

Chapter 2

Theories of Peasant Economies

Peasants practice land husbandry and must produce more than minimum subsistence needs to continue their practice. Prime elements of land husbandry include technology, labor, and capital resources. Their needs include a complex of natural and social requirements, called the minimum standard of consumption, which they meet primarily through family farm units of production and secondarily through social relations of production. A society is simply the organization of people making a living together (Bloch, 1983: 22), and together, these peasant family farm units form a society.

Land Husbandry

All peasant families, by definition, practice land husbandry (Shanin, 1987: 4). There is an intimate relationship between producers and their means of production (Kottak, 199:170). Nash writes that within these means, technology is simple, capital inputs low, with labor divided along 'natural' lines of gender and age (Nash 1966: 20). Further, he contends that these

less complex means of production invariably marginalize productivity:

The productive output of a society is first a function of its technology and the width of the division of labor, and hence the simpler and more rudimentary these are, the lower the gross product of the society is...No society can transcend the limit imposed by its technological and organizational format. (Ibid: 22)

Two elements dominate. Technology is the fundamental feature, which producers use to enable them to reach certain levels of production. They are "ingenious, marvelously fitted to a particular environment", but still only one aspect of the equation (Ibid: 20). A more important aspect, at least in peasant societies with simple technology, is the labor factor. Balibar, as quoted in Terray, writes:

On the one hand, the means of labour (the tool) must be adapted to the human organism; on the other, a tool is no longer a technical instrument in the hands of someone who does not know how to use it: its effective use demands of the worker a set of physical and intellectual qualities, a sum of cultural habits (an empirical knowledge of the materials, of the tricks of the trade, up to and including the craft secrets, etc. (1975: 103)

Terray expands:

The tools of labour (hoe, machete, the miner's small pick) are rudimentary; generally it is a matter of individual tools, mere extensions of the human arm, the productivity of which varies little. (Ibid)

Labor organization and cooperation is also an important feature in production (Ibid). In the case of

peasant producers, the low level technology results in job 'telescoping' (relatively low level of specialization in work) (Shanin 1987: 4), the basic outcome of which is few producers carrying out the entire production process (Nash, 1966: 20-21). Galeski explains:

The activity composing the farmer's labour covers not only a wide scope but is also the basis for separate occupations. It is not just a matter of the farmer having to know many things. There are many occupations where knowledge in many fields is useful or even necessary...The farmer, however, must often engage in labour which constitutes the basis of other occupations. He first of all carries on the farming occupation proper (breeding, gardening, production organizer, etc.), then the other trades connected with agriculture (food processing, for example), or even non-agricultural occupations (tool and implement repair, transport, minor building activity, etc.). The farmer cannot have the necessary preparation for all the jobs he does, but the most important thing is that he does them in the same manner as repairing an electric light in one's home, i.e., not professionally. It is precisely all of these tasks which compose the farmer's vocation. (1987: 138-139)

Labor is generally not divided along "occupational" lines. Rather, people are ranked into gender groups and age grades, and this mostly within the family unit. Because while communal activities and operations exist on temporary utilitarian levels (Clammer, 1985: 139), the bulk of labor organization and cooperation lies within the family. The family produces its own tools, trains its members to carry on their trades and crafts (Nash,

1966: 21), and continues this cooperation through to the consumption process.

In addition to technology and labor organization, Nash cites land as the other chief capital component in peasant production systems. Land in these communities are often distributed through kinship, inheritance, and marriage, rather than through "more strictly economic modes of transfer", such as contract or sale (Ibid: 34). Rights to land reveal a family or individual's position in the social structure. Property rights are more importantly a reflection of that person or family unit's social relationships and position, or as Nash puts it more succinctly: "Part of being a member in the tribe or community, in the family or the lineage, in the clan or the phratry is to have access to specified pieces of land" (Ibid).

Nash adds, too, that changes in social position, via age, marriage, succession, death, and inheritance, also bring about changes in land rights (Ibid). Arensberg's 1937 work on Irish family farms describes such changes upon marriage. He reports that the complexity of marriage arrangements and dowries is a "crucial point of rural social organization", which "unites transfer of economic control and advance to adult status".

Marriages, in addition to uniting different families, is the predominant mode of property transfer and inheritance within a family (1937: 72).

In absolute terms, land, its abundance or lack thereof, also has principal implications on social and economic structures. Alavi writes that small peasant societies, for instance in many segmentary communities of Africa, were egalitarian and could reproduce themselves as such generationally "so long as land was available to settle each new family when young peasants married" (1987:186). Chayanov's theory of the peasant family farm also relied on specified land availability conditions. According to critics, Chayanov's economic presumptions, based on Russian family farms, were only plausible when land was scarce, in short supply, with few alternative forms of employment (Gledhill, 1999:Theory9.htm).

