

Moral perception of the economy and wealth in peasants' worldview

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Abstract

The peasant economic rationale differs profoundly from that which characterises market capitalism. Amongst the many differences between the two is the peasants' tendency to interpret economic processes in moral terms and to judge them in the context of communal, hierarchical relationships. This article presents the results of an investigation carried out in Argentina dedicated to understanding peasants' worldview. Some significant findings are peasants' tendency to: associate wealth with a moral deficit, interpret the commercialisation processes of their harvest in terms of expropriation and to affirm the right of all people to live in a dignified manner, a view which presupposes that those who have more wealth lend assistance to those in need.

Keywords: peasantry, economy, moral foundations theory, worldviews, psychology

INTRODUCTION

The rationale used by peasants to both make sense of the economy as well as carry out important decisions regarding production and commercialisation of farming products differs to that used by big farmers who, in contrast, organise their economic activity in accordance with the market economy (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1988; Cáceres, 2003; Henningsen, 2001; Landini, 2011a, 2011b). Thus, in this sense, it has been argued that peasant activity is characterised by being more of a family subsistence strategy than one directed at obtaining profit (van der Ploeg, 2009; Waithaka, Thronton, Herrero, & Shepherd, 2006), that peasants prefer to reduce risk rather than increase profits (Ayalew, King, Bruns, & Rischkowsky, 2003; Patiño, 2000; Stage & Rekke, 1998), that their activity is geared towards diversification rather than monoculture (Cáceres, 2006; Mora Delgado, 2008) and that their practice is founded upon local knowledge that may or may not correspond with scientific knowledge (Chaves Alvez, 2005; Nuñez, 2004; Uzeda Vásquez, 2005), amongst other elements that characterise their practice. Scholars interested in comprehending peasants' economic rationale have failed to study peasants' worldview about how they construct their moral judgment of the economy and wealth. Thus, this work conducts a re-analysis of the results of a research conducted in the Province of Formosa, Argentina, that explored

peasants' worldview, with a particular focus on the discourses through which peasants construct moral judgments about the economy and wealth in general.

Despite that 'morality' is recognised as belonging to an interdisciplinary field of study (Souza & Vasconcelos, 2009), a psychosocial approach to this subject was adopted in this research. Moral psychology is an area of psychology characterised by two main strains of thought (Haidt, 2008). The first is a cognitive-developmental approach, founded by Piaget and later consolidated by Kohlberg (Araujo, 2000; Arnold, 2000), which today constitutes the main line of moral psychology. This approach is characterised by a focus on the reasoning processes present in moral judgments (Jensen, 2011; Souza & Vasconcelos, 2009) as well as by having a strong base in the Kantian conception of morality, centered on justice, rights and obligations towards others in the context of a liberal, progressive narrative (Haidt, 2008). However, as Haidt (2008) points out, at the start of the nineties, a new approach began to emerge that articulated advances in neuroscience with evolutionary and social psychology, an approach that proposed not only the recognition of the role of feelings and intuitions as an integral part of the construction of moral judgments, but also included the extension of the concept of 'morality' itself (Souza & Vasconcelos, 2009). In this context, Haidt (2001, 2008) proposes the social

intuitionist model of moral judgment, which considers moral judgment to be the result of a rapid, intuitive process grounded in the emergence of evaluative feelings about actions, situations or persons coupled with no awareness of a conscious, evaluative process (reasoning). For an analysis of the confluence between reasoning and moral intuitions, see Cushman, Young, and Hauser (2006).

Regarding the concept of 'morality' itself, various authors have proposed that its conceptualisation transcend the liberal tradition from whence it comes, one that focuses on the individual and his rights and obligations, opting instead to consider it as a means for regulating social relationships. As stated by Rai and Fiske (2011), 'our sense of morality functions to facilitate the generation and maintenance of long-term, social-cooperative relationships with others' (p. 59). In this sense, Haidt (2008) also argues, 'moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible' (p. 70).

