

Russia in the 1920s: Chayanov's "Theory of Peasant Economy" and its place in the contemporary intellectual history

Saturday 28 January 2017, by [SHANIN Teodor](#) (Date first published: 1986).

Introduction for: A.V. Chayanov. *The Theory of Peasant Economy*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986 [Alexander V. Chayanov (1888 - 1937) was a Soviet agrarian economist, a scholar of rural sociology, an advocate of agrarianism and cooperatives who fell victim of Stalin's purges - ESSF].

Contents

- [Usage, Experience, Meaning](#)
- [Methods and Labels](#)
- [Historiography and Future](#)

CHAYANOV MESSAGE: ILLUMINATIONS, MISCOMPREHENSIONS, AND THE CONTEMPORARY "DEVELOPMENT THEORY"

Acknowledgment. The author is grateful for advice and help, direct and indirect, from Eduardo Archetti, Goran Djurfeldt, Harriet Friedmann, Barbara Harriss, John Harriss, Mark Harrison, Gavin Hitching, Shuichi Kojima, Harold Newby, Michael Redclift, and David Seddon.

The first English edition of *The Theory of Peasant Economy* [1] made history. The reactions following its publication in 1966 were remarkably strong. The book has been quoted right, left, and center, by those who gave it considerable thought as much as by those who clearly received only a garbled version. The author was hailed by some as peasantry's new Marx, a hero-inventor of a radically new political economy. He was attacked with equal heat by the defenders of the intellectual old regimes. For a time Chayanov was high fashion but even when the swing of academic attention moved to new names and "fads" many of his book's questions, insights, and even terms (e.g., "self-exploitation") have remained as fundamental points of reference of the contemporary social sciences, economic and noneconomic. For that reason, the book made history also in the sense of acquiring a life of its own—an influence which shapes perception, focuses attention, defines plausibilities and modes of analysis, offers symbols, and often underlies political programs, national as well as international.

The 1966 introductions and glossary by Thorner, Kerblay, and Smith did a fine job and their retention in the second edition makes unnecessary here any further summation of Chayanov's career and of the book's content and preliminary criticisms. We shall focus this preface on the book's own life and its place in the intellectual history of the dramatic two decades which followed 1966 and the subsequent scholarly as well as political attempts to come to grips with the so-called development theory. At the core lay the issue of general analytical approach and of attempts at conceptual retooling by the contemporary social sciences in the face of social reality which has proved most predictions consistently and dramatically wrong. This problem of theoretical inadequacies reflected in consistent failures of prediction and planned intervention has not gone

away and, indeed, has since acquired new depth. Chayanov's theoretical contribution should be judged vis-a-vis experience and usage as well as in the face of the contemporary projections of the future, as a potentiality.

Usage, Experience, Meaning

The book's "own life" meant necessarily that in encounter with its audiences the significance of its different elements varied from that attached to it by its author. Application centered mainly on the rural conditions within the contemporary "developing societies." The book was extensively used by analysts of different persuasions, countries, and academic disciplines. Its misconceptions were often as significant in effect as its illuminations. Despite the consequent variety there was a pattern to the ways Chayanov's insights and examples were perceived and selected for use.

The least utilized or accepted of Chayanov's main suggestions were his consumption-needs / drudgery ratio, relating the operation of family farms to family consumption, labor, and demographic (or biological) regularities. Put in a rigorously scientific form and accordingly mathematized, it was not substantiated by most of the available data drawn from Russia of the early part of the century or else from the "developing societies" of today. Nor was it particularly illuminating in an analytical sense. The reasons were partly spelled out by Chayanov himself. His formulas assumed the easy availability of farming inputs other than labor, especially of land (to which complex equipment, fertilizers, and credit should be added nowadays). This had seldom been the case; indeed, it was decreasingly so. Also, the demographic determinants act relatively slowly compared with the current trends of social transformations. The growing complexity, heterogeneity, and changeability of contemporary agriculture and of the peasant ways to make ends meet would make this demographically related model very limited as against the factors which do not enter it: state policies and markets of goods and labor (by now worldwide), new agricultural techniques, the extravillage cartelization of supply, demand, and credit, or the social construction of new needs. What was to Chayanov "not the sole determinant" shrank to barely a determinant at all, at least in the short term.

It is not surprising therefore that the major case when the discussed formula was put to use (and bore interesting fruits) was in a study by a leading anthropologist of the past within the present, expressed in the "Stone Age Economics" of the gatherers and hunters. [2] A broadly parallel suggestion that Chayanov's needs drudgery ratio may prove increasingly realistic as we proceed back along the history of rural Russia was indeed made by one of Chayanov's Marxist critics already in the 1920s. [3] Following similar logic, D. Thorner suggested a higher significance of Chayanov's "ratio" for the thinly populated areas while E. Archetti assumed it for parts of Africa when compared to other "developing societies" of today.

The general aspect of Chayanov's analysis which captured contemporary attention was the depiction of peasant family farms as an economic form which differs from capitalist farming even in an environment clearly dominated by capitalism (and cannot be treated as feudal or "semifeudal" simply because it is non-capitalist). The analytical approach suggested was to begin the consideration of peasant agriculture "from below," that is, from the operational logic of the family farms rather than from the national and international flows of resources, goods, and demands. Of the two parallel specifications explored by Chayanov's book, the interpretation broadly adopted from his analysis of the particular economic structure and logic of the contemporary family farms was not the demographic one (related to the needs/drudgery ratio, with a possible autarkic extension of it). It was the one which defined a particular peasant economy by the characteristics of family labor and the relative autonomy of its usage at the roots of peasant survival strategies which are

systematically different from those of capitalist enterprises. [4] A diverse calculus of choices when production, land-renting, labor out-of-farm, etc. are concerned meant different patterns of operation of the farm enterprises as well as different extraeconomic corollaries and different outflows into the political economy at the national and international levels. Evidence drawn from “developing societies” substantiated this; indeed, there are difficulties in interpreting much of it in any other way. This evidence documented the capacity of peasants to out-compete the often well-capitalized farming enterprises based on wage labor, to buy out large landholders, and to offer goods at cheapest price. Peasant farms often work at a consistent nominally negative profit yet survive—an impossibility for capitalist farming. Maximization of total income rather than of profit or of marginal product guides in many cases the production and employment strategies of peasant family farms. And so on. The message is one of difference of operational logic, of output, and of outcome as well as of the possibility, at times, of actual retreat of the classical capitalist forms of production in face of family farming. Chayanov’s work offered an anticipation and analytical illumination of all these. The growing awareness of the significance of underemployment and employment patterns in the development of the contemporary rural economies facilitated the explicit as well as implicit popularity of this dimension of Chayanov’s work.

