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# **Peasants and agricultural wagedworkers in Argentina in the 20th — 21st centuries: Some paradoxes of the dichotomy ‘rural–urban’**

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*Abstract.* The article proposes an unusual starting point to consider the peasantry in Argentina — the concept of rurality. This paper is based on the already highly debated conceptualizations of the rural–urban question in dichotomous terms; the author develops an analytical approach that implies a complex perspective of spatiality in non-binary forms. Such a task involves the integration of other variables in the study of societies connected with the agrarian worlds, already stripped of obsolete univocal characteristics. To solve this task, the author revises some of the discussions of peasant decomposition and wage earning in Argentina. These debates have renewed the understanding of the present peasant and agricultural wage-earning in Argentina, given that historically there were only peasants in the ‘non-pampean’ area (outside the Pampas region). It was not until the 1960 that the peasant self-perceptions and organizations emerged under the slowing demand for labor in the industrial sector. After the analysis of documentary sources in various regions of the country, the author argues that there are rural workers of non-peasant origin, which can be empirically proved. They depend on subsistence activities with the classic peasant features. Agricultural workers and inhabitants of rural worlds are not necessarily the same subjects mobilized daily and being the result of the agro-industrial activities since the 1980s. Since then, they have acquired typical characteristics of the globalized capitalist mode of production. Thus, paradoxically, in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, in some regions of Argentina globalization creates the peasantry.

*Key words:* peasants, agricultural wagedworkers, rural societies, urban societies, Argentina, 21st century

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I will start with the concept of rurality to consider the peasantry in Argentina. To avoid confusing misinterpretations, this is a reflective, conceptual work with the qualitative empirical evidence collected in field studies during the last 17 years. In no way this work is conclusive or seeks to close the discussions on the relevant issues. On the contrary, this article aims at reconsidering and revitalizing such debates based on the challenges of the postmodern Western society for social researchers. In my case, these are highly debated sociologi-

cal conceptualizations of the rural and urban questions and their traditional references in the agrarian and industrial questions, i.e., the same dichotomous terms that modernity added to the social question. Therefore, I begin with the complex perspective that includes spatiality in non-binary forms, forms of social action and configurations of actors that constitute these spatialities.

The first issue that transforms traditional visions is the dimension of people's spatial mobility; the second one is the construction of territories and territorialities as a product of these mobilities; the third one is the agency with which subjects construct their personal, family, community and societal lives on a daily basis. Then other elements such as age, gender, origin, class, place and their intersections and current manifestations are highlighted. Another crucial dimension is the destination of production: internal market, external market, demanding and non-demanding, which refer to new ways for segmenting labor markets and building career paths that are no longer restricted to a single productive activity or branch. This situation is central to the new generations of workers, whose trajectories increasingly involve participation in rural labor markets or in agricultural activities with or without residence in rural areas.

The empirical data that supports the presented conceptual reflections was collected in non-Pampas regions of Argentine. This clarification is important since there are diversities between the agrarian social structures of the Pampean zone and of other agricultural economies due to the radical differences in history, characteristics, production practices, territorial construction, subjects and social actors participating in the national economy. All these elements require separate work to understand the processes involved, which are profoundly heterogeneous.

As an empirical basis, I included brief mentions of the surveys conducted in Patagonia — an area that specializes in production of stone fruits — and in the southwest of the province of Buenos Aires, which specializes in fruit and vegetable production — the city of Batán close to Puerto Mar del Plata, the only space in the Pampas region studied by my research team. It is the typical fruit and vegetable producer present in different areas of Argentina, close to intermediate cities or provincial capitals for the supply of fruits and vegetables at the local and regional levels. Therefore, its incorporation into the article is possible. In this group, the history of the Pampas region does not affect its development.

This framework allows to understand the ways in which the peasantry of Argentina is engaged in the wage work of agricultural production. Could it be that the key to the difference between actors is longer in off-farm work? Have the previously sectoral labor markets been assimilated? How does all this affect the traditional dichotomous spatiality? How should we approach it under the transformations of social relations? How should we understand the local in the global

social-economic dynamics? How do the peasants survive in the 21st century with its unemployment, modernization of production and traditional labor practices under the high qualification requirements and the many other conflicts? What are the actors of our time? Who are the peasants of Argentina in the 21st century?

