

"The return of those who never went": Peasant and / or family farmer? Theoretical-conceptual reflections and the pertinence of the peasantry¹

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*Trabalhe com a enxada, semeie, colha, caminhe, e você me encontrará ali.
Work with the hoe, sow, reap, walk, and you will find me there.*

Michel Serres - Notícias do mundo

Abstract

This work proposes a theoretical-conceptual reflection on the categories of “peasants” – this “disturbing” social actor – and “family farmer”, especially in the light of Brazilian, though not only, intellectuals whose object of study is the agrarian question. Our objective is to point out what gives substance to the social construction of both the peasant and the family farmer, though taking into account the undoubted heterogeneity of Brazilian family-based agriculture, which reflects its difficult definition. An analysis is proposed, which considers these two categories, understanding them not as opposing poles – as if the peasant were reduced to a political actor and the family farmer to a productive actor – but as possibly overlapping categories, by highlighting the relevance of the peasantry in the country.

Keywords: Peasant; family farmer; social changes.

A volta dos que não foram”: camponês e/ou agricultor familiar? reflexões teórico-conceituais e a pertinência do campesinato

Resumo

Este trabalho propõe uma reflexão teórico-conceitual acerca das categorias de “camponês” - esse “incômodo” ator social, e o “agricultor familiar” à luz, sobretudo, de intelectuais brasileiros, mas não apenas, que têm como objeto de estudo a questão agrária. Nosso objetivo é apontar aquilo que dá substância tanto à construção social do camponês, quanto do agricultor familiar, mas levando em consideração o fato de que a heterogeneidade da agricultura de base familiar brasileira é indubitável, refletindo-se, portanto, na sua difícil definição. Propõe-se uma análise que pondera a respeito dessas duas categorias entendidas, não como pólos opostos, como se o camponês fosse resumido a um ator político e o agricultor familiar a um ator produtivo, mas a partir das possíveis imbricações entre ambas categorias destacando, sobretudo, a pertinência do campesinato no país.

Palavras-chave: Camponês; agricultor familiar; transformações sociais.

Resume

Ce travail propose une réflexion théorique et conceptuelle sur les catégories de "paysan" - cet acteur social "inconvenient" et le "L'agriculture familiale" avec fondement, surtout, des intellectuels brésiliens, mais pas seulement, qui ont pour objet d'étude la question agraire.

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Notre objectif est de mettre en ce qui donne de la substance à la construction sociale du paysan et de l'agriculteur familial, mais en tenant compte du fait que l'hétérogénéité de l'agriculture familiale brésilienne est incontestable, reflétant ainsi sa difficile définition. Proposé ici une analyse qui considère ces deux catégories non pas comme des pôles opposés, comme si le paysan se résumait à un acteur politique et l'agriculture familial à un acteur productif, mais basé sur les interactions possibles entre les deux catégories mise en évidence avant tout, la pertinence et la pertinence des paysans dans le pays.

Mots-clés: Paysan; agriculture familiale; transformation sociale.

Introduction

We contribute, in this work, a seminal discussion for the social sciences, for involving the conceptual category of peasant. Thus, for being a key concept for the orientation of this work, the construction of the object – peasant – leads essentially to an effort of objectification and description of the real, although obviously without intending to reveal all aspects of the reality in question. It is, therefore, a theoretical-conceptual effort to approach reality (Pires, 2016). I should note that, despite this work being strictly theoretical and conceptual, it is based on “solid ground”, since it emerges from the concerns arisen during the master's research of the author, which required to think theoretical-conceptual basis for understanding the reality in question.

Aware of the intense and historic debate that involves such a concept, I intend – even if very shortly – to anchor my argument, mainly but not only, to those of authors who have promoted this debate in the light of the Brazilian context as: Velho (1969); Queiroz (1963); Martins (1981); Abramovay (1998); Fernandes (2002); Wanderley (2004), in addition to Shanin (2005); Batra (2011) and Ploeg (2013). Clerly, my purpose is not to analyse the genesis of the peasantry and its reproduction in Brazil, but to highlight its pertinence and political relevance, possibly more emphatic than ever (Ploeg, 2013). There is, therefore, a revaluation of the “peasant” and “peasantry” categories today (Wanderley, 2014).