Two recent sets of studies exemplify the relevance of peasant farm particularities and their interpretation in the light of the dominant usage of family labor. Djurfeld, Taussig, Friedmann, and others have documented for different environments the tendency of agrobusiness to withdraw from the process of production in agriculture, focusing their profit-making activities on credit, supply of inputs, contracting, and selling, while leaving farming to the small holders and “skimming” them rather than replacing them. [5] Capitalist profit-accountancy prevailed over the capitalist form of production. Second, the recent studies of the paradoxical simultaneity of “critical shortage of labor” said officially to be endangering or even demolishing the agriculture of Egypt and of the parallel evidence of production figures directly contrary to it. [6] Once the data concerning capitalist farming are selected from that of the peasant sector the initial puzzle dissolves. It is the capitalist farming which folds up despite the efforts of its owners and the government’s attempts to help them survive. The family farms use family labor flexibly, draw on unwaged neighbors’ help, and give priority to “home” when deciding on the times of family members’ departure to work elsewhere (e.g., the Gulf) or to return. In result, family farmers advance their global production as well as their share of land held and produce compared with the capitalist farmers-employers. It means not a crisis of the agriculture of Egypt but its peasantization. (Insofar as capitalism is defined by its classical formula as commodity production for profit based on the use of wage labor, it is decapitalization as well.) One can multiply such examples.

This may be the place to refer to two standard misreadings of Chayanov linked to the issue discussed. First, his “analysis from below”—that is, the building up of the understanding of the social economy which commences with the operational logic of family farms—has often been treated as a substitution of the psychological and the subjective for the deterministic and the economic. This is wrong, for the material and structural determinants involved in the relations of production and exchange shape and restrict choices, even though more flexibility of possible and adopted strategies was built into Chayanov’s explanatory scheme. What results is a combined explanation of some complexity, but the more realistic for it. In general terms there is little particularly “chayanovian” to it for a combination of the “objective” and the “subjective” at the roots of human action has been assumed by a broad gamut of schools of thought (from Marx’s “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, etc.” [7] to the contemporary phenomenological studies of Intel-subjectivity). The point is that an alternative general view, cross-cutting major conceptual divisions, adopts a different position. Within diverse schools of thought it assumed an archmodel of human action the determination of which is extrasubjective only—a puppet theater model of humans in society, associated with philosophical positivism. This view is necessarily misleading if applied to

Chayanov's explanatory scheme.

Next, Chayanov's term "self-exploitation" is often understood simply in its most direct sense of excruciating labor by underfed peasant families damaging their physical and mental selves for a return which is below that of the ordinary wages of labor power (equating it therefore with K. Kautsky's "underconsumption" and Lenin's rural "plunder of labor"). [8] To Chayanov this is not the whole story for it must be read together with his concept of "differential optimums," that is, his conclusion that in the different agrarian regions and sub-branches of farming and at any given stage of technology, there are different optimal sizes of enterprise and that the decrease as well as increase from these will make productivity decline. To this the social context of peasant farming and especially the resulting availability of the family, kinsmen, and neighbors' aid and unwaged labor should be added. Family economy is to Chayanov not simply the survival of the weak through their impoverishment which serves super-profits elsewhere, but also, the utilization of some characteristics of farming and of rural social life which may occasionally give an edge to noncapitalist economies over capitalist forms of production in a capitalist world. [9] The continuity and relative wellbeing of family farmers under capitalism can be therefore postulated as a possibility while self-exploitation (and indeed exploitation) takes place, even though no conclusion about a necessary survival of such economic forms can be deduced or should be assumed within this line of thought.

To return to the utilization of Chayanov's insights in contemporary scholarship, the effect of Chayanov's general view of "post-Euclidian" economics, which assumes the plurality of simultaneously operating economic systems and the need to match it by multiplicity of conceptual schemes, was characteristically ambivalent. It corresponded with the work of the more imaginative economic historians of precapitalism, especially K. Polanyi, [10] but those who were ready to quote Chayanov as their authority on contemporary rural economics usually treated it with more respect than application. Disciplinary languages and academic training tend to disregard the submerged assumptions on which they are based with the conclusions drawn taken to be either universally true or universally false. In turn, eyes trained to universalist analysis of an ever-true homo economicus or of epochs which are uniformly capitalist or uniformly feudal tend to miss the centerpiece of Chayanov's assumptions, namely, that family farms are coincident with other economic "systems," responding to and/or being penetrated and influenced by the dominant political economy without their particularity dissolved (indeed, remaining particular also in their response). The consequent issue is not only one of multiplicity of forms but also of what results from multiplicities of types of interdependence and of analytical categories engaged. Such a logic of composites was explored more recently in a debate between Marxists concerning the "articulation of modes of production," but it carried there a significantly sharper stress on the hierarchy of socioeconomic systems, on their domination and exploitation by each other (which Chayanov recognized but accentuated to a lesser degree). On the other hand, much of the "articulation" debate was caught in the deadly trap of "if not capitalist, then feudal" to peter out with little analytical consequence. An attempt to introduce the concept of a particular Peasant Mode of Production, also made then, was a direct if not very successful attempt to incorporate theoretically the particular logic of peasant economy inserted into a dominant political economy. [11]

Finally, Chayanov's practical program of agricultural transformation was made remarkable little of directly, considering the extent to which both its positive and its critical parts were validated by further experience. Once again Chayanov's views on these matters were often misunderstood (and at times rediscovered through experience and at considerable social cost, or else used while their authorship and background remained hidden.)