Likewise, Jensen and Shweder developed what they called the 'three ethics approach' (Jensen, 2011; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). These authors argue that the individual-centered moralities only reflect one of three existing ethics, ethics based on different ontological presuppositions (Haidt & Graham, 2007): ethic of autonomy, studied in the classic studies of moral psychology, ethic of community and ethic of divinity. In an effort to further develop the 'three ethics approach', Haidt and collaborators proposed the Moral Foundation Theory (MFT; Craig, Graham, & Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2007), identifying five psychological systems in the context of which moral intuitions are generated across cultures. The five foundations are: (1) harm/care, (2) fairness/reciprocity, (3) ingroup/loyalty, (4) authority/respect, and (5) purity/sanctity. The authors propose these moral foundations operate in almost all cultures and social groups, yet groups are differentiated by varying levels of attachment to, or recognition of, each foundation, as well as by the culturally determined way in which they judge and act in the moral realm. Although Rai

and Fiske (2011) develop an interesting proposal of their own, they also contribute to MFT by highlighting the importance of paying close attention to the social contexts within which subjects or social groups, regardless of their general preferences, are going to prioritise any specific moral foundation.

Thus, taking into account the interest of studying moral systems that differ from those of the researcher (Haidt, 2008), as well as that it is of utmost importance to comprehend the ideological constructions through which different social groups find the means to approach these five foundations (Haidt et al., 2007), the current article presents the research results by focusing on the construction of meaning through which the peasants make sense of certain economic processes and wealth in moral terms.

METHODS

The present investigation was conducted in the village of Misión Tacaaglé, located in the province of Formosa, Argentina. Its main objective was to identify and describe the psychosocial factors that influence rural development in peasant communities. Due to its exploratory-descriptive nature and its interest in describing peasants' perspectives, experiences and points of view regarding issues related to rural development, a qualitative approach was adopted (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004; Montero & León, 2007), which locates this article within the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Given qualitative methodology is diverse and far from being monolithic (Knoblauch, Flick, & Maeder, 2005) as well as the specific research objectives mentioned, which focus on the description of the peasants' subjective meanings and sense attributions, this research follows the traditions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology (Flick, 2002; Flick et al., 2004).

Given that the methodology of an investigation is chosen in relation to its research questions and objectives (Álvaro, 1999; Ibáñez, 1992), this investigation utilised participant observation (Guber, 2001) and in-depth interviews organised by areas of interest (Taylor & Bogdan, 1992), a combination which allowed for a triangulation of methods (Flick, 1992). Participant observation was made

possible by coexisting with a family of smallholders during several fieldwork trips conducted between 2003 and 2007, comprising a total of almost 6 months. During the fieldwork, research notes were taken (Guber, 2001) regarding comments, situations, interactions and practices related to rural development, such as cooperative practices, research projects or problems with the sale of their crops. Additionally, the author recorded interviews with 71 peasants and 11 other actors, including four rural extensionists, three municipal officers, two medium farmers, two employees of a non-governmental organisation and one peasant leader.

In order to analyse and interpret the data collected, the general guidelines of grounded theory were used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an approach that focuses on the understanding of the meaning that different aspects of social reality have for those who partake in it (Mattar Yunes & Szymansky, 2005; Soãres de Lima et al., 2010). The interviews and fieldwork notes were typed and incorporated to the Atlas Ti software for qualitative analysis, a method suitable for working with grounded theory (Flick, 2009). This inductive methodology, employed for theoretical construction (Flick, 2002), is characterised by its flexibility and recursiveness with regards to data analysis (Soãres de Lima et al., 2010).

In this research, the interview process and the data analysis were organised into three phases. During the first phase, preliminary interviews with peasants and other participants were conducted with the objective of identifying possible areas of interest to explore during the research, given that the specific topics to be addressed were at first unclear. After these unstructured interviews were conducted, the transcribed material was coded and six general categories related to psychosocial processes were constructed in order to organise the texts in relation to development projects, farming activities and problems when selling their produce. The construction of these categories emerged as a result of a process of abstraction of certain topics found in the interviews where psychosocial issues appeared. These general categories are: the subjective impact of political clientelism, the relationship between rural extension workers and peasants, associative

practices, peasant economic rationality, identity as related to rural life, and the subjective positioning (active or passive) of peasants.

