

Historicizing Chaianov

Intellectual and scientific roots of the Theory of Peasant Economy

Introduction

Since the beginning of the economic conceptualization of agricultural production in the late eighteenth century, the peasant household was not subjected to scientific investigation. Realizing that agriculture in Western Europe during the epoch of industrialization became market-oriented and technically advanced, economists traditionally were convinced that agriculture barely differed from industrial production. Following the ideal of specialized and highly integrated farms, they studied agricultural production, making use of analytical instruments which had originally been developed to investigate large-scale industrial enterprises. Against this background, peasant household production based on labour and a low level of farming technology was not a popular subject in agricultural economics.¹

To a greater extent than Western European agriculture, Russian agriculture was characterized by small-scale household production which was directed towards the subsistence of peasant families. Nonetheless, until the late nineteenth century, Russian agricultural economics ignored peasant economy and concentrated on the domains of the landed gentry (*pomeshiki*).² This lack of scientific interest in peasant household production was caused by the perception of the Russian peasantry by non-villagers: Throughout the nineteenth century, state authorities as well as slavophile and populist intellectuals regarded Russian peasants as representatives of an 'other' Russia, thereby projecting their own religious values, national sentiments or revolutionary expectations on the rural population. This romantic mystification of the rural population went along with the ignorance of its role in agriculture. With the famine in 1892/93 challenging the idealization of the villagers, intellectuals perceived the peasantry as a cultural backward mass, which was unable to cope with agricultural production.³ In this context, scientific research on peasant household production units seemed to be the outcome of romantic sentiments towards the peasantry. It was suspiciously observed by state officials who advocated a course of rapid industrialization, as well as radical Marxists who considered peasants to be an obstacle to historical progress. For them, agricultural progress required the 'depeasantization' of the peasantry through the replacement of peasant households either by propertied farms or large-scale socialist enterprises.⁴

Nevertheless, due to the intelligentsia's awakening interest in the realities of Russian village life, the peasant household was introduced as a new field of research into Russian agricultural economics. By 1910, the so-called Organization Production School (*Organizacionno-proizvodstvennaja shkola*) was consolidated. Among its most influential supporters were agricultural experts as: Alexander Chaianov, Alexander Chelintsev, Nikolai Makarov,

Alexander Rybnikov, Alexander Minin, and Genadii Studenskii. These economists investigated peasant decisions on household inventory, family consumption and production in order to derive a microeconomic theory of peasant household economies. Chaianov's model of economic decision-making within peasant families marked the height of Russian 'peasant economics'.⁵

Instead of discussing the actuality of Chaianov's theory or providing an economic analysis of his microeconomic model,⁶ this paper attempts to complete research on Chaianov by reflections made in historical sciences. The motivation is easy to explain: While the notion that place and time leave their traces in scientific work has become a commonplace in social and cultural sciences, economists following the illusion about the existence of 'pure' theory still tend to underestimate the role of political, cultural or social factors for the development of economic theory. Even works on the history of economic thought often follow an internalist and essentialist approach to the history of science and knowledge.⁷ Asking for the traditions which led to the rise of peasant economics in late Tsarist and early Soviet Russia, and reconstructing the scientific and intellectual milieu to which Chaianov and his colleagues belonged, this paper is part of a recent concern to re-interpret classical history of sciences. Considering that scientific knowledge is to a great extent linked to institutions, mentalities, political interests and the scholars themselves, the article wants to make a contribution to a history of economic thought which takes historiographical approaches into account.⁸

Russian populism and 'neopopulist' economists

In a small brochure, published in 1923, the Russian economist Lev N. Litoshenko made a far-reaching remark on the importance of Organization Production Theory for the history of Russian economic thought:

"The affinity to *narodnik* writers is so obvious, that I would suggest to the representatives of the Organization Production School, or however they call themselves, to replace the term "labour-consumer-theory" by a more simple and understandable one: *neonarodnichestvo*."⁹

Litoshenko used the term *neonarodnichestvo* (neopopulism) to illustrate his critiques concerning Chaianov's idea that peasants did not behave like entrepreneurs, whose aspirations included the maximization of profit and income, rather worked to satisfy the consumer demands of their family members. From his point of view, the representatives of Russian peasant economics were 'fanatics of the peasant economy'¹⁰, who were only extending the ideas of nineteenth century Russian populists.