Chayanov's actual program for the advancement of Russian agriculture, presented fully in the book which followed *The Theory of Peasant Economy* consisted of three interdependent conceptual

elements: rural cooperatives, differential optimums, and vertical cooperation. [12] The first adopted the experience of Europe, especially of Denmark at the turn of the century, while accentuating grass-roots democracy and a “peasants are not stupid,” anti-paternalist and anti-bureaucratic view. The second element has already been mentioned. The third one concluded with a suggestion for a flexible combination, cooperative in form, of different sizes of units of production for different branches of farming. It had also shown that, historically, while the concentration of landownership was insignificant, merchant capital penetrated and transformed peasant agriculture through “vertical capitalist concentration” taking over selectively its extraproduction elements and creaming off incomes (as in the U.S. context where 65 percent of farmers’ income from sales was taken then by railways, banks, traders, etc.). This process, however, is not a necessity. With the power of capital weakened by peasantry’s organizations, and/or state policies, and/or internal contradictions between the capitalists, a different type of “vertical concentration,” which is cooperative and run by the peasants, can be established and even play a central role in the socialist transformation of society. Chayanov linked it to a powerful and remarkably realistic precritique of Stalin’s type of collectivization, code-named “horizontal cooperation,” which substitutes maximization for the optimization of the sizes of units and bureaucratization for the suggested management “from below.” The predicted result of such a “horizontal” reform was the stagnation or decline of productivity of the agriculture. “Horizontal” cooperation combined with the “milking” of agriculture’s resources for the sake of urban growth and the ordering about of peasants would prove as counterproductive as it would be antidemocratic. It would thus court peasant resistance or apathy and destroy the local store of irreplaceable agricultural knowledge and capacity for communal self-mobilization for which bureaucratic pressure from above would prove a poor substitute. Shortage of resources would then be supplemented by their wastage, exploitive hierarchies by new ones as pernicious but less competent.

The typical misreading, especially by those who quoted Chayanov at second hand, tended to interpret his program as a dream of archaic peasant bliss stretching into the future, a “peasantism” from which no practical prescription for modern agriculture and rural change can be drawn. In fact the idea of peasant “vertical cooperation” included the need for large units of agricultural production and their further extension as the farming technology advances. It even accepted the “Grain Factories” idea of the day, subject to the right technology. *Outside his Travels of My Brother Alexis* (a novella defined by him as “a peasant Utopia”), there was no “small is beautiful” message in Chayanov, only a sharp objection to a “the larger, the necessarily more effective” assumption then prominent, and a functional suggestion for a combined development intended to “optimize” (following the agronomists best choice for any regional context of natural conditions and the available labor and technology) plus democratic decision-making “from below.” A relatively slow pace of change can be deduced, related once again to the wish to “optimize” rather than to maximize and to the characteristics of agriculture as understood. Agrarian reformers of different persuasion have encountered and documented ever since the dangers of excessive speed and bureaucratic zest when the transformation of agriculture is involved.

The peak of Chayanov’s analytical work came in the 1920s, between the ages of 32 and 42, which for Russia will be mostly remembered as the years of the NEP—the new economic program which followed the revolution, civil war, and the egalitarian redi-vision of all Russia’s arable lands by its peasant communities. The main economic issues of the country were those of postwar recovery, industrialization, and increase of agricultural production, which in the conditions given meant the increase of agricultural productivity and partial transfer of the rural labor force into towns. The political context was one of a postrevolutionary state intertwined with a socialist city-bound party facing a massive peasantry organized in rejuvenated peasant communes, in which 85 percent of the country’s population held more than 95 percent of its arable land. This political economy was spoken of as one of “state capitalism” and socialist control of the “commanding heights of the economy”

within a population most of whom were “middle peasants.” Prognostication and planning by the rural specialists of Russia was defined by considerations which with hindsight is often referred to as the issue of the Collectivization. Chayanov’s treble alternative and his precritique are relevant to agriculture and ruralites quite unrelated to Russia or to postrevolutionary states with Marxists in charge, but it can be tested most substantively vis-a-vis the Collectivization debate and results.

The last twenty years have seen a considerable amount of soul-searching and policy change concerning collectivized agriculture but nowhere more than in Hungary. [13] They first followed the Soviet “horizontal” pattern and after the 1956 revolution reorganized and tried it out again. What resulted was a decline or stagnation of agriculture and chronic shortages of food supplies (to which, before 1956, harsh repressions meted out to a resentful rural population should be added). Neither mechanization nor the deportation of “Kulaks” and the arrest of the “saboteurs,” nor bureaucratic orders and campaigns solved the permanent agricultural crisis. Then the Hungarian leadership demonstrated the courage of retreat, made a clean sweep, and began in a totally new manner. Village-scale units were now combined with both multi-village and single family ones. Those deported from their villages were permitted to come back and often to direct cooperative production. External controls declined, compulsory sales were abolished, and “vertical” chains of mutually profitable production arrangements were set up and facilitated (e.g., a small holder buying fodder at a price satisfactory to him from the large-scale collective enterprise of which he is a member, to produce within his family unit meat which is then sold on a “free market” or under a contract). The agricultural results were dramatic, moving the country rapidly to the top of the European league where increase in agricultural production and incomes are concerned, not only resolving the problems of supplies but establishing Hungary as an exporter of food. The case of Hungarian agriculture and many other experiments with Collectivization, positive and negative, in Europe as well as in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, acted as an important validation of Chayanov’s suggestions for agricultural transformation, of his prognostication, and, up to a point, of his more general theoretical constructs and approaches. It was clearly not the issue of size or of collectivism or even of Collectivization *per se* but of the actual form of rural transformation and new organization of production as well as the way it combines with peasants-versus-bureaucrats relations, How of resources, and the substantive issues of farming (and its peculiarities as a branch of production). In the face of all these issues, Chayanov’s and his friends’ superb understanding of agriculture, combined with that of rural society, made them unique. This makes his major project—what he called Social Agronomy—pertinent still. It is not that, on the whole, those who succeeded or failed have studied him directly in Hungary or elsewhere. [14] Such lines are seldom clear. But they would (or will) benefit and could lessen some pains if they would (or will) do so. The fact that this part of Chayanov’s intellectual heritage is seldom considered or admitted has to do not with its content but with the nature of current ideological constraints to which we shall return.

