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EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

Mundua nork, nola eta zer-nolako inplikazio sozial, ekonomiko eta ekologikorekin elikatuko duen izango da eztabaidagaia

Taking the part of peasants':

Hits and Misses

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"...populist practice is concerned with two things: personal survival and improved agriculture." (Narkiewicz 1976, 271)

"It is up to the agriculturalists of the whole world, once they have understood their significance and value and their common destiny, to unite for the sake of the welfare of the people – to defend society, to assist the State on its way to peace, and to uphold agriculture; that is to say, by growing food and by the character of their own existence, to fulfil the principal agrarian idea in giving the people, the States and the nations a firm foundation for a life of material and moral well-being." (Central Office of the International Agrarian Bureau, Prague, 1922, quoted by Mitrany 1961, 143)

Introduction

This is a preliminary sketch of parts of a larger paper in progress which will consider how convincingly 'Agrarian Marxism' and Agrarian Populism- as (socio-)economic theory, ideology and political project - meet the challenges of hitting their targets, as well as their direct confrontations and contestations with each other. The most celebrated, and intriguing, historical *loci* of such confrontations and contestations remain Russia from the 1880s into the 1920s, and south-eastern Europe from the late nineteenth century, and especially the end of World War I, until World War II. Those instances, and their contemporary and subsequent debates, inform much of this paper, and are used to help structure exposition. I also aim to restrict references although, as will be evident, I have benefitted greatly from re-reading two books in particular: David Mitrany's classic, if somewhat eccentric, populist work *Marx against the peasant* (1961, first published 1951), and Gavin Kitching's remarkable little critique of 'populist development theory', *Development and underdevelopment in historical perspective. Populism, nationalism and industrialization* (revised edition, 1989, first published 1982).

'Hits and misses' in the title refers to the main 'targets' associated with Agrarian Populism ('Taking the part of peasants') to which this paper limits itself. This is imposed by constraints of time and space, but also seems appropriate to this ICAS meeting which appears firmly wedded to 'Peasantism', as Mitrany (1961) terms it. At the same time, it is worthwhile to ask how much agrarian populism today departs from the historical conditions and preoccupations of the 'classic' debates and confrontations indicated - and their complexities.

Of course, the framing by (socio-)economic theory, ideology and political project is heuristic and in practice it can be difficult (impossible?) to maintain secure boundaries between its three components. Both analytically and empirically (which includes historically) it is useful to distinguish between the 'economic sociology' of agrarian change, complex enough in its diversity and determinations, and its 'political sociology' which adds further determinations, hence complexities (Bernstein 2010).

1. (Socio-) economic theory

I begin with some familiar themes from political economy applied to explore highly varied trajectories of the development of capitalism, a central preoccupation in both Marxism and classic (Russian and eastern European) populism and on which they clashed: analytically on the ‘necessity’ or otherwise of capitalist development, above all industrialization; empirically on its actuality - how far capitalism had proceeded in the countries concerned; and prescriptively on its desirability or otherwise, as establishing conditions of possibility of ‘alternative’ paths, by-passing or transcending full-blown capitalism.

Central elements here include issues of the development of the productive forces in farming and agriculture more widely; economic scale; relationships between agriculture and industry/industrialization; accumulation; property; markets; class relations and dynamics (exploitation and oppression); and indeed today ‘feeding the world’. Here are some unavoidably brief comments on each.

The development of the productive forces in farming, and in agriculture more widely, was, of course, a central concern of classical political economy and its models of accumulation. To criticize simplistic and reified notions of the development of the productive forces in farming, and in agriculture, that links them unconditionally to economies of scale, to technical change (mechanization and ‘chemicalization’), and hence to a continuously growing productivity of labour – characteristic of ‘mechanical’ Marxism – is relatively straightforward and necessary. At the same time, there are issues lurking here that agrarian populism ignores to its cost. For example, there are many (‘capitalized’) ‘family farmers’ (in both North and South) who rely on mechanical and chemical technologies to pursue their activities and to reproduce themselves.

