Post-Socialist Peasant?

Rural and Urban Constructions of Identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the former Soviet Union

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First published 2002 by
PALGRAVE
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 0–333–79339–0

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Post-socialist peasant? : rural and urban constructions of identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the former Soviet Union / edited by Pamela Leonard, Deema Kaneff.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–333–79339–0
1. Peasantry—Europe, Eastern—Congresses. 2. Peasantry–
–Former Soviet republics—Congresses. 3. Post-communism–
–Europe, Eastern—Congresses. 4. Post-communism—Former Soviet republics—Congresses. 5. Europe, Eastern—Rural conditions–
–Congresses. 6. Former Soviet republics—Rural conditions–
–Congresses. I. Leonard, Pamela, 1963– II. Kaneff, Deema, 1962–

HD1536.E852 P67 2001
305.5'633'0947—dc21

2001036353

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

Printed in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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Subsistence Farming and the Peasantry as an Idea in Contemporary Russia

Caroline Humphrey

What if we start by leaving aside objective definitions of the peasantry and ask instead which people call themselves peasants in Russia today? It is important to realise that 'peasant' has become a fully operational category in post-socialist Russia. The agricultural reforms of the early 1990s aimed to replace the collective and state farms with financially independent small farms. A certain number of these were created all over the country and they were called 'peasant economies' (*krest'yanskiye khozyaistva*). Collective and state farms did not totally disappear; but most were dissolved and reconstituted, and these 'privatised' organisations were also termed associations of peasant economies of one type or another. Russia therefore should be full of people who identify themselves as peasants. Yet this is not so. The explanation cannot be simple, for older concepts of the peasantry (*krest'yanstvo*) smoulder behind the new label. This chapter explores why self-identification with the peasantry is so fragile and changeable in contemporary Russia, and it shows how official use of the word 'peasant' masks fundamental contradictions in the agricultural reforms.

The idea behind the reforms was that, freed from the administrative control and the systematic abrogation of property rights of the collectives, individual agricultural producers would find it in their own rational self-interest to set up efficient, independent, market-oriented, household farms. Policies to effect this transformation have been dramatically unsuccessful and the collectives remain functionally more or less unchanged in most areas, whether renamed or not (Humphrey 1998). Nevertheless, if we look at what is actually happening in villages and towns, there are two processes which suggest that something which

might in theory be seen as the 'peasantisation' of everyday life is proceeding apace. In both rural and urban contexts there is increased reliance on subsistence-oriented agriculture with household or family labour. The first process occurs in collectively organised farms. Here we have strong evidence that the jointly organised institutions are weakening dramatically, while the individually held plots of the members are gaining in economic importance. Almost everywhere, the latter now provide a far greater proportion of family income than the wages earned in the collective (Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9; Panarin 1999a). I call this process smallholding activation. In provincial towns and cities there is a second process at work which is economically somewhat similar. In the worsening economic crisis of the 1990s there has been a mass recourse to urban subsistence farming. Vegetable plots, sometimes more than one per household, are allocated by city councils on designated lands on the edge or outside the town. People build themselves second tiny houses on these sites, colloquially known as *dachas*. I call this process *dacha* activation.

The activation of both rural smallholdings and urban *dachas* have led to more time being spent by ordinary people, whatever their profession, on peasant-like concerns: digging, weeding, milking, etc., preoccupation with matters such as better seeds or storage of root crops, or calculations of how much will last over the winter; indeed there has appeared a mass literature on homely techniques of do-it-yourself farming. But neither process is unequivocally identified with 'peasantisation' by the people involved. I shall argue that this is because both smallholdings in collectives and *dachas* are caught up in their own, separate templates and ideologies, neither of which coincide with the historically resonant notion of the peasant economy (*krest'yanskoe khozyaistvo*).

The same is true of the one type of farm which in the early 1990s was seen expressly as the start of the resurrection of the old pre-revolutionary Russian independent peasantry. This is the independent small commercial farm, the so-called 'peasant-farmer economy' (*krest'yanskoye-fermerskoye khozyaistvo*). At the start of the reforms, rural people were encouraged by the government to take their shares from the collective and set up on separately allocated land, either as a small partnership (*tovarishestvo*) or as an individual family farm. However, the government has never created the basic market conditions by which such farms could function, notably the right to buy and sell land. This is again a matter of ideology, as will be described briefly later. The contradiction is implicit in the name: if the word *fermer* suggests a western-type of commercial farmer, the word *krest'yanskoye* denotes a more subsistence-oriented,

inturned, and ultimately state-dominated existence. As we shall see, the tiny number of independent farmers who have survived the 1990s are now more likely to see themselves as businessmen than peasants.

What I am arguing is that 'the peasantry' is present in Russia as a highly meaningful social category and yet almost no one sees their own life as corresponding to it in reality. Most people do not identify themselves straightforwardly as peasants because what they do, and their place in the scheme of things, does not coincide with their idea of what a peasant existence is.[1] To understand this, we must examine not only the actors' various rationales for agricultural activity but also their wider conceptual mapping of property, society and politics.

What is complex about the Russian situation is that at some deep level of identity many people will say that they *are* peasants, or that 'ancestrally' they are peasants, even if now they are not (living as) peasants at all (Koznova 1997: 379). A reader might react, well, so what? Who cares what they call themselves? I suggest, however, that identity does matter, because it affects motivations and strategies in the real world. Chapter 1 in this volume has already stated that top-down models of the peasantry developed by urban and educated élites have had important repercussions for the lives of rural populations; peasants have been variously idealised as revolutionary heroes and vilified as petty capitalists, or seen as a conservative drag on economic progress. This is indeed the case for Russia, especially in the Soviet period. But today, with the weakness of the Russian state and the indecisiveness of central agricultural policies, the operational categories of local administrators and the current ideas actually held by the farming people themselves are far more important. From a methodological point of view, it is useful for us to abstract a concept of 'the peasant life' from these local representations, because this enables us to understand better farming people's strategies which are developed both in relation to this idea and, as it were, by turning their back on it. The 'peasant life' is an idea that is honed in relation to other possible lives. The theoretical models of the peasantry and the rejection of socialism promoted by Russian intellectuals are more or less irrelevant, since the villagers' own experience is what counts for them.[2] It is through family memories and, crucially, through the education and practical experience of the Soviet system that the idea of a new peasantry is evaluated (a similar point is made by Zbierski-Salameh (1999) with regard to Polish small farmers). So, if this book in general is taking an identity-centred approach to the question of the peasantry, the particular issue addressed here is why, despite the increase in depend-

ence on subsistence agriculture, and despite the fact that they have a firm and not necessarily negative idea of what the peasant life is, most people are in various ways reluctant to identify themselves with it. Is this because they cannot be peasants, or because their values and hopes are now such that do not want to be peasants – or both?

