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## Peasant Identities in Brazil and Russia

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### Abstract

*This article analyses Brazilian and Russian peasantries from a relational perspective. The authors argue that, in order to understand the trajectory of peasantries in both countries, the classic substantialist perspectives on peasantry (either Marxist or Chayanovian) have to be complemented by a relational interpretation that focus on the construction of peasantry as an identity alternative to family farming, smallholders, and households in confrontation with agribusiness. Therefore, we show that modern peasantry is both the expression of an evolving socio-productive logic incorporated by different groups of farmers, and a political identity that, mainly in Brazil, is still mobilized by social movements that question the contemporary concept of family farming. In Russia, where the emergence of capitalism in agriculture did not lead to intensive political confrontation, the term ‘peasant’ has lost its interpretive power, being revindicated only in academic circles, and being gradually replaced by the term ‘family farming’.*

**Keywords:** *peasantry, Brazil, Russia, family farming, smallholders, rural households, agribusiness, identity*

### Introduction: Peasant issue in Brazil and Russia

The death of peasantry is a common line for both neoliberal and Marxist traditions. However, even today there are vast social groups in the Global South, which can be still

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described as peasants. Ploeg even argues that new peasantries are emerging in Europe [Ploeg 2013].

Alongside peasants, the categories of family farmers and smallholders emerged in the academic literature and political discussions. For example, Graeub et al. claim that 98% of all farms in the world are family farms, which occupy 53% of agricultural land [Graeub et al. 2016]. They describe family farmers as an extremely diversified group, which needs context-specific agrarian policies. However, they use the term ‘peasant’ only once and as a synonym to smallholders.

In these cases, the term ‘peasant’ is used either as a theoretical category or substituted with other labels like smallholder or family farmer. We argue that the dimension of peasant identity is also important as it defines its social position and, as a result, interactions with wider society including the state, customers, financial institutions, competitors and so on. Ploeg also discusses the process of agricultural modernization in post-war Europe, which led to the de-peasantization of European agriculture [Ploeg 2018]. It was a project which implied not only technological and economic changes but also an intellectual shift legitimizing those changes. At the heart of that intellectual project was the creation of new identities, namely, the dichotomy between backward peasantry and progressive capitalist entrepreneurs. That narrative became a part of the political and academic discourses. Similar processes can be observed in countries outside the Western world like Brazil and Russia, although with different outcomes. Here we explore the issue of creating and recreating peasant identities in Brazil and Russia more thoroughly.

Brazil and Russia are two major countries on their continents. They have huge territories, large populations, a high level of urbanization, a relatively small percentage of agricultural employment, and vast areas of agricultural land (Table 1). While Russia only recently became an important global agricultural producer, Brazil has always been an agricultural giant. It still dwarfs Russia in terms of agricultural GDP and exports. It is difficult, however, to compare family farming in the two countries, as they have different criteria for who to include in this category. Brazilian statistics have a clear category of family farmers, while Russian statistics distinguishes between households and so-called ‘*fermery*’, which are legal entrepreneurial entities and legally they are identical to the term ‘peasants’.

Table 1. **Brazil and Russia: Basic indicators**

	Brazil	Russia
Total territory, mln. km <sup>2</sup>	8,5	17
Population, mln. people	203,6	146,4
Agricultural land, mln. ha	239	215
Agricultural GDP, mln. USD	157 538	97 898
Agricultural export, mln. USD	101 563	26 509
Rural population, %	13	25
Employed in agriculture, %	9,7	6
Number of family farmers, thousand	3 897	116
Agricultural GDP by family farmers, %	23	15,8

Sources: Brazilian agricultural census 2017; Russian agricultural census 2016; Russian statistical bureau (Rosstat); Faostat.

To compare the relative positions of family farming in Brazil and Russia, we use the data from agricultural censuses in both countries, which took place almost in the same years. Though some results may seem outdated, we believe that they adequately serve our goals by providing comparable and reliable data as we are seeking for long-term trends rather than for assessments of the current situation.

Census data on the evolution of family farming in Brazil (*Table 2*) show that, from 2006 to 2017, the number of family establishments decreased from 4 305 105 (83% of a total of 5.2 million) to 3 897 408 (77% of a total of 5.1 million). This reduction is mainly explained by the growth in the number of family farmers that have non-agricultural revenues surpassing 50% of the total income of the establishments, which excludes them from the formal identification criteria defined by the Law 11.326 / 2006 (“the Law of Family Farming”). In any case, these 3.9 million establishments still account for 23% of the total agricultural production value (compared to 25% in 2006); provide employment for 10.1 million people (compared to 12.3 million in 2006); and occupy 80.89 million hectares, that is, 23% of the country’s total agricultural area. While in absolute terms, this denotes an important reduction in the number of employed persons, and a small reduction in the total area, which, in 2006, corresponded to 81.27 million hectares, in average the area occupied by each establishment increased from 18.6 to 20.7 ha.

These data reveal a change of land concentration that, even being much stronger among non-family farmers, has also forced internal social differentiation among family farmers. The recent reduction in the number of family farms is also related to the fact that some of them (the most capitalized) used public support to acquire land, and, owing to the limit accorded by Brazilian law, they have been reclassified as non-family farmers. Here it is important to note that, in a different way from Russia, to be formally classified as a family farmer in Brazil – and therefore be eligible for specific public support – an agricultural establishment cannot have more than four “fiscal modules”, which is a unit of measure set differently for each municipality according to the environmental conditions and type of agricultural work. As a fiscal module generally varies from 15 hectares, in South Brazil, to 100 hectares, in the Amazon region, a Brazilian family farmer cannot have more than 60 ha or 400 ha in each of these regions.

