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Peasant Modernism: World Literature and the Future of Agriculture

Abstract: In their rejection of capitalist industrial agriculture, their fight for food sovereignty and land, peasants are fully contemporary global subjects. World literature has played a key, and ambiguous, role in representing the peasantry and in informing perceptions of agriculture more generally. This chapter focuses on two texts that connect agriculture to the futural force of modernity whilst providing an immanent critique of modernity's limitations: Alexander Chayanov's 1920 Utopia *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of the Peasant Utopia*, written in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and Bessie Head's post-colonial georgic, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), written contemporaneously with the Republic of Botswana's declaration of independence. Chayanov's expertise in peasant agriculture informs his futuristic vision of post-revolutionary Russia – from the abolition of the division of the country and the city to a new (aesthetic) conception of human development. Bessie Head, meanwhile, reworks the georgic to represent the contradictory fusion of traditional tribal modes of agriculture with modern agricultural techniques, whilst immanently criticizing both and, in doing so, offering crucial insights into gender, colonialism, genre, science and internationalism. Each text belongs to a world-literary current of agricultural fiction that holds key lessons for the twenty-first-century agrarian question.

Keywords: peasantry, Marxist theory, Alexander Chayanov, Bessie Head

Peasant Modernism

According to the conventional view of capitalist development, the peasant is a figure destined to disappear. A living anachronism, a walking archaism, the peasant is a residuum of premodernity awaiting its inscription into universal history – an inscription that is also its dissolution. Like art, the novel or history itself, the peasantry is that which is always ending but never quite dead. In purely numerical terms, there are approximately 2 billion peasants alive today – a rather large number of people to exclude from contemporaneity, one would have thought. For a group on the verge of passing away, they seem curiously active, almost as if they never received the memo that their time is up. From La Via Campesina, the great transnational peasant movement founded in 1993, to the Landless Workers'

Movement in Brazil (founded even earlier, in 1984) – to name but two of the best-known examples – the peasantry is not only alive and kicking but is very much at the forefront of some of the most urgent contemporary political and ecological struggles (over land, food sovereignty and agroecology).¹ If the Green New Deals of the Global North tend to occlude agriculture and the peasantry, this says more about their imperial ideological limitations than it does of global actuality.² The aim of this chapter is to set out some of the challenges these movements pose to our historical imagination and to suggest the ways in which they are imbricated with world literature.

The term “peasant modernism” comes from a 2006 article by Philip McMichael in which, like the vast majority of secondary literature on the topic, he stresses the emphatically contemporary nature of these struggles.³ The phrase is productively paradoxical: it fuses the premodern “peasant” – an earth-bound term which, in English, can still be used as a word of contempt – with a “modernism” that conjures up the artistic abstractions of the imperial metropolis. It generates an unease, an affect produced by the jarring of the ideology of the modern, itself premised upon the hegemony of the city. It also immediately evokes the question of representation (as both *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*). In the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, Marx infamously equated the rural isolation of the peasantry (“the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of isomorphous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes”) with an incapacity for class-conscious self-representation: “They cannot represent themselves [*sich nicht vertreten*]; they must be represented.”⁴ This is no longer the case for contemporary peasant struggles, which avail themselves of all the means of civil society and transnational organizations.⁵ Nonetheless, despite a twentieth-century replete with peasant revolutions – from Cuba to China – the image of the “sack of potatoes”, not to

1 For an overview of contemporary peasant struggles, see Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries: Rural Development in Times of Globalization*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

2 For a compelling critique of Global North Green New Deals, see Max Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). On the intersection between agriculture and ecology, see Ivette Perfecto, John Vandermeer and Angus Wright, *Nature's Matrix: Linking Agriculture, Biodiversity Conservation and Food Sovereignty*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019).

3 Philip McMichael, “Peasant Prospects in the Neoliberal Age”, *New Political Economy* 11, no. 3 (2006): 407–18.

4 Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, trans. Ben Fowkes, in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 239.