During the second phase, specific questions related to these topics were developed and most of the interviews with peasants were conducted. Some of the questions asked included: What happens here during electoral periods? What type of work do rural extensionists do? What kind of difficulties do you encounter when working in a cooperative manner? This material and the fieldwork notes were typed and coded using the categories already developed. Subsequently, sub-codes were developed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mattar Yunes & Szymansky, 2005; Soãres de Lima et al., 2010). Finally, new interviews were administered so as to clarify questions that emerged during the previous analysis, such as the differences between peasants' knowledge and technical knowledge as well as the reasons for specific productive choices.

During this first analysis of the results, moral interpretations of economic processes and wealth did not emerge as one of the six core subjects to be analysed. Nevertheless, throughout the process of sub-code construction, the peasants' insistence on moral interpretations related to economic processes and wealth became apparent, which provided an opportunity to describe and analyse the specificities of the peasants' making sense of certain economic processes and wealth in moral terms, an issue neglected in both moral psychology and rural development studies. In consequence, the peasants' perspective and its diversity on these topics will be described and analysed in this article.

With respects to ethical norms, this investigation abided by the American Psychological Association's ethical code (American Psychological Association, 2002) and was analysed and approved from an ethical standpoint by Argentina's National Council on Technical and Scientific Research (CONICET). First of all, before each interview was conducted, a verbal informed consent was used, which included a description of the objective of the research, the use that would be given to the recorded interviews and results, and also included a reference to the institutions that were supporting the investigation. For the participant

observation, although APA does not require that the population receive formal informed consent forms (American Psychological Association, 2002, norm 8.05.b), all the people with whom the researcher established frequent or extended contact were informed of his role in the village. Secondly, in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, no data that could reveal their identity was included in any of the reports or papers that emerged from this research.

BACKGROUND

The village of Misión Tacaaglé is located northeast of the Formosa province, on the border between Argentina and Paraguay. The climate is subtropical and the soil has moderate agricultural potential. Production activity is concentrated primarily on extensive cattle ranching (bovine) and agriculture. In the case of the latter, peasants focus mainly on harvesting vegetables and cotton which, due to a lack of tools and machinery, have low productivity levels. The majority of the local peasants own the land they farm, although there do exist cases of precarious land tenures or disputes over land ownerships. Agricultural activity is centered on smallholding, although there do exist farmers that have more opportunities for capitalisation. In this investigation, the small producers interviewed will be described as 'peasants', even though they commercialise a large portion of their production. This is due to the state of poverty in which they live, their predominant use of family labor force (Manzanal, 1993) and their low capacity for accumulating capital (van der Ploeg, 2009). Misión Tacaaglé peasants tend to use ox or tractors, the latter provided by the local government at a low cost- for soil preparation, and they hoe and harvest manually, which results in a particularly low level of influx of income. Consequently, the area is characterised by elevated levels of poverty, a condition that favours political clientelism. The region produces vegetables for the national market, but because it is located far from the main areas of consumption, in times of abundance, the cost of transportation becomes greater than the sales price of the product, a situation that makes commercialisation impossible. Nevertheless, even when the peasants are able to commercialise,

because they do not have access to buyers outside of their immediate radius, they tend to sell their produce at low cost to the biggest producers or to other intermediaries, buyers who tend to obtain a large profit from the transaction (Landini, 2010).

FINDINGS

In this section, three specific themes will be addressed. Theme 1 will analyse the peasants' construction of 'poverty' as a synonym for morality. Theme 2 will address the peasants' interpretation of two processes in moral terms: the disappearance of credits for small farmers in the province and the problems related to the commercialisation of produce. Finally, theme 3 will show how the peasants construct the argument that it is rich people's duty to assist those who are not economically well-off.

Theme 1: Poverty as an indicator of morality

As Tajfel (1984) states, people and social groups strive to construct and maintain a positive identity that allows them to consolidate their self-esteem, an end towards which a multiplicity of strategies may be employed. Amongst them is the construction of oppositions (Bolaños Gordillo, 2007) or 'contrastive identities' (Cardoso, 2000) between their own social group ('the peasants') and other social groups, as well as between themselves as individuals and other small producers, with regards to moral issues. This is a strategy of particular relevance and lends peasants the ability to give themselves a positive connotation while differentiating themselves from others.

