

## CONFLICT IN THE CONTEMPORARY RURAL WORLD

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### The peasantry: a contemporary historical subject

One of the characteristics of this paper is that we conceived of and attempted to explore the history of peasants and farmers as rural *workers* and also as pluriactive or “symbiotic” agents, capable of influencing and adapting to contemporary processes of social and productive transformation.<sup>2</sup>

A central and traditional object of study in the field of the history of social conflicts, and social history as a whole, has undoubtedly been the working class, often understood as "working classes" precisely because of its plurality and diversity of conditions, rather than being seen as a homogeneous social group. The initial analyses in the field of social history predominantly paid attention to the lives and work of industrial workers and the organization of labour in countries that were considered to be “advanced capitalist”, of which the English case featured as the genuine model. Yet the progressive historiographical renewal of the second half of the twentieth century assisted in diversifying, on the one hand, the objects of study, and, on the other, it helped to break with interpretative paradigms of a more deterministic and teleological character.

The deficiencies were marked in part by some of the positions of Marx himself,

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<sup>2</sup> There is a great deal of literature regarding the industrial, commercial, and daily activities of the peasantry. An excellent guide is DOMÍNGUEZ MARTÍN, Rafael. “Caracterizando al campesinado y a la economía campesina: pluriactividad y dependencia del mercado como nuevos atributos de la "campesinidad". *Agricultura y Sociedad*. n. 66, 1993, 97-136. As for adaptation and unrest, some perspectives that guided our work had already been raised by ARTIAGA, Aurora; BALBOA, Xesús L; CARDESIN, J.M.; FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, L.; HERVÉS, Henríque. "Agricultura y capitalismo en Galicia. Una perspectiva histórica". In: VILLARES, R. and SAAVEDRA, P. eds., *Señores y Campesinos en la Península Ibérica (ss. XVIII-XX)*. Barcelona: Crítica, vol. 2, 1991 and HERVÉS, Henríque; FERNÁNDEZ GONZÁLEZ, A.; FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, L; ARTIAGA, Aurora; BALBOA, Xesús L. “Resistencia y organización. La conflictividad rural en Galicia desde la crisis del Antiguo Régimen al franquismo”. *Historia Agraria*. 13, 1997, pp. 165-191. And following this Hispanic thread of rural studies, an important inspiration came from SEVILLA-GUZMÁN, E. and GONZÁLEZ DE MOLINA, M. *Ecología, campesinado e Historia*. Madrid: Eds. de la Piqueta, 1993.

which left a lasting impression on the historiography of the left.<sup>3</sup> Both classical Marxism, from a theoretical point of view, and the political parties and the trade unions whose practice was inspired by it, had difficulties dealing with the integration of the peasantry in their readings of capitalist social relations and their alternatives to overcome them. Marx dismissed the question of the attitudes and potential for social transformation of the peasantry with the successful (for its repercussion, not for its accuracy) expression “sack of potatoes”. The ties of the peasantry to the land it farmed, its immediate surroundings, its supposed individualism, the mirage of property (whether real or as an aspiration) and its apparent isolation hampered the collective actions of the peasantry. It is significant, in this sense, that the depth, subtlety and nuance of Marx’s analysis of capitalism and the proletariat was not matched by his analysis of the peasantry and agriculture. The conception of the peasantry as a dead weight, incapable of adding value to any revolutionary process, led Marxists to downplay its importance in their interpretation of reality, as they predicted the drastic decline in the agricultural workforce as a consequence of the unstoppable progress of industrial capitalism. If the means of production developed as they had been intended to in this Marxist interpretation, we would thus observe in agriculture the same process of concentration that had already occurred in the industrial sector (concentration of capital, decrease of the craft sector, etc.), which would give rise to corporately managed large farms. The fate of the peasants was either emigration or exodus to the cities to reinforce the needs of the secondary sector, thus becoming real proletarians. Coinciding with conceptions in classical economics, the economic role of agriculture as a sector would be subordinated as a mere supplier of food and, in the process of primitive accumulation, a provider of capital and labour.