**Table 2. Comparison between family farming and non-family farming establishments (2006–2017) in Brazil**

	Family Farming			Non-Family Farming		
	2006	2017	Δ	2006	2017	Δ
Establishments [N]	4 305 105	3 897 408	-407 697	870 531	1 175 916	305 385
Establishments [%]	83.2	76.8	-9.5	16.8	23.2	35.1
Agricultural area [ha]	81 268 779	80 891 084	-377 695	252 411 258	270 398 732	17 987 474
Agricultural area [%]	24.4	23.0	-0.5	75.6	77.0	7.1
Employed persons [N]	12 281 545	10 115 559	-2 165 986	4 286 754	4 989 660	702 906
Employed persons [%]	74.1	67.0	-17.6	25.9	33.0	16.4

Source: Brazilian Agricultural Censuses 2006 and 2017.

Russian agricultural censuses show that family farms reduced in number but become larger on average in terms of cultivated agricultural land (*Table 3*). On average, a family farm employed 4 workers in 2006 and 3 workers in 2016 and the average agricultural area per farm increased from 84.7 ha in 2006 to 226.5 ha in 2016. Family farms employ a fifth of all people working in agriculture (including farmers and their family members). The drop in the number of employed persons is explained by the reduction in number of family farms and by mechanization of agriculture. During the last decade, family farmers in Russia have come to play an important role in Russian agriculture.

Corporate farms still play a leading role in terms of volumes of agricultural output, exports, and employment, though they have reduced in number, land area, and the number of employees. Household production is shrinking and is now mainly subsidiary farming rather than the primary occupation.

Differentiation is ongoing in all three categories of agricultural producers. Some family farms are more similar to corporate farms in terms of their business logic and approach, while smaller ones may resemble households. Similarly, a very small number of the households can be called agricultural professionals and hire workers.

**Table 3. Comparison between family farming, households, and corporate farms (2006–2016) in Russia**

	Family Farmers			Households			Corporate Farms		
	2006	2016	Δ	2006	2016	Δ	2006	2016	Δ
Establishments [N]	147 496	115 597	-31 899	20 219 200	18 752 400	-1 466 800	40 627	27 521	-13 106
Establishments [%]	0,72	0,61	-21,6	99,1	99,2	-7,3	0,2	0,15	-32,3
Agricultural area [ha]	20 094 600	36 288 700	16 194 100	6 912 900	8 242 500	1 329 600	97 947 400	80 193 100	-17 754 300
Agricultural area [%]	14,5	27,8	80,8	5,3	8,5	19,2	79,7	63,2	-18,1
Employed persons [N]	553 503	377 426	-176 077	-	-	-	2 613 888	1 386 407	-1 227 481
Employed persons [%]	17,5	21,4	-31,8	-	-	-	82,5	78,6	-47

Sources: Russian agricultural censuses 2006 and 2016. Registered but inactive agricultural producers are omitted.

Throughout the twentieth century, academic and political literature on peasantry was heavily influenced by Lenin, Kautsky, and Chayanov, whose political and theoretical differences defined diverse approaches within the critical rural sociology and, more broadly, in the agrarian debate [Bernstein 2009]. The importance of these authors was so strong that, nowadays, some scholars are still identified as their heirs, despite peasantry

having undergone through many changes worldwide since the publication of those classical readings.

Brazilian rural sociology did not escape this influence. Until the 1990s, the main debates in Brazilian rural sociology focused on the limits of social reproduction of the peasantry (or smallholders<sup>1</sup>) due to the advance of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture. In general, while Leninists and Kautskyans provided competing explanations for the end of smallholders [*Silva* 1981; *Wilkinson* 1986], followers of the Chayanovian perspective sought to demonstrate why peasantry would survive, despite increasingly precarious conditions [*Wanderley* 2009; *Wanderley* 1985]. This discussion gained new contours only with the gradual incorporation of new references, mainly from French and North American rural anthropology, which replaced the thesis of the end of the peasantry with the recognition of family farming functionality to capitalist development [*Veiga* 1991; *Abramovay* 1992].

Brazilian rural sociologists have been discovering new international perspectives on peasantry, including writings of Chayanov that are only now being translated to other languages, including Portuguese [*Chayanov* 2017]. The dialogue with Nepochayanovian perspectives, such as one supported by Ploeg [*Ploeg* 2008], is intense and Brazilian sociology is discussing the logic of the “new peasantries” [*Schneider, Niederle* 2010; *Goergen* 2017].

In Russia, discussion about the future of peasantry ceased to make sense considering the changes imposed by the Soviet regime. On the one hand, the socialization of land and other resources led to the disappearance of traditional peasantry as a social category, at least if we define it as “small agricultural producers, who, with the help of simple equipment and the labor of their families, produces mostly for their own consumption, direct or indirect, and for the fulfillment of obligations of political and economic power” [*Shanin* 1987a, p. 3], although official Soviet academic and political discourse still used the term “kolkhoz peasantry”. On the other hand, academic discussion about peasantry also changed, since official Soviet Marxism monopolized rural sociology, while other groups of leading rural scholars were forced to migrate to other countries or were persecuted.

Therefore, it was impossible to develop a critical rural sociology in the Soviet Union. Only in the last three decades, has an effort in this direction been made by the rediscovery of the writings of Chayanov and his colleagues. However, in the 1990s Russian rural studies shifted from Soviet Marxism to a neoliberal approach with its focus on markets and the capitalist transition. Critical rural sociology, being established internationally, was still not an important framework for Russian rural studies. Besides, the word “peasant” is slowly moving out of Russian rural discourse and is substituted by family farmers and subsidiary households.