During the interviews it was observed that most peasants tended to describe themselves as hard workers. As one interviewee pointed out, "I work [...], I never go to the town council and cry to anyone over a kilo of sugar or anything [...]. And you know that I make my whole family study in just this tiny farm". The phrases placed in double quotation marks, which are not bibliographical references, correspond to textual phrases taken from taped interviews with the peasants and subsequently translated into English by the author. Furthermore, most peasants also tended to describe themselves as trustworthy and invested in others' well-being, "I've never fought with my neighbor, if I have it, I give him whatever he comes by to ask

for. If I have a spoonful of sugar I divide it right then and there and give him some, that's how one should act with a neighbor". In contrast, inhabitants of cities and towns, as well as other peasants they sought to differentiate themselves from, were often depicted as untrustworthy, individualistic, irresponsible and lazy, "[there are those who] aren't interested in, who don't care, who live like they live and don't try to progress by doing more", "he goes to play cards and drinks", "he gets money but spends it like it's nothing". Thus, oppositions were constructed with the end of creating a morally superior self that was then compared to others who lack these valued characteristics. One of the areas of comparison observed was that which associates people's morality with their wealth or income.

The differentiation and contrast between the categories of 'poor' and 'rich' were based on a moral axis that presented the poor as good people and the rich as not good. The majority of peasants interviewed asserted the poor are always available to offer help in situations of need because they know what it is like to suffer and sacrifice. However, most of them argued, people who have money do not know what it is like to be in need and thus are not willing to lend support to the peasants. As stated by a peasant interviewee:

Someone that has, what is he going to get from a poor person, from a humble person? Now, instead, if I have money, yes [...] But people who have money and a poor person, no, nothing happens. Those of us who are poor [...] when we need something we help each other out, because we understand the suffering of being in need.

As Lim, Teo, and Loo (2003) found, a statistically significant relationship exists between having experienced financial problems and the willingness to both give money for charitable ends and a tendency to be more generous.

Additionally, most peasants also argued that those who have money only want to obtain more and, given that the poor do not have material goods of value, rich people in general take no interest in them: "those who have more, they no longer care about those who have less". Worse yet, some peasants also argued: not only do rich people lack interest in the suffering of those less

fortunate, but they also tend to take advantage of the poor "[he who has money] makes you work for 1 kilo of pasta, 1 little peace of fat. 'Because you are poor you have to suffer', they say". It followed that, from most peasants' point of view, the poor are better people than the rich; they are more honest, sincere, responsible and dependable. As one peasant stated, "you can lend a poor person a bit of money and he will pay it back for sure because he is embarrassed, [...] and the people who have money, you lend them money and they don't pay it back".

Regardless of the objective reasoning upon which this characterisation is supported, the following question arises: What are the pragmatic consequences, for those peasants interviewed, of describing the rich as abusive, dishonest and disinterested in their fellow citizens and deeming the poor as honest and trustworthy? Following social identity theory (Tajfel, 1984), it could be argued that by describing those who have money in a manner that distinguishes them from those who are poor and, furthermore, by stating that the former deserve to be valued in a negative manner due to their questionable ethics, those interviewees that were supporting this argument were resignifying their poverty as something positive, even desirable. In this way, associating poverty and morality allowed them to give their reality a positive connotation, thus rendering the status of being poor a certain level of importance and endowing poor people with the following characteristics: that of being honest and incorruptible. In consequence, to be poor could become source of pride.

Similarly, the principal moral foundation (see Introduction) for peasants' questioning of the morality of those they considered to be rich was related to the 'harm/care' moral foundation in that, what was essentially being questioned was the act of not providing the care expected of them. Explicit reference to the 'authority/respect' moral foundation, however, was not found, due to the peasants' relationships with their out-group not being interpreted in hierarchical terms, at least in most cases. Nevertheless, this point will be the focus of a subsequent discussion. Likewise, most of peasants' criticism of the rich did not appear to sustain itself in terms of the 'in-group/loyalty'

foundation because the comparisons made clearly established themselves along the distinguishing line between an in-group (peasants/poor people) and an out-group (rich people).

Theme 2: A moral interpretation of economic processes

As was stated in the introduction, peasants comprehend the economic processes of which they are a part through the use of their own, particular rationale, one that profoundly differs from that which is generally used by businessmen. Two areas where the peasants tended to understand certain economic processes in moral terms are presented below.