We still know much too little about Chayanov’s most direct topic of concern: the Russian countryside in the face of Stalin’s Collectivization. We do know that contrary to the ideological myth to follow, it 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. [15] It was outstandingly destructive of resources and humans, facilitated the brutalization of the country’s political system and contributed to the current inadequacies of Soviet agriculture and arguably to a demographic crisis and industrial slow-down of the last decades. The first post-Stalin steps of the Soviet studies of Collectivization, relevant once again to the last two decades or so, indicated clearly that the flourishing of TOZ, that is, the self-help teams at its beginning (“vertical” rather than “horizontal” in its implications), was effective and actually well supported by much of the Russian peasant population. [16] It was the decision of “the Center” to sweep aside practically overnight the TOZ as well as the socialist communes and every other regionally specific form of rural cooperation stemming from local initiative, [17] and to impose the one and only form of a village-size Kolkhoz directed from above,

which defined the destructive trend of the 1930s. [18]

Methods and Labels

As stated, the misconceptions of Chayanov often played as important a conceptual role as the views he actually offered, and we have referred to a few of them. Two more, general in scope, will be considered to round out the picture: the status of conceptual models in Chayanov works and his “neo-populist” designation.

At the center of Chayanov’s method of theoretical analysis, indeed, what made him the leading theorist of his generation, lie systematic exploration of alternative models and typologies. Abstraction and purposeful simplification are systematically used to define and test causal links. As is usual when theoretical models are concerned, purposeful simplification means the overstatement of some characteristics. The totally nonwaged family farm and the eight pure “economic systems” presented in the translation, find their farther equivalents in his *Experiments in the Study of an Isolated State*, the *Nomographic Elements of Economic Geography*, and even in his “science fiction”: *The Travels of My Brother Alexis* and the 1928 discussion of “farming in a bottle” of the future scientific production of foodstuffs. [19] Chayanov’s mastery and extensive use of Russian empirical evidence (and its wealth for the rural scene of the day), as well as his pronounced practical interests as an agricultural reformer, make many of his cursory readers miss the fact that his was an endless and highly imaginative experimentation with logic of analysis as a way to order the complexity of data in his grasp. He did not lack positive views of his own, made them clear, and can be criticized for them as well as for the methods he used to arrive at conclusions. This has been done by many, including the book’s first editors and myself. [20] But Chayanov must be treated on his own terms, that is, with understanding of the way his mode of exploration and actual conclusion differed from each other. This is why it is unhelpful and often plainly ridiculous to express surprise or dismay at Chayanov’s disregard of market relations, wage labor, or capital investment in the rural context. This “disregard” is a method, an analytical suspension used to explore causal links through the media of a conceptual model (which can be useful or less so). As to the issue of a conceptual model’s realism, that is, its match with reality, it is important but provides only one element of theoretical thought. Chayanov experimented with a unicausal demographic model, with a bicausal model of agricultural development defined by population density and market relations intensity, and so on. Chayanov was also one of the leaders of the field of factual studies of market relations, monetarization, and wage labor, and was remarkably realistic when the day-to-day life of the Russian peasantry was concerned. [21] Recent studies by Soviet and other scholars have indeed shown that he was right as to the low commodity production and very low use of wage labor in rural Russian 1900-14 and 1921-28. [22]

Every model is selective, and Chayanov made his own choices on what to focus his attention and which causal links to “bracket” or deaccentuate. These were relevant, of course, to his views as well as to his conclusions. For example, Chayanov stated in a 1927 debate that he was only then beginning his own studies of peasantry’s socioeconomic differentiation. [23] Considering what we know now about the relatively low class polarization of rural Russia of 1912 and 1921-28, the focusing of attention on the rural cooperation and optimal use of labor made good sense to a leader of a trend committed to the advance of what was called Social Agronomy. But it limited the grasp of the exploitive potentials of simple cooperation, state/peasants interaction, and some other issues. (In parallel, the work by his major critic Kritzman and his assistants, who adopted from the young Lenin the model of peasantry’s necessary polarization, overstated heavily their concern, arguably offering inducement to Stalin-type collectivization without sufficient awareness of its agrarian dimension and potential social pitfalls.) To recollect, one can criticize Chayanov for his priorities, or better still,

consider their impact on his conclusions, but it is epistemologically naive to treat him as naive, blind to evidence, or overwhelmed by the ideological aberrations of “peasantism.”

The positioning of Chayanov within an ideological context and vis-a-vis analytical and ideological laxonomies suffered mostly from two miscomprehensions. The first was less prominent, less significant, and less literate, resulting from limited knowledge of Chayanov’s background, his range of publication, and from only cursory reading of Thorner and Kerblay’s efforts to present its picture. It assumed Chayanov’s singularity in inventing “chayanovism.” The other classified him as a Neo Populist and derived his main characteristics from it.

The splendid tradition of Russian rural studies was rooted in the regional authorities’ (*Zemstvo*’s) 1860s to 1917 effort that was introduced mostly by enlightened nobles and their employees within the “rural intelligentsia” to take account of and to improve the livelihood of the plebian populations in their charge, which was mostly rural and peasant. [24] Those studies reached maturity in late 1880 to 1906 (when Chayanov was being born or in school) to revive again after a failed revolution in 1909-14 (Chayanov began then, in 1912 at the age of 23, his spectacular public career.) As part of it, the conceptual family-farm focus can be traced back to A. Vasil’chakov’s book of 1881, the *Budget Studies* development and initial usage to F. Shcherbina in the late 1890s, the *Dynamic* (“cohort”) *Studies* to N. Chernenkov at the very beginning of the century, and the direct antecedents of Chayanov’s assumption of structurally specific peasant economics to V. Kosin-skii’s book published in 1906. The expression “economics” is somewhat misleading, in fact, as was the usual occupational designation of most of those involved as “rural statisticians of the *Zemstvo*.” What evolved were peasantry-focused social sciences in their broader sense, merging the contemporary Western disciplines of economics, history, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, demography, public medicine, agronomy, and ecology. Chayanov’s originality is not in question. But his significance lay to a considerable degree in abilities of synthesis and presentation. In the best style of Russian intelligentsia he was a very literate man: well read, fluent in a number of foreign languages, skillful in his analytical presentation, and besides an author of essays, five romantic novellas *a la* Hoffman, a guide to West European drawing, a local history of Moscow and a book of poetry. [25]

The description of Chayanov’s work and of the views shared by the so-called Organization and Production School as neopopulist, especially when used as a synonym of programmatic “peasantism” idealizing or hoping for a future peasant universe, is badly informed and misleading. A multistage miscomprehension is involved concerning populism, neopopulism, and Chayanov himself.

