

A cultural worker's reflections on Alexander Chayanov's peasant meta-utopia

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DOI: 10.22394/2500-1809-2022-7-4-133-147

I intended to write a detailed and consistent analysis of Alexander Chayanov's science-fiction novella *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* but failed. When getting the snippets of people's voices that constitute my research, I could not give up my own speculative comparisons and ideas which had sparked my interest. With this text, I wish to outline the vast horizon of opportunities for my colleagues from various spheres of knowledge — including contemporary art — when considering Chayanov's legacy as a writer, economist, and thinker. Being unaffiliated with the academia, I can take this liberty as a researcher — a liberty Alexander Vasilievich would have hopefully forgiven me.

Chayanov's ideas are scattered throughout his novels and economic works and are difficult to generalize within a single topic or discipline. Chayanov as the writer is inseparable from Chayanov as the scholar: to understand the former, we must think about the latter. This is a challenge that may reveal new opportunities for surprising comparisons and unexpected interpretations.

Having started the study of Chayanov's social-philosophical futurology, I discovered that many works had already been devoted to it. In this text, I primarily refer to the works of Alexander Nikulin. I am very grateful to him for our conversations with such an interest and consideration.

I want to thank Alexey Kravchenko and Sergey Fonton for the chance to study wonderful materials from their family library. I am also deeply grateful to the staff of *syg.ma* who supported my work, and personally Kirill Rozhentsov and Dmitry Bezuglov for their patience and faith in my finishing this text, for their considerate and sincere comments and editing. Finally, I want to thank Gediminas Daugela for translating this paper into English, which was written in 2020–2021, at the height of the pandemic.

Dreams, sensations, and make-believes are as important to this research as facts and sources I studied during and after the covid-19 lockdown. It is no coincidence that in the story, the main character's journey into utopia starts with a dream. Chayanov's protagonist, having lost consciousness, mysteriously finds himself in the city of Moscow in 1984. So did I, having stumbled upon a mere mention of this utopia, fell down the rabbit hole of learning more about Chayanov's legacy. Therefore, this text (and the research) cannot be considered in any way complete. I am still learning about fascinating people and keep uncovering new details like shiny little gems from a jewel box, without much of a system; I am just hoping that in the end they can be arranged into a new and scintillating mosaic.

I believe that research is impossible without an irrational element: Chayanov wrote numerous magical texts imbued with a Hoffmannian spirit. He lamented how Moscow lacked its own stories of mystery which define the spirit of a place: they were written for the old Moscow which was disappearing and which he knew and loved deeply. In mayor Sergei Sobyenin's vapid and glitzy Moscow of today, there is no place for the mystery that enables a deeper understanding of reality. This is why the small town of Nikolina Gora located just outside Moscow, where Chayanov lived and worked and where I am working now, is the perfect place to study his works. In my dream, I get my answer: "go big". I should settle for no less than the world he foresaw and precipitated, and the major practical challenges — both present and future — that he was restlessly and enthusiastically aiming to overcome by not only enlisting the help of other people, but also developing diverse and distinct concepts and ideas.

In addition to Chayanov's synthetic thought, which was of interest to his contemporaries from various areas of knowledge, it is his ability to build horizontal connections that is worth noting. He found common grounds with colleagues from different poles of the political spectrum and successfully criticized the limitations of different political systems. For instance, he pointed out the inferiority of the liberal model (one of its weaknesses is the inability to create utopias) and the limitations of the socialist model (the dangerous possibility for new social upheavals)¹.

Chayanov's political beliefs could be defined as 'pink'. As a moderate socialist, he knew how to compromise and seriously considered the possible synthesis of economic systems in *The Journey of My*

1. "A new uprising. Where is it? And in the name of what ideals?" — he thought. "Alas, the liberal doctrine has always been weak because it could not create an ideology and had no utopias". Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

*Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia*². However, Chayanov often disagreed with the policies of the Bolshevik party, openly opposing it on key issues (such as industrialization and collectivization), which cost the scientist not only the career, but also his life³.