### **Some persistent discussions: Rurality redefined**

When thinking about the transformations of rural societies and their impact on spatiality, it is important to start with the classic debates on the rural-urban relationship. The advance of capitalism in the agrarian world constituted the central theme of such classics as Marx, Lenin and Kautsky with the discussions about the persistence or disappearance of the peasantry; as Weber, Parsons and Tönnies who recovered the features of rural societies, basically agrarian, their growing secularization and urbanization, developing new ways of living and working. In both aspects, rural families with agricultural work for subsistence and/or products exchange accompany the advance of capital (or modernization) by entering the labor market as demanders or suppliers of labor (Crovetto, 2012; 2019). This was interpreted as a peasant decomposition.

However, the growing modernization and technologization of agriculture implied differences to what was proposed in classical studies. On the one hand, various works questioned the relationship between agricultural work and place of residence as in some markets the workers employed in agriculture are not always of peasant origin. On the other hand, intensive labor has created various ties between workers and employers: various hiring methods, significant differences in wages and working conditions, and 'secondary' markets (households' members helping the head employed in the seasonal harvest). These ideas were presented in the conceptions of off-farm work of the traditional peasantry, especially when it was considered as a social class, which did not always take place in Argentina, at least not in all its regions. It is vital to clarify that after the restructuring of agriculture, changes in the production of the non-Pampean agrarian economies were diverse (see, e.g.: Aparicio & Benencia, 2001). Likewise, several works on the female agrarian work question the relationship between it and place of residence, and the peasant origin of wagedworkers in non-pampean economies. Some works question the activities of children and adolescents — their employment in general and in agriculture in particular (Aparicio, 2007; 2009; Crovetto et al., 2015; Macri & Uhart, 2012; Macri et al., 2005; Forni, 1979).

Regarding the daily spatial mobility, first I analyzed the circulations through the 'rur-urban' spaces of the Lower Valley of the Chubut River (VIRCH) — an irrigated valley in Patagonia — to show the growing daily spatial mobility between rural and urban

areas (Crovetto, 2010; 2012; 2014; 2015). In 2021, I focused on a more conceptual level by considering the advances in the field and the corresponding theoretical reflections (Crovetto, 2021). The team I am a part of prepared a book on spatial movements between rural and urban areas in different regions of the country (Patagonia, NEA, NOA). This book shows the coexistence of urban and rural jobs in the annual occupational cycles and in the biographical trajectories of agricultural wageworkers, and a significant difference between the branches of the first job and the current one. More recent works on forms of learning and occupation have identified changes that migrations and annual mobility between branches bring to labor markets in the perspective of both workers and employers (Crovetto, 2018a; 2018b; Crovetto et al., 2020).

### **Argentina and the peasantry: An inconclusive debate**

In Argentina, the discussions about the decomposition of the peasantry and its incorporation into the wage labor markets of the 1970s changed the understanding of the peasant groups in the 1980s — 1990s. Moreover, these discussions clarified the characteristics of these social actors in Argentina today, considering that only the ‘non-pampean’ area was peasant historically, and with great force and presence, organized or not northern Argentina was more peasant than other regions. This was in addition to a stronger ethnic component of the original peoples.

It was not until the 1960 that peasant self-perceptions and organizations emerged under the slowing labor demand in the industrial sector. According to the data from documentary sources in various regions of the country (especially qualitative), the current existence of rural workers of non-peasant origin can be empirically proved. Their subsistence activities are one of the classic features of the peasantry. Agricultural workers and inhabitants of rural worlds are not necessarily the same subjects, are mobilized daily and are the result of the agro-industrial demands that since the 1980s have acquired the features of the capitalist mode of production — globalized and deepening its mechanisms.