The disappearance of credits

Two decades ago, the provincial public bank of Formosa used to grant credits to farmers for production. Nonetheless, these credits disappeared during the nineties, when this bank was privatised. The majority of the peasants interviewed tended to focus on the farmers' lack of willingness to pay back the credits rather than the change in public policy resulting from the privatisation of the bank. What most of them argued was that, in the past, in the interest of obtaining votes, the government had granted credits to farmers as well as non-farmers, a situation that led to the latter being unable to pay back the credit, since they were using the financial assistance towards consumption and not farming. As time went on, credits were condoned on several occasions, giving the general perception that these loans did not have to be settled. As a peasant explained, 'the government used to give credits before, [...] but during election time he took care of everything', and this was why, '[the people of the region] got used to not paying the bill and no one said anything'. From this situation, the majority of the peasants interviewed deduced the conclusion that people did not pay back the loans out of an unwillingness to do so, thus resulting in the government's decision to stop granting those credits.

The peasants tended to explain the disappearance of the credits by way of a moral factor, unwillingness to pay back the loans, when they could have used political or economic arguments. It is possible, as local development agents argued, that the lines of public credit disappeared due to

this bank's privatisation, a process that led the bank to modify its business strategy. Thus, taking into account that most peasants avoided the acknowledgment of this second alternative, it is possible to hypothesise that the peasants interviewed had the tendency to understand economic processes in moral terms, when other social groups, such as bankers or businessmen, would judge this with moral indifference because they perceive, from their own point of view, that there is no moral issue at stake. It could be argued that it was the peasants' lack of knowledge of economy and finances that was inducing such moral evaluations. Nonetheless, peasants' explanations of lack of payment as being mostly due to unwillingness and not to low prices in the sales of cotton, which is a fact known to them from experience, provided evidence to support that most peasants have an inclination to understand and judge certain economic processes in moral terms.

What were the moral foundations used when interpreting this issue? Evidence affirms that fairness/reciprocity was the core foundation used by the majority of the peasants interviewed to explain the moral issue of not repaying the loans. Repaying a credit, firstly, was what is considered the *correct thing* to do, "the credits, you must pay them". Thus, not paying acquired the meaning of 'failing' to who provided it and constituted feelings such as guilt and shame, "once you fail someone, you cannot just go and face them again", "[if] I don't pay, I will be ashamed, and I don't want to go through that". Finally, some peasants also explained the importance of repaying the credits by mentioning that paying helped to maintain a relationship wherein it was possible to obtain future credits. Thus, loans must be reciprocated with their payment: "You pay back your credit so that next year you can ask for another one".

The process of commercialisation

The tendency of most of the peasants interviewed to understand the process of commercialisation of the products destined towards the market in moral terms is also of great interest to this study. Two of the most important difficulties that all the peasants of this community face are the struggle to sell their produce and the low sales prices, "we work

a lot here, we sow lots of things, but there is little market". The majority of the peasants interviewed tended to interpret these problems in two ways that are not necessarily in opposition, using what could be described as 'the theory of product abundance' and 'the theory of expropriation'.

The theory of product abundance focuses on the fact that the products cropped in Formosa mature earlier than in other provinces due to its being located in the north of the country, causing the produce to enter the market earlier. In consequence, selling vegetables becomes a problem only when the squash and watermelon start to mature in other provinces located closer to the main areas of consumption, which makes them cheaper. This explains both the diminishing price of the harvest, once the same product matures in other locations, as well as the subsequent difficulty in selling the produce. A peasant explained this:

When it is freezing near Buenos Aires [which is nearer to the wholesales market], then all the products from here are taken there, but when the weather is good there, then all the products are supplied by that area [...] if everything around there goes broke, then buyers come here and then we make good profit

This explanation focused on economic and productive factors that influence the functioning of the agricultural market, rather than on evaluations of a moral nature.