First, a few bothered to work out the actual characteristics of Russian populism over and above its descriptions by political foes (especially Lenin’s attack on the SRs, which taken out of context, served its readers ill). [26] Russia’s original socialism-for-developing-societies and its remarkable contemporaneous message which raised for the first time the issues of Uneven Development, State Capitalism, party Cadres, or Social Ecology is often being reduced to rural sentimentality. That it was they who created the first Russian socialist party of revolutionary type, its first urban Trade Unions and workers press, or that their Geneva branch permanent delegate to the General Council of the International was a man called Karl Marx, are simply left out of sight. The next stage in miscomprehension, the latter-day impact of populism—that is of its main theorists like Hertenzen and Chernyshevskii and strategists like Zhelyabov or Kibal’chich of the Peoples Will—is treated as if it could be disassociated from the rest of Russian intellectual history. To exemplify, Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* manifestly modeled in context and in name on Chernyshevskii and the Peoples Will loses its intellectual roots becoming in turn a self-generated invention of a singular genius. The general interdependence of effects, the mutuality of borrowings, and the capacity to learn are “streamlined” to appear as a set of dogmatisms, eternally diverse and absolutely pure (and totally right or totally wrong, of course). Chayanov, being neither “a Marxist” nor a good bourgeois, must be assigned to one of the intellectual chains. A game for those not overburdened by knowledge of the actual context

of Russian history asserts itself then, a world divided into “us” versus “them,” while everything else is put into a leftover category of Populism due to trigger off images of sitting on the fence, sentimental attachment to obsolete archaism, Utopian dreams, and manure. As to Chayanov, the easiest way not to dismiss outright his genius nor to surrender him to one’s direct ideological enemies is to define him as a Populist (with a prefix “Neo” added for the benefit of those prone to point out that his views differed substantively from those of the main theorists of Russian Populism and from those who were defined in his generation as their most direct heirs be it Chernov, Aksentev, or Gershuni). Chayanov took his cues from the declared Marxists V. Kosinskii, V. Groman, and I. Gurevich (I must disagree here with Thorner, it was Gurevich who first suggested “demographic differentiation”), from the liberals N. Cher-nenkov and F. Shcherbina, as well as from the bone fide SR populist P. Vikhlyaev. His methods and conclusions paralleled in many ways those of the Bolshevik Central Committee member of 1905-7 P. Romyantsev and later work of similar persuasion by A. Khryashcheva. His tolerance of different ideas was known; in the 1920s he helped the careers of N. Kondratiev, the brilliant pioneer of the studies of global economic systems, as well as of the Marxist “young Turks” like V. Anisimov. He also often disagreed with those of his own “school,” for example, A. Chelintsev, but proceeded to work closely with them. There is no way to define his possible guilt by heritage or association.

The only way to resolve the question of Chayanov’s populism is to consider his actual views vis-a-vis the contemporary Russian Populists’ main articles of faith concerning rural Russia. He did not accept the view of some right-wing populists in the 1890s that capitalism must fail to establish itself in poverty-ridden rural Russia. He did not adopt the most significant proposition-cum-program of Populism’s left wing in 1906-22, the PSR, to turn peasant communes in control of all available land into the core structure of postrevolutionary rural Russia. He shared with the Russian Populists, but not only with them, the wish to have Russia transformed along lines which would see autocracy abolished and democracy established (with much peasant coloring to it in a population which was 85 percent peasants). The idea of “service to the people” by the Russian intelligentsia was also “populist,” but by this time, not only so. Chayanov’s political party animus was low. In the dramatic year of 1917 he was closest to the Popular Socialists, a mildly populist, markedly academic party of little following. Throughout his life he was to stay the nonparty Muscovite intellectual at his best: erudite, hardworking, broadminded, and deeply committed to humanitarian causes, scholarship, and aesthetics. This approach and those capacities were met in the 1920s by a remarkable laxity toward him by the authorities (said to be ordered by Lenin himself). [27] It was to cost him his life in the decade to follow and to end with his posthumous “rehabilitation” for what it was worth.

As to their goals and predictions, Bolsheviks, SRs, and Chayanov shared hostility to rural capitalism, especially in its extra-production forms (the “Kulaks”). In common with the SRs Chayanov believed more in peasants undifferentiated socioeconomic advance or decline (“aggregate shifts”) versus capitalist and/or state capitalist economy than in the significance of interpeasant polarization processes. He was attacked because of that by many of the Russian “orthodox Marxists,” but some other “orthodox” Marxists, for example, Kautsky, were far from sure on that score. [28] So were some of the Bolsheviks. [29] Chayanov’s distrust of the “large is beautiful” proposition accepted then by most adherents of Progress did not relate this to a peasantist dream à la Proudhon; in the hungry Moscow of War Communism he depicted a small-holder’s universe in a text described as “Utopia” (and a peasant one at that), but suggested something very different in concluding chapter of the book he called in 1925 *The Theory of Peasant Economy*. One should best take as true Chayanov’s own explanation of his views as rooted in study of Russian agriculture of which he had so superb a knowledge. On balance Chayanov was being defined as neopopulist mostly by default, a shorthand description which hides more than it reveals.