But this repositioning of discussions would not make sense without focusing on the earlier debates of classical theorists — Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Chayanov and Russian populists, whose works helped to understand the positions and conceptualization that were made in Argentina. I will start mapping the trajectory of these discussions with some ideas of Murmis (1999), referring to Marx’ contributions to the analysis of agriculture, especially its key function in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and its strength as a sustainer of this mode of production, despite having been displaced from the economic center by industrial activity

once the transition was completed. Murmis considers “the society in which wage exploitation, accumulation and the market are generalized” (Murmis, 1999: 81). He emphasizes the careful reading of the social structure, its actors and their positions: “We found a systematic approach that combines the study of the internal structure of the sector with the general functioning of the capitalist system, when Marx analyzes the subsumption of agriculture and the operation of income and introduces figures of the landowner, tenant and rural proletariat, of the sharecropper and peasant, although granting them marginal or transitional positions” (Murmis, 1999: 50).

Besides the political role of the peasantry as a social group making a path for the anti-capitalist revolution, Marx also considered the peasantry as a social group impoverished and marginalized under capitalism. According to Murmis, this is the key for sociological analysis, for understanding great social processes and their local features: Marx was quite methodical in his know-how for seeking social transformation even before globalization of society, world economy and its permanent acceleration: “He developed a systematic theory as a theory of a moment in the historical process, situated that moment in history as a whole, including the future and the steps to be taken in the present to bring a desirable future, used theory to define social agents and consider their actions in specific situations, taking advantage of existing knowledge and fighting with it with what the nascent economy, history, biology, agronomic science, classical literature and philosophy could offer; all this was a part of Marx’ daily work and is present in his works on agriculture, its structure, history, and place in society” (Murmis, 1999: 53).

This affected the theoretical-methodological discussions in Argentina about the local peasantry and its characteristics. However, at first the most outstanding, classical theoretical ideas of the 20th century were debated. Thus, in 1985, Giarracca focused on the peasantry subordinated to the agro-industrial complexes such as tobacco in Mexico, but her examination of the theoretical peasant question is invaluable. She reviews and discusses the ‘functional dualism’ of the peasantry in relation to small agricultural exploitation presented by de Janvry in the Latin-American and European (Thomas, Znaniecki, Galeski, Servolin, Vergopulos, *Journal of Peasant Studies*) directions.

It is essential to delimit the analysis historically to define the peasantry, since there are different compositions in different historical moments and even different modes of production (Giarracca, 1983: 1–15). Thus, some interpret the peasantry either as a mode of production or a class or part of it. For Giarracca (1983), the most influential voices in Latin America on the peasantry as a mode of production were those of Servolin and Vergopoulos in 1976, of Meillasoux in 1978, of Bartra in 1974. Giarracca disagreed with de Janvry that “Marx and Chayanov considered the lack of gain in the peasant behavior as a result of the objective situation and not of premeditated behavior” (Gi-

arracca, 1983: 28). She argues that this reflection is associated with the initial appearance of labor markets. Then she proceeds to the debates of Chayanov and Lenin with Russian populists, especially on peasant differentiation that triggered the penetration of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture. Giarracca defines the peasantry “as a social class that cannot be characterized as a mode of production... This class or a class fraction (in general a social sector) has special characteristics within the capitalist social formation, and the most important is transience... The issue of peasant differentiation is crucial in the debate on the agrarian question... it has not been given due importance, especially since the explanatory model of peasant ‘functionality’ has been applied (in most cases supposes a homogeneous peasantry)” (Giarracca, 1983: 34–35).

Seven years later, Giarracca (1990) proposed to resume the discussion about the peasantry in Argentina, considering the text published in 1988 by Manzanal, who wrote about the mini farm in Argentina without defining the peasantry and taking it as a synonym, according to Giarracca’s criticism. The 1990s’ text highlights that Argentina could not participate in the 1970s’ debates on the peasant decomposition, among other reasons due to censorship and repressions of the civil-military dictatorship that made up the de facto government in the country. In this work, Giarracca refers to works of Archetti and Stölen (1974) on the differences between the producers who rely on family labor and peasants, of Bartolomé (1975) on the missionary settlers and of the Group of Rural Sociology of the Ministry of Agriculture on the small sharecroppers of Corrientes as ‘minifundistas’: “The definition ‘peasants’ was reserved for some groups of small farmers with strong cultural or ethnic identities or typically peasant demands. Today, this consensus seems to have broken: several studies generalize the category ‘peasant’ for any agricultural producer who does not use the labor of others or for any rural inhabitant who works on land. Thus, almost a half of agricultural producers in the country are peasants or smallholders” (Giarracca, 1990: 332).