During the second half of the 1920s, when Soviet economics was increasingly influenced by Bolshevik ideology, the characterization of Chaianov's school as 'neopopulist' became a political weapon to stigmatize agricultural professionals who adhered to the idea that peasant households were able to cope with agricultural improvement and could exist within a socialist economic order. When the New Economic Policy (NEP) came to an end, and Stalin turned towards collectivization, the term 'neopopulist' was used by Bolshevik

politicians and representatives of Soviet social sciences to discredit advocates of a policy which was openly directed towards peasant needs. The supporters of Organization Production Theory were accused of admiring peasant life and ignoring or favouring the rise of capitalist relations within Soviet villages. Blamed to support the needs of the 'class enemy', Chaianov and his colleagues were excluded from Soviet scientific and administrative institutions and heavily punished by the Soviet state.¹¹

While there was an intellectual connection between late nineteenth century Russian populism and Organization Production Theory, it would be short-sighted to reduce it to the statement that economists who investigated the economic nature of peasant households were intellectually bound to the sentimental admiration of the Russian peasantry: Chaianov and the other representatives of the Organization Production School did not idealize Russian village life. Unlike the first generation of *narodnik* intellectuals, whose romantic 'movement to the people' (*khozhdenie v narod*) in peasant skirts in the early 1870s had been the most visible expression for the widespread ignorance of village reality within the Russian intelligentsia, agricultural professionals of the early twentieth century were much more familiar with the problems of peasant everyday life and the way in which peasants perceived their social, political and economic environment. Even though they advocated a policy which supported small peasant households, their approach to the Russian peasantry was more pragmatic than romantic. Advancing a fundamental improvement of the rural standard of living, agricultural professionals neither tried to protect the village society from technical and social change, nor did they dogmatically intend to conserve the repartitional commune (*obshina*), which in early populist writings had represented the prototype of a future socialist society.¹²

Chaianov's model of the peasant household economy is connected to Russian populism as it meant the consolidation of an intellectual tradition in Russian economic thought opposed to both, liberal and Marxist economic theories. Throughout the nineteenth century, Russian economics had oscillated between the adoption of Western models and the implementation of theoretic concepts, which took the specifics of Russian society and economy into account. During the first half of the century, Decabrist intellectuals made a major contribution to the diffusion of Western liberal thought within the Russian intelligentsia. In the 1850s, Russian economics was dominated by the school of Ivan Vernadskii, an enthusiastic believer of the promises of Western liberal economics, who admired the practical achievements of English liberalism. Referring to England, which he thought was foreshadowing the Russian future Vernadskii favoured the Westernization of Tsarist Russia by means of political, economic, and social liberalization.¹³

Slavophile philosophers and populist economists doubted that the unique laws of economic development established by classical economics could be applied to Russia. Being convinced that Tsarist Russia had a different historical destiny than England, they advocated less abstract investigations of the social and economic dynamics in Tsarist Russia than those applied by liberal economists. Populist economists criticized the liberal ignorance of the impact made by place and time on economic progress and stressed the peasant character of Russian economy. Questioning the idea of private property being in any case superior to collective property, Russian populists argued that peasant collectivism within the *obshina* was not only compatible to technical and economic progress, but would also allow the Russian people directly to pass into a socialist society predominant to the atomic capitalist societies in Western Europe.¹⁴

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, accelerating industrial growth and the gradual emergence of an urban working class challenged the populist prophecy that Russia could avoid the social problems and economic disparities related to the rise of Capitalism in Western Europe. While Russia's economic take-off gave the impression that populism was a mere dream of escapist intellectuals, Russian Marxists could ideologically benefit from the ongoing economic dynamics: By drawing attention to the issue how industrial capitalism gained ground in Russia, they challenged the anti-capitalist visions of Russian populists. The *narodnik* attitude towards Marxist theory was ambivalent. Appreciating that Marx had scientifically justified the rejection of Western capitalism, they simultaneously denied his teleological approach to history, as it implicated that the English way of socio-economic progress was the visual expression of universally valid historical laws. From a *narodnik* point of view Marxist theory thus seemed very similar to classical political economics against which it had originally been directed.¹⁵

V. P. Voroncov (V. V.) and N. F. Daniel'son (Nikolaion), the leading figures of economic populism in the 1880s and 1890s, denied any idea of historic universalism and searched for a non-capitalist model of economic progress which would allow taking workers' and especially peasants' interests into account. Making extensive use of statistical data, Voroncov and Daniel'son promoted the rise of populist economics and the scientification of populist thinking, thus linking economic research to *narodnik* ideas of historical development. Both of them argued that Russian capitalism could not be seen as the natural outcome of Russia's historical evolution, because its rise had been initiated by the Russian government. Capitalism in Russia would thus never obtain the progressive character which it was supposed to in Marxist theory, but rather lead to disaster. According to Voroncov, non-capitalist modernization by the enforced support of small-scale agricultural and crafts production within the collective institutions *obshina* and *artel'* was the only way to solve the Russian dilemma. Daniel'son on the other hand, advocated a radical change of Russia's economic system. Considering himself to be a Marxist, he thought that the Russian economy should be organized by means of large-scale socialised production. This ideal, however, should be achieved without passing the historical stage of Capitalism. Neither Voroncov nor Daniel'son believed that the replacement of peasant household production by profit-maximizing capitalist farms would be a necessary by-product of Russia's economic take-off. In their opinion, the country's traditional agricultural order was no obstacle to agricultural progress: Even under the conditions of accelerating economic growth, the land commune would give Russian peasants the advantages of collective economic institutions and make peasant households economically viable.¹⁶