In the 1930s, Chayanov's organization-production school collapsed, which led to a dissolution of a vast and branching network of rural *zemstvo*⁴-based 'grassroot' agricultural specialists, mostly left-wing intelligentsia. These were young specialists that remained influential in the first decades under the Soviet rule and, since the beginning of the century, had been suggesting a different solution to the crucial issue of agriculture — not by nationalization or socialization of land, i.e., not by political revolution⁵. Chayanov's arrest was a part of the plan to destroy this intellectual network that had been working in different regions of the country. Despite the fact that Chayanov was

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2. "In general, Chayanov's utopia is a 'pink' progressive utopia of a moderate agrarian socialist. This is an attempt to invent an alliance between liberalism and socialism". Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3. "Chayanov was a moderate non-party liberal-socialist, only in 1917 he become a member of the People's Socialist Party" (Ibid.)
 3. Chayanov's organization-production school offered an alternative to collectivization. Chayanov showed that there were certain models of the family economy that could, through cooperation, be integrated into both global and agricultural markets. It is possible to organically transform the traditional 'wild' life of the natural peasantry, without violence, to make them an equal player in the global market economy of the 20th century. Kerblay B. (2018) Chayanov. The evolution of the agrarian thought in Russia from 1908 to 1930: At the crossroads. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 3, no 4.
 4. *Zemstvo* — a form of the rural self-government in the Russian Empire and Ukraine; was established in 1864 to provide social and economic services, had a significant liberal influence in imperial Russia. *Zemstvos* existed on two levels — the *uyezd* and the province; the *uyezd* assemblies consisted of delegates representing landowners and peasant communities and elected the provincial assemblies. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 18, 2015. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/zemstvo>.
 5. After 1905, this new generation of agronomists was powerful enough to control all agricultural societies in the country. Such societies in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Kharkiv, as to a large extent the Free Economic Society, were no longer governed by nobles; they were headed by left-wing intelligentsia, and its role became decisive in the agrarian thought on the eve of the First World War... While Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries believed that the agrarian question could be solved only through nationalization or socialization of the land, i.e., only by means of the political revolution, the whole so-called organizational movement, which mainly united like-minded people from agronomists and teachers in *zemstvos*, believed that the division of land was only a palliative, insufficient measure to solve the agrarian question. Kerblay B. (2018) Chayanov. The evolution of the agrarian rhought in Russia from 1908 to 1930: At the crossroads. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 3, no 4.

not a politician, the authorities destroyed his legacy, with his ideas forgotten for a long time, due to their implicit political potential⁶. Throughout his works, Chayanov wondered how and in what system people could live together, how such a life could be built without the unbearable violence and exclusion⁷.

The utopian thought of Chayanov as the scholar and the writer, or the text is about one utopia, but it is worth mentioning at least three

*It is as if the mind had been freed from the hypnosis
of everyday Soviet life;
new, exciting thoughts stirred in my consciousness,
thinking in new ways became possible
A. V. Chayanov*

Chayanov as the writer and the scholar created many works — from mystery stories to rigorous economic treatises. Several utopian works written in the 1920s are of a particular interest for they show the evolution of the author's views and his reaction to the changes in the country⁸.

Researchers of Chayanov's work usually focus on *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* — his most fa-

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6. After the beginning of the forced collectivization, Chayanov and his colleagues were persecuted and repressed, accused of subversion, sabotage, and counterrevolutionary conspiracy. The investigators reminded the defendant Chayanov of his authorship of the so-called counterrevolutionary utopia (Chayanov, Petrikov, 1998). In 1937, Chayanov was executed. Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3.
 7. Socialism will go through all its stages and reach extreme, even absurd outcomes. Then the cry of disavowal will burst out again from the titanic breast of the revolutionary minority and the mortal struggle will begin again, in which socialism will take the place of the present-day conservatism and will be defeated by a future revolution yet unknown. Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*. by V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.
 8. Most often researchers of Chayanov's work analyze his famous fantastical story *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia*. But we believe that in some other, primarily scientific works by Chayanov, it is possible to identify signs of the utopian thinking that constructs utopia. We primarily refer to such abstract-theoretical works as *On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems* and *Experiments in the Study of the Isolated State*. In addition, Chayanov confirmed the status of utopia of his last futurological novel *The Possible Future of Agriculture*. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.

mous, but not only utopian work⁹. Chayanov created utopias throughout his professional life: it became a kind of the method to assess and anticipate the dramatic changes in the country and the world at the time (his predictions were often accurate to the year). A fascinating detail about Chayanov was that his diverse interests included astrology; perhaps, he used this symbolic system in his futurological constructions¹⁰.

