

From peasant agriculture to the local and convivial supply economy of the future

Christian Hiß, September 2015,

The term 'peasant agriculture' generally describes a type of rural economy that practically does not exist in our society, which is dominated by industrial and service economy. The term is however present with most people as an image, a memory, something that provides them with feelings of existential security, an outlasting societal constant. It carries positive attributes, for the farmers and their representatives as well as for society and politics. Thus, it is strange that peasant agriculture has no chance to continue since decades, even though it is described positively and still is desired as essential part of society. Perhaps nobody has realised that peasant agriculture has been lost already.

In only a few decades, structural agrarian change has completely altered the subsistence farm fabric that has historically grown. For centuries peasant farming has been the form of living and the type of economy that supplied people in the countryside (and in the cities) with food and housing. In Germany, after the 2nd world war, this „old“ type of agriculture has been sacrificed to the paradigm of industrial production. Facts and figures are known but the images and imagination of this old type of agriculture are still in the minds of the people. 'Peasant agriculture' has become a fictional (magic) term, to which we attribute many positive things. We however do not realise that it does not exist anymore in our present food system.

It is noticeable these days that society in general is more eager to feed itself more locally. To eat "regional" is by now a stronger criterion for consumption and advertisement than "organic". It is however not clear if the motives for this are forward or backward oriented. There is an association between 'regional' and 'peasant' without clarifying what that means. That is why it has to be worked out if the positive attributes of the term peasant agriculture are romanticised reminiscences to old days (whereby the advantaged would be myths) or if they describe a visionary form of life and economy that is better suited to ensure the sustainable food supply of people than industrial agriculture.

What does peasant agriculture mean? Is it sufficient to run any agricultural enterprise to call yourself a peasant farmer? The term is hollow.

In order to find the answer we have to consider the historic model of subsistence farming - this is the reference point to peasant farming. At its heart stands the supply of a group of people, in our culture that refers to a family and further people around the family circle (including workers) which are all supplied with food and shelter. The need of feeding everyone provided the work schedule. The frame of work and work techniques were set by the social, geographic and ecologic circumstances of the location. Naturally fertile areas were preferably used. The farms were primarily built in a functional way with working and living areas. The enterprises were socio-economic units that closed circles and that had an

often outstanding efficiency. Before fossil fuels started to appear only self-generated energy was used. This energy emerged from solar energy through assimilation of sunlight to substance matter. Humans and animals used the plant material that generated energy and work power. Fertilisation, especially the nitrogen, which is required for plant growth, was enabled through the alternating planting of leguminous plants (fixing aerobic nitrogen in the soil) and re-use of animal manure in the circular system of the farm. All processes that took place at the farm used the substances that were provided by sun energy.

During industrialisation of food production, external input to the farm was added. The connectivities of the farm production became less dependent on the circumstances of the farm location. The farm enterprises became agrarian production sites with specialised focus. The economic challenge was not to feed a family/a farm with food but to supply a market, the bigger the better. The more shares you have in this market the better – this became the economic doctrine. A farm that buys the production means as cheap as possible on a global market, adds value to them and then supplies a market has more resemblance to an agrarian production site than to a peasant farm, even though the business is run by a family. The industrialization of agriculture works on the idea that the principles of industrial production are applied to an agricultural enterprise. The economic effectivity and not the agricultural efficiency becomes the all determining paradigm of farm management.

This method of production works under premises and assumptions that are not feasible in the long-run. This includes the high use of fossil energy in production and pre-production of the production means, the practices applied for plant breeding with a reduction of biological diversity, the massive reduction of the number of farms because of the competition, a production form that is based on exploitation of limited natural resources, senseless work and negative impacts for the climate.

Why, despite these facts, is there a different image of agriculture that many farmers and large parts of society have? Perhaps because this change happened rapidly and the memory of centuries of subsistence economy is still strong? A considerable number of still living people grew up with the „old“ kind of agriculture.

