

Chayanov's peasant utopia and contemporary perspectives of a more just and ecological society

A utopia camponesa de Chayanov e perspectivas contemporâneas de uma sociedade mais justa e ecológica

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Abstract: For the sociologist Norbert Elias, the emergence of the utopian literary genre, initiated by Thomas More in the 16th century, constitutes an important indication of the transformation of the modern world. Since then, utopian works have expressed a growing number of reflections on the role of the State. It involves conceiving a model of social organization based on moral principles accepted as legitimate. Alexander Chayanov's thought is representative of these reflections by idealizing a peasant utopia as a perspective of a just world, with precursor principles of ecological justice. This type of utopia currently inspires choices and actions like those of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST) with a view to democratizing access to land. The concept of the "Comuna da Terra" settlement, advocated by the MST in the state of São Paulo, shares many points of affinity with Chayanov's utopia. Case studies of this nature is promising for discussing the construction of transformative orientations in Brazil.

Keywords: Chayanov, Norbert Elias, peasant utopia, agroecology, MST.

Resumo: Para o sociólogo Norbert Elias, a emergência do gênero literário utópico, inaugurado por Thomas More no século XVI, constitui um importante indício de transformação do mundo moderno. Desde então, as obras utópicas expressam um aumento crescente das reflexões sobre o papel do Estado. Trata-se de conceber um modelo de organização social fundamentado em princípios morais aceitos como legítimos. O pensamento de Alexander Chayanov é representativo dessas reflexões, ao idealizar uma utopia camponesa como perspectiva de mundo justo, com princípios precursores de justiça ecológica. Esse tipo de utopia anima, na contemporaneidade, escolhas e ações como aquelas do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) com vistas à democratização do acesso à terra. A concepção de assentamento "Comuna da Terra", preconizada pelo MST no estado de São Paulo, apresenta muitos pontos de afinidade com a utopia de Chayanov. O estudo de casos dessa natureza é promissor para discutir a construção de orientações transformadoras no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Chayanov, Norbert Elias, utopia camponesa, agroecologia, MST.

1. Introduction

The Russian thinker Alexandre Chayanov is one of the great references in terms of peasant and family farming studies. Because his life took place in a period of great transformation, which certainly favored his reflection on building a more promising future¹, his work presents thought-provoking ideas for conceiving social innovations, particularly in the agrarian sphere. However, if the social landscape at the beginning of the last century offered hope for a utopian reflection on a better world, the risks for the thinkers, innovators and critics of the period were equally important.

¹ By the way, van der Ploeg (2016) suggests that Chayanov's genius is a product of historical circumstances of social transition.

In fact, Chayanov's ideas did not correspond to the predominant orientation of the regime of "war communism" (Niqueux, 2023) led by Stalin, who was responsible for his assassination while in exile in Kazakhstan. As a result, his texts were forgotten for a long time, only to be rediscovered in the 1960s. In fact, part of his bibliographical output is still little explored. Therefore, this article focuses on his "peasant utopia", seeking to discuss the extent to which there are similarities with emerging contemporary proposals for agricultural alternatives and sustainable rural development, especially those disseminated by Via Campesina and the Landless Workers' Movement (MST).

To this end, the article first situates the production of Chayanov's utopian writings, considering in particular the teachings of Norbert Elias on the transformations of utopias, both scientific and literary, since Thomas More. Next, the central characteristics of a utopian peasant society, as conceived by Chayanov at the beginning of the 20th century, are presented. Finally, parallels are drawn between the thinking of this Russian author and contemporary constructions, with the aim of discussing points of inspiration from his utopian conception for perspectives on the transformation of agri-food landscapes, expressed notably in notions such as agroecology, food sovereignty, recampesination, multifunctionality of agricultural activity, urban agriculture and short agri-food circuits.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Utopia according to Norbert Elias

The sociologist Norbert Elias is indeed an insightful thinker, whose work covers a wide range of topics. As Marc Joly (2012) suggests, Elias made a notable contribution to clearing up the turbidity surrounding knowledge about Western society, and can be considered a major representative of an ideal type of sociological excellence, despite his late recognition (Moruzzi Marques, 2014). In fact, some of his texts have not yet been translated into Portuguese, such as those dedicated to reflecting on utopia (Elias, 2014). For our purposes, his ideas on the inflection that occurs in the development of utopian perspectives constitute a very interesting framework for situating Chayanov's peasant utopia. In fact, Elias' interest in utopias is part of his intellectual career focused on the sociological analysis of collectively shared knowledge, behaviors and beliefs. In this way, this sociologist defines utopia as an imaginary representation of society, which contains proposals for solutions to unresolved problems in a given historical reality and indicates changes that the authors or defenders of this utopian construction desire or believe can occur (Elias, 2014, p. 35-36). With this vision, utopia reveals a cognitive and emotional projection of the future, situated in time and space.

