

Rural questions and the peasantry: an interview with Teodor Shanin

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Abstract

From October 13 to 16, 2017, the conference "New Extractivism Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates" was held in Moscow, Russia. The conference, organized annually by the BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies, brought together experts from five continents to critically discuss agrarian issues from the perspective of Agrarian Political Economy, Geography, Sociology and Agroecology. After the conference and fieldwork, we talked with Professor Teodor Shanin about his academic background, Russian agrarian thinking, challenges and possibilities to understand the present. Professor Teodor Shanin, president of the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, is an esteemed sociologist whose long-standing commitment to the study of peasant societies has led to a prolific academic career and has written more than 100 publications and important books, as "Peasants and Peasant Societies" and "Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism".

Keywords: Peasantry; Russia; rural; agrarian thinking.

Resumo

Questões rurais e campesinato: uma entrevista com Teodor Shanin

Entre os dias 13 a 16 de outubro de 2017, ocorreu a conferência "New Extractivism Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates", em Moscou, Rússia. A conferência, organizada anualmente pelo BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies, reuniu especialistas dos cinco continentes para debater criticamente as problemáticas agrárias sob o prisma da Economia Política Agrária, Geografia, Sociologia e Agroecologia. Após a conferência e a realização de um trabalho de campo, conversamos com o professor Teodor Shanin sobre sua trajetória acadêmica, o pensamento agrário russo, desafios e possibilidades de compreender a atualidade. O professor Teodor Shanin, presidente da Escola de Ciências Sociais e Econômicas de Moscou, é um conceituado sociólogo cujo compromisso de longa data com o estudo das sociedades camponesas consolidou sua prolífica carreira acadêmica, na qual escreveu mais de 100 publicações e livros importantes, como "Peasants and Peasant Societies" e "Marx Tardio e a Via Russa – Marx e as Periferias do Capitalismo".

Palavras-chave: Campesinato; Rússia; rural; pensamento agrário.

Resumen

Cuestiones rurales y campesinos: una entrevista con Teodor Shanin

Entre los días 13 a 16 de octubre de 2017, ocurrió la conferencia "New Extractivism Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates", en Moscú, Rusia. La conferencia, organizada anualmente por el BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies, reunió

a expertos de los cinco continentes para debatir críticamente las problemáticas agrarias bajo el prisma de la Economía Política Agraria, Geografía, Sociología y Agroecología. Después de la conferencia y la realización de un trabajo de campo, conversamos con el profesor Teodor Shanin sobre su trayectoria académica, el pensamiento agrario ruso, desafíos y posibilidades de comprender la actualidad. El profesor Teodor Shanin, presidente de la Escuela de Ciencias Sociales y Económicas de Moscú, es un conceptuado sociólogo cuyo compromiso de larga data con el estudio de las sociedades campesinas consolidó su prolífica carrera académica en la que escribió más de 100 publicaciones y libros importantes, como “Peasants and Peasant Societies” and “Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism”.

Palabras-clave: Campesinos; Rusia; rural; pensamiento agrario.

What are your theoretical views on Kautsky, Chayanov and, of course, on your own work? In what ways can we read Chayanov to better understand the present state of the world?

Teodor Shanin:

Let us begin with Kautsky then, because you start with Kautsky. Kautsky was an orthodox Marxist in his own eyes. But he was definitely not an orthodox Marxist in the eyes of Marx – in fact, to be more blunt, it is safe to say that Marx did not like him. There are several situations in which Marx clearly spoke of him as pedantic, among other much less complimentary adjectives. At the same time, however, he was a Marxist icon, by which I mean that not only was he Marxist but he was also considered to be the most significant theoretical thinker of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, which at that time was the largest Social Democratic Party in the world.

Chayanov had major expertise in matters concerning the constitution of Russian peasantry. After the Great Reform of 1860's¹, Russia created fairly effective rural local authorities. These local authorities were elected by land-owners for each regional jurisdiction but since the Tzarist regime feared they could represent a strong opposing force and thereby