However, this explanation was not the most commonly accepted theory in the region, but instead, the theory of expropriation. The context for this was that peasants had scarce contact with market players and had a limited volume of production and thus sold their vegetables to large producers, who supplemented their load with produce from smaller farmers, gaining a percentage of the profit by functioning as intermediaries. In this case, most of the peasants interviewed did not deem as illegitimate that the large producers made a lot of money from their own, large production volume, but did oppose when they did so at the peasants' expense. All the peasants stated that the local intermediaries paid much less for the produce than the price at which they would then sell it: "he pays 50 [%]

and 50 is theirs, or he pays 40 and eats 60. And we [are] the ones who produce and we charge less than they do". The large producers were perceived here as making money *at the expense of the peasants*, since they did so without taking on any risk nor doing extra work, in contrast to the benefits they obtained from the work on their own production, to which the peasants had no objection. This situation generated the experience, in the case of most of the peasants interviewed, that they were being abused and expropriated, a situation reinforced by the lack of alternative means of commercialisation.

In this way, most peasants not only felt abused, but worse, at the hands of who was buying their product, who appeared to be taking advantage of their condition of poverty and need, "[the intermediaries] buy at the price they want", "he sets the price and, what can you say? If you don't sell it to him, who are you going to sell it to?" Further, for some peasants, the local intermediaries should pay for and sell the product for the same, or almost the same, price, without making a profit from the transaction, since it was not perceived as being the fruit of labor or personal effort. In a sense, the intermediation was conceived as being a favour that the bigger farmers should do for the peasants and not a legitimate source of profit. Thus, some peasants argued, "the intermediaries profit from the people's sweat, from their sacrifice" and that they paid less than the real value for the produce, "[the buyer] comes, he just comes here and he, the man from here, from the area [the local intermediary] comes and he buys from us at the lowest price and then he goes and sells it at the price that it should be sold".

The peasants' moral criticism of the intermediation process, in some cases, even extended to the decision made by large producers to sell their own crops before the peasants', an action that is perfectly appropriate within the market logic. Two peasants explained, "those guys [large, local producers], when the market opens at a nice value, they supply with their own farms and then the price goes down and us small producers are left with our squash on the farm", "they first take their own produce and then, if there is enough [demand] [they buy] from the small ones. And maybe if the demand is not big enough, then all of it is left behind on the farm".

However, why would large farmers buy a small amount of production from a peasant if they had their own produce to sell? Nevertheless, from the point of view of most peasants interviewed, who experienced being marginalised because of their poverty, economic logic was transformed into a moral one, leading them to consider illegitimate that large producers sold their crops while they could not, when they were the ones who needed the income the most. While it may not be coherent when considered from the standpoint of how economic systems function, in the context of the peasants' needs and state of scarcity, it was quite a reasonable argument. Shouldn't the person who needs the most be the one who is able to sell first?

An alternative situation that emerged was when one of the large producers functioned as a patron, giving the peasants inputs for production or money to deal with situations of extreme need, in the context of a personal, paternalistic, relationship. In existing literature, this type of hierarchical relationship generally characterises the patron as caring and protective, while the person in a dependent position is characterised by gratitude and deference. A peasant exemplified this:

Here we have a patron, for example, I need [help], I go, I tell him, 'I want you to prepare my land' and when the product is ready I pay him [...] He is a man who knows when someone is poor and he helps. If we have, we pay; if we don't have we say 'Ok, we can't', and it's not a problem.

The most common agreement reached in these cases by the peasants was that these large farmers provide resources to them while committing to buying their production in times of harvest, when they would deduct what had been loaned from the balance. In this case, all peasants deemed as acceptable that the patrons paid less than the price at which they sold, in return for doing this 'favour' because the sale took place in a context of a reciprocal relationship where help had been previously provided and, consequently, peasants did not speak of abuse nor expropriation when alluding to these, particular cases. Here, both the relationship and the exchange were also valued in moral terms. However, in this case, the

intermediary was endowed with positive connotations since the benefits he obtained from the relationship were perceived as being related to the help he previously provided.

In terms of the moral foundations for the value judgments made of the commercialisation process, what was salient was the importance given to the expected reciprocity in the context of the hierarchical relationship between peasants and intermediaries (authority/respect moral foundation). In this context, all the peasants seemed to expect support and protection from more wealthy producers, which, in turn, created a tendency towards interpreting that expropriation had taken place when this support was not provided and to the perception of fairness, in the case of the 'patrons', when help was provided.