I first discuss the case of rural agriculture and then that of urban farming. In the final section I make some speculations about the wider political implications of the stances that people in fact are taking.

Villagers' ideas of the 'peasantry'

Contemporary ideas of the peasantry are many layered and include conceptions of several stages of Soviet rural life over and above what is seen as the timeless archetype of the 'Russian peasant'. What is this archetype as present-day rural people formulate it? From oral materials collected by Koznova in Central Russia in 1993–6,[3] it seems that the idea rests on the independent family farm within a village community (*obshchina*) of similar farms. Peasant farms are mixed, not specialised, with livestock, fruit and vegetables as well as arable fields. The values associated with peasant life flow from key words: the care for and restoration of the *earth*, respect for manual *labour*, the *will* (*volya*) of the owner, orientation towards provision for the *family* and its future, a feeling of *community* (*obshchnost'*), the practice of *mutual help*, and belief in *Orthodox Christianity* – all of this bound by tradition, conservatism and group social experience (Koznova 1997: 360).

The pre-revolutionary peasant is associated with tenacious consciousness of *ownership* (*sobstvennost'*), that is, the sense of personal possession, mastery and responsibility, especially of land. Note that this idea of possessive ownership is distinct from, even opposed to 'private property' in the western legal sense (property that may be negotiated, alienated and used to make a profit[4]).

Possessive ownership was never market-oriented, yet it was antithetical to Soviet ideology. Generations of villagers were taught that possession-consciousness was the narrow-minded characteristic of outmoded societies. It should be eradicated by Soviet mass activism on behalf of the collectivity, that is, by the old Russian communalism or communitarianism (*sobornost'*) which was always attributed to the peasants and was now manifest in the modernised, industrialised Soviet guise of collectivism.[5] A sketch, recently written by the ethnographer Meshcheryakov revealing the sensibility of 'a man of the past', shows us the satirical scorn of Soviet attitudes to peasant-like property-consciousness:

> How robust are our people. However much the authorities tried to eradicate the feeling of ownership, nothing came of it. Here's one aunty buying milk from another. The deal is done right in the bus. Both the one and the other have three-litre jars. But one's is full and the other's is empty. Protecting their sacred personal property, they don't exchange jars, but in the midst of the journey start pouring the milk. Of course, it spills. They both got angry and started to scold the driver – why did he, heck, swing so hard round the corners?
>
> (Meshcheryakov 1999: 81)

Leninist ideology saw the peasantry as a dying class, destined either to become a rural proletariat or a petty capitalist farming class (Zemstov 1991), and Koznova writes (1997: 360–1) that this may explain why Soviet policy-makers never perceived, and therefore never developed, the positive, adaptive qualities of Russian farmers. The paradox, she continues, is that the Soviet cultural model of the peasant, while directed purposely to subordinate the peasantry, actually 'fed' on some of its values. The values of individual labour, the autonomous household economy, and independence in general, were repressed, but the peasant qualities of egalitarianism (*uravnitel'nost'*) and corporatism were excessively promoted. The Soviet cultural model is relevant to current attitudes because it was energetically and thoroughly followed up in practice: state and collective farms only served to eradicate the already weak market orientation and 'private property' institutions of Russian villagers. As 'Soviet' soon came to be a synonym for the socialised and the collectivised, the idea of the 'Soviet peasant' found itself in opposition to the independent peasant. In effect, as Koznova perceptively remarks, the 'Soviet peasant' was a contradiction in terms, since it presupposed the overcoming of the core of what was peasant-like in the peasantry: autonomous, property-conscious economising (1997: 361).

Rural farming and the idea of the Peasant Farm

The 'Soviet peasant' nevertheless became an official social category,[6] evolving through the 1930s–40s, the 1950s–60s, and flowering in the Brezhnev period of the 1970s–80s. In reality, the way of life of Soviet farming populations was based on a tense relation between wage work for the collective and labour on the personal plot (which was assumed to be in competition with the official job). By the 1970s the system culminated in extreme hierarchisation and labour specialisation. Collective production reached a ceiling, despite numerous reforms aimed to give

incentives to the workers. Meanwhile, production on the plots slowed somewhat, and it became apparent that farm workers were preferring to buy food rather than labour on their smallholdings to produce it themselves.[7] As people came more and more to be waged workers with plots on the side, and were taught to see themselves as tractor-drivers, calf-herders, irrigation specialists, or mechanics, the word 'peasant' (*krest'yanin*) was pushed aside in favour of blander, less historically redolent terms, such as 'rural labourer' (*sel'skii truzhenik*). Indeed, Zemtsov writes of late Soviet times:

> In short, every effort is made to avoid using the word 'peasant', even when the word fits. The only reason for this circumlocution is that the authorities associate the word with the image of the unruly, ungovernable *muzhik* (bumpkin) class that has more than once rebelled against the regime.
>
> (1991: 229)

In post-Soviet times, we have to deal with an extraordinarily complex interweaving of factors. On the one hand, the official Soviet denigration of the peasant was replaced by the official reformist policy of reviving the peasantry. On the other, the collectives did not disappear, so the objective conditions for people to consider themselves rural waged workers remained for the majority of people. Yet, neither of these situations is a simple as they appear.