The farmer owns the land, the bourgeois owns the capital and the proletarian sells his labor force. And the peasant? What does he own? What does he produce? What does he sell? [...] He is a multiform phantom defined by his intricate complexity (BARTRA, 2011, p.74).

First, it is worth emphasizing those aspects that give sense to these categories. A priori, from the identitarian point of view, historical-economic, ethnic and productive diversity are the rule. According to Ploeg (2013), in the forms of peasant organization there is no simple mathematics, what explains the emergence of diversity in peasant agriculture.

From the viewpoint of the generalizations ascribed to the peasant, Shanin (2005) compiles six main features often used to describe and distinguish peasants from other

groups. These are: 1) the peasants' economy is characterized by extensive forms of autonomous labor (that is, family labor) and by the control of their own means of production, the subsistence economy; 2) the trends in peasant political organization have often shown considerable similarity in different regions and countries of the world (banditry, guerrilla, peasant rebellion); 3) typical and very similar norms and cognitions have been perceived such as the pre-eminence of traditional rationalization, the role of oral tradition, specific "cognitive maps"; 4) peasant social organization and its functioning have shown considerable similarity throughout the world; 5) particularly the social reproduction, that is, the production for supplying material needs, the reproduction of human actors and the system of social relations show patterns that are specific and generic to peasants. Relevant, here, is the occupational learning within the family. The rhythm of life of the village and of the peasant domestic group clearly reflects the main "natural" cycles, that is, the agricultural year; 6) the fundamental causes and patterns of structural change have been considered, once again, as both generic and specific to peasants. However, Shanin (2005) emphasizes that the peasant's specificity reflects the interdependence of the mentioned characteristics, thus being not limited to any of these aspects.

The heterogeneity is undoubtedly a characteristic of the peasantry, thus reflecting in its difficult definition, especially because, if we understand it as a class, this is aprioristically a non-uniform class. In short, "a peasant' does not exist in any immediate and strictly specific sense. Over no end of continents, states and regions those so designated differ in ways as rich in content as the world itself" (SHANIN, 2005, p.1).

Here is, then, the peasant's dilemma:

But from the appropriation of which part of the social work does the peasantry live? How to economically define the form of income that corresponds to this? If profit is attributed to the peasant, he becomes a capitalist. If he gets a wage, he becomes a worker. If he lives off of the land income, he, then, becomes a land owner (ABRAMOVAY, 1998. p. 35).

It is crucial to delimit what is understood by 'peasant', in order not to take the conceptual category of peasantry as a synonym for family farming, nor to regard it as an axiom extended to all those who have their ways of life and work linked to the land and/or subordinated to the income of the land, thus neglecting the historical-political importance of the concept of peasant (Martins, 1986); and also, according to Velho (1969), in order to avoid possible deviations, arbitrariness and abuses of the concept I delve into, here, without seeing it as the opposite extreme of family farmer. Therefore, the theoretical-conceptual understanding of 'peasant' must be clearly set, presenting its convergences and divergences regarding other concepts related to rural activities, namely: the family farmer.

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that the understanding of 'peasant' in this manuscript is anchored to an open perspective, that is, it is not restricted to the definition of peasantry as a social class and ideologically oriented as advocated in the classical sense. Rather, although recognizing the historical-political relevance of the peasantry, the present approach goes beyond, insofar as it understands them as being linked to a way of life that, above all, builds autonomy as a horizon (Batra, 2011). In this sense, peasantry has a specific way of life, based on the autonomy and cooperation among its members, therefore, it nourishes community ties such as the *mutirões*² highlighted by Candido (2001), and a relationship with agriculture that goes beyond a mere economic relationship.

The surplus question

Before dwelling on the discussion of the peasant specifically, it is important to briefly make a brief discussion on a central question for the debate, that is, the notion of "surplus." After all, the need to produce surplus is understood as the main form of subordination of the peasant to the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the peasant economy, in order to guarantee its reproduction, is conditioned to the production of surpluses that assures both its subordinate condition in capitalism and the exploitation of peasant labor (Bartra, 2011). In this sense, and considering the importance of the surplus in the peasant economy, it is worth bringing back Polanyi's notion of surplus:

Neither the lilies of the field, nor the birds in the air, nor men in pastures, fields or factories – tending cattle, raising crops, or releasing planes from a conveyor belt – produce a surplus over their own existence. Labor, like leisure and repose, is a phase in the self-sufficient course of man through life (POLANYI, 2012, p. 51).

