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**New family agricultures or new peasant agricultures ? : an analysis based
on Brazilian and French examples**

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Abstract:

H. Mendras taught us that the category “peasant farmer” was meant to disappear when peasant societies would disappear. This tendency was well illustrated in the European case. However, new evolutions in the social movements up-dating peasant identities in Europe, Latin America and Africa have brought this question to the present debate. This paper intends to present a comparative view of the new family agriculture in the Northeast of Brazil and France, considering the resistance, roots and peasant values. The Brazilian Northeast family farming is characterised by the permanence of an irregular and partial relation to diversified markets, as well as by the modernisation or the resurgence of peasant redistribution relations and reciprocity practices. In France, the claim of peasant trade unions is more linked to the valorisation of product quality and of local identity, although the peasant society does not exist any more. Thus, the integration to segmented markets more and more qualified or still subsidised, questions the future extension and generalisation of the European peasant model.

On the contrary, in the Brazilian Northeast, peasant communities which are capable of developing regional and local collective projects still maintain themselves. Parallel to the economic integration of competitive family farming into the markets, there is an alternative for territorial and social integration through pluriactivity and multifunctionality of the agriculture. The challenge is to mobilise and negotiate public policies devoted to modern peasant agriculture, considering the collective attributes and human values, instead of social assistance to poor rural families.

Key-Word: family farming, peasant society, reciprocity, public policies, agroecology.

Introduction

Henri Mendras in “La fin des paysans” (1967) questioned the issue of the category of peasant farmer disappearing with the end of peasant societies. He has illustrated well this process in the European case. The triumph of industrial society has put an end to the co-existence of peasant agriculture with the surrounding society. However, recent evolutions of social movements defining themselves as peasants in both Europe and Latin America, lead to the re-emergence of this issue. The attitude in relation to peasantry has changed on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. It has stopped being considered as a curious relique to be regarded as a social transforming force but is now seen as family farming which is not just capitalist, in the sense of a small family enterprise. The *Confédération Paysanne* in France refers to a non-capitalist way of life and to values linked to the quality of work, products and local life. In Brazil, university scholars and organized farmers, linked in particular to the alternative agriculture and agro-ecology movement suggest to revise the peasant issue. The *Via Campesina* movement (Cirad, 1997) and its Brazilian expression, The *Movimento dos Pequenos Produtores* (Almeida, 1998) defend a peasant agriculture founded on a new agreement between farmers (producers of food and of values) and society (with more demanding customers towards food quality as well as social and cultural identity values). This communication will deepen this debate supporting itself on a comparative reading of the recent evolution of family farming in the Brazilian Northeast and in France. It is based on the analysis of the effects of the modernizing policies which support family farming and of the reactions linked to peasant roots and values. The first part presents the peasant and family farming evolution in France and Brazil and the search for more sustainable alternatives, due to the critical crisis provoked by globalization. The second part discusses the teachings and limits of these analyses in terms of public policies and concerning the conceptual and methodological proposal for the research.

1. The Evolution of family farming in France and Brazil

Which kind of family farming is resisting?

In spite of being supposed to disappear, family farming sustains 41% of the worldwide population and it also mobilizes 1,3 billion of farmers in the world according to FAO (2004). Family farming resists and ascertains 80% of the production of food. In most cases (Africa, Asia and Latin America), this is even still in a peasant-like way, although they are peasant societies in mutation.

Notwithstanding this reality, a model of modern “enterprise” family farming totally integrated to the capitalist market has been defended in France like in Brazil. However, it has already started to collapse, even in Europe (Gervais et al., 1978).

In the case of France, the modernization of family farming revealed first the limits of the peasants’ integration. The policy for the modernization of family farming promoted by Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), through subsidies, generated social differences within the farmer category, causing social exclusion. This model allowed an important increase in food production, in particular in developed countries. In France, the active agricultural population passed from 7,2 to 2 million between 1936 and 1975. In the same period, the exportation of cereal passed from one to ten billion steady francs (Klatzmann, 1978).

