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How "Rural" is Agricultural Pluriactivity ?

1. Introduction

The study of agricultural pluriactivity has enlightened the understanding of the process of change in contemporary societies and economies. Nevertheless, current research still reflects a double bias: pluriactivity is seen as an 'agricultural' problem and, furthermore, most approaches assume a descriptive nature. However, pluriactivity is essentially, an inter-sectoral phenomenon which, to be understood, requires a comprehensive analysis of socio-cultural and economic change.

The main aim of this paper is to relate pluriactivity to the micro-social framework in which reproductive strategies of the family play a central role as well as to the broader context of change from which its dynamics partially derive. By doing so, it will be possible to deal with the pervasive nature of such a phenomenon and, consequently, to conclude that only to a limited extent can pluriactivity be taken as a 'rural' issue. This assertion is particularly relevant in Portugal in which the historical development of society didn't produce homogenisation of the economic and social structures of urban and industrial rationality.

The attempts that have been made to overcome the agricultural origins of pluriactivity studies have led to the analysis of the farm family and its reproduction strategies. This focus has led to the perception that the economy of the family and of the farm do not necessarily coincide and that the logic behind farm (economic) change cannot be divorced from that of family (social) change. Nevertheless, this type of approach tends to neglect the interaction between the

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process of change at the family and farm level and that of the wider forces which, together, shape the configuration and historical evolution of local economic and social structures.

Indeed, any insight on pluriactivity can neither be divorced from nor insensitive to the terms in which the process of development of 'rural' regions is increasingly equated. The analysis of pluriactivity cannot ignore changes occurring at other levels, particularly wage regulation, the evolving nature and patterns of unevenness in the spatial distribution of manufacturing industry and the regulation of the employment system.

The wide range of questions to which one would be led by the above considerations do converge on one fundamental theme: the role and relevance of labour force reproduction in the contemporary processes of economic regulation. Furthermore, it is also necessary to stress that its influence does vary according to the central or peripheral nature of the national social system within which it takes place. More recent research approaches share this broader perspective, particularly The Arkleton Trust Project which is a good example of a cross-cultural analysis from which there is much to be learned.

2. The Restructuring Process: Towards Flexible Integration

The relevance of strategies of pluriactivity in the context of change occurring in contemporary societies has been widely documented and acknowledged (Mingione, 1983; Clerc *et al.*, 1984). The analysis of agricultural pluriactivity as a (farm) family reproduction strategy provides useful insights on the mediative processes between the supply and demand sides of the labour market (Humphries and Rubery, 1984). However, the analysis of the process of social change in agriculture, from this point of view, leaves out a fundamental dimension of the overall (and wider) process of change.

If it can be argued that wage income and the integration in the non-agricultural labour market are strong components of family reproduction strategies, even though these conditions are not necessarily definitive and irreversible as the early modernization thesis assumed, it is necessary to bring into the analysis the main lines of change which characterise the current process of restructuring in contemporary economies and societies. Among the relevant characteristics of restructuring, one can point to the 'fragmentation' of wage relations, as an example. It concerns the breakdown of contractual stability and the automatic incorporation of productivity gains in wage relations, which earlier phases of economic growth suggested would be extended to an increasingly large number of economies and economic sectors. There has been a growing diversification of work statutes and an increasing relevance of 'atypical' forms of labour

mobilization, closely associated with significant changes in the spatial pattern of manufacturing growth. Local configurations of productive structures become more and more relevant in this context. These include tendencies towards more dense networks of inter-firm relationships, which develop hand in hand with more intense articulations between production strategies and the locally dominant modes of social reproduction (Reis, 1988).

This inevitably superficial picture of emerging trends in contemporary capitalist economies contrasts sharply with the characteristics of the model which prevailed and typified the process of growth for about three decades in the core industrial societies. The 'fordist' period (see, for instance, Aglietta, 1979; Sabel, 1982; Lipietz, 1985), was associated with high levels of inter-sectoral labour force transfers, a marked process of urbanization, the rising pre-eminence of wage labour, significant increases in productivity levels and the industrialization of agriculture. Its political counterpart was the growth of the Welfare State, associated with the management of the reproduction sphere and the creation of new and multiple forms of indirect income. Therefore, the notion of Fordism corresponds to a mode of economic operation limited in space (the central economies of the capitalist system) and in time (the period between the post-war and the 1970's), and taken in its simplest form. Thus, the true meaning of this notion must be critically reconsidered whenever one takes into account the complexity of social practices (Veltz, 1983) and/or the specificity of certain economies (Reis, 1989: 48, 82-93).