For Polanyi (2012), the idea of a surplus refers to the economic transformation that occurred in an extremely short period, in which the crucial step was the transformation of labor and land into commodities, as if they were produced for sale. This process resulted in the "establishment of a market price for land use, called income" (POLANYI, 2012). Once mobilized the mechanisms that triggered the engine of capitalist accumulation, based on the surplus value, liberation of the labor force, expropriation and privatization of the means of production, besides the expropriation and appropriation of the own person (worker), this latter, from now on, is forced to sell his/her workforce in the market (Bensaïd, 2017).

The transformation in the regime of property in eighteenth-century Europe, and the imposition of new (private) property relations by means of the brutal suppression of the old forms of land ownership – replaced by hybrid forms, for these did not result in private

² *Mutirão* (or *mutirões*, plural) in Portuguese, refers to mutual aid mobilizations. (Translator's note)

capitalist property, nor in communal property associated with so-called customary law – abolished the right of the pauperized masses to common property resources. Marx (2017 [1841]), in his writings on the law on wood theft, sublimely analyzes the social war of property rights, that is, customary law that established hybrid forms of property, neither communal nor private, and the new private law which established private ownership of common property resources (means of production).

The State favored private property by establishing private law and private property as an end. According to Marx, private interest sees itself as the ultimate end of the world. Therefore, if the law does not realize this ultimate end, it is a law opposed to the end (Marx, 2017 [1841]). The law, then, became the main mechanism of spoliation (Bensaïd, 2017), inasmuch as, without succeeding in making people “believe that there is a crime where there is no crime”, “will only succeed in converting crime itself into a legal act” (Marx, 2017 [1841], p.82).

Thus, based on the mercantile domination over the land – an entity to be bought, sold and used to produce profit, that is, a potential rent extracted from it by its owner –, private property was secured (Wolf, 1976). A process that, according to Marx (2010), changes the logic of land ownership, since it is the "transformation of land property into a commodity ..." (MARX, 2010. p.74). In Marx, land rent is not an ambiguity for capitalism; on the contrary, it is the outcome of the capitalist production that allowed, firstly, the primitive accumulation of capital through the expropriation of peasant lands, forcibly throwing the masses deprived of their means of labor (land) towards the cities to proletarianize.

Therefore, it reduced the need to produce, which earlier dealt with a variety of possibilities and motivations, to the idea of profit. Accordingly, a series of mechanisms were imposed in order to secure the surplus in the capitalist mode of production that, in the peasant case, is marked by deep asymmetries in the exchanges³, since, in the process of production, the peasant generates a surplus that is transferred to the capitalist economy and, at the same time, he reproduces himself as the exploited (Bartra, 2011).

Peasant and / or family farmer: confluences and discrepancies

Resuming the theoretical-conceptual discussion, it is necessary here to point out what gives substance to these categories. It is observed that the peasant category is often presented as either a synonym or an antonym of the concept of family farming. In Abramovay (1998), for example, the modern family farmer corresponds to a profession –

³ According to Bartra (2011), while the peasant commodity is produced from a perspective of use value and so it circulates in the capitalist market, the capitalist commodity, differently, is regulated by the exchange value. The asymmetry of exchanges results from this relationship.

professional farmers – unlike the peasant that refers to a way of life. Thus, capitalist development in central countries tends to devastate the social structure of the peasantry as it establishes family farming as the fundamental basis of technical progress and capitalist development. Thus, to emphasize the ruptures and continuities (Wanderley, 2004) of the present peasantry, is an arduous task, though a necessary effort.