Between 1980 and 2001, the active agricultural population decreased from 2 million (8% from the total of French Active population) to 850,000 (3%), while the exportations doubled (FAO, 2004). However, this has caused some problems. The mass production crisis increased in the 80's (causing overproduction) and above all in the 90's causing sanitary and biological risks (nitrates, mad cow disease and pesticides), leading to search for alternatives. Two models are starting to stand out, associating resisting elements with the promotion of a new project of peasant agriculture, linked to the sustainability. They refer to product quality and take into account the agro-ecological rural environment. The model defended by the *Confédération Paysanne*, gives more value to the quality of life and of the products, via organic agriculture for example. One group of FNSEA (*Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles*) and the CNJA (Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs), defends "*agriculture raisonnée*" ("integrated" or "reasoned agriculture" reducing the use of chemical inputs) (Claude, 2001). The claims of these farmer unions are mostly linked to the valorisation of the quality of products and of local identity, although peasant societies no longer exist. However, the integration to a diversity of markets, every day more qualified and segmented, or even still subsidized, questions the capacity of the extension and generalization of this neo-peasant or neo-rural model in Europe.

In the Northeast of Brazil, the socio-economical configuration is different: There is still a family farming with peasant-like features, partially integrated, until the last ten years, to commercial exportation productions (tobacco, sugar cane, coffee, cotton, sisal, seed of the castor-oil plant, potatoes, etc.) and therefore, in constant evolution (Martine, 1987). It has kept a diversity of productions in such a way to face the irregularity and uncertainties of the climate, as well as of the market (prices). It demonstrates a relative autonomy in relation to the market: self-consumption, use of few external inputs and bank credit, preference for proximity credit, such as consortium and revolving funds (Caron & Sabourin, 2001). This autonomy is associated to risk-limitation (few inputs, a lot of work and little investment in capital or cash).

However, the high input of family work is associated to capacity of innovation and adaptation, due to the mobilization of the inter-personal networks, comprising social, family and organizational dynamics. This investment in human capital finds its translation in mutual help, direct selling or via short chains and proximity markets, or also by the redistribution of production factors (land, technology, water, seed, work and even capital via revolving funds) (Sabourin, 2000).

This economy barely assures the production and reproduction of human values linked to these forms of proximity relations, redistribution and reciprocity. These are values of trust, solidarity (affinity, mutual help), responsibility (before the natural resources and the future generations). They are also values of quality, for the labor (know-how) and for the products (quality and specificity). These qualities are associated to the name (the identity) of the peasant who guarantees his status and his place in the society. This specificity ascertains the prestige, the fame which entitles respect, authority and, as a consequence, power, in societies of reciprocity (Temple, 1998).

It is true that one of the characteristics of peasant societies, the dependence on the local political and economical elites, still exists in the Northeast.

Rural peasant communities may still be capable of maintaining local and regional collective projects, if they receive some form of support. Beside the economic integration of the more

competitive family farming to the markets, an alternative territorial integration should be considered, by the means of the pluriactivity and the multifunctionality of the agriculture (Adington, 1998, Remy, 2000).

What is the project for tomorrow's family farming in Brazil?

In the Northeast, the democratic opening, the development of markets and the government's support were initially effective. The Northeast agriculture production reached its peak at the end of the 70's, from this moment on, it started to decrease. The crisis of activities in the cattle-cotton-farming complex led the contribution of the semi-arid area to the regional economy to progressively decreased, from 28% (in 1970) to 21% (1980 and the production per capita, decreased from 74,7% to 53,2% (Tonneau, 1994). This productive crisis is essentially an investment one. The classic policies of "modernization" (Green Revolution, bank credit, technical assistance & extension) in the 70's were selective and little effective. They profited few establishments, only those which had - according to the opinion of extension services - the potential to integrate the market chains, that is to say: cattle/milk, vegetable and fruit farming. Mono-productive specialization for the market revealed itself as risky due to the high cost of intensive external inputs (Tonneau et al, 1997). Bank credit and the credit practices of inputs firms led the vulnerable productive systems to bankrupt, because of the lack of capital reserves. Both the availability of financial resources and the capacity to manage and organize the services did not permit, in the majority of case, to cope with the agronomic (plague attack), climatic and economic risks.