The years before World War I seemed to confirm this position. While Russian industries survived a period of capitalist concentration and specialization, agriculture did not significantly differ from what it had looked like in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Russian countryside was dominated by small peasant households whose production was primarily consumption-oriented. Reacting to the growing demand for agricultural products in the urban centres of Tsarist Russia, small-scale household economies which were located close to a city, successfully operated in regional and national markets without substantially changing their way of production.¹⁷

In this situation the question whether Russia would enter Capitalism or not ceased to be an intellectual problem: At the beginning of the twentieth century, even populist-inspired

intellectuals did not doubt that Capitalism had made its way into Tsarist Russia. Nevertheless, Russian agriculture was far from any prophecies about enlarging production units. Observing the persistence of small peasant households, agricultural economists now raised the question concerning the way in which Capitalism would generally impact agriculture and peasant production.¹⁸ This was the intellectual atmosphere in which the development of Chaianov's theory of peasant household economy finally took place: Being convinced that neither liberal nor Marxist theories offered useful explanations for the persisting peasant character of Russian agriculture, Chaianov continued arguing in opposition to both of the leading ideological camps in economics.

Zemstvo activism and the investigation of peasant households

The economic interest in the peasantry was part of a more general development, leading to the production of knowledge about Russian village-life in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The generation of knowledge about the rural population directly followed the establishment of the organs of rural self-government (*zemstvos*) in 1864, which entailed the diffusion of the rural population by well-educated people from the country's centres of political and social life. Rural Russia, which formerly had been *terra incognita* to most of the non-villagers, would now become an important part both of their mental world as of their everyday life.

The *zemstvos* were supposed to provide social and economic services to the rural population. Since professionals capable of fulfilling this task were rare in the countryside, the institutionalization of local self-government went along with an influx of mainly liberal and legal populist intellectuals in the rural regions of the Russian Empire. These teachers, veterinarians, agronomists, physicians, and statisticians were representatives of the intelligentsia who began to define themselves beyond the traditional categories of the estate (*soslovie*) system. Their growing presence in the *zemstvos* fostered the emergence of a local public sphere, which on the one hand was noted with suspicion by the Tsarist officialdom, but on the other hand was tolerated, as the *zemstvos* provided services in line with governmental interests, such as medical assistance, educational programs or agricultural supervision for peasants.¹⁹

Many of the intellectuals, who moved to rural territories, supported legal populist ideology. Unlike radical populists, who had relocated their political activity from the villages into the growing urban centres of Tsarist Russia, attempting to instigate social uprisings by means of terror and revolutionary propaganda, *zemstvo* professionals showed increasing scientific interest in the rural population, after the unsuccessful 'movement to the people' had challenged their romantic image of the peasantry. Being aware of their lack of knowledge about the Russian countryside, they advocated the 'rehabilitation of reality' through the direct investigation of peasant everyday life.²⁰

For this reason, many *zemstvo* activists considered employment within the organs of local self-government not only as an opportunity to escape from the social marginality they had been exposed to in the centres, but also as a strategy to continue the *narodnik* mission of the 1870s by legal means. Referring to the 'theory of small deeds' (*teoria malych del*) which soon became the ideological framework of *zemstvo* activism, *zemstvo* professionals

perceived their work as a way to bridge the deep gulf between 'civic' intelligentsia and Russian peasants. The aim of this second 'movement to the people' was to improve peasant everyday life. Peasant interest in political concerns, this was a common notion, could not be awoken as they had not learned how to handle urging problems such as hunger, disease or epidemics.²¹

Agronomists and statisticians, in particular, who worked in *zemstvo* bureaus made a considerable contribution to the genesis of Organization Production Theory. According to the *zemstvo* statute of 1890, *zemstvos* had to support local agricultural production. Although the famine of 1891 confronted the organs of local self-government with the need for agricultural advice, the number of agricultural professionals in local *zemstvo* bureaus remained low. Since many *zemstvos* could introduce agronomist posts only on the provincial and county levels, agronomists due to the vast spatial distances between them and the peasants had to limit their work to educational assistance. In the regional centres they organized reading circles, short term educational programs, agricultural exhibitions, and model farms. *Zemstvo* agronomy reached its turning point in 1906, when Petr Stolypin initiated far-reaching agricultural reforms and promoted the rise of local agronomy. With the number of agronomists on district level growing, these had better chances to directly influence peasant farming through the promotion of new machines and modern cultivation methods, the designing of individual business plans for peasant households, and the founding of peasant agricultural cooperatives.²²

The agronomists' vision of a highly rationalized agriculture as expressed in many agronomic writings corresponded with ideas of backwardness and progress which arose from an intellectual discourse far away from the villages. Asking for the causes of Russian backwardness, many non-villagers noticed a lack of culture and education among the rural population. The pragmatic concern of agronomy, the rise of agricultural productivity, was therefore connected with a mission as for the cultivation and civilization of peasants.²³

In a textbook on the so-called social agronomy (*obshchestvennaia agronomia*), Chaianov expressed this approach as follows:

'The social agronomist is not so much a technician as a social worker. His sphere of action is neither fields nor livestock, but the people, its psyche, consciousness and relationships. He wants to build a new agriculture; he wants to create a new spirit, a new culture and leaves this culture to create the new agriculture.'²⁴

Although the idea that peasants were a dark mass of irrational culturally-backward people, was common among both Russian intellectuals and conservative state authorities, their attitude about the aim of agronomic advice differed: State officials from the intellectual milieu of Stolypin considered agronomy as a means of direct support for creating a stratum of loyal independent farmers, which would replace pre-modern peasant households by business-like organized agricultural enterprises.²⁵ *Zemstvo* agronomists, instead, envisioned an agricultural order in which due to educational programs and agronomic aid peasant production and agricultural development were compatible:

'The task of social agronomy is 1. to introduce perfected methods of cultivation and animal husbandry; 2. to modify the organizational plans of the farms in accordance

to the changing challenges of their economic environment and 3. to force the voluntary association of peasants within agricultural cooperatives, which on the one hand shall offer small-scale production units the advantages of large-scale production and on the other hand shall enforce and deepen the new principles of farming.²⁶

Both in agronomy and in statistics knowledge about the peasantry was subjected to a process of scientification. With their creation in 1864, the *zemstvos* had been given the right of self-taxation. The need for *zemstvo* statistics was a consequence of the *zemstvos*' responsibility for the provision of economic services and the collection of taxes, since these required statistical records on the amount and distribution of taxable property and income among the rural population. Some *zemstvos* established statistical bureaus as early as in the 1870s. During the 1880s, *zemstvo* statistics saw a significant rise, but were soon heavily restricted by official agencies which were willing to limit the authority of the *zemstvos* by means of precise statutory provisions concerning the principles and methods of statistical registration. Only after 1905, were rural statisticians gradually set free from suspicious supervision through the central state.²⁷

The distrust in *zemstvo* statisticians, expressed by state officials, was closely linked to the transformation of the *zemstvos* into platforms of intellectuals who did not conceal their rejection of the Tsarist government and the social hierarchies of their country. Moreover, among the *zemstvo* statisticians were veterans of the first *narodnik* 'movement to the people' regarding employment in the *zemstvos* as an opportunity to express their sympathy for the rural people. Like their colleagues who provided agricultural advice, medical services or educational programs, *zemstvo* statisticians carried populist concerns into the organs of local self-government and thus challenged the conservative Tsarist politics of the late nineteenth century.²⁸

Soon after the first statistical offices had been established by the *zemstvos*, it became obvious that the interest of many statisticians went beyond the scope of tax-related data gathering. Vasilii I. Orlov, the head of the statistical *zemstvo* bureau in the Moscow province, thought his real task was the setup of a theory of peasant economy. Orlov's monographic inquiries covered information on a peasant household's inventory, as well as on education, medical care, and sometimes even on the books read by the peasants. Thus, they were supposed to cast a light on the manifold facets of rural life. Similar approaches were pursued by Petr P. Chervinskii in Chernigov province, V. N. Pokrovskii in Tver province, and N. Annenskii in Nizhnii Novgorod province. In Voronezh province, F. A. Shcherbina pioneered the budget studies of peasant households including all annual monetary and non-monetary flows of peasant income and expenditure. Providing much more detailed information about peasant income and consumption than studies focusing on household inventories at a given time, budget studies were thus an important precondition for understanding economic decision-making within peasant households.²⁹

The emergence of inventory and budget studies constituted a paradigmatic shift in populist economic thinking. Whereas the first generation of *zemstvo* statisticians had hoped to prove the populist belief in the *obshina* as a quasi-socialist economic institution, the results of their investigations did not correspond with populist expectations. Instead of being an economic alternative to Capitalism, the Russian land commune defied populist categories, as it consisted of individual households which calculated independently from each other.

The notion that despite their membership in the land commune, peasant households were not primarily committed to communal interests initialised the decline of the idea that the *obshina* was a viable alternative to Capitalism.³⁰

At the turn of the century, the insights into the character of Russian peasant economy gained by *zemstvo* statisticians were specified. According to Aleksei Peshekhonov, Alexander Chupro, and Vladimir Kosinskii, peasant households were a specific form of agricultural production and, as such, distinct from large-estate farms aiming at the maximization of profits:

‘The peasant is an independent businessman, using his own working power and his own soil in his own enterprise. His income does not split into wage and ground rent – he earns an income *sui generis*. The peasant is not a worker; he is a businessman (...), but a non-capitalist businessman, who neither receives profit nor ground rent.’³¹

Emphasizing that peasant production was mainly directed at the satisfaction of family consumer demands, Russian agricultural economists now took the stand that peasant economy could not be studied in terms of standard or Marxist economics. Their approach was no longer a purely populist one, as they did not want to prove *narodnik* claims of a ‘Russian path’ or the proto-socialist mechanisms within the *obshina*. Instead, they considered the specifics of small peasant households as a clue for the non-capitalist character of peasant agriculture in general.³²