Many studies offer a split perspective, that is, on the one hand the social isolationism characteristic of the peasant and, on the other, the integration into the market of the family farmer. For Neves (2009), for a long time in the social sciences, the interpretations about the peasantry were focused on the dualistic character between the new and the archaic. Discussions on the peasantry were dominated by the dualism that placed capitalist and peasant farmers as mutually opposed categories in rural studies (Ploeg, 2016). In short, duality circulates from a supposed isolation of the peasantry, in one end, to a greater entry into society and, subsequently, greater participation in state agricultural programs by the family farmer, the "professional farmer", in the other extreme (ABRAMOVAY 1998, p. 211).

Therefore, the peasants were thought of from the perspective of their conditions of material poverty and discontinuous institutional links with the society in general. It is worth mentioning, as observed by the 19th century anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus, that the discourse of devaluation of peasant agriculture is quite old – the argument of being educators in rational agriculture, that is, agronomists and also large landowners, thus, presumed experts on the technique of agriculture, was also used to justify the usurpation of peasant lands (Reclus, 2015).

In these terms, the peasants are considered as isolated from the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, that is, they are placed in a pole that represents a closed economy, in which they produce for their own consumption, configuring a subsistence economy, without concern for generating surpluses and integrating into the modern world of production and the national economy (Queiroz, 1963). They, thus, would be exclusively devoted to ensuring family subsistence and would not be interested in undertaking efforts that would involve investment in agricultural activity (Wanderley, 2004). As for the low ties with society in general, Candido (2001) offered a splendid account of the cultural uniqueness of the *caipira* (yokel), marked by a closed and subsistence economy, that carries elements of semi-nomadism and itinerant agriculture, of dispersed settlements, spatial isolation, independence and alienation from social changes. In this case, there are no technical or social reasons to justify an additional effort to produce surpluses (Wolf, 1976).

The family farmer, in turn, would be integrated into the new capitalist relations, being a kind of modern peasant (Fernandes, 2002), understood as the transformation of the family producers, through the valorization of forms of integration into the society as a whole,

that is, the modernization through productivism, developmentalism, greater integration into the productive organization (Neves, 2004).

According to Abramovay (1998), the specificity of family farming, especially following the second world war in the capitalist countries, is due to the technical and innovative capacity, and to the novel social forms which often do not have any relation with the peasant heritage. The author also underlines the assertive role of the state in the structuring of agrarian capitalism, since family farming played a fundamental role for the development of the capitalist world insofar as it ensured most of the food supply with a lower price for the working classes, being an agriculture highly integrated with the market, which "is far from being considered peasant" (ABRAMOVAY, 1998, p. 22).

It is important to emphasize, especially in respect to the work, that Abramovay (1998), when discussing the concept of family farmer, places it into a specific context in which family labor is assimilated by the capitalism of the central countries, particularly in the post-war and with Fordism, and such assimilation is carried out through the control of the State. Thus, the author refers to a unique group of agricultural workers in which the family base was distinctively assimilated by capitalism, but which has no connection with the characteristics of the peasantry. For the author, the modern family farmer corresponds to a profession – they are professional farmers, unlike the peasants who entail a way of life. Therefore, capitalist development in central countries tends to overthrow the social structure of the peasantry as it establishes family farming as the fundamental basis of technical progress and capitalist development.

According to Fernandes (1996), such dichotomized approach would have embedded an evolutionary, linear and economistic vision. In opposition to the "peasantry," there would be a transformation of the peasant, by means of an integration to a greater or lesser degree to the market, into a family farmer. The peasantry, then, remaining as the producer of a subsistence agriculture.

In short, the "modern" family farmer would be integrated into the market, inserted in public policies aimed at family agricultural production and with financing for the incorporation of sophisticated technologies, while the peasant would be the representation of the archaic and doomed to extinction (Fernandes, 2002). In these terms, Abramovay (1998) emphasizes that the environment in which contemporary family farming is developed is exactly the one that will stifle the peasant, that is, will undermine its forms of social reproduction and deprive its ties of integration.

The idea that peasant agriculture was in itself incipient and poorly integrated to the society as a whole persists today. This idea gave rise to the need for modernization of the peasantry and for its greater integration to society (Neves, 2009). The major milestone in the political context of this process in Brazil occurred in the 1990s, with the adoption of the

category "family farming" by the State itself, with the formulation of the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (PRONAF), whose activity was organized by and for the family. At the same time, the adoption of this category diluted the historical-political content present in the word 'peasant' (Wanderley, 2014).