In the 1920s, young Chayanov headed the scientific discipline, and his career was developing rapidly. He was the department head at the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy when he establishes and then headed the Research Institute of Agricultural Economics, the main international-level institution.

According to Alexander Nikulin, we can consider Chayanov's first utopian work as a collection of sketches on the economy of an isolated island state; it was written in 1915–1922 and published in 1923. At the outbreak of the World War I, Chayanov studied the disintegration of the market in general and of the agricultural market in particular. Later he changed the analysis of the empirical evidence of the autarkization¹¹ of global and peasant economies for the development of abstract models of interaction between capitalist and peasant economies in the autarkic space¹².

Surprisingly, in the politically volatile 1920s, when the Bolsheviks still had a tenuous hold on power and seriously feared peasant unrest, Chayanov published his second utopia, *The Journey of my Brother Alexei*¹³. As V. B. Muraviev, the researcher of Chayanov's

9. Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3.

10. It is necessary to note Chayanov's extraordinary social-political intuition which made him one of the first among his contemporaries to sense the profound changes in the spirit of the 1910s and 1930s, so aptly named as the era of catastrophes by the British historian E. Hobsbawm (2004). Each of Chayanov's efforts at utopian construction, as a rule, coincided with new catastrophic stages in the evolution of the society. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.

11. Autarky (Greek *autarkeia* — self-sufficiency) is the state policy of the regional economic isolation from the economies of other countries. Autarky is to create a closed, independent economy capable of independently providing itself with everything necessary. The highly restrictive tariffs on imports, an increase in prices for consumer goods, etc., are the main means of autarky. Barikhin A. B. (2010) *Big Legal Encyclopedia*, Moscow: Knizhny Mir.

12. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification?. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.

13. Chayanov's book was written very quickly in 1919, as the author was under the time pressure of never-ending research and administrative work. Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3.

legacy, describes in the article *The creator of the Moscow Hoffmanniad*, the order to publish this utopian work most likely came from Lenin. There is evidence that Chayanov did meet with the Bolshevik leader and, although their views differed, Lenin (as an agrarian) could not but praise the gifted and extraordinary scholar and underestimate the power of Chayanov's "utopian fantasy"¹⁴. It should be noted that "Vera Pavlovna's utopian dreams in Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?* inspired a whole generation of revolutionaries"¹⁵.

Another evidence of Lenin's interest in publishing the book is the fact that the preface was written by the eminent party publicist V. V. Vorovsky (under the pen name P. Orlovsky), the head of the *Gosizdat*, the state publishing house. Instead of being banned outright, the book had been printed with a devastatingly critical preface: "We publish this utopia so that every worker and especially every peasant, who thinks about the great revolution we live in, knows how differently the future is envisioned by those who do not think the way we do, and is able to critically and consciously come to the conclusions of the enemy. This was a bold and unusual move aimed at neutralizing Chayanov's radical ideas. After all, the story questioned two key Bolshevik tenets: first, that in the revolution, the peasantry would follow the proletariat (*The Journey of my Brother Alexei* describes the victory of the peasant-led party); second, the feasibility of creating a federation of republics by the Soviet government (in the utopia, the federation collapses). Chayanov did not receive further scathing reviews after the book's publication, but the authorities issued an eloquent warning. In the following years, Chayanov was reluctant to turn to his 'folly' and even tried to cover up the fact that the book had been published: "I would actually prefer if nobody brought it up in Moscow"¹⁶.

14. It is not at all that great people tend to owe tribute to dreams — this is a facet of the utopian thinking and, contrary to popular belief, not the most important one. What is more significant is that utopians in their social views were the first to use the ability of the human mind to foresee the future. This discovery was highly appreciated by Lenin. In his book *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin quotes the words of Engels from the 1874 preface to the pamphlet *The Peasant War in Germany*: utopian socialists "ingeniously anticipated such countless truths the correctness of which we now prove scientifically". *Library of Contemporary Science Fiction* (1967), vol. 14, Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya.