Why then the persistence of the neither-us-nor-them neopopulist designation in our own times? The

reason lies in the ideological confrontations of our own generation to which the already discussed reductionism should be added. The admirers of Green Revolution who believe in its antisocialist potentials often interpreted the “from below” approach as “let it be as it is” for “those above” and then used “peasantism” as a handy ideological device to forget the agrobusiness. Once one moves from the form to substance Chayanov is unacceptable to them: he is sharply anticapitalist, with no trust in “free market” processes, and devoted to the cooperatives’ warfare against the “entrepreneurs.” Moreover he was clearly loyal to the Russian postrevolutionary state, refused to emigrate, and even prospered temporarily in his career under the new regime. For the orthodox Marxists of the “developing societies” his method of analysis was equally unacceptable for it challenged head on Lenin’s 1899 study which had acquired the status of supramodel as to what peasant society is and/or is becoming. (Kautsky’s position, definitely “orthodox” and legitimated by Lenin’s admiring references, yet in no necessary contradistinction with Chayanov’s view of peasant economy’s possible survival under capitalism, is still barely known.) But the crux of the “need” to define Chayanov as Neo-Populist lay there in the very assumption of one and only finite Marxism. As to Chayanov, he was neither “a Marxist” nor a rich farmers lover, but neither was he simply a Populist thereby. He learned from many sources but stayed his own man.

Why then did not Chayanov become a contemporary guru, a patron saint of a new sect of admirers who would use his books to enforce and validate their own separateness and ideological purity? He has been quoted admiringly but nobody has claimed his mantle while those called Neo-Populists have usually disclaimed such designation. The answer lies partly in the ideological dualizations described above but it was caused also by a fundamental limitation of Chayanov’s mode of analysis, itself explicable in terms of the experience available when he wrote as against that of our own time. The most significant of the social transformations of the twentieth century was the advancing integration of increasingly complex social forms. Rural society and rural problems are inexplicable any longer only in their own terms and must be understood in terms of labor and capital flows which are broader than agriculture. To understand the diversity of the results of Collectivization one must look at the countryside as well as at industry and at the political elite. And so on. Chayanov’s analysis “from below” is incomplete not only because its author was precluded from its completion. It cannot be completed by simply proceeding along the same road. Not accidentally it was his most exclusively family-centered model, the demographic one, which first fell into disuse. The only way to handle effectively contemporary social reality is through models and theories in which peasant family farms do not operate separately and where peasant economy does not merely accompany other economic forms but is inserted into and usually subsumed under a dominant political economy, different in type. Also peasant economies are being transformed (or even reestablished) mostly by “external” intervention, especially by the state and the multinational companies, intervention which outpaced by far Chayanov’s experience as well as his theoretical schemes. This makes combined “from above” and “from below” models necessary for further exploratory advance. In this, Chayanov’s analysis did play a major but restricted role. Some of his views were clearly mistaken (and invalidated by further evidence), but in the main his weakness lies in an analysis which was not incorrect but insufficient. For the increasingly complex rural world of today it has clear limits, hence, no “chayanovism” but there are many of Chayanov’s illuminating insights, explicit and implicit, in the contemporary rural studies.

Historiography and Future

At its 1966 beginnings the effect of Chayanov’s book’s first English edition was the direct result of a major crisis, of what was called the Third World and of its conceptualization within the Modernization Theory and its political corollaries, conclusions, and predictions. [30] The post-World War II rapid decolonization, the Cold War, and the expanding U.N. as a focus of new hopes, have

redrawn maps as well as redefined and dramatized the problem of world inequality between “The West” and what was then called “the Backward Nations.” This global gap between states and societies became a fundamental issue of the day. A new terminology was coming into being representing new concerns. The global gap was part of it. The confrontation of the “world” led by the United States with the one led by the Soviet Union (extending its impact to the native revolutionaries elsewhere) made the issues of the development in the Third World into a matter of utmost political urgency. Fortunately the solution seemed at hand—a take off into the self-sustained economic growth along the lines tried out by the forerunners of industrialization. [31] Western-style parliaments, markets, ideas, and education plus some aid or loans and investments were to facilitate it all. An assumed natural law of social equilibrium was to secure international equalization, stability, and homogeneity (the larger the discrepancy the more powerful its -tendency for self-eradication). [32] Rationalization embodied in science was to help it along for it is seemingly faster to import experts and expertise than to produce them first hand. The assumedly inevitable Progress was to close the First/Third worlds gap, to eradicate poverty and to keep revolutionaries at bay.

By the turn of the 1950s the optimistic assumptions were proving shockingly wrong. The “gap” was increasing. Pauperization advanced through most of the Third World. Postcolonial independence, economic spontaneity of local and international markets, literacy campaigns, and charitable aid did not resolve “the problems of development.” The West and especially its slow-to-take-the-hint colonizers and budding neocolonizers clearly faced situations no longer describable as riots of despair but massive popular wars and coalitions between resentful governments of the “backward” nations: the Algerian war and the Bandung Conference of the Nonaligned Nations, Congo, Vietnam, and a new UNESCO majority. On the intellectual scene Paul Baran, Gunnar Myrdal, and Paul Prebish savaged the Modernization Theory prescriptions and methods. [33] Against the old registers of correlates and determinants of economic growth came the new pessimism of focusing at the bottlenecks explaining the growing gap in a catchy phrase which swept the world—the development of underdevelopment. [34] This was increasingly defined by the international dependency of the peripheries on the exploitative metropolitan centers. It was also defined intranationally by dependent plebeian populations which were structurally marginalized and excluded from the benefit of modernity—nowadays often called the subaltern classes. This conceptual box was increasingly being filled by peasants—the large majority of the population of the developing societies (the “backward nations” of yesterday). But peasants appeared now not only as victims or an object of development. The dramatic impression of the victory of Mao’s peasantry revolutionary army was spreading and being reinforced by guerrillas all through the Third World. Also, the peasantry was increasingly being seen as a potential political actor—a subject of history. In the 1960s they came to spell new hopes of sweeping away oligarchy in Latin America, outfacing an imperial army in Vietnam, helping to balance failures of industrialization or of the egalitarian program attached to the Green Revolution.