5 See Annette Aurélie Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

mention the supposed “idiocy of rural life”,⁶ continues to haunt dominant conceptions of the peasantry and agriculture, and by extension our visions of post-capitalist futures. Even on the Marxist Left, it is no coincidence that in recent years the notion of “fully automated luxury communism” has tended to dominate the utopian imagination, as opposed to, say, a vision of degrowth communism premised upon labour-intensive, small-scale agriculture.⁷ The Left remains trapped within a dogmatic, unilinear developmentalism that is, in fact, the historico-temporal self-projection of capital itself: from this perspective, internal to capital’s abstract universality, the peasantry is denied futurity.⁸

World literature has a curiously important role to play in these debates. To a surprising extent, political and theoretical splits within the Russian Revolution continue to inform discussions of the peasantry today. In doing so, they conjure up the lost world of Russian populism (the *Narodniki*), which tended to romanticize the peasantry, even if only to rehearse the Bolshevik break with all bourgeois romanticism. In this light, Tolstoy in particular becomes a symptomatic figure because of the importance attributed to him by Lenin. As the latter famously remarked to Gorky: “There was no real *muzhik* [Russian peasant] in literature before that Count came along.”⁹ Lenin also referred to Tolstoy as the “mirror” of the Russian Revolution (of 1905), reflecting the ideological contradictions of the peasantry in post-Emancipation Russia. Tolstoy thus remains a major figure in the very *conception* of the peasantry today and an unexpected mediator of theoretical debate. At the same time, it was precisely these ideological contradictions – not only of Tolstoy but of the Russian populists more generally – that had to be broken with in the development of a non-Romantic, modern, proletarian class consciousness. Increasingly, the term “populist” became a convenient slur for dispatching with one’s political opponents – sometimes literally. One such victim in

6 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), 224.

7 Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (London: Verso, 2019); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work* (London: Verso, 2015). This is slowly changing, as recent Marxist work on degrowth attests. See esp. Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

8 I have written elsewhere about the difficulties entailed in conceiving the universality of capital, engaging in particular with the work of the Subaltern Studies group and of their principal detractor, Vivek Chibber. Daniel Hartley, “The Person, Historical Time and the Universalisation of Capital”, *Salvage*, no. 6 (2019), <https://salvage.zone/the-person-historical-time-and-the-universalisation-of-capital/>.

9 Quoted in Maxim Gorky, “V. I. Lenin”, accessed 29 March 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/01/x01.htm>.

the Stalinist era was Alexander Chayanov, a brilliant Russian agrarian economist who was critical of war communism and state-enforced collectivization, and who in 1920 published a short “peasant Utopia” which he listed as one of his four most important works during a Soviet Secret Police interrogation in 1930 that eventually led to his execution in 1937.¹⁰ Chayanov, along with fellow-members of what became known as the Organization and Production School, rejected the label of “Neonarodnik”, but his admission during the interrogation to a “Neonarodnik” phase in the early 1920s was taken as a confession.¹¹ Despite the disturbing history of this term, however, even today Chayanov is written off as a “populist” by certain Marxist agrarian economists, though he is championed by an important minority, who are themselves written off as populists.¹²

In this sense, the agricultural battles of the present are being fought, in part, in the disguises of the Russian revolutionary past: can the peasant poetry of the future learn to speak its own language? It is far beyond the scope of the present chapter to offer a reckoning with the Tolstoyan and Russian populist inheritance; instead, I wish to examine two works which, unusually, connect the peasantry to *futurity*: Chayanov’s *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of the Peasant Utopia* (1920), written in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and Bessie Head’s postcolonial georgic, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), written contemporaneously with the Republic of Botswana’s declaration of independence in 1966. Chayanov’s expertise in peasant agriculture informs his futuristic vision of post-revolutionary Russia – from the abolition of the division of the country and the city to a new (aesthetic) conception of human development. Bessie Head, meanwhile, reworks the georgic to represent the contradictory fusion of traditional tribal modes of agriculture with modern agricultural techniques, whilst immanently criticizing both. Moreover, somewhat unexpectedly, the characterological system of the novel provides us with an allegorical means of rethinking one of the most famous literary-critical texts of the twentieth century – Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1916) – and of detecting an agricultural unconscious in the immanent unfolding of the novelistic dialectic that is said to define literary modernity itself. Each text belongs to a world-literary current of agricultural fiction that holds key lessons for the twenty-first-century agrarian question, and which may help lead us beyond the inherited imaginative limitations of the past.

¹⁰ Frank Bourgholtzer, “Aleksandr Chayanov and Russian Berlin”, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 26, no. 4 (1999): 13–53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² See Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2013). For a contrary view, critical of so-called populism, see Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2010).