¹ “The cornerstone of the Great Reforms was the emancipation of Russia's peasants. They fell into those groups: the proprietary or seigniorial serfs were the property of individual landowners and lived in conditions of virtual slavery; the appendage peasants lived on the personal elite's properties. The state peasants lived on state lands under state administrators; they received freedom in 1866. The core “freedom” the peasants received was the elimination of the personal, arbitrary, and capricious power of their noble and state masters. Members of the noble landowning estate and the tsar's agents could no longer buy and sell peasants, mortgage them for cash, order their daily labors, determine whom and when they married, move them from one estate to another, break up families, beat them, claim sexual rights over them, exile them to Siberia, impose both police and judicial authority over them, or decide who would enter military service for virtually their entire adult lives. Many peasants were disappointed not to receive land freely, and most former serfs received less land than they had cultivated before the emancipation. Despite peasants' frustrations and protests, land shortages, and failures to meet their tax and redemption payment obligations, two facts point to the emancipation's positive impact: the population of the Russian Empire, which was more than 80% peasant, exploded in the post-emancipation years in demographic testimony to the improving health of the liberated peasantry and peasants began to buy more land from the nobility in the succeeding decades. By 1905 peasants had purchased over 25 million hectares of land”. In: Frierson, Cathy A., ed. and trans. *Aleksandr Nikolaevich Engelgardt's Letters from the Country, 1872–1887*. New York and Oxford, U.K., 1993.

prevented them from creating a unified organization and centralizing their research. This relative isolation proved itself useful to different local authorities who then ended up creating their own research methodologies. Such apparent constraints gave way to research methodologies that were diverse and rich in possibilities. This is why in Chayanov's days Russia produced so many different methodological variants. When Chayanov became the head of the National Institute of Rural Studies [the Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy, in Russian *Российский государственный аграрный университет — МСХА имени К.А. Тимирязева*], he benefitted greatly from the experiences that arose from that environment.

I come from the old Polish territories, now Lithuania, where many spoke Russian. When I went to Birmingham to work on my PhD there was not much published on Russian peasantry, partly due to the lack of raw data. As a doctoral student I discovered that under Russian law four universities of the Russian Empire received copies of every publication in Russia: Moscow, Petersburg, Kiev and Helsinki. I discovered a full set of documents in Helsinki, copied it and then brought it over to Birmingham. It is still there and available.

It is important to say that, to my belief, people defining themselves as Marxists within Chayanov's argumentative framework are not really Marxists, but Leninists, which is a different thing². Lenin was a Marxist, but he treated it in his own way and within a framework of his own understanding. The same goes for me. What I wrote is not Chayanovism but Shaninism.

In what ways is your work inspired by Chayanov and what would you say are your theoretical differences?

Teodor Shanin:

It is clear that the percentage of peasants in most parts of the world is declining. Firstly, and most importantly, it cannot go without saying that a decrease in percentage does not mean that the total number of peasants is declining. We have more peasants and people in the countryside than we had 30 years ago. Secondly, Chayanov never took any real interest in the variations of peasant populations. He was mainly interested in investigating the reasons for their ongoing existence; the means through which they live and reproduce; the innerworkings of their economy and its comparability to capitalist economy. His answer to that last question was clear: peasant economy is not like capitalist economy in a strict sense, although it does certainly present some of the characteristics of capitalist economy, especially in capitalist countries. In his book, *The theory of peasant economy*, Chayanov produced a

² Also see "Critical Perspectives in Rural Development Studies", Saturnino M. Borrás Jr, 2009, p. 50-69.

fundamental model for describing peasant economy, its operations, the relations between different parts and sectors. Peasantry is, of course, something that exists.

This is around the same time that Plekhanov, who had purportedly brought Marxism to Russia, declared that “historically speaking, the peasantry did not exist”. He said so while 85% of the Russian people were peasants! “It does not exist in a historical sense because it will disappear”, he said, “predicting” the disappearance of the peasantry. He was a Marxist (personally Marx did not like him, it is very interesting to notice how Marx obviously knew people, not only their ideas) but his projections for the end of the peasantry were radical and were never reconsidered in his work. Marx disliked most of the Russian Marxists, and in one of his writings he affirmed: “I don’t know about these gentlemen, but I was never a Marxist”. You really cannot put things in a better way than Marx could. Of course he said it was a joke, but Marx had his own system of jokes through which he conveyed serious messages.

And he is quite right, because to say “I am a Marxist” and to close this concept in its own closet is contradictory, since Marxism changes with new modes of discovery, with the design and development of new analyses, and so forth. Marx was many things but he was definitely not closed-minded³. Time and time again, he changed his views. The same can be said of Lenin – which made him a first-class leader. Had Lenin not been eager to change, he would have finish like Plekhanov, a bitter old lonely man, dying in his bed. Lenin died as the leader of a successful revolution.