In sum, we see a striking difference between discussions on peasantry in Brazil and Russia. In Brazil, the peasant question is widely discussed in academic studies and political debates, while in Russia discussions on peasants are marginal. The difference can be partly explained by the difference of peasant identities in Brazil and Russia. We view peasant identity as a relational category, which was socially constructed and reconstructed throughout peasant history in both countries in different ways. Furthermore, it serves not only as an analytical category for scholars, but also as a

<sup>1</sup> Because of its so-called “communist appeal”, peasantry was a term almost forbidden by the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985).

tool in discourses and narratives about agrarian policy. Considering that all identities are relational constructions, the article deals with following research question: how are peasantry and family agriculture positioned in the social fields in relation to other actors in Russian and Brazilian rural areas, such as agribusiness?

## Peasantry as a mode of production and socio-political identities

Rural scholars describe peasantry as a political-economic mode of production, a class, a local community/society, or a specific culture. In the majority of these perspectives, peasantry is represented from a ‘substantialist’ point of view, given that it contains a set of distinguishing attributes. Here we propose to complement this view with a relational perspective. Unlike the substantialist approach, which seeks for definitions on the basis of attributes such as practices, which allow to identify the object in any context, the relational approach seeks for definitions on the basis of relations. We use the relational approach to consider peasantry as a set of identities, which are socially constructed through relations of peasants with the wider society.

Although relational sociology clearly distinguishes between ‘substantialist and relational thinking’ [Emirbayer 1997, p. 282; see also Donati 2015], we do not consider them as antonyms. We propose a relational analysis as an addition to traditional substantialist approach, which repetition, from our point of view, is still indispensable and provides some key understandings of peasantry.

In order to define the “substance” of peasantry, we follow the fundamental Marxist and Chayanovian findings on peasant dynamics. From Lenin’s *Development of capitalism in Russia* [Lenin 1967] we borrow the idea of peasant differentiation and two paths of capitalist development in rural areas (the so-called Prussian and American paths). From Chayanov we borrow the idea of peasant resilience to capitalist and socialist transformations and the ability to preserve the distinctiveness of peasantry, which creates difficulties in conceptualizing peasantry using Marxist and neoliberal doctrines [Shanin 1972].

Chayanov understood peasantry as a specific mode of production based on two types of balances: between labor and consumption and between drudgery and utility [Chayanov 1986]. According to Ploeg, a Chayanovian reading on contemporary peasantry must consider other types of balance (or ordering principles), like those that are established between production and reproduction, internal and external resources, scale and intensity, people and nature, and autonomy and dependence [Ploeg 2013]. This perspective defines peasantry as a particular mode of production, which exists within an economy dominated by capitalist relations, but is not structured as a capitalist enterprise. In addition to a set of agricultural practices, peasantry generates particular forms of social organization, which are not guided by the logic of capitalist societies. For example, Chayanov saw peasant cooperation as a source of resilience for peasant small-scale production in the era of mechanization and large-scale production [Chayanov 1991].

In sum, we follow a Chayanovian perspective and consider peasantry as a specific mode of production and life, which can be very resilient to capitalist and socialist transformations. However, we accept the relevance of the Marxist argument



of the social differentiation of peasants. As we show, differentiation is ongoing in Brazil and in Russia. Nonetheless, we are not able to understand peasantry without adding to this debate a relational analysis of its socio-political identity. Certainly, a peasant's identity is embedded in the specific configuration of their productive and organizational practices. However, the construction of this identity also depends on a discursive work of semantic framing [Goffman 1986]. It implies an interpretative work to organize an incredible diversity of social practices, affirming those that are “distinctive” of the peasantry while excluding others that are imputed to other social groups (family farmers and agribusiness, for example). That interpretative work is being done by peasants themselves and by other social groups including academics.

In brief, the term “peasant” is a historical construction determined by economic, social, and cultural practices, and a discursive and political construction of distinctiveness, without which it is impossible to confer a common identity to the diverse social actors under the umbrella of peasantry.

### **The identities of Brazilian and Russian peasantry: peasants, family farmers, or smallholders?**

The differences in peasant identities are rooted in different histories of Brazilian and Russian peasantry. We show the emergence of the notions of family farmers and smallholders as conceptual rivals of peasantry and the differences in the interplay between those categories in the Brazilian and Russian contexts.

The occupation of Brazilian territory was marked by the conflict triggered by the arrival of the Portuguese and Spanish to Latin America. The land system configured a geopolitical structure that is still evident today in the current division of Brazilian states. Known as *sesmarias*, this system was the basis for the development of the plantation system with slave labor (initially indigenous and then African). Until 1850, the Brazilian economy was based almost exclusively on slave labor [Wanderley 2014].

In 1822, Brazil became independent and, from this moment onward, the immigration of Europeans from different ethnicities and origins intensified. The aim was to create a stratum of “free” workers for the *haciendas* (large estates) and to promote the “whitening of the Brazilian population” that, according to the racist elite, had become too black because of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the origin of the Brazilian peasantry can be attributed to the confluence of different processes that led to the formation of an enormous diversity of social groups, mainly European immigrants from different ethnic origins, escaped or freed slaves, and indigenous communities that survived the genocide. Each of these groups developed a set of relatively specific socio-economic forms of agricultural production and rural lifestyle. The most notable differences include the forms of land ownership and the division of labor, whether familiar or collective. In comparison to Russian history, the utility of the concept of peasantry to characterize these Brazilian social groups has always been under intense discussion. Even the social actors themselves, which could be substantially defined as peasants because of their mode of production, do not identify

<sup>2</sup> We should note that 5 million African slaves came to Brazil. No other place in the world has received so many slaves. In the US, there were about 400,000.

themselves as peasants, preferring to refer to other identities that express their multiple forms of relationship with land, labor, and nature, such as *colonos*, *parceiros*, *meeiros*, *faxinalenses*, *quilombolas*, *geraizeiros*, *lavradores*, *ribeirinhos* etc [Niederle et al. 2014].