As a result of the failure of modernization policies, in the second half of the 90's, the governmental public policies exclusively turned to offer "social compensations" (food aid, minimum income, education cheques, retirement pension, etc). Several scholars demonstrated the importance of the transfers to stabilize rural families' income, and even to reduce the number of poor families in the countryside (Delgado, 2000; Abramovay, 2000; Veiga, 2001).

The Northeast family (and peasant) farming is in crisis because the State only supported the production related to irrigated fruit-culture for export or national markets. The objective of the Brazilian public power was to duplicate this model with sector and territorial policies of qualification and certification, or via quality and exportation segments. Such a model may only be adopted in a minority of situations by family farmers in the Northeast, if they are able to handle human and financial capital (Sabourin, 2001). On the other hand, the implementation of this model has been accompanied by high environmental expenses. The tendency to the homogenization of productive practices, to the simplification, to the extreme and artificial transformation of the natural environment has been accompanied by the degradation of agricultural soils, the endangering of cultivar and animal genetic diversity and the contamination of food (Bastos, 2002).

Searching for sustainable agriculture

The notion of sustainable development emerged from the reflection over the difficulties above mentioned. It takes into account the multiple faces of the project of the society, without excessive sharing between production and its purpose (Latour, 1993). It refers to the notions of sustainable agriculture, ecological agriculture or even peasant agriculture,

privileging labor and its diverse forms of reward, developing quality production and accepting natural, biological and climatic factors (Van der Weid, 2001). In other words: an agriculture which respects producers, consumers and nature by a renewed social agreement.

Can the peasant utopia of autonomous communities with respect to the capitalist market contribute to this reflection? Can this kind of utopia have its place in a post industrial society? Mendras (1976) asked whether the most recent techniques of a new industrialization would be compatible with the social traditions and the values of peasant civilizations. Jollivet (2003) underlines that it is the fact of belonging to a peasant society that identifies the peasant. The challenge is to define a renewed social project for rural societies and, better, for the whole society.

In this perspective, notions such as multifunctionality of agriculture and pluriactivity of farmers must be perceived as an opportunity to “discover” and “create” adequate economic activities in the rural regions of the Brazilian Semi-arid (Wanderley, 1990, 2003).

The agro-ecology project in Brazil and France: a peasant project?

The disengagement of the government from diversified agriculture policies linked to the specific necessities of family farming in Brazil has opened the way to “alternative productive projects” by the civil society (small holders organizations, NGOs, trade unions, church groups, etc), especially in the 90’s (Almeida, 1998). Some of these projects are based on agroecology (Altieri, 1987) and are more and more critical of the social exclusion inherent to capitalist agriculture. Behind agroecology there is a political project to promote sustainable development and living in the semi-arid, based on the valorization of peasant knowledge (his work, his culture), of the environment, of natural resources and on the valorization of human groups which compose the community.

This posture supports itself on a certain number of central hypotheses. The agricultural sector may continue for a long time as the principal sector for employment in rural areas. The alternatives of jobs are really rare. Family farming, with reduced use of inputs and intense work investment, may keep rural employment at a high level, and this way, avoid the increase of territorial and social imbalance linked to strong urbanization. Therefore, it can be economically competitive – in particular, to guarantee the food security of rural populations, via a partial self-consumption, but also of the poor populations in the cities – more effective for natural resources management and more socially fair.

Within these certain conditions, the social policies of the State (retirement pensions, scholarship, food-aid, etc) and incomes from pluractivity of families may be invested in the agricultural production (Remy, 2000).

The model intends to establish the basis for an autonomous development of family farming, using goods and natural resources in the most rational way possible. The basis principle for the agro-ecological model constitutes of rational exploration of the biotic and non-biotic diversity of rural territories.