With the development of the labour movement in the late nineteenth century, the European socialist parties (as well as the trade unions) would face the problems that arose from this discourse when they needed to propagandize and mobilize for collective actions in rural areas. Both the agriculture and peasantry still had an enormous weight in the European economies and societies at the turn of the century. Furthermore, the data did not corroborate the Marxist prediction of the decline of the small peasantry since family farming had weathered with surprising adaptability the broad, baffling agrarian crisis at the end of the century, capable of shaking up the agricultural estates and

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<sup>3</sup> F. Engels had similar positions. For example, in *La guerra campesina en Alemania* (1850) and *El problema campesino en Francia y Alemania* (1894).

consciences throughout Europe. Moreover, the crisis also inflicted serious damage on large farms, affected by the rise in wages and by the exclusive dependency on certain cash crops.

The practical difficulties that these theoretical standpoints meant for the expansion of socialism in rural areas led to intense debates at the core of social democracy, particularly within German social democracy.<sup>4</sup> This controversy was related to, but did not overlap with, the debate over revolution and revisionism. Kautsky emerged as the guardian of orthodoxy (years later he would revise his positions): to defend the small landholding peasant was to prolong the agony of a social group doomed to extinction that was also fundamentally “counter-revolutionary”. In the case of the Italian Socialist Party, the only European socialist party with a strong agricultural base, its expansion was largely due to the figure most easily assimilated by the proletariat, the rural labourer (*bracciante*) in need of land to work on and whose demands (greater salary, reduction in working hours, etc.) and methods used to achieve them (strikes) were comparable to those of industrial workers. However, Italian socialism was unable to incorporate in equal measure the needs and traditions (mutual support and reduction of the recruitment of wage labour) of the other categories within the peasantry, leading to the tragic consequences of the fascist offensive in 1921-22.5 Throughout Europe, the difficulties of the socialist parties were very similar<sup>6</sup> and in the absence of a reassessment of theoretical dogmas, cooperativism in its multiple forms (on which were pinned the hopes of spreading collective habits which would erode the supposed individualism of the peasants) was the main palliative.

The more militant, and increasingly theoretically stagnant, Marxist

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<sup>4</sup> LEHMANN, H-G-. *Die Agrarfrage in der Theorie und Praxis der deutschen und internationalen Sozialdemokratie*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970.

<sup>5</sup>See PROCCACCI. *La lotta di classe in Italia agli inizi del secolo XX*. Roma: Editori Riuniti Procacci, 1972 for a classic vision and CRAINZ, G.. *Padania: Il mondo dei braccianti dall'Ottocento alla fuga dalle campagne*. Roma: Donzelli Editore, 1994 for a revision that shows how the *braccianti*, even those who were socialist militants, had not necessarily renounced the aspiration of private ownership of the land nor had they left behind the peasant ethos. There was a certain parallelism in the clash in France between BARRAL, P. *Les Agrariens français de Méline à Pisani*. Paris : A. Colin, 1968 and BARRAL, Pierre and GRATTON, P. *Les Paysans française contre l'agrarisme*. Paris: Editions François Maspero, 1972. Barral put the emphasis of the involvement of the French peasantry in the political sphere around the nineteenth century on associationism and Gratton replied that the “agrarian defense” discourse only benefited the powerful and hid the class struggle that in the rural world included lumberjacks, day labourers, etc.

<sup>6</sup> BLOK, A; HITCHINS, Keith; MARKEY, Raymond; SIMONSON, Birgir. eds., *Urban radicals, rural allies. Social Democracy and the Agrarian Issue, 1870-1914*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2002.