In Brazil, during the first half of the twentieth century, the peasant forms of production in rural areas remained on the margins of the export-oriented hacienda and, because of that, were far from the interests of the state. It was only in the 1940s that peasants caught the attention of the government. Under the influence of the Brazilian Communist Party, peasant movements (*Ligas Camponesas*) emerged to face the oligarchic control of the state. The main demand of these movements was a massive land reform [Medeiros 2015].

Facing economic crisis in the early 1960s, the government proposed a set of economic reforms, including a program of land reform. Although the program was much less radical than the Communists expected, it was enough to produce a strong reaction from the agrarian elites, which triggered the military coup of 1964. Thereafter, the peasant social movements were exterminated, and their leaders killed. The military government pursued public policies which facilitated an even greater concentration of land, pushing small farmers to urban areas, where they would serve as a reserve workforce for nascent national industry. The term “peasant”, by its supposed ideological connotation, was then banished from literature and public discourse and replaced by “smallholders”.

The military regime lasted until 1985. Only in the beginning of 1980s, with the emergence of movements for re-democratization, did peasants return to the political scene. The main milestone in this sense was the emergence, in 1984, of the Landless Movement (MST), which began to capitalize on the new struggles for agrarian reform. The new constitution of 1988 and the agricultural (1991) and agrarian (1993) laws opened the possibility for the state to create specific agricultural policies for this social segment [Picolotto 2014].

Another economic crisis that followed the process of re-democratization put Brazilian agriculture in a particularly difficult situation. The smallholders were the primary losers of the commercial liberalization of the early 1990s, mainly due to their inability to compete with producers from other Mercosur countries. In response, in 1995, the government created the National Program of strengthening of family agriculture (PRONAF). Note that an entirely new identity emerged in the Brazilian political scene at the moment. Until then, almost no one used the term “family farming” to refer to smallholders.

To understand this interpretive change, it is important to emphasize the role of rural sociology. Although the majority of critical social scientists were persecuted during the military dictatorship, with the democratic reopening of the 1980s, an intense movement of theoretical renewal came to the fore in all social sciences, which also took advantage of the return of many exiled scholars. For Brazilian rural sociology, this was the moment to participate in the ongoing neo-Marxist debate in the US and Europe. Much of this debate was aimed precisely at the conditions of social reproduction of “petit commodity production” in advanced capitalist countries [Bernstein 1986; Friedmann 1978].

Brazilian rural sociology and anthropology were strongly influenced by French literature, and from this, important research projects were conducted to characterize the socio-cultural dynamics of the Brazilian peasantry [Lamarque 1993]. The term “peasantry” once again returned in the discourses of rural sociology and anthropology.



It was in the heart of this new theoretical discussion that some Brazilian researchers began to incorporate the notion of family farming, which was already used in both the US and France. Several scholars started then to argue that this social segment was the main base of capitalist development in advanced countries, so that if Brazil wanted to follow this way, it should support family farmers [Abramovay 1992].

To some extent, it can be said that scholars transferred the idea of family farming into the state and social movements, which found in it a new alternative of collective political action. However, not all social movements bought the idea. In particular, the agrarian movements most closely linked to what would later become the Via Campesina, mainly MST, remained critical of the notion of family farming. For them, this identity not only hides the differences among multiple rural social groups, but also disarms the political critique of capitalism, since, unlike peasantry, family farming plays a useful role in capitalist development [Medeiros 2015].

The history of Russian peasantry had a significant turning point – the mass collectivization campaign from the end of 1920s until the second half of 1930s. Before that period, traditional peasants dominated Russian agriculture.<sup>3</sup> They were close to the abovementioned general definition of peasantry [Shanin 1987b], being defined as family based agricultural producers, occupied primarily in agriculture [Figes 1987].

Land belonged to rural communities, which periodically redistributed it according to consumption needs or the labor capacity of peasant families, i.e. there was no peasant private ownership of land. Moreover, the Russian peasantry had been a politically subaltern stratum from medieval era. Land and peasants themselves belonged to aristocratic landlords. The liberation reform of 1861 by the Alexander II made peasants personally free, and the Stolypin agrarian reforms (1906–1911) attempted to destroy communal property on land and substitute it with private property of peasant families. That reform was the first attempt to create a stratum of capitalist family farmers in Russia.

Soviet Marxists were always suspicious about peasantry, being neither capitalist nor proletarian. The mass collectivization campaign changed the situation completely. Rural population faced a new socio-economic reality. However, throughout the Soviet period, even the official stratification model identified kolkhoz peasantry as a distinctive social group. Therefore, we argue that, despite the socio-economic nature of peasants radically changing, their self-identification as peasants was resilient. The basic reason is that peasants did not transform into rural workers (hired labor). First, officially they were not workers but members of a collective farm. However, it was more a symbolic status and the differences between collective and state farms were blurring. Second and most importantly, rural populations were allowed to keep their own small gardens and farm animals. That activity preserved connections with the traditional peasant lifestyle of their parents and grandparents.

Soviet agricultural enterprises and the household plots of their members constituted a symbiosis between large and small agricultural producers [Nikulín 2003]. The management of large farms supported (for low prices or even for free) households with fodder, agricultural machinery services and tolerated pilfering. In sum, we can identify kolkhoz and sovkhoz workers as quasi-traditional peasants.