15. Pervushin A. (2019) *12 Myths About Soviet Fiction*, Saint Petersburg: AuraInfo & Gruppya MID.

16. "My big request to you, if you are going to publish a review on Kremnev's utopia, is not to disclose my pen name, and not to divulge too much about the historical part or any of the predictions, otherwise the disclosure of the pen name... would cost me too much, and I do not want to add fuel to the fire". A. V. Chayanov (2006) *The Moscow Hoffmanniad*. Afterword by V. B. Muravyov, comments by V. B. Muravyov, S. B. Frolov, Moscow: Ton-

The analysis of Chayanov's unique blend of ideas in *The Journey* on order to outline his main lines of thought is no small task. Despite his desire to create bold and whimsical hybrids (be they syntheses of cultural phenomena or economic systems), Chayanov is not neutral in his social-economic and historical-cultural preferences: "He is axiomatically convinced that the rural world of peasant farms is the foundation for the evolution of the global diversity of society. Chayanov acts as a leading representative of the ideology of agrarianism, contrasting his utopias with other ideologies and utopias, namely progressivism and urbanism, capitalism and communism"¹⁷.

The French scholar Basile Kerblay, whose research in the 1960s revived interest in Chayanov's works, describes Chayanov's ideology in his utopian book as follows: "This literary-political experience primarily aims to put forth an ideology that can oppose communism and be traced back to the traditional peasant system of land use. Indeed, in its content, the ideology proposed by Chayanov serves as a vehicle for concepts borrowed from Kropotkin — with his ideas of urban deconcentration, local autonomy and a diversity of one's activities suggested by then-fashionable theosophists and anthroposophists. Kerblay emphasized that it was Chayanov's wide range of interests, in addition to how boldly he constructed concepts that incorporate a variety of views and ideas, that drew him and other researchers to Chayanov's legacy"¹⁸.

Today, many scholars find hope and inspiration in Chayanov's ideas — both foreign researchers from France to South Korea and those from Russia, be they economists, literary critics, peasant and agrarian scholars, and independent researchers. At the last annual Chayanov Conference held at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, a section was devoted to his literary works. One of the questions was if it was possible to define with certainty *The Journey of My Brother Alexei* as a utopia? Features of both utopia and dystopia are intertwined in it. A meta-utopia, a fairy tale, a futurological novel — we can define this work in different ways¹⁹.

chu. "Since I have no wish to end up in Lubyanka upon my return to Moscow, I ask you again to submit this review for my approval... In general, I would prefer that this work was not brought up in Moscow" (Ibid).

17. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.
18. Kerblay B. (2018) Chayanov. The evolution of the agrarian thought in Russia from 1908 to 1930: At the crossroads. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 3, no 4.
19. To some extent, Chayanov's utopia rethinks the ways to revitalize the cause in his agrarian ideology perspective which fully embodied the ideals of the February Revolution led by the alliance of bourgeois, populist and social-democratic parties. In general, Chayanov's utopia is a 'pink' progressive utopia of a moderate agrarian. Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3.

In 1928, the grain procurement crisis ruptured the link between urban and rural areas as established under the New Economic Policy (NEP). The Bolshevik leadership sought to overcome it with the non-economic methods of forced seizure of grain from peasants, while expediting ambitious plans for the industrial development of the first five-year plan. At this time Chayanov wrote his third utopia. “The article is published in the collection *Life and Technology of the Future: Social, Scientific and Technical Utopias* on the very eve of collectivization, which means that Chayanov was already compelled from making specific social predictions and preferred to focus on science and technology”²⁰.

In his last utopian work, Chayanov follows some ideas of *The Journey of My Brother Alexei*. Nikulin notes that, “for instance, the words ‘peasantry’ and ‘peasant’ almost do not appear in the text”. Chayanov was aware of the impending technological (anti)utopia which threatened the peasant world that fascinated him and that he loved so much. He had already realized that industrialization was irreversible, and the strengthening Soviet state would risk implementing the most audacious and cyclopean projects that would turn the social order of agrarian Russia upside down. However, he could not yet predict what exactly these projects would be. Chayanov aptly foresaw the onset of the pivotal events and crises: it was in moments of premonition, shortly before everything started to change, that his utopias were written²¹. Chayanov’s statements show his critical attitude to collectivization and ‘proletarianization’ of the peasants. He questioned the Bolshevik approach to the peasantry as a bearer of petty-bourgeois ideology, a “relic of the past” or “proto-matter”, and explained this position by the fact that managers “had economic experience only in the manufacturing industry and could think only in terms and forms of their organic experience”. In his third utopia, Chayanov describes his environmental project, devoting the last two sections (9 and 10) to climate regulation. The concept of ‘manageable climate’ which allows to predict harvests, cause precipitation and reflect military aggression (via special devices ‘meteorophores’) had

20. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.