Chayanov’s emergence into the English-speaking world coincided with a dramatic “face to the peasants” realignment of attention which took place in the 1960s. The World Bank officials and Marxist revolutionaries, politicians and scholars, not forgetting the committed student masses, rapidly turned peasantologists. From a piece of anthropological exotica, peasants have moved into the center of debate about the most significant contemporary issues. Overnight the discussion of peasantry in books, theses, and programs has shot up from next to none to hundreds and then thousands of items. The very word “peasant” became “hot” and “with it”; like sex and crime it was by now selling manuscripts to publishers and books to readers. The trouble was that this academic avalanche was theoretically very thin. The freshly collected “facts” about peasants, mostly localized, and the speculations about them, mostly very grand and abstract, found themselves like Pirandello characters searching for a conceptual framework which could relate and transform them into a branch of systematic knowledge. Of the available older writings of relevance only Lenin and Redfield

could be put to partial use, [35]] Chayanov's 1966 book entered this void (together with Marx's *Grundrisse* presented first in English by Hobsbawm in 1964, and a more conventional economics text by Schultz published in the same year). [36] The richness of the data and the sophistication of the methodology put forward by Chayanov, the contemporaneity of his concerns, and his broad theoretical sweep took the breath away from scores of peasantology beginners. Some declared allegiance, more used it to cut their teeth defending or reestablishing the orthodoxies of old, but the most numerous utilized Chayanov's evidence and insights in their own analyses and schemes concerning peasants the world over.

It would seem that the very positioning of Chayanov as "the man who knew about peasants" or his more literate designation as a social scientist who helped us see better the analysis of family farming as a particular form or element of economy should lead to the gradual decline of his significance in the future. Peasants still form a major part of mankind but their numbers are stationary while their share in the population of the "developing societies" is rapidly in decline. They are also being "incorporated" while the livelihoods of those who survive as rural small holders increasingly include what has been considered as "nonpeasant" characteristics. A decline in the significance and the particularity of peasantries leading to a parallel depeasantation of the social sciences can be predicted, with Chayanov assigned eventually to the archives. Or is it?

The crisis of the 1960s has not been resolved but has actually broadened in its substance and its implications. The predicament of the Third World, made morally unacceptable and politically dangerous by the way the better-off have prospered, extended into a socioeconomic crisis which includes "us." Massive structural unemployment at the lower pole of the First World has grown sharply and is increasingly being recognized as irreversible. A crisis of the Second World, both economic and moral, is visible and self-admitted, diminishing its ability to offer alternatives—the impact of a major model and determinant of development in the past generations is declining. All through the 1980s a parallel crisis of capitalism and of its actually existing alternatives has been growing, economically and politically but also conceptually; we face a reality we decreasingly know how to extrapolate or to grasp.

A central element of contemporary global society is the failure of the capitalist economies as well as of state economies to advance unlimitedly and to secure general welfare in ways expected by the nineteenth-century theories of progress, liberal and socialist alike. Control and extent of profits by capitalist multinational companies is advancing side-by-side with the retreat of standard capitalist forms of production and of social organization linked to the extension of unemployment and "underemployment," of "informal economies," and other networks of survival. Sluggish state economies are intertwined with the massive "second" and "third" (or "black") economies, increasingly recognized as irreducible. While in the "developing societies" islands of precapitalism disappear, what comes instead is mostly not the industrial proletariat of Europe's nineteenth century but strata of plebian survivors—a mixture of increasingly mobile, half-employed slum-dwellers, part-farmers, lumpen-traders, or pimps—another extracapitalist pattern of social and economic existence under capitalism and/or third-worldish types of state economy. The populations involved in the informal and/or family-bound and/or "black" and/or mixed economies are growing around the globe and one cannot understand without reference to this either the way national economies work or the way people actually live. While exploitive relations are preserved and enhanced, the functional organization of economy changes, extending rather than concealing those elements of it which call for modes of analysis alternative to those ordinarily in use. By now a new "green" radicalism has begun increasingly to respond politically to these experiences, new exploitative patterns, and conceptual insights. Theoretically the analysis of modes of incorporation by a dominant political economy is in increasing need of being supplemented by the parallel study of modes of nonincorporation operating in the worlds we live in.

It is against this context that Chayanov's analysis of alternative and complimentary economies, of family labor, of the nonmonetarized calculus of choices and of patterns of physical production (rather than their prices only) of differential optimums, of modes, and of utilities of cooperation—an analysis "from below" attempting to relate structure to choice—will have to find its future possible echo and uses. So will the method of exploring models of alternative realities and rationales. In fact there are still hundreds of millions of peasants and as many may exist in the year 2000 but, paradoxically, Chayanov's fundamental methods and insights may prove particularly enriching for worlds of fewer peasants as well as of fewer "classical" industrial proletarians while the subject of his actual concern, the Russian peasantry, has all but disappeared. In no way would future theorizing be a simple replication of Chayanov, but it might carry important elements of his achievements and that of the Russian rural analysis of 1880s-1928 as part of the body of new development theories aiming to understand more realistically our environments and to improve future worlds. Which will make a good epitaph for a memorial of a great scholar when his countrymen remember to build him one.

Teodor Shanin (1986).

P.S.

* <http://eng.yabloko.ru/Books/Shanin/chayanov.html>

Published by yabloko. ru with a kind permission of Teodor Shanin.

See the original at <http://www.msses.ru/shanin/chayanov.html>

Footnotes

[1] Publié originellement en 1923, la traduction anglaise est parue en 1966 - ESSF

[2] S. Sahlin, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972), chaps. 1-3. (The author disassociated himself, however, from the marginalist mode of Chayanov's explanation.)

[3] G. Meerson, *Semeino-trtidovaya teoriya i differentsiatsiya krest'yanstva v rossii* (Moscow, 1926).

[4] Kerblay stresses rightly the particular significance given to this position by B. Bratskus, but Chayanov has adopted it as well (if less exclusively), and it was through his work that this approach spread into the contemporary literature.

[5] J. Harriss, ed.. *Rural Development* (London, 1982). Also H. Friedmann, "World Market, State and Family Farm" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1978), vol. 20. The contemporary spread of the "putting out" system outside agriculture broadened the conceptual issues involved.

[6] B. Hansen and S. Radwan, *Employment Opportunities and Equity in Egypt* (Geneva, 1982); and E. Taylor, "The Egyptian Agricultural Labour Shortage: A Crisis for Whom?" (Manchester, 1985).

[7] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (London, 1973), p. 398.