historiography continued to voice these positions until after the Second World War. The lack of cooperation of the peasantry with the labour movement was attributed to their alleged lack of class-consciousness and inability to shake off the mental and material shackles of traditional hierarchies (landowners, clergy, etc.). In the 1960s new perspectives began to emerge, especially British cultural Marxism. E. P. Thompson was able to understand the logic of seemingly *primitive* actions like the food riots of eighteenth century England, while contributing to *dematerialize* the analysis of such conflicts. These were no longer exclusively due to the evolution of objective and measurable factors (prices, wages, distribution of land), but also due to the cultural values and economic burdens associated with the activity, and the expectations regarding what was to be expected of the different actors involved, which Thompson coined the "moral economy." Meanwhile Hobsbawm and Rude, in their study of the Captain Swing riots, revalued the rational logic of actions that had traditionally been dismissively referred to as simple fury against "progress".<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm would also rescue the role of the peasantry in socio-political processes, although his theoretical positions would lead him to qualify as "primitive" the formulas and ideologies separate from Marxism, as in the case of Andalusian anarchism.<sup>8</sup>

There was also a reevaluation of the role of the peasantry in historical sociology such as Charles Tilly's work on the defensive or reactive conflicts to keep the state at bay (which for Tilly was the vanguard of economic progress and modernization in general), giving way to proactive conflicts in which influence within the political and administrative system was sought.<sup>9</sup> And although his conclusions were controversial, since they seemed to imply that a precondition for the triumph of liberal democracy was a reduction, as drastic as possible, of the peasantry, another historical sociologist Barrington Moore also put the fundamental role of the peasantry on the table, showing that its political positions could decide one way or another the outcome of the struggle between democracy, fascism and communism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. J.; RUDÉ, G.. *Captain Swing: A Social History of the Great English Agricultural Uprising of 1830*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. J. *Primitive Rebels. Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1959; HOBBSAWM, E. J. *Bandits*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> TILLY, C. *The contentious French. Four Centuries of Popular Struggle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> MOORE, B. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. London: Beacon Press, 1966.

Thompson, Hobsbawm, Rude and Tilly, among many others, contributed to this renewal that would also result in a rethinking of the significance of the processes of politicization, until that time closely associated with what were considered certain essential moments and historical subjects, almost as if there were “chosen” classes. In the consolidation of these new perspectives, a key aspect was the criticism of modernization theories, which had gained a hegemonic status in the social sciences since World War II. So much so that social science and modernization theories constituted an essential part of an era and a paradigm: that of modernization. It was in this context that the social sciences were constructed and their arguments strengthened: through studying the delay and obstacles to modernizing development. What about history? Imbued with such social scientific theories, researchers regarded history as the best place to discover how obstacles to progress developed. The past was effectively turned into a laboratory of modernization in the present.

Following this historiographical renewal, but in a more focused manner, the rural world and its protagonists, the peasants, would later become central objects of attention. When investigating the composition of the British working class in the Industrial Revolution – and “industrialization” before the Industrial Revolution itself – there was nothing to be found, but the rural world and peasants. But that was in the past. In the present of Thompson, Hobsbawm and Rude in the 1950s and 1960s, the prominence obtained by farmers in the context of the liberation struggles of the Third World put the emphasis on the need to diversify beyond a Eurocentric and industrial-urban perspective. In this second half of the twentieth-century, peasants were no longer considered as the “sack of potatoes” defined by Marx in the nineteenth-century, useless to the revolution that only the working class could undertake. To the contrary, they began to appear as active social and political agents in the liberation and anti-colonial struggles of the Third World, as shown by the studies of E. Wolf and J.M. Paigne.<sup>11</sup>

The contemporary realities of the 1970s allowed such scholars to see a different past when reviewing classic themes. It also opened space for a dialogue with the parallel conceptualizations of the peasantry as defined by rural anthropologists and sociologists, from the Polish rural sociology of the 1920s to the fundamental contributions of peasant studies led by T. Shanin and passing through the conceptualizations and

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<sup>11</sup> WOLF, E. *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969; PAIGNE, J.M. *Agrarian Revolution: social movements and export agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*. New York: Free Press, 1975.

