agriculture has not created strict, pure categories, but rather ambiguous and even contradictory situations. There is a substantial difference between the ways in which capitalist laws are manifested in agriculture and in industry. Due to certain natural conditions which distinguish it from the other sectors—and which lead to peculiarities in capitalist relations—agriculture imposes barriers to capitalist production. The fact that agriculture is subordinated to capital and that its relations of production are primarily capitalist does not necessarily imply the existence of a simple relationship between capital and wage labour. There is no law which determines a generalization of wage labour; instead new relations of production may arise which depend on the conditions and possibilities of the process of accumulation of capital; old relations are regenerated or existing relations, such as wage labour, are shifted. The existence or persistence of 'anachronistic' forms such as small-scale peasant production does not correspond to erratic development, or to an omission of the system: these forms are rather an integral part of the system and even a basis for its reproduction. Instead of being an apparent relic of old forms of production which will soon disappear, peasant production may be, in reality, the result of capitalist develop-

ment. The eradication of the peasants from their land has certain limits, because it is impossible to absorb this labour force in other sectors. That is why we share Warman's opinion "that there is a definitive structural barrier against the transfer, in the foreseeable future, of the labour force working in agriculture to other economic activities".⁹⁶ The fact that in the rural area the freed labour is largely superfluous helps us to understand and explain the problem of the obstinate survival of peasant production, which, by its very impoverishment, should have disappeared long ago; the explanation is that to be a peasant "is not a way of life but a way of survival". The capacity of peasant production to retain productive or non-productive population, adjusting itself to the requirements of the absorption rate of labour in the secondary and tertiary sectors, is probably the most important function of this type of production, especially at the political level.

The pure proletariat, deprived of the means of production and depending for their subsistence and reproduction on wages alone, still do not constitute a generalized category in the Latin American rural areas.

It would seem that the number of wage workers has increased as a result of the development of the productive forces in the rural areas, although it has also been affected by this same development to the extent that agriculture has been mechanized. In the trend towards proletarianization, there are periods during which the process speeds up, alternating with other periods of slow growth; it is a movement which responds to changes in agrarian policy, in the relations of production, and in the demand for agricultural products, and/or to variations in the prices of the latter. In times of crisis, the proletarianization process, as a means of self-defence against unemployment, becomes reversible. In this context, the seasonal character of the requirements of labour (one of the characteristics of agriculture) is of greatest importance. The seasonality of agricultural production means that small producers, or members of the family unit, sell their

⁹⁶A. Warman, "Desarrollo capitalista o campesino en el campo mexicano", *op. cit.*, p. 402.

labour at certain times of year; that is, they become wage workers but later go back to working on their plots of land. Miró and Rodríguez state that the relationship between the enterprise and the minifundio which has become the most widespread in the whole region is that involving 'temporary' wage workers, which has meant 'atypical' proletarianization. Temporary wage labour becomes a substantial factor in reestablishing the peasant economy. It has become a survival strategy for the working population and is no longer a reproduction strategy for the haciendas or plantations.⁹⁷

Some other authors rule out a process of accumulation which destroys the way of life of the peasant economy from within. According to them, it is not the lack of surpluses which prevents accumulation, since small-scale peasant production does produce surpluses, but rather the fact that the relationship between peasant production and the market is characterized by an unequal exchange, so that part of its labour is absorbed by the society of which it is a part and with which it carries out transactions. Thus, the peasant transfers surpluses at the expense of his consumption, and this may transcend strictly physical terms to such a point that, on occasions, it absorbs a portion of the labour necessary for the reproduction of his instruments of production. Since the value of the family labour is not included in its entirety as a cost of production, the self-exploitation which characterizes the peasant economy is transformed into a direct appropriation of its product by the capitalist enterprises once the peasantry enters the labour market as a semi-proletariat. The amount required for subsistence should ensure not only the peasants' own reproduction but also the training of future producers and the retirement of old ones, and the means of subsistence should sustain this group in periods of unemployment as well. What usually happens, however, is that the temporary wage worker is only paid for the time actually worked. As a result, he then has to obtain the means for his reproduction by working on his parcel of land during certain periods of the year. "In this way capitalism extracts

from its workers a rent in labour, in so far as labour produced in the domestic economy is transferred to the capitalist sector."⁹⁸

