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### V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov: looking back, looking forward

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## V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov: looking back, looking forward

Henry Bernstein

This essay revisits aspects of the ‘Lenin–Chayanov debate’ which was so prominent in the formative period of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*: to distinguish some of its various strands, to identify some of its tensions and ambiguities, and to reflect on the legacies of Lenin and Chayanov. The resonances and ramifications of Lenin’s and Chayanov’s work encompass so many aspects of the world-historical, and highly charged, theme of the fate(s) of the peasantry in the making of modernity – the development of capitalism and (once) socialism – that the observations and suggestions presented here can only be selective. They are offered in the hope of clarifying and stimulating consideration of patterns of agrarian change today: how they differ from, and might be illuminated by, past experiences and the ideas they generated.

**Keywords:** agrarian political economy; Chayanov; Lenin; peasant differentiation; socialism

### Introduction: texts, twists and turns

This is less an essay with an argument than a series of notes to help identify issues in looking back at its two protagonists in order to look forward from them. The notes are ordered by particular debates at particular times, by key concepts, by the twists and turns of historical circumstance, of the force of events not of their or others’ choosing (see Table 1 and its ‘markers’). Looking back at Lenin and Chayanov entails at least sketching the contexts of the problems they addressed and the nature of the solutions they arrived at (my first section), and reflecting on later readings and invocations, appropriations and applications of their ideas and arguments (my second section). I illustrate the latter with reference to the explosion of academic interest in peasant studies from the 1960s, and in particular the political economy of agrarian change exemplified and advanced by *The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* from its founding in 1973.

In trying to clarify my own thoughts through the notes presented here, I am drawn into a conversation with Teodor Shanin’s essay in this collection, especially his suggestion that ‘Chayanov died for the third time in the Western establishment’s “development theories” of the 1960s–80s concerning the Third World, *as well as in alternatives offered by most of their radical critics* before IMF power came to marginalise debate’ (Shanin 2009, 94, this collection, emphasis added). Amongst the anonymous ‘radical critics’ who contributed to Chayanov’s third death, were, I assume, many contributors to *JPS*, not least those who took the class differentiation of the peasantry as a central, indeed definitive, dynamic of the transitions to capitalism in the countryside. This was personified as the ‘Lenin–Chayanov debate’

Table 1. Lenin and Chayanov: some 'markers'.

'Markers'	V.I. Lenin	A.V. Chayanov
Dates	1870–1924	1888–1937
Career	Professional revolutionary and Marxist intellectual	Agricultural economist, applied researcher and policy analyst
Key works (on agrarian issues)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Development of Capitalism in Russia</i> (1899)</li> <li>• Other work on capitalism and agriculture, and political strategy in relation to Russian peasantry, especially between Revolutions of 1905 and 1917</li> <li>• (little between 1917–1924: Revolution, war communism 1918–1921, New Economic Policy 1921 on)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many empirical and then also theoretical studies from 1909, published in Russian and later German, culminating in <i>On the Theory of Non-capitalist Economic Systems</i> (Germany 1924; English 1966), <i>Peasant Farm Organisation</i> (Moscow 1925; English 1966), <i>The Theory of Peasant Cooperatives</i> (Moscow 1927; English 1991)</li> </ul>
Key ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Prussian' and 'American' paths of development of capitalism in agriculture, the latter via class differentiation of the peasantry into agrarian capital and labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Theory of peasant economy' (as species of genus 'family economy')</li> <li>• Centred on household reproduction (demographic cycle), generating demographic vs class differentiation</li> <li>• 'Self-exploitation' of peasant households</li> </ul>
Model of development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capitalist transition (as above): changes in social relations of production as condition of development of productive forces (with growing economies of scale)</li> <li>• Transition to socialism in the countryside, i.e. large-scale 'scientific' farming; need to gradually 'remould the small farmer' towards this end</li> <li>• (Contributions of agriculture to industrialisation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'the development of agriculture on the basis of cooperative peasant households, a peasantry organised cooperatively as an independent class and technically superior to all other forms of agricultural organisation'</li> <li>• Cooperation to achieve economies of scale suited to different purposes/activities in different branches of production ('differential optima')</li> </ul>
Legacies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide availability of his writings, distributed by the USSR and the Comintern in many languages.</li> <li>• <i>The Development of Capitalism in Russia</i> a key text for subsequent agrarian political economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'treble death' (see Shanin 2009), with work known to wider international audience only from 1966 taken up by variants of neo-populist analysis and policies to promote small-farm(er) development</li> </ul>

and also informed criticism of later currents of agrarian populism or neo-populism often viewed as the legacy of Chayanov by some of their champions and (especially?) their critics.

Shanin's question of what 'alternatives' those critics were able to offer points to a crucial disjuncture: the definitive opposition of his essay is *not* Chayanov vs Lenin but Chayanov vs Stalin as the principal architect of the forced dispossession and

collectivisation of the Russian peasantry from 1929. In effect, it was Stalin's abrupt *action* that cast its long shadow over subsequent history – as powerful an example as any of the force of events in this context, of twists and turns that shape the lives and deaths of texts. Stalin's action rendered Lenin and Chayanov (and many others) irrelevant to what actually happened in the moment of 1929. Whether their ideas are later brought back to life, and when, why and how – for what purposes and with what effects – is considered for Chayanov in Shanin's bravura essay, and provides the backdrop to what follows.

### Looking back I: Russia

I begin by noting some other significant disjunctures, or at least asymmetries, in how Lenin and Chayanov may be contrasted.

#### *Careers, intellectual and practical*

(1) Lenin was a Marxist intellectual and professional revolutionary. His central concern was to analyse the conditions and prospects of political revolution in Russia, in order to inform strategy and tactics, programmes and positions, for the Bolshevik party. This entailed intense (often polemical) engagement with other currents of Russian Marxism and radicalism, and by extension with those of communist and socialist parties elsewhere. His work sought to connect socioeconomic analysis (the development of capitalism) with a political sociology of class forces and interests, and how they were manifested in particular conjunctures, events, parties and indeed personalities, during a period of massive upheaval (the 1905 revolution, the Stolypin reforms, the First World War, the circumstances, course and aftermath of the 1917 revolution).

Chayanov was a professional agricultural economist who became the leading figure in the Russian Organisation and Production School. He did not produce a political sociology of the peasantry or of policy making, and might best be regarded as a kind of scholar-technocrat of exceptional intellectual culture and originality, commitment and immersion in practical activity. As Stalin's collectivisation was launched, Chayanov was dismissed from his post as Director of the Research Institute for Agricultural Economics, arrested and eventually executed in 1937.

(2) Lenin's principal work in agrarian political economy came early in his career. His study of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) was the only comprehensive account of the development of capitalism in a backward country, peripheral to the centres of industrial capitalism, in the corpus of classic Marxism. Subsequently he wrote a sequence of important articles that demonstrate his continuing interest in agrarian questions, especially (but not exclusively) in relation to the need for a Bolshevik *political* analysis of, and strategy towards, the Russian peasantry after the 1905 revolution and the Stolypin reforms that followed it (Kingston-Mann 1980). However, he was able to contribute little on the peasantry and agricultural strategy in the few years between the end of the revolutionary war and his death in January 1924.

Chayanov published a massive corpus of empirical and theoretical studies from his precocious early writing to his two most elaborated works (written when he was still in his thirties, and works in progress, as he emphasised): *Peasant Farm Organisation* and *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives* published in Moscow in 1925

and 1927 respectively, that is, after Chayanov's return to Russia to resume his work there in the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (and after Lenin's death).

(3) Lenin's iconic status after 1917 as the greatest revolutionary of his time, and the availability of his writings, distributed by the USSR and the Comintern in many languages, meant that his ideas were widely influential, especially among the emergent and important communist parties of Asia. For the project of agrarian political economy pioneered by *JPS*, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* was a key text, and especially its analysis of peasant class differentiation.

Chayanov's ideas, of course, were largely lost in the years of Stalinism, as Shanin's account shows so vividly, and became available to Anglophone scholars only with the English translation in 1966 of *Peasant Farm Organisation* (together with the key essay *On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems*), a founding text of the interest in peasant studies that gathered from the 1960s. Following long delays, *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives* (which Shanin considers Chayanov's more important work) was published in English translation in 1991, and remains much less widely known than *Peasant Farm Organisation*. Two special issues of *JPS* made their own valuable contributions to the recovery and dissemination of Chayanov's work. His novella *The Journey of my Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* was the centrepiece of R.E.F. Smith's *The Russian Peasant 1920 and 1984* (1976). And as new archival sources became available after the end of the Soviet Union, Frank Bourgholtzer (1999) produced another historical treasure in *Aleksandr Chayanov and Russian Berlin*, a collection of Chayanov's letters from his stay in Berlin and more briefly England in 1922–23, with some additional material and a biographical essay on this hitherto largely obscure moment of Chayanov's life.