For one thing, the political freedoms gained in the early 1990s meant that people were at last free not to agree with the new government approval of the peasantry. Koznova's materials indicate that people mostly saw the reforms as the affair of the bosses. 'Just let the pay be good – the rest is up to the farm director,' was one reaction; 'They tell us where to work; that's where we go,' was another. 'Reorganisation was necessary, wasn't it? We are neither for nor against it. We know there are new trends and we should carry them out,'[8] was a typical response to the reforms. This 'psychology of the hired labourer' (Koznova 1997: 363) did not encourage people to separate off from the collective. The proportion of people supporting the idea of the 'new peasantry' dropped sharply during the 1990s (Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9). By the mid to late 1990s, as both Koznova and Gorshkova *et al.* (1998: 22–5) have clearly shown, the Brezhnev period, the acme of subsidised collectivism in agriculture, was widely seen as a golden era, a time of stability, economic abundance, national pride, social justice and belief in the future.[9]

Of course, this rosy vision of the past takes form in contrast to understandings of the present day (and vice versa). In brief what has happened is that collective production has plummeted during the 1990s, and production on the plots has not risen sufficiently to compensate. The liberalisation of prices for agricultural products caused a drastic fall in incomes, and the poverty and uncertainty this produced are now compared bitterly with the Brezhnev period. Indeed, that era was indeed 'better' for rural populations. Two questions arise: why would villagers identify with a future construct of 'the peasantry' that has none of the security (even if illusory) they associate with life ten years ago? 'Life has never been worse than in the present; life today is sickening (*toshno*),' agreed many of Koznova's respondents (1997: 368). And: even if such a peasant life were attractive to some, are there realistic possibilities for villagers to achieve it?

Today, the faltering collectives and the plots are disastrously entangled. Householders are unable to manage their plots without help from the collective (ploughing, fertiliser, cattle feeds, hay-making, spare parts, fuel, and so forth), yet the collectives cannot give all this out and also pay wages. Without wages, people are reluctant to work for the collective and they steal from it too (Panarin 1999a), and so the vicious circle goes on. This means that 'objectively' collective farmers cannot be peasants, because they cannot manage an autonomous smallholding, and 'subjectively' they cannot be peasants because an important part of their consciousness remains that they are specialised professional parts in a social whole. Someone who has been trained as, and sees himself as, a tractorist may be reluctant to take on the general farming work of the 'peasant' enterprise (pig-keeping, lambing, and all the rest of it). Furthermore, the very term 'collective farmers' gives the wrong impression, because it suggests that all the people living in villages are engaged in hands-on farming. This is far from true. The lists of village-dwellers include numerous accountants, machine repairers, builders, drivers, engineers, secretaries, bakers, furnace workers, etc., and this is not to mention the teachers, doctors, librarians, Trade Union officials and so forth who live in villages but are now paid by the state rather than by the farm (Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9).[10]

Still, as I have said, all villagers are now relying on their plots for subsistence.[11] Let us look at this 'smallholder activation' in more detail. In the 1990s, the plots have been freed from tax in most places, have been made available for purchase, that is, they can now be the property (*sobstvennost'*) of the farmer rather than the collective,[12] and earlier restrictions on the number of livestock held have been removed. How-

ever, it is not just economically, but also ideationally, that the plots do not correspond to the peasant farm. For a start, they are still called 'personal subsidiary holdings' (*lichnoye podsobnoye khozyaistvo*, LPKh), expressing the idea of their secondary character. In Buryatiya, they are too small to support the entirety of a household's food needs at locally defined reasonable standards through the year (Panarin 1999b). For this reason, and because there is little work in the collectives, young people are leaving the land to take temporary work elsewhere (mines, building-sites, and so on.). Therefore, the 'household' that cares for the plots is in many cases not a full household and may consist only of old people. With the drastic fall in availability of petrol and electricity, work on the plots is even more manual than in late Soviet times. Finally, as Panarin's team discovered in Tunka, Buryatia (1999b) strategies for farming the plots still rely on collective farm inputs rather than the classic 'peasant' support of kin and neighbours. It is not that neighbours and kin do not help one another – they exchange labour and ready-made goods. But they lack the technology to keep the smallholdings going in the current mode of production. Even if all the useful land of the collective were to be divided up and given out to the households – which would give each household enough land for respectable subsistence – in reality the system could not survive, because the type of cattle preponderant in Tunka requires artificial fodder (now produced by the collective with heavy machinery) and without it, their productivity would decline; it would then be necessary to increase the number of cattle, and the land would then be insufficient (Panarin 1999b, Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9). Villagers know all this well: consciousness of the virtual impossibility of turning the smallholding into a peasant farm reinforces the existing specialised-worker identity and the myriad of daily decisions that maintain the miserable interdependency between the collective and the plots.

There is yet another problem with realising the peasant life, the idea of *sobstvennost'* (ownership) itself. Administrators are now encouraging farm directors to encourage property-consciousness among their workers. But there is complete confusion about what this means: the promotion of commercial farming along neo-liberal lines, or some 'peasant' hybrid in which control of land and profits still ultimately remains in state hands? Full rights to buy and sell land is rejected by the great majority of people, on the grounds that this will give rise to rapacious landlordism. According to Koznova's materials, rural people associate the idea of *sobstvennost'* only with material income, the products from the smallholdings, or income from collective seen as dividends for their

shares. Most of them do not link ownership with the peasant connotations of responsibility, risk, strategising and selling. And if they do make such associations, they may reject them: 'I think that I could probably be a salesman no worse than anyone else,' said one animal technician aged 33 in a collective farm of Vologod district, 'but I was brought up from my childhood to work the soil' (Koznova 1997: 365). It is assumed that the 'working the soil' and 'salesmanship' are incompatible.

The ambiguity over ownership refers not just to the plots but also to the property of the collective. Here we could refer to Stark's notion (1996) of 'recombinant property' and Verdery's idea (1999) of 'fuzzy property', both referring to the situation where the same item is subject to complex overlapping rights. In Russia, members of collectives in theory 'own' those collectives through their shares. Yet, they do not control them (the farm directors, state Land Commissions,[13] and the Ministry of Agriculture do). Hence it is not surprising that workers mostly do not want to get involved in the details of wider economic decision-making, leaving this to the managers. They are confused by the new system of values: 'Under socialism everything was counted as the people's (*narodnym*), but now all of it is being sold to the people for money,' said another of Koznova's respondents (1997: 375). By the late 1990s this situation is even more confusing, since no one has money to buy anything from the collectives and all external loans have dried up. Even so, the whole idea of 'selling off' the collective property (seen in 'privatisation', the issue of shares, the 'selling' of shares for land and machinery in the early 1990s to selected *fermers*, etc.) has undermined the emotive link between workers and the collective. Almost everyone put their shares back into the collective, but for many workers an indissolvable tie was nevertheless lost: the collective is now seen as alien (*chuzhoi*), no longer 'ours' (*nash*) (Koznova 1997: 375).[14] Consequently, it is among the managers, who do have to take decisions on behalf of the collectives, and the few energetic milkers or machine-operators who still identify with it, that one might find a sense of 'real ownership' (Koznova 1997: 365).

