EMPIRICAL EVALUATION OF THEORIES OF PEASANTRY

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Like other social sciences, anthropology has theorized about peasantry and its basic concepts in many ways, most of which contradict each other. Shanin viewed them as fitting four major categories. First, the European authors have presented peasantry as an earlier cultural tradition which lags behind modern socio-economic development. For Marx, peasantry meant a class of producers formerly exploited by elite of the pre-capitalist society, which presently represents a leftover from the preceding evolutionary societal stage (1975: 3). Authors of the third category, like Chayanov, regarded peasantry as a special type of mode of production. Finally, DurkHeim and his anthropological followers like Kroeber claimed peasantry to be a structural component of civilization, in Kroeber's terms, a "part society" (1948: 284).

Of the above theories, especially the Marxist concept has to be rejected on empirical grounds. If one views exploitation as payment of the rent and of the various fees extracted from peasantry, then are not we all in a sense exploited by having to pay sometimes very onerous taxes imposed upon us by the lawyers and politicians? Furthermore, in various times and places, not all peasantry would fit the Marxist classification. In different times and places, peasants of Europe and Asia were not subject to payment of the rent or being some sort of underdogs. Indeed, sometimes they shared in the power of the State (e.g. in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Switzerland, and even in Communist China). In Austria, a country in which I have conducted long-term research, Austrian peasantry, the *Bauern*, have for a long time enjoyed the highest social status (as also Khera points out; 1972: 352). In my native Czechoslovakia the largest "agrarian party" ruled the country, in a coalition, for its democratic duration of twenty years (1918-1938). As a consequence of the supposed idea that all peasants are exploited underlings, Marxists and also the subscribers to the concept of the "peasant mode of production" hold that the peasants practice subsistence economy, that they produce only for feeding their family and

pay the required rent or taxes (see Cole and Wolf 1914: 87, 140, 152; Roseburry 1976: esp. 51). But it had been the peasant production which provided the surplus which paid for the cities and castles and which fed the industrial revolution (Potter 1967a: 380). Roseburry admits that some peasants themselves became capitalists exploiting the poorer peasants (1976, esp. 50-51). In the definition of surplus, Marxists and other authors leave out investments made by peasants on their farm and business activities, such as building farmhouses, payments to co-heirs in areas of impartible inheritance, buying equipment and machinery, providing irrigation and drainage, creating new arable land, building of roads and bridges, buying superior breeding stock, etc. Thus capital is not limited to purchasing labor only, as Wolf claims (Worsley 1984: 17).

Some theories seem to be even more detached from reality. In order to keep logical with their tenets that, in their production, the aim of the peasants is basically satisfaction of their households' needs, they claim that they use little money in their subsistence economy (Wolf 1955: 454; Shanin 1975a: 15). Some authors go as far as to view peasants living in a non-money economy. With the advent of money, they supposedly slowly transformed their peasant type of production into an enterprise of a capitalist nature (Shanim 1975a: 16). Even worse, the peasants are often depicted as being resigned to their fate and passive when faced with problems of survival choices. Poverty and struggle for survival are supposedly regarded as inevitable, and any innovation is primarily viewed as pathological in nature (Cole and Wolf 1974: 152; Ortiz 1975: 330-331). These absurd assertions have been challenged by many. Herring shows that peasants who faced great adversity as exploited sharecroppers were challenged rather than resigned to their fate, and produced more than owner-operators (1984: 136). Indeed, Ortiz categorically states that peasants not only operate in a money economy, but also that their decisions can "easily be explained in terms of the state of the market, that peasant behavior does not seem to be so different from Western producers" (1975: 331). David Greenwood agrees that every peasant feeds his family but also runs an enterprise, thus actually being a manager and entrepreneur (in Durrenberger 1980: 134). Similarly Thorner claims that peasants produce for exchange (in Ortiz 1975: 323) and Diaz demonstrates that "the peasant village is not economically self-sufficient, depending upon a wide network of personas to whom peasants sell their surplus handicrafts and produce, and from whom they purchase the goods that they themselves do not produce" (Potter et al. 1967: 165; see also Wilk 1991: 5). Indeed, even some Marxists claim that there is no special peas-

ant mode of production (Tannenbaum 1984a: 31). Foster shows that the prices peasants charge are determined by international forces and local monopolists (Potter et al. 1967a: 9). Even most of the peasants of Thailand produce beyond subsistence level, as Tannenbaum shows (1984: 938).