21. Perhaps, it is in the anticipation of the impending ‘great turning point’ of collectivization and the ‘big leap forward’ of industrialization, Chayanov postulates in the introduction to his final utopia a certain initial difference between agriculture and industry, and in the finale of his utopia he promises to show how the agrarian development will eventually end in “a complete catastrophe and the abolition of agriculture”, after which the remains of agriculture will be “decorative gardening, turning the surface of our planet into parks, and, perhaps, the production of some fruits and wines, whose subtle flavor and aromas will not be substituted by mass production for a long time”. Nikulin A. M. (2017) Chayanovian utopian visions: Looking for the balance under the crises of optima intensification. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 1.

already been explored by Chayanov as the science fiction writer in *The Journey*, and now it was explored by Chayanov as the scholar²².

Based on the examples, he showed how the humanity of the future would predict long- and short-term weather fluctuations and crop yields. According to Chayanov, “all agriculture will turn into a measured, precisely established production system, just like our manufacturing industry... Every millimeter of sunlight falling on the earth will encounter a vegetation surface on its way, which will absorb this solar energy with an efficiency never seen before, and not a single drop in our irrigation systems will go to waste, contributing to the capture of the sun’s energy”. Nikulin notes that Chayanov described only solar energy and not, for instance, nuclear energy (like Alexander Bogdanov).

After years of peasant studies and searches for a solution to the agrarian question, Chayanov makes two paradoxical conclusions in his last utopia: the peasantry will disappear, and the need for agriculture as we know it will become obsolete. He describes the future world with areas around cities turned into gardens or free green zones. This is a much bolder assumption compared to the ideas of *The Journey*, in which cities also became green oases, but the land around ‘polises’ serves the agricultural peasant production by the inhabitants of future utopian Russia.

In this regard, we can mention the work of our contemporary, geographer Boris Rodoman, and his concept of Russia’s “ecological specialization”²³. Rodoman proposes to change and expand the role of Russia as a supplier of natural resources and a guarantor of the conditions necessary for the survival and development of all mankind. He argues that the country’s wealth does not consist of specific minerals or biological resources but rather of the entire natural landscape, or “the totality of the natural components of the cultural landscape”. The preservation and maintenance of this most important part of the biosphere should become a prioritized sector of the Russian economy. “Our country’s ecological specialization on a global scale is desirable: the transformation of most of its territory into national parks, nature reserves, as well as into hunting, fishing and other semi-wild acreage, all used within the limits of the natural biomass growth”²⁴.

The path envisioned by Chayanov towards “utopian green Russia of the future” and Rodoman’s project of turning the country into a global ecological ‘donor’ imply the need to abandon militaristic policies. Both are surprisingly contemporary but radical for the country

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22. Chayanov develops the same utopian ideas of controlling climate and crop yields in the 1928 article: Chayanov A. V. (1928) The possible future of agriculture. *Life and Technology of the Future: Social and Scientific-Technical Utopias*, Moscow–Leningrad: Moskovsky Rabochy.

23. Rodoman B. (2017) Ecological specialization as a desirable future for Russia. *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 2, no 3.

24. Ibid.

Notes on the Russian utopia as a cultural project

This is precisely why peasant leaders and ideologists had previously sought to make a cultural revolution in rural Russia, to drag it out of the ennui and simplicity of the traditional rural life. They awakened the social energy of the masses, channeling into the countryside whatever culture available in the uyezd and volost theaters, uyezd museums with their volost branches, people's universities, sports of all shapes and forms, choral clubs — everything including religion and politics — could offer to stimulate the villages' culture.

A. V. Chayanov

I will briefly describe the cultural situation described in *The Journey of My Brother Alexei* and then will elaborate on the context in which culture exists in this utopia. I will also explore the ways in which the power elite influence culture in both Chayanov's utopia and today's Russia. These comparisons might make little sense due to one important difference: in Chayanov's utopia, the state is abolished²⁵; while the enlightened oligarchic elite, the so-called ‘augurs of the spirit’, remain intact. Nikulin defines the utopia's model of governance as artistic populism, mainly due to the key role of culture: “In general, Chayanov's *The Journey of My Brother Alexei* is a kind of conservative-traditionalist ‘artpop’: artistic populism”²⁶. This last point is of particular interest but is beyond the scope of this article.