Ultimately, the issue of *sobstvennost'* (ownership) goes back to the question of control. An adviser on agriculture to the Buryat government told me:

> We have no tradition of private property. People don't even feel it. If a *fermer* (private farmer) has taken separate land people will drive their cattle on to it or cut his hay. He may grumble, but nothing will be done. There is no mechanism to compensate him or punish the

> others. In fact, there is no one to complain to. Officials will say, 'It's a pity,' but that's all.
>
> In our society, everything depends on your post (*dolzhnost'*) and your power-authority (*vlastnoe polnomochiye*). You feel yourself an owner because of your powerful position, not because of your legal rights. That's why the people who became *fermers* did so because of their close ties with structures of power, and only those who cultivate those links can succeed.[15]

These observations apply in the collective sphere as strongly as outside it. The 'owner' (*obstvennik*) is the one whose position gives the maximum number of rights and who *also* has the personal, practical power to make others bend to his or her will.[16] Ownership in this sense is divorced not only from the legal situation (which may be deeply unclear) but also from the idea of peasant possession, which rests on the moral right given by labour.

Yet the archetype of the peasant surfaces constantly in post-Soviet responses. The peasant life is one of patient suffering, bare survival and low status. 'Peasants are working cattle,' said one of Koznova's respondents (1997: 371). Yet people also say, 'If there had been no peasants, there would be no Russia'; 'the peasant feeds the people, he cannot go on strike'; 'the peasantry is the foundation of society; that is why there are these social misfortunes, because peasants are in a calamitous situation'; and, 'all that is good in people, their love for their children, for the earth, for the Homeland – all that comes from our peasant past' (Koznova 1997: 371–2). There are some people for whom this positive vision is a spur to action. In fact, there are two categories of potential peasants requiring further discussion, the people excluded from collectives, and those who have either left voluntarily to become *fermers* or who came from the cities to take up independent farming.

The excluded are those whom the managers reckon cannot contribute fully to the farm; they may be ill, disabled, alcoholic, or simply undisciplined and negligent.[17] Many of them remain living on the collective, for especially in the rural depths they have nowhere else to go, and Koznova is using a term current among managers when she refers to them as 'ballast' (1997: 365). Now in a situation of economic prosperity, especially if loans were available, it would be possible for these people to make claim to land through the Land Commission and set up as independent 'peasants'. However, such a situation is extremely rare in Russia. For the most part, the excluded exist on temporary work, state

benefits, the plots immediately beside their houses, and thieving (Koznova 1997: 365).

The 'peasant-farmers' set up at the beginning of the reforms are the most plausible candidates for a new peasantry. Koznova (1997: 379) gives the examples of K., whose grandfather had been a peasant in Siberia, and decided to become an independent farmer (*fermer*), seeing this as a revival of an ancient, forgotten way of life; and, C., who had spent his life working in a factory, whose decision to become a farmer was influenced by the fact that his ancestors were state peasants. Note, however, that ancestral inspiration is not enough. Anyone setting up as a *fermer* would have to have official contacts. Most commonly these were people who were already managers of collectives and who obtained approval to hive off the profitable parts for themselves (Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9). The reality is that independent private farms required large capital loans and equipment to get established, and hence were restricted to those with powerful connections. Furthermore, it turned out that successful operation of lone farms was almost impossible on the basis of a single family – the great majority of such farms failed altogether, or turned into trading companies. Now, only a tiny number of private *fermer* operations survive. They usually employ workers and they are mostly located in situations where there is ready access to city markets (Panarin 1999a); in other words, they succeed as commercial, not 'peasant', farms.

Group operation tends to fall foul of the peasant ideal of equality. Even if a communal group of shareholders (*tovarishchestvo*) sets up a private farm, the logic of decision-making and control of shares by those who contribute more (or less) labour leads to fears that the main shareholder will become an 'individual master' (*yedinolichnyi khozyain*) while the lesser shareholders soon become his hired labourers.[18] The accountant of such a farm, aged 44, dreaded returning to the collective, but was even more scared by the private farm. 'That [the collective] was such a nerve-wracking thing, such a responsibility! They called you up, you were rooted to the ground... No, I don't want to go back to that. But living with a master? We are painfully unaccustomed to taking orders. The ones in the collective, they were not masters, that was socialism! The Party and the Trade Union would protect you' (Koznova 1997: 378).

From the outside, *fermers* may be counted peasants if they themselves work the land with their own hands. Interestingly, it is held that they should produce not just for themselves but also for the state. Koznova's respondents said (1997: 379): 'Most *fermers* are not peasants, they are self-seekers (*rvachi*) and give nothing to the state'; 'the *fermer* is after big *sobstvennost'*; the peasant laboured and delivered (*sdal*) to the state, but

the *fermer* will be a landlord (*pomeshchik*) tomorrow; everything is just for himself'; 'the peasant loves his work, the *fermer* his income'.

Despite all this, some independent farmers do see themselves as peasants. A former driver, now a *fermer*, made a paradigmatic statement to Koznova (it seems almost too good to be true):

> A human being by his nature should be gifted with something that connects him to the land. That is what is most acceptable to me. I plan everything myself: my work, my day, and I don't have to report to anyone. I like the work. In the collective farm there are many extra people, and they don't sympathise with it with their souls (*ne boleyut dushoi*), they don't feel it is their own. My work is for myself, for my sons, and so that things should be better and simpler for the state.
>
> (Koznova 1997: 380)

Most *fermers*, however, see themselves as having an entirely different social status from the peasant. The peasant for them is someone who lives by old folk customs, seen condescendingly as backward and stupid, while the farmer is a phenomenon of the new times. In such a view, the challenge of running a farm is not working the earth, but how to organise and make money, how to realise their intellectual, managerial potential (Koznova 1997: 378).