Data from Obernberg Valley, a village which I have subjected to long-term research, studying it since 1962 (when I stayed for a whole year), and returning every year since (spending over seven years there, when counted together), contradict all the above definitions of peasantry. They are more in line with the above-mentioned critiques of Ortiz, Diaz, and Foster. My quantitative research discloses that the peasants of Obernberg lived in a money economy and produced a surplus not only to pay the fees and taxes extracted by the past nobles and later the state, but also for investment and profit. It is not true that peasants have a static technology (see also Nettig 1981: xiii), as shown by my data on the constant technological modernization of Obernberg. Peasants accepted proven technological inventions (scythe, water power, wind power, electricity, cable hay lifts, hay slides), and a whole array of modem power tools and machinery. Indeed they accepted new crops (potatoes, tomatoes, and a variety of vegetables). They have made maximization of income their basic strategy, as Gamst concurs (1974: 34). This aptitude for market for which one does not have to be literate and have legal codes as Gamst suggests (1974:34) and profit motivation are easily discerned in my quantitative data of the year 1967, when non-farm activity provided a full 47.14 % of income for Obernberg's 50 farms. Only during political and national crises, when the market collapsed, did they return to subsistence strategy. Unlike specialized farms and especially the various kolkhozes, producers associations, and latifundia of rich individuals, the peasants showed great economic flexibility (also Wiber 1985: 437).

As Wolf aptly states, the peasants' control of land enables them to retreat into subsistence and "insulating adaptation" when need demands (Cole and Wolf 1974: 30). Because of this flexibility and unification of management and labor, the peasant family farm has a far greater capacity for survival than the commercial and state farms. Soviet collectivization, for example, with its system of kolkhozes and state farms, transformed the once surplus-producing Ukraine ("the old breadbasket of Europe") and the whole Soviet State into a food importing country. In times of crisis, peasant family production usually subsidizes the urban population (Jones 1984: 161). In present and past times of prosperity, Obernberg's diversified agriculture, with its field of grain and potatoes, disappeared and gave way to areas of grassland which provide fodder

for cattle, the merchandise for market-oriented production. Such flexibility is hardly possible on a large commercial or state-owned farm.

A widespread theoretical ethnographic tradition comes from European ethnologists. There the peasants are viewed as representatives of an outdated tradition, or simply as survivors because of supposed inertia typical of peasant societies (Sharin 1975b: 148; also Foster 1967a: 9; Diaz 1967: 50). The traditionalist and conformist theory originated from the supposed peasants' fear of the outside world. As Ortiz shows, this "traditionalism" of peasants stems from past experience when holding to the old method of production avoided risks with untested new urban ideas and minimized losses and starvation (1975: 334). From my own experience, I can claim that holding to the old ways is sometimes reinforced by failures of urban "scientific advisors." Was it so clever that in the USA and, for example, in Czechoslovakia, the abandonment of traditional crop rotation and reliance on artificial chemical fertilizers ruined the balanced ecology, rendered the groundwater undrinkable, and choked the fish streams and lakes with algae? Moreover, the new urban reliance on fertilizers and modem cultivation techniques produce cash outlays and involve long-term costs that a farmer can hardly afford. In the village of Vojnice (Czechoslovakia), where I farmed for five years (1942-1946), wasting the available manure and straw, in a new Soviet-styled kolkhoz, resulted in a mountain of a 40-year accumulation of manure surrounded by a smelly lake of liquid animal excreta and another mountain of rotting straw, and failed to produce the promised increase in production and income (see also Ortiz 1975: 334). While working on my research among the Hopi Indians of Arizona, I heard a very relevant story. An expert from Washington came to teach the Indians how to grow corn. With his tractor he plowed a field in the nearby arroyo (dried-out river bed) and planted corn, while his Hopi neighbors used their old digging sticks and dispensed with the plowing. Soon the Hopi Indian field was green from growing corn, while that of the "urban expert" was bare. By plowing, the famous agronomist had destroyed the soil capillarity and rendered his field barren. No wonder that, after few of such experiments, the peasants view new inventions with caution and very slowly accept only those that have demonstrably proved to be successful. Similar critique is expressed by Minz (1973) and Netting (1981: 228).