I wrote an article called “Lenin’s four and a half agrarian programs”, in which I attempt to understand and demonstrate Lenin’s intelligent ability to adjust his views according to the constantly changing reality. In this sense it can be said that Chayanov changed his views, keeping some principals while developing his theory throughout the entire time. That is one of the reasons why academically I criticize people who say they are Marxist, Leninist, Chayanovist. Politically I suppose it can be used as leverage to influence the left.

If our thoughts remain consistently the same over 20 years of research and study then we should be dismissed and never be allowed to go back to the university.

³ It is important to refer to the MEGA project, Marx-Engels [Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe, MEGA], which brings together the set of books, drafts, excerpts, letters and other lively signs that were left by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The project begins in the 1950s and is still far from its conclusion. See the article about the project written by Thomas Marxhuasen, “História crítica das Obras completas de Marx e Engels (MEGA)”. In: *Critical History of the Complete Works of Marx and Engels (MEGA)*, Revista Crítica Marxista n 39, 2014. Available at: https://www.ifch.unicamp.br/criticamarxista/arquivos_biblioteca/artigo2015_11_09_16_31_1133.pdf. Accessed: December 15th, 2017.

Bernardo Mançano has just translated your book “Late Marx and the Russian Road” (1983) into Portuguese. In what ways do you think your book can contribute to the current political conjuncture?

Teodor Shanin:

I cannot say because I am not a prophet. But I think academics do have a god, and each and every god is always telling the truth. What people think they know about Marx is often based on fairly superficial journalism. Many of them were introduced to Marxism through such vapid media but never really read Marx himself. This obviously puts their work in a difficult position. At the end of his life Plekhanov was finished politically. He lost all his influence on the Social-Democratic movement, paying the price for refusing to review his own understanding of Marxism.

If you want my message to those who are young and energetic and would like to engage in radical political work, I would say do not be Marxists or Leninists. But learn from both Marx and Lenin. Be yourself. But remember how dangerous it is to become someone like Plekhanov. In Russia, it is common to see photos of Putin, and sometimes Lenin, in several governmental and public buildings. As for myself, I would hang a picture of Plekhanov so that people can be reminded of what happened to a very intelligent man who refused to change.

We are curious with regards to the historical changes for the peasantry in the USSR, during the Perestroika, for example, as well as in present times. What do you consider to be the most significant historical moments for the Russian peasantry?

Teodor Shanin:

Well, the main change for the peasant population in Russia occurred much before Perestroika, with “passportisation”. This was established in the final years of Khrushchev and the early years of Brejnev. The government conceded rural populations with passports, which meant the ability to travel⁴. It meant freedom of choice in terms of place of residence, not to mention having for the first time the option of working in a factory or a building, as well as the possibility for many ethnic Asians to relocate to Central Russia.

⁴ Teodor Shanin has written an article that further discusses the issue related to peasants and historical changes in Russia. Available at: <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-64451991000100007>. Accessed: November 24, 2017.

How do you see the latest transformations in these patterns of peasant migrations fluxes? In what areas are the migration fluxes stronger?

Teodor Shanin:

Well, there is nearly no place in Russia to which its citizen cannot go to. From that point internal migration has increased. It means that in some areas you will only find some women left in the villages, often elderly women.

In the south of Russia, where the climate is much better, the villages have survived and despite migration are relatively stable. There are still some rural villages in the South. But on its opposite magnetic pole, so to speak, in the north of Russia, at this moment, there are areas pertaining villages, but they are not “real villages”. I mean, they are villages, there are houses there, they have a name and exist officially in the books, but there is nobody there except for a few women. And this is fairly usual now. Actually, Alexey Naumov and Potapova Alexandra have done a lot of work in this direction. Their research is on the peasants in northern Russia and they go every year to visit the areas. This is a very present phenomenon, a definite sign of our times.

I am thinking about what you were saying in terms of the reproduction of the peasantry and how there are thinkers that try to argue that the peasantry will inevitably cease to exist. Many thinkers define peasants in terms of the absence of capitalist relations of production, but it seems that it is not possible to say currently that peasants are not part of the capitalist system. So how can we comprehend the ever-growing presence of money in peasant relations and its implications for the reproduction of the peasantry?