Examining the current notion of the 'peasant' in relation to the situation, practice, and ideational frames of various categories of rural dwellers has enabled us to understand why it is that so few people identify themselves as peasants. Looking at urban farming raises slightly different issues, since for townsfolk the question of self-identification with the peasantry hardly arises. Yet the central problematic of the forgoing section remains: how are we to characterise the huge recent increase in the importance of subsistence farming? Here again, we can use the idea of the peasant farm as a foil.

Farming in the city

Of course, it is not only in post-socialist countries that city farming is an important source of income for urban dwellers (IDRC Report). Yet Vishnevskii's work (1998) shows that the socialist city was in many ways quite unlike those in the capitalist world that accumulated *ad hoc* from commercial, governmental and cultural activities.

The socialist city was in many ways deeply 'village-like' (*derevenskii*). For a start, it was swamped demographically with former peasants from the early 1930s onwards.

> Sacrificed to the Moloch of industrialisation, deprived of rights, tortured by hunger and the bloodletting and destruction of the war, the village looked to the city to be saved, but continued [in the city] to serve the same Moloch, bearing on its shoulders the main weight of the 'building of socialism' and its defence. Those who saved themselves by surviving in the cities were for some time in a huge numerical predominance over the core city inhabitants. The natural consequence was that gradually influence and power over the city centres came into their hands.
>
> (Vishnevskii 1998: 98)

In cities like Magnitogorsk, thrown together in a few years to produce vast amounts of steel, most rural incomers lived at first in earth huts (*zemlyanki*) and by 1938 the city was host to more than ten thousand cows, goats and pigs (Kotkin 1995: 137). Vishnevskii sees the urban former peasants as disoriented, 'declassed' people, having left the village behind but failing to acquire urban habits or values (1998: 99–100).[19] By the Khrushchev generation not only the party élite but the entire ruling class at all levels and in all regions was unprecedentedly rural in social origin. The fast-growing cities were hybrid concatenations of functional and power relations. Planning, for example of where to site a factory, obeyed no economic, still less market, rationality, but was a matter of the officials' whims. Decisions were taken at the very heights of power reflecting ambiguous attitudes to urban industry. One of these was the 1956 edict not to site further manufacturing in major cities, and in minor cities to place it on the far outskirts. Urbanisation became a standardised side-product of industrialisation, a matter of mere utilitarian functions ('the "labour resources" must be housed somewhere') and no effort was devoted to thinking about the specifically urban development of the city itself (Vishnevskii 1998: 103). This judgement may be excessively harsh, but it is certainly the case that Soviet cities consisted largely of functional settlements attached to factories and institutions (for which Vishnevskii uses the old term *sloboda*, settlement or colony) and that these could be extraordinarily distant from one another 'leaving between dwelling houses and social buildings wide spaces which the population can neither fill not bring to life'.[20] City centres were deliberately left to slowly decay in contrast to workers' colonies on the outskirts.[21]

Apartment block construction could not keep pace with the massive inflow of people. Surrounding each city were streets of 'temporary' barracks, and more germane to our theme, large areas of log cottages which were identical to those the former farming folk had left behind in the villages. In Russia as a whole in the 1940s and 1950s these urban cottages were around 38 per cent of all city dwellings; by the 1970–90s they were still 8–10 per cent (Vishnevskii 1998: 104).

It has to be said, however, that the peasant-type cottage was never a popular dwelling in the city. This was not just because it lacked sanitation and central heating and was almost invariably distant from the place of work. Nor was it because Soviet regulations by the 1950s or so forbade the keeping of cattle, etc. within city boundaries. The whole aim of moving to the city was to better one's social status, to shift if not oneself than at least one's children upwards to the position of educated, civilised people. To recall Sheila Fitzpatrick's idea of the 'stories' Soviet people told themselves to make sense of their lives, the 'Out of Backwardness' story constructed the 'primitive' peasantry as perhaps the most basic legacy of the past to be overcome. Quite simply, peasants were backward compared to town-dwellers (1999: 9–10). Individual people could take part in the Soviet achievement merely by moving to an urban job and living in an apartment.

As I have argued in the previous section, nothing has happened in the 1990s to dislodge this story. Nevertheless, especially in the Russian provinces, people are increasingly relying on urban farming and we must ask how they conceive of the process. The notion of the *dacha* captures the contradictions.

> A *dacha* [writes Zemtsov] can be anything from a squalid one-room hut, without water, electricity or heating, to a palatial mansion, complete with servants, watchmen, and a private beach and wood.
> (1991: 81)

The word *dacha* comes from the verb *dat'* (to give) and the term expresses the idea of an out-of-town summer house with a garden given as a reward to selected people by the authorities. Initially limited to Party functionaries and other élites, by the 1960s *dachas* came to be given out to whole classes of state employees (see Humphrey 1997). Except for those given out to political leaders, *dachas* were not set apart but were built in picturesque places in large compounds (though without the shops or centres of a village). Conceptually, the *dacha* was contrasted with the cramped, regulated life of the city. A way of life

previously limited to the aristocracy, with summers largely spent at the *dacha* and the rest of the year in the apartment, spread to all the more prosperous sections of society. The importance of summer to-ings and fro-ings from the *dacha* for the political élite was underscored by the construction of specially paved roads to whisk cavalcades from the city centre to rural retreats (Colton 1995: 513). For everyone, the *dacha* was somewhere to relax, to indulge in private pursuits, to make friends over a bonfire in the evenings, to go mushrooming, to play with the children. The authorities began to impose strict legislation (the size of the plot, the location, style and number of rooms in the house) as the number of *dachas* grew, but nothing could eradicate the sense of relative freedom and intimate sociability associated with *dacha* life.