Despite that identity resilience, Soviet kolkhoz peasantry were no longer pre-socialist self-reliant family-based farms. Connections to collective farms changed their

<sup>3</sup> We consider only traditional area of Slavic population in the European part of Russia. Thus, we simplify the overall picture, as we do not take into account Siberian nomads and Muslim regions of Russia and USSR.

lifestyle, practices, and self-perception although they did not undermine them completely. That is why lately during the post-socialist agrarian reforms the majority of kolkhoz peasants did not return to their historical roots but preferred to stay in reorganized former collective farms.

Russian post-Soviet peasantry evolved from kolkhoz peasantry through radical market reforms and changed its nature and identity. While in a socialist economy peasant identity established in relations to proletariat, in a market economy it has other references, i.e. agribusiness and family farmers.

The post-Soviet Russian government conducted radical agrarian reforms which either reorganized collective and state farms into capitalist or cooperative enterprises or divided them into a number of family farms. The ideological leaders of privatization said that their primary goals were not so much economic, but political.<sup>4</sup> This meant that privatization was a tool which should make impossible the restoration of a planned economy and communism in Russia. As early as 1990, the government issued a special law on peasant (farmer) holdings, thus blurring the distinction between family farmers and peasants, as in legislation those terms were used synonymously.

The reformers advocated Stolypin agrarian reform in Russian Empire,<sup>5</sup> which had aimed to transform traditional peasants into capitalist family farmers and tried to transform kolkhoz members and sovkhoz workers into family farmers taking the agrarian model of Western Europe as an example. Therefore, two intersecting groups of agricultural producers established after the neoliberal reforms, namely, the 'old' group of household agricultural producers, rooted in the Soviet agrarian structure (smallholders), and the newly emerged group of family farmers (entrepreneurs).

Neoliberal reforms in Russia provoked discussions about family farming and peasantry in rural studies, similar to those in Brazil (for an overview of the discussion see [Kurakin 2007a; Kurakin 2007b]). Family farmers and peasants were conceptually associated with capitalist agriculture and opposed to socialist collective agriculture. It is no surprise then that the leftist critics of market reforms did not consider peasants as their allies, strongly opposed the dismantling of kolkhozes into private farms, and voted for legislation which preserved the kolkhoz peasantry as members of production cooperatives [Vershinin 2015].

The successors of the Soviet collective farms are often called large farm enterprises (LFEs), and they remain one of the major agricultural producers in Russia today despite the aspirations of 1990s reformers who expected individual farmers to constitute the core of Russian agriculture. The role of the latter is still quite modest despite their recent positive dynamics [Wegren 2011]. On the contrary, in the 1990s, the role of household plots rose dramatically during the market reforms, as they became the major source of subsistence for the impoverished rural population [Kalugina 2001]. However, since the start of economic recovery after the radical market reforms, household agricultural production has been decreasing.

The leading role at the first stage of the transformation of LFEs was played by the former heads of collective farms with the help of the former kolkhoz/sovkhoz elite, trying to accumulate land shares and take control of farms. Later, non-agricultural

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<sup>4</sup> Citations from Anatoly Chubais, one of the 'fathers' of Russian privatization, see in: Voucher as a "Nail in the Coffin of Communism" (2022). *TASS*, September 22, 2022. Available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/4593254>, accessed 12.12.2023 (in Russian).

<sup>5</sup> Comparison of Stolypin's and Yeltsin's agrarian reforms see in [Uzun, Shagaida 2015].

investors (including foreign companies, which, however, do not play a decisive role today) invaded the land market [Rylko, Jolly 2005]. This process resulted in establishing of agroholdings which began to dominate in the certain regions [Davydova, Franks 2015]. The emergence of big agribusiness leads to blurring the identity of corporate farms.

The same process of differentiation is also relevant to households and family farmers. Despite household production is generally shrinking; a small proportion of them turned into a sort of “professional” agricultural household producers [Uzun 2010]. Family farmers were also professionalizing, reducing in number while enlarging in size. This meant that differentiation into winners and losers in all three types of agricultural producers, i.e. households, family farmers and corporate farms, is under way. Another specific feature of Russian agriculture is the mutual ignoring of agroholdings and farmers, resulting in the absence of collaboration in supply chains [Barsukova 2016]. It also led to the emergence of isolated worlds of agribusiness and family farming.

We can draw several conclusions from these brief outlines of Brazilian and Russian peasantries. First, the different histories of Brazilian and Russian peasantry determine different structure of peasants today. Russian peasantry was a comparably homogenous group, which was radically transformed several times throughout its history which shook but did not destroy its identity; Brazilian peasantry was initially a more heterogeneous group with ongoing battles for identity. Second, in post-Soviet Russia, the terms “peasantry” and “family farmers” are sometimes used as synonyms, and, more important, have never been a serious political issue; in Brazil family farming emerged as an alternative socio-political identity for smallholders, leaving the peasant identity to be revindicated only by scholars or Marxist social movements, but not for the famers themselves, who still identify themselves according to different identities under the “family farming” umbrella. Third, in Brazil and in Russia, peasantry is differentiating into winners and losers, i.e. household plot holders vs family farmers in Russia and rural poor vs family farmers in Brazil. Fourth, in Brazil, peasantry is associated with leftwing ideology and movements; in Russia, peasantry was reintroduced into the social discourse as a capitalist agent in a form of family farming (agrarian entrepreneurs).

## Peasants and agrarian policy

The most important implication of peasant identities is that they can be and are utilized in political debates and narratives, which shape the agrarian policy of a society. Below we show how dramatically different peasant identities manifest themselves in Brazilian and Russian agrarian discourses and policies.