I turn next to other differences (and an unremarked similarity) between Lenin and Chayanov.

### **Key ideas**

*The Development of Capitalism in Russia* was theoretically framed by Lenin's reading of *Capital* in the context of intense polemic against the economic and political arguments of the Narodniks of the time (Lenin 1967a, Ch. 1), and drew on and analysed a comprehensive range of up-to-date empirical material. Its second chapter, with its extensive tables of *zemstvo* statistics, argued the case for class formation among the Russian peasantry as both expression and driver of the development of capitalism in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> Lenin provided a model of three basic peasant classes – rich, middle and poor peasants – which anticipated their (eventual) transformation into classes of agrarian capital (rich peasants) and proletarian labour (poor peasants), with a minority of middle peasants joining the ranks of the former and the majority joining the ranks of the latter. It is important to distinguish peasant

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<sup>1</sup>Chapters 3 and 4 considered respectively 'The Landowners' Transition from Corvée to Capitalist Economy' and 'The Growth of Commercial Agriculture'. The *zemstvo* statistics on farming were produced by organs of provincial (*guberniya*) and district (*uezd*) government established after the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861. 'In the decades from the 1880s onward, Russia's leading economists, statisticians, sociologists and agricultural experts assessed, analysed and fought over the materials furnished by the successive *zemstvo* inquiries. Their articles and books provided the richest analytical literature we have on the peasant economy of any country in the period since the Industrial Revolution.' (Thorner 1966, xii).

class differentiation as a *tendency* and as an observable *trend* in any given place and time. Lenin used Marx's theoretical concepts and method to derive the fundamental tendencies of a social dynamic from available empirical evidence, an approach that he sometimes termed (necessary) 'exaggeration' and that required considerable dialectical deftness, signalled in many of his observations, for example, that 'infinitely diverse combinations of the elements of capitalist evolution are possible'.<sup>2</sup> Whether Lenin got the trend of peasant differentiation right from the *zemstvo* statistics he drew on was, of course, contested by his Narodnik opponents and by Chayanov (below), as well as questioned by later scholars (e.g., and from different positions, Banaji 1976a, Kingston-Mann 1980, Lehmann 1982).

*The Development of Capitalism in Russia* was Lenin's principal contribution, following from which – together with his studies of Germany and the USA – he formulated his conception of paths of transition to capitalism in farming 'from above', the 'Prussian path' of the 'internal metamorphosis' of landed property, and 'from below', the 'American path' of class differentiation in the absence of (pre-capitalist) landed property, and characterised them as respectively reactionary and progressive in terms of their social and political effects.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast with Lenin, Chayanov argued that indices of apparent inequality among Russian peasants – in particular size of land farmed and stock of instruments of labour (draft animals and equipment) – were not due primarily to class formation but reflected the locations of households in the demographic cycle, traced in the 'labour-consumer balance' or ratio of producers (working adults) to consumers (working adults plus dependants: children and the old) at different moments in the recurrent process of generational reproduction. This links with another fundamental element of Chayanov's 'theory of peasant economy': that the aim – or 'motivation' (a term he used) – of peasant households is to meet the needs of (simple) reproduction while minimising 'drudgery' (of labour). This can have both virtuous and vicious effects, as it were. On one hand, the mode of economic calculation of peasant households distinguishes them from the conventional capitalist enterprise which costs all 'factors of production' in its drive for profit maximisation and accumulation. Indeed, for Chayanov 'peasant economy' was an instance of a broader and generic 'family economy' centred on the organisation of 'family labour'.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the imperatives of reproduction in family labour enterprises mean that labour costs (drudgery) are discounted in adverse conditions, generating peasant 'self-exploitation'. In effect, peasants tend to farm more intensively than capitalists, albeit at lower levels of labour productivity; similarly they are often constrained to buy or rent land at higher prices, and to sell their product at lower prices, than capitalist farmers are prepared to do. Chayanov

<sup>2</sup>From the Preface to the second edition of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* in 1907, and continuing: 'only hopeless pedants could set about solving the peculiar and complex problems arising merely by quoting this or that opinion of Marx about a different historical epoch' (Lenin 1967a, 33).

<sup>3</sup>On Germany the key work was Kautsky's *Die Agrarfrage*, also published in 1899, which Lenin (1967a, 27) considered 'after Vol. III of *Capital*, the most noteworthy contribution to recent economic literature'. A full English version of Kautsky appeared only in 1988, although Jairus Banaji (1976b) had earlier published an influential translation of extracts from Kautsky.

<sup>4</sup>See *On the Theory of Non-capitalist Economic Systems* (in Chayanov 1966) – and a 'non-capitalist economic system' that also 'resists' capitalism as many populists claim, or simply assume?

devoted a great deal of attention to the integration of peasant households in capitalist commodity markets, touching on a variety of complex factors and processes, including issues of the capitalisation of peasant farming and the sale (and purchase) of labour power. Much of what he said continues to be of great interest and utility, even if he failed to theorise the social relations of such processes (see further below).<sup>5</sup>

### *Models of development*

As implied above, there is a sharp disjuncture between Lenin's profound analyses of the development of capitalism in agriculture, and more generally, and what he may have considered an appropriate model of development in the novel and testing circumstances of constructing socialism in a 'backward' country where the transition to capitalism was incomplete and the economy ravaged by years of war and foreign invasion. Lenin's brief statements between 1917 and 1923 were addressed to practical issues of immediate urgency, above all the supply of grain during 'war communism' (that is, no kind of communism at all) and in the subsequent shift to the NEP. Of most interest are his short but strategic contributions to the Tenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party (RCP(B)) in March 1921 that introduced the NEP. Its centrepiece was the substitution of a (lower) tax in kind on peasant farmers for the harsh requisitioning of ostensibly 'surplus' grain under the 'war communism' of 1918–21. In his addresses to the Congress on this vital matter, Lenin concluded that in the conditions then prevailing 'It is our duty to do all we can to encourage small farming' (Lenin 1967c, 238) while 'it will take generations to remould the small farmer' (Lenin 1967b, 216).

Chayanov's model of development was encapsulated in the definition of neo-Narodism he was ordered to provide by his interrogator from OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate, in effect the secret police apparatus), after his arrest in 1930: 'the development of agriculture on the basis of cooperative peasant households, a peasantry organised cooperatively as an independent class and technically superior to all other forms of agricultural organisation' (Bourgholtzer 1999, 16).<sup>6</sup> We can read the former as meaning 'independent' of (i) predatory landed property and its exactions, (ii) capital and its imperative of accumulation, and (iii) state socialism and collectivisation as the 'proletarian line' in agriculture – respectively the burden of the past, the pressures of the present, and the threat of the future. 'Technical superiority' refers to the optimal scale of a farm that can be managed and worked by *family* labour (which will vary with the technologies at its disposal), informed by the inimitable knowledge of its natural environment that it accumulates.

The peasant household/farm economy thus remains the basic cell of Chayanov's model of agricultural development but it requires cooperation to achieve its technical superiority. His intense interest and practical engagement in cooperatives in Russia<sup>7</sup> – for input supply, machinery, technical services and, of strategic

<sup>5</sup>Of less interest is his use of marginalist analysis to model decision-making in the peasant household. Chayanov's marginalist economics is considered by Sivakumar (2001).

<sup>6</sup>Eerily, the name of the interrogator, chief of the Secret Department of the OGPU, was Yakov Agranov.

<sup>7</sup>And elsewhere; his first publication (1909) was on cooperatives in Italian agriculture (Chayanov 1966, 279). Viktor Danilov (1991) provides a useful sketch of the intense Russian interest in cooperatives before and during Chayanov's time.

importance, credit and processing/marketing – focussed on how they can satisfy the ‘differential optima’ of various organisational economies of scale appropriate to different activities/functions in different branches of agricultural production inserted in commodity markets (including those of ‘state capitalism’ under NEP (Chayanov 1991)). Effective cooperation in turn requires state support and regulation that replaces or substitutes for the kinds of ‘vertical’ concentration/integration characteristic of capitalist commodity markets and organised by large(r)-scale capitals, and thereby excises the ‘self-exploitation’ of peasant farmers generated by such adverse circumstances as shortages of land and credit and the market power of large (often locally monopolistic) merchants and processors. In effect, Chayanov’s work on cooperatives also served to describe the agricultural sector as a technically and functionally differentiated whole, and by extension its place within ‘national economy’, building on his model of the farm household/enterprise as the individual cell of agrarian economy. How successfully it did so remains another matter.<sup>8</sup>

And the similarity: Chayanov was no less committed than Lenin to technical progress that raises the productivity of labour in (peasant) farming, including the use of machinery and chemicals, and with it the incomes and security of farm households. In short, Chayanov was no less a moderniser, which distinguishes him radically from many agrarian populists, on whom more below. Before that, it is necessary to return to the central theoretical issue of peasant class differentiation, and incidentally a historical matter: whether Lenin and Chayanov actually ‘debated’ with each other.

