Shanin, Chayanov and peasant studies of Russia and beyond

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This text is based on the presentation at the roundtable in memory of Teodor Shanin (Moscow, 23 October 2020) and on the recent author's paper in press, which surveys Shanin's work of the 1970s and 1980s. The author provides a guide to tracing Shanin's main themes and issues. First, the family farm is usually if not invariably featured first in Shanin's characterizations of peasants as a general or generic type. Second, Shanin sought explanations of peasant household reproduction in his model of 'multidirectional and cyclical mobility' against the 'biological determinism' linked to the organization-production school and against the 'economic determinism' of Marxists. Third, Shanin emphasized "life of a small community within which most of the peasant needs of social living and social reproduction can be met", but he aimed to avoid a romantic view of the *mir*. Fourth, Shanin believed that "the definitions of peasantry, which view it as representing an aspect of the past surviving in the modern world, seem, on the whole, valid", and that rural society can be understood in terms of labour and capital flows which are broader than agriculture. Fifth, Shanin wrote that the triple origins of Marx's analytical thought suggested by Engels — German philosophy, French socialism and British political economy — should be supplemented by the Russian revolutionary populism. Sixth, Shanin argued that the concept of 'peasant mode of production' had too many heuristic limitations to be sustained. Finally, Shanin's vision of an alternative to both capitalist development and the projects of Soviet style was firmly rooted in the legacy of Chayanov.

Key words: Shanin, Chayanov, peasant economy, organization-production school, populist, peasantry, peasant mode of production

DOI: 10.22394/2500-1809-2020-5-4-32-38

My remarks touch on some of the ways Shanin used the work of Chayanov, which was, of course, enormously important to him. At the same time, what I say has the great limitation that I do not read nor speak Russian. I am aware that working in Moscow occupied most of Teodor's attention in the last 30 years of his life, that he continued to research and publish in Russian, and that much of Chayanov's work is available only in Russian and that editing, publishing and assessing it remains an ongoing project. My remarks

here drawn on a recent paper titled 'Russian to modern world history: Teodor Shanin and Peasant Studies' (Bernstein, in press), which surveys his work of the 1970s and 1980s, the principal period of his publications in English. Its abstract notes that the paper may "serve as a guide to tracing Shanin's main themes and issues, which included establishing a 'generic' peasant studies ('peasantology') and how he aimed to do so; his explorations of the development of capitalism and its impact on peasantries in Russia from the late 19th century to the contemporary Third World, not least peasant class differentiation; similarly his ideas of the promotion of 'modernization' of peasant agriculture by states; his relationship to Marxism in the historic Russian context and beyond; his views of peasant 'classness' and politics; and his vision of an alternative path of agricultural development based in peasant farming".

Shanin's strong affinity with much of Russian nineteenth-century ('revolutionary') populism and with the neo-populism of Chayanov and his school, especially in the 1920s, permeated everything he wrote. Shanin was irritated by what he considered loose (and dismissive) applications of the terms 'populist', 'neo-populist' and the like, which I trust is avoided in this essay. I try to be guided by Shanin's own uses of the terms. In the invention or revival of peasant studies in the Western academy from the 1960s, Shanin wrote of the dramatic impact of translations into English of Chayanov (1966) and of extracts from Marx's *Grundrisse* (1964).

First, the *family farm* is usually if not invariably featured first in Shanin's characterizations of peasants as a general or generic type. Its emphasis is on *simple reproduction* of farming households, with determinate effects for how economic and social activity is organized. This, of course, was famously modelled by Chayanov (1966) as driven by a different logic than maximising returns/profits on investment characteristic of capitalist enterprise (expanded reproduction). Peasant logic calculates and adjusts the resources and efforts required for simple reproduction according to the household's producer-consumer balance across its generational, hence demographic, cycle. Because of this distinctive logic many specific peasant practices are regarded as 'irrational' according to the postulates of conventional economics centred on maximization shaped by market conditions.

Interestingly Shanin was less influenced by the more economistic Chayanov, and did not deploy the latter's household producer-consumer calculus (expressed in terms of marginal utility) in his own analyses of the Russian peasantry, which proposed a new conceptualization of the 'cyclical mobility' of peasant households (notably Shanin, 1972: Part II). Shanin (1990: 321) described the 'consumption-needs/drudgery ratio' as the "least utilized or accepted of Chayanov's main suggestions", and suggested that it was Chayanov's "most exclusively family-centred model, the demographic one, which first fell into disuse" (Shanin, 1990: 336). However, it was one that appealed to some

conventional economists because of its individualist calculus of decision making which was 'utility maximizing' if not 'profit maximizing'.