Since the 1990s, family farming has gained enormous legitimacy vis-à-vis Brazilian society. The ability of this segment to produce food and absorb labor, in contexts of inflationary crisis, rural exodus, or high unemployment, became an important foundation for its legitimation [Grisa, Schneider 2015]. However, the institutionalization of public policies for family farming came with the intensification of social struggles for the recognition of other related identities, establishing the diversity of the rural world as an inescapable characteristic [Picolotto 2014]. An example was the construction of a national policy for the sustainable development of “traditional communities”.

This denomination encompasses, for example, the indigenous and *quilombola* communities (descents of slaves) who have always had some difficulty in adopting the identity of family farmers because the latter became strongly associated with the values and ways of production of the descendants of European immigrants.

The heterogeneity of family farming can also be seen in economic dimensions. The neoliberal argument suggests that only a few family farmers are economically viable. The remainder, the so-called “rural poor” – about 3 million out of a total of 4.3 million establishments classified as family farms – are seen as unable to earn a living by means of agricultural activity and need social assistance. This analysis supports arguments for the inability of the poor people to become “real farmers”. They question the state’s “insistence” on supporting unproductive farmers with agricultural policies [Navarro 2016; Buainain et al. 2013; Alves, Rocha 2010].

Because of this, some scholars are returning to the notion of “smallholder”, arguing that the term “family farming”, given its heterogeneity, is not helpful for analysis. This is a way of excluding the multiple meanings of family farming, which are, above all, sociopolitical. Agrarian elites attempt once again to demonstrate that “there is only one agriculture” in Brazil. This narrative hides the historical conflicts between the subaltern groups in rural areas and the haciendas. While family farming united subalterns into a new and strong identity, agrarian elites built their own identity around the notion of “agribusiness” [Ioris 2017]. This identity also includes heterogeneous actors and thus establishes itself as the opposite pole in the disputing narratives that have marked the Brazilian countryside in the last two decades [Niederle et al. 2019].

This opposition was institutionalized in two ministries for agriculture. In addition to the traditional Ministry of Agriculture which mainly served the agribusiness segments, in 1999 the Ministry of Agrarian Development was created to manage policies for family farming. In 2016, this Ministry was closed along with many of the policies supporting family agriculture. Agribusiness insisted that the rural poor should only be supported by social policies that guarantee their survival, while “real farmers” must undergo a new technological modernization shock, which would create a highly productive, specialized, and capitalized rural environment. Along with this emerged the narrative that productive family farming should be treated as part of agribusiness and therefore with traditional agricultural policy instruments [Niederle et al. 2019]. Accordingly, since 2019, family farming has also been under responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Due to the heterogeneity that characterizes Brazilian family farming, one of the main risks currently experienced by the social movements and unions that have adopted this identity as agglutinative of their actions is the disintegration of their social base. In recent years, many capitalized family farmers have been attracted by the conservative discourse of the agrarian elite according to which they are “welcomed to the club” of “real farmers” (i.e. agribusinesses). Agribusiness political entities try to separate these farmers from social movements and unions, bringing them into their political coalition [Bruno 2016]. In some territories, it has already resulted in serious conflicts between family farmers, on one side, and traditional black and indigenous communities, on the other.

The efforts of unions and social movements to keep these farmers in their social base led to the intensification of conflicts with other social groups for whom these “rich” family farmers already act as a kind of “small agribusiness” (*agronegócinho*) that reproduced the same productive (export monocultures) and political-cultural

(conservatism) logic historically defended by the agrarian elites. Precisely in order to distance themselves from these farmers, certain agrarian social movements, scholars, and some policy makers reaffirm the “peasant” identity. For them, what unifies all of peasants is the fact that they incorporate innumerable elements of “peasant logic” or of a “peasant mode of production”, which are expressed not only in the ways they do agriculture, but also in the mechanisms of reciprocity and community organization. The main representative of this narrative is the Via Campesina and some academics [Fernandes 2014; Oliveira 2001].

Russian agrarian policies in post-Soviet period can be divided in the following stages: 1) the privatization of land and enterprises (1992), 2) the national project “The development of agro-industrial complex” (2006–2007), 3) the food security doctrine (2010), 4) accession to WTO (2012), and 5) import substitution (since 2014) [Barsukova 2017]. Briefly, Russian agrarian policy shifted from neoliberalism towards developmentalism and state patronage and from pro-farmer privatization (at least, in declaration) towards an agribusiness skewed policy.

After the radical market transformations in the 1990s, Russian agriculture laid in ruins. However, it was not only the neoliberal reforms which were responsible for that. Late Soviet agriculture already had big troubles. The initial plans of the neoliberal reformers to create farmer-based agriculture failed, and the state strategy has changed since Putin came to power [Wegren *et al.* 2018]. Russia became a significant player in wheat global markets, and wheat became its major export crop. However, the overall Russian protectionist policy prevented the participation of the country in the international division of labor to avoid relying just on a couple of staple crops and importing everything else. The third aspect of agrarian policy was the strategy of enhancing agricultural exports. In sum, Russian agriculture today largely relies on agribusiness in achieving national goals of increasing exports and food security [Barsukova 2016]. Despite the presence of foreign capital in Russian agriculture [Visser *et al.* 2012], the protectionist policy of the Russian state prevented the capture of national agriculture by transnational companies, and thus domestic agribusiness plays the leading role in agricultural growth.

In the eyes of the state and considered common knowledge, a major part of Russian household agricultural producers today, unlike family farmers, do not have the image of ‘real farmers’, who have the ability to ‘feed the country’. In other words, smallholders are not considered ‘professionals’ in agriculture. Furthermore, many rural households are happy to stop agricultural production when they have the chance. In sum, rural households have the image of peasants, because they engage in agricultural production, but they are not considered ‘professional farmers’.