Norbert Elias develops a series of very consistent conceptual and methodological ideas for the study of utopias, which is pertinent for reconstructing conceptions of unresolved problems from the point of view of those who experienced the difficulties of a particular place in past societies, proposing, through utopian means, ways of overcoming them. From this perspective, a central task of this type of research consists of determining the human social problem for which a utopia presents possibilities of resolution, as well as explaining the reasons why the utopian author conceives a specific form of response. In addition, Elias (2014) considers that research into utopias must identify the focal public to which its author is directed, seeking to address its function in historical processes. It is thus a question of establishing as accurate a diagnosis as possible of the social experiences of the author and the intended readership. The literary form chosen for the utopian elaboration is a very important element of analysis for dealing with its public communication.

In fact, this approach not only considers the critical perspective of a given author in relation to the prevailing moral sense of his time, but mainly the means by which, or the means by which, political movements are produced. Utopia is established as an argumentative strategy for valuing certain social groups and perspectives of a just world, which in turn have a certain potential for confronting the social and political order in force.

In this sense, Elias' (1994) interest in the civilizing process awakens his attentive eye to the flourishing of the literary genre of utopias, which acquires greater relevance in a world with more and more pacified spaces, conducive to broadening the horizon of the thinkable. In this way, words come to possess greater power than the sword, favoring argumentative confrontations based on plural conceptions of a just world: public debate then tends to take center stage in social conflicts (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020).

It's also important to note that utopia for Elias can be positive or negative. The latter is much more often treated as a dystopia, as Quentin Deluermoz (2014, p. 11) points out. In any case, this way of treating utopias is associated with his reflections on the "civilizing process" (Elias, 1994, 1995) and the transformations of utopian productions, constituting an element for understanding civilizational changes.

It is worth noting that Elias considers the predominance of catastrophic utopias to have begun in the first quarter of the last century, the period in which Chayanov wrote his work. Prior to this, positive utopias, conveying hopes for a better world, had largely predominated. In this sense, it is possible to situate the author focused on in this article in a period of transition, whose utopian conception still tends towards blissful prospects for the future.

In his line of reasoning, Norbert Elias places great emphasis on the utopian work that can be considered the inaugural work of this literary genre, that of Thomas More, who, not by chance, launched ideas capable of answering the problem of the function of the state. In fact, the subsequent growth of utopian literature is closely associated with the formation of modern states. In other words, this phenomenon is linked to a major structural change, which leads to the emergence of new experiences and implies the emergence of new problems. More's *Utopia* can thus be seen as a symptom of the growth of conceptual reflection on the state, with new meanings linked to the changes underway.

The work in question was published in 1516, when More was 38 years old. A thinker educated in humanism, his reading of ancient texts and his circle of relations certainly inspired his critical view of the absolutist power of the royal crowns of his time. At this age, he was more prudent than when he was younger, when he directly affronted the powerful king of England, Henry VII (1457-1509). In fact, this prudence gradually turned into adherence to the configuration of power he was criticizing, and in his old age he became a direct advisor to Henry VIII (1491-1547). In view of this conversion, Elias considers two clearly distinct stages in More's life: as a young man, he defended religious tolerance and was an uncompromising critic of kings; but in old age, he became a strict orthodox in the obedient service of the monarch.

In any case, it was his humanist side that drove his secular outlook on the problems of his time. The inhuman way in which many of his contemporaries lived could not be overlooked by this humanist spirit. Utopia therefore represents an attempt to conceive a model of social organization based on the realization that human beings can and must act to reduce misery, not as a means of being rewarded in the afterlife, but for their own worldly sake. Thus, More is part of the first group in European history to conceive of a mission to reform the State and the

Church, even without giving up his religious faith and with extremely little room for maneuver for this reformist project².

Another point should be made about the atmosphere in which this utopia was produced. Indeed, the publication of a critical work against the powerful of the time could result in severe punishment. More (1997) therefore uses cunning devices to disguise his criticism, considering that the background knowledge of his time was a considerable obstacle to distinguishing reality from fiction. Incidentally, the interplay of languages used in the narration (the text was originally written in Latin, but most of the references, especially toponyms, are in Greek) paradoxically serves to reinforce the realism of the exposition and to indicate the absurdities of the narrative (Racault, 2005; Bore, 2014). Among these stratagems, the potentially dangerous critical comments and reports are attributed to an unknown wise Portuguese navigator called Rafael Hitlodeu, whose family name is deliberately peculiar, in order to leave traces of the fictional character of the work. The model of narration in the form of dialogue was exploited very skillfully by More (1997), who introduces himself and his friends into the conversation. Another cunning move was to present the idealization of a more democratic and just state, implanted on a fictitious island; however, at a time of great maritime discoveries (Lestringant, 2006), such an experience could be judged as effective and credible. Thomas More achieved this prodigy with great imagination and literary talent, which allowed him to launch his ideas to a wide audience, much larger if the work had been a philosophical treatise on the ideal form of state.