The fictional Alexei Minin is a bright representative of the power elite in the book. In the conversation with the protagonist, he emphasizes that for his country in the 20th century, issues of cultural influence and development were no less and perhaps even more important than economic ones. In fact, Minin talks about the need in a cultural project that creates a ‘movement from the center’ to regions and praises the need in an oligarchic ‘gift’ from elites to the people. It is hard not to compare the situation in Chayanov's book with the one we observe in Russia today, with the regional branches of the largest state cultural institutions being built (like ambitious projects by ‘the Big Four’ of

25. We are especially cautious of the state, which we make use of only when necessary. All social progress is ultimately in the fact that the circle of people who drink from the primary source of life and culture expands. Nectar and ambrosia have already ceased to be the food of only Olympians, and now adorn the hearths of poor villagers. Chayanov A. V. (1989) *The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

26. Nikulin A. M. (2020) *Chayanov's School: Utopia and Rural Development*, Moscow: Delo.

Russian museums), which means the expansion of the country's few private institutions into its faraway regions in recent years.

At the same time, Minin gives an unambiguously negative assessment of the state apparatus' work in regard to art, while remaining skeptical of a possibility to develop a grassroots artistic initiative without 'warming up from above': "Another consequence of democratizing national income is a significant reduction in patronage and in the number of idle people, that is, the two substrates that have largely nourished art and philosophy. However, I must confess that the amateur peasant art, somewhat warmed up from the center, was able to solve this task"²⁷. The utopian Russia of the future believes in the possibility of grassroots self-organization at all levels (self-organization is encouraged by the government, and for the peasantry it is familiar and natural). Moreover, the initial participation of the state and capital in the cultural project led to the grassroots demand, shaping the need of rural communities to support and purchase art²⁸.

Perhaps Chayanov's model gives us hope that in the future, when the state influence on culture weakens, projects 'from above' will be 'intercepted' 'from below' and rethought²⁹. In Chayanov's utopia, it is artists and cultural institutions that play the key role in the structure of social relations. We can continue to create utopian roadmaps, looking for alternatives to economic, environmental and social models of society, while offering other ways for cultural projects at the institutional level.

To some extent, through his characters, Chayanov argues that a good test of whether a country's economic and social experiment succeeded is an analysis of how its cultural project were implement-

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27. Ibid.

28. There is also a competition of rural communities for artists to work in them: in fact, this serves as a kind of long-term residency — the artist receives support and commissions from local peasants: "You know Mr. Charlie, not only the works of artists but also artists are in demand. I know more than one case when a parish or a county paid significant sums under long-term contracts to an artist, poet or scientist for simply moving to their community. You must agree, all this is reminiscent of the Medici or the Gonzaga during the Italian Renaissance". For art to flourish, it requires increased social attention and an active and generous demand. Now both are evident... with the current development in rural areas, frescoes are ordered to cover hundreds if not thousands of square *sazhens*... There is a considerable private demand. Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

29. Kremnev sprang to his feet stunned: "Don't worry, Mr. Charlie. First of all, no strong personality will feel even a hint of our tyranny, and, second, you would have been right about thirty years ago: back then our system was an oligarchy of gifted enthusiasts. Now we can say: "Nunc dimittis!" The peasant masses have matured to actively participate in shaping the public opinion in the country". Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

ed. The legitimacy of the new system of utopian Russia is justified by a robust culture accessible to all (and well-organized in the managerial sense), and Moscow's existence is justified by the unification of these cultural forces.

Moscow as a social being

*Kremnev looked around with amazement:
instead of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior,
golden and shiny like a Tula samovar,
he saw gargantuan ruins covered in ivy
and evidently carefully maintained.*

*What awaits me behind these walls? The wonderful land of socialism,
enlightened and consolidated? The wild anarchy of Prince Pyotr Alekseevich?
The return of capitalism? Or, perhaps, some new, previously unknown social system?*

*As far as I could tell from looking out of the window, one thing was clear:
people live at a fairly high level of culture and prosperity, in peaceful coexistence.*

A. V. Chayanov

To imagine a different culture and a different system of social relations in Russia, we should first imagine a different Moscow: an alternative concept of Moscow as an 'Octopus-city'³⁰ sucking the life out of all Russia, as a concentration of human and financial capital. *The Journey of My Brother Alexei* gives us inspiration to do so for Chayanov describes a utopian Moscow of the future: it is no longer a city but a place for cultural leisure, "a place, not a social being".