Peasantry develops only in a civilization. A civilization does not have to have writing and written literature, as the Inca civilization demonstrates. A civilization is defined by the existence of a city, which other forms of societies do not possess. A city, in turn, is a community which, irrespective of its size, is

economically not self-sufficient, but depends for food on the *Hinterland*, an area dotted with villages. In exchange, it provides defense, services of social, commercial, religious, political and educational nature, and products of craftsmen or industry. Thus peasants of the villages are structurally bound to the city and necessarily participate in the monetary and market economy. Consequently, the claim that the peasants are isolated, not profit-oriented and practice subsistence economy is obviously incorrect (also see Foster 1967: 5; Redfield 1953: 40; Kroeber 1948: 284, Diaz 1967: 51). The city functions not only as a political partner, an outlet for the peasants' produce, and the source of material goods, inventions, and services, but also as the source of peasants' dependence and sometimes subjugation and political domination. As a consequence, a proper study of peasantry requires of necessity discussion of the history, economy, laws, and associational structure of the associated province and the state as they relate to the village life (also claimed by Wolf 1956: 1066).

The contact between the city and its *Hinterland* has been culturally expressed by some authors as a duality of the Great and Little Tradition. The great tradition of the city is supposed to contain the educational elite which, by its advanced knowledge, dominates the political and economic life of the rural population. Accordingly, the city is portrayed as to provide the important innovations, architects who built the monumental structures, and the painters, sculptors and literary people who produce the advanced academic achievements and art. The countryside, we are told, contains only a simplified version of the elaborate city's "Great Tradition" (Redfield in Foster 1967: 6). In the religious sphere, Gamst goes to the extreme in claming that the city provides priests and nuns, and that the backward countryside peasants function only as spectators, possessing only superstitions as their own religious product. Indeed Gamst generalizes that peasants are illiterate and their illiteracy reaffirms more absolutely the contrasts between city dwellers and peasants (1974: 14). Because of this illiteracy and traditionalism, the peasants are supposed to need an agent to mediate between them and the city to interpret "The Great Tradition's cultural achievements and inventions" (Potter et al. 1967b: 9).

All these simply fantastic generalizations are readily contracted by cultural achievements of peasantry in Europe and Asia, and, of course, by my findings in Obernberg (Tirol, Austria). The Obernberg peasants, although having some of their own legends and superstitions, participate fully in the Roman Catholic Church activity. Peasant illiteracy, if applied to Europe, is simply nonsense. Obernberg produced several well-educated priests and even a university

professor and a doctor of veterinary medicine. Many of the Obernberg farmers graduated not only from European high school, but also from college or university. To explain the folly of the above-mentioned theories, one has to realize that not only did the authors mentioned study only the Latin American (mostly Mexican) situation, but they also appear to be ignorant of the peasantry of the rest of the world. In Europe and Obernberg, the rural people have their own subculture in their own right, with their own dialect and written literature, songs, poetry, original architecture, style of furniture, food recipes, and folk costumes. None of these are some sort of derivations from their neighboring city culture. The small valley of Obernberg, up to 1967 partially isolated by a precipitous and dangerous road to the outer world, prides itself on its own dialect, local legends, an Olympic gold medalist in skiing, two highly literate and knowledgeable "*Heimatforscher*" (Andreas Saxer and Herman Hilber, students of the local folklore and history).

Peasantry had been viewed by many anthropologists as a category characterized by several attributes. The most widespread one requires that the peasants be farmers to qualify as members of this category (Wolf 1966; Handlin 1981: 466; Ortiz et al. 1967: 6; Shanin 1975a: 15). True enough, most peasants are engaged in farming, but the villages also contain craftsmen who share their life with other farming village co-residents. One has to view peasantry not as a category but as a subculture which includes the farming and non-farming population. In Obernberg, for example, the district of Eben housed laborers with little land to farm and, in the district of Aue, specialized craftsmen such as cobblers, tailors, basket makers, carpenters, masons, and weavers conducted their business. Besides, the claim that peasants, unlike modern farmers, do not cultivate cash crops is contradicted by the history of Obernberg and also most of Central Europe, where cash crops have been produced by peasants since the Middle Ages. Again, peasantry is a subculture or sub-society tied structurally to the city, and not a category.