Until the end of the 19th century, the utopian literature inaugurated by the English thinker fed on scientific and technological advances to present promising prospects for the future. From then on, a profound transformation took place, with H.G. Wells being considered, as Elias (2014) proposes, the key author for analyzing the transition. His most important work for the purposes of this article was originally published in 1896 (Wells, 2019). While Wells, in various texts, shows signs of belief in the possibilities of a better society thanks to the progress of science and education, the author is perfectly aware of the threats that scientific development could pose to humanity. According to Elias (2014), Wells' ambivalent view of science heralds a change in the intellectual climate throughout the 20th century. The hitherto dominant confidence in scientific production and rationality, based on the certainty of its contribution to a better future, gave way to doubt, hesitation and disillusionment. The emergence of pessimistic utopias - or dystopias or projections of "nightmares", in Elias' terms - is therefore a symptom of a change in perspective. The explanations for this metamorphosis are somewhat obvious today: science and rationality are unable to prevent wars and have even become the basis for intensifying armed conflicts.

Other factors are less noticeable for this change in perspective, which Elias (2014) also sets out to highlight. More realistic representations of the world are often more unpleasant to the human eye. Darwin's (2014) evolution theory and the fall of the anthropocentric conception of the universe caused traumatic emotional disappointments. As Elias (2014) points out, it was emotionally and very satisfying to consider the Earth and humanity as the center of the universe, which offered many meanings for human life. To start seeing our planet as a tiny star in the Solar System, and even infinitely smaller in relation to the Milky Way or the observable universe, implies a strong erosion of meanings for the role of humanity³.

² It is important to emphasize that, despite the similarities with contemporary moral sentiments, at least in some aspects, the perspective of justice eternalized in Utopia must be studied taking into account its very limited "potential for realization". In other words, Elias (2014) recommends paying close attention to the historical processes of the specific socio-political context in which the work in question was produced.

³ On the other hand, it is also important to take into account the reaction of conservative forces which, almost simultaneously, produced new forms of differentiation and qualification of the modern human in relation to other living beings. Even Darwin (2002) in *The Origin of Man and Sexual Selection*, a decade after the publication of *The*

Dystopias then come to reflect the slow emergence of this world disenchantment, caused by scientific progress, which at the same time has produced new dangers and allowed us to see previously invisible risks. The perception of science is changing: it is no longer the basis for a better life, but the source of our worst nightmares. These are lost hopes, aggravated by catastrophic fears about the future.

These fears are associated with a human condition that is truly incapable of controlling the harmful consequences of social processes, which are, however, the work of human beings themselves. Worse still, as Elias warns, most of humanity finds itself submerged in an enigmatic environment: even though it uses cutting-edge technology from the natural sciences, the orientation of its societal practices is not linked to the slightest reasonable notion of how social processes occur.

3. Methodology

To do this, we mobilized primary data from previous studies carried out in land reform settlements in São Paulo, organized under the Sustainable Development Project (*Projeto de Desenvolvimento Sustentável*, PDS) model, as well as an in-depth literature review. This data was collected using a life story interview approach (Alberti, 2013; Bertaux, 1997), with the central aim of shedding light on the moral arguments mobilized by the interlocutors to support decisions related to engagement in the struggle for democratization of access to land and in defence of agroecology. The approach taken in the interviews was not really aimed at drawing parallels between the testimonies of the settled interlocutors and the Chayanovian peasant utopia, but rather at providing new interpretations of the conceptual constructions of the Brazilian rural world, with a focus on family farming. In this sense, the concept of utopia developed by Norbert Elias reveals great potential for analyzing historical elements, especially those that express conceptions of a just and ideal world (utopia) or an unjust and terrible world (dystopia). In fact, life stories collected in other studies can be reinterpreted in the light of different theoretical assumptions, offering new perspectives to the debate on the Brazilian rural world. After all, this is data collected using a sociological technique, which offers multiple possibilities for analysis.

In addition to exposing some of the appropriations of Chayanov's political perspectives and academic theses by the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), the idea is to deepen theoretical discussions about peasant utopias. In particular, we considered the notion of utopia developed by Norbert Elias, which has been little explored in Brazilian rural sociology. With this starting point, this text aims to shed more light in the field of rural studies on Chayanov's utopian construction.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Chayanov's utopian perspective

Chayanov has become a major reference point for contemporary studies on family farming. His utopian literary text reflects perspectives on the construction of a socialist society, with a notable role for peasants, which is conceived on the basis of his solid theoretical foundations

Origin of Species, sought to clarify "possible misunderstandings" in relation to the theory of natural selection applied to the human species. In this last work, Darwin reassessed his theory to propose the uniqueness of *Homo sapiens* in the face of natural selection, and it is considered one of his most controversial texts.

on the dynamics of family-based agriculture. It is therefore useful here to present his main contributions in this field, as well as the context of his production.

An economist and agronomist, this Russian thinker had a network of relationships in renowned European research centers, which allowed him to get to know the reality of European agriculture in great depth. In this way, Chayanov was able to examine the peasant production unit with great insight, considering the insufficiency of approaching the peasantry from the categories of "wages", "capital", "profit" and "income" (Abramovay, 1998). From this perspective, family farming can be conceived as a form of production organization whose main characteristic is the "absence of surplus value".