In search of confluences in the Brazilian case

As I stated at the outset of this argument, I do not corroborate the thesis that such features of one category or another can synthesize actual striking differences. I believe, therefore, that the confrontation of a mix of these categories is closer to the reality. After all, peasants, in the current context, cannot escape from mechanization and increased productivity, due to the pressures to which they are subjected (Kostas & Vergopoulos, 1977). In fact, this change and assimilation of the peasant ways of life can be observed even in the profile of the classical peasant, that is, the European peasant, as observed by Éliase Reclus in the mid-nineteenth century:

The peasant, as he was once known, is on the verge of disappearing: the way of land concession changing around him, he must change accordingly. Even the small owner who still seeks to walk in his father's footsteps and clings desperately to the old routine of culture cannot ignore the methods of his neighbor, nor cover his ears to the stories he hears at the exhibition fair. He continuously sees the circle of interests grow around him; whether seeking information or not, he knows that the wheat from Russia, that the corn from the United States come to compete with his products and diminish their sale values; despite everything, he is involved in the specialization of work (RECLUS, 2015, p. 210).

According to Wanderley (2004), the peasantry does not constitute a world apart, isolated from all other societal relations; on the contrary, peasant societies maintain ties of integration with the whole of society, among which lie mercantile ties. Therefore, the peasantry always exists within a larger system (Wolf, 1976). As Queiroz (1963) recalls, in Brazil, since the colonial era, the closed economy and the market economy coexist. With regard to the colonial economy, Prado Jr. (1976) underlines the importance of subsistence agriculture as the one responsible for the supply of agricultural products for domestic consumption. Martins (1986) points out the significant role of the peasants, during Brazil Empire, represented by the *agregado*⁴ as the main agent in the production of agricultural products for domestic consumption. That is, although they practiced subsistence agriculture, they also traded their "surpluses". Thus, it is not possible to understand the peasants outside

⁴ *Agregado* was a land tenant who had no right to own land (for not being white or other condition), but who neither was a slave. These people traded services with the large farmers in exchange for the right to grow food in some area of the farm. (Translator's note).

the broader social structure and the historical context in which they are inserted (Shanin, 2005).

Velho (1969) brings important contributions in this sense. According to the author, there are nuances in the use of the category peasants in Brazil and which differ from its classic meaning. Such nuances range from a maximum character of peasantry to a maximum rural proletarianization and will vary according to certain criteria. The opposite borderline case occurs when the peasant sells his labor force. This is the labor force that he does not apply with his own means of production, either because these are insufficient or because certain products yield less than he and his family need to subsist. That is, they sell their labor force because their income as producers is not able to guarantee their reproduction (Bartra, 2011). Among these opposite cases, there are the intermediate ones that will combine criteria of both and that comprise the most common cases in the country.

The concept, then, moves between visible and contradictory aspects, because anchored to the alternation of periods, sometimes of *depeasantization*, sometimes of *repeasantization*. This latter process - repeasantization – shall not be confused with a mere return to the past (Ploeg, 2013). On the contrary, it is an active reconstitution of relations and elements (old and new, material and symbolic) that help to confront the modern world.

Nevertheless, to infer that peasants generally comprise an isolated social group situated on the fringes of the capitalist society would be to overlook the mechanisms of subordination to which peasants are subjected, because, despite being considered free and owners of the means of production (land), they are always subordinate to tax mechanisms or to unequal exchanges (Velho, 1976) and so effectively integrated into the markets, since they must sell their surpluses, although practicing subsistence farming (Wanderley, 2004). In addition, according to Harvey (2011), state taxation serves as the enduring means by which peasant populations are brought into the orbit of capitalist accumulation, that is, the need to pay income tax immediately entails the need to produce to sell.