The agroecological model is constituted by the mobilization and articulation of the practical and technical understanding of the farmers, and confronting them to scientific knowledge. This model demands, therefore, the mobilization of applied research, because it depends on a lot of information and training, on human capital. To fulfill this necessity, it is important to develop the farmer’s competences to manage local surroundings, resources and labor force.

The organization and the invention of new “alternative” services require the realization of complex institutional policy settings.

The result of the implementation of this model is competitive products able to answer, through short marketing chains which generate jobs, to the increasing demand of urban populations in its diversity (basic food –subsidized– for marginalized populations) and to the specific or organic emergent markets. The work on technical innovation and on the creation of socio-technical networks (for extension, collective savings and proximity credit), allows to develop a new institutional frame, which is a way to achieve a more humanized and citizen-like development (Silveira et al., 2002).

In this perspective, the agroecological model may be qualified as “peasant”, since it contributes to criticize the productivist model of the “conservative modernization”, emphasizing environmental and social aspects.

Such a model is quite close to the alternatives constructed by the French “neo peasants”.

- conversions to technical systems of sustainable, organic or “reasoned” agriculture;
- new ways of autonomy: few external inputs and diversification (Reintjes et al., 1992), less dependence on standardized product circuits ;
- new relation with society and customers: quality and proximity, reward of dignity, knowledge, know-how and work, not only raw material;
- new ways of thinking about the markets (proximity) and the labor (family labor and mutual help, cooperatives for common use of machinery);
- new ways of placing agricultural activity in rural life: pluractivity, multifunctionality, solidarity and collective action.

2. Lessons & perspectives

Limits and conditions of alternative strategies

Care must be taken not to mislead to an idyllic point of view, which may be interpreted as going back to the past. Most peasants, old” or “new”, are not militants enlightened on agro-ecology which reject consumer goods from the international market so as to value self-consumption or proximity ecological markets. Globalization has arrived and has made irreversible marks. The current change, even though it mobilizes itself as a resistant discourse, “The world is not a merchandize”, corresponds to an economic change and to a citizen awareness. It also corresponds to a certain ideology to promote historical peasant universal values, or at least its glorious and positive aspects. However, such a change comes from economic demands which associate work level, family income and leisure time similar to that of wage workers. This social demand, since women and children work or study outside the farming unit, especially in France, generated economic adaptations. Smallholders who chose to adopt such an “alternative” are as interested as any other human being, in having access to goods. Through experience and collective learning (mistakes and success), they became aware of that both the productivist official model and the competitive new model based on segments of products and certification did not work out for them. Therefore, they kept some practices and some peasant values, trying to adapt them to the updating context. For that, they experiment alternatives, as an attempt to ensure the social and economic reproduction of their family units as well as of the local life. All

young peasants, all over the world, would love to work with better conditions (irrigation/mechanization), with better wages, (fair fees) in addition to more free time and easy access to consumer goods. From these general considerations, it is obvious that such wishes do not imply adhering to the standardized mass consumption model nor refusing the advantages of access to quality food via self consumption. Smallholders appreciate and are proud to offer quality products to the consumers.

Then, would it be viable to realize this renewed social project? Would it be viable to maintain peasant agriculture in the capitalist world? If it is to be this way, such a procedure can only be voluntary and, consequently, has its limits. This is why many researchers criticize the notion of family farming itself. For instance, Eliseu Alves (2003) considers two great difficulties with relation to the consolidation of family farming as an alternative to the capitalist market.