With regard to Alexander Chaianov’s theory, the scientification of agronomic knowledge and the rise of statistical surveys on peasant households were the beginning of a scientific interest in peasant everyday life and the nature of peasant household economy. Chaianov’s concept of the peasant family as an economic unit distinct from other forms of agricultural production had thus been foreshadowed by Russian *zemstvo* employees in the late nineteenth century.³³

Economic historicism in Tsarist Russia

The interactions between populist ideology, *zemstvo* activism, and the growing scientific interest in peasant economy were linked to intellectual developments beyond the borders of Tsarist Russia. The German Historical School of economics provided a framework for the ideological and practical concerns expressed by Russian populists. Due to well-established scientific contacts between Germany and Russia and personal linkages between economists from both countries, the Historical School became a major source of influence for the economic investigation of peasant agriculture.

German historical economists were sceptical about the liberal belief in the existence of fundamental economic laws. Doubting that the economy was a sphere uninfluenced by culture and institutions, they favoured an economic theory based on empirical investigations. This perspective, taken by economists such as Wilhelm Roscher or Bruno Hildebrand, implied that economic development could vary depending on the social and cultural conditions of a given economy. Economic historicism was thus an approach in line with the concerns of Russian legal populists, because it allowed them to hold to their dream of a Russian way of development.³⁴

From the 1870s on, Russian populists travelled to Germany and Austria to study at the chairs held by famous representatives of the Historical School. The most important of them was Alexander Chuprov, who studied at the chairs of Wilhelm Roscher, Georg Friedrich Knapp, and Kuno Fischer. Back in Russia, Chuprov was appointed to the prestigious chair of statistics and economics at Moscow University and became one of the most influential statisticians of the country. Apart from Orlov, Chuprov was one of the fathers of Russian *zemstvo* statistics, guiding a number of statistical surveys which were carried out by his students in local *zemstvo* offices. Arguing that social sciences were to serve the improvement of material conditions in the Russian countryside, he supported the realization of the 'theory of small deeds' and simultaneously promoted the rise of normative social sciences in Tsarist Russia.³⁵

Although Chuprov's main scientific concern was to prove the viability of the land commune, his work was a first step towards a conceptualization of the peasant household. He adopted the historicist idea that society was an organism which could not be investigated by highly aggregated data as such data covered the impact of place and time, as well as the variation of individuals. Accordingly, he was convinced that only a statistical observation of the individual entities within a society could offer insights into the mechanisms of social life. Chuprov did not consider the village communities as indivisible economic and social objects. Arguing that peasant households were the smallest entities of the rural society, he favoured statistical surveys focusing on the peasant farmstead (*dvor*).³⁶

Not only in theoretical, but also in practical respect had the German Historical School functioned as a model for the Russian legal-populist intelligentsia. Its main institution, the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, founded in 1872, was directed against the liberal policy of economic *laissez-faire* and the revolutionary propaganda articulated by the socialist left. With the introduction of political reforms and the strengthening of trade unions, the *Verein* was supposed to ease the pressure of industrialization for the lower classes. Moreover, the members of the *Verein*, who were soon denounced as being 'academic socialists' (*Kathedersozialisten*), forced the statistical investigation of working and living conditions in the urban centres of Germany.³⁷

The intention of Russian historical economists was akin. They wanted to tie research with a policy in favour of the lower classes. Unlike their German counterparts, who focused on urban workers, Russian economists were interested in peasants, since these constituted the bulk of their country's population. In their hope for a general improvement of the living conditions in the countryside, they combined legal populist *zemstvo* activism with the belief that social sciences could improve reality, an idea which had arisen already in the era of Enlightenment.³⁸

Russian historical economists fostered the institutionalization and standardization of rural statistics. In 1882, Orlov, Chuprov, his scholar Kablukov, and other Russian statisticians could assert the creation of a permanent statistical section within the Moscow Juridical Society (*Statisticheskoe otdelenie Moskovskogo iuridicheskogo obshestva*), which became an important platform for liberal and legal populist ideas. Its scientific purpose, the harmonization of *zemstvo* statistics, however, the section could never realize. Depending on the monetary funds available for statistical surveys and the methods of investigations used at the local level, *zemstvo* statistics varied heavily. Supervision by state agencies made the use of populist inspired statistical concepts and the standardization of statistical surveying even more difficult.³⁹

Intellectual biographies of Russian agricultural professionals of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show direct personal and intellectual ties, leading from Chuprov and his scholars to the Organization Production School. When Chaianov studied at the Moscow Agricultural Institute (*Moskovskii sel'skokhoziaistvennyi institut*) between 1906 and 1911, Chuprov's works were very popular among the professors and students of the institute. Besides, Vladimir Kosinskii, a former student of Alexander Chuprov, attracted the attention of agricultural professionals at Chaianov's alma mater.⁴⁰ Since Kosinskii had been one of the first economists who introduced the distinction between peasant households and other modes of agricultural production into the economic discourse, Chaianov emphasized that he considered Kosinskii the actual father of Organization Production Theory.⁴¹