The role of *dachas* in providing fresh food, compensating for eternal shortages in Soviet times, was recognised by the institution of 'garden plots' (*sadovyye uchastki*). As the earlier disorganised urban farming was phased out, garden plots came to take their place, though now among the more prosperous townspeople. These allotments (also colloquially called *dachas*) were given out by institutions to deserving workers on the basis that the land must be worked. Here people grew all those things they could never otherwise acquire: local flowers, raspberries, lettuces, tomatoes, squashes and so forth. A small house might be built, but nothing solid or warm enough to live in through the winter. All of this was still associated with pleasure; gardening was something that gave joy to life. It is only in the 1990s, that the picture is darkening. In poverty-stricken areas of Russia the *dacha* is now associated with necessity and grinding work. Nevertheless, people are trying hard to keep hold of the *dacha* ideal.

With the end of Soviet allocation of *dachas*, they are now acquired 'through connections' and money. In Ulan-Ude, for example, plots belong to associations attached to government ministries, such as the 'Selenga' society of the Ministry of Agriculture or the 'Kosmos' society of the Ministry of Trade. These are two organisations where shady patronage reigns (*blatnyye organizatsiya*), I was told, where besides paying an annual fee[22] one must have links with the managers in order to join. With money, one can get a larger plot, even a scenic spot to build a two-storied, year-round house. No longer do the great factories provide communal transport, ploughing services or storage for their workers holding 'garden plots'. Families must now arrange all this themselves. Cultivation is intense, with irrigation, raised beds, greenhouses and storages sheds pressed into the small plots. The proliferation of do-it-yourself publications indicates that townsfolk are not just reproducing the old gardens

but engaging in serious farming, requiring new knowledge and techniques. Increasing amounts of time have to be spent ('To do it properly, someone has to live there all summer,' I was told).

Some people say that the *dacha* has now to all intents and purposes disappeared in a city like Ulan-Ude.[23] Yet I found that more prosperous people commonly mentally divide their various allotments into places for leisure and places for work. Practically all city dwellers now have subsistence plots, which are given out by the authorities to all bona fide citizens or else are simply appropriated on any free land.[24] Thus many people now have two types of land: the *dacha* with its little house, where vegetables, fruits and flowers are grown, and the nameless second plots, where people raise life's necessities, mainly potatoes and cabbages. Poor families make do with the second type alone. Roadsides outside the city of Ulan-Ude are lined with potato plots, each marked with distinctive pegs at the corners.

The *dacha* ideal is under severe pressure. In provincial cities, the 'second home' has been reduced to a tiny hut, not really a dwelling at all but a second work-place and tool-store at the garden plot. Commenting on the run-down state of city apartments in the 1990s, Khandazhapova and Manzanova write (1998: 3), 'The presence of two primitive habitations instead of one fully adequate dwelling does not raise, but on the contrary, lowers the quality of life. It leads to excessive waste of space, but while the present structure continues, the construction of such "second homes" will continue to increase at an ever faster rate.' As the economic crisis deepens (increased urban unemployment, delayed or non-existent wages, price rises for food), subsistence farming is necessary for all, but it is handled socially in different ways.

Buryats in Ulan-Ude rely on country relatives to produce most of their meat, butter, cream, flour, etc., for which they pay by labour; they go out to the villages in summer to help with the hay-making that sustains the livestock during the winter. Nevertheless, they too have had to start allotments in the city for potatoes, which are an increasing part of their diet. Russians on the whole do not have relatives living in the countryside, so they work even more intensively on the urban allotments, hoping to produce enough to sell commercially and thus obtain enough money to buy meat and so on. Most allotment compounds now have a small kiosk by the gates to sell products to travellers[25] and to provide basic necessities to those who live at the *dacha* all summer long. A small number of very prosperous people of either ethnic group keep a '*dacha*' further out in the country that is in effect a smallholding, including livestock. This is worked by poor relatives, clients, or hired labour,

and the owner visits by car at weekends to enjoy the fruits and give orders.

We see from this that intensive urban farming has begun to necessitate someone living at the allotment from spring to autumn. Not only is there far more work than there used to be in the days of the '*dacha* for leisure', but travelling to and from the city is expensive and burdensome. Furthermore, theft of produce is now common so it is necessary to guard the plots and the stores. Reports of knifings and shootings of potato thieves are frequent, and they are even carried out by old women left alone to guard the crop (Beeston 1999).

Thus, contrary to the situation in more prosperous countries (Czegledy, Chapter 9 this volume), *dacha* is now a word that Russian families often hear with dread. Who is to go and do the backbreaking work? Who will stay for months in a tiny, comfortless hut? Who will go to the market to sell the produce? Most often, in my observation, it is the elderly retired people who bear these burdens. The situation does not, on the whole, cement family relationships but gives rise to endless complaints, especially against young able-bodied people who refuse to help. If differentiation is thus happening *within* the household – something that is conceptually unacceptable with regard to the 'peasant household' (though that communalism is known to have its costs too[26]) – it is all the more evident *between* urban households, and this contradicts the contemporary vision of peasants, that they live in egalitarian communities. For a start, the very burden of the allotment may cause families to split, as young people in employment hive off, leaving the old generation to subsist on its own account. Money now decides which land, how much land, and whether hired workers can be employed on the plots. In metropolitan cities, the very poorest people of all, single, elderly, unemployed women, cannot even keep the simplest potato plot, because they cannot afford the bus fare to go and tend to it.

Yet, however formally similar it may be, no one is identifying this situation with the 'differentiation of the peasantry' described by Lenin. Quite simply, as I have mentioned, people do not identify urban farming with peasant models at all. This is a matter of aims and values, not practical effects. Thus city officials who give out land in Ulan-Ude have reduced the size of plots from eight to six *sotok*[27] during the 1990s, because they do not see the allotments as turning into farms, and therefore they are not prepared to battle with collectives outside the city for extra land for city dwellers. For the same reason, regulations forbidding the keeping of cattle within city boundaries and *dacha* compounds are still in force, and plot-holders would not even try to obtain the necessary

licenses for large-scale commercial production. Urban farming is seen as even more subsidiary than the smallholdings of rural workers on the collectives; it is understood to be an expedient, not a way of life. The plot-holders themselves share these views. Those who can afford it try to uphold the 'apartment cum *dacha*' ideal, driving the subsistence plot into a nether region of the unpleasant realities of post-Soviet existence. The glossy media responds to the attraction of this ideal. Nostalgic articles appear about the warm, creative, passion-ridden life of the old Soviet intelligentsia in the rambling *dachas* around Moscow, and it is described how politicians and oligarchs are still building themselves mansions in these now myth-laden places ('And here on the veranda Richter gave piano recitals . . .'), (Zubtsova 1999: 38–47).