Teodor Shanin:

There is no doubt that the peasantry today lives in a capitalist society. But living in a capitalist society does not by itself mean that the life of a peasant family is in way similar to the life of a family in a capitalist society. And that is why it is important to remember what Chayanov said. It is important, evidently, to typify the work done by today’s peasants in order to clarify if it really is the same form of work implied in what is called “historical peasant work”, but it is not important to attempt definitions to determine if certain groups of people are or are not peasants. Chayanov was very certain of it. He was not speaking of something presumed to be eternal, that will always exist in that specific conformation, he was speaking about the existing peasantry.

Sometimes he said that changes would come, but he never said that they must come, he only said that they may come, there is a difference. Fundamentally, he believed that the

best system for the peasantry is the cooperative and that the best type of production organization for peasants is the cooperative. This, of course, arrived late to the fact that the peasants of his time, in Russia, had been cooperated degree by degree. There were longstanding and massive traditions of cooperative peasantry, even before the “collectivization” – cooperatives not in the sense of kolkhozes, but in a much broader sense.

So he believed that the cooperative system is the best system in terms of the interests of peasants and in terms of the interest of Russia. He wrote that “if you try to stop it, Russian production will go down” and he was right because that was exactly what happened as an aftermath of forced collectivization. We know this as a fact now because now it is not difficult to find the corroborating data.

In fact, before the Stalinist regime killed him, Chayanov published systematic suggestions on the reorganization of the peasantry and ways in which productivity could be increased without collective farming. Because he believed that the best way to reorganize the peasantry (and he knew that it was important to reorganize the Russian peasantry at that particular time, with all the demands for the introduction of machinery, for example) was to create a powerful cooperative movement and not insist on the doomed strategy of forced collectivization.

The cooperative movement was a demand clearly sustained by the peasantry itself. At that time, Russia was probably carrying out the largest peasant cooperative movement in the world. Chayanov considered that a cooperative alternative would have created a situation in which productivity would have gone up and would not have been met with resistance, as was the case with forced collectivization.

There is one last thing which I consider to be of extreme importance. In the Russian conditions of that time, the “elite peasants” were not the “kulaks”, because kulaks were doing non-peasant work at that time. I mean, they were the “intermediaries”, the ones who got money on percentage, selling things to merchants, and so on. “Elite peasant”, however, in the meaning given in those days, referred to the peasantry that had a little bit more than others – it simply indicated that they had more production, more horses, a little more money. And because of that, they rose to leadership roles in their peasant communities. Under these conditions, what Stalin did was destroy the leadership of the peasantry through forced collectivization. And because he destroyed the leadership of the peasantry, the peasantry was quick to object to Stalin. Collectivization was not only creating the kolkhozes, it was essentially sending away from the villages those who were the leaders of the peasantry and also the best agriculturalists. Because to be called an “elite peasant” most of the time meant that you were also the best agriculturalist.

I will explain further. Social mobility in the peasant society is very active, because if you perform good agriculture work, you will go up very fast, if you perform bad agriculture work,

you will find yourself going down very quickly. Because of that it coincided that the people on the top were more often than not the best agriculturists too. So the Stalinist regime gets what they got and of course there were massive protests against it, because the people who were arrested and deported to other regions in Russia were mostly village leaders. It means that their leaders were being taken away. That was fundamentally what happened with collectivization. Therefore, collectivization did not work not just because this model of cooperation does not work, but also because caused the villages to lose their best agriculturists. They are named “kulaks”, but in fact, in peasant understanding they are not kulaks, because as far as they were concerned, a “kulak” was a man that was not doing peasant work. He was making his money from other affairs and therefore could not be considered a normal agriculturalist. The Bolsheviks use to call every “elite peasant” a “kulak”, because in terms of political propaganda it was easier to arouse anger against an “elite peasant” by referring to them as a “kulak”.

In Brazil we have very little research on the “Peasant International”. In Argentina there is something, in Mexico, but in Brazil not so much. Could you say a few words on the importance of the Peasant International and how it influenced the peasant movement in Russia?

Teodor Shanin:

Well, they did not know enough about how the peasantry worked. It is clear that they didn't understand what was going on in Russia at that time. This is absolutely clear because they developed their own picture of what was happening in Russia. The left wing supported what was happening in Russia, the right wing opposed it, but neither understood, at that time, what was happening in Russia. This is something that only now, with the diligent work of investigators, through historical research essentially, is beginning to be explained. That is basically it: no one understood what was going on in Russia with the peasantry at that time⁵.

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⁵ This interview had a small participation of Bruno Rezende Spadotto, doctoral student of the Department of Geography of the University of São Paulo (USP).

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