Another former scholar of Alexander Chuprov repeatedly mentioned in this context is Nikolai Kablukov. Following Chuprov's footsteps, Kablukov had spent some time in Western Europe, where he studied at Georg Friedrich Knapp, Gustav Schmoller, Wilhelm Roscher, and Lorenz von Stein, and made the acquaintance of leading representatives of the social-democratic movement, such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, and Viktor Adler. Since 1877, Kablukov worked in Orlov's statistical board of the Moscow *zemstvo*, and held the chair of the office between 1885 and 1907. In 1903, Kablukov became a professor for agricultural economics, statistics, and political economy at Moscow University, where Nikolai Makarov and Alexander Rybnikov, two well known representatives of the Organization Production School, would study at his chair some years later.⁴²

Chaianov's favourite professor at the Moscow Agricultural Institute, Alexei Fortunatov, was a good friend of Vasilii Orlov and a student of Alexander Chuprov as well. The former *narodnik* and *zemstvo* activist was familiar with legal populist ideology and the empirical approach taken to the study of the peasant economy, which Chuprov had partly adopted from the German Historical School. Being professor for agricultural statistics at the Moscow agricultural institute, Fortunatov became one of the intellectual transmitters of historicist and *narodnik* ideas.⁴³

In his introduction for the German edition to the *Theory of Peasant Economy*, Chaianov made a short remark on the history of Organization Production Theory:

'The interpretation of this material [the *zemstvo* statistics] began with Kosinskii's brilliant work "On the agricultural question" on land rents and prices; it was continued by a group of young economists from the school of the professors A. Fortunatov and N. Kablukov.'⁴⁴

Thus, by mentioning Kosinskii, Kablukov, and Fortunatov as mentors of the Organization Production Theory, Chaianov positioned himself in an intellectual tradition, which combined German historical economics with the cultural mission of legal populism as expressed in the rise of *zemstvo* activism, and an intellectual interest in the peasantry which was directed towards a pragmatic solution of the 'agrarian question'.

Transferring analytical instruments: Chaianov's use of the marginal utility approach

By the turn of the century, the peasantry had become an object of interest in Russian agricultural economics. Several studies now focused on the process of economic decision-making on the level of peasant households, stating that these were distinct from profit-oriented capitalist farms. It was in this intellectual atmosphere that Alexander Chaianov generated the theoretical model of peasant household production through the application of the microeconomic marginal utility approach to the decision-making in consumption-orientated peasant households.

During his studies at the Moscow agricultural institute, Chaianov had travelled to Western Europe several times. In Italy and Belgium, he met representatives of peasant cooperatives and developed ideas on a general theory of peasant cooperatives. In Germany, Chaianov became acquainted with the agricultural economists Friedrich Aerobe and Theodor Brinkmann who were pioneers in generating a microeconomic theory of business-oriented farms. During a visit to Switzerland, Chaianov was inspired by the investigations made by Ernst Laur, director of the Swiss peasant association and professor at Zurich University. Laur had developed a model of peasant households directed to market production, foreshadowing some important features of Chaianov's model. In a letter he sent to Laur in 1923, Chaianov acknowledged that he had received the most important scientific ideas while staying at Laur's Peasant Secretariat in Switzerland.⁴⁵

Chaianov's model differed from the investigations carried out by his Russian colleagues, as well as the models developed by agricultural economists in Western Europe. Chaianov combined the scientific interest in consumption-oriented peasant households with the use of the concept of marginal utility, originally stemming from the Austrian School of economics. Unlike the adherents of the Austrian School focussing on profit-maximizing enterprises, Chaianov applied the approach to peasant family households, which due to the absence of hired labour he considered non-capitalist. Additionally, Chaianov concentrated on collective decision-making within the peasant family instead of conceiving of the family as a sum of individual *homines oeconomici*, the dominating concept of Western economic theory. Chaianov thus continued the paradigmatic interest in the peasant household, which had been brought into being by Russian *zemstvo* statisticians, and combined it with an analytical concept originating from Western business economics.⁴⁶

Due to his open-mindedness towards the use of different approaches, Chaianov had to face harsh criticism throughout the 1920s. As he used analytical instruments generated by the Austrian School, his Soviet opponents accused Chaianov of favouring 'bourgeois economics'. Chaianov, however, did not consider himself a supporter of the capitalist economic system, as approved by the followers of the marginal utility school. Instead, he thought the subjective approach of the Austrian School to be helpful for conceptualizing the microeconomic phenomena of peasant households, even if they were not subjected to the laws of private capitalist production. In the Russian version of the *Theory of Peasant Economy*, Chaianov stated:

‘Of course, I might, in expounding my views, avoid the curves and the Austrian terminology and say everything “in my words”; but I think no one would gain from this manipulation and my exposition would be more confused and less clear.’⁴⁷