Chayanov's Peasant Utopia

Chayanov's little-known peasant Utopia imagines a 1984 very different from the hopeless, Orwellian world that would come to hegemonize the liberal conception of communism. Alexei Kremnev, the protagonist, returns home from a meeting at the Moscow Polytechnical Museum in 1921, reminisces about his youthful love for Alexander Herzen (one of the founders of the Russian populist movement), falls into a swoon and awakens in a futuristic Moscow: "Have I really become the hero of a Utopian novel?" he asks, rather awkwardly.¹³ The world into which he awakens, swiftly adopting the alias of an American visitor called Charlie Mann, is a combination of pre-Petrine Russian cultural forms with modern technology – aeroplanes and motor cars are mentioned frequently. Barring a few remaining landmarks, the new Moscow is almost unrecognizable: "The piles of stones which had once crowded the horizon were gone; whole architectural complexes had disappeared . . . Instead, there were gardens everywhere . . . Sprawling clumps of trees enveloped the whole space almost up to the Kremlin itself."¹⁴ He soon learns that a decree was promulgated to abolish towns of more than 20,000 inhabitants. His guide, Minin, explains:

You see, formerly the town was self-sufficient, the countryside was no more than its hinterland. Now, if you like, there are no towns at all, there are only nodal points of the nexus of social relations. Each of our towns is simply an assembly point, the central area of an *uezd* [administrative unit]. It's not a place for living, but a place for celebrations, gatherings and some other matters. A point, but not a social entity . . . Communications are such that every peasant can reach his town in an hour and a half, and visits it frequently.¹⁵

Where the Bolshevik vision of communist modernity was primarily urban, Chayanov is attempting to imagine the overcoming of the country–city divide. In this, he follows the *Communist Manifesto*, which called for the "gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country".¹⁶ In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels attributed this idea to the "utopians" Fourier and Owen, but stated that, now (in 1877), not only were the

13 Ivan Kremnev [Alexander Chayanov], "The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 4, no. 1 (1976): 75.

14 *Ibid.* (suspension points in original).

15 *Ibid.*, 81.

16 Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 244. This position was widely supported in the nineteenth century, not least by August Bebel, as Jasper Bernes has recently reminded us. Jasper Bernes, "The Belly of the Revolution: Agriculture, Energy, and the Future of Communism", in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, ed. Jeff Diamanti and Brent Bellamy (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2018), 341.

material preconditions for its realization present – hence it was “not Utopian” – but that it had become a “necessity” to overcome urban pollution and metabolic rift.¹⁷ By 1920, this idea had clearly been thrust back into the realm of Utopia, but was reborn – to tragic effect – in Mao’s China.¹⁸ In 1973, Raymond Williams, acknowledging the Chinese situation, could still lament that the formulation was “at once the most exciting, the most relevant and yet *the most undeveloped* in the whole [Marxist] revolutionary argument”.¹⁹ It seems little has changed since: in 2018 Jasper Bernes observed that the “revolutionary project” of abolishing the town and country divide has “largely been forgotten”.²⁰ Alexei is thus as surprised as we are to encounter a world in which the antithesis of urban and rural has ceased to exist.

The basis of Chayanov’s Utopia is a peasant economy well known to the author from his role as agrarian economist. Just as he argued in *Peasant Farm Organization* (1925) that the peasant farm constitutes a *sui generis* productive form that remains effectively unchanged in its essence, but which becomes articulated throughout history with various modes of production (feudalism, capitalism, etc.), so Minin explains that the first task of the peasant utopians was “to consolidate the *old*, centuries-old principles on which from time immemorial the peasant economy had been based” but “to enhance their cultural value, to transform them spiritually”.²¹ In doing so, they fuse the old with the new, in the sense both of modern technology and of disseminating “the highest forms of culture, which had long been the monopoly of urban civilization”.²² Chayanov then binds the centrality of the peasant farm to an implicit critique of the state violence he associates with Bolshevik war communism: “We endeavoured to conquer the world by the inner strength of our cause and our organisation, by the technical superiority of our organising principle, not by smashing in the face of anyone who thought otherwise.”²³ Indeed, Chayanov’s wide-ranging experience on peasant farms across Russia and Europe had convinced

17 Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, trans. Emile Burns, chap. 25, accessed 29 March 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch25.htm>. On the concept of metabolic rift, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

18 Mao’s China requires a study in its own right. For a helpful overview, see Jeremy Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao’s China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 304 (my emphasis).

20 Bernes, “Belly of the Revolution”, 340.

21 Kremnev, *Journey*, 88 (emphasis in original).

22 *Ibid.*, 89.