### *Peasant differentiation: dynamics, extent, implications*

This marks the fundamental difference between Lenin and Chayanov. For Lenin differentiation of the peasantry (as of other petty commodity production/producers) was intrinsic and central to the development of capitalism and the class dynamic of its ‘laws of motion’ theorised, with unique power, by Marx. In emphasising differentiation, Lenin added significantly to Marx’s model of agrarian transition, based as it was principally on British experience and what can be called an ‘enclosure’ model of primitive accumulation.

Chayanov contested any such strong argument about class differentiation of the Russian peasantry on two grounds: theoretically that the logic of peasant economy (simple reproduction) excludes the capitalist imperative of accumulation for its own sake (expanded reproduction), and empirically according to the *zemstvo* reports and surveys he and his teams of researchers conducted.<sup>9</sup> In effect then, Chayanov could not provide a theoretical explanation of any dynamic or tendency of class differentiation in the countryside, while having to recognise its existence to at least some degree (see below).

These observations also point to issues of the *extent* (as well as forms) of class differentiation in different areas of the Russian countryside at different times, and their implications. Thus Lenin, introducing the ‘tax in kind’ of the NEP (above),

<sup>8</sup>Sivakumar (2001, 38) suggests that ‘Chayanov and his colleagues had neither a sound theory of value nor a sound macroeconomic theory; eventually this became the Achilles heel of the Organisation and Production School’.

<sup>9</sup>The accumulation of capital is different from the importance of investment both to meet household needs at improved levels of income/consumption, and to develop effective cooperatives.



suggested that the extent of peasant class differentiation had diminished by 1921 as a result of land redistribution: ‘Everything has become more equable, the peasantry in general has acquired the status of the middle peasant. Can we satisfy this middle peasantry as such, with its economic peculiarities . . . ?’ (Lenin 1967b, 216).<sup>10</sup>

Whether peasant differentiation then increased again as a result of the market liberalisation of NEP – as Lenin had predicted it would (1967b, 225) – and if so its consequences, was a preoccupation of the Agrarian Marxists who followed in Lenin’s footsteps during the 1920s, while developing a more nuanced methodology for identifying and measuring class differences (Cox 1979, Cox and Littlejohn 1984). Chayanov had touched on class differentiation briefly towards the end of *Peasant Farm Organisation* (1966, Ch. 7), and *The Theory of Peasant Cooperatives* includes an analysis of a survey conducted by his research institute in 1925. He distinguished six ‘basic types of peasant household’, while insisting that the vast majority of Russian farmers are ‘middle peasants’ of types three, four and five who form the social base for developing cooperation (Chayanov 1991, Ch. 2). In these instances, we can assume that Chayanov is ‘debating’ or contesting Lenin’s approach and findings (without naming him) and those of the contemporary Agrarian Marxists.

Once again, all this was swept aside by the decision to launch collectivisation in 1929, justified by the assertion that it was the rise of ‘kulak power’ under NEP that produced the grain supply crisis of the late 1920s (Lewin 1968). Stalin’s collectivisation generated many difficult questions at the time and since, the object of large literatures and debates. For example, was it in some sense the logical outcome of Leninist or Bolshevik or generically Marxist conceptions of the objective nature of progress *qua* development of the productive forces? Of their justifications of the subjective will and force necessary to develop the productive forces in the historically unprecedented, and unanticipated, circumstances of socialist revolution in a backward country?<sup>11</sup> Was its ‘nastiness’, in terms of both the massive violence and suffering of its execution and its fatal consequences for remaining hopes of socialist politics in the USSR, nonetheless ‘necessary’: whether to resolve the immediate grain supply crisis of 1927–29, to establish the conditions of a productively superior large-scale agriculture in the longer term, and/or to contribute to the accumulation fund for industrialisation? And did it achieve those objectives?

This, then, is to return to the central disjuncture noted earlier, and highlighted by Shanin’s essay in this collection. On one hand, there is Lenin’s work on the development of capitalism in agriculture and the absence of any similarly rich consideration by him (or any other major Marxist thinker?) of basic questions of socialist construction, and especially in countries where ‘the peasant is a very essential factor of the population, production and political power’, as Engels (1951) remarked of France and Germany in the 1890s. On the other hand, there is Chayanov’s account of the economic life of Russia’s peasants, rejected by subsequent materialist political economy, and his ‘alternative’ model of

<sup>10</sup>Does ‘economic peculiarities’ contain an indirect reference to the ideas of Chayanov and his Organisation and Production School of agricultural economics? Lenin’s principal argument for the tax in kind was to incentivise middle peasant production, primarily through liberalising exchange, and he also emphasised the importance of local circuits of trade and a role for (consumer) cooperatives.

<sup>11</sup>Shanin (1986, 11) remarks that collectivisation ‘was not a natural deduction from Marxism or from Lenin but a fairly arbitrary result of the 1926–28 failure of rural policies and of interparty factional struggle’.

development – peasants/small farmers + cooperatives + a supportive state – that was either ignored or subsumed into the more generalised arena of dispute between Marxism and agrarian populism. In short, there is a kind of vacuum that exerts its own force in the later career of agrarian political economy, that I turn to next.

### Looking back II: legacies

The founding of *JPS* manifested the intense intellectual and political currents and concerns of its own historical moment, characterised by continuing struggles against imperialism in which peasants were major actors (notably the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation); the prospects for economic and social development in the recently independent, and mostly agrarian, former colonies of Asia and Africa, as well as in Latin America; and the ways in which those prospects could be explored through investigating practices, experiences and theories of socialist transformation of the countryside. In *JPS* these concerns were typically (but not exclusively) informed by a materialist political economy – with all its variants and internal debates – and by a strongly historical approach, applied to agrarian social formations before capitalism; transitions to capitalism in its original heartlands and subsequently; agrarian change in colonial conditions and in the revolutionary circumstances of the USSR and China, Vietnam and Cuba; processes of agrarian change in the independent countries of the Third World in the contexts of their various projects of ‘national development’; and then the unravelling of those projects (as of actually existing state socialisms) in a new period of ‘globalisation’ and its neo-liberal hegemony.<sup>12</sup>

How did the ghosts of the Russian debates and experiences haunt agrarian studies from the 1960s, especially in the pages of *JPS*? As the agenda of *JPS* developed in its early years its commitment to agrarian political economy became clearer, which meant a closer connection with the approach exemplified by Lenin in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* than with that of Chayanov. This was not an *a priori* nor dogmatic intent; indeed *JPS* published two special issues presenting some of Chayanov’s writing for the first time in English (above), as well as articles sympathetic to Chayanov. Nonetheless, ‘Lenin’ here stands as shorthand for the interest in and commitment to more generally Marxist investigation and debate in the 1960s and 1970s, not least of the highly topical concerns noted in the previous paragraph. Moreover, Lenin’s approach to the development of capitalism in agriculture – like that of Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Preobrazhensky, Kriksman, Gramsci, and others – extended beyond the logics and paths, problems and prospects, of peasant farming. It encompassed different types of capitalist agriculture – their origins, paths of development, modalities of accumulation, labour regimes, location in social divisions of labour, relations with other forms of capital and with the state – while Chayanov restricted himself to the capitalist farm *qua* commercial enterprise familiar from any standard economics textbook (the model against which the distinctive principles of the peasant farm household were defined).

<sup>12</sup>I draw here on elements of Bernstein and Byres (2001) which considers the conjuncture and concerns of the founding moment of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* and provides a thematic survey of the work it published from 1973–2000.