[8] K. Kautsky in *The Agrarian Problem* (London, in print), chaps. 2c and 6b; and the study of U.S. agriculture in V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1968), vol. 19, p. 343

[9] It has been pointed out by M. Harrison that selective preference for productivity of the small units does not explain on its own why capitalists do not react simply by decentralization of units owned by them. The answer seems to lie in the combination of economic or social patterns and effects as discussed.

[10] K. Polanyi, K. Arensberg, and H. W. Pearson, *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Glencoe, 1971).

[11] The concept of “mode of production” loses much of its heuristic power without the inbuilt assumption of the intramode class conflict at its core rather than on its frontiers. For further discussion see T. Shanin, “Denning Peasants,” *Sociological Review* (1983); for a general debate see A. Foster-Carter, “The Modes of Production Debate,” *New Left Review* (1978).

[12] Reproduced in B. Kerblay, *Oeuvres Choisies de A. V. Chayanov* (Paris 1967), vol. 5. Touched upon in short in the last chapter of *The Theory of Peasant Economy*.

[13] N. Swain, *Collective Farms Which Work* (Cambridge, 1985).

[14] The Hungarian scholarship had its own tradition of peasant studies represented also on its Marxist wing especially by the works of I. Markus. Its views were condemned by the Soviet-like collectivizers as anti-Marxist but eventually won the day and were expressed in the country’s third (and successful) collectivization. The impact of the implicit cross-influences cannot be ascertained but the views of Chayanov and Ills friends spread fairly broadly through Europe and Asia via the German professional literature of the 1920s.

[15] S. M. Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power* (London, 1968). See also R. W. Davies, *The Soviet Collective Farm, 1929-1930* (London, 1980). The frequent use of Lenin’s 1923 article “On Cooperation” to legitimate the 1929-39 Collectivization is an open falsehood. The article does not focus on production cooperatives.

[16] For example, see the item *Kolectivizatstya in Suvetskaya isloncheskaya entsiklnpediyn* (Moscow, 1961), and also M. Vyitsan, V. Danilo, V. Kabanov, and Yu. *Moshkov, Kolektivisatsiya sel’skogo kliozyaulva v SSSR* (Moscow, 1982), especially chaps. 1-3.

[17] Since the civil war there were a number of Socialist Communes which came to be considered “too collectivized” and dismantled in 1929-33 to provide for the homogeneity of the rural organization of production. There was also in 1928—30 some talk of gigantic-size Kolkhoz, but nothing came out of it.

[18] See footnote 14. The productive successes during the last two decades of the family plots and of the experiments with the *zveno* system of multifamily units (autonomous within a general kolkhoz system) in the Soviet Union and its current version under Gorbachev offer an interesting reference to the issue of “optimums” today.

[19] Kerblay, op. cit. As in the case of *Travels with My Brother Alexis*, this was also defined as “Utopia,” but this time a “scientific-technical” one.

[20] In a section devoted to “biological determinism” in *The Awkward Class* (Oxford, 1972).

[21] For example, his detailed Budget Study of the family farms in the district (uezd) of Starobel'sk in Kerblay, op. cit., vol. 2.

[22] See A. M. Anfimov, *Krest'yanskoe khovfaislvo evropeiskoi Rossii* (Moscow, 1980); V. P. Danilov, *Sovetskaya dokolkhoznaya dorevnya* (Moscow, 1979), vol. 2; T. Shanin, *Russia as a “Developing Society”* (New Haven, 1975).

[23] In a debate conducted by *Puti sel'skogo khozyaistva* (1927), nos. 4-9.

[24] The best English source for coverage of those events is still G. T. Robinson, *Rural Russia wider the Old Regime* (New York, 1949).

[25] Practically unknown, these novellas were recently published in Russian by Russica Publishers in the United States as A. Chayanov, *Istorifa Parikmakherskoi Kukty i Drugie sochineniya Botanika X* (New York, 1982). An introduction by L. Chertkov offers insightful commentary on Chayanov's literary career, but in reference to his economics repeats some of the mistaken assumptions of his Soviet critics.

[26] For discussion see T. Shanin, *Russia 1905-7: Revolution as a Moment of Truth* (New Haven, 1985). For studies available in English of the Russian Populism and its most manifest followers, the SRs' party (the PSR), see F. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution* (London, 1960); I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth, 1979); and A. Walicki, *The Controversy over Capitalism* (Oxford, 1969).

[27] Chertkov speaks of Lenin's order in 1921 to let Chayanov be “because we need wise heads, we are left with too few of them” (Chayanov, op. cit., pp. 23-25). The extensive publication of Chayanov's works, even then highly controversial, and his frequent travels to Europe in the 1920s substantiate the assumption of particular tolerance displayed toward him in those days.

[28] See K. Kautsky, op. cit., chaps. 7, 9, and 10.

[29] For N. Bucharin's place in this debate see M. Harrison in Harriss, op. cit.

[30] For further discussion see H. Alavi and T. Shanin, *Introduction to Sociology of the “Developing Societies”* (London:1982).

[31] W. W. Rostow, *Process of Economic Growth* (London, 1962).

[32] A position advanced by the Functionalist School in sociology and by the simpler versions of Neoclassical economics particularly influential in the 1950s.

[33] P. Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (New York, 1957); and G. Myrdal, *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions*. The work of P. Prebisch became known in the 1950s mostly through the Reports of UN ECLA he directed.

[34] Introduced by A. G. Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York, 1969), to become for a moment arguably the most read book on theory of development

[35] Translations of V. I. Lenin, *Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Initially 1899) were

particularly well known and used by the Marxists as the archmodel of analysis and of conclusions concerning peasantry's demise. R. Redfield, *Peasant Society* (Chicago, 1956), offered the usual starting point for many U.S. anthropologists.] while the more contemporary efforts to make theoretical sense of the peasants were only then beginning to come through. [[E. R. Wolf, *Peasants* (New York, 1966); T. Shanin, *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Harmondsworth, 1971); and B. Galeski, *Basic Concepts of Rural Sociology* (Manchester, 1972). Two early journals specifically devoted to peasantry began publication in the early 1970s in the United States and the United Kingdom: *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Peasant Studies*.

[36] K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (London, 1964); and T. W. Shultz, *Transforming the Traditional Agriculture* (New Haven, 1964).