Equally false is the claim that peasants have simple technology, resisting change coming from outside. The truth is that they accepted new technology as soon as it was proven to be successful and efficient. Thus Obernberg displayed modem machinery, electrification and architecture. However, they are still reluctant to use extensively insecticide and herbicides that poison the water and exterminate useful birds and animals. Pests (mice, moles, harmful insects, squirrels, and rabbits) are still mostly controlled by predatory insects (wasps, hornets, lady bugs, praying mantises, etc.), singing birds, hawks, owls, ferrets

and foxes. The old plow, which brings up the low layers of fertile soil filled with nutrients from cow manure, is still in full use rather than the modem cultivator which just churns up the top soil, leaving the unused nutrients of the lower level unused and wasted.

Peasantry theorizing has not left out the personality of the rural population. Unfortunately the concept of the personality of peasants and the various theories are not clearly stated, and the terms used remained not well defined (see also Ortiz 1975: 327). Furthermore, the authors' theories disclose a strange naiveté mainly due to studying an individual's statement and attitudes rather than comparing their interpretations with hard economic realities. The result is that Netting's and my empirical findings can hardly be compared with the typical peasant personality of anthropological literature (Pospisil 1995: 14; Netting 1981: 227). The peasant characteristics that are claimed may not even be shared by all the individuals studied (Diaz 1975: 327) and the ideal described is usually viewed as an equivalent to reality (Ortiz 1975: 333). So, for example, the claim that equality is the overriding value of the peasants is not brought out by empirical reality. My Obernberg findings, and also those of Ortiz, show that to assert that peasants supposedly form a uniform, homogeneous society is simply an illusion. My Obernberg people range from conservatives to progressives, which was clearly demonstrated by their decision-making concerning their use of machines, selection of crops, and the acceptance or rejection of new cultivation techniques, especially those involving the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These findings show the impossibility of putting a categorical label of "progressive" or "conservative" on all the Obernberg farmers.

Another dubious generalization states that peasants have an implicit, covert "image of limited good" (Foster 1967: 296). They are supposed to believe that desired things in life exist in limited quantity that cannot be increased. Therefore this limited good should be more equally distributed and not hoarded by a few individuals. From this, therefore, stems their hostility toward wealth. Having been a European farmer for five years, and having studied Obernberg peasants since 1962 (a total of seven years of research), my interpretation of this hostility views it as simple envy. In this respect, there is no difference between the urban and rural populations in Europe. In comparison, the culture of the United States is conspicuous for a relative lack of envy. So it may be that Americans who study peasants abroad, while relatively ignorant of their urban compatriots, view this envy as a special mark of peasantry. An anecdote expresses the problem of envy difference between American and European cultures quite well. In Europe, Franz prays to God, complaining that his neighbor has a nice pig. God appears and asks Franz, "Do you wish a pig like your neighbor's?" "No, God," replies Franz, "I wish my neighbor's pig were dead." In a similar situation in the United States, Frank, a counterpart of Franzi, certainly has a different wish: "No, God, I would like to have ten pigs like his." The joke reveals the pure envy of a European peasant rather than any feeling of a "limited good." There is another controversy over the conception of a peasant personality. While in his study of the Tepoztlan community of Mexico, Redfield claims that the peasants displayed idyllic behavior, Oscar Lewis, who restudied the same community, found the people there to be suspicious, individualistic, envious, and uncooperative (Redfield 1930; Lewis 1960). My research in Obernberg and in the Czech village of Vojnice, where I farmed for five years, suggests that both of the authors were, in a sense, right. In Europe as in Mexico, and unlike in the USA, peasants as well as urbanites have a double standard of behavior. They classify people with whom they interact into two categories: the proximate, including relatives, friends and underlings, and the distant category of acquaintances, strangers, superiors and enemies. Members of the two categories are addressed by different pronouns (e.g. *du* and *Sie* in German, *tu* and *vous* in French, *tu* and *usted* in Spanish, etc.). Radically different patterns of behavior are applied to these. Members of the distant category are suspect; one is reserved and uncooperative toward them, possibly even hostile. With "proximate" people, one tends to be helpful, trusting, open and unreserved in one's behavior. These patterns are not particular to peasantry, but are applied in European and Mexican societies to all their members. During my first two years of stay in Obernberg, the people were suspicious and mistrusting of me, but afterwards I was reclassified as "proximate" and many of them opened their lives to me, disclosed their financial status (debits and credits in their bank accounts). Would an American so openly show me his/her debts, credits and other financial documents?