*The development of capitalism*

First, there was considerable interest in the Russian experience of agrarian change from the 1890s to the 1920s analysed (at different moments) by Lenin and Chayanov as well as by Kritsman and the Agrarian Marxists.<sup>13</sup> Chayanov's work was revisited in four notable articles in *JPS* by Mark Harrison (1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1979), which also engaged with other key texts, notably Shanin's *The Awkward Class* (1972), as did Cox (1979). Shanin had counterposed a model of social mobility in peasant Russia to both Lenin's analysis of class differentiation and Chayanov's demographic differentiation which he termed 'biological determinism' (1972, 101–9).<sup>14</sup> Harrison and Cox supported the argument for class differentiation, albeit with qualifications that require more subtle methodologies and sensitivity to the nuances of rural dynamics. Kritsman was an innovator in both these respects, according to Cox, enabling him to identify counter-tendencies to class differentiation, while Harrison (1977a) proposed that the particular effects of patriarchy in patterns of commodification and class differentiation in Russia contribute to explaining practices of household partition more fruitfully than Shanin's argument from social mobility.

Beyond this, there was a plethora of studies of agrarian change *qua* the development of capitalism that both drew on and extended the range of the Russian debates historically, geographically, and in terms of themes, concepts and methods. Historically, the new peasant studies opened up explorations of agrarian change in colonial conditions which also extended the geographical range beyond Europe and Russia, the principal referents for Lenin, as for Marx, Kautsky and others, including Chayanov. Seminal texts included Barrington Moore's magisterial comparison (1966) of the agrarian conditions of transitions to modernity in England and France, the USA, Japan, China and India (further informed by his knowledge of the histories of Russia/Germany and Russia/USSR); Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) with its case studies of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba; and James Scott's study of peasant rebellion in colonial southeast Asia, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976).

Thematically, a central question from the start of peasant studies, and one pursued extensively in *JPS*, was whether 'peasants' constitute a distinct and coherent object of study, whether as economic form or mode of production, 'class', type of society, 'community' and/or culture, or some other entity, that can be usefully identified and analysed across different historical circumstances and periods. Chayanov provided an economic model which others might then seek to elaborate in social and cultural terms, as in Scott's formulation (1976) of a 'subsistence ethic' inspired by, or grafted on to, Chayanov's economics.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>In another notable special issue of *JPS*, Terry Cox and Gary Littlejohn (1984) provided extensive essays on the Agrarian Marxists of the 1920s together with an abridged translation by Littlejohn of a key work by their leading figure L.N. Kritsman on *Class Stratification of the Soviet Countryside*.

<sup>14</sup>Shanin has been a key figure in the revival of interest in Chayanov's work with a preference for *The Theory of Peasant Cooperatives over Peasant Farm Organisation*, more evidently the economists' Chayanov, as it were. Together with Shanin (1972), another key text of the 'Russian influence' on the founding moment of peasant studies was Moshe Lewin's *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power* (1968).

<sup>15</sup>As well as inspired by E.P. Thompson's celebrated essay (1971) although Thompson's militants of moral economy were not peasants but eighteenth-century English plebeians rioting against rising bread prices.

There are several major and connected problems attached to notions of a generic, and trans-historical, figure of ‘the peasant’ in the line of Chayanov.<sup>16</sup> First, Chayanov lacked any significant theorisation of *social relations*. For the basic cell of the peasant household, the key relation is the internal producer–consumer ratio and its shifts over the cycle of household (demographic) reproduction. While his work on the insertion of peasant households in wider economic systems and circuits, especially those of capitalist commodity exchange, contains rich empirical analysis and many fruitful insights, these are *not theorised*. What they ‘do’ for Chayanov is to delineate the conditions *external* to peasant households and that impose greater or lesser constraints on their pursuit of (simple) reproduction (‘subsistence’ in Scott’s term), which points to the second problem.

This is that the theory of the peasant household is fundamentally one of its ‘internal’ logic (and organisational ‘machine’ as Chayanov often put it) which gives it its trans-historical character: it applies to a variety of historical circumstances (‘historical epochs’, note 2 above) in which a variety of ‘external’ forces bear down on peasants – landlords, merchant capital, and states (representing the exactions of rent, commercial profit, and taxation respectively) – thereby intensifying the response of ‘self-exploitation’ to meet the pressures of simple reproduction.<sup>17</sup> Is it possible to maintain the utility of such a trans-historical construct without slipping into the ahistorical? As sympathetic a commentator as Daniel Thorner remarked that ‘Although it encompassed a very wide range of possibilities, Chayanov’s theory of peasant farming remained essentially a static one’ (1966, xxii). This is an acute observation. Chayanov does indeed specify ‘a very wide range of possibilities’ concerning ‘external’ conditions and how peasants respond to them, but their responses represent only so many ‘adaptations’ derived from the unchanging logic of household reproduction and its mode of calculation.

A third kind of problem follows: if many ‘peasant’ households are driven by (deepening) insertion in commodity relations to reproduce themselves increasingly through non-farming activities, at what point do they remain ‘peasants’ in any meaningful sense? Chayanov (1991, 27) acknowledges the salience of this question in his sixth type of household ‘whose main income is derived from the sale of their labour-power ... (but which) nonetheless have their own farming activities, usually on a very small scale and nearly always for their own consumption’.<sup>18</sup> And he was clear that agricultural cooperatives are not for rural households of this type (a small minority at the time, in his view).

The question indicated of the meaning of ‘peasant-ness’ or ‘peasant-hood’, and appropriate indicators to specify (and perhaps measure) it, is not intended to invite a

<sup>16</sup>From this point, due to limits of space, my brief summaries become increasingly anonymous as well as selective. Interested readers who want to follow up references to work in *JPS* on the issues and debates sketched can refer to the survey by Bernstein and Byres (2001), and the thematic index of *JPS* from 1973–93 (Bernstein *et al.* 1994). There is also, in a polemical and personalised register, Tom Brass’s survey (2005) of the ‘third decade’ of *JPS*, and a later thematic index for 1993–2003 (*The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2005).

<sup>17</sup>Unusually (exceptionally?) among Marxists, Banaji (1976a) commended the very abstraction of Chayanov’s theoretical model of the family labour farm as providing something lacking in Lenin.

<sup>18</sup>Almost an echo of Lenin’s remarks on ‘allotment-holding wage-workers’, and his warning against ‘too stereotyped an understanding of the theoretical proposition that capitalism requires the free, landless worker’ (1967a, 181).

resurgence of the syndrome of determining and attaching the ‘right’ class (or other) labels to categories of social agents. Indeed, many of the contributions to *JPS* (and elsewhere) on peasantries and their differentiation in the development of capitalism illuminated the great fluidity, as well as range of variation, of their forms in different places at different times. The Chayanovian take is that such fluidity and variation manifest only the ‘very wide range of possibilities’ that attach to the basic, and unchanging, cell of the peasant household; the Leninist take is that they represent how, in different sets of historical conditions, the dynamic of the development of capitalist commodity relations shapes the conditions, practices and fates of petty producers – and indeed is *internalised* within their enterprises and circuits of reproduction.

The materialist inspiration of much of the political economy featured in *JPS* thus illuminated both general analytical concepts and specific historical experiences across the range of forms evident (and less evident) in the development of agrarian capitalism. Lenin’s perspective and approach were assessed, reassessed, and advanced, not least in the elaboration and testing of increasingly sophisticated methods for investigating peasant class differentiation, informed by awareness of the difference between tendencies and trends noted earlier, itself an antidote to simplistic understandings of Lenin’s schema by friend and foe alike.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, that schema had to be recast in key respects by the impact of feminism, and the gendered nature of peasant households (absent in Lenin and Chayanov) as of class formation in the countryside, was explored in a series of articles in *JPS*, especially from the 1980s. Gender analysis added further, and necessary, complexities to investigating and understanding the fluidity of the social boundaries between peasant capitalism and other forms of capital (and the state), and between peasants and classes of rural labour. Moreover, some notable essays not only acknowledged that fluidity but explored the determinants of its intricate patterns in specific historical and social conditions.

These kinds of analytically and empirically precise studies also engaged with wider theoretical debates. One important example was the theorisation of agrarian petty commodity production (PCP) or simple petty production (SCP) and its constitutive social relations, in capitalism and transitions to capitalism. This was of particular interest for several reasons. First, it can be viewed in part as an attempt, if often implicitly so, both to provide a theoretical approach alternative to Chayanov’s model of the peasant household/farm and to fill the gap of a fully articulated alternative model in Lenin’s work on the peasantry (see note 17). Second, it brought together, in a common debate with similar theoretical preoccupations, work on both peasants and the ‘family farm’ in developed capitalist countries. Third, the consideration of PCP/SCP also addressed questions of peasant differentiation from another angle: whether and how peasant production and differentiation are inflected, and in some circumstances constrained, by specific forms of pre-capitalist social relations and practices and their reproduction (and reconfiguration). This, in turn, often connected with vigorous debates concerning the ‘articulation of modes of production’.