The analytical concept of the ‘labour-consumer-balance’ (*trudovoi-potrebitel’nyi balans*) defined as the equilibrium of labour drudgery and consumer needs within a peasant family, was the cornerstone of Chaianov’s theory. Since constant hired labour was alien to what Russian intellectuals were used to call the ‘peasant labour farm’ (*trudovoe krest’ianskoe khoziaistvo*), Chaianov was convinced that peasant households calculated independently from external categories like wages or profit: The decision on the amount of labour spent within a peasant family depended on the ratio between workers and consumers and on the satisfaction of the family’s consumer needs. Unlike capitalist farms and their obligation to avoid losses and to maximize profits, peasant families could thus take decisions which were objectively irrational, but corresponded to their subjective needs:

‘(...) one and the same objectively expressed payment per labour unit, at one and the same level, will be considered now advantageous, now disadvantageous for the peasant family, primarily depending on the state of the basic equilibrium between the measure of demand satisfaction and that of the drudgery of labour. If in the farm’s estimation the basic equilibrium has not yet been reached, then unsatisfied demands are still quite sharp, and the family running the farm is under a very strong stimulus to expand its work and to seek outlets for its labour while accepting a low level of payment. “Due to the necessity”, the peasant initiates what are, at first sight, the most disadvantageous undertakings.’⁴⁸

Thanks to their ability to enhance ‘self-exploitation’ (*samoeksploatatsia*) – the ability to flexibly extend or reduce the employed labour force – peasant households could exist in a capitalist environment. Under the condition of an economic crisis, Chaianov was convinced, peasant households would survive even better than their capitalist counterparts:

‘(...) given a deterioration in the market situation negative quantities (losses), thanks to the mechanism of the labour calculation, appear much later on the peasant farm than on the capitalist one (hence, the exceeding viability and stability of peasant farms). Frequently, the family farm’s internal basic equilibrium makes acceptable very low payments per labour unit, and these enable it to exist in conditions that would doom a capitalist farm to undoubted ruin.’⁴⁹

Chaianov’s model corresponded to the necessity to explain the viability and persistence of peasant households in an environment of high capitalist dynamics, as they emerged in late Imperial Russia. Combining the intelligentsia’s cultural mission with advanced micro-economic research methods, his theory was the culmination of peasant household investigation, which had originated already in the late nineteenth century.

Peasant economics and peasant politics

Chaianov's concern was not a purely theoretical one. Being involved in the cooperative movement before and after the Russian Revolution, as well as in Soviet agricultural policy, Chaianov advocated a political program oriented to the needs of small peasant households. After the February Revolution in 1917, he and many other adherents of Organization Production Theory founded the League for Agrarian Reforms (*Liga agrarchnykh reform*), an advisory board of the Provisional Government searching for solutions to the 'agrarian question'. Emphasizing the economic advantages of small peasant households, the members of the League favoured an agricultural policy which would guarantee the continued existence of the traditional Russian agricultural structure:

'We agree that the peasant labour farm [*trudovoe krest'ianskoe khoziaistvo*] shall form the base of Russia's agricultural order, and that it should use all the land which belongs to our fatherland. (...) Having given the land to the peasantry, we shall support the labour farm, introduce culture and offer agronomic advice to it. We shall organize the peasant labour farm within cooperatives, strengthen its position in the markets and make credits accessible to it. This is the way our agrarian reform should look like.⁵⁰

For Chaianov who had been the author of the League's agenda, the political support of peasant households and cooperatives was not only an economically rational way to develop Russian agriculture, but a necessary condition for the realization of a democratic society, in which the peasantry could equally participate:

'For us, the constructors of a new Russia, freedom does not only mean the liberation from the arbitrariness of the old order and the power of the police, but also the free building of a democratic state and a democratic *zemstvo* through the mutual cooperation of our country's living cultural forces. (...) When we talk about the soil, we talk about the labour of the people working on the soil. The labour of the tiller, the economic foundation of national life, should be protected and organized in a democratic Russia.⁵¹

From this perspective, an agricultural order based on peasant households seemed to be a solution for the enduring 'agrarian question' and promised the perspective of 'economic citizenship' for the peasantry. The investigation of the peasant household was thus part of a general conception of society, in which peasants would not be marginalized, but economically and finally even socially and politically integrated. As Nikolai Makarov stated, through the investigation of peasant economy, he wanted to prove that peasant households '[were] not only able to develop, but [were] already developing'.⁵² Makarov regarded the theory of peasant economic decision-making as part of an ideology in favour of the peasantry:

Agronomic aid, the cooperative movement or the local and central policy need a socio-ethical fundament. Peasant Russia should have its own healthy peasant ideology.⁵³

The representatives of Organization Production School were at the height of their political and scientific influence during NEP, when, according to Lenin's slogan of the class alliance between workers and peasants (*smychka*), Soviet policy sought to balance industrial and agricultural development and actively supported peasant households and cooperatives. During this period, Chaianov, Chelintsev, Makarov, Rybnikov and others not only held important chairs of agricultural economics, but were even engaged as political advisers in the Russian People's Commissariat of Agriculture (*Narkomzem RSFSR*).⁵⁴