This dichotomy in Europe does not mean that there would not be hostilities between two particular families in Obernberg. Indeed, while in the Obernberg districts of Aussertal, Innertal, and Leite, the interfamily grievances were inherited and perpetuated, in the districts of Gereit and Eben the animosities were open, violent, but short-lived.

In the seventies, the work of Chayanov became popular with the theoreticians of the West. The heart of the Chayanov's theory is the on-farm equilibrium, the point where additional effort and production cease. It is determined by

the balance between the family needs of the Russian farmer and the supposed drudgery of labor expended to meet these needs. The needs and the drudgery of expended work are subtle and hard to determine. They form two curves and, at their intersection, the labor of the Russian peasant studied is supposed to cease. Since additional factors determine this utility (needs of the family) and drudgery of expended work, it is difficult to be exactly identified; Sahlins used the easily identifiable ratio of consumers and number of the productive workers of the family and correlated this with the household production. Thus, to Sahlins, the intensity of a given household's production varies inversely with the relative working capacity of the domestic unit. In other words, Sahlins assumes that all peasants of the world tend to work only to supply the needs of their families and are not motivated by profit (Sahlins in Tennenbaum 1984: 927). Aside from the fact that Chayanov also worked with other factors and not only with the two simple ones used by Sahlins, Sahlins and followers of Chayanov failed to understand the data Chayanov worked with. His source of facts came from the Soviet Union of the twenties, from the apartitional communes whose peasants, dominated by the Communist administration, were assigned and reassigned amounts of lands with regard to the changing size of their families. These communes were, of course, an artificial construct of the Communist revolutionaries and thus had little to do with actual peasantry. Since, in my Obernberg and in most other peasant communities, one's landholdings cannot be enlarged or diminished at will, Chayanov's findings, while very good for understanding the early Soviet agrarian era, are irrelevant to the rest of the world's peasantry.

As in other social studies, theories of peasantry have not escaped the influence of Marxism. It became assumed, without any empirical evidence, of course, that originally peasant villages had held and used all their land communally (Handlin 1981: 659). The Marxist-influenced authors saw a survival of the supposed old-time Communism in the contemporary Alpine institution of *Almen*, an association holding pasture land in a community. According to them, *Almen* represent communes where every farm of the valley is entitled to pasture its cattle (Cole and Wolf 1974: 99). Unfortunately, *Almen* are not communes, but are private corporations in which the farmers have secured rights to pasture individual heads of cattle, either through long-time use (*logaeva consuetude*, *usu capio*) or through purchase with subsequent incorporation. As a consequence, in Obernberg only 60 residents and four non-residents have pasture rights, while two Obernberg farms have no rights, and 13 farmers

acquired pasture rights in *Almen* of the neighboring community of Gries. There is little relation between the size of a farm and its number of head of cattle entitled to use the pasture in Obernberg's ten *Almen*. In conclusion, *Almen* are certainly not communes, but corporations whose legal rights and duties form a fictive legal personality separate from those of its members. They are not economically wasteful and irrational as Friedl claims (1974: 52-55). My quantitative analysis, which Friedl lacks, shows just the opposite. Neither the putative ancient collectivism of Marxism nor the forced collectivization of the Soviet Union of the twentieth century shows any supposed human appeal. Indeed the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule had to "liquidate" (under Khrushchev's direction) three million peasants in the Ukraine alone.

Another Marxian dogma of an evolutionary stage of an "egalitarian society" has proven to be a myth, not only among the peasants but also in studied tribal societies (Netting 1981: 228-229; Wilk 1991: 5; Lewis 1981: 61; Pospisil 1963 and 1995). The population of Obernberg ranged from very poor peasants to rather well-to-do elite, the former concentrated in the district of Eben, and the latter in the Ausserthal district.

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