In this sense, peasant property is, at one and the same time, an economic unit, because it produces surplus, and the basis of its own subsistence (Wolf, 1976). As to the exploitation, it takes place in the market, into which the peasants bring their surpluses by means of unequal and subordinate exchanges⁵ (Bartra, 2011). Certainly, the capitalist mode of production resulted in profound modifications in the contemporary agrarian structure, which altered the dynamism of peasant relations. Amin & Vergopoulos (1977) point out that the peasant integration into the new dynamics produced by capitalism can be observed in the intensification of the self-exploitation of the work of the peasant family, in the

⁵ For Bartra (2011), the subordinate mode of production is embedded in the socioeconomic relations, forms of production or circulation, and juridical, political or ideological relationships, that is, non-capitalist strictly speaking, but which reproduce themselves through the operation of the mode of production to which it is subordinated.

indebtedness, since they need inputs to guarantee increasing production – a mechanism that leads to work even more intensively, due to increasing tax burdens and monopolization of the agri-food circuit.

More recently, such coexistence was made explicit in what Velho (1976) called authoritarian capitalism, in which, unlike bourgeois capitalism, the peasant base was not destroyed by capitalist development, but was kept as a subordinate form of primitive accumulation and production. Peasants serve capitalist development in a less explicit sense, offering cheap labor, cheap food, and markets for goods that make a profit. In Wolf's (1976) definition, peasants are rural farmers whose surplus is transferred into the hands of dominant groups to ensure their own standard of living. Thus, it is clear that, at different scales and to a greater or lesser degree, peasants as either squatters, tenants, settlers or small owners are inserted in the market.

In these circumstances, the peasantry comprises a political class (Velho, 1976) subordinated to a broader societal structure and to its respective leaders, who exploit the peasants. Therefore, the peasantry is, at the same time, a low status social class generally dominated by other classes and a "different world" – an extremely self-sufficient "society in itself", presenting typical patterns of social relations. According to Shanin (2005):

'Peasant*' is not an empty word reflecting prejudices of the *populus*, linguistic frivolities of the intellectuals, or else plots of ideological henchmen, even though each of those may be true at times. If retired, this concept cannot yet be easily substituted by something else of similar ilk. It carries together with concepts like 'capitalism', 'proletariat' and, of course, 'mode of production' potentials for reification [...] That is why it was right to say that 'the price of using models is eternal vigilance'. It is also true that without such theoretical constructs no advance in social sciences would be possible at all (SHANIN, 2005, p. 18).

Therefore, the transformation of the Brazilian peasantry cannot be understood as a mere transition from a situation of social isolation and disconnection from the market (the peasant) to another situation of economic and social integration to society as a whole (the family farmer) (Wanderley, 2004). According to the author, the family farmer is undoubtedly a social actor typical of the modern world, what, however, does not allow to assert that it represents the disintegration of the peasantry. Rather, this recognizes the interactions with the capitalist market by virtue of life in society, that is to say, relations of production insofar as, to different degrees, all are embedded in and are influenced by the modern market. It also recognizes that "family farmers are carriers of a tradition (whose foundations lie in the centrality of the family, forms of production and way of life), but need to adapt to the modern conditions of production" (Wanderley, 2002, p. 47). They comprise a unique form of social organization of production, based on the production managed by the family (Wanderley,

2009). According to Shanin (2005), the peasant must be understood by investigating the characteristics of the peasant family farm and its interactions with the larger social context.

Wanderley (2002) highlights the aspects that enable today both the discontinuity and the continuity of the peasant category considered in the light of the notion of family farming. For the author, family farmers are not reduced to whatever modern invention produced by action of the State, although they must adapt to the modern conditions of production and social life. However, it is precisely the maintenance of their traditional logic that allows to define them as peasants. According to the author, the familial logic is constitutive of the peasant tradition and is not abolished; on the contrary, it persists. Moreover, it is undeniable that the historical-political dimension that distinguishes the formation of Brazilian peasantry was not concealed in family agriculture, quite the opposite (Wanderley, 2004).

Based on Wanderley (2004), it can be said that the concept of family farming is embedded in that of peasantry, although with caution, because there are often both continuities and ruptures associated with the new configuration of capitalism, which obviously have caused and still cause changes in the social relations, modes of production and the peasant ways of life. Therefore, family farming is not a concept in opposition to peasant, but a kind of adaptation of this latter category to contemporary demands, that is, "able to transform their production processes, so that to reach new technological levels that can turn into larger produce, greater profitability of productive resources applied and full worth of work" (Wanderley, 2009, p. 33).