The Minimum Standard of Consumption

Peasant families must strive to provide a minimum standard of consumption for their families. This minimum standard includes a myriad of funds and obligations, directly related to each family's need to reproduce their production activities over time. Sahlins highlights that all humans must provision more than social relations. For example, events, such as marriage and other rites of

social passage, require additional household economic production (Gledmill, 1999: theory8.htm). Other funds include membership tributes to states and other ruling authorities.

Peasant families must accelerate economic production in order to meet the economic costs of social rites of passage and other rents and funds. Sahlin's idea was that peasant households would only be able to reproduce themselves as social entities if they were able to produce more to fulfill social obligations (Ibid). Kottak delineates the following minimum standard funds and obligations (1991: 166-167):

1. Subsistence fund - This fund includes all activities directly related to subsistence needs only.
2. Replacement fund - Wolf describes this fund to include essential production related technology and items, such as seed corn for the new sowing and tools, as well as draft animals to be replaced (Gledmill, 1999: theory.7htm). Firth argues that the key to peasant family survival is control over the means of reproduction (1975: 47).
3. Social and Ceremonial funds - Peasant families maintain their own biological, social, and economic survival through social and ceremonial funds. While

social funds refer to ordinary social obligations, which require some form of economic expenditure, ceremonial funds refer to ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, cremations and religious rituals.

4. Rent funds and State obligations - In addition to paying for rental fees, rent funds apply also to sharecroppers as well as peasants who live under feudal systems. Kottak notes that it includes "resources that people must render to an individual or agency that is superior politically or economically. Peasants also owe state obligations, which include paying taxes through money, produce, or labor.

These funds and obligations reveal both the importance of securing basic family subsistence, as well as the family's relationships to other families in the society and the state. In order to continue producing and reproducing itself as an entity and a unit of economic production, peasant families work hard to meet these requirements.

The Family Farm and Social Relations of Production

Peasant economies are embedded in the social structure. According to Nash, the means of production are socially derived, while control over these means are rooted in both social relations and relationships to the

state (Nash, 1966:23). Sahlins, as summarized by Firth, supports this contention, arguing that all material transactions are nothing more than "momentary episodes in continuous social relations" (1967: 3). Activities found within the economic sphere of production, as well as social occasions and rites of passage directly link economic and social phenomena. Clammer describes the peasant socio-economy:

...It is an entity based upon small-scale, largely low technology farming of landed property either owned or rented, and that the unit of the exploitation of this land is an individual family, linked through kinship with other virtually identical families, and who employ outside labor (or themselves work elsewhere than on their own land) only in rare and usually unavoidable circumstances. The household or family unit which is the focus of the peasant system is usually highly cohesive, acting as it does as an economic, domestic, and even political unit. (1985: 138)

Two important features are addressed. Firstly, the peasant family has been invariably described as the basic, fundamental, rudimentary unit of production (Galeski, 1987: 138; Alavi, 1987: 185; Shanin, 1987: 3-4; Tung, 1987: 58). Chayanov's 1925 family farm model stands as the prominent archetype of this contention, describing the production and consumption activities of the peasant farm, and its relationship to the market.

Secondly, the peasant family is a part of a larger society. They are "linked through kinship" to other

families (Clammer, 1985: 138), and maintain socio-economic relations that are necessarily the bulk of the local economic infrastructure. This social and economic connection has been described in Marxist literature as social labor, the connection between work and the society for the reproduction of the society of which the family is an integral part (Mandel 1974: 24). The peasant family must participate in a society to survive over time, both biologically and economically. Aspects within both the family unit and production relations to other families, as well as within the state, in general, determine who controls the means of production and reproduction of the families and the society.

Chayanov's Family Farm

Chayanov's pure family farm model, claimed to be the basis of ninety percent of early 20th century Russian farms, was created as an alternative to the existing, and inapplicable capitalist based models of economics (Thorner, 1966: xi). Chayanov writes:

On the family farm, the family equipped with means of production uses its labor power to cultivate the soil and receives, as a result of a year's work, a certain amount of goods. A single glance at the inner structure of the labour unit is enough to realize that it is impossible, without the category of wages, to impose on its structure net profit, rent and interest on capital as real economic categories in the capitalist meaning of the word. (Chayanov, 1966: 5)

The model posits that the peasant family farm operates as units of both production and consumption, and assumes that the primary objective of production in peasant societies is

to provide a minimum standard of consumption for the family. Members are not employed by wages, and consumption is apportioned on the basis of needs, not particular labor contributions. Because of this, Chayanov writes that the family household should be treated as a single economic unit, with an annual product (minus outlays) and a single return for future further family activities (Ibid: xiv).