23 *Ibid.*

him that top-down state directives and collectivization were economically and democratically disastrous, hence his rousing defence of the autonomy of the peasant farm: it is, he writes, “a system of working peasant farmers, a system in which labour is not separated from creative management, in which the freedom of individual initiative allows each human being to develop his full spiritual potential, while enabling him also when necessary to make use of the whole might of the collective large-scale economy and of public and state organisations”.²⁴ This is no “neopopulism” or anti-modern romanticism; it is a vision of personal autonomy and creativity, materially grounded in agricultural work and a multi-scalar socialist economy.²⁵ It goes hand in hand with Chayanov’s prescient critique of those who wrongly reduce socialism to large-scale industrial productivism, a notion which, he argues, was “born in the dungeons of German capitalist factories, nurtured in the mind of an urban proletariat haunted by forced labour, by generations that had lost the habit of any individual creative work or thought”.²⁶ Already in 1920, then, Chayanov had defined Soviet productivism – the dominant image of “communism” for the next century – *as an effect of alienation*.

This is not to say that all is rosy in Chayanov’s Utopia. On the contrary, like all utopian texts, it is what Fredric Jameson has described as a “semiotic operation, a process of interaction between contradictions and contraries which generates the illusion of a model of society”.²⁷ Likewise, the political unconscious that generates the raw material of Utopias is “something like a kaleidoscope: compulsively breaking down, scrambling and reassembling its collection of ‘social images’ from the past of ideology, in response to the recurrent dilemmas, conflicts, traumas appertaining as a matter of course to . . . daily life”²⁸ – and how much more so in a period of revolutionary civil war. Thus, the rejection of state coercion sits uneasily with the revelation of an elite body of intellectuals who secretly shape the society behind the scenes (albeit with the intention of *encouraging* popular autonomy and critique); likewise, the vision of popular creativity and personal development jars with Chayanov’s insistent – explicitly anti-Bolshevik – defence of the patriarchal family and the frankly tired representations of women (“Her wide-open, attentive

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ On Chayanov’s later theory of different optimal scales for the production of different types of goods and services – from peasant farm to cooperative to full-scale national economy – see Teodor Shanin, “Chayanov’s Treble Death and Tenuous Resurrection: An Essay about Understanding, about Roots of Plausibility and about Rural Russia”, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 83–101 (esp. 89).

²⁶ Kremnev, *Journey*, 89.

²⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 29n17.

²⁸ Christopher Kendrick, quoted in *ibid.*, 34.

eyes and a mole on her neck spoke to him of the superiority of neorealism more than any arguments”);²⁹ finally, what is one to make of the “residual capitalism” that spurs the peasants on to technological advances³⁰ or of Alexei’s capture and interrogation on suspicion of his being a German spy? It is no wonder, as Lucian George has shown in a very useful article, that Chayanov’s peasant Utopia has generated a plethora of mutually contradictory readings: modern and anti-modern; socialist, populist, liberal and conservative; programmatic blueprint and generic parody – all are labels that have been applied to it.³¹ To make clear why these interpretations are all possible (if not all equally convincing), it will help to map Chayanov’s utopian attributes onto a Greimasian square (see Figure 1). Doing so makes apparent the *semiotic* challenge of imagining an agrarian post-capitalist modernity. The task will then be to try to distinguish theoretically and politically between those elements which are merely ideological (e.g. patriarchy) and those which constitute a critical, viable, inheritable vision of a future agricultural dispensation which, whilst cutting against the grain of the hegemonically urban post-capitalist imaginaries of our present, remain plausible from a socialist perspective.

An exhaustive analysis of the square would exceed the scope of the present chapter. It would need to take account of the competing political affiliations of each semiotic attribute, the overlapping models of historical temporality (from rupture and endurance to perpetual dialectical sublation) not to mention the complex re-lays between national and international levels. Suffice it to say that the left-hand side of the square is dominated by forces of *conservation*: those things Chayanov wishes to retain or save from the elements of Bolshevism most insistent upon the logic of *rupture* with the past (a logic which characterizes the temporality of modernity as such, but which is accentuated by social revolution). The right-hand side, meanwhile, consists of forces of *construction*. The Soviet state, the city, technology and industry: all are monuments to the heroic *productivism* of collective human endeavour – that truly modern emphasis on Promethean self- and world-making. “Peasant socialism” (Utopia) might then be conceived as a *construction within conservation*. Consequently, even those elements that *appear* “traditional” are submitted to the shaping power of critical, collective construction that is characteristic of modernity (just as, for the late Marx, the *obshchina* – the Russian peasant village commune, which *appeared* obsolete and premodern – could become the nucleus of

29 Kremnev, *Journey*, 78.

30 *Ibid.*, 91.