Second, Shanin sought explanations of *peasant household reproduction* in his model of 'multidirectional and cyclical mobility' against the 'biological determinism' linked to the neo-populists of the time (the organization-production school), of whom Chayanov is the best-known in later peasant studies (Shanin, 1972: 105-108, including changes and problems in Chayanov's position), as well as against the 'economic determinism' of Marxists. He concluded that "the middle peasant had always (at least until 1930) constituted a decisive majority of the Russian peasantry" (Shanin, 1972: 174). In this crucial respect, Shanin lined up with the (Russian) populist belief in "the ability of peasant cohesiveness to withstand capitalist differentiation" (Shanin, 1972: 46-47).

Third, Shanin emphasized "life of *a small community* within which most of the peasant needs of social living and social reproduction can be met" (Shanin, 1987: 4; also "the village as an economic unit" — Shanin, 1990: 109-110), an emphasis which went beyond Chayanov. In part, this reflected Shanin's reading of anthropological and sociological studies but its principal source in his work was the inspiration of the *mir* (peasant commune) and its importance to Russian 'revolutionary populism'. At the same time, he aimed to avoid a romantic view of the *mir*, for example: "The stubborn narrow-mindedness of the village assemblies, and the viciousness of inter-family and inter-village feuds, indicated how far removed the peasant community was from the heaven of brotherly love in which the traditional populists tended to believe" (Shanin, 1971: 267).

Fourth, in an essay of 1986, reflecting on the reception of the English translation of Chayanov's *Theory of Peasant Economy* 20 years after its first publication, he noted that there is "little doubt that the *major patterns of change* in the contemporary world lead it away from encompassing typical peasant social structures. In this sense, the definitions of peasantry, which view it as representing an aspect of the past surviving in the modern world, seem, on the whole, valid" (Shanin, 1990: 47-48). Further, Chayanov's analysis "cannot be completed by simply proceeding along the same road", albeit "in the main his weakness lies in an analysis which was not incorrect but insufficient" to accommodate the vast social changes since his time, including the "increasingly complex rural world of today" when "peasant economies are being transformed (or even re-established) mostly by '*external*' intervention, especially by the state and the multinational companies" (Shanin, 1990: 336, emphasis added). "Rural society and rural problems are inexplicable any longer in their own terms and must be understood in terms of labour and capital flows which are broader than agriculture" (Shanin, 1990: 335).

Fifth, Shanin famously wrote that "it had been no accident that it was from Russia and the Russians that Marx learned new things

about 'global unevenness', about peasants and about revolution, insights which would be valid in the century still to come. The triple origins of Marx's analytical thought suggested by Engels — German philosophy, French socialism and British political economy — should in truth be supplemented by a fourth one, that of *Russian revolutionary populism*" (Shanin, 1983: 19-20). One can then ask the question: what connection was there between Chayanov and Russian revolutionary populism?

Sixth, Shanin asked if peasants were a mode of production (Shanin, 1990: 63) and answered that "on balance, the concept of 'peasant mode of production' has probably too many heuristic limitations to be sustained" (Shanin, 1990: 65), even with the support of "the comparative taxonomy of economic systems by Chayanov" (Shanin, 1990: 66). This is the only reference I am aware of by Shanin to Chayanov's essay "On the theory of non-capitalist economic systems" (Chayanov, 1966). At the same time, and in the same essay, Shanin's consistent position that "peasants represent a social and economic specificity of characteristics which will reflect on *every social system they operate within*" (Shanin, 1990: 68, emphasis added) seems to come very close to Chayanov on 'non-capitalist economic systems'.

Finally, Shanin's vision of an alternative to both capitalist development and the projects of Soviet style and other (would be) 'modernizing' states, and the impacts of both on peasants, was firmly rooted in the legacy of Chayanov. Satisfying the needs of simple reproduction "did not mean lack of drive for betterment on the peasants' part" (Shanin, 1972: 40), and Chayanov's "organization-production school, or the neo-populists... envisaged rural economic growth, based on capital-intensive and highly productive family farms, participating in a large-scale co-operative movement" (Shanin, 1972: 46-47). In short, the (Chayanovian) core of peasant studies was not focussed exclusively on peasant poverty and difficulties of reproduction.

In an early article, Shanin outlined some of Chayanov's ideas about a progressive path forward for agriculture including his notion of 'vertical integration' as a flexible solution to different economies of scale. The core of Chayanov's theory of 'differential optima' was to distinguish various functions of agriculture as an economic sector, and central to its prosperity, which are satisfied best by different scales and types of organization linked together through cooperatives: "The various branches of agricultural production could be divided into those which were to be organized on a broader-than-village level, those which should be organized on a village basis, and finally those which would operate best at the level of family farm" (Shanin, 1971: 269; see also Shanin, 1990: 325-327; Shanin, 2009). As can be seen from this simple explanation, farming was to remain primarily a 'family' (i.e., peasant) concern, which larger institutions would support by providing credit, machinery, chemicals and seed, credit, processing and marketing facilities, and the like, "without destroying... those aspects of econo-

my where small family production is technically more effective than the large one" (Chayanov cited by Danilov, 1989: 5). The cooperative mechanisms of such structures would prevent the domination of their linkages by large-scale capital and its consequent ability to 'exploit' (family) farmers, so central a theme in agrarian studies today. Chayanov's concept of (capitalist) vertical integration is regarded as a major innovation by the leading Marxist scholar Jairus Banaji and used by him in his new book *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (2020).