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<sup>19</sup>Lenin’s two paths of development of agrarian capitalism (above) were explored and extended in the seminal work of Terence J. Byres (1991, 1996); see also Byres in this collection (2009, 33–54).

The political economy of *JPS* connected the socioeconomic study of peasant production and reproduction with wider themes: the political role of peasants in different times and places of the turbulent upheavals that created modernity; the nature and forms of rural proletarianisation and labour regimes; the size and forms of the peasant (and more generally agricultural) ‘surplus’ and its contributions (or otherwise) to an accumulation fund for industrialisation; the class character and role of states in managing such transfers of the peasant/agricultural ‘surplus’ (or failing to do so); and analysis and critique of ‘development’ regimes, policies and practices, both in colonial conditions and following political independence (to which Shanin alludes).

There was not much to be found in Chayanov to inform exploration of such central themes, compared with Lenin and the Marxist tradition more generally, with, perhaps, one exception of considerable resonance. This concerns widespread debate of the relatively slow and uneven development of capitalism in farming, at least in the form of the predominance of large capitalist farms, for which Chayanovian concepts might be part of the explanation, and especially his emphasis on how self-exploitation underlies the apparent staying power (‘resistance’ in more heroic versions) of small-scale/peasant farming throughout the era of modern capitalism. ‘Self-exploitation’ is a profoundly ambiguous notion. On one hand, for poor peasants (and many middle peasants, according to circumstances) it involves back-breaking drudgery at very low levels of labour productivity and income – as Chayanov (1991, 40) emphasised: ‘No one, of course, can welcome peasant hunger, but one cannot fail to recognise that in the course of the most ferocious economic struggle for existence, the one who knows how to starve is the one who is best adapted’.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the capacity of peasants to intensify their labour is central to a neo-populist path of agricultural development (see below). This would have alarmed Chayanov for whom the mundane realities of ‘self-exploitation’ derive from how peasants are incorporated in capitalist markets; the passage just quoted continues: ‘All that matters is that those who shape economic strategy should make this latter method superfluous.’

### ***Transitions to socialism***

Between 1973 and 2000, *JPS* published nothing on Soviet agriculture from the 1930s to the 1980s. This is all the more striking given the rich contributions to, and debates within, *JPS* (and on the left more generally) that skirt this profound silence: on one side of it, the Russian debates and experiences from the 1880s to 1920s, already noted; on the other side, the extensive topical contributions on farming on Russia, and other regions of the former USSR, in the *aftermath* of the collapse of the Soviet Union (including the reinsertion of ‘peasant’ themes and their inevitable controversies). Did that silence imply a tacit, if reluctant, acceptance that Stalinist collectivisation was a ‘nasty but necessary’ condition of subsequent Soviet

<sup>20</sup>Relevant here is Kitching’s vivid observation that peasants represent ‘the historically classical and demographically dominant example of people who are poor *because* they work so hard’ (2001, 147). Some explanations for the ‘persistence’ of peasant farming under capitalism, including its ‘functions’ for capital, rest on notions of (intense) ‘self-exploitation’. There are resonances of this in Kautsky (1988); analyses from value theory of the peculiar trajectories of capitalism in agriculture include Mann and Dickinson (1978) and Djurfeldt (1981).

industrialisation?<sup>21</sup> Similarly the rich material on peasant movements and rebellions, and the places of peasants in the social revolutions of the twentieth century – Eric Wolf’s ‘peasant wars’ – tended to stop at that moment when communist or social parties achieved the ‘capture’ of state power (Wolf 1969).<sup>22</sup>

This silence meant that the articles that filled many of the pages of *JPS* on the ‘Lenin–Chayanov’ debate looked to Lenin’s earlier polemics with the Narodniks while ignoring the immense issues attached to collectivisation, let alone the subsequent performance of Soviet agriculture and its contradictions. Consequently the principal focus was on the places, prospects and fates of peasantries in historic and contemporary processes of transition to capitalism (outlined above), with questions of the forms and functioning of socialist agriculture attached to consideration of China and Vietnam as explicit ‘alternatives’ to capitalism and its ‘development’ policies in the Third World, for some as ‘alternatives’, explicit or implicit, to the once hegemonic claims of the ‘Soviet model’ – and also as ‘alternatives’ to various currents of agrarian populism (‘taking the part of peasants’), which I touch on next.

### *The critique of populism/neo-populism*

As Gavin Kitching (1982) showed to such effect, populist ideas are a response to the massive social upheavals that mark the development of capitalism in the modern world. Advocacy of the intrinsic value and interests of the small producer, both artisan and ‘peasant’, as emblematic of ‘the people’, arises time and again as an ideology, and movement, of opposition to the changes wrought by the accumulation of capital. This is the case in both the original epicentres of such accumulation (north-western Europe, North America) and those other zones exposed to the effects of capitalist development through their integration in its expanding and intensifying world economy, from nineteenth-century Russia to the ‘South’ of today. Agrarian populism, in particular, is the defence of the small ‘family’ farmer (or ‘peasant’) against the pressures exerted by the class agents of a developing capitalism – merchants, banks, larger-scale capitalist landed property and agrarian capital – and indeed, by projects of state-led ‘national development’ in all their capitalist, nationalist and socialist variants, of which the Soviet collectivisation of agriculture was the most potent landmark.

There are many varieties of populism, and of agrarian populism, that should be distinguished not only by their specific discursive elements and intellectual forms, but also by the particular historical circumstances in which they emerge and their varying

<sup>21</sup>And if its ‘necessity’ is less demonstrable than its nastiness? Soviet collectivisation was considered in only two articles before 2001: Nirmal Chandra (1992) started from the question whether it was the only possible response to the grain supply crisis of 1927–29, and then identified and (‘counterfactually’) assessed an alternative industrialisation strategy formulated by Bukharin; while Peter Nolan (1976) contributed a seminal comparison of collectivisation in the USSR and China, including the contrasting relations of their communist parties with the peasantries of their countries, a factor also highlighted as a critical political deficit of the Bolsheviks by Cox (1979) and Harrison (1979). After 2000 there were special issues of *JPS* on the contemporary Chinese countryside (30(3–4) 2003), presenting rather mainstream analyses, and on Russia over the past century (31(3–4) 2004), with an emphasis on ‘peasant adaptation’.

<sup>22</sup>With the partial exception of some articles on China and Vietnam, and on agricultural policy in the very different circumstances of nationalisation of large export-oriented plantations and estates in, for example, Cuba, Mozambique and Nicaragua.

political strength and salience. Not surprisingly, the moral dimension of agrarian populism – as defence of a threatened (and idealised) way of life – often encompasses strong elements of anti-industrialism and anti-urbanism. Such ideologies are often explicitly anti-proletarian too, as new classes of wage labour represent the same threatening urban-industrial milieu as classes of capital and ‘modernising’ regimes of different political complexions. Much agrarian populist ideology, then, is backward-looking and explicitly reactionary, but this cannot be said of Chayanov.

For present purposes it is useful, if hardly sufficient, to differentiate at least two currents of populism that permeate agrarian debates, not least in relation to the problems and prospects of peasants or family farmers. The first can be termed ‘political’ populism, the second ‘technicist’ populism or, better, neo-populism. I come back to the former in the next section, after saying something about neo-populism defined here as based in (conventional) economics and its associated policy discourses, with claims to Chayanov as intellectual ancestor. It champions an equitable agrarian structure of small farms as most conducive to efficiency and growth. The economic case for efficiency incorporates arguments about the intrinsic advantages of the deployment of family labour in farming (lower supervision and transaction costs) and the factor endowments of poorer countries (plentiful labour, scarce capital), and combines them with arguments about equity (the employment and income distribution effects of small-scale farming). The neo-populist case thus rests on belief in the ‘inverse relationship’: that smaller farms manifest higher productivities of land – output per area – than larger farms, as well as generating higher net employment (albeit at necessarily lower levels of labour productivity). This remains a central plank in continuing populist economic arguments for redistributive land reform, encapsulated concisely and seductively in the notion of ‘efficiency *and* equity’ (Lipton 1977): the philosopher’s stone of policy discourses that seek to reconcile the contradictions of capitalist development.<sup>23</sup>

A successful small farmer path of development also requires conducive market institutions, and a supportive state – in effect, removing the counterproductive oppressions of usury and merchant profit, and of taxation, in the same way that redistributive land reform removes the burden of rent (and/or of ‘functional landlessness’). The obstacle to achieving these conditions, in another central term in the vocabulary of contemporary neo-populism, is the power of ‘urban bias’: the notion that policies in the South in the period of statist developmentalism (1950s–70s) favoured cheap food policies in the interests of strong urban constituencies and a (mistaken) emphasis on industrial development, at the expense of smaller and poorer farmers. This was a notable component of the World Bank’s encompassing assault, from the 1980s, on state-led development strategies and their outcomes, with the added argument that poorer countries would do best to remove policy ‘distortions’ that impede the contributions of agriculture to their export performance (on the principle of comparative advantage) as well as supplying their domestic markets. Most recently, more technicist neo-populist approaches have adapted, more and less easily, to new conceptions of market-led land and agrarian reform,

<sup>23</sup>The neo-populist answer to the central question of land reform – to whom should land be redistributed and why? – is: to those who are both able to use it best (small farmers) *and* who need it most (the ‘rural poor’). It is one of the profound ironies of modern agrarian history that the land reforms that have come closest to this ideal, an equitable distribution of ‘land to the tiller’, have been the outcomes of moments of violent social turmoil that brought together massive peasant mobilisation with revolutionary political parties.



closely associated with the World Bank and its hegemonic grip on development discourse in this conjuncture of ‘globalisation’.