The economic crisis of the early 1970's, and the long process of transition between modes of economic regulation which is still taking place, signalled the end of dominant technological models of production orientated towards mass production. The virtuous cycle of economic growth had come to a halt. More recently, one has witnessed the growing relevance of what has been termed a post-Fordist¹ or flexible regime of accumulation (Piore and Sabel, 1984) to which Cooke (1988) prefers to term 'flexible integration'. This 'regime' led to the 'derigidification in labour processes, labour markets, products, patterns of consumption, and the financial system' (Cooke, 1988: 286) inevitably introducing qualitative changes in the way social formations are structured.

It has been argued, see Newby (1985) and Urry (1987), that the process of restructuring of capitalist production has had the fundamental effect of 'heightening the socio-political salience of local systems of social stratification' (Newby, 1985: 212). Furthermore, it can also be argued that the traditional urban-rural duality is increasingly inadequate to reflect the ongoing

¹ For an analysis both of the post-Fordism notion and of the possible economic scenarios under a new mode of accumulation, see Boyer (1989) and Sayer (1989).

processes of change (see, for instance, Mingione and Pugliese, 1987). So, the analysis of the current process of restructuring "offers a much more holistic account of rural social change than the **sociology of agriculture and rural community study** approaches which preceded it" (Newby, 1985: 213).

Nevertheless, the specific social and economic outcomes of the process of restructuring of social relations and of the regime of flexible accumulation do vary significantly with the level of development of the society in which they take place. As a working hypothesis, it can be argued that while in the more advanced societies flexibility is mainly achieved through higher levels of technological advancement and strategic alliances in key industries in the pursuit of external economies of scope (Cooke, 1988), at the level of less developed societies flexibility is mainly achieved through the mechanisms of labour force mobilization.

It is in this sense, we believe, that the semiperipheral nature of Portuguese society must be discussed. We follow and develop Wallerstein's approach in which a semiperipheral society can be characterised by the existence of an old industrial fabric where traditional and more dynamic outward looking sectors are mixed. It is also characterised by an heterogeneous entrepreneurial class and by long established regional and local specialised production systems. In terms of the reproduction sphere, agricultural farming plays an important role for a large number of families. Therefore, it must be seen as a fundamental feature of the semiperipheral status of Portuguese society (Santos, 1985). This complex set of conditions derives, to a large extent, from the less centralized forms of economic regulation, so lending greater autonomy to the local processes of economic development (Reis, 1985; 1987).

So, in order to understand the socio-economic role which agricultural pluriactivity is currently assuming, one needs to adopt a methodological approach which takes into account the processes and mechanisms of the spatial reconfiguration of the economy: productive decentralization, endogenous initiatives and growth, and the articulation between process of production and modes of reproduction. It is no less a fundamental task to take into account the process of change in the domestic economies of farm families.

3. On the local environment: post-peasant reproduction

In order to fully assess the nature and role of pluriactivity, the analysis of reproductive strategies has to go beyond the **logic** of farm change and capture not only the innerworkings of family decisions but also their **rationale** and their **implications in terms of productive and social practices**. The following section aims at illustrating this argument, with special reference

to the situation in the Central and Northern regions of Portugal. Here, the abandonment of farming activity as the main economic occupation of **individual** land holders occurred in a context where the other members of the **family** secured the maintenance of the farm and farming activity.

The importance of uneven patterns of spatial development, both in terms of dominant productive and reproductive practices, for the historical development of capitalism has been widely documented (eg, Massey, 1984). Agricultural pluriactivity in Portugal can illustrate this interdependency between different 'spaces' of the same social system. There, the process of industrialization gained a renewed impetus in the late 1970's without giving rise to any significant increase in the levels of urban concentration or to full proletarianization of the labour force. Particular attention must therefore be paid to the influence that the traditionally dominant modes of production and reproduction in the rural economy exert on the shaping of the emerging social and economic structures.

In the peasant system, the reproduction of domestic groups is dependent upon autonomous work on the farm. Within an overall context where the available resources are restricted to land and labour and in which domestic surplus production does not reach significant levels, efforts are concentrated on maintaining and passing on the productive resources (reproduction). This attitude is reflected in an articulated framework of institutions, norms and values, widely accepted and legitimised, which constitutes the rural socio-cultural context for reproduction strategies.

The spatial diffusion of new forms of production and of new patterns of economic rationality have brought about important changes in the peasant system. At the level of reproduction, the displacement of farm revenue by wage income was perhaps the more visible effect, often leading to the abandonment of agricultural activity, as well as the farm and even the rural locality. However, in some areas, as is the case of the Portuguese regions mentioned above, despite the growth of wage income derived from economic sectors where a capitalist logic prevails, the persistence of **family** farming is remarkable. The total number has remained fairly stable since the early 1950's despite the fact that the number of active persons in the agricultural sector was halved in the same period (Rosa Pires, 1987).

In Portugal, farm families largely adopted an ambivalent strategy of economic reproduction based on an inter-sectorial allocation of resources. This attitude led to a redefinition of domestic roles often associated with a process of adjustment in farming practices (be it in terms of the

substitution of capital for labour or in terms of the reduction of scale in farming) which was also not totally indifferent to market trends (Hespanha, 1987). Nevertheless, as far as agrarian structures are concerned, the process of change was far more important in terms of the domestic patterns of activity than in terms of the productive framework.