In a detailed analysis of the problems to survey this type of actors, of the shortcomings of official surveys and of regional situations, Giarracca presents a variety of actors based on different measurements and corresponding theoretical and operational definitions. She also warns about the risks of the assimilation of the smallholder to the peasant in an agriculture like Argentinian, which was always eminently capitalist and modern and in those years was undergoing structural and technological transformations that left population in the labor market in power of employers, without land or with it but in deep impoverishment (whether residing in the countryside or having migrated to urban centers, increasing the scale of the Argentinian rural poverty).

Thus, wage-earning processes have been the basis for the transformation of the peasant-type social formations. On the data of the

first national censuses, Tasso (2000) shows the evolution and disappearance of activities related to agriculture and peasant formations in northern Argentina, particularly in the province of Santiago del Estero — area with the highest share of peasant population and culture in Argentina to this day. Tasso emphasizes that scales and concepts are no less important than definitions to understand the agrarian social structure of each historical moment, its transformations, appearance and disappearance of actors, technification and growth of agroindustry, decrease in the women participation in some tasks and increase in others. The transition to commercial and business agriculture is essential to understanding some key transformations, especially for the formation of labor markets for the peasant wage labor in the region. In short, it is fundamental for the development of adequate action programs.

### **Agricultural wage earners, peasants, and globalization in the non-pampean Argentina in the 21st century**

From the 20th to the 21st century, paradoxically, the peasantry appears in numerous regions of Argentina together with the local impacts of the highly globalized capitalist mode of production, which includes the circulation of values and intangible goods.

In the areas under study, with the interview method, we found out that workers, whether or not they are small producers, are employed in other productions and do not perceive themselves as peasants or linked to the countryside and agricultural production in the past. An exception is Bolivian producers and their descendants who do not perceive themselves as peasants but are family producers. In fact, they organize due to the idea ‘workers of the land’ or the national identity ‘Bolivian horticulturists’. In both the Lower Valley of the Chubut River (VIRCH) and in Batán they keep such features and behaviors.

In many cases, it is a ‘saving’ occupation in times of the high demand for seasonal labor that provides income in long working hours, especially when women pack cherries for export in the Patagonia. However, identification of agricultural work is an intellectual operation of researchers and not an identity that constitutes a collective. As Aparicio and Gras (2000) stress, access to knowledge about the behavior of actors is essential to broaden knowledge about the types of groups implied by the traditional structural characteristics of the typologies of actors. Such typologies become an instrument and a product. The perspective that includes the behavior of social actors is the key to understanding multiple territorialities in the purely rural physical space, which fade in a metamorphosis that absorbs post-modern and urban practices.

The Lower Valley of the Chubut River (VIRCH) was selected as the main area of the study in the Patagonian region, which



since the end of the 1990s has shown a significant growth of enterprises specializing in cherry production and demanding the largest number of workers for one month a year. Here too the low-scale diversified productions stand out (Crovetto, 2014) as requiring a constant occupation of labor, mostly the family one. For instance, among the fruit productions of the Lower Valley of the Chubut River, cherry production is indicative, since in the start and expansion phases of this production, which started just twenty years ago, women employed in packaging are not a part of the agrarian tradition, not of peasant origin, do not live in rural areas and are not engaged in other tasks during the rest of the year, as was recorded in other non-Pampas Argentinean productions such as citrus export in Tucumán. Adolescents and younger people participate in harvesting, although with less possibility of registration due to the widespread prohibition of child labor and the protection of adolescents. The latest field work at the VIRCH in 2019–2022 showed that the cherry production reached the consolidation phase, registering farms working for export or for domestic market, which differ in the need in temporary labor and in search of women for packing. Women interviewed are residents of urban centers of the Valley, some are employed in harvesting, while the majority works almost exclusively in classifying and packing the fruit for a brief period from October to January (summer in the southern hemisphere). They do not identify with agricultural work and even less with the peasantry, study at the university, are mothers and have other jobs during the rest of the year (mainly self-employed). The location of packing facilities is not random — it is a business choice based on the possibility of quickly hiring workforce that can complete long work shifts in rotating time slots, which transforms the pace and direction of the daily spatial mobilities of these territories. In high season, the fruit packing sheds work until the day's harvest is fully classified and packed or in long shifts of 24 hours a day.