Unlike what happens in the context of capitalist companies, the income achieved by family production is characterized by a lack of separation between production and household budgets. Thus, it is the needs of the family members that guide the farmer's choices. With these premises, Chayanov believes that peasant rationality is based on the balance between work and consumption on the family farm. The labor efforts (physical and mental) of the family members are combined with family provisioning, with a view to providing a level of satisfaction and well-being that is considered acceptable⁴.

The energy employed by a worker in family agricultural production is stimulated by the family's consumption demands and, as they increase, the peasant's rate of self-exploitation grows as a result. On the other hand, the work effort is inhibited by how hard the work is. The harder it is, the peasant family begins to accept a lower level of well-being in return for a reduction in fatigue. Often, even to achieve this reduced level of comfort, great effort is required. In other words, the degree of self-exploitation is established by a relationship between the measure of satisfaction of family demand and the measure of workload⁵.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting the importance of the theme of family pluriactivity in Chayanov's work. In his elaborations on the organization of peasant economic activity, the author points out that the family "is sometimes obliged to employ part of its workforce in non-agricultural rural activities"⁶ (Chayanov, 1974, p. 44).

With these in-depth studies of the peasantry, Chayanov defended cooperativism and vertical integration in agriculture as the foundation of socialist construction in the Soviet Union. Although he considered collectivization projects with a view to socialism to be pertinent, the author resisted the forced way in which it was carried out in the USSR. He proposed a process of "self-collectivization", in other words, that participation in local farmers' cooperative organizations would be the means to modernize agricultural activity. With this grassroots organization, Chayanov believed that the incorporation of technologies would not destroy the essence of peasant agriculture, because the changes would take place in a democratic manner.

In fact, Chayanov was not proposing peasant isolation in order to preserve their traditions. In fact, in his eyes, cooperativism would make it possible to conceive a new form of agricultural

⁴ As Patrícia Schneider Severo and Flávio Sacco dos Anjos (Schneider Severo & Sacco dos Anjos, 2022) point out in Chayanov's work, this family logic does not prevent the recruitment of outside labor at certain stages of the production cycle to ensure that the needs of the domestic group are met.

⁵ Our translation of: "The energy developed by a worker on a family farm is stimulated by the family consumer demands, and as they increase, the rate of self-exploitation of peasant labor is forced up. On the other hand, energy expenditure is inhibited by the drudgery of the labor itself. The harder the labor is, compared with its pay, the lower the level of well-being at which the peasant family ceases to work, although frequently to achieve even this reduced level it has to make great exertions. In other words, we can state positively that the degree of self-exploitation of labor is established by some relationship between the measure of demand satisfaction and the measure of the burden of labor" (Chayanov, 1966, p. 81).

⁶ Our translation of the last part of the following paragraph: "Nuestra tarea es el análisis de la organización de la actividad económica de la familia campesina, una familia que no contrata fuerza de trabajo exterior, que tiene una cierta extensión de tierra disponible, sus propios medios de producción y que a veces se ve obligada a emplear parte de su fuerza de trabajo en oficios rurales no agrícolas" (Chayanov, 1974, p. 44).

production controlled by the farmers themselves, with repercussions on social structure. With this in mind, he believed that the Soviet revolution should not waste the productive and organizational energies of the peasants.

In this line of thinking, social organization should be based on the formation of independent cooperatives in which family farmers could make gains in scale thanks to the vertical concentration of production. The idea is to keep the scattered agricultural crops and livestock in the hands of the farmers, but with the processing and distribution of the products under the management of the cooperatives. Cooperatives would therefore allow farmers to control the processing and marketing stages. In this way, the state could interfere less, channeling more power to local entities and cooperatives. Maria Nazareth Wanderley's (2009) study of Chayanov's socialist conception is quite eloquent on this point. The author highlights the idea that, for the Russian thinker, "self-collectivization" would represent a true agrarian revolution, with the formation of "cooperative bodies" capable of promoting a profound process of vertical concentration in agriculture. If, in capitalist society, cooperation is an adaptive means for small farmers to survive, cooperativism in a socialist regime would form the basis of a new social structure, becoming a central component of a project to build a more egalitarian society.

Clearly, these concepts served as the basis for Chayanov's utopian thinking, which envisaged a transformation of the rural world and Russian society in such a way as to make peasants the unavoidable protagonists of a model of socialist democracy. In fact, Chayanov's utopia is part of a reflection on the problem of overcoming social inequalities with the establishment of a socialist or communist regime.

This elaboration was signed with a pseudonym (Kremnirov, 2023), because Chayanov anticipated the problems that these ideas could cause him. As in Thomas More's utopian work, Chayanov develops his narrative in the form of a dialog between Kremnirov and his Russian hosts, 60 years ahead of his time. In fact, the beginning of his journey into the future takes place when the central character of the work delves into texts from Russian utopian literature, prompting his imagination to question the characteristics of socialism.