More generally, the productivity of labour remains a central issue and can, or should, not be sidestepped with reference to inherited (‘traditional’) ways of farming, let alone celebration of its long hours and often backbreaking labour (‘drudgery’ in Chayanov’s term), nor to modes of ‘agro-ecological’ farming which are acclaimed for their labour intensity. The wider implications include not least the returns to farmers and farming households, signalled by ‘models of pricing’ and ‘producers’ salaries’ noted in the motivation for this conference. And they also connect with how productivities of labour in farming bear on the feasibility of ‘family farmers’ feeding the (rest of the) world.

Indeed, the need to improve the technical quality, hence output (and *marketed* output) of household farming was a constant theme in the deliberations of the classic (Russian and eastern European) populists, often tied to issues of scale, which I comment on next.

The agrarian populists of Russia and eastern European were mostly clear about the severe limitations of ‘backward’ peasant farming, just as they were champions of the moral qualities of peasant ways of life. They saw ‘backwardness’ as derived from tiny scales of farming and the ‘primitive’ instruments of labour employed (as well as low levels of technical culture and education). Economically unviable farm size could be highlighted by demographic pressure. Mitrany (1961, 129) remarks that the ‘irony of the eastern revolution was that the break-up of the large estates

into millions of peasant holdings [after WWI, HB] was presided over not by Populists but by those who stood for the industrial solution', with land redistribution followed by rural population increase of nearly 30 per cent between the wars in south-eastern Europe (ibid, 120), and with almost no growth in marketed production (ibid, 117) – itself a problem for wider economic development.

With land reform after WWI in south-eastern Europe, the 'farmer was to be made secure in his tenure, but the secure tenant was expected to be a good farmer' (Mitrany 1961, 110). In the populist vision of the time, the solution was to combine individual household farming, equipped with sufficient land and other means, with economies of scale both upstream and downstream of farming achieved through effective co-operation (though some populists hoped for movement towards collective production in farming). In short, more 'scientific' populism (in Mitrany's term; or 'neo-populism' in Kitching, 1989, for whom Chayanov was the key pioneer) advocated both much improved and productive individual family farming, linked with the wider economy through supportive networks of rural co-operation managed by farmers themselves.

Russian populism in the nineteenth century (until the 1880s) was infused with hostility to industrialization on the model of 'western' (European) capitalist development, and the threat it posed to an often-idealized peasant existence. Later more 'scientific' populism (or neo-populism) in south-eastern Europe was more receptive to forms of industrialization that could support peasant farming, that is, industry that was smaller-scale, decentralized, used local materials, centred on the production of means of production and consumption for the countryside, *and* was able to provide employment for peasants according to agricultural seasons. The last was explicitly argued in terms of dealing with rural 'surplus labour', and more specifically supplementing incomes derived from household farming.

Evidently, one of the principal differences between conditions then and now concerns the trajectories, extent, forms and effects of capitalist development. Russia and south-eastern Europe in the periods noted were predominantly 'peasant societies' of a kind which no longer exists in the twenty-first century. It is not surprising, then, that their intellectuals were preoccupied with paths of development preferable to that of 'the west', also a central motif in debates about development in Asia and Africa after independence from colonial rule. (This is a principal theme of Kitching 1989; and is elaborated in the case of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century by Shanin 1985). Today, alongside the strong (sometimes apparently definitive) vein of agro-ecology in populist theory, is there any systematic thought on industry and industrialization other than a generalized antipathy on one hand, and, on the other, specific critiques of 'industrialized' agricultural production methods? One wonders about the place of industry, what types of industry and their linkages to agriculture, and urban 'classes of labour' (and indeed rural proletarians), in the contemporary populist imaginary.

At the same time, an enduring continuity between earlier and contemporary populists is their opposition to agriculture, and its farmers, serving as a key source of ('primitive') accumulation for industrialization, whether framed within notions of 'national' development (Kitching 1989) or now increasingly 'globalized', a concern brought up-to-date with reference to David Harvey's 'accumulation

through dispossession' (2003) and its often promiscuous invocations (although building a 'national' industrial accumulation fund is no longer a principal goal in this era of neo-liberalism).