Galeski describes the family production process:

The work is done by the family. What is more, the generally accepted pattern of the organization of labour on an individual family assumes family participation. Otherwise, it is either not fully accomplished, not done properly or it meets with considerable difficulties. Contrary to the case of domestic production, which often involves the family but where it can be easily substituted by some other group, on the individual farm the range and system of activity are harmoniously linked with the family as the production crew, according to the physical capacities of the family members and their places in it. (1987: 138)

Distribution and consumption, because of social values and the unit's peculiarities, were divided based on needs and availability, not on labor inputs. Thorner writes that people were vaguely aware of the number of

days and hours they put in, and with nothing else to evaluate but the net product, there seemed no way of dividing contributions of labor into bushels of wheat (or bags of rice) (Thorner, 1966:xiv).

Chayanov's Family Cycle model illustrates the singularity of the family unit (Cancian, 1989: 143). The model shows that the intensity of work done by individual working members is inversely related to the number of dependent consumers it must support. The higher the ratio of non-working children to workers, the harder the productive members must work (Gledmill, 1999: theory7.htm). Once the ratio is reduced, the working members will reduce their level of self-exploitation.

The Family Cycle model also highlights another feature of the pure family farm. Producers only produce as much as they have to. Gledmill writes that once the peasant household has produced an acceptable standard of consumption for the entire family, it would not work harder (1999: theory7.htm). If there are four consumers, the family produces enough for four consumers. The costs of labor are not measured in capital outlays but in subjective terms of "hardship", "drudgery", and "irksomeness". Chayanov argues that it is this hardship of labor that

creates a balance between the minimum consumption of needs and maximum production inputs:

Peasant farms are structured to conform to the optimal degree of self-exploitation of the family labor force and in a technically optimal system of production factors as regards their size and relationship of the parts. Any excess of production means available to labor or of land above the technologically optimal level will be an excessive burden on the undertaking. It will not lead to an increased volume of activity, since further intensity of labor beyond the level established for its self-exploitation is unacceptable to the family. Its productivity due to an increase in capital intensity naturally cannot be raised once the achieved rate of provision is itself optimal. (Chayanov, 1966: 92)

Most minimum needs are met through the family farm. Most peasants are not fully self-sufficient, though, and so supplement their farm activities through craft production, and wage labor, often on a seasonal basis, and through other market exchanges. Their approach to the market is strictly non-capitalist (Gledmill, 1999: Theory7-8.htm). Chayanov's theory stresses that peasant households approach markets and wages in terms of use value. Gledmill suggests the example of a peasant family trading its surplus corn for cooking pots. The pots are to help cook foods, in order to meet their subsistence. Whether this family trades its corn directly for the pots, or sells the corn for money to buy them, is irrelevant. The purpose of the exchanges in both

examples is for its use value. The same is true when peasants engage in craft production or wage work or seasonal work. In each endeavor, their primary concern is the use value of their trades, profits, and wages (Gledhill, 1999: theory7.htm).

Peasant families survive adverse market conditions by applying noncapitalist, family farm approaches. In the words of Chayanov:

...The family, needing to expand its economic activity, will carry out many improvements disadvantageous and not available to the capitalist farm... (1966: 238)

They increase their rate of self-exploitation and sometimes secure more land or additional draft animals. By accelerating production when market prices drop, which would cost capitalist firms far more than the family-labor based peasant household, they are able to survive and continue with production in the future (Alavi, 1987: 185).

Social Relations of Production

In order to produce and reproduce both its subsistence and biological survival, peasant families must maintain social relations with other families. This extends, with varying degrees, to all aspects of the production process. Social relations in production themselves are rooted in simple labor divisions and

social alliances, such as procreation and marriage. Developmentally, social relations in peasant societies are in some cases in part dictated by wealth and power differentials in the society.

The Marxist notion of social labor argues that people relate to each other through work, in order to reproduce their societies (Mandel, 1974: 24). Marx and Engels contend that social labor originally evolved from "natural" labor divisions within the family. They begin with what they presume to be the most fundamental production activity:

Men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history"...The first historical act is...the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. (Carver, 1991: 228)

Engels expands:

The division of labor...was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act. (Ibid: 229)

Godelier's analysis of Yengoyan's work on the Australian Aborigines supports this contention, demonstrating that social relations, which he finds to be central to noncapitalist economics, was originally derived from the need to reproduce the society. Godelier writes that the family is not its own unit of reproduction (1975: 3). Virtually universal incest taboos

and exogamy injunctions, which encourage marriage outside the "narrow circle of kinship" (Zonabend, 1996: 12), force families to ally themselves with other families, in order to reproduce further generations (Godelier, 1975: 3).