Taking these factors into account, we may say that the peasant economy is participating to a significant extent in the capitalization of agriculture and the accumulation of capital in the other sector through a process of exploitation. It is these conditions, generally speaking, which explain the limitations on accumulation within small-scale peasant production, and not the existence of a supposed equilibrium between labour and consumption (as suggested by Chayanov) or a backward productive mentality (as some anthropologists and exponents of the modernizing approach would have it). In our opinion, the 'peasantization' attitude is not incompatible with the 'depeasantization' view that the minifundistas are on the road to extinction, and that the disappearance or elimination of the peasants by capitalism assumes their transformation into landless wage workers, that is to say, into a rural proletariat in the strict sense.

In the first place we must take into account the time horizon: the peasant economy will surely not disappear in the medium term, nor will all the peasants turn into *petits bourgeois* or proletarians. Until the development of capitalism has reached sufficient dynamism to allow it to create channels of absorption of the labour in other sectors—which is not likely—it will seek some form of 'symbiosis' with the agricultural economy, using it for its own interests but not eliminating it. This, of course, does not mean that in certain regions with advanced capitalization, there will not be strong depeasantization and proletarianization at the local level, while in others the peasant economy persists and even becomes stronger.

Some groups of peasants with access to land, credits and marketing possibilities, particularly near urban centres, could specialize, for example, in vegetables for the domestic market with a possibility of earning good profits. In the future, these enterprises could also produce food and agricultural products for the urban markets; they could devote themselves

⁹⁷Miró and Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸Luisa Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

to specific products where the type of labour needed is appropriate to small properties, which thus have comparative advantages, and, finally, they could fulfil the function of an anticyclical 'cushion' for some products which fluctuate sharply in price.

The sectors of small producers who do not manage to incorporate themselves into this group could either sell their land or submit to a process of growing peasantization, with increased cultivation of subsistence products and sale of labour outside the property, thus assimilating themselves to small-scale traditional agriculture, with few relations with the capitalist market.

The parcels of land in the marginal agricultural areas could be devoted to the retention of population, thus preventing increases in migratory flows and unemployment, and measures such as the Integrated Rural Development Projects could be taken in order to improve their income, without society as a whole being greatly affected by their problems.

The usefulness of a definition or conceptual framework as an analytical category is demonstrated by the extent to which it aids in understanding and explaining reality. Its elaboration, then, cannot be exclusively the product of the observation of given attitudes and their extrapolation in time and space; but neither can it be only the result of a theoretical process of deduction. The great variety of different phenomena and forms which can be observed when dealing with the peasant question in the region makes necessary a better balance between theoretical concerns and concrete applications in order to grasp the effective evolution of the actual situation and the concrete 'movement' within the trend, before reducing them to general schemes. "The concrete phenomena in Latin America are such that it cannot be assimilated to any of the 'classical models'."⁹⁹ We agree with Landsberger, who advocates as broad a concept of the peasant as possible in order to "carefully analyse the status of the peasant in a series of economic and political (as well as cultural...) dimensions peculiar to him".¹⁰⁰ There is a cer-