However, the discussion on the definition of the term „peasant agriculture“ is only of limited use, instead we have to discuss whether the functional attributes that can be associated with peasant agriculture are viable for the future and if yes, how these attributes can be maintained and organised anew. To only hold on to traditional images and don't realise that the core attributes of peasant agriculture do not exist anymore is silly.

In the “old” agriculture and subsistence economy the people were bound to natural and social constraints, they were not free. The emancipation out of these circumstances into freely chooseable forms of living and working is the essential force of the current socio-economic metamorphosis. Consciousness plays a major part in it. The influence of science and technology are accompanying circumstances of this basic desire for freedom. This process of historic proportions is often referred to as de-rooting of people. However,

according to me it is important to see the positive sides of this loosening of socio-economic ties and to take advantages out of them.

The share of citizens that will have no existential connectivity to (the old type of) agriculture will increase sharply in the coming years. We can therefore assume that the – in my estimation problematic – effect of the „old“ image we have of agriculture will also decrease and that new generations will look at agriculture less romanticised than their parents.

This will enable new chances for the design of food systems that make sense. The new generations will have the opportunity to address the issue more rationally. When this moment has come then we need design principles that are useful to re-organise agriculture and food away from industrial forms. The attributes of peasant agriculture that have proven to be valuable in the cultural history of humankind can provide an inspirational concept that will not be confused with an image. These ideas should be placed in new constellations with modern means and principles that are useable for the future.

What were the most important attributes of peasant agriculture?

- ⇒ The supply of a social community,
- ⇒ The generational contract,
- ⇒ Production that is needs-oriented,
- ⇒ The farm organism,
- ⇒ The production means that are generated on the farm,
- ⇒ The (bio)diversity of farming,
- ⇒ The local marketing,
- ⇒ The diverse design of cultural landscape,
- ⇒ The use of knowledge based on experience.

In my view it is absolutely crucial for our survival to apply these principles of peasant agriculture into the design of a future form of food economy. We however have to take in consideration two aspects when we think of using the functional core features of subsistence economy for the future:

- Farm sovereignty at the economic level
- Social freedom at the human level

The key to economic sovereignty lies in the free access to production means and resources. These are knowledge, genetic material of plants, water, energy, technology, land, nutrients, capital soil and services of all kind. A lot of this has been discussed in the debate about “commons”.

Social freedom means that you can design your life irrespectable of creed.

The main points:

- ⇒ To be able to choose your job freely,
- ⇒ To be able to choose work partner independently of family or creed,
- ⇒ To be able to establish contracts freely,
- ⇒ To be able to experience work processes transparently,
- ⇒ To be able to treat humans, animals and plants in a fair way,
- ⇒ To be able to work ethically,
- ⇒ To be able to consume ethically,
- ⇒ To have humane work conditions,
- ⇒ Extended generational contract,
- ⇒ Enable participation,
- ⇒ Mobility.

If we take the functional attributes of peasant agriculture and apply the outlined principles of social freedom we get the following requirements of the new peasantry:

- ⇒ Supply of a community beyond the family
- ⇒ Local economic areas instead of single farm organisms
- ⇒ Work sharing on enterprise level instead of personal level
- ⇒ Farm succession outside of the family
- ⇒ Generational contract beyond the family
- ⇒ Enterprise networks instead of single family enterprises
- ⇒ Written contracts instead of traditions
- ⇒ Cooperation of consumers and producers

The future local supply economy will be organised in new forms that will be driven by the conscious decision of the participating parties. The economic links will be transparent and everyone will know about the situation of the other. Like this connectivity and responsibility can be realised.

The term that characterises work and development is conviviality. We need 'tools for conviviality' for living and working.

The local convivial supply economy will contain all relevant areas of work and will be organized systematically and through shared work - analogue to the peasant farm system. Plant breeding and seed production will be there as well as animal husbandry and compost economy, vegetable and fruit farming, grain production and forestry.

The products will be processed locally. The service provider will take care of logistics, energy production and storage.

The decisive difference to the current industrialised form of agriculture is that the reason and the reference point for economic activities lie in a concrete demand of a fellow human and not in supplying an anonymous market. Like this the most important attribute of peasant agriculture is maintained and modernised.