After 1925, this situation changed. When the idea, that capitalist class struggle gained ground in the Soviet villages, became common notion among the members of the communist party and Soviet social scientists, Chaianov and his colleagues were accused of supporting the growing influence of the 'class enemy' in the villages. Organization Production Theory was now considered to be anti-Soviet propaganda, and its adherents were exposed to severe punishment. The shift in Soviet politics towards the end of the 1920s went along with the political blame of economic theories whose supporters were sceptical about collectivization and economic planning. With the institutional reorganization of Soviet agricultural sciences, and the imprisonment of Chaianov, Chelintsev, Makarov, Rybnikov, Studenskii, and Fabrikant in 1930, Soviet peasant economics ceased to exist. Their demise did not only lead to tragic personal fates, but marked the end of an era in Russian economics, which reached back to the late nineteenth century.⁵⁵

Conclusion

These results indicate that Chaianov's theory of peasant economic decision-making was not a mere continuation of populist economic thinking, than rather the outcome of several intellectual and scientific traditions, which in the early twentieth century came together in Russian agricultural sciences. Chaianov's opinion that peasant agricultural production was a non-capitalist way of production had its roots in the populist-inspired discourse about the influence of Capitalism on Russian peasant economy. The Organization Production Theory continued populist thought, as its representatives regarded peasant agriculture as the main feature of Russia's future agriculture, thereby arguing in opposition to both, liberal and Marxist economic theories.

Scientific interest in the peasant household, as displayed by Chaianov and the other supporters of the Organization Production School, already emerged in the late 1870s, when *zemstvo* statisticians and agronomists turned to the investigation of peasant economic decision-making. Realizing that the land commune was not an indivisible economic entity, but rather consisted of independently calculating peasant households, *zemstvo* professionals shifted their scientific and practical focus from the commune to the peasant household. Adopting the organicistic view on society and the social ethos from the German Historical School, economists and statisticians in the higher educational institutions of Tsarist Russia supported this intellectual development. When Chaianov applied the marginal utility approach to consumption-oriented peasant households and created the unique model of the peasant household in the 1920s, he completed these investigations.

Taking the non-economic implications of Chaianov's model into account, it becomes obvious that his theory was not only a new approach in studying economic decision-making

on the level of peasant families, but also an example of how Russian scholars translated their sympathy for the peasantry into a sophisticated economic model. It was part of a vision of society based on peasant household economy, cooperatives and local self-government. 'Social agronomy' was the practical expression of this idea; it was intended to technically and culturally modernize the peasantry. Chaianov's professor Aleksei Fortunatov expressed this aim in an article on the tasks of local agronomists:

'Helping the local people to produce more "bread" is the most important task of our time. This will also support the people's intellectual and civic development: They will get access not only to "bread", but also to enlightenment and freedom.'⁵⁶

In early twentieth century, similar discourses about the peasantry and its position in economy and society emerged also beyond the borders of late Imperial Russia. Reacting to the beginning processes of industrialization and urbanization, intellectuals throughout Eastern Central Europe searched for means to protect peasant interests in the context of changing economic conditions. This intellectual interest in the fate of the peasantry went along with the rejection of the idea that economic development could only be initiated by industrial growth and, in the long run, by a smaller share of agricultural and especially peasant production in national income. Being antipathetic to urban culture, many intellectuals were convinced that peasant production and economic growth were not mutually exclusive. East Central European agrarianism, which promoted an alternative to industrialization and urbanization, included the romantic idealization of the peasantry recurring on the myth of a better past, as well as the dream of rural modernization by the improvement of peasant farming, cooperatives and local self-government.⁵⁷

Focussing on the *narodnichestvo* and the Socialist Revolutionary Party, historians have traditionally regarded Tsarist Russia as an example for the radical tradition of agrarian ideology.⁵⁸ The fact that some East Central European intellectuals explicitly referred to nineteenth century Russian populism confirmed this position and supported the one-sided understanding of Chaianov's theory as 'neopopulist'.⁵⁹ However, the genesis of the model of peasant household economy provides evidence, that Chaianov shared the widespread vision of a peasantry, economically strengthened by cooperatives, socially and politically integrated due to the democratization of local self-government and culturally 'modernized' thanks to educational and agronomic aid programs. He and the other representatives of Organization Production Theory did not want to 'protect an idealized peasant world from a modernity which was conceived as rationalist'⁶⁰. Instead, their theory was the outcome of the 'public modernization campaign'⁶¹ which at the beginning of the twentieth century, was promoted by the Russian intelligentsia. Unlike East Central European agrarianism, this Russian variant of agrarian action did not find expression in the rise of a powerful peasant party, but in the mobilization of intellectuals within the ideological framework of the 'theory of small deeds'. Against this background, the investigation of peasant economy which culminated in Chaianov's theory of the peasant household can be regarded as attempt to give Russian agrarianism a scientific face.

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