reconceptualizations of anthropologists such as Kroeber from 1923-1948 and E.J. Wolf in 1966.<sup>12</sup> The appearance on both sides of the Atlantic (USA and UK) of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in the early 1970s represented a concrete materialization of this new research on the peasantry in which anthropologists, historians and sociologists participated (as did the World Bank, politicians and university students). Farmers got "trendy" and the search for conceptual categories and theories that could bring us closer to the understanding of its historical evolution and its role in history led not only to new formulations, but reinterpretations of classic authors such as Lenin and Redfield.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the rediscovery of the Russian author Alexander Chayanov in the 1960s was fundamental; especially his studies from the 1920s on the workings of the peasant economy – the peasant economic unit – that he had actually begun before the Russian Revolution of 1917.<sup>14</sup> During the Russian Revolution, Chayanov developed his understanding of the nature and logic of the peasantry and published *Peasant Farm Organization* in 1925 in which he formalized and revealed the economic aspects of the peasant family. This Russian populist and independent socialist, convicted in the Stalinist purges of 1930 and executed in 1937, has since been instrumental to peasant studies and to the understanding of the relationship of the peasantry to the market and to wages.<sup>15</sup>

But this renewal of peasant studies emerged through a long and often interrupted process. Under the modernization paradigm in European and Western history itself, it was revealed that the history of rural areas and peasants was generally relegated to a

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<sup>12</sup> KROEBER, A.L. *Anthropology: race, language, culture, psychology, pre-history*. New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1948; WOLF, E. *Peasants*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> LENIN, V.I. *Development of Capitalism in Russia The Process of the Formation of a Home Market for Large-Scale Industry*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977 [1899]; REDFIELD, R. *The Little Community*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956; *Peasant Society*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1956.

<sup>14</sup> CHAYANOV, A. *La organización de la explotación campesina La organización de la unidad económica campesina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1974 [1925].

<sup>15</sup> The first publication of Chayanov in English appeared in SOROKIN, P.A.; ZIMMERMAN, C.C.; GALPPIN, C.J. *Systematic Source Book of Rural Sociology*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965. In 1966, his *magnum opus* was published. CHAYANOV, A. In: KERBLAY, B; SMITH, R.E.F. and THORNER, D. eds., *Theory of the Peasant Economy*. Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin for the American Economics Association, 1966. A Spanish edition followed in 1974. See CHAYANOV, A. *La organización de la unidad económica campesina*. *Op.Cit.* The last two publications recovered the two most important books by Chayanov from the 1920s *Sobre la teoría de los sistemas económicos no-capitalistas* and *La organización de la explotación campesina*. The English version of 1966 was translated from the German and the Spanish version of 1974 from Russian. See SÁNCHEZ DE PUERTA TRUJILLO, F. *La economía de trabajo (Alexander Vasilevich Chayanov: Selección de escritos)*. *Agricultura y Sociedad*. n. 55, 1990, pp. 239-248.

secondary role, limited to occasional outbursts of protest arising from their poor living conditions or rejection of the innovations of modernity. Groups of farmers became peripheral, ostracized, quintessentially subordinated groups, incapable even of revolt against historiography. Not surprisingly, the contemporary world started, symbolically, with the French Revolution and the struggle of the Jacobins against the "reactionary" peasants of the Vendée. Throughout modernity, peasants had been the repositories of reaction, of political conservatism and, in some cases, the essence of patriotic traditions that were lost in the mists of time, unable even to support or collaborate with the historically revolutionary classes of modernity, whether it be the bourgeoisie or, later, the proletariat. The farmers were the Irish scabs of Marx's England, or the tireless workers of the "cursed races" of his son-in-law, P. Lafargue, in *The Right to be Lazy*.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, concepts such as "democracy", "citizenship" or simply "politics" let alone technological innovation or social change were incompatible with the nature of social processes related to the rural world.<sup>17</sup> These ideas dominated in some influential theories of political science in the second half of the twentieth century, which generally pushed in two ways for a vision of politicization as a unidirectional process: from top to bottom (from the elites of the system to the public) and from the centre to the periphery (from the more modernized dimensions of the social system to the ones falling behind). Therefore, the politicization of the rural world was consistently conceived as a process of the incorporation of farmers into politics through a process of the arrival of a political reality that was completely foreign to them, and the only part they could play was in either accepting or rejecting these modern political identities.<sup>18</sup> Precisely because of this, this paradigm may serve as the articulating element of this introduction since it rejects the peasantry as an object ("a sack of potatoes"), treating the peasants as subjects

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<sup>16</sup> LAFARGUE, P. *The Right to be Lazy*. Fifth Season Pr, 1999 [1883].