Rather than outlining distinct fields with particular denominations, attributing to each one features that are exclusive and even antagonistic in relation to the others, attention must be paid to the constitution of a vast field of farmers who do not hire labor nor own large estates, and who have particular ways of living and working in the rural world (Wanderley, 2014. p. 31).

In this sense, the now widespread family farming refers to a form of work organization as a reflection of current capitalist relations (Fernandes, 2002). At present, no radical mutation has been observed among peasants and/or family farmers in Brazil. It can be said that we are dealing with equivalent categories, easily interchangeable, in which the adjective family reveals the characteristic that, along with the political expression, is typical of the peasant category (Wanderley, 2009).

Ultimately, the family farmer is a facet of the peasantry which, inevitably, forms part of the wider society and both affects and is affected by it. The political component is one of the main features that distinguish the peasantry. According to Fernandes (2002), for family farmers to remain as peasants, their relationship does not lie in the integration into the modern market, but in the political struggle.

The concept of peasant designates, above all, their social place – it is a political word that expresses the unity of peasant struggles. It was the dispute over the land so hard to attain, and kept in the hands of the few, that ignited the peasant struggles in the country between the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century (Andrade, 1963 [2009]; Martins, 1986). As Manuel Correia de Andrade argued about Brazil's land structure:

the old structure set up by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, which has gradually changed in the four centuries of our historical evolution, is now facing its greatest challenge, with a more serious impact, we believe, than the one faced in the end of the nineteenth century with the abolition of slavery (ANDRADE, 1963 [2009], p. 73).

According to Martins (1981), the consolidation of land rent occurred, in the Brazilian case, by means of the transformation of the rent capitalized and immobilized in the slave into capitalized land rent in the nineteenth century, since previously the core of the economy dwelt on the slavery trade. The expansion of capitalism in the countryside and the subjection of the income from land to the capital turn the struggle over land mainly into a struggle against the capital that expropriates and exploits (Fernandes, 1996).

Besides its partial relationship with the capitalist economy and in addition to its political struggle, the peasantry comprises a way of life (Abramovay, 1998) based on specific values and codes, on the family work that seeks primarily to satisfy their subsistence needs and on community ties such as the *mutirões* highlighted by Candido (2001) when describing the social organization of the *caipira*. It is a way of life and work grounded on family and community ties. It is also this feature that allows to consider them peasants (Wanderley, 2014). It is on these bases that the peasant way of life is structured and from which they derive their economic relationship with the wider society.

Closing, but not concluding: the "upsetting" r-existence of the peasantry

In the context of this process, it seems that, under certain conditions, peasants contradict what Lenin (1985) called the "peasantry disintegration"⁶, since the peasantry did not disappear or differentiate entirely into capitalist entrepreneurs and wage-earning workers, or simply pauperize. "They may persist, while gradually transforming and linking into the encapsulating capitalist economy" (SHANIN, 2005, p. 9).

In contrast to the "proletarianist" and "depeasantist" predictions that equated the "peasantry" with backwardness, something outdated, and that anticipated that the capitalist

⁶ Referring to capitalist development in Russia, Lenin (1985) argued that the disintegration of the peasantry brought to the fore a process that has the mercantile economy as its common denominator. Disintegration refers to the contradictions within the peasantry and to the depeasantization.

"development" would fragment them into either agricultural entrepreneurs or rural proletarians, in addition to socialism that sought to fight them for being the seeds of a despicable agrarian bourgeoisie (Bartra, 2011), what we see today is an intense revitalization of the condition of "being peasant", whose immediate basis of any peasant struggle is to fight proletarianization .