31 Lucian George, “Interpreting Alexander Chayanov’s Peasant Utopia since 1991”, *Historia i polityka* 38, no. 45 (2021): 9–34.

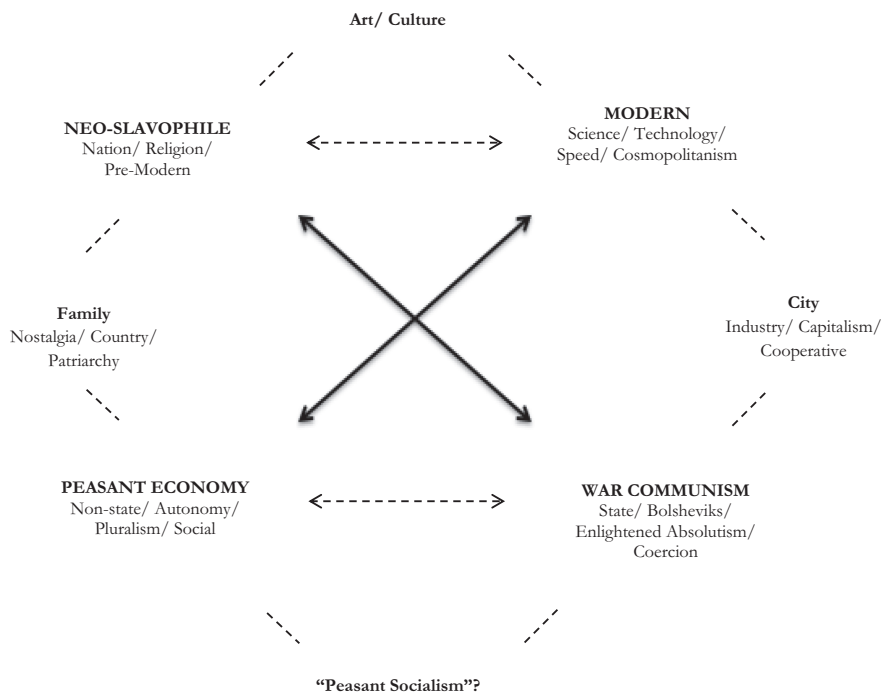


Figure 1: Chayanov's 1920 peasant Utopia.

a higher mode of social organization).³² Inversely, construction itself must occur within certain recognized historical and ecological limits.³³ Conservation, that is, knows many modes beyond that of restoration, beyond the patriarchal family and premodern nostalgia.³⁴ The utopian task is then *to think the constructive break of the modern within the limits of the critically conserved*.

Ultimately, the multiplicity of conflicting interpretations to which Chayanov's peasant Utopia has given rise should be read not only as a result of the ideological *bricolage* that characterizes all utopian texts but also as symptomatic of the objec-

³² Cf. the four drafts of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich in "Marx-Zasulich Correspondence: Letters and Drafts", trans. Patrick Camiller, in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Verso, 2018), 97–126.

³³ George, "Chayanov's Peasant Utopia", 30–31, has some suggestive reflections on the strain of historical realism that runs through Chayanov's Utopia.

³⁴ It is perhaps not coincidental that one of the few recent books to take seriously the ecological role of agriculture – Perfecto, Vandermeer and Wright, *Nature's Matrix: Linking Agriculture, Biodiversity Conservation and Food Sovereignty* – specifically mentions "conservation" in its title.

tive limitations of a historical imagination for which “the future” – insofar as it still exists – continues to be equated, in a stubborn hangover from modernism, with urban vistas and ever-more advanced technology. In an age of sustained economic downturn, in which the old promises of automation have been found wanting,³⁵ Chayanov’s 1984 holds important lessons for an already ancient-seeming 2024. It enables us to map the limitations of our historical purview and points to the systemic and geopolitical causes of our blinkered gaze. It reveals that visions of a purely urban, industrial future remain tied in complex ways to capitalist productivism and alienation; in doing so, it submits the dominant image of modern universal history to an immanent critique at the very moment it was on the verge of capturing the communist imaginary for a century.