<sup>17</sup> For an ample debate regarding changes in technology and the peasantry (farmers, ploughmen), consult PUJOL, J. and FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, L. "El cambio tecnológico en la historia agraria de la España contemporánea". *Historia Agraria*. n 24, August 2001, pp. 59-86. Another revisionist article is QUINTANA, X. R. "Campesinos que se adaptan agricultura que se mueve". *Áreas*. n. 12, 1990, pp. 147-165. For a monographic study with respect to this question, see FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, L. *Labregos con ciencia. Estado, sociedad e innovación tecnolóxica na agricultura galega (1850-1939)*. Vigo: Eds. Xerais, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> MACHO, Antonio Míguez; VILLAVARDE, Miguel Cabo. "Pisando la dudosa luz del día: el proceso de democratización en la Galicia rural de la Restauración". *Ayer*. n. 89, 2013, pp. 43-75.

and actors in the process of democratization.<sup>19</sup>

Questioning the prejudiced vision of the peasantry thus signifies breaking with various interpretative inertias (which actually constituted a lasting interpretative model that was present all throughout modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). First, it is necessary to provide a two-way view of the processes of the politicization of the rural world, in which the rural world is not a passive subject of sociopolitical changes. This is an interpretation that favours the interaction between the adaptability of the elites of the system to the challenges posed by the demands of the political participation of the peasantry, and the ability of the peasantry to influence and act in political struggles. Therefore, the statement by Hobsbawm, during the process of deagrarianization that was simultaneously going on in various parts of the world after the Second World War, that "the end of the Middle Ages" had arrived was also called into question.<sup>20</sup> The idea that nothing important had happened in the history of the rural world up to its extinction was false as was the stigma of backwardness, primitivism, social and technological millenarianism and immutability that it was blamed for. The ahistorical, purely imaginary, idea of a "traditional" and immutable world, either with no history or outside of it, should be strongly criticized.

It was in this way that the notion of "peasant logic" and the understanding of the rural world acquired a central role as a complex, changing and organic object of study. The peasants were understood as being able to articulate their discontent and their protests according to their own behavioural pattern, a prominent feature if one can see past the walls put up by theory of social movements which imposed a somewhat formalistic interpretation. On the other hand, the successful formula of James C. Scott's "weapons of the weak" was an explanation with Thompsonian foundations to the puzzle of how the peasants expressed their discontent while appearing submissive in the acceptance of their fate, and it did so by empathizing with their conditions (limits to formal organization, aversion to risk, social subordination, etc.).<sup>21</sup> The combination of

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<sup>19</sup> MARKOFF, J. *Waves of democracy. Social Movements and Political Change*. Newbury Park, Ca., Pine Forge Press, 1996; MARKOFF, J. *The Abolition of Feudalism*. University Park, Penn.: State University of Pennsylvania, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> HOBBSAWM, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*. London: Michael Joseph, 1994, pp. 288–9, 415.

<sup>21</sup> SCOTT, J.C. "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance". *Journal of Peasant Studies*. vol. 13, n. 2, 1986, pp. 5-35. See also SCOTT, J.C. *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976 and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.