These instances of neo-populism as model of agricultural development – small is beautiful in farming, redistributive land reform, the removal of ‘urban bias’ – are often shared with the ‘political’ populism of rural movements and the radical intellectuals who identify with them. And they continue to be subjected to criticism critique from positions that might be considered ‘Leninist’, at least in the broad sense that they are rooted in the analysis of class relations in the countryside and beyond. That criticism need not be rehearsed here (see, for example, Byres 2004), but one can ask: what this has to do with Chayanov, and the legacies associated with him? Certainly Chayanov would have recognised, and embraced, some elements or contemporary expressions of the ‘technicist’ version of small farmer development outlined, if not others.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, in the recent trajectory of neo-populism Chayanov’s expansive vision – for example, his emphasis on organisational economies of scale (‘differential optima’) to be achieved through the cooperative pooling of resources and efforts by peasant households with state support – has been increasingly reduced to a set of arguments from neo-classical economics that can be accommodated to the dominant neo-liberal paradigm. The effect is that household enterprises (‘family’ farms) should be constituted on the basis of *individualised* property rights and production in properly competitive markets for land, as well as other factor and product markets, a position that Chayanov would not have endorsed any more than contemporary ‘political’ populism does. And indeed he would have been entirely sceptical of the view that an equitable structure of small farming could be ‘sustainable’ in such conditions – itself an extraordinary article of faith.

Why were populism and neo-populism, often personified in the figure of Chayanov, so strong a polemical axis in the founding moment and subsequent career of *JPS*? Here are several suggestions. First, the revival of Marxism – and especially the centrality of Lenin’s *Development of Capitalism in Russia* to the new wave of agrarian political economy – needed to distance/distinguish itself from other types of ‘radical’ critique of capitalism, including longstanding varieties of populism and ‘peasantism’. Some of the theoretical bases and consequences of this have been sketched, with special reference to class analysis and class formation in the countryside. Second, this acquired a particular focus in contesting versions of neo-populism applied to agrarian questions in newly independent Asia and Africa (as well as in Latin America) and manifested in development policies prescribed for those great zones of the world. This contestation centred, once more, on issues of class dynamics with particular reference to two ‘classic’ issues: belief in economies of scale in farming (as in manufacturing) as a necessary condition of the development of the productive forces, and the effects of agrarian class structure for industrialisation, not least the transfer of the agricultural ‘surplus’ through some or other form of taxation, be it of landed property, agrarian capital and/or rich peasants (or all classes of the peasantry?). Third, some authors identified with, and were sometimes members of, existing communist and socialist parties which

<sup>24</sup>The most potent explicit critique of Chayanov in this respect, constructed through the contrast with Lenin’s *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, was by Utsa Patnaik (1979): ‘Neo-populism and Marxism: The Chayanovian View of the Agrarian Question and Its Fundamental Fallacy’. Patnaik based herself on Chayanov (1966); his *Theory of Peasant Cooperatives* was not then available in English translation.

confronted political formations with an agrarian populist ideology, programme and, indeed, appeal in the countryside. This leads to the next section.

### **Politics**

I begin by returning to the vacuum suggested earlier at the core of much of the ‘Lenin–Chayanov’ debate, an empty space between, on one hand, the lack of any political sociology in Chayanov,<sup>25</sup> and, on the other hand, the tensions and strains in the long and tortuous history of Marxism as it has sought to connect its intellectual claims and analyses with its political ambitions (and realistic ‘alternatives’ to capitalism) – and over which Stalinism cast so long a shadow for its followers and opponents alike. The most useful commentary that I know of in this context is the last of Mark Harrison’s sequence of four articles cited above. In it Harrison (1979) reaffirmed his respect for Chayanov by way of identifying the problems of a (politically) ‘subordinate Marxism’ restricted to ‘reactive theoretical critique’ and unable to advocate ‘practical theory’ as Chayanov had done. Harrison illustrated this ‘with reference to three (connected) themes of great significance for Soviet history (and beyond): the lack of Bolshevik political work, experience and organisation in the countryside; a tradition of Bolshevik ultra-leftism towards the peasantry; and the failure to transcend these problems after 1917, despite some ‘fresh and creative impulses’ shown by Lenin and Bukharin in the early and late 1920s, respectively.’ (Bernstein and Byres 2001, 13, n. 20).

This is not to disregard the large, often innovative and valuable, body of work on peasant politics published in *JPS* and elsewhere, across the range from ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1985, Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Kerkvliet 2009, 227–43, this collection) through ‘new farmers’ movements’ in India (Brass 1994) to ‘peasant wars’ (Wolf 1969) – and often framed as debates between ‘political’ populism and Marxism. However, from the latter viewpoint, as noted earlier, analysis tended to stop at the moment when communist or social parties achieved the ‘capture’ of state power, with the two exceptions indicated: the ‘lost’ Soviet 1920s, and a brief moment of enthusiasm for the communes of Mao’s China before their subsequent dismantling. The symptomatic quality of these exceptions carries forward to the present moment, when Marxism is (even more) prone to its own inverse relationship between political marginality and ‘reactive theoretical critique’ with its seductions of class purism and ultra-leftism. And in the current conjuncture, this registers its vulnerability to the force of a revived and vigorous ‘political’ agrarian populism, as I suggest in the following section.

### **Looking forward**

‘Chayanov’s analysis . . . is incomplete (and) cannot be completed by simply proceeding along the same road’, suggests Teodor Shanin, for this reason: ‘Rural society and rural problems are inexplicable any longer in their own terms and must be understood in terms of labour and capital flows which are broader than agriculture . . . (where peasant economy) is inserted into and subsumed under a dominant political economy, different in type’ (1986, 19). I have argued that this was already widely recognised among

<sup>25</sup>Although there is a plausible sense in which scholars like Scott and Shanin have sought to create a kind of Chayanovian political sociology.

Chayanov's Marxist predecessors and contemporaries who created and developed a theoretical and historical approach in which such concerns were established from the beginning. Shanin (2009, 97, this collection) also refers to today's world of 'fewer peasants as well as of fewer "classical" industrial proletarians'. This points to an apparent paradox: that this world of fewer 'classical' industrial proletarians and peasants is one of 'more' capitalism, so to speak, and of more global capitalism, than ever before. Shanin's point here is to propose the continuing relevance of Chayanov, whose model of the family labour household he extends to the pursuit of 'livelihood' (simple reproduction) in an ever growing non-agricultural 'informal sector'. In looking forward from Lenin and Chayanov to today's world of globalising capitalism, I start from the continuing centrality of class relations and dynamics but in the conditions of a different 'historical epoch' than that which they addressed.<sup>26</sup> On the former, in capitalism production and reproduction are structured *universally*, but *not exclusively*, by relations of class. To paraphrase Balibar (as quoted by Therborn 2007, 88): in a capitalist world, class relations are only '*one determining structure*' but a structure that shapes '*all social practices*' (emphasis in original). In effect, what makes class unique is not that it is the only 'determining structure' but that in capitalism it is the only structure of social relations that permeates all others.<sup>27</sup> On the latter, the different 'historical epoch' we confront today is that of capitalist globalisation.<sup>28</sup>

### **Globalisation**

First, globalisation – for all the confusion and controversy that surrounds the term and its uses (and abuses) – is central to, indeed entails, a qualitative shift in agrarian class relations without, of course, displacing or transforming all their previous forms. I come back to this below, but note here the limits of Lenin and Chayanov on the internationalisation of agriculture, its global divisions of labour, financial and commodity circuits, and so on. This was partly due to the historical circumstances of their time, when the primary issue for them in the geographical areas they focussed on (above) was international *trade* in agricultural commodities rather than, say, foreign direct investment in their production and processing (more evident then in colonial zones and parts of Latin America), or today's concerns with technical change and 'transfers of technology', or the consequences of global income distribution, hence 'effective demand', for specialised export production in different parts of the world.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>This section selects from, and radically abbreviates, elements of the arguments in Bernstein (2008, in press).