Bessie Head’s Postcolonial Georgic; or, Lukács in Botswana

Almost 50 years later, Bessie Head wrote *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) in the immediate aftermath of Botswanan independence. It is based in part on her 5-month experience of the Radisele Development Association farm, located near Serowe, and co-managed by white British volunteer Vernon Gibberd. It tells the story of Makhaya Maseko, a black South African political refugee who flees apartheid after serving a prison sentence for anti-apartheid agitation and who finds refuge in the Botswanan village of Golema Mmidi. The village is unusual in that it consists of “individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life”³⁶ and is one of the few areas in the country where people are permanently settled on the land. There he meets Gilbert Balfour (modelled on Gibberd), a white British agriculturalist intent on helping the locals to modernize agricultural production and form cooperatives. Participating fully in the local way of life, Gilbert has won allies in the village, such as the wise old Dinorego and his daughter Maria, whom Gilbert eventually marries, but he has also made enemies. His primary foe is Chief Matenge, malevolent brother of senior Chief Sekoto and staunch defender of African tribalism (insofar as it benefits his own material interests). Matenge’s cattle speculation business is ruined by Gilbert’s formation of cattle cooperatives, the cause of an enmity the novel increasingly casts as progress (Gilbert) versus

35 Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London: Verso, 2020); Jason Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

36 Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London: Virago, 2010), 18.

obsolete tribalism (Matenge). Working with the women of the village, and battling a severe drought, Makhaya and Gilbert lead the locals to embrace agricultural change by installing boreholes, growing Turkish tobacco as a cash crop and implementing new cropping and grazing patterns. The climax of the novel occurs when Matenge makes a last-gasp attempt to assert his authority over the village but the villagers rise as one in silent protest, causing him to hang himself. It concludes with Makhaya's marriage proposal to Paulina Sebeso.

Many critics have read the agricultural elements of the novel metaphorically or allegorically,³⁷ but those who engage with the realist content have identified possible shortcomings in its perceived celebration of agricultural modernization.³⁸ Jonathan Highfield, for example, has argued that whilst “throughout her writing Head is a powerful commentator on the centrality of women in Tswana society and the creator of a number of extraordinarily powerful female characters, she remains oblivious to the negative effects ‘modernizing’ agriculture had on the lives of the women she otherwise so sensitively portrays”.³⁹ He notes, for example, the increased burden on women's labour effected by certain agricultural “advances” and argues compellingly that Head underestimates the extent to which the implantation of foreign cash crops (such as Gilbert's Turkish tobacco) was a continuation of colonialism by other means, destroying local biodiversity and crop variants. Elspeth Tulloch's reading, meanwhile, whilst acknowledging the serious blind spots in Head's vision, emphasizes the novel's subtle (and nascently “postcolonial”) critique of modernization and development discourse.⁴⁰ She notes, for instance, that Gilbert's universalizing drive to modernization is ineffective until mediated by local knowledge acquired by observation, experimentation and listening to indigenous inhabitants' knowledge of the history of the local environment.⁴¹ In that sense, the novel could be read as a critical forerunner of present-day agroecology, which has been defined as a “dialogue of wisdoms” combining indigenous knowledge about agriculture, soil health and crops with “modern ecological and agricultural science”.⁴² One might also men-

37 e.g. James M. Garrett, “Writing Community: Bessie Head and the Politics of Narrative”, *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2 (1999): 122–35.

38 Head took so seriously the element of agricultural realism that an agricultural officer checked everything she wrote. Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Thunder behind Her Ears* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Cape Town: Philip; London: Currey, 1995), 100.

39 Jonathan Highfield, “Agriculture, Colonialism, and Foodways in the Writing of Bessie Head”, in *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*, ed. Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 106.

40 Elspeth Tulloch, “Husbandry, Agriculture and Ecocide: Reading Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* as a Postcolonial Georgic”, *European Journal of English Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 137–50.

41 *Ibid.*, 143.

42 Peter Rosset and Miguel Altieri, *Agroecology: Science and Politics* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2017), 9.

tion the novel's crucial distinction between the *spontaneous* justifications Gilbert offers of his actions (most of which are developmentalist), and the "real life" he has actually been living in common with others and the earth.⁴³ This split within Gilbert's position between developmentalism and a more holistic, reparative approach arguably also characterizes his agricultural practices themselves. Where critics tend to focus understandably on the more self-evidently "modernizing" cash crops and borehole explosions, they overlook the proto-agroecological aspects of Gilbert's experimentations. For example, early on, we learn that Gilbert has left a border strip between a fence and cultivated land for a period of 2 years, during which it has effectively rewilded and produced new grasses, flowers and gourds which have not been seen since the earliest settlers (as Dinorego confirms). Within Gilbert's modernizing developmentalism, then, there is at work a more multifaceted, regenerative relationship to the local ecosystem and to the community.⁴⁴