Unlike Brazil, the identity of Russian peasantry does not have any vital challenges today, as it has not yet emerged as a social force or an important reference in agrarian discourse. The traditional notion of peasantry is today divided into family farmers and smallholders (rural households), which have different interests and agendas. In Russia, both family farmers and rural households define themselves as non-agribusinesses. State policy also creates boundaries between agribusiness and others, especially when the government launched the policy of export growth and import substitution [Barsukova 2016]. In contrast to Brazil, where agribusiness started to seek allies among family farmers, Russian agribusiness either ignores or competes with the latter. Russian successful family farmers are not ‘welcomed to the club’ unlike their Brazilian counterparts.



However, family farmers and rural households have different ways of interaction with agribusiness. While family farmers became competitors to agribusiness, especially in agriculturally attractive regions in the Russian south, and expect fair competition, rural households expect from agribusiness a continuation of symbiotic practices and social responsibility. Therefore, claims of smallholders and family farmers lie in economic and social domains respectively, excluding any common ground between those groups of modern ‘peasantry’.

Smallholders and family farmers have demonstrated diverse dynamics in the post-Soviet period. During the 1990s, household agricultural production in Russia gained extreme importance in being responsible for more than half of agricultural GDP. Since then, the role of household agricultural production has been steadily decreasing, and now households are responsible for about a third of agricultural GDP, which is still a comparatively high share. Therefore, Wegren uses the term “left behind”, when describing the perspectives of smallholders (households) in Russian agriculture [Wegren 2018]. Nonetheless, despite their slow marginalization, smallholders have created culturally grounded but not institutionalized field of subsistence agriculture [Visser *et al.* 2015].

Despite Russian pro-agribusiness state policy, neither rural households nor family farmers have ever really struggled for their identity. The vast majority of kolkhoz peasants preferred to stay in reorganized collective and state farms instead of establishing their own business [Amelina 2000]. Family farmers today have a clear image, identity (internal as well as external), and even official organization—The Russian Association of Peasants (Farmers) and Agricultural Cooperatives. However, they do not form a political force or movement and are unable to act collectively [Mamonova, Visser 2014]. Agricultural cooperatives are not developed [Sobolev *et al.* 2018; Yanbykh *et al.* 2019].

We summarize this section with two conclusions. First, in Brazil, agribusiness is trying to make a coalition with family farmers, while in Russia family farmers started with the image of a capitalist alternative to collective agriculture but later became ‘less capitalist’ in comparison to agribusiness. Second, the peasant identity (and the struggle for it) is more acute in Brazil than in Russia because it is used by Brazilian social movements as an ideological resource, while in Russia peasant identity is nothing more than an image or academic category.

## **Conclusion: elusive peasant identity**

In both countries, we can still identify social practices that are related to traditional peasant agriculture. In this sense, it is possible to ratify the Nepochyanovian argument about the relevance of the peasantry, not as a class, but as a way of life or a productive logic [Ploeg 2013]. However, differentiation processes among peasantry are under way both in Brazil and Russia and the organizational practices in both countries are very different. While in Brazil peasantry includes strong social movements and cooperatives, in Russia peasantry is disorganized.

We also identified that, through the history of both countries, states actively create (directly or indirectly) the identities of peasants, family farmers, and smallholders; over the last decades, family farming emerged as a new identity, first in Brazil and then



in Russia. However, in both countries some family farmers are moving closer to the logic (or mode of production) of agribusinesses. Even though in Russia this has not yet challenged identities, in Brazil it creates problems concerning peasant identity. Because of that, some leftist movements have already contested the identity of family farming and supported other identities, including the return of peasantry as a politically collective actor.

The comparison of the identities of Brazilian and Russian peasantry leads us to the conclusion that peasantry as a ‘substantialist’ category is losing its descriptive power. In contrast, peasantry as a ‘relational’ category is useful in a political field. Therefore, where political tensions in agriculture and rural issues are open and acute, as in Brazil, the term ‘peasantry’ has become politically influential. On the contrary, in Russia, where the emergence of capitalism in agriculture and rural areas did not lead to broad and intensive political debates, protests, or revolts, the term ‘peasantry’ is losing its interpretive power.

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## Крестьянские идентичности в Бразилии и России

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### Аннотация

*Исчезновение крестьянства считается неизбежностью как с неolibеральной, так и с марксистской точек зрения. Однако в странах Глобального Юга крестьяне по-прежнему составляют существенную часть сельского населения и являются важными производителями сельскохозяйственной продукции. В Бразилии понятие «крестьянство» по-прежнему активно обсуждается как в академических кругах, так и в среде политики и управления. В России же после непродолжительного всплеска интереса в первой половине 1990-х гг. тема крестьянства ушла на вторые роли и, можно сказать, стала почти что маргинальной. Причина такого различия состоит не в том, что Россия прошла модернизационный период, а Бразилия якобы еще нет, поэтому и разговоры о крестьянстве в последней больше. На самом деле, сельское хозяйство Бразилии – это технически и организационно развитая отрасль, благодаря которой Бразилия уже много лет является важнейшим игроком на мировых продовольственных рынках, по порядку опережая Россию по валовым показателям сельскохозяйственного экспорта. На наш взгляд, причина кроется не только в технической и организационно-производственной эволюции сельскохозяйственного производства, но и в борьбе за смыслы и определения, когда крестьянская идентичность становится предметом переопределения и уточнения границ и отношений с близкими ей понятиями, такими как фермеры и личные подсобные хозяйства. Вопросу крестьянской идентичности в Бразилии и России и посвящена данная статья.*