tain consensus that "the peasant is a direct worker on the land he possesses (whether by ownership, rental or any other form of tenure); he uses family labour which is not remunerated by money; and of the total that he produces he keeps part for self-consumption and sends the rest to market".¹⁰¹ However, the same author observes that "if this definition is applied strictly, it includes only one sector of the real peasant world, that is, the so-called average peasant".¹⁰² It leaves out, on the one hand, those who can hire non-family labour and produce principally for the market; and, on the other, those who have to sell at least part of their labour, and produce essentially for self-consumption. Peasants are subject to a permanent process of elimination and reproduction of their form of production. As a result, they cannot be defined by following static criteria; rather it must be observed that they are oscillating between two extremes—becoming integrated into commercial agriculture or becoming proletarianized—, but in any case with various intermediate forms which sometimes have a high degree of persistency. The difficulty of separating the different categories empirically leads us to prefer to include in our analysis also the permanent wage worker and the landless peasant (a numerically very important category according to the censuses of various countries). In our opinion, these two categories, which are excluded from the traditional definitions,¹⁰³ form one extreme pole of small-scale peasant production, just as the 'rich' peasants constitute the other. There is a certain mobility between these social groups: consequently, drawing too strict a division between them could mean that, for reasons of theoretical purity, a group is left outside the analysis which, in other times and circumstances, could be reintegrated into the 'peasant economy'.

If we summarize the arguments set forth by the participants in the current debate in favour

¹⁰¹Sergio Gómez, "Descomposición campesina: análisis de los asignatarios de la reforma agraria", PREALC/ILO, Santiago, Chile, January 1980, p. 6.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³See also Crispi and Brignol, "Algunos alcances teóricos para orientar una investigación sobre el campesinado en América Latina", CEPAL/FAO, July 1979 (draft for discussion).

⁹⁹Miró and Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰Henry A. Landsberger, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

of one or the other approach, and if we compare them with the ones used at the beginning of this century in the controversy between Marxists and neopopulists in Russia, we get a somewhat *déjà vu* feeling, in view of the scant originality of the discussion. Besides, the high level of abstraction of some authors' studies contrasts in turn with the deficiencies as regards the search for adequate categories to reflect the new or changing economic relationships of the different agricultural (or rural) producers with capitalism.

Despite all the attempts at interpretation, there is a clear lack of a satisfactory theory on the peasantry, its specific form of production and reproduction, and its character and role in societies such as those of Latin America.

We agree with Miró and Rodríguez that the key to understanding the possible alternatives for agriculture in the region can only be found in a profound understanding of the phenomena which appear to emerge, seeking to rearticulate the theory in the light of new findings, and not the reverse.¹⁰⁴ Only in this way we can overcome what Warman calls the lack of correspondence between what can be observed and investigated in the rural areas and what is analysed and discussed through the current definitions. To continue to formulate hypotheses on the theoretical disappearance of the peasantry on the basis of empirical affirmations which are frequently restricted to limited areas or sectors of little representativeness, appears to be a sterile academic exercise. Regardless of the label which is given to them, the peasantry exists and will continue to exist, at least within the foreseeable future, in spite of certain general tendencies which point to their proletarianization.

In this context the notion of peasant econ-

omy seems useful in studying both the internal operation of this form of production and its relations with capitalism. However, this notion has various dangers, which are pointed out in the presentation of a selection of texts entitled *Economía campesina* and which we feel it may be useful to cite here:¹⁰⁵

“1. By emphasizing the autonomy and isolation of this type of economy or by seeking its specific features, it is easy to fall into the ahistoricity of this notion, depriving it of all its content of social relations;

2. Occasionally, the notion of peasant economy suffers from a strong economicist bias, which hinders the analysis of all the aspects entering into its operation;

3. The notion of peasant economy, deprived of its historical and social content, may lead to new and refined forms of dualism: two distinct social topics, which coexist simultaneously in the same country without any significant interrelationship;

4. By stressing the specificity of the peasant economy and trying to isolate its components in the peasant agricultural productive process, we forget the actual social relationships of this peasant economy and ignore the other processes and forms of social reality in which this peasant economy is inserted”.

Finally, we wish to stress once again the need to achieve greater balance between theoretical concerns and concrete applications, by incorporating new elements and new evidence which allow us to remove the debate from its ivory tower and, what appears even more important, to contribute to the formulation of policies which really benefit the peasants and which do not ultimately lead to greater impoverishment of the rural population.

¹⁰⁴Miró and Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵J. Orlando Plaza, *Economía campesina*, presentation and selection of texts, Lima, Desco, 1979, pp. 20-23.