Conclusion

This chapter has tried the method of locating contemporary ideas of 'the peasantry' in various rural and urban situations, with the aim of thereby elucidating the nature of present-day farming practices. 'Practices' have been seen here as both modes of action and of thinking. They provide the key to the understanding of the ways people constitute themselves as subjects capable of knowing. The chapter describes the maintenance of substantive continuities in agricultural practices from Soviet times. Notably, the personal plots in rural collectives are still considered to be *podsobnyye* (subsidiary) and continue to be maintained in this fashion, even though most of the family income comes from them; and in the provincial cities, the '*dacha*–apartment' duo continues to be valued, while the mundane allotments are despised, despite the fundamental necessity of the latter to family budgets. In both of these situations, the 'peasant way of life' appears as something that either cannot, or should not, be emulated. The private farmer (*fermer*) comes closest to the idea of the peasant, and has been designated by this term by government reformers. However, the chapter has shown that the commercialisation of social relations inside the *ferma* contradicts basic values such as love of labour and egalitarianism attributed to peasants by contemporary Russians (who here again are much influenced by Soviet teachings). Actual 'peasants' in the early twentieth century may have been far from equal, but today great offence is taken at the idea of working for a private individual and at economic inequality more generally. Therefore, it is widely held, farmers who employ workers, or even just buy up most of the shares, cannot be peasants. So, taking all this together, and notwithstanding the huge increase in subsistence farming, the

practices of ordinary people in all their variety hardly ever support a self-constitution or self-identification as peasant.

This situation contrasts interestingly with Poland. A consideration of the difference will help us suggest some thoughts about the lack of political activism among Russian agriculturalists despite their extraordinarily adverse conditions. In Poland, small farmers are unhesitatingly called peasants (*chlopy*) both by themselves and in the literature, a usage which I follow here.[28] Polish peasants have a history of relative independence from the socialist regime. They refused, on the whole, to be collectivised. Thus, in the 1990s, they were considered the ideal ground for development of independent, market-oriented, capitalist farms (Zbierski-Salameh 1999). Now they were like Russian rural farmworkers in one respect, they had greatly gained economically from the security and subsidised prices of the late socialist period. And as in Russia, though far less drastically, the Polish peasants were damaged by the reforms: prices shifted markedly in their disfavour and they found it difficult to obtain credits or licenses enabling them to expand production. However, their reaction, at least according to Zbierski-Salameh (1999), was different from what we have seen in Russia. The Polish peasants strengthened practices of 'involution' (1999: 202), that is, reliance on themselves to generate the resources for the renewal of production cycles (unlike farmworkers of Russia who continue to rely on collectives) and 'retreat from markets', which saw them diverting field-crops away from commercial sales into fodder for their own livestock. Farm sizes have fallen, as the larger, more specialised enterprises sold land and dismissed hired workers to generate funds for the switch to closed-cycle production.[29] In other words, the Polish peasants have become if anything more 'peasant-like' during the 1990s.

What I would like to suggest here is that the increased autonomy of Polish peasant farmers may be a factor in their political activism. Zbierski-Salameh (1999: 205–10) describes how peasants blockaded sugar-beet processing plants, went on strike against adverse milk prices, and in 1990 dumped loads of potatoes at the Ministry of Agriculture in Warsaw to protest against state reduction in purchases of potato flour and starch. Of course, Polish farmers also had the political advantage that Rural Solidarity and other organisations had been working since the early 1980s in the countryside to challenge the socialist government. No such organisations were present in Russia. But I would like to argue here that the way the Russian farming people see themselves as parts of larger wholes, as opposed to independent units, is part of the explanation for their political passivity. For the relation between the smallholder and

the collective is not just an economic one, it is a relation of patronage. Similarly with the relation between the allotment-holder and the association or mayoral office that grants land. The collectives and the associations are themselves dependent on client-like relations with powerful economic patrons. In rural Russia, economic pressure can be, and is, exerted to political ends (for example, veiled threats to cut off the electricity unless one votes a certain way). This network of dependencies, which is maintained by the myriad of practices that have hindered the emergence of independent farmers, cowers people into what is quite rational political passivity in the circumstances. Paradoxically, in view of Marx's dismissal of peasants as lacking political awareness like 'potatoes in a sack', in Russia it is *refusal* of the peasant life and political passivity that seem to go together.

Notes

1. Rural farmworkers call themselves villagers (*sel'skiye*), or by the name of the place they come from ('*My Torskiye*' – 'We are people of Tory', and so on.).
2. Such theories would be relevant for rural people only in the case where they penetrate, through state policies, down to administrators who propound them locally (see Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9).
3. Koznova collected oral materials through extended, non-structured interviews with around three hundred rural respondents in the Orlov, Nizhegorod and Vologod Oblasts during 1993–6. The respondents had a range of occupations, from farm directors to manual workers, and were of various ages, though most were over thirty. Koznova acknowledges that attitudes in different parts of Russia may vary from her findings (1997: 362). Nothing in Koznova's materials contradicts my own field materials from the Buryat Republic in 1996 (see Humphrey 1998), but I have chosen to use her examples rather than my own because 'the peasantry' is classically a Russian cultural idea and to introduce Buryat data would complicate the argument.
4. The word *sobstevnnost'* is etymologically quite similar to 'ownership', since it relates closely with *sobstevnnyi* (one's own, proper, true), even though it does not link to ideas of 'private property' that seem so inseparable from ownership to Euro–American minds. *Sobstvennost'* is closer to 'personal' than to 'private' property (see Humphrey 1998).
5. 'The new, communitarian (*sobornyi*) "ordinary person" differed markedly from his peasant predecessor only in external, instrumental attributes. In the Soviet version of the future, this was first of all an industrial worker, a mechanical detail of the steely proletarian ranks, conscious of discipline, a homogeneous mass marching in a single human rhythm and standing above personal attachments. In essence, this was the collective (*obshchinnyi*) peasant, but reclothed in urban dress and with a modern education' (Vishnevskii 1998: 111–12).