Theme 3: The moral duty to help those in need and the right to a suitable level of subsistence

Henningsen (2001) states that, in peasant economies, there exists the expectation that those who are wealthy or have control of available resources should be generous and contribute to satisfying the needs of those less fortunate, a factor related to a moral foundation of authority and respect in the context of hierarchical relationships. In Misión Tacaaglé, this expectation for help and assistance, particularly in times of need, befell upon two social actors: large farmers and politicians. In general terms, most peasants expected that large producers who acted as intermediaries provide them with inputs for production and that politicians provide assistance in the form of food, public employment, welfare plans and productive assistance, assuming that both would do so, additionally, in emergency situations or ones of extreme need, such is the case of illnesses or climactic disasters, by using either public funds or their own, personal, assets, "because when I needed, I spoke to him, when I got caught by that tornado [...] there the mayor helped me [...] they're there for that". Thus, these social actors, who were supposed to control resources, were expected to help peasants when needed because the type of relationship at play was one characterised by bonds of patronage, where the large farmers or politicians were committed to providing the peasants with resources

(favours, goods or services) and protection from the risks inherent to daily life, while the peasants in turn assumed the promise of loyalty, of handing over their production for sales and lending support when needed, which often became political clientelism when what was needed were votes. In the context of these hierarchical support relationships, most peasants responded with gratitude, an emotion related to the perception of having received benefits from more powerful subjects (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). A peasant expressed this gratitude, “I believe that I can never repay what he did for me, not matter how many votes I give him. What’s most important is how grateful I am”.

The general conception of what justifies, or legitimises, these relationships was the particular combination of the peasants’ inability to satisfy their own needs with the existence of people who had available resources and were thus in a position to help. This refers to a principle that could be deemed as a ‘universal right to a suitable level of subsistence’ under which the rich and powerful are obligated to act as providers of basic goods as well as become a sort of insurance against any adversities that may arise in daily life, in case the poor cannot not access a suitable level of subsistence. The following quote showed this: “if your family is sick they [the local councilmen] have to help you, they should take it out of their own salary [...] that [is] something that they should fulfill”. This was because he who asked for help was in dire need, as can be observed in the following quote, “this mayor [...] you go, you tell him to help you, that you have nothing, that you have many children”.

This principle did not find its sustenance in a rule of equity, nor on a legally constituted universal right, nor public policies of inclusion or redistribution. On the contrary, it referred to more personalised forms of assistance, where the obligation to comply was of a moral rather than legal kind, which demanded a sense of gratefulness and reciprocity from those who received the assistance. In no interview was the legitimacy of the difference between the rich and the poor questioned. Although all peasants did consider unjust that the rich used their resources to take advantage of the poor, no mention was made of the possible injustice to be seen in the mere fact that there are rich

and there are poor people. This type of paternalistic relationship, based on assistance and organised exchange, seemed to legitimise economic inequalities and social hierarchies, as long as the rich complied with their duty to assist. In the following quotation, the interviewee criticised rich people’s greed, yet not the existence of social differences, “the owner of this farm here wanted this land for himself. He had 5,000 hectares but he wanted these 50 back [land that was being reclaimed by poor peasants]”.

Analysing this theme by the moral foundations used by most peasants to make moral judgments, it is quite evident the authority/respect moral foundation is the one predominantly used. The reference most commonly made by peasants when making moral judgments was regarding the conduct of, for example, local authority figures, politicians, large producers and wealthy people in general and their expectation that these people, with whom they maintained hierarchical relationships, complied with their responsibility to protect and support the peasants when they were in a situation of need. The peasants’ conduct was also evaluated in the terms laid out by these hierarchical relationships, particularly when awaited-for help had been received, an occurrence which generated a moral obligation to reciprocate with loyalty and gratitude.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article analysed peasants’ discourses on wealth and other economic processes, as well as the moral evaluation that they tended to make of them. This type of analysis has never been carried out before from the perspective of moral psychology. The primary conclusion reached is that, within the worldview of most peasants of Misi3n Tacaaglé, there was a strong tendency to interpret wealth and economic processes that are usually perceived with moral indifference by other social groups, from a moral perspective. In other words, when understanding people’s wealth and certain economic processes, most of the peasants interviewed focused on the integrity and fairness of the actors’ conduct and not on the way the market or the economic system functions, which, hypothetically, is not the responsibility of individuals. This matter does

not tend to be mentioned in the ample literature dedicated to peasant rationale (see Cáceres, 2003, 1995; Chonchol, 1990; Manzanal, 1993), despite having been mentioned more than 30 years ago by Scott (1976, quoted in Henningsen, 2001).