No reading of the novel can fully grasp its ambiguities, however, if it overlooks one of the most important dynamics: the relationship between Makhaya and Gilbert. It is at first sight an unlikely friendship: a black political refugee haunted by the trauma of racial violence befriends a white British man who champions a collective, modernizing project of precisely the kind with which Makhaya is now so disillusioned. Yet it is this unlikely friendship, I argue, that allows us to connect the agricultural concerns of Head's fiction to the internal dialectic of the modern novel form as such. The *characterological* attributes of Gilbert and Makhaya, respectively, map closely onto the *formal* attributes of the first two types of novel in part 2 of György Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, each defined by one specific mode of "incommensurability of soul and work, of interiority and adventure".⁴⁵ Abstract idealism, the first type, refers to a situation in which the soul is narrower than the world. The abstract idealist is one who "chooses the direct, straight path towards the realisation of the ideal" and consists in a "complete absence of an inwardly experienced problematic [which] transforms such a soul into pure activity".⁴⁶ This is Gilbert, the Don Quixote of the new Botswana: a "hurricane of activity" whose "gaze forever restlessly swept the horizon seeking some new challenge",⁴⁷ but whose technocratic-idealist instincts struggle to grasp the resistant knottiness and materiality of sociocultural relations. Makhaya, by con-

43 Head, *Rain Clouds*, 210.

44 Worth mentioning here is Gilbert's concern for soil conservation and for a rotational crop and grazing system in which cattle are brought to the crop-producing area so that they can be fed on crop residues and grain surpluses. Both are now recognized features of agroecology.

45 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 97.

46 *Ibid.*, 97, 99.

47 Head, *Rain Clouds*, 210, 26.

trast, is the hero of the romanticism of disillusionment, Lukács's second type; here, the incommensurability is caused by "the soul's being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it".⁴⁸ The soul, writes Lukács, "leads a rich and animated life of its own and, with spontaneous self-confidence, regards itself as the only true reality"; the form of such novels disintegrates into "a nebulous and unstructured sequence of moods"; the world is seen as "entirely dominated by convention . . . [by] second nature".⁴⁹ But the "second nature" that forces Makhaya to flee into his own traumatized interiority is no standard reification: it is the white supremacy of apartheid. Makhaya lives on a "touch-and-go line with his sanity, finding nothing to stabilise him", experiencing life as "an abysmal betrayal, a howling inferno".⁵⁰ Head thus enables us to "stretch" Lukács's category (in Fanonian spirit) so as to rewrite European lyrical introversion as the racialized trauma of political defeat. What draws these two figures together is the sense that each has access to what the other lacks: Gilbert's abstract idealism leaves him hamstrung when dealing with sociocultural or psychological motivations (especially those of evil), whilst Makhaya requires an anchor point in objectivity and externality that is the only domain Gilbert has ever known.

Formal consequences follow. The scenes with Gilbert tend to gravitate either towards romance or realism.⁵¹ "Romance" is intended here in the sense of the Quixotic adventurer, ever on a mission of some kind, and ever liable to become embroiled in absolute battles of good and evil, even when Gilbert himself is ignorant of those stakes. The realism, however, occurs in those wonderfully detailed descriptions of agricultural processes and experiments or of Gilbert's observations of the natural world. Taken together, these can be said to constitute the principal georgic tendency of the novel.⁵² Scenes with Makhaya, by contrast, tend towards a style which, at its extreme, gestures towards psychosis: a totalizing, metaphysical interiority in which objective reality as such has been lost. It is no coincidence that Bessie Head's friends and editors repeatedly criticized her writing for being "out of touch with physical reality"⁵³ or that she herself suffered from bouts of psychosis. This is the style which became predominant in her later

48 Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 112.

49 *Ibid.*, 112, 113.

50 Head, *Rain Clouds*, 141, 144.

51 Here, I am drawing on but adapting certain arguments from Garrett, "Writing Community". In particular, I do not follow Garrett in applying the label "romance" to *both* Gilbert and Makhaya.