Another key socio-economic theme centres on property, above all peasant proprietorship of land. This is manifested in movements for land reform (and access to 'commons'), of course, then and now, in a wide range of historical conditions: anti-'feudal' movements, anti-capitalist movements, and whether peasants' property rights in land are argued on the basis of individual tenure or some or other form of 'community' ownership. A potent thread in populist thought is the unity assigned to ownership of land and the 'family' labour that works it: the 'family labour farm' theorized by Chayanov. This is a central belief of Mitrany (among many others), who suggests somewhat problematically that 'the claim to individual ownership may be logically rooted in the nature of agricultural production itself' (1961, 125), and more generally Schumacher (1973) that there is 'something natural and healthy about...the private property of the working proprietor' (cited by Kitching 1989, 96).

This raises various issues especially once the assumption is dropped that family (or patriarchal) individual ownership of land is reproduced seamlessly across successive generations of the same families of farmers – more plausible perhaps in the time of Chayanov, his predecessors and contemporaries, than today, precisely because of the ways in which capitalism has spread since then. If the assumption is relaxed, or formulated as a matter for investigation (rather than an *a priori*), then other possibilities arise, notably the outright or implicit commodification of land: the emergence of 'formal' (*de jure*) or 'vernacular' (*de facto*) commodity exchanges of land and all that can entail.

This then brings us, in haste, to another much-contested area, that of markets in 'peasant' reproduction. The basic model of Chayanov is one of simple reproduction of the 'family labour farm'. Once this is separated from notions of 'subsistence' as exclusively or primarily self-provisioning, then it points to issues of simple reproduction secured at least partly and often largely through involvement in markets: to obtain instruments of production (and also land, above) and credit (indebtedness is one of the most widespread and continuous burdens on family farmers in the different times and places of modern history), and to sell farm products. Chayanov was well aware of this; his model is not one of 'subsistence' in any narrow sense. The big question then became, and remains, even more, a concern today: how do different forms of (necessary) peasant involvement in markets help or hinder their reproduction? How might it generate differences between peasants?

There is, of course, a vast literature on such questions, field-based and empirical as well as manifested in theoretical contention. Kitching follows Marx's response to visions of socialism as a kind of small producers' (peasants and artisans) market utopia, citing Marx's conclusion on Proudhon and others that

They all want competition without the lethal effects of competition. They all want the impossible, namely the conditions of bourgeois existence without the necessary consequences of those conditions. (Kitching 1989, 32, see also 136)

Kitching's fifth chapter on 'Neo-populism in modern development theory' focuses on four emblematic sets of texts: those of Julius Nyerere, the ILO's *World Employment Programme* papers of the 1970s, Michael Lipton's *Why poor people stay poor* (1977), and Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (1973). His discussion of the ILO and Lipton shows, implicitly, that their versions of what might be called 'applied populist development theory' – applied to employment generation by the ILO, and to small farmer development by Lipton – follow a logic of neo-classical economics. What holds back advance in the two areas they address is, in effect, political 'interference' with markets, attributed to 'big leap' import-substituting industrialization in the first case, and 'urban bias' in the second. Pro-employment and pro-small farmer policies to help eradicate poverty thus amount to the 'right' political interventions to repair market 'distortions' that arise from the wrong sort of political interventions, thereby restoring market 'efficiency'. (Schumacher unusually argued explicitly for reducing labour productivity, also implicit in the ILO analysis, and had a strong ecological dimension.)

This is cited not to suggest that there is any single correct theorization, and practice, adequate to peasant progress through market integration, but that the 'market question' continues to generate tensions and ambiguities in agrarian populism today.

I now arrive at the theme where so much of the above and its contestations converge, namely class relations and their dynamics of exploitation and oppression, including, of course, patriarchy, and ethnic and religious differences and divisions, often strongly associated with colonial and imperial legacies (as in parts of Tsarist Russia and south-eastern Europe).