The first difficulty is the strength and the dynamism of capitalist agriculture. The author wonders what may stop the capitalist agriculture to achieve ownership on markets and technologies, even if created and opened by family farming. *“Organic agriculture is in accelerated expansion within the capitalist agriculture system. What avoids the capitalist agriculture from adopting technology, expanding production and dominating the market as well”?*

The second, however, is the cultural resistance capacity of family farming. *“Who can be against preserving local culture? However, the question is whether this is possible? Is that what communities want? Lately, a macro-social force, impulsed by mass communication, mainly from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, exerts devastating influence on our society, even on the regional accent”.*

Alves’ arguments are strong if they are related to agro-ecology requirements: work requirement, family model demands resulting in little autonomy of young people; lack of monetary income. If the first results are encouraging ones, it should not be left behind that basic problems such as lack of land or low education are really weigh down on real alternative possibilities. But strength of necessity is also intense. Which other future can be thought of with the great lack of jobs in big cities? What about the South African model, where the population concentrates itself in rural shantytown, as the only place for living? They are left without activities, being provided with social help to spend in supermarkets. It’s common knowledge that some urbanization projects of small rural municipalities in semi-arid Brazil are following this way. Hence violence dissemination all over the territory which most probably comes as a result of these choices.

Alternative Public Policies

What kind of policies would be able to match such a diverse reality between peasant family farming and enterprising ones? The challenge is to mobilize and negotiate public policies, not only of social assistance, but as subsidies conditioned by the modern forms of peasant farming, valuing social attributes and not only the economical ones of its productive system, sociability forms, collective human values and practices.

Farmers from France as well as from Brazilian Northeast have conveyed and dealt through their organizations some guidelines towards those public policy instruments.

First, local production protection systems, which limit in a way the wild concurrence with no penalty for poor country peasants, must be considered. It may be with new modalities of

the quality certification. Not only a single guaranty of the product quality is being on focus and even its origin; be it by means of certification which reduces capitalist concurrence or by means of protectionism such as subsidized prices, which penalize the poorer country peasants. The fairest alternative would be the certification and qualification of sustainable production farming systems: organic and agro-ecological. In France there are already concrete issues (*agriculture biologique & agriculture raisonnée*) and in Brazil (*Pro-ambiente* project in Amazon region).

Second, as for the autonomy related to the capitalism market it must be reinforced through all possible ways. Self-consumption is relevant, however, it does not provide a solution, nor a free excess redistribution, even if it must be encouraged and valorized among close people. The true autonomy starts by dependence reduction of the input industries, promoting local input use inside the production units. The alternative to the bank credit goes through proximity credit (revolving funds adapted for trust relationship and for small investment.) or at least cooperative banks while there is grassroots social control (Brazil Bancoop case but not France Agriculture Bank, the *Crédit Agricole*). Finally, the third autonomy way goes through implementation of direct sell, as well as the proximity and short chain or local markets. Those are through competent mediators, which valorize the product quality and the producer's name by means of inter-personal relations. It's a matter of quality guarantee through non-normative personalized certification.

Another guideline consists of attributing acknowledgment and public support to the farmer collective devices, which assure the natural common resource management (water, fields, forest, biodiversity and seeds) or local public goods production, such as: rural schools, innovation and experimentation groups. Such devices based on a complementary interaction between collective and public action have had a good experience in France and have conquered them by Paraíba's peasant trade union. (Sabourin, 2003). Those four instruments of public policy instances are easy to be introduced. They're adapted so as to revitalize the reproduction of peasant structures and systems, because they associate individual and collective responsibility of farmers, guaranteeing their dignity and identity, favoring attribute expression and territorial specificities; in other words they contribute for production and reproduction of human values, commonly found in the peasant reciprocity. The proximity market, as the direct sell, also guarantees the producer's name, as well as revolving funds or the sharing systems (redistribution of products and of production factors), because it demands, its responsibility.

Conceptual Lessons and Research Purposes

Both in France and Brazil we can refer to contemporary peasant model. But to what extent does the term deserve such a classification?

I wonder whether it corresponds to Mendras (2000) definition or to Wolf (1976) or even to Shanin (1990). If the main peasant model features remain, I wonder if it develops itself a sign of peasant society or just of a rural society. What are those features (values and structures)? Thus we may conclude that peasant production systems can exist without peasant purely society (France) or just rural society (Brazil, Northeast).