I will draw a (somewhat dubious) analogy with contemporary Russia: Moscow of Chayanov's utopia is basically a sprawling, city sized Zaryadye Park (opened with fanfare in 2017) but more wholesome. It is worth noting that the construction of Zaryadye was preceded by a 'purge' of the historically significant part of Moscow's center. Moreover, there is the controversial framing of Zaryadye as a "gift from the authorities to the citizens", as explored in the study entitled *Zaryadyology* by Michał Murawski, Margarita Chubukova, Daria Volko-

30. The drama of Moscow as a region, according to the saying, is that it is a large village (today rather a mega-village overpopulated in its own urban-agrarian way). The large village in the Russian social history is often associated with a number of very contradictory qualities. As a rule, the large village is rich, enterprising, commercial, but at the same time aggressive and quarrelsome, exploiting and dominating neighboring small- and medium-sized villages. Once, during the years of collectivization, Moscow took up arms against the kulaks, uprooting indiscriminately huge layers of ordinary hard-working peasants. And since then, having 'liquidated the kulaks as a class', Moscow, the large village, has steadily turned into a kulak village in the darkest sense of the word, into a mega-leech parasitizing on the vast expanses of Russia in various administrative and speculative ways. Nikulin A., Nikulina E. (2016) Moscow: From big village to mega-village. *Friendship of the Peoples*, no 9.

va and a team of the invited authors: “Zaryadye is almost but not quite an ‘organic empire of blooming complexity’. The sacred center of mayor Sobyanin’s Moscow, this is (as Kalgaev puts it) “both a gift from Putin and an American project”, not only a city-gift but also a product, an artwork by not only Belyaev-Gintovt, but also Zhilyaev, which tries to encompass more contradictions than it can contain, acceptably control or please”³¹.

And if in today’s Moscow Zaryadye is an “organic empire in the times of decline”, then Chayanov’s Moscow is its accelerated, utopian version. The duality inherent in the very design of the park, combining state control and the flowery complexity of pretend diversity, can also be seen in Chayanov’s complicated utopian project of Moscow of the future.

Moscow in the *The Journey* remains the only megacity (just like today) but lacks the opportunity to concentrate financial, industrial and economic forces: its capital is purely cultural³². “Moscow in Chayanov’s utopia is no longer a capital in the traditional sense: an imperialist city for which the rest of the country serves as a subservient pedestal to feed on. Instead, it is just a cultural-managerial center, the first among other rural-urban centers for culture and communication, both large and small, and equal to it”³³.

Not only Moscow is reshaped, but also the relationship between the capital city and its territorial subjects. Russia’s people of the future do not see the capital as a city for living, choosing instead its satellite villages: “The whole country is an extended agricultural settlement around Moscow, stretching for hundreds of miles interrupted only by squares of public forests, strips of cooperative pastures and vast climate parks”³⁴.

Moscow remains significant only as a symbolic center of the broader network, which justifies its existence. One cannot live here — there are nicer places for that. Moscow lost both its industrial complex and significance; it underwent —if the term is appropriate — a radical gentrification. The capital changed its borders and lost most of its

31. Murawski M. (2017) Zaryadyology. *Urban Studies and Practices*, vol. 2, no 4.

32. You see, before the city was self-sufficient, the village was nothing more than its pedestal. Now there are no cities at all, there is only a place serving as a hub for social connections. Each of our cities is just a gathering place, a central square of the county. This is not a place for living but a place for celebrations, gatherings, and some affairs. A place, not a social being”. Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

33. Nikulin A. M. (2018) Dreams of the Russian revolution in the utopias of Alexander Chayanov and Andrey Platonov. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 17, no 3.

34. Ibid.

buildings; in Chayanov's utopia, the creation of cultural Moscow — a new type of city equipped not for life, but for implementing a cultural project — is called 'the great barbarity' for everything that was no longer of cultural value was destroyed. On the one hand, the author's position is clear: no grand vision justifies barbarism. On the other hand, Chayanov describes the Moscow of his dreams, which fascinates him, and everything that he appreciates and loves about it, is preserved. Apparently, Chayanov could not completely and unambiguously decide whether his vivid depiction of the city was a utopia or a dystopia, his dream or his fear.