At its broadest, agrarian populism views *all* farmers deemed to be 'family farmers' as belonging to a single class, or at least a distinctive social formation with common interests: 'people of the land'. This raises the question of 'who are the farmers?' in social terms (Bernstein 2014), especially when a unitary (or at least unified) quality ('essence'?) is applied across the extremely diverse range of farmers in the world today, from, say, hoe-farmers in sub-Saharan Africa to (capitalized) family farmers in North America. 'Family' farmers in North America and western Europe may be heartened by the belief that they pursue the same (benign) 'logic' as hoe-farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, the latter less so: why then are they rich and we are poor? What they have in common might be theorized in Chayanovian terms, the (simple) reproduction of farming households, informed by their striving for autonomy, at its most extreme postulated as a trans-historical (which is to say, ahistorical) universal. Or they might share oppression by, and resistance to, the pressures exerted on them by large-scale capital upstream and downstream of farming, associated with contemporary conditions of giant agribusiness (and finance capital too). Thus 'farmer' vs capital, with 'classes of labour' (wage workers) tending to disappear from the picture of class relations in capitalism.

As class is a *relation*, any claims for class or class-like social qualities entail mutually constitutive relations between classes, which change, especially in their forms, in different historical conditions. For Russian and south-eastern European radical intellectuals, both populists and Marxists, many peasants (the majority?) they addressed through the agrarian questions of their times were still exploited and oppressed largely through 'semi-feudal' or 'neo-feudal' exactions of landed

property (and states), a condition highlighted by the limited gains (if any) for most peasants of the formal abolition of serfdom ('emancipation') in Russia in 1861 and subsequently elsewhere in the east, and which fed into their politics. Teodor Shanin 1986, among others, argues that the dramatic uprisings of Russian peasants in the 1905-7 revolution led Lenin to a fundamental reappraisal of their political role.

Nonetheless, and as is well-known, Lenin (1964/1899) had earlier pioneered the investigation of class differentiation among Russian peasants as part of the wide development of capitalism there. Whether his account was empirically accurate has been questioned by some formidable scholarship, suggesting a salutary warning about leaping from a shaky economic sociology to an even more shaky political sociology. However, Lenin's *analytic* continues to be tested and applied in much materialist work on agrarian change, and indeed in ways that tend to abolish the application of inherited notions of 'peasant' farming, economy, society, and the like, to today's conditions of global capitalism. One approach, developed in my own work, is to see those designated as 'family' farmers in the world today as mostly either petty commodity producers, constituted as a contradictory combination of capital and labour, or rurally based 'classes of labour' whose reproduction is necessarily secured through wage labour, even when combined with a degree of 'own account' farming (Bernstein 2010).

Why, and how, class differentiation of farmers is problematic for today's calls to agrarian movements held to represent all ('family') farmers, 'people of the land', is considered further below. However, it can be noted here that issues concerning property in land, and reproduction through integration in markets and commodity relations, however briefly stated above, at least raise some complications for agrarian populism. This is nicely illustrated by an incident reported in Venturi's encyclopaedic account of Russian populism and socialism from 1825 to 1881. At a meeting convened by narodniks who 'went to the people' in the 1870s, and who told assembled villagers of a post-revolution idyll when they would own land, one response was 'Oh, how wonderful when we shall redistribute land! I shall hire two workers and live like a lord!' (Venturi 1966, 505). There is no reason to believe that peasant was typical but he was certainly familiar with the notion, and no doubt the practice, of individually owned private land worked with wage labour.

2. Ideology

The sketch so far already points to elements of ideology, which include struggles for social and environmental justice; other philosophical and cultural issues; and the matter of whose interests 'alternatives' (to capitalism) are imagined or constructed to serve.

Social and environmental justice

The declaration from the Central Office of the International Agrarian Bureau, based in Prague, in 1922, quoted at the head of this paper, serves as well as any, as a brief statement of a global ideological vision. Indeed, it could serve as the charter of *La Vía Campesina* today, apart from some traces characteristic of its historical moment, notably its reference to 'the State' and 'States', and with the topical addition of the virtues of agro-ecology practiced by at least a vanguard of 'peasant' farmers.