6. The 'peasantry' was a category not only for sociology but also in Soviet legal and administrative practice. For example, the peasantry had a different status in relation to taxation, army service, passports and social security from urban workers or employees.
7. In 1987 the plots produced a quarter of all agricultural production in the USSR, despite strict limits on their size and the number of livestock kept privately. Between 1968 and 1988 production on the smallholding reduced from 26 per cent to 24 per cent, with a particularly sharp drop in cattle and poultry products. In 1986, the average collective farm family was purchasing 32 kg of meat, as opposed to 20 kg in 1981. Zemtsov attributes this situation to the hard manual labour required on the plots, which were almost entirely unmechanised (Zemtsov 1991: 327–8). One might also add that rural family size was declining (Vishnevskii 1998: 138) and that young able people were leaving the countryside. Between 1969 and 1988 the total agricultural workforce declined from 52 to 49 million (Zemtsov 1991: 327).
8. Accountant, aged 43, in the TOO Moslovo, Orlov District, Orlov Region, Koznova 1997: 363.
9. Panarin (1999b), on the basis of a detailed study of the village of Tory in Tunka, Buryatia, writes that collective farmers' income did reach an optimum in the Brezhnev–Gorbachev period. At the end of the 1980s, arable and livestock production in the Lenin collective were both so improved that a whole stratum of families (17.3 per cent of the total) could live almost entirely off their wages; they did not need to keep private cattle and used their plots only for extra vegetables. The situation was not sustainable, however. Prosperity rested on a constant subsidised supply of fertilizers, technology, lubricants, for example, and this whole mode of agriculture conduced to degradation of the soil, water and wind erosion, and over-use of pasture.
10. Even in the late 1980s, the agricultural workforce was only half the rural population (Zemtsov 1991: 327) and the situation has undoubtedly worsened since then as young people depart for the cities leaving an aged population in the villages.
11. Village dwellers hold two kinds of plot. The first is the *priusadebnyi uchastok*, a plot under a hectare in size immediately beside the house, used mostly for potatoes, other vegetables, pigs and chickens, and for cattle sheds. The second type of plot is located outside the village and consists in Buryatia of a hay-field to provide winter fodder for cattle (in other areas of Russia this plot might be used for other purposes). The first plots are almost never taken away from the family living in the house even if they are formally the property of the collective farm. The second type of plot is re-allocated fairly frequently, and some collectives do not make them available to teachers, and others, who live in the village but are not members of the farm.
12. They can be passed on in inheritance, as during Soviet times, but they still cannot be sold on the open market (that is, to outsiders, Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9).
13. Land Commissions in each district have the task of deciding on allocation of lands between collectives and other claimants, such as independent farmers or production cooperatives.
14. The sense of alienation is not universal. Koznova also notes (1997: 378) people who say they want to keep their shares in the collective in the hope

that the collective will become prosperous again and to preserve their sense of common ownership (*stremleniye sokhranit' sobstvennost'*).

15. Galina Manzanova, personal communication, Ulan-Ude 1996.
16. An example is the director of a state-owned institution, a station for producing horticultural specimen plants near Ulan-Ude. Besides fields and laboratories, the station included housing for its workers and numerous other buildings. The long-time director, who had numerous influential contacts in the city, clearly felt herself to be the 'owner' in the sense outlined by Manzanova. She gave or took away housing, and sold other buildings, according to her own will (fieldnotes, Ulan-Ude 1996).
17. To give some idea of the numbers, in 1996 in the Karl Marx Collective Farm in Selenga district, Buryatia, of a total of 490–500 households 320 were members of the farm, around 70 were state employees, and the rest (around 100) were 'ballast'. Of course the proportions may be different elsewhere in Russia, but other farms I visited in Buryatia had comparable numbers. Koznova notes 'ballast' to be around 30 per cent of households in Central Russia (1997: 378).
18. In the conditions of economic crisis, poorer shareholders may have to sell their shares to the director for financial reasons, Koznova 1997: 378, Humphrey 1998: Ch. 9.
19. In the steel-producing city Magnitogorsk in the 1930s, 'Many of the peasants came to the site in traditional groups of migrant villagers known as artels whose leaders were generally older peasants, men who commanded absolute loyalty from other members and brooked no incursions into their authority,' Kotkin 1995: 88–9. The artels divided the wages amongst themselves and maintained their own traditions. The Bolsheviks considered that they had to 'smash the artels' in order to assert their own authority (Kotkin 1995: 89).
20. Vishneveskii is here quoting Leroy-Beaulieu, who was describing Tsarist cities, with the aim of showing that Russian cities have changed little in this respect (1998: 104).
21. 'In many cases our workers' quarters look better than the centres of the cities,' said Stalin with pride (quoted in Vishnevskii 1998: 104).
22. The fee is not large, since the associations are still subsidised by the government (1996); it covers the cost of water for irrigation of the gardens.
23. Chief city architect, Ulan-Ude 1996.
24. From 1985 these plots were given out only to people with five year official residence permits (*propiski*) for the city. With the crisis of the 1990s this regulation has been relaxed, and now plots may be given out by the mayoral office even to migrants without registration. All officially allotted land is subject to taxation in Ulan-Ude. For this reason, many people simply appropriate unused land, slipping a bottle of vodka to anyone who looks as though they might interfere.
25. In 1996, because of increasing poverty, such travellers are now few and many of the kiosks were having to close down. The produce is sold instead at the city market or on street-corners.
26. In the late nineteenth century, studies of Russian villagers revealed that they thought a large patriarchal family was good for farming work, but that for living it was anything but happy. 'Everything is unsteady, everyone is straining at the leash, demanding their own because of the awkward

conditions; everything is suffocated by the despotism of the parents-in-law, and the husband, the wife, the brothers are straining for freedom and hate having to submit...', said one farmer (quoted in Vishnevskii 1998: 131).

27. Six *sotok* is six-tenths of a hectare.
28. 'Peasants' is not the only term small farmers use for themselves, but it is unproblematic in many regions (Frances Pine, personal communication).
29. Closed-cycle production ('involution') implied scaling back numbers of animals proportional to the land available (Zbierski-Salameh 1999: 204–5).

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