<sup>27</sup>There remains, however, a persistent and recalcitrant theoretical issue: if commodification is a general ('world-historical') process that entails both class and other social relations, the latter can *not* be theorised through the same procedure of abstraction as the class relation of wage labour and capital (exemplified in Marx's *Capital*) even though they are ubiquitous in shaping specific and concrete forms of class relations in 'actually existing capitalisms' (and transitions to capitalism).

<sup>28</sup>I share the approach to globalisation that sees it as the restructuring of capital on a world scale since the 1970s, hence the latest phase of imperialism.

<sup>29</sup>Lenin noted that *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* deliberately excluded consideration of its international dimensions, both trade and foreign investment. Within the primarily market(ing)/trade focus of his book on cooperatives Chayanov (1991) made interesting observations about what we now call commodity chains, including the currently fashionable theme of standards and 'branding'.

Second, the majority of ‘peasants’/‘small farmers’ (and of those in an ever expanding ‘informal economy’) in a globalising ‘South’ are a component of what I term ‘classes of labour’, and a component that is neither dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing itself nor in possession of *sufficient* means to reproduce itself.<sup>30</sup> The former is not exceptional (see note 18). The latter marks the limits of their viability as petty commodity producers. ‘Classes of labour’, then, comprise ‘the growing numbers . . . who now depend – directly *and indirectly* – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction’ (Panitch and Leys 2000, ix, emphasis added). Classes of labour in the conditions of today’s ‘South’ have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and increasingly ‘informalised’ wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure ‘informal sector’ (‘survival’) activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex *combinations* of employment and self-employment. Many of the labouring poor do this across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, as well as wage employment and self-employment. This defies inherited assumptions of fixed, let alone uniform, notions (and ‘identities’) of ‘worker’, ‘peasant’, ‘trader’, ‘urban’, ‘rural’, ‘employed’ and ‘self-employed’.

Third, class differentiation of petty producers is a *necessary tendency* of capitalist dynamics even when this is not registered in evident (or extensive) trends of class formation. For example, the ideal model or aspiration of agrarian populism of the robust ‘family’ (or ‘middle peasant’) farm is typically compromised by the analytical problem that it is naturalised, *à la* Chayanov, as a kind of norm from which other social forms (capitalist farms on one hand, ‘landless peasants’ on the other) deviate. However, the relatively stable ‘family’ farm – when it occurs – has to be problematised both analytically and concretely, that is to say, historically. This includes investigating whether and how the formation and reproduction of such farms are *the result of processes of differentiation* as ‘entry’ and reproduction costs rise in the course of commodification, there is competition for land and/or the labour to work it, and so on.

Fourth, a further aspect of this, that complicates the ‘classic’ (Leninist) three-class model of peasant differentiation, is the extent to which the operations, and relative stability, of all classes of the peasantry (increasingly) depend on activities and sources of income from outside their own farming: investment and accumulation in the case of rich peasants, ‘survival’ and simple reproduction at higher or lower levels of income and security for middle and poor peasant respectively. These are not aspects of peasant incorporation in capitalist social relations novel to the current moment of globalisation, but they have become increasingly central. This means (as Shanin (1986), above, indicates) that it is impossible today to even begin to conceptualise agriculture, and its classes of labour *and* capital, independently of the circuits and dynamics of capitalism more (indeed most) broadly.

The consequences of globalisation for earlier paradigms also include, first, different conditions of possibility for industrialisation (and different paths of

<sup>30</sup>I prefer the term ‘classes of labour’ to the inherited vocabulary of proletarianisation/proletariat (and semi-proletarianisation/semi-proletariat), as it is less encumbered with problematic assumptions and associations in both political economy (e.g. functionalist readings of Marx’s concept of the reserve army of labour) and political theory and ideology (e.g. constructions of an idealised (Hegelian) collective class subject).

industrialisation), more detached from paths of agrarian change and the ‘classic’ preoccupation with the contributions of agriculture to industrial accumulation; and, second, patterns of ‘de-agrarianisation’ – or ‘de-peasantisation’, in Lenin’s term – associated with different combinations of (a) pressures of reproduction on small-scale farming and (b) opportunities for employment outside ‘own account’ farming. This links with the second and fourth observations above, and is a key dimension of the wide range of variation in the conditions and prospects of classes of labour, including the salience of their agrarian components where applicable.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, the various elements of the fragmentation of classes of labour indicated have profound implications for the political sociology of the struggles their members engage in, actually and potentially, and it is here that ‘political’ agrarian populism has reappeared with such vigour to take up the cause of ‘peasants against globalisation’.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it has done so in ways, and for reasons, that highlight the inherited problems in the political stances of Marxist agrarian political economy, now exposed more than ever by the demise of its Stalinist or Maoist exemplars and influences, its apparent inability to imagine a socialist ‘agrarian programme’ to replace them, and the dangers of retreat into the comfort zone of ‘reactive theoretical critique’, class purism and ultra-leftism.

### ***Politics and populism: challenges of the current moment***

The dynamics, modalities and effects, not least the environmental effects, of globalisation as it affects international food regimes/systems, and the problems and prospects of ‘peasants’/‘small farmers’, are the subject of much topical interest registered *inter alia* in the recently invented field of ‘political ecology’, and especially its more radical populist wing committed to supporting political movements of ‘people of the land’ – an emblematic signifier for the target constituencies of transnational peasant and farmers movements, defined by a political project opposed to globalisation. That opposition also informs notions of development imaginaries or alternative futures for farming and farmers.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, ‘people of the land’ is a central notion in the discourse and programmatic ambitions of *Vía Campesina* and its intellectual champions. Philip McMichael, for example, formulates a ‘new agrarian question’ which opposes ‘the corporatisation of agriculture ... (that) has been globally synchronised to the detriment of farming populations everywhere’ by ‘revalorising rural cultural-ecology as a global good’ (2006a, 473, 472). The agents of the latter comprise a ‘global agrarian resistance’, an ‘agrarian counter-movement’, that strives to preserve or reclaim ‘the peasant way’ (2006b, 474, 480, and *passim*). The ‘new agrarian question’ is world-historical in that, first, it transcends the capital–labour relation and, second, the social forces (‘of global agrarian resistance’) that it mobilises have the capacity, at least potentially, to generate that transformation, according to McMichael (and others).<sup>34</sup>

Marx and Lenin, of course, would recognise transcending the capital–labour relation as the sense of a world-historical beyond capitalism, even if they would have

<sup>31</sup>On determinants and patterns of ‘de-agrarianisation’ see, for example, the contrast between Southeast Asia (Rigg 2006) and sub-Saharan Africa (Bryceson 1999).

<sup>32</sup>In the title of Marc Edelman’s outstanding monograph on Costa Rica (1999).

<sup>33</sup>For example, in the context of the global food economy and its ‘crisis’, compare the rigorous and provocative analysis by Weis (2007) with the sloppiness of Patel (2007).

<sup>34</sup>See also McMichael (2009, 139–69) in this collection.

been startled by the suggestion that this could be driven by the contradiction between capital and ‘peasants’, (‘family’) farmers or ‘people of the land’ mobilised in ‘global agrarian resistance’. Notions of ‘the peasant way’ resonate lineages of agrarian populism that have always appeared and re-appeared in the long histories of modern capitalism.<sup>35</sup> When counterposed to what is undoubtedly, in key respects, a new phase represented by the globalisation of agriculture, advocates of ‘the peasant way’ argue that it does not represent nostalgia (‘worlds we have lost’) but that contemporary rural social movements incorporate and express specific, novel and strategic conceptions of, and aspirations to, modernity, and visions of modernity alternative to that inscribed in the neo-liberal common sense of the current epoch. This is a plausible thesis, always worth investigating in particular circumstances, but the principal weakness of ‘the new agrarian question’ *qua* ‘the peasant way’, as articulated to date, is its lack of an adequate political economy.