First of all, we find in Brazil and in France, the remaining of peasant productions system in rural areas, despite of no longer existence of a peasant society in France, furthermore the peasant communities are changing in the Brazilian Northeast. The notion of "rural spaces"

seems to be broader than “rural societies” ones considering social group diversity -peasants and non-peasants (Wanderley, 1990). We see “space” as a social construction, resulting of actor multiple practices, and this way we question the views which conceive the space as something out of groups and individuals actions.

Thus, there are no societies purely peasant, but the remaining of diverse groups have revealed historically that it is not only the peasant who survive, but also his social, economical and cultural practices which are fundamental in the resistance to the exploration logic, human and environmental degradation of capitalism society. Above that, they are building differentiated development practices from the dominant model, either in France or in Brazil, in Pyrenees or in Amazon as well, in Bretagne as in the semi-arid Brazilian *Sertão*.

Following that thought, the peasantry remains a way of living, which deals with a production system based on the work and on the quality; a certain autonomy in relation to the capitalist market; a space organization based on land, labor and family; a sociability ground on inter-personal relation; mutual help; solidarity; but also permeated with conflicts and collective and individual interests (Menezes, 2002).

Barbosa (1998) proposes to work on the peasant concept in a theoretical level, allowing a certain comprehension about group specific historical configurations such as: fishermen, rubber workers, family farmers, etc. A research guideline would focus precisely on the concept the peasant not as an essence, but as a process one and also verify demographic relations, parenthood, the territory use and handle, partial autonomy related to the capitalist market.

Concerning this perspective, the concept of peasantry is essentially a set of analysis and as well as public policy purposes for the rural world and ever wider for the society as a whole. So, it is necessary to convince that there are possibilities of another evolution. The incentive instruments and support to the multifunctionality has conveyed a fundamental role in France during the elaboration of another agriculture view in which the production function for selling is not the only one therein recognized.

The statement of a peasant life way in a society depends on its constitution while political actors, or through social movements and states policies. Thus, it is a great challenge to be faced and the one by which many peasant groups in Europe and in Latin America have passed through. That way, the peasants, a social group which has led historically movements once considered a great threatening to dominant power in Brazil, such as: “Canudos” and “Peasant Leagues”, emerge again in a hard situation, apparently definitive without returns, when the neo-liberal economy and politics are guiding society paths, both national and international.

Conclusion:

Such a debate, which invaded the Brazilian scenery and permeates the renewing of CAP in Europe about the relationship between family farming and public policies, deserves to be emphasized. Such communication attempted to rescue the rural reality, mainly, the one from Northeast of Brazil, which it could not be neglected from an integration perspective through the market. The researches in favor of the elevation of family farming competitiveness have also observed the exclusion mechanisms as well as the creation of a less numerous category of capitalist family farming. It concerns the reproduction of the an agriculture modernization model of the European countries and USA as well, which

privilege, above all, the social or marginal resolution of the excluded problem of development integration. However, the propositions of rural job introduction or ever-social treatment of this problem are little convincing.

On the other hand, the first results of the agro-ecological model seem to be promising and justify the possibilities of original rural development strategies that refute the fatality of the rural population decreasing. In the meantime, so as to provide more credibility to that model, it must be achieved a great effort of systematization and result valorization. In short, the agro-ecology seems to allow the maintaining and the reconstitution of the four capital types, regarded as being necessary for the rural development: ecological, economical, human and social capital.

Thus, as we convey the peasant agriculture importance in the local development dynamics, we are not defending a flashback in which the peasant agriculture was mainly toward to self-consumption, nor even a rejection to the integration forms to the competitive market.

Last, but not least, in a conceptual level it would be interesting to think about peasants as a culture according the terms purposed by Geertz (1989, 1997) as “a meaning net”, that is to say, not only as a model constituted by a set of quite fixed features which identify a group, but also through practices and representations of diverse social individuals. Thus, there is no peasant or peasant culture model; on the contrary there are social and economical practices, peasant groups with their mentalities and political actions which build rural spaces.

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