In this way, the basic characteristics of the rural social environment which played an important role in past reproduction strategies were preserved. The reproductive 'rationality' based upon the extended family still plays a key role in the behavioural patterns of rural people. This is revealed by a generalised concern with the cohesion of the domestic group and the search for autonomy in production activities. These characteristics play a major role in shaping the economic structures which underpin local processes of development.

In Portuguese society as a whole, the pervasive nature of agricultural activity and of the rural milieu is quite evident. More than 18% of the people are active in agriculture. Thirty-four percent of Portuguese families have a farm; more than 50% in the Central and Northern regions. If one also takes into account the links between farm families and 'urban' families with a rural origin, then the cultural relevance of the rural milieu becomes yet more notable (Hespanha, 1986; 1987). This phenomenon is probably not confined to the Portuguese situation¹.

It is important to stress, however that the level of dependency of farm families on farm income is low, with only 18% depending exclusively on that income and the vast majority (61%) depending mainly on other sources of income. The obvious conclusion, then, is that income alone cannot explain why such a large number of families keep their farms. Other issues, linked to self-provisioning and non-formal activities which, to some extent, constitute a compensation for the under-development of the Welfare State (Santos, 1987), have to be brought into consideration. In any case, pluriactivity and pluri-incomes are, in the Portuguese case, a current strategy to improve the level of well-being of Portuguese families.

It can be argued that productive rationality and social consciousness characterise the ambivalent nature of 'rural' society. As far as Portugal is concerned, the 'deficit' of class consciousness which can be recognised both in the Portuguese bourgeoisie and the proletariat does in fact correspond to a strong rural consciousness. For instance, it is reflected in a marked sense of belonging to primary social groups (the family and the community), and in the marked individual integration into the societal networks of their place of origin. It also reflects the

¹ See, for instance, Etxezarreta, 1985; Clerc *et al.*, 1984; Pieroni, 1983; Katranidis and Analytis, 1988; Zurek, 1986; for an overall assessment of part-time farming in EEC countries, see CEC, 1986; Rosa Pires, 1987.

continuous search for autonomy in relation to the mechanisms of integration into 'urban' society and implies a way of life which clearly denotes the influences of value systems deeply rooted in rural society.

Indeed, the ambivalence of a large proportion of the population and the persistence of strong networks forged outside the work place bring together, and to some extent blurs, the distinctions between different social groups, so making the development of capitalist relations highly dependent on complex forms of mediation. A further point to be made is that although this complexity can be specific to 'semiperipheral' societies, it does not constitute a stage of pre-development but rather constitutes a consolidation of a particular type or model of development and of integration in the wider level of the world economy. Moreover, bearing in mind the arguments of Newby (1985) and Urry (1987), it becomes obvious that an explanatory approach to pluriactivity cannot ignore the implications which derive from the nature of the processes of social change, to which it also contributes.

4. Conclusion

Agricultural policy concerns played a key role in firmly reestablishing pluriactivity in the European research agenda (Rosa Pires, 1988; Robson *et al.*, 1987; von Meyer, 1987). There is a tendency to elaborate this theme, once again, in purely agricultural terms. There are, however, two 'counter-tendencies'. First, agricultural structures policy is itself increasingly elaborated in terms of 'regional development policy' as opposed to the sectoral approach which prevailed hitherto (eg, CEC, 1988). Second, research on pluriactivity is now far more developed and sophisticated than in the past (Fuller, 1984). We hope to have shown that pluriactivity is not amenable to blanket policies and that agricultural policy can only grasp one dimension of the problem.

Agricultural pluriactivity of the type referred to in the last section is a social and economic phenomenon which, although being clearly **rural** in its origins and in the way it adapts to the structural evolution of capitalism, is transformed as it gradually becomes part of that evolution. In the same way as the static nature of the 'rural' geographical concept blurs its boundaries and becomes a non-geographical network of socio-economic relations with a local or regional basis, so agricultural pluriactivity increasingly becomes a component of wider processes of change of the type we have attempted to outline.

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Abstract — This paper questions the adequacy of the traditional approach to the study of agricultural pluriactivity which tends to be set within a narrow agricultural framework and assumes a descriptive nature. The basic argument is that an explanatory approach to contemporary forms of agricultural pluriactivity has to be informed by the process of capitalist restructuring and social change. This paper starts with a general analysis of the changing modes of the economic relations and then focusses on labour force reproduction structures. These are seen as most relevant in the context of a 'semiperipheral' society such as Portugal. It is concluded that although agricultural pluriactivity is clearly 'rural' in its origins, it contributes to, and gradually becomes part of, a wider process of change which transforms its very nature and blurs its original 'rural' boundaries.