For Ploeg (2013), the peasant mode has continually adjusted to the new circumstances and, since 1990, has experienced various movements of revitalization comprising an interesting process of "repeasantization". According to the author, becoming a peasant does not happen in a single moment, but is a continuous and fluctuating process over time, seeking to decrease dependence on the market and its agents, on extra-economic coercion, on the relative autonomy that can be obtained, as well as on levels of productivity. It is a process that combines two dimensions: the qualitative and the quantitative, as it involves a qualitative change in people who become peasants coming from any other condition; and, also a quantitative change, since the number of peasants is increasing

In Brazil, as Shanin (2005) points out, there has been an absolute increase in the number of peasants, that is, a process of "repeasantization". Tensions around the issues of the reproduction of the peasantry as subordinated to the capitalist mode of production, the decreasing and insignificant agrarian reform, the increase of land concentration, the increase in the processes of deterritorialization and other factors have amplified the struggles over land in Brazil. Thus, to record the processes of dissolution of the peasantry is not to reaffirm the imperative of expropriation in capitalism, but rather to record the development of this process, which often results in the active participation of the affected groups, which emerge as social actors in the construction of other horizons (Neves, 2009).

In this process, tenancy reflects the negation of capitalist property – is the result of a broader struggle, a struggle over the land, insofar as land is an instrument of labor and therefore safeguards the autonomy of those who sow, cultivate and harvest it (Martins, 1986).

The monopoly of the land is only theoretical for the peasant, since he is neither a landlord nor a capitalist entrepreneur and the notion of profit, at first, is not on his horizon (Kostas & Vergopoulos, 1977). This is to say that "although the peasant farm deals with labor, produce and land, it does not imply the presumption that it generates wages, profits and income from the land" (ABRAMOVAY, 1992, p. 59). Ultimately, tenancy is the antithesis of private property and exploitation, and the peasant struggle is a struggle over the use of the land and a resistance against expropriation (Fernandes, 1999).

For the peasant, capital comprises implements, machinery, inputs and other means used to increase land productivity, which is not the same as profitability. Although peasant property being a subordinate and quintessentially contradictory part of the capitalist mode of

production, it is not in itself a capitalist production unit, for it is not structured as a capitalist enterprise, and is not based on the capital-labor relationship insofar as the family work is not salaried (Ploeg, 2013).

The peasant struggles have recently claimed food sovereignty, environment protection and, underlying these claims, the defense of their territories (Bartra, 2013). This is a struggle that is not limited to the conquest of land as a means of production, but land as a space for self-government – a struggle for autonomy that "announces imminent libertarian windstorms" (BARTRA, 2011, p. 78). It is a struggle to assign meaning to the land, based on existence and resistance, above all, on "r-existence" (Porto-Gonçalves, 2006), since they reinvent themselves according to the circumstances. In fact, these struggles have increased in the country. This is what the report "Conflicts in the field – Brazil 2016" by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT, 2016) informs. According to the document, in comparative analysis with the year 2015, more than 400 conflicts involving peasants were observed throughout the country in 2016.

Therefore, this is about giving meaning to being on the land, thus guaranteeing the material conditions of production, but it goes beyond. For Porto-Gonçalves (2002), this is about a way to give meaning to being-in-the-world, to inscribe the land, to invent new territorialities (Porto-Gonçalves, 2002).

The struggle for autonomy (and for survival, dignity, prospects for a better life) in a society that rather condemns people to submission, dependency, deprivation and to the menace of a deteriorating livelihood, becomes central to the 'peasant condition'. This struggle for autonomy, which the peasantry evidently shares with many other social categories, articulates, in the specific case of the peasantry, as the ongoing construction, improvement, enlargement and defense of a self-controlled resource base, out of which land and living nature (crops, animals, sunlight, water) are essential parts (PLOEG, 2006, p.20).

Finally, I use the concept of peasant, because I believe that it is a group that has a historical and singular context, with political protagonism in the struggle for land, and for which family subsistence constitutes the core of the organization. This is a concept that, as Shanin (2005) says, although insufficient in itself, just as any other concept, is pertinent and current and, from the theoretical-conceptual point of view, should not be merely revoked due to the new dynamics of capitalism imposed on the peasantry

Thus, from the theoretical-conceptual point of view, 'peasant' encompasses a socially constructed category, whose proper interpretation can only occur within the scope of specific historical and political contexts. According to Velho (2009), it is a concept originally referred to a certain historical and localized context that was appropriated by social

scientists. Thus, the resumption of this concept will depend on its explanatory value in the various current and specific discussions.

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