52 See Tulloch, "Husbandry, Agriculture and Ecocide", for an extensive reading of the novel as postcolonial georgic.

53 Patrick Cullinan, quoted in Eilersen, *Thunder*, 93.

novel *A Question of Power* (1973). In the earlier novel, the binding force which mediates these competing formal tendencies is the third-person omniscient narrator and the extreme compression of the narrative economy (one is reminded at times of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). Yet a provisional narrative unity is not the same as a historico-philosophical sublation. In Lukács, it is initially the *Bildungsroman* that offers a reconciliation of abstract idealism and the romanticism of disillusionment: "The inherent loneliness of the soul is surmounted; and this in turn presupposes the possibility of human and interior community among men."⁵⁴ The soul's interiority learns to adapt to a set of social structures it no longer perceives as alien, but rather as a means of "active expression of the essential life substance".⁵⁵ In some sense, this is precisely what Makhaya achieves. His experience in Golema Mmidi brings about the realization that it was "only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness".⁵⁶ Love and community, in other words, enable Makhaya to find his way back to the world. Yet *When Rain Clouds Gather* is not a *Bildungsroman*, so what, precisely, is the operator of reconciliation here?

The answer is cooperative agriculture. It is not simply that Gilbert's and Makhaya's opposing qualities complement one another, but that through their shared agricultural labour, through their respective loving relationships and marriages (themselves rooted in work) and through the common actions of the entire village, each is able to achieve a provisional, meaningful accommodation with a shared reality. This *totalizing* vision brings the novel close to Lukács's fourth and final stage of what had seemed a completed dialectic. For, beyond the reconciliation of the *Bildungsroman*, there suddenly appears the possibility of a *utopian* integration of soul and world that would be even closer to the ancient epic ideal, a status which Tolstoy is said to have approached:

Tolstoy's great and truly epic mentality, which has little to do with the novel form, aspires to a life based on a community of feeling among simple human beings closely bound to nature, a life which is intimately adapted to the great rhythm of nature, which moves according to nature's cycle of birth and death and excludes all structures which are not natural, which are petty and disruptive, causing disintegration and stagnation.⁵⁷

The problem, however, is that in clinging to nature *in opposition to* culture Tolstoy falls short of the epic totality for which "nature" (on Lukács's reading) simply *was* an organic form of "culture"; "nature" becomes an objectively existent, trans-

⁵⁴ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 133.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Head, *Rain Clouds*, 184.

⁵⁷ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 145–46.

historical locus of reprieve from the world of convention, but only ever temporarily. Only a *new* culture, capable of incorporating, institutionalizing and sublating Tolstoyan “nature” into a living, durable everyday life, could realize the consummation of the secret utopian desire of the novel: it would also end the novel form as such by sublating the historico-philosophical problematic that gave birth to it.

Conclusion: Culture in the Age of Peasant Struggles

Would it, then, be too far-fetched to identify just such a new “culture” with the peasant movements of today? Could La Via Campesina or the Landless Workers’ Movement hold the key to the fulfilment of the Lukácsian dialectic? After all, the very word “culture” contains within it *in nuce* the historical movements that have given rise to these struggles. Originally denoting “the tending of something, basically crops or animals”,⁵⁸ during the sixteenth century, “culture” came, by extension, to mean a process of human development. Thus, Francis Bacon could write of the “culture and manurance of minds” in what Terry Eagleton has called “a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction”.⁵⁹ A cognate of “civilization”, “culture” came ultimately to mean three things, all of which are distant from the land: (1) a “process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; (2) “a particular way of life” and (3) “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity”.⁶⁰ In the course of capitalist modernization, then, a shift in meaning was effected whereby the separation of producers from the land enacted by capitalist dispossessions and the enclosures of the premodern commons was registered conceptually by an increasing *abstraction* of the meaning of culture *away from the land and the practices of agriculture* towards a process of *inner* spiritual and intellectual development. The immanent historical trajectory of the concept “culture” was thus from soil to soul, its geographical trajectory from country to city. It was precisely this trajectory that created the material preconditions for the Tolstoyan *desire* for nature in its separation from the urban, bourgeois abstractions and artificialities of culture. Contemporary peasant struggles, however, have opened up a new era in the historical trajectory of the keyword “culture”. They are attempting, practically, to reappropriate expropriated

58 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983), 87.

59 Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 1.

60 Williams, *Keywords*, 90.

land, to localize food networks, to abolish the country–city divide, to close nutrient cycles, to decommodify inputs and to break with the disarticulation caused by export-oriented global commodity chains. In doing so, they are redefining the course of “culture” and reinstating its roots in agriculture and the land; by extension, perhaps, they are also readjusting the immanent modes of world-literary possibility. Alexander Chayanov and Bessie Head can thus be seen, retrospectively, as fellow-travellers of these movements: as forebears who themselves struggled with the practical, human and symbolic dimensions of the peasant path beyond capitalist modernity.

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