Other philosophical and cultural issues

This is unfortunately expressed here as a kind of residual and cannot be taken further in this paper. Rather it serves to signal the many, rich and eclectic philosophical and cultural ideas in which populism abounds throughout its varied histories, sometimes at the expense of any plausible (socio-)economic theory, as Venturi (1966) argues for much Russian populism in the nineteenth century (and Kitching 1989 does for 'populist development theory' generally). That was largely a product of the intelligentsia, both resident (often in prison and internal exile) and emigré. Venturi traces the ideas of, and contestations between, those influenced at different times by German romanticism, the work of Proudhon, by other socialist currents and increasingly over time by Marx, by Marx's anarchist opponents, of whom Bakunin and Kropotkin were leading figures, and so on. Moreover, there were influences of Slavophil historians on notions of peasant tradition in Russia that bore on heated disputes concerning the *obshchina* or Russian peasant commune, its fortunes in the face of capitalist development, and its prospects for the future. Arcane as some of these debates may seem, they provide links with some persistent tropes of populist discourse today, not least claims over land and ways of life of indigeneity (including in the Basque country?), and issues of 'community' as an organizing principle of farming and social life (below).

In whose interests?

The declaration from 1922 quoted above is striking in its belief that 'agriculturalists of the whole world' are the potential saviours of humanity. This is echoed in some populist beliefs today that agro-ecological farming, together with 'food sovereignty' and the like, is the primary key to saving the planet and all its people from the social injustices and ecological destructions of capitalism. Even though 'people of the land' are no longer a majority of the world's population, unlike what populists could argue a century or so ago (Mitrany 1961, 148), they carry the promise of a 'world-historical subject' for our times. In effect, they are promoted to the status of the universal 'class' once bestowed on the proletariat in Marxian socialism. This moves from the plane of the ideological to my third component, agrarian populism as a political project.

3. Political project

In many ways, this can be regarded as the crux of the matter, and a central concern of the motivation of this conference, at which I expect to learn about current forms of thinking and activism in the pursuit of that project from others who know far more about them than I do. In view of that I limit my observations in this section.

Political project(s) include the familiar issues of the key classes/groups 'targeted' for mobilization; 'community' as a basis for solidarity and action; political alliances; strategies and tactics. It is the terrain on which Marxist agrarian programmes have at best a varied historical record. Has agrarian populism a better record, and (or) does it promise more in today's conditions?

Constituencies

In principle, ‘people of the land’ - producers of food - is the encompassing constituency of contemporary agrarian populism, as remarked above. As all people are also consumers of food (albeit divided by class and cultural differences), they have, or can and should have, an interest in the food that is available to them: how it is produced, where it comes from, its variety, quality, cost, and so on - key concerns of the project of ‘food sovereignty’.

A central feature of this project is (and should be) the recognition that not all farmers are committed to the practice of agro-ecological and autonomous activity, and indeed not all ‘family’ farmers. Leaving aside capitalist farmers, and ‘family’ farmers who pursue specialized commodity production and accumulation (for whom it might promise a measure of ‘autonomy’), those committed to agro-ecology are likely to be a ‘vanguard’ in the vastly different places and conditions of ‘family’ farming – indeed for some populists this is a matter of ‘choice’ by farmers (and those who would support them). The purpose of the project, indeed what makes it a *project*, is to demonstrate to ‘family’ farmers the virtues of agro-ecological production, and to enlist them in the movement. If the ‘art of (agro-ecological) farming’ is used to construct a *political* (rather than socio-economic) definition of ‘peasants’ as those committed to it, then they constitute the spearhead (‘vanguard’?) of the project which draws in more and more ‘peasants’, old and ‘new’, as it advances: a valid characterisation of the project of *La Via Campesina*? The matter remains, of course, of how to base the project in socio-economic conditions and their analysis, necessary to assessing its feasibility.

This perspective may be conceptualized, and classified, in terms of a series of widening concentric circles, from working with small groups of farmers in particular locales, with all their ecological and social (including market) specificities, to regional and ‘national’ organizations, programmes and demands, to the formation and activities of a strategically ambitious transnational social movement like *La Vía Campesina*.