Taking Elias' (2014) precepts into account, it is very plausible to think that Chayanov's literary effort was aimed at reaching a much wider audience than that of specialists on the agrarian question and thus fostering adherence to a political perspective to guide the implementation of Soviet socialism. In any case, the fiction was built on the aforementioned trip to the future, in which the protagonist is mistaken by his hosts for an American visitor, Charlie Man, who is keen to learn about the socio-economic changes taking place in Russia, especially in relation to agriculture. In his first observations of Moscow in 1984, the time traveler sees the city as a huge park, within which clusters of buildings resembling scattered small towns can be seen.

In his utopian model, Chayanov conceives of a solution that breaks with the profound separation of urban and rural life. Considering that large urban concentrations pose significant risks to the democratic regime, Chayanov idealizes a strong urban emptying, with a social organization under the peasant baton that transforms cities into a place mainly for recreational, sporting, associative and artistic gatherings. In this utopian society, transportation is highly developed, allowing for fast and frequent travel between the countryside and the city. Rural areas would be very dynamic, with a high population density. The towns would offer comfort, quality of life and well-being, housing schools, libraries, concert halls and other public services.

Particularly interestingly, this utopia stimulates reflection on the different roles that agricultural activity could play in a democratic and socialist regime. In this idealized peasant country, agriculture absorbs an enormous amount of work. In fact, Chayanov proposes a development alternative that anticipates some of the most pertinent responses to the contemporary employment crisis.

Quality agriculture, in a very specific way in relation to other human activities, requires intense care and great creativity in order to offer a diversity of products and healthy food. At the same time, this agricultural work fulfills a mission of environmental preservation. Chayanov therefore clearly conceives of an agroecological project *avant la lettre*. As Jean Viard (2023) suggests, in his contemporary reading, the Chayanovian utopia takes on a new meaning, an ecological one. It's about a society in nature, with little consumption, but lots of travel and encounters, linking the countryside with the heart of the cities.

Today, agroecology is considered by its advocates to be the foundation for designing sustainable rural development strategies. Guzmán (2001) approaches the latter based on its endogenous characteristics, proposing that its construction should be based on local knowledge, which would be essential for agroecological transition processes.

Against the industrial way of using natural resources, which is a homogenizing mechanism hostile to the forms of social interaction in rural communities, endogenous development mobilizes elements of resistance specific to each local identity. From this perspective, agroecology would offer the means to articulate forms of collective social action that have endogenous transformative potential. Thus, the creation and re-evaluation of indigenous technologies would be favored, articulated with external technologies that, through testing and adaptation, can be incorporated into the cultural body of knowledge and the value system specific to each community. These ideas are therefore very much in line with Chayanov's utopian perspective of development under peasant leadership.

In fact, Guzmán's (2001) concept of agroecology refers to activities far beyond agriculture. Thus, the management of natural resources from agriculture, livestock and forestry would constitute an initial element of development strategies for rural territories, subsequently offering potential and opportunities for the implementation of economic and socio-cultural activities that can contribute ecologically to providing livelihoods capable of promoting an improvement in the well-being of the local population. From this point of view, the pluriactivity of farmers would be a pertinent way to promote sustainable ecological and economic practices, which could be exemplified by rural tourism or food processing, as well as environmental services, especially thanks to associative structures that can strengthen bonds of solidarity.

The author also insists on the idea that the protagonists of change should be the local inhabitants themselves, maintaining management and control of the key elements of the process. In this line of thinking, local markets are privileged, forming short agri-food circuits. It is from the local level that integration into markets based on longer circuits should take place, which could then foster perspectives of an ecological and solidarity nature.

Guzmán's vision of endogenous development is based on a concept of social construction that recreates heterogeneity in rural areas, adapting external elements in order to assimilate them into the local identity, with the aspiration that these adjustments of external innovations to the cultural matrix of the locality can generate specific technologies suited to a given territory. Incidentally, Bernard Pecqueur (2006) considers "specification processes" to be central to territorial development, which ties in closely with Guzmán's ideas focusing on the endogenous. In both approaches, the mobilization of social forces within the local community is an essential asset for establishing actions in favour of development with strong local specificities, which is a very favourable concept for agroecological models.

As argued here, the Chayanovian utopia anticipates such agroecological perspectives. According to the Russian author, in the peasant production unit, the basis of his utopian socio-economic system, creative agricultural work would engender new forms of existence, transforming each worker into an artistic creator, since each manifestation of individuality in

agriculture would represent an art of labor. In this conceptual framework, life in the countryside would offer countless opportunities and would be very healthy, promoting a great diversity of forms of existence.

In fact, in an article whose title highlights the rediscovery of Chayanov, Guzmán (1990) points to three key elements of Chayanov's theoretical proposal: agricultural cooperatives, vertical cooperation and "differential optimums". This last point deals with the combination of socio-economic structures, peculiar forms of agricultural exploitation and technologies adapted to local modes of knowledge in order to achieve productive and social advantages. In other words, Guzmán believes that Chayanov's view of agronomy combines scientific-technological knowledge with peasant knowledge, giving an intellectual dimension to spontaneous local creative actions. In this way, this agroecology scholar considers Chayanov's thinking to be capable of responding to contemporary problems, with a view to building "modern agricultural production", especially in terms of the use of natural resources with ecological concerns.