Meillasoux's early 1960's work on the Guro of the Ivory Coast expands on the significance of marriage as an economic alliance, with immediate implications. The complex system of bride wealth circulates and accumulates production goods. Meillasoux, as quoted in Kahn, writes:

Deriving from the social organization of the economy, wealth which permits marriage is used by those who have it for the perpetuation of that very organization. Natural reproduction, the reproduction of social structures, and the organization of the economy, are therefore closely integrated in a coherent system. (1984: 62)

Marriages, bride wealths, and dowries are "always a system of exchange" (Levi-Strauss, 1969: 478). Peasant families sustain themselves not simple through their own labor but also with their socially based alliances with other families. Individual households of people, thus, come together to aid in the succession of their filiations.

Other forms of alliances and exchanges include gift giving and labor recruitment (Levi-Strauss, 1969:52). Alavi summarizes the phenomena:

The family farm was replicated generation by generation and produced primarily for self-consumption. Peasant communities produced not only agricultural commodities but also a varied assortment of articles that they needed, such as clothing and simple tools, making them virtually self-sufficient. Surplus goods were exchanged, by means of gifts as well as barter and sale in local markets; long distance trade, if any, was marginal to their economies. (1987: 186)

What was important in these exchanges of gifts and trade, was their extensive noneconomic implications. Mauss calls them "a total social fact", affecting religion, magic, economics, law, practical usage, morality, and sentiment. Gifts among the Maori of New Zealand were offered at births, at marriages, deaths, peace treaties, tribunals (Levi-Strauss, 1969: 52). Levi-Strauss summarizes the extent of influence of gifts and exchange:

Goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion; and the skillful game of exchange (in which there is very often no more real transfer than in a game of chess, in which the players do not give each other the pieces they alternately move forward on the chessboard but merely seek to provoke a counter-move), consists in a complex totality of conscious or unconscious manoeuvres in order to gain security and to guard oneself against risks brought about by alliances and by rivalries. (Ibid: 54)

Economic exchanges of gifts and labor sometimes occur simply to "produce a friendly feeling between the two persons concerned", as was noted by Radcliffe-Brown

of the Andaman Islanders (Ibid: 55). Becker insists however that such exchanges in general occur more because of the lack of formal insurance, as a cautionary and protective measure (1993: 343). Examples of both types of motivation can be identified, perhaps within a single exchange, however dominant one factor may be over another.

This is evident in the issue of labor exchanges in peasant societies. Nash writes that labor exchanges are socially crafted and customed in ceremony or ritual, so as the "selling labor power does not appear either to the buyer or the seller as a naked economic transaction" (1966: 24). The economic functions of labor exchanges are presented as social relations between families. The economic necessity of the exchange, for example, during peak agricultural periods such as harvest season, warrant the use of extra, often collective labor. However this labor is masked under friendship, feelings amongst kindred, and confidence of an established reciprocity, be it generalized, balanced, or negative.

Negative reciprocity tends to occur in asymmetrical relationships, which debatably occurs to some degree within peasant societies. To the contrary, Marx saw "homologous magnitudes" and "a sack of potatoes", all

living in similar conditions with little variation in talent and technology (1987: 332). Chayanov also saw peasant family units as being like in economic and social status, explaining away wealth differentials through his theories of land distribution. According to Chayanov, smallholders only appeared to have different sized holdings, yet closer examination would reveal that these holdings were proportional to age, to status, in terms of marriage and the numbers and ages of children. Nash adds to this perspective arguing in addition that once a peasant family builds up to unequal levels, it employs a leveling mechanism, which "forces the expenditure of accumulated resources or capital into channels that are not necessarily economic or productive" (Nash, 1966: 35).

Nash speculates:

...[In] peasant economies leveling mechanisms play a crucial role in inhibiting aggrandizement by individuals or by special social groups. (Ibid)

Leveling mechanisms have, in fact, been a huge part of the body of literature proposing away wealth differentials in a society. An example of a leveling mechanism is the potlatch, practiced by the Salish and Kwakiutl tribes in Washington and British Columbia. The potlatch's sponsor gives away food, blankets, pieces of copper, and other coveted items. The primary return for

the potlatch is prestige, the reputation as a giving person. Kottak notes a positive, direct relationship between the prestige earned and the value of goods given away (1991: 176).