Chayanov's vision of the city's radical redevelopment implies a (careful, tentative) comparison with Stalin's urban planning policy. In the 1920s, Chayanov could not have known that hundreds of buildings in Moscow would be replaced by the first massive high-rises, and he did not witness the new country's 'utopian city in the city' erected by *udarnik* collective farmers in 1939 (VSKhV, now VDNKh, *Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy*, was opened on August 1, 1939); however, he anticipated such grandiose changes³⁵.

I will assume that Chayanov did not want to build a new city, he wanted to go back to the old one when investigating the ley trends of his time. As an amateur scholar of Moscow, a collector of ancient ruins in the maelstrom of revolutionary changes, and a witness of rapid transformations in all spheres of life, Chayanov wanted to simultaneously remove all superfluous things and return the image of that old, mysterious Moscow, which he loved so dearly and wanted to dedicate his fiction to. According to Natalia Mikhailenko, he wanted to create an image of the city of the future, a man-made 'new Babylon' — eerily different and inviting³⁶. Therefore, he transferred his beloved image of medieval Moscow into 1984 and saturated it with biblical allusions from the classical art that he so highly valued³⁷. The

35. The scientist may have attended the opening of the All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Exhibition in Gorky Park in 1923 (and could have seen, for example, the 'Hexagon' pavilion built by Ivan Zholtovsky). It is Zholtovsky's bureau in Chayanov's utopia that is responsible for the reconstruction of the entire Moscow metropolitan area.

36. How everything has changed. The stone hulks that once lined the horizon had disappeared, entire architectural ensembles were missing, the Nirnsee House was not where it used to be. And everything was buried in gardens... sprawling clumps of trees flooded almost the entire space to the Kremlin, leaving lonely islands of groups of buildings. Streets and alleys crossed the green, already yellowing sea. Lively streams of pedestrians, cars and carriages poured down them. Everything breathed a distinct freshness, a confident cheerfulness. Undoubtedly, it was Moscow but a new Moscow, transformed and enlightened. Chayanov A. V. (1989) The journey of my brother Alexei to the land of peasant utopia. *The Venetian Mirror*, V. B. Muravyov (Ed.), Moscow: Sovremennik.

37. The minds of the utopia's citizens are dominated by the 12th-century Suzdal frescoes, "the realm of realism with Pieter Bruegel as an idol". The image

question remains: how can you bring into the future what is crumbling before you? Chayanov's utopian Moscow is an attempt to imagine this transfer.

Alexey Kravchenko. *From Struggle to Construction*, 1927

O. Shirokostup
A cultural worker's
reflections
on Alexander
Chayanov's peasant
meta-utopia

In lieu of a conclusion

Chayanov's futurological works were written in different genres, his fantastical constructs seeped into academic articles, blurring the boundaries between scholarly and creative research. Today we would say that Chayanov conducted artistic research, blending methodologies from various areas of knowledge. Chayanov as the scholar was "fundamentally open to what is possible": by freeing knowledge from the yoke of rigidly defined disciplines, his research was performative in nature and modelled both possible and impossible scenarios.

Therefore, it is appropriate and even necessary to further develop his ideas in contemporary art, in artistic practice. Unlike academic research, the artistic research presupposes (does not exclude) speculation and confabulation, i.e., we can continue to think like Chayanov and with Chayanov.

In addition to interdisciplinary collaborations, we, workers of art and culture, can offer academic researchers of Chayanov's legacy new and unexpected frameworks for his ideas.

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of the Tower of Babel was significant for historians and theologians: *Babel* by Y. Rodenberg, *The Tower of Babel* by M. N. Albov and K. S. Barantsevich, *Muscovite; Abroad* by V. O. Mikhnevich. Perhaps, some of these works were read by Chayanov, who had a unique library for which he was granted a state security certificate in 1918. The symbolism of the Babylonian Empire and the Tower of Babel can be seen in Chayanov's *The Journey of My Brother Alexei* in separate strokes and flourishes, as if pushing the reader to deducing it. Mikhaleiko N. V. (2016) The symbolism of the Tower of Babel in A. V. Chayanov's *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia*. *Issues of Historical Poetics*, no 14.