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В статье бразильское и российское крестьянство рассматриваются с реляционной точки зрения. Реляционная социология предлагает уделять первостепенное внимание отношениям, нежели сущностям объектов. Подход с определением сущностей объявляется «субстанциалистским» и критикуется. Крестьянство, согласно субстанциалистскому подходу, должно обладать рядом атрибутов, которые и позволяют его идентифицировать и определять. Различные теории в рамках крестьяноведения акцентируют внимание на разных атрибутах: способе производства, классе, локальном сообществе, специфической культуре и т.п. Согласно реляционному подходу определения и границы задаются отношениями и связанными с ними нарративами, дискурсами и фреймворками. В отличие от радикальных версий реляционного подхода мы считаем, что субстанциалистский подход все еще незаменим при обсуждении крестьянства, поэтому мы добавляем его реляционной составляющей. По нашему мнению, для понимания развития крестьянства в обеих странах следует дополнить «субстанциалистский» взгляд на крестьянство (будь то марксистский или чайновский) «реляционной» интерпретацией, которая обращает внимание на социальное конструирование крестьянства как противостоющей агробизнесу идентичности, а также альтернативной фермерству и личным подсобным хозяйствам.

Как в Бразилии, так и в России группы сельскохозяйственных производителей, которых можно было бы по тем или иным основаниям причислить к крестьянству, играют заметную роль. В Бразилии фермеры (или, как их там называют, семейные фермеры) составляют значимую группу с точки зрения как производства, так и сельской занятости, и им уделяется отдельное внимание государством, которое инициирует специальные целевые программы поддержки. В России в 1990-х гг. важную роль в обеспечении продовольствием играли личные подсобные хозяйства населения, а зарождающееся фермерство было слабо и, казалось, обречено на исчезновение. Однако в последние годы фермерские хозяйства начали выходить на передние позиции, тогда как сельскохозяйственная активность личных подворий стагнирует.

Для сравнения крестьянских идентичностей в Бразилии и России мы, во-первых, проследили истории крестьянства в двух странах, так как идентичности всегда прочно укоренены в прошлом. Во-вторых, мы рассмотрели, каким образом понятие «крестьянство» используется при формировании аграрной политики в Бразилии и России.

Крестьянства Бразилии и России имеют разную историю, что, несомненно, сказывается на формировании крестьянской идентичности. Во-первых, несмотря на радикальные преобразования села в годы коллективизации, российское крестьянство хотя во многом и изменилось, но не утратило свою идентичность: даже в советских официальных документах устойчиво использовался термин «колхозное крестьянство». В Бразилии же, напротив, крестьянство изначально было сильно гетерогенной группой, а борьба за идентичность никогда не прекращалась. Во-вторых, в постсоветской России термины «крестьянство» и «фермерство» никогда друг другу не противопоставлялись, часто употреблялись как синонимы (например, в законодательстве и государственной статистике), а их определение не являлось серьезным политическим вопросом. В Бразилии термин «семейные фермеры» возник в качестве альтернативной социально-политической идентичности для мелких сельскохозяйственных производителей, в то время как понятие «крестьянство» использовалось только в академических кругах и левых социальных движениях, традиционно сильных в Бразилии. В-третьих, процессы дифференциации крестьянства происходят как в Бразилии, так и в России, однако ее результаты обозначаются по-разному: в Бразилии полюса обычно маркируются как «сельская беднота» и «семейные фермеры», а в России, как правило, говорят о фермерах и личных подсобных хозяйствах. В-четвертых, если в Бразилии крестьянство ассоциируется с левой



идеологией и движениями, в России с 1990-х гг. нарратив о крестьянстве описывал его как капиталистического агента в виде аграрного предпринимателя.

Что касается политической составляющей крестьянских идентичностей, то в Бразилии агробизнес, обычно противопоставляющийся в дискурсе крестьянам, пошел на создание коалиции с частью наиболее экономически успешных фермерских хозяйств. В России фермерство изначально получило имидж капиталистической альтернативы коллективным хозяйствам, однако позднее их стали противопоставлять уже «суперкапиталистам» в лице агробизнеса, с которыми у российских фермеров коалиции не сложилось. В Бразилии, в отличие от России, продолжается серьезная политическая борьба за крестьянскую идентичность, поскольку она используется различными социальными движениями как идеологический ресурс.

В истории обеих стран активную роль в формировании крестьянских идентичностей играло государство. Сама концепция семейного фермерства была выработана в Бразилии и завоевала популярность во многих международных организациях и странах, проникнув в том числе и в Россию. Данная идентичность традиционно противопоставляется агробизнесу. Несмотря на это, в обеих странах часть фермеров начинает приближаться к агробизнесу с точки зрения своего способа производства и экономической логики хозяйствования. В России данное обстоятельство пока не оказывает влияние на идентичности, тогда как в Бразилии это создает трудности для крестьянской идентичности, некоторые левые движения уже стали критиковать идентичность семейного фермерства и поддерживать иные идентичности, включая крестьянство как коллективного политического актора.

Таким образом, мы продемонстрировали, что современное крестьянство является как отображением развития определенной производственной логики, воплощенной в различных группах сельскохозяйственных производителей, так и политической идентичностью, которая, прежде всего в Бразилии, все еще используется социальными движениями, которые критикуют современную концепцию фермерства. В России, где становление капитализма в сельском хозяйстве не привело к масштабным политическим конфликтам, термин «крестьянство» теряет свой объяснительный потенциал и постепенно вытесняется термином «фермерство». Понятие «крестьянство» продолжает относительно активно использоваться только в определенных академических кругах.

**Ключевые слова:** крестьянство, Бразилия, Россия, фермеры, личные подсобные хозяйства, сельские домохозяйства, агробизнес, идентичность

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