First, it tends to present ‘farming populations everywhere’ as a single social category that serves, or is necessary to, both the analytical and political purposes of ‘resistance’ to globalisation and neo-liberalism.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, ‘farmers’ thus constitute not only a single category but a singular one: they are deemed to experience, to challenge, and to seek to transcend the social and ecological contradictions of a globalising capitalism in a uniquely *combined* fashion. While differences within and between ‘farming populations’ – differences of ‘North’ and ‘South’, of market conditions, of gender relations, and sometimes even class relations – are acknowledged, this tends to be gestural in the absence of any deeper theorisation and more systematic empirical investigation of the conditions in which farming and agriculture are constituted by specific forms and dynamics of the capital–labour relation, and not least how they express, generate, reproduce and shape class differentiation. For ‘the new agrarian question’, whether by intent (explicitly) or by default (implicitly), class and other social differentiation is subordinate to what *all* ‘farmers’ (‘family farmers’) and their struggles have in common: ‘exploitation’ by capital (which they share with labour?) and a special relation with and respect for nature (which distinguishes them from non-agrarian classes of labour, or simply urbanites?). This is evident in many statements by advocates of this vision that represent contemporary variations on long-established themes of ‘agrarianism’. For example, Annette Desmarais refers to ‘people of the land’ as a unitary global social bloc, also known as ‘peasants’ apparently as when she applauds ‘over 5,000 farmers including European, Canadian, American, Japanese, Indian and Latin American *peasants*’ marching on a GATT meeting in Geneva in 1993 (2002, 93, emphasis added).

Second, there is little specification of the ‘alternative’ systems of production that the ‘peasant way’ may generate as the basis of a future post-capitalist, ecologically friendly social order. Rural community, and an associated localism, are championed, of course: antithesis to the thesis of the global corporatisation of agribusiness and the drive to individualisation of neo-liberal ideology, but where is any plausible formulation of the social and material coordinates of a synthesis (negation of the

<sup>35</sup> Although Chayanov seems to have been largely forgotten.

<sup>36</sup> I distinguish globalisation in the sense of new forms of the restructuring of capital (above) and neo-liberalism as an ideological and political project. Conflating the two, which is unfortunately all too common, precludes the possibility that the former can proceed in the future without the latter, despite their close connection in the current conjuncture.

negation)?<sup>37</sup> That is, advocacy of ‘the peasant way’ largely ignores issues of feeding the world’s population, which has grown so greatly almost everywhere in the modern epoch – and principally because of the revolutions in agricultural productivity (as well as medicine) achieved by the development of capitalism. In response to provocations on this matter of the demographic – or, better, population/productivity – challenge, McMichael (2006b, 415) observes that ‘Longer-term questions of raising agricultural productivity to provision cities are yet to be resolved.’ Why is this longer-term? And how might it be resolved?<sup>38</sup> While Friedmann’s ‘brief formulation of the population question of today’ concludes that ‘We may be heading for . . . demographic collapse. What this means for the “global” phase of capitalism, capitalism *tout court*, and even human survival is what we need to think about now’ (2006, 464). This, once more, is to (re-)state a problem (however fundamental) rather than point to its resolution.<sup>39</sup>

Third, celebrations of ‘global agrarian resistance’ and the transformational aspirations attached to it, lack any plausible formulation and analysis of how it could work as a political project (though see note 40). Interestingly, the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) in Brazil is especially emblematic for both those who advocate land struggles as the cutting edge of semi-proletarian politics in the ‘South’ today (Moyo and Yeros, 2005) and those who aspire to transcend the capital–labour relation through ‘revalorising rural cultural-ecology as a global good’. Both are frequently given to long quotes from MST documents in ways that elide that necessary distinction or distance between sympathy with the programmatic statements of the organisation and its leadership and the demands of analysis. As Wendy Wolford (2003) points out, many discussions refer to the ‘imagined community’ articulated in such statements as accurate empirical representations of the experiences, beliefs and practices of its socially heterogeneous membership, in effect attributing to ‘the movement’ a unity of vision and purpose that is unwarranted, and unhelpful. Too many accept the ‘official’ ideology of the MST (as of *Via Campesina*) at face value from political sympathy, rather than combining sympathy with the critical inquiry necessary to adequate investigation, analysis and assessment.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Some lines of thought in considering this question are sketched by McMichael (2006b, 186–87), as usual with reference to the manifestos of *Via Campesina* and its central notion of ‘food sovereignty’.

<sup>38</sup>Elsewhere – as an instance of ‘global agrarian resistance’?! – McMichael (2006c, 186) asserts that urban gardens ‘provision 35 million people in the US alone’ without specifying what ‘provision’ means here. van der Ploeg (2008) is a more serious statement of this line of argument, not least because of the author’s deep knowledge of farming and of agricultural industries in different parts of the world that provides a more plausible contemporary echo of Chayanov’s ‘practical theory’.

<sup>39</sup>From their earlier work Friedmann and McMichael have sought to incorporate an ecological dimension as central to the history of international food regimes. The use of titles like ‘Feeding the empire . . .’ (Friedmann 2004) and ‘Feeding the world . . .’ (McMichael 2006b) makes the absence of any demographic consideration the more surprising. Interestingly, the population question is central to the ecological economics of Joan Martinez-Alier (2002) who seeks to wrest it from its Malthusian heritage, while insisting that global environmental sustainability requires fewer people (and zero economic growth?). At the same time, he is among the most evidently romantic, and unhistorical, advocates of ‘the peasant way’ (Bernstein 2005).

<sup>40</sup>As does Marc Edelman (1999), including the valuable methodological reflections of his concluding chapter on ‘Peasant Movements of the Late Twentieth Century’; see also Edelman (2009, 245–65) in this collection, and a number of the contributions to Borras *et al.* (2008), including the editors’ valuable introductory essay.

In short, ‘people of the land’ (‘family’ ‘farmers’, ‘peasants’, and so on) are posed as a unitary and idealised, and ostensibly world-historical, ‘subject’, in a strange (or maybe not so strange?) echo of qualities once attributed to ‘the international proletariat’. Nonetheless, for all their shortcomings and difficulties, as briefly outlined, populist formulations of a ‘new agrarian question’ that seek to understand, combat and transcend globalising tendencies of the organisation of agriculture, raise fundamental issues about what is changing in the world of contemporary capitalism: the modes of operation and powers of corporate agribusiness, their social and ecological effects, and the social bases of ‘resistance’ and ‘alternatives’. By the same token, this challenge the agrarian question inherited from ‘classic’ Marxism via Lenin, and especially its capacity to address a world so different from that which generated its original concerns with paths of transition from pre-capitalist (agrarian) social formations to capitalist agriculture and industry (and state socialism in the unique adaptation and impact of the ‘classic’ agrarian question registered by the Soviet experience).

The ‘classic’ agrarian question of Marxism at its most doctrinaire can reduce to a strongly deductive ‘model’ of the virtues of economies of scale in farming. Reconsideration by historical materialism of its historic, and uncritical, attachment to the benefits of large-scale farming is long overdue for various reasons, including the following. First, it is salutary to recover a properly materialist rather than technicist conception of scale in agriculture as an effect of specific, and variant, forms of social relations. Second, the scale and distribution – *and* uses – of capitalist landed property in particular circumstances are often shaped by speculative rather than productive purposes. Third, the productive superiority of large(r)-scale farming is often contingent on conditions of profitability underwritten by direct and hidden subsidy and forms of economic rent, and indeed ecological rents. Fourth, materialist political economy needs to take much more seriously the environmental consequences and full social costs of the technologies that give modern capitalist farming the astonishing levels of productivity it often achieves. These types of issues illustrate the challenges of, and demands on, an agrarian political economy less confined by its historic sources and preoccupations and more committed to problematising and investigating what is changing in today’s (globalising) capitalism. They are *not* presented as elements of a general argument *against* large-scale farming as I am sceptical about *any* ‘models’ of (virtuous) farm scale constructed on deductive or *a priori* grounds.

And politics? The political economy in this paper is not deployed in any ‘anti-peasant’ spirit or prescriptive stance on petty commodity production. Nor do any of my observations suggest withdrawing political sympathy and support for progressive struggles because they fail to satisfy the demands of an idealised (class-purist or other) model of political action. Rather, I have suggested that part of the problem with the ‘new’ agrarian question sketched is how it posits a unitary and idealised, and ostensibly world-historical, ‘subject’: ‘farmers’ or ‘peasants’ or ‘people of the land’. The point, then, is first, to recognise and, second, to be able to analyse, the contradictory sources and impulses – and typically multi-class character – of contemporary struggles over land and ways of farming that can inform a realistic and politically responsible assessment of them. This means rising to the challenges posed by a re-energised and radical agrarian populism, to engage both seriously and critically with the agrarian movements of the present time, and thereby to recover the spirit of Lenin’s ‘fresh and creative



impulses' of the early 1920s, and of Chayanov's contributions to 'practical theory'.

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