Men interviewed on the farm are mostly from other provinces, young men from urban residences who are engaged in summer harvesting in different productions. During the rest of the year, they work in other branches, mainly in construction. The transformation of the labor market from dichotomous to mixed is evident: labor markets are increasingly rururban, and their participants in agricultural activities have access to services that were previously exclusive to industry or service sectors, especially those linked to telecommunications. They build communities from social networks, which allows them to maintain communication with families and employers and among themselves during the rest of the year. In the middle of the harvest, they compare employment conditions at different farms, sing and listen to music while harvesting to alleviate the hostility of a dry and extremely hot climate in summer.

The transformations of agricultural production and new links between the countryside and the city demand new explanatory models for understanding labor markets and new forms of the peasantry. The daily mobility of actors and their alternation in branches of activity was traditionally considered an exclusive today evidence of the formation of mass workforce engaged in different activities with relative ease and finding a refuge in agricultural activity for daily reproduction. But such workers do not identify with peasant groups, probably due to the strong association with work on peasants' own land.

My approach proceeds from the definition of labor markets that includes structural positions, symbolic resources and social practices, which affects the transformation of rural spaces and landscapes, the spread of packing sheds, the alteration of the local population each summer, which attracts harvesters and determines hundreds of women's daily activities during the rest of the year — they define themselves as local, but their families come from other Argentine provinces, and they work for international capital (of which they are unaware of and for which they do not express displeasure).

The relevance of cases is justified by the possibility to observe regularities and particularities in territories that differ in terms of agrarian social structure, technological development and access to differentiated commercialization circuits, all of which affect the organization and constitution of labor markets and their segmentation. Identification of such 'segmentations' contributes not only to the traditional conceptual frameworks for the study of labor markets, but also to the development of policies for the population that can no longer be thought of as 'rural' (at least not in terms of the agrarian world, peasant and small production) under the agro-industrial food production policies that displace populations from the city to the fields to survive with what they can, including rural residence. What tools are needed to address these highly challenging situations in sociology? What criteria are needed for non-agrarian ruralities that are not exclusively residential? The first step is to refuse the dichotomous vision of the world. The second step is search for ways for grasping the characteristics of postmodernity and for conceptualizing new spatialities and new social actors.

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**Крестьяне и наемные сельскохозяйственные рабочие в Аргентине в XX–XXI веке: некоторые парадоксы «сельско-городской» дихотомии**

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*Аннотация.* Статья предлагает непривычное основание для изучения крестьянства в Аргентине — понятие сельскости. Статья опирается на давно обсуждаемые концептуализации сельско-городской дихотомии, но автор разрабатывает аналитический подход, который предполагает комплексную трактовку пространства вне его бинарных форм. Такой подход включает и иные переменные в изучение общества, связанного с аграрным миром, который давно избавился от устаревших однозначных определений. Для разработки такого подхода автор реконструирует ряд дискуссий о разложении крестьянства и наемном характере сельского труда в Аргентине. Такие споры обновили понимание современного крестьянского и наемного труда в Аргентине с учетом того, что исторически крестьянство было сосредоточено за пределами Пампасов. Лишь в 1960-е годы здесь оформилось крестьянское самоопределение и крестьянские организации — под влиянием сокращающейся потребности промышленного сектора в рабочей силе. Проанализировав документальные источники из разных регионов страны, автор утверждает, что сельские работники сегодня не имеют крестьянского происхождения, и это можно подтвердить эмпирически. Их трудовые практики характеризуются классическими крестьянскими чертами. Сельскохозяйственные рабочие и сельские жители сегодня — это не обязательно одни и те же субъекты, которые трудятся на ежедневной основе и являются результатом агропромышленных трансформаций, запущенных в 1980-е годы. С того периода сельский труд обрел типичные черты глобального капиталистического способа производства. Парадоксальным образом на рубеже XX — XXI веков в некоторых регионах Аргентины глобализация порождает крестьянство.

*Ключевые слова:* крестьяне, наемные сельскохозяйственные рабочие, сельские общества, городские общества, Аргентина, XXI век