Response to Phil Ryan's "Duet for Peasant and Socialist Revolutionary"

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Phil Ryan's lively and well-informed critique of the agrarian reform policies of Nicaragua's Sandinista Front for National Liberation makes an important contribution to the debate on the "peasant question." I have often found myself amazed, frustrated, and disheartened by the grandiose schemes that Marxists — and liberals also — concoct to modernize agriculture and "backward" peasants. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Ryan's critique would have been strengthened if he had further explored the relevance of scale economies for different types of agriculture. He concludes by arguing that the organization of rural women could have allowed the Front to meet more of its original goals. That might have been the case, but I doubt that it would have made much difference without respecting the peasants' desire for individual landownership.

Before continuing, I must confess that my reactions to the article — and my dismay with many agrarian reforms attempted by reformists as well as socialist revolutionaries — come not only from study but also from the experience of living in what might be called a quasi-peasant society from 1940 to 1949. I am referring to an extended-family farm in one of the poorest and most traditional provinces of Finland — in the central eastern region, close to the border with the ex-Soviet Union. During the past fifteen years, I
have visited the area on three occasions and found it transformed, or, if the reader prefers, fully modernized.

During the 1940s farmhouses had no electricity or indoor plumbing. The nearest modern health facilities, some 10 kilometres away in the village of Sotkamo, could be reached on horse, bicycle, skis or foot depending on the season. In fact, the cooperative dairy in Sotkamo (milk was the “cash crop”) owned the only truck in the district and no buses travelled the unpaved roads. Work was almost entirely animal or person powered. Moreover, because of the post-war lack of teachers, the first grades of school were taught for only four weeks per grade during the year. Of course, in sharp contrast to most third world rural contexts, we lived well: housing was adequate if spartan, food was sufficient although monotonous (potatoes, porridge and rye bread featured every day), and battery powered radios kept people in touch with world and national news (listening to and then discussing the news was a daily household event).

Today, the area is quite prosperous, with industry based on the farm and forestry sectors. Most farmhouses enjoy modern conveniences, the remaining farmers boast improved stock, machinery lightens the work load, and doctors can be called by telephone in emergencies. This transformation was accomplished by providing support to the farm sector, composed (as elsewhere in Finland) of small and medium-sized producers, and by building on existing simple relations of cooperation. For example, to improve milk yields, my grandparents formed part of a group of six mostly related farmers who obtained credit to purchase an improved breeding bull, with each farmer responsible for taking care of the animal during two months of the year. (Cooperation around harvest time was the norm, as it is, indeed, in many other places.) The agricultural extension agent was a local farmer’s daughter who had received the appropriate training, rather than an “agronomist” or “engineer” or “outsider.” Consequently she knew the predilections and aspirations of the people she was serving and she spoke their local farm dialect. Macroeconomic policies were designed to assist these sectors in particular and outlying rural areas in general, but more on that later.
The question that I wish to pose is: if socialism is about the establishment of non-exploitative social relations, why can’t these relations be developed and sustained through reliance on small- and medium-scale peasant production? Why not organize cooperative services that build on traditional extended family relations and patterns of community cooperation and leave the peasant on his/her land (fields are different and farmers get to know their fields, with time)? Or why not aim for a mixture of such individually owned units — integrated by credit, marketing, and processing cooperatives (the Finnish case) — with state farms, but a mixture debated by and chosen with the genuine participation of the producers themselves?

In this respect, it is instructive that when the Zapatista peasant rebels briefly gained control of part of Mexico’s central southern region during the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917, they proceeded to carry out an agrarian reform that combined state, community, and individual forms of ownership. Today, many of Ecuador’s indigenous peasant communities still practice a combination of private and “community” agriculture, the mix varying from one community to the next. Some of them have also established — often with external assistance — other community-owned and operated enterprises, in cheese and honey production for example.

To return to macroeconomic policies, in the case of post-war Finland they were designed to assist the farm and the related small-scale forestry sector while promoting rapid industrialization. Prices, interest rates, and the like were set in such a way that the average income of farm families, who still in 1950 made up 42 percent of the population, could rise to the average family income level in the cities. These policies were fought out within the “red-green coalition” that effectively ruled the country in the post-war years; Social Democratic and Communist parties representing the interests of farmers. Interestingly enough, industrial growth was very rapid and food self-sufficiency was for the most part secured, although the proportion of small farmers in the rural population actually went up following the war. That was the consequence of the resettlement, partly through...
agrarian reform, of ex-servicemen and some 420,000 refugees (the latter making up about 11 percent of the population) who were displaced from land ceded to the Soviet Union.

In sum, Finnish governments — under pressure from, and responding to the interests of, both organized urban workers and organized farmers — aimed for balanced urban-rural development and, on the whole, achieved it. With variations, that was also the case in Sweden: a prosperous and politically organized peasantry was central to that country's rather egalitarian development path. With all this, I am not arguing that what we might call Scandinavian "peasant paths" have created utopia or perfect justice. Far from it, but they certainly have created rather prosperous societies with a high degree of social equality and cooperation. Indeed, the demand for equality — especially in rural communities can be carried to amusing extremes: my uncle Kaarlo "finlandized" his name to Kalle when he could no longer put up with the jokes of neighbouring farmers about being named after aristocrats and kings (as in the Kaarles/Charleses of Sweden or the Carloses of Spain) though he was of peasant stock.

Nor am I arguing that the Scandinavian countries provide policy "models" to be mechanically replicated elsewhere in the world. There are no formulas: ecological, social, and other conditions in agriculture are widely variable and policy must be adapted to local circumstances. But some important things might be learned from them and from other successful cases of agriculture combined with cooperative organizations — Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea among them. In different ways and degrees, these countries pursued urban-rural balance and integrated small-scale production into cooperative institutions. It is not surprising that case studies of agricultural production cooperatives in the third world identify among the primary causes of their failure a combination of urban-biased macro-economic policies and top-down institutional arrangements imposed upon producers.

Of course, production cooperatives can succeed, and a slavish devotion to the idea that private ownership is the only route to development creates its own problems. Within the ex-Socialist bloc, Hungary's success resulted from terms
North/Peasants and Socialists

of trade designed to favour an agricultural sector organized into production cooperatives combined with individual plots. Today the country is an illustration of the follies of ideologically driven privatization: most cooperatives have been dismantled, with disastrous consequences — a thirty percent drop in agricultural production.

To conclude with Nicaragua and the follies of ideologically driven preference for collective organization, a Dutch development worker told me a revealing story. While teaching agricultural economics at the national university in Managua in the mid-1980s, he had some 20 students conduct field work on the performance of state farms, production cooperatives, medium-sized farms, and peasant holdings. As could be expected on the basis of Phil Ryan's analysis, the state farms and cooperatives were in dismal shape while peasant holdings, followed by the medium-sized farms, were performing much better. When questioned about the policy implications of these results, the majority of the students stated that the government should be encouraged to provide more resources for the state farm sector in order to create the conciencia that would improve their productivity. When asked what Nicaraguans would eat in the meanwhile, they replied that the Soviet Union could provide the necessary assistance, as it had done in Cuba!

Notes


4. See the oral histories of communities compiled under the initiative of University of Waterloo Political Scientist Tanya Korovkin in *Nuestras Comunidades Ayer y Hoy: Historia de las comunidades indígenas de Otavalo* (Quito: Abaya-Yala, 1984).