The lack of interest in this topic stands in strong contrast with the relevance it has proved to have in this case study and its implications for the design and implementation of rural development projects (Landini, 2011a), given that this dimension of Misión Tacaagle peasants' worldview serves as a lens through which most of them perceive economic processes and consequently organises their behavior. Additionally, this interpretation of wealth and certain economic processes contains an implicit critique of the capitalist logic, a logic that prioritises the right to property over people's needs. Essentially, all the peasants interviewed considered it their right to receive assistance from those who had more than enough resources than they needed to live in a dignified manner, while others, like the peasants, did not have enough. Further, most peasants considered it illegitimate that intermediaries and large producers take economic advantage of their commercial contacts by, for example, placing their products in the market before the small farmers could, even though the latter needed the sale more because they are poor. This gave rise to a series of suppositions that are very reasonable in terms of social equity but intuitively contradictory to the manner in which contemporary capitalist societies function.

Despite that these conceptions may be seen as naïve and anachronistic, they are relevant tools for rethinking how most people comprehend the economy in modern capitalist societies where, while social injustice is considered illegitimate, the economic processes through which this injustice is consolidated and reproduced are not. This does not mean, however, that one must fall into the practice of revering the peasants' traditional culture and thus hold it up as a model to be followed. Essentially, one must remember that these peasants' criticism is not based on a proposal for equality, but instead strives only to achieve a suitable level of subsistence, not rejecting inequality as long as those who occupy the top of the social pyramid assist, in a personal manner, those who have less. This justifies,

albeit indirectly, many illegitimate practices, such as political clientelism (Auyero, 2001).

On the other hand, the manner in which most peasants interviewed comprehend certain aspects of the economic system can also hinder real processes of human and economic development (Landini, 2012). Consequently, both the 'everyone has the right to a suitable level of subsistence principle' perception, which obligates those who have more to help those in need, as well as the perception of themselves as abused, mistreated and left out by more powerful economic actors, can easily lead the peasants to assume a passive role. This can translate into a constant appeal for assistance, for example, or continuous complaining and blaming, which inevitably impairs their focus on developing their own capabilities.

Additionally, this research also contributed to the understanding of the ideological constructions through which this particular social group approaches the five foundations described by the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt et al., 2007). When addressed, (1) 'poverty as an indicator of morality', the harm/care moral foundation was identified as the core foundation used in that context. In the case of (2) 'the disappearance of credits', it was the fairness/reciprocity foundation, and when analysed, (3) 'the processes of commercialisation' and (4) 'the moral duty to help those in need', the salient moral foundation was that of authority/respect. In an effort to integrate these results and, working under the assumption that the five moral foundations can be articulated amongst themselves, it may be argued that in (1) the importance given to the duty of care for others can be understood as being a part of the duty to help others that is characteristic of the hierarchical relationships developed in (3) and (4). Thus, although the hierarchical nature of the relationship was not considered a central point of the analysis, this finding cannot be omitted when making a general overview of the data obtained. Similarly, although case (2), the disappearance of credits, was previously analysed within the framework of an intuitive moral foundation of fairness and reciprocity, the hierarchical nature of the relationship between one who grants credits and one who receives them should not be overlooked,

even though this was not highlighted during the analysis. Consequently, the moral foundations that are a part of hierarchical relationships seem to play a central role in the peasants' worldview. This is linked to a duty to care for others that befalls upon those who control economic resources and to the peasants' assumed responsibility to reciprocate the favours received by paying back the credits or treating those who provided assistance with deference and gratitude, which in turn highlights the importance of fairness and reciprocity.

In brief, the ideas presented in this article have contributed to a better understanding of peasants' economic rationale. This area of study would benefit from further research in the future, particularly by comparing results of investigations conducted in different peasant societies or by studying the practical implications that these results have on designing more effective strategies for rural development in these populations.

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