In relation to the structures of democratic power in his conception of a future society, Chayanov envisages the broad and diffuse constitution of peasant class groups, which would be represented in the central organs of power, offering forces for the consolidation of his utopian socio-political regime. The strength of this peasant power would be linked to a social base motivated by secular principles of peasant economy, but open to the renewal of cultural values that could represent the permanent dynamization of human activities in the countryside. It is therefore a question of strengthening the peasants' exceptional spirit of passive resistance so that it can become a driving force behind profound progressive social changes.

In Chayanov's futuristic fiction, the healthy life of the countryside, with its multiple potentialities, would have been recognized in this utopian society, allowing the victory of the peasant project over that of industrial agriculture, the "bread and meat factory". This industrialized production would be a machine driven by the energy of human greed on the one hand and hunger on the other. The challenge for the peasant project of overcoming this industrial production model would have been both to integrate stimuli for the private economy and to launch measures to democratize income, avoiding its unequal distribution. By blocking the formation of large fortunes, income would be better distributed. However, in his utopian construction, Chayanov points to the problem of insufficient capital formation for major investments. He therefore envisages a future society in which "social and special capitals" would be formed. On the one hand, this role would be assigned to peasant cooperatives and, on the other, to creative inventors, who would receive generous public resources so that they could invest in strategic and innovative fields associated with their inventions.

In this narrative of a prosperous future, the peasant regime would have been secured thanks to the conception of answers to two problems considered fundamental: that of the economy, with the development of a national economic system supported by the peasant unit with a directive role, and the socio-cultural one, with the strong cohesion of social organizations representing the social masses. With these imaginative solutions, access to the most diverse and elevated forms of social life, based on agri-food activities in rural areas, would favor the flourishing of great cultural progress.

A striking aspect of this utopian construction is the profoundly democratic character of the idealized peasant society: "every project, every creative effort, must have the possibility of competing with peasant ideals" (Kremnirov, 2023, p. 165-166). In this way, the ambition of the peasant project would consist of conquering the world with the strength of peasant organizational perspectives, without destroying divergent thinking.

In order to build this society that is guardian of the general interest, Chayanov suggests that the final criterion for public choices should be based on deepening the content of life, with the aim of fostering the fullness of human personalities. To this end, social progress would be based on stimulating people to feed on original sources of culture. Such a utopian peasant society would be the heir to the Soviet socialist one, abandoning its authoritarian pattern, especially with the development of elements of democratic management of cooperative enterprises. In this way, Chayanov leads the protagonist of his utopian country to define such a regime as one of peasant soviets.

On this point, Biagio d'Angelo's (2021) article on Chayanov's idealizations is also very useful for situating his utopia, especially in relation to Russian utopian productions of the 19th and 20th centuries. His study highlights the romantic influence on Russian utopian writings of the 19th century, with varying degrees of appreciation for the past, a return to a life closer to nature, individual freedom and nationalism. In this period, the utopian work of Nikolai Tchernichevski can be considered central, as it inspired key thinkers in the revolutionary movements of the early 1900s in Russia, especially Lenin, who named one of his main political essays after the author's best-known book, *What Is To Be Done?* (Tchernichevski, 2020).

As a result, d'Angelo believes that the Bolshevik revolution contributed to a symbiosis between literary utopia and its realization. Soviet Russia would be the embodiment of a country in which the egalitarian dream could be realized. However, utopian optimism soon gave way to anti-utopian pessimism. As mentioned above, based on Norbert Elias' interpretation, Chayanov's work can be placed in a period of transition, in this case in the Russian context. As d'Angelo rightly observes, the final chapters of the utopian text in question change tone, as Kremnirov is arrested and the spectre of dystopia looms. The utopian aspiration is then replaced in the work by hints of a nightmare, which effectively comes true with Chayanov's arrest and firing squad.

4.2 Peasant utopia and agroecology as the basis for contemporary projects of social transformation

The perspective of sustainable development, particularly that associated with agroecology, favors the construction, in contemporary times, of new guiding references for agri-food public policy (Muller, 2003; Grisa & Schneider, 2014; Moruzzi Marques & Dória, 2021). Indeed, the Chayanovian utopia as an alternative to the productivist industrial model can be considered a precursor⁷ to many ideas that are being developed today with a view to dealing with agri-food problems with ecological justice (Blanc & Moruzzi Marques, 2022; Retière & Moruzzi Marques, 2019; Moruzzi Marques et al., 2021).