Community

‘Community’ is one of the most promiscuously used terms in social science and indeed public discourse, hence always needs to be interrogated. It typically means community of identity, sometimes described as ‘community of fate’, or community of interest, or, ideally for certain purposes, not least in agrarian populism, a unity of the two

‘Community’ is a widespread trope of agrarian populism today, and is especially significant as it seems to point a way beyond working with (socio-economic) models of *individual* household farming (which is the core of Chayanovian theory). Invocations of ‘community’ signify the claim, or hope, that there are solidarities of rural groups, sufficiently homogenous and equal in their internal social relations, that can be drawn on to facilitate the agrarian populist project at local levels – or that can be constructed for that purpose. The former rests on notions of pre-given (‘traditional’) qualities and capacities of rural community (typically embedded in a cultural foundation) as a basis of co-operation, and, as noted above, received its most intense attention, and contestation, in the case of the Russian *obschina* (or *mir*). This was a corporate entity responsible for allocating land from a common stock to its member households, ideally according to their needs, not least family size and location in the cycle of household reproduction, highlighted in the

Chayanovian notion of demographic differentiation (as opposed to class differentiation). The *obshchina* also exercised other functions of village self-government, and was responsible to the state for taxes and other obligations. It is worth noting here the interest in the *obshchina* of the late Marx, as part of his more general concern with ‘primitive’ community and its place in social evolution. (see Shanin 1983 for the various drafts of Marx’s correspondence with the Russian revolutionary populist Vera Zasulich, and a number of commentaries).

However, the second kind of use indicated above may not need to claim some or other pre-given quality as a basis of peasant economic organization (co-operation, mobilization) but focuses rather on how ‘community’ can be constructed as part of the political project, by farmer activists, outside sympathizers, or some combination of the two. This then entails some conscious effort to overcome divisions internal to particular ‘communities’ – of class, gender, generation, and other differentiation – to achieve the greater good. This is an area of which there are ‘emblematic instances’, as I called them elsewhere (Bernstein 2014), in the literatures of *La Via Campesina* and ‘food sovereignty’ and no doubt more examples will be presented at this conference.

Political alliances

Beyond alliances between farmers constructed through the diffusion of and education in agro-ecological farming, and of the means to establish it, and through activism and organizing within and between ‘communities’, there are issues of connecting with non-farmers: ‘classes of labour’ in both countryside and town. Some scholar-activists are more sensitive to class differences in the countryside (for example, Edelman and Borras, 2016), but have yet to formulate a politics of dealing with it? This applies similarly to connecting with urban ‘classes of labour’, whose frequent conditions of immiseration and insecurity means that they are driven to obtain food at the lowest possible prices (and lowest qualities). There are many instances in the histories of agrarian populism when it was presented, across a wide ideological spectrum, as the alternative to both capitalism and socialism, and to political formations based on the interests of capital and labour. Are there examples of this today?

More directly (and pragmatically?) there is the pursuit of alliances with environmental movements, in some cases with political parties and governments, and lobbying activity in different types of international arenas, plus a distinctive process of trying to get a declaration of ‘Peasants’ Rights’ adopted by the UN. This connects then with issues of strategies and tactics.

Strategies and tactics

While aware of strategic positions and tactical practices in agrarian populism today, I prefer to leave their discussion at this conference to those who are better informed about them than I am, and indeed who are committed to developing and advancing strategy and tactics of greater and lesser scope and ambition (across the concentric circles noted above). Much of this political work is necessarily pragmatic much of the time – what works? what works better? in what conditions? – and presents a moving target, of course.

4. Agrarian populism: hits and misses

Agrarian populism then and now

The conditions, forms and trajectories of agrarian change in the worlds of today's capitalism differ a great deal from those that preoccupied earlier generations of populist thinkers and activists, not least in nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia and further afield in eastern and south-eastern Europe. A key baseline for investigating and understanding differences between ('family') farmers across the world today is how they are incorporated in – and 'resist' – the ongoing uneven development of capitalism and its always contradictory dynamics. Its trajectories are highly diverse, of course, with deep historical roots, although the common thread – the general theme from which different histories weave complex variations (to paraphrase Gilson 1982) – is the commodification of production and reproduction (elaborated in Bernstein 2010).