Chayanov's win-win organizational 'model' could thus be appreciated both for its intrinsic virtues and as an implicit critique of collectivization and the subsequent poor record of agriculture in the USSR and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. There was a near identical argument by Danilov (1989) with greater detail on the Soviet 1920s, and claims of how widespread different types (and 'levels') of peasant cooperation were on the eve of Stalin's collectivization (see also Shanin, 2009: 89-90). Danilov (1989: 5) suggested that, in some key respects, Lenin at the end of his life, Chayanov and Bukharin all shared the broadly cooperative vision of a peasant path on an "absolutely voluntary basis serving the best economic interests of the peasant", i.e., 'self-collectivisation' moving through 'intermediate stages' to a socialist farm production structure. "Chayanov supported a *multi-level cooperative movement*, a cooperative of cooperatives, organised 'from below' and facilitated but not managed by the government" (Shanin, 2009: 89, emphasis in original).

The Chayanovian model of development was invoked again by Shanin in the context of possible reform of Soviet agriculture under *perestroika*. My review of Shanin's work in English points to several of his 'strategic qualifications' which I suggest "often serve to protect his positions without exploring further, or problematizing, what generates a need for such qualification". Just one example of this concerns peasant differentiation or class formation. Shanin said that "without doubt, *differentiation* has played an important role in the capitalist transformation of peasant agriculture, and has often represented the most significant structural change of it. *The theoretical and factual claims in support of that are valid*" (second emphasis added). But he continued that "it is the interpretation of it as the axiomatically necessary and exclusive pattern of development which is not" (Shanin, 1990: 59). In short, first, there is not only one path of the development of capitalism in peasant farming, and, second (by implication), political practices cannot be deduced (or predicted) from patterns of socioeconomic differentiation in any simple or straightforward manner. Both correct.

However, the exploration of *peasant class formation*, its significance, and its empirical variation, requires a *theoretical framing* that Shanin, like Chayanov before him, failed to provide. Ironically, a perverse effect of the lack of a theoretical framing is that 'differentiation' can become 'naturalized' with attention then focussed on those dy-

namics deemed to inhibit it, like an intrinsic cohesiveness of peasant communities. I think there are also other tensions of different kinds, for example, that attach to Shanin's overarching binary of the pursuit of 'modernity' via 'market' and 'plan' (this is illustrated and developed in Bernstein, in press), and (as above) his desire to fuse the frameworks of Russian revolutionary populism and of Chayanov, a cultured economist and policy analyst (but not a revolutionary in any standard political sense), through their shared if diffuse belief in peasant initiative 'from below'.

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Шанин, Чаянов и крестьяноведение в России и за ее пределами

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Текст основан на выступлении автора на круглом столе памяти Теодора Шанина (23 октября 2020 года в Москве) и на последней его статье (в печати), которая посвящена работе Шанина в 1970-е — 1980-е годы. Автор представляет читателям краткий путеводитель по основным тематикам творчества Шанина. Во-первых, семейное хозяйство обычно считается главной шанинской

характеристикой крестьянства как общего или универсального типа. Во-вторых, Шанин искал истоки воспроизводства крестьянского домохозяйства в своей модели «разнонаправленной и цикличной мобильности», противопоставленной «биологическому детерминизму» организационно-производственной школы и «экономическому детерминизму» марксизма. В-третьих, Шанин подчеркивал важность «небольшой общины, в рамках которой удовлетворяется большинство крестьянских потребностей в социальной жизни и социальном воспроизводстве», но старался избегать романтизации общинного мира. В-четвертых, Шанин считал, что «определения крестьянства как фрагмента прошлого, выжившего в современном мире, в целом обоснованы», и что сельское общество можно рассматривать в категориях труда и капитала, причем не только применительно к сельскому хозяйству. В-пятых, Шанин писал, что к обозначенным Энгельсом основаниям концепции Маркса — немецкая философия, французский социализм и британская политэкономия — следует добавить русское революционное народничество. В-шестых, Шанин полагал, что понятие «крестьянский способ производства» имеет слишком много эвристических ограничений, чтобы его придерживаться. И, наконец, шанинские идеи об альтернативе как капиталистическому развитию, так и проектам советского типа были тесно связаны с наследием Чаянова.

Ключевые слова: Шанин, Чаянов, семейное хозяйство, организационно-производственная школа, народнический, крестьянство, крестьянский способ производства