Scott's work with so called "subaltern studies", focused on colonial contexts, would be a catalyst for the study of the peasantry, which however still had to face criticism from Marxist positions that focused on the lack of definition of the subject, as well as accusations of populism.<sup>22</sup>

Rude, Hobsbawm and H. Alavi, meanwhile, sought the peasant of their present in the past and found it as a pre-political and *primitive rebel*, capable of participating in riots, but not of creating policy proposals and even less capable of building civil society. What is remarkable is, in any case, the search, because the definition contains the explanation of a paradigm that is now too obsolete for us to keep using, even if it continues to appear and people persist on using it, whether because of the success of the expression or by virtue of the strength and intellectual authority of its authors or even simply by the powerful force of modernization theories in the explanation and understanding of present history. We are children of the welfare state, modernization and of the post-war years, as T. Judt demonstrated who, under the progressive influence of the *Annales*, did his thesis on contemporary French farmers.<sup>23</sup> However, a great deal of progress has been made in the characterization of peasants in history since then, and this progress is not without its importance for our knowledge of the past if we take into consideration that we are talking of the vast majority of humanity from the Neolithic period until well into the twentieth century. Even today peasants and farmers account for more than half the world's population.

Environmental studies also contributed to the task of conceptually redefining both the peasantry and its theoretical status. Authors such as Guha, Martinez Alier and Toledo have shown that the "lower classes" in the poorest of the poor countries, almost entirely constituted by farmers, largely indigenous, possess characteristics and knowledge worthy of being retrieved as they may hold the solution to the environmental crisis and help us achieve a more sustainable handling of agricultural ecosystems.<sup>24</sup> In this way, farmers lose their status of "waste" and gain a new status, that of an "alternative model", and they do so mostly under the eyes of non-Europeans. At the

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<sup>22</sup> BRASS, T. *Peasants, Populism, and Post-modernism: The Return of the Agrarian Myth*. London: Frank Cass, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> JUDT, T. *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. London: Penguin Press, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> GUHA, R. "El ecologismo de los pobres". *Ecología Política*. n. 8, 1994, pp. 137-153; MARTÍNEZ ALIER, J. *El ecologismo de los pobres. Conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de valoración*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2004; TOLEDO, V. *La paz en Chiapas: Ecología, luchas indígenas y modernidad alternativa*. Chiapas, México: UNAM/Quinto Sol, 2000.

same time, this line of study that has become popular since the late twentieth century, has changed its outlook on the conflicts involving the peasantry, adding to their "logic" the defence of environmental ideals ("environmentalism of the poor", "popular environmentalism"), always starting from assumptions opposite to those of "enlightened" Western environmentalism.

The peasantry is a complex object of study, firstly, because the notion of "peasant" was revealed to be an abstraction of multiple realities and social identities that, although always taking place in the rural world, included various types of relationships to the land and to agricultural work. With respect to this, reference may be made to the debate on the definition of peasantry that occurred in the 1970s, which interacted with the crisis of structuralist Marxism. Beyond that, the complexity of analysis thrived with the increasing incorporation of other global realities outside the Western European context. A whole stream of studies related to rural realities in the so-called "Third World" found itself attached to the increased attention to environmental issues. The effects of the Green Revolution had reached a global dimension, constituting a project of transformation of the rural world in the context of the disturbing crisis of the environment and the sustainability of the model of development.

With respect to the idea of the changing subject, reference is made to the attention given to the historicity of the change in the rural world and its relation to society as a whole. The idea of the immutability of the peasantry and its environment, and its supposed secular isolation, was the result of a strongly ideological construction which was employed to justify the submission of their identity, to legitimate identity and romantic discourses on the building of European nations in the nineteenth century. It is actually a definition of the social sciences that opposes the urban with the rural, the modern with the traditional, the open market with autarchic-gated communities unfamiliar with the free movement of goods. Conceptions that established and served this paradigm of modernization and the development of the green revolution, although they were already present in the older attacks on the rustic world, reflected a view of the peasantry as ignorant and illiterate (a new version of the pagan) as opposed to the educated and enlightened urban world (a new version of Christianity) that began with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and in some cases even before then.<sup>25</sup>

The deconstruction of this discourse began with the analysis of some of its core

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<sup>25</sup> BOROJA, Julio Caro. *Le Carnaval*. Trad. Sylvie Sesé Léger. Paris, Gallimard, 1979.

elements, such as the evolution of social relations around the issue of land ownership. The complex process of peasant proprietarization went beyond merely overcoming feudalism and was interrelated with forms such as that of communal property that did not fit the “perfect” liberal and individual model of property. This went hand in hand with the new questionings of the alleged lack of technological renovation of the productive practices of peasants, which were traditionally subsumed under the dichotomy of mechanical *vs.* traditional agriculture. These new studies rather looked to include models of adaptation and "dead ends" that, again, challenged the unidirectionality of the notion of historical progress.