Today commodification has proceeded, however unevenly, at every site from villages to the global capitalist economy. 'Peasant societies' of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century in some zones of the world, and which had started to bind peasants into commodity relations within continuing (if changing) forms of 'semi-feudalism' and 'neo-serfdom' – of endogenous and colonial provenance – no longer exist. Perhaps the most common, and least implausible, application of 'peasant society' today is to the village or rural locality, and (more of a stretch, analytically) in Chayanovian notions of what constitutes peasant 'behaviour' (and 'choice?'). It is now impossible to designate as 'peasant societies' national entities shaped only marginally by industrial production and urban concentrations, and by other (non-agrarian) classes, whether strongly evident within countries and/or for the poorest countries effected through their integration in international economy.

Populist rediscoveries and reconstructions of the 'family' farmer thus have to place her and him in the diverse and mutating conditions of contemporary capitalism. Moreover (as above) 'family' farmers are no longer a majority of the world's population, and even less so if (i) many so designated are better understood as rurally based 'classes of labour', (ii) only a minority (the 'vanguard') exemplify agro-ecological farming with family labour (*and* are surplus food producers?).

There are some other more specific differences between agrarian populism then and now. Perhaps the most significant is the strong, almost definitive, framing of agrarian populism today by its ecological concerns. Interestingly, this is built into the appeal of *La Vía Campesina* to some farmers in the North as well as South (a division that, in any case, the notion of 'new peasantries', argued from a Chayanovian perspective, would transcend). This certainly marks a break from 'classic' populism; despite the appeal to a global movement of 'agriculturalists' quoted above, the 'Peasant leaders [of south-eastern Europe, HB] never assumed that that their views had any validity for industrialized countries' (Mitrany 1961, 156).

Finally, there are, of course, vastly different circumstances of political context. Then there were more and less intense struggles between contending ideas, and the political forces organized around them – agrarian populist and (Marxian) socialist – in conditions of Tsarist autocracy and the incomplete and extremely

fragile new ‘democracies’ of eastern and south-eastern Europe after WWI. The course of such struggles, as always, took many twists and turns, unexpected by the theories and strategies, practices and tactics, of those engaged in them. Now there is little in the way of serious Marxian political organization and activism on larger scales, but a variety of ‘anti-capitalisms’ including agrarian populism and radical environmentalisms.

To summarize, there are several strategic differences between agrarian populism then and now. One is today’s ecological framing which focuses attention on farm production and how it is done (a departure from the primacy of distribution over production, argued to be characteristic of populism by Kitching 1989, among others). Another, somewhat counter-intuitively, is relatively less emphasis on property rights in land, despite its centrality to some topical concerns, notably ‘land-grabbing’ which is a major theme in agrarian populism, and despite the ongoing commodification of land and its effects for ‘peasant’ reproduction and differentiation, which is not. A third is that *La Vía Campesina* is not preoccupied in the same ways with achieving government, let alone state, power, however much it might strive to influence policy and how it is conducted.

Socio-economic realities

On one hand, the major ‘hit’ of agrarian populism today is its critique of contemporary capitalist farming and agriculture (comprising all the linkages upstream and downstream of farming, dominated by agribusiness and increasingly finance capital), in which it overlaps with (some) materialist analysis (e.g. Araghi 2009, Empson 2014, Moore 2014). On the other hand, its ‘miss’ is that this is probably stronger on ecological grounds than in terms of social relations, to the extent that the latter are framed theoretically around Chayanovian notions of the individual ‘family’ farm and its internal ‘logic’, or politically by appeals to a potential united ‘people of the land’.

Some of the reasons for my scepticism about both these ‘framings’ were indicated above, and have been elaborated elsewhere (Bernstein 2014, 2016). Central to this are the various, and admittedly complicated, issues concerning the formations, and mutations, of class relations in the countryside, of which some agrarian populists are aware but tend to avoid confronting even when they signal them. This no doubt stems from agrarian populism as a political project committed to constructing a unity of (most) farmers, transcending whatever differences might exist between them, requiring then an awareness of class alliances and their challenges. One major challenge is that the potential constituencies of agrarian populism are located differently within capitalism, with different strains on their reproduction. This is, in significant part, a matter of class differences between farmers, whether at local levels or far apart (mediated through the functioning of the international economy), which can be regarded as ubiquitous, if varying widely in their mechanisms, forms, degrees and effects.