The recent recognition of agroecology—capable of opposing the green revolution model by denouncing its technical, economic and social limits—makes it an effervescent field for the production of ideas. In the 1980s and 1990s, leading researchers such as Miguel Altieri (1987) and Stephen Gliessman (2014), as well as the aforementioned Eduardo Sevilla Guzmán (2001), raised questions about the “domain of validity” of the concepts and assumptions of the agronomic sciences, proposing systemic approaches aimed at building more sustainable agriculture. For these authors, agroecology is at the forefront of agri-food alternatives, mobilized in fields of debate on environmental justice, food sovereignty or the multifunctionality of agriculture. In this

⁷ Contemporaries of Chayanov, Mokiti Okada (1882-1955), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), and Albert Howard (1873-1947) can also be considered pioneers of agroecology (Blanc & Moruzzi Marques, 2022), each developing their own models of ecological agriculture, evidently in a quite independent manner.

line of thinking, it is a conceptual approach that goes far beyond a set of agricultural techniques and, as previously proposed, draws on perspectives integrated into Chayanovian thinking.

In this final section, an analysis of the evolution of the MST's strategic orientations highlights the growing recognition of agroecology. The article by Borsatto & Simões do Carmo (2013) is a consistent reference for discussing the theoretical influences of the productive models proposed for rural settlements by the MST. From its birth until the mid-1990s, it was the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Kaustky, taken in a very orthodox way, that led the movement to adopt a radical model of collectivized production, encouraging the setting up of agricultural production cooperatives (*Cooperativas de Produção Agropecuárias*, CPA) in the settlements. The intention was to make them the basis for large-scale production, with heavy use of agrochemicals, in order to obtain undifferentiated products for sale on long circuits. These collective structures were supposed to be the foundation for the implementation of socialism, according to the "theory of rural organization", with the "desirable" elimination of "peasant ideological behavior"⁸, i.e. a supposedly individualistic attitude.

Internal criticism of this model, which was indifferent to the particularities of each settlement and based on a strong dependence on the market, reinforced by the rapid failure of the CPA, strengthened alternative proposals that have multiplied since 2000, when the MST's IV National Congress took place. This trend goes hand in hand with joining Via Campesina, which has expanded the MST's network of international relationships. La Via Campesina particularly promotes the defense of food sovereignty, combined with an agroecological orientation to combat agri-food productivism. In fact, this peasant project draws heavily on Chayanov's theoretical framework, allowing us to think about its utopian influences on socialist society.

At this point, it is pertinent to present the concept of the "Land Commune" as a fruit of the MST's agroecological reorientation in the state of São Paulo (SP), as it has many points of affinity with the utopian perspective we are focusing on. Firstly, it is a way of "relocating" agriculture closer to consumers, by integrating it into urban spaces. In fact, this proposal is largely designed to attract families living in precarious situations on the outskirts of large cities in a highly urbanized state. Thus, the intention is to ensure easy access to public services and infrastructure in the metropolis for the settlers, while at the same time favoring the creation of short proximity circuits, expanding the interaction between producer and consumer. Cooperativism and, of course, agroecology are also central to this concept of settlement (Goldfarb, 2006).

The case of the Milton Santos settlement, located partly in Americana, SP, and partly in Cosmópolis, SP, illustrates the impacts of implementing a project of this nature. It was set up along the lines of the "Land Commune" at the end of 2005. With the support of various organizations, many families involved in the MST, in search of better living conditions and security, occupied an area that could be earmarked for land reform. With the intervention of the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), the project came to fruition. The settlement was then classified as a Sustainable Development Project (PDS).

Located in a peri-urban region marked by vast sugar cane plantations, the settlement can be seen as an oasis of diversity in agricultural and para-agricultural activities in a monoculture desert. The mosaic of its landscape contributes to an improvement in the quality of life compared to what the settled families knew before, which is a view shared locally. The defense of this peri-urban agrarian reform initiative is often related to the intention of promoting inclusive sustainable territorial development, based on agri-food activities in the vicinity of urban agglomerations (Moruzzi Marques et al., 2014, 2017).

⁸ This perspective, in its most radical form, is represented by the measures of Josef Stalin aimed at eliminating peasant agriculture, considering it an obstacle to socialist progress. Thus, he led authoritarian actions towards "forced collectivization".

Thus, the settlers, who at first could be seen as opportunists and usurpers, are now being recognized especially for supplying quality food to the urban population, especially those who are food insecure. The Food Acquisition Program (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*, PAA) was very important in underpinning food production by the settled families, and for a long time it was the main device for marketing local products (Moruzzi Marques, 2022). Even though many settlers work in central areas of the city to earn an income, the desire of most of those interviewed in our research is to be able to consolidate a variety of activities in the settlement itself to ensure the family's livelihood.

As has been pointed out, the settlement has improved the families' quality of life, thanks in particular to access to healthier food and the construction of their own homes. These achievements offer a strong sense of security, as also highlighted by local interlocutors.

The growing difficulties in accessing the PAA, due to budget cuts, reinforce one of the most important initiatives aimed at giving greater visibility to the choice of agroecological production in the settlement. Since 2014, Social Control Organizations (*Organizações de Controle Social*, OCS) have been set up, allowing the organic recognition of the settlers' products (Moruzzi Marques et al., 2017). These OCSs are the founding base of a local cooperative, Cooperflora, which mainly develops innovative solidarity economy initiatives, especially the distribution of organic food baskets to solidarity consumption groups in the surrounding area (Pinto & Moruzzi Marques, 2019).