Finally, the very dynamics of this evolving and complex subject necessarily implied conflict. The rural world had been very much alive in history, and this was so primarily due to the capacity to organize themselves as one, to struggle for their interests when possible and to attempt to take advantage of what political and economic systems offered. The attempt to unify all these struggles under the category of "reactionary" resembled an ideological prejudice more than a historical observation, since this latter reality also demonstrated struggles to build profitable alternatives for the peasantry. The questioning of the model of development that prevailed through concepts such as modernization and progress also arose in this struggle for alternatives, directly or indirectly. In line with this approach, several authors have questioned the idea of a single genealogy of the concept of democracy in favour of a more plural and complex vision where the paths to democratization were numerous, although one eventually imposed itself.

The problem of the denomination of the peasantry, as we call it here in an attempt to unify academic studies in a comprehensive way, is not a minor problem. The denomination that has stood out has been that of *peasant*, but this term, although it depends on this language, is often foreign to the peasantry itself. It is how they are identified yet there are other names according to the time period and their activities: farmers, day workers, tenants, landlords, ploughman, land workers, etc. But what do they call themselves? Almost always, external observers have referred to them differently to what they call themselves, whether they come from urban, scientific or political sectors. The Spanish denomination of "campesino" (peasant), for example, as common as it is in urban, political and scientific contexts, is distinct from the diverse and objective ways the peasants call themselves. They call themselves "labradores": those who plough. Yet a whole host of other terms are also employed: Labregos,

lavradores, llauradors, pagès, paisano, peasant, pessant. We dare not attempt to distinguish them in a universal and timeless way, so many years after T. Shanin classified this as a supremely difficult task in his important article published in 1979, "Defining Peasants".<sup>26</sup> But we know that peasants were defined in different ways in the past, which has left traces and sources that allow us to study them and not just the images of them left by ecclesiastic and aristocratic sources.

Finally, it is necessary that we mention the historiographical currents of the *Annales*, who were among the great promoters of the insertion of the peasantry in history, even before World War II: from Marc Bloch to George Lefebvre, who stressed the peasantry as an essential agent in the origins of the French revolution to G. Duby's studies on the medieval peasantry in the early 1960s.<sup>27</sup> The lessons, methods and investigations of Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the 1920s are well integrated within current rural and agrarian global studies.

It is also possible to ascertain, in most of recent works on rural and agrarian history, how the old dichotomies regarding the peasantry (pre-political versus political, modern versus primitive) can be overcome. There is also a need for a more open and plural interpretation, less sociological than the characterizations of B. Moore and T. Skocpol in political science that were so successful in their day. An interpretation that pays closer attention to historical change in a world where change is more common than during the postwar and Cold War eras is therefore necessary. Moreover, after post modernism and the linguistic turn in historiography, a return to the material and the social is as appreciated as it is necessary. It is essential that we bring in, syncretically but eclectically, the methodological and theoretical innovations that have been produced, tested and incorporated in recent decades. It remains the case that using the definition of the peasant without succumbing to ahistorical essentialisms and at the same time being able to incorporate their internal diversity and the multiple local realities (sometimes even within the same country) nevertheless continues to be a challenge.

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<sup>26</sup> SHANIN, T. "Defining Peasants: Conceptualisation and De-conceptualisations, Old and New in a Marxist Debate". *Peasant Studies*. vol. 8, n. 4, 1979, pp. 38-60.

<sup>27</sup> BLOCH, M. *Les caracteres originaux de l'histoire rurale française*. Paris: A. Colin, 1952 ; LEFEBVRE, G.. *La Révolution Française*. Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1951 ; DUBY, G.. *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, Aubier, 1962.