To give one type of illustration: there are relatively few, if any, rural households today that are able (or wish?) to reproduce themselves wholly through their farming activity. This has long been a concern, including among agrarian populists, as shown above: the issue of rural ‘surplus labour’ as well as earnings from farming inadequate for reproduction. The celebration of ‘part-time’ farmers (engaged in ‘pluriactivity’), deemed to be otherwise (or because) committed to

‘the peasant way’, is not convincing as an overarching generalization (or deduction from first principles). (As I have long argued in conversations with Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, this may be the case for some farmers in some places at sometimes, but not for many others – in short, it is an empirical question). At the very least, the prospects of success of ‘part-time’ farmers rest on the opportunities of and returns to work outside of their own farming, hence to the wider conditions of economic growth, and specifically labour markets, especially ‘informal’ labour markets, and above all for ‘footloose’ labour from the countryside (in Jan Breman’s potent term).

A further factor here is the demographic. I noted earlier Mitrany’s concern about the effects of rural population growth in south-eastern Europe in the 1920s and 1930s following land redistribution but *without* marked improvement in productivity, marketed product, and rural seasonal (non-agricultural) employment. There may well be viable futures for some ‘family’ farmers (as petty commodity producers) but hardly for all currently engaged in some or other (small) scale of farming, let alone their children. Indeed, it seems to me that many of the more positive ‘emblematic instances’ of small-scale farming provided by agrarian populism today necessarily entail conditions that apply to only a minority of ‘peasants’ – whether deploying agro-ecological ‘alternative’ methods; able to exploit or construct niche activities and ‘nested’ markets; to economize on certain ‘inputs’; to diversify (eco-tourism and gastronomy), and the like – however much energy and ingenuity they devote to them. What works for some according to location and activity in wider socio-economic contexts will not work for all.

Ideological

This is listed for the sake of completeness albeit I have little to add here to what I’ve sketched already, including the lacuna (‘miss’) of agrarian populism in not confronting capital-labour relations in today’s capitalism, with all their variation across the global economy. ‘Classes of labour’ are hardly restricted to the ‘classic’ industrial proletariat but encompass all engaged in the pursuit of livelihood/reproduction through wage employment across different sites of the social division of labour, traversing countryside and town, and so often combining wage work and petty production.

Political project

A final illustration from Mitrany’s account of south-eastern Europe between the wars concerns his explanation for the defeat there of agrarian populism which generated some major political parties and led or participated in government for short periods. Apart from the rivalry with socialist currents and parties (whose agrarian programmes were often very similar, Mitrany 1961, 171, 173) he points to a kind of ‘premature’ formation of political parties - ‘the eastern peasantries found themselves called upon to act as parties before they had been educated politically and philosophically as a movement’ (ibid, 142); to the ferocious power of reaction which crushed the aspirations and gains of the peasant parties; and, interestingly, to a kind of anticipation of ‘weapons of the weak’: ‘The peasant’s power lies not in action but in resistance; that is why he so often proves an endless puzzle to revolutionaries and reactionaries alike.’ (ibid, 155)

It is not for me to pronounce on the political project(s) of agrarian populism today, especially their political record of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ (‘hits and misses’) on the

different scales/arenas which agrarian populism ‘targets’ and in which it operates. I can only note that unavoidably the actions of agrarian populism vary in their radicalism, their scale, and their feasibility, and it would be most interesting to learn how such differences are expressed within agrarian populism and enter its debates about strategy and tactics. Further, the arenas in which successes may be claimed, from local experiments and networks in agro-ecological farming and ‘alternative’ markets to influencing international arenas and organizations, say the FAO, vary greatly, as noted earlier. This is in part the problem of the ‘emblematic instance’: success in one small-scale project in a given place at a given time should not be exaggerated as signifying the success of what happens elsewhere, nor of the larger project.

It is not helpful to counter tendencies to triumphalism in the stances and rhetoric of contemporary agrarian populism with a dismissive stance—there are only ‘misses’ - but it is always necessary to ask about, and investigate, the class bases of particular farmers’ movements, their dynamics and their practices.

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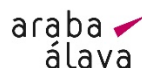
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