Levi-Strauss remarks that in potlatches and other leveling mechanisms, "the destruction of wealth is a way to gain prestige" (1969: 56). It also hampers too much accumulation of wealth by single individuals and individual family units. Nash highlights that because leveling-mechanisms, prevent the accumulation and concentration of capital, they also prevent technological development, which is essential to hamper class divergence and differentiation. He writes:

Most small-scale economies have a way of scrambling wealth to inhibit reinvestment in technical advance, and this prevents crystallization of class lines on an economic base. (1966: 36)

Others debate, however, that despite leveling mechanisms and similar technological conditions, differentiation within peasant societies, between peasant families, do exist. For example, in studying the Asiatic Mode of Production, referred to as the Tribute-paying Mode of Production when found outside of Asia, Godelier found internal exploitation.

The principal feature of this mode of production is the dominance of external forces upon small peasant

communities, whereby the political majority use state power to extract a tribute, and yet leave local peasant communities with a high margin of political autonomy. Party lines states these populations are mainly self-sufficient, and the state "which extracts a surplus from them, and the ruling class amongst whom it is distributed, is external to the peasant community" (Alavi, 1987: 187).

Godelier argues that in addition to state-sponsored exploitation of peasant communities, internal exploitation exists within the function and content of production relations, despite their communalistic and classless forms and structures. (Bailey, 1981: 97). In other words, far from homologous magnitudes and sacks of potatoes, Godelier is suggesting class within these Asiatic Mode societies, one that is socially based but economically expressed. Commenting on relationship and status differentials:

We must also stress the danger - avoided by Marshall Sahlins, but not Eric Wolf - of presenting producers in classless societies as all equal controllers of the means of production. In 1877, Engels warned against those who hoped to find in earlier communities the exact image of social equality: 'In the oldest primitive communities equality of rights existed at most for members of the community; women, slaves and strangers were excluded from this equality as a matter of course. The whole modern ethnology has confirmed this view, providing much information on economic and political inequalities

to be found in classless societies -between older and younger siblings, men and women, 'big-men' and commoners, founders lineages and stranger lineages... (1978: 32)

Furthermore, Engels and Morgan's argument that "the domination of kinship relations in the social organization is incompatible with the exploitation of labor and the existence of class relations" (Terry, as quoted in Clammer, 1985: 90) is met with further resistance by Godelier who writes that "kinship does not play a determining role alongside the economy, since it is itself an element of the economic infrastructure" (As quoted in Clammer: 91). Godelier in this point is arguing that kin relations do not determine whether relationships are exploitative. If the economy is set up as such, the kin will behave accordingly.

Offering a social measure of class, with which the economic implications in terms of alliances and exchanges could be great, Barber writes that marriage is the "acid test". In so many words:

By definition, social classes are groups of families who treat each other as equals, and the clearest and final test of such equality is marriage between members of such a group of families. (Barber, 1955: 99)

In addition to having potential internal class differentials, it is undisputedly argued that peasants as

a group are differentiated and exploited by nonpeasants. They face political and economic domination (Shanin, 1987: 3-4), and are absolutely poor in both real and relative senses (Cancian, 1989: 146). These factors, in turn, lead peasants towards the formation of their own socio-economic class.

They are dominated in the form "taxes, rents, corvee, interest and terms of trade unfavorable to the peasant" (Shanin, 1987: 3-4). Their domination is acutely burdensome, including rent and government obligations of taxes in currency and in kind. Kottak highlights the detriment caused to peasants by such obligations:

The rent fund is not simply an additional obligation for peasants. Often it becomes their foremost and unavoidable duty. Sometimes, to meet the obligation to pay rent, their own diets suffer. The demands of social superiors may divert resources from subsistence, replacement, social, and ceremonial funds. (1991: 167)

Summary

Clammer provides what he calls a thumbnail sketch that can be used to summarize the peasant family economy:

It is that particular combination of primary, small-scale and low-technology farming that is pursued through the total utilisation of the domestic labour power of the household which is the primary unit of production and consumption, and within which division of labour takes place on a functional basis and the means of production are owned by the domestic unit itself and distributed amongst its members as their economic roles require. If any appropriation of surplus-labor takes place, it is

through corvee or other communal co-operative projects, except in a feudal or certain socialist systems where the labour is devoted to the landlords or to State directed enterprises. (1985: 140)

The family farm unit of production and consumption is a fundamental component of the peasant economy. It interacts economically with other family units, towards both social and economic maintenance. Economic activities evolve from the practice of land husbandry, the exploitation of which requires a complex of technology, labor organization and cooperation, and other resources such as land. The family, as a part of a greater state and state system, faces political, economic, and social domination by outsiders, and potentially by those within their own communities.

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