In a similar context of an initiative linked to the MST, the Mário Lago settlement, located in Ribeirão Preto, SP, also shows interesting results as a proposed "Commune of the Earth" model, especially in terms of using agroecological alternatives for the "sustainable development" of the territory. It was through the mobilization of ecological criticism and arguments that the then Fazenda da Barra was expropriated under the justification of "defending the environment".

As in Americana and Cosmópolis, modern, productivist and industrial agriculture also predominates in Ribeirão Preto's rural landscape, producing the image of a great "green desert". Between 1962 and 2000, the municipality lost 70.09% of its natural vegetation, with the sugar-alcohol agribusiness being the main culprit in this deforestation (Henriques, 2003). The advance of sugar cane took place mainly in the eastern part of the municipality, where there are outcrops of the Guarani Aquifer (Ibidem). As a result of this process of sugarcane plantation expansion, the then Fazenda da Barra, located on the banks of the Rio Pardo (East Zone), was repeatedly fined for environmental crimes between 1990 and 2000. This history of infractions was then used, in 2003, as proof of non-compliance with the social function of rural property, as provided for in the 1988 Constitution, especially in relation to its pillar of environmental requirements (Alves & Ferreira, 2024).

Like other "Land Commune" experiences, the Mário Lago settlement is categorized as a PDS by Incra, with a view to providing socio-environmental quality. Since 2009, various initiatives have been carried out to restore Permanent Preservation Areas (PPA) and Legal Reserves (LR) using agroforestry management techniques. By flying the agroecological flag as one of its main causes, the MST in Ribeirão Preto has become an important player in regional political debates on sustainability, especially in relation to healthy eating and the protection of water resources (Alves & Ferreira, 2024; Alves & Fest, 2023). Thus, the agroecological proposal in peri-urban areas proved to be not only an argumentative strategy legitimizing an alternative production model, but also created new possibilities for the political engagement of urban actors in favor of agrarian reform (Alves & Ferreira, 2024).

These characteristics allow us to agree with Yamila Goldfarb's (2006) interpretation that the "Land Commune" initiatives are characterized by contemporary processes of re-campesination. This notion is also used by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2008, 2016) in his analysis of the resistance

of many sectors of the population to agricultural activities based on mechanisms that offer more visibility and appreciation for sustainable production, favoring the engagement of urban consumers in favor of a peasant cause. In fact, this recampesination, which has parallels with neo-ruralism (Retière & Moruzzi Marques, 2019), is taking place in Brazil thanks fundamentally to the actions of movements demanding the democratization of access to land. As Angela Damasceno Ferreira (2002) suggests, this movement to return to the countryside exists in Brazil due in particular to the MST, which offers prospects for transforming the countryside into a "territory of the future", offering relevant answers for overcoming contemporary crises. Recampesination, turning the countryside into a "territory of the future", would be an embodiment of Chayanov's peasant utopia, representing the generation of occupations that can be associated with other senses of quality of life, with healthy and creative food, housing and work, providing a great deal of personal satisfaction in a radically fair and democratic environment.

5. Conclusions

Chayanov's work is at the forefront of studies of family production units and has been able to influence analyses of different scientific disciplines that reflect on rural areas and agriculture. His recognition today is undeniable. Thus, an in-depth knowledge of his work, despite being well situated in time and space (Sacco dos Anjos, 2003), is an intellectual exercise that can shed light on pertinent elements for the conception of promising actions for development anchored in the perspective of an inclusive and ecological future.

In the case of his peasant utopia, it is an optimistic perspective, insofar as it conceives of a democratic alternative to the establishment of Soviet socialism, even if his futuristic work contains signs of dystopia, typical of our time, as Norbert Elias points out. The structure of his socio-economic model is in opposition to the industrial development that can be observed in the countryside and in the city, based on instrumental reason that turns most human beings into cogs in the productive machine. In other words, with his utopian vision, Chayanov presents a civilizational project in which life in the countryside can offer multiple opportunities for human satisfaction, thus providing justification for the conservation of natural resources. In other words, he presents environmental rationality (Leff, 2012) as a horizon to guide human choices with a view to building a just and democratic world.

In short, his peasant utopia, based on his solid knowledge of the rural reality of his time, has the potential to feed contemporary projects for social transformation, with a focus on rurality and agricultural activity. Therefore, reflection on agroecology, short food circuits, the multifunctionality of agriculture and food sovereignty has, in Chayanov's utopian thought of a just world, one of the most stimulating pieces of literature. In this utopia, the peasant society of the future would be the best configuration for the constitution of socialism, with the institutionalization of a high-intensity democracy, with effervescent social participation, thanks to a thriving grassroots cooperativism.

Authors' contributions

PEMM and JCQA: Conception/design of the study, Data collection, Analysis and interpretation, Writing of the manuscript, and Critical review.

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