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Abstract

Amid the range of organizations and forces described in a variety of social movement literature, organizations of people living and working in rural areas receive short shrift. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that has increasingly little justification. In this article, the contemporary context of neoliberal agrarian change is discussed, and the formation of the Via Campesina peasant network is presented using a Marxist sociological analysis. The problem of social movement reproduction and solidarity is then discussed drawing on the ideas of Alain Badiou.

Keywords Alain Badiou • peasantry • social movement • solidarity • Via Campesina

I

The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry. (Hobsbawm, 1994: 289)

They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself. (Marx, 1964: 124)

News of the death of the peasantry is somewhat exaggerated. The veteran scholar of rural change, Henry Bernstein (2003), diagnoses the politics behind the representations of ‘the end of the peasantry’:

First, there are denials of this event, and of the inevitability of processes that produce it: views of the 'persistence' of the peasantry in the world of mature capitalism. Such 'persistence' may be celebrated in various forms of agrarian populism as the effect of qualities of peasant resilience and 'resistance'. Or it may be regretted, in both Marxist and bourgeois versions of modernisation. Second, the prediction of the 'death of the peasantry' may be maintained, and again whether this outcome is regretted or welcomed, as it is by Eric Hobsbawm albeit with a recognition that the death throes are more protracted than once believed (and that this itself is a historical puzzle). What these positions share, despite all their other differences, are typically essentialist views of 'the peasantry' as pre-capitalist. (p. 3)

Those looking for an undifferentiated body of pre-capitalist rural people, waiting patiently for the enlightenment, modernity, capitalism, and then socialism (in that order) to find them, are likely to be disappointed. Similarly, a view of rural people struggling with a single and unified purpose to return to some idyllic family farm, following Chayanov, owes more to ideological concerns than empirical fact. The death of this conception of 'the peasantry' is one to be celebrated, for it is symptomatic of a chauvinism about rural experience, politics and organizing that is increasingly belied by the complexity of contemporary scholarship about, and political organizing by, groups of rural people struggling for agrarian change in a global context.

As Guha (1990) has observed, even scholarship that aims for a more sensitive understanding of power in rural contexts can end up imputing a mollifying passivity to rural people which, even as it extends the palette of possible forms of resistance in one dimension, collapses the possible sources of the self, and of politics. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), for example, seeks to find agency, and rebut accusations of false peasant consciousness, by observing the hidden transcripts of resistance that exist in men's opposition to their conditions of labour in Malaysia's Muda region. But even here, valuable as this intervention is for those seeking to compile repertoires of protest, the parameters through which peasant men and women understand their lives, the spaces of politics around them, and themselves, needs careful interrogation. Hart (1991), in the same research site, found a vibrant and gendered politics of resistance that threw three of Scott's theoretical assumptions into sharp relief:

Scott's subject is a free-willed individual decision-maker, with fixed and unambiguous identity and interests . . . essentially those of a peasant who is actively engaged in ongoing covert struggle to resist the predations of 'external' forces in order to remain a peasant . . . The form and class character of the state are irrelevant. (p. 116)

The aporias of rural social movement ethnographers, especially those that ignore gender and the historical and place-situatedness of struggle, are ones that

have been repeated at higher levels of analysis – especially by scholars looking at global social movements and the multilateral organizations that they seek to oppose (Massey, 1994). Waterman's (1998) thoughts on internationalisms foreground labour and women's movements, discounting the possibility of peasant internationalisms. Looking at the World Trade Organization (WTO) more explicitly, Desmarais (2002) notes the despair that Bonanno et al. (1994) feel over the possibility of peasants ever organizing themselves. Evans's (2000) spectrum of activists opposing the WTO fails, for example, to include peasant organizing, instead choosing to emphasize:

... a ragtag set of activists who have managed to turn fax machines, Internet hook-ups, and some unlikely long-distance personal ties into a machinery for harassing transnational corporations and repressive local politicians. (p. 240)

Not all scholars have been guilty of this kind of oversight, of course. Petras and Veltmeyer's (2002) work in Latin America, for instance, provides exemplary sensitivity to rural organizing. In Africa, Bundy and Shivji perform similar services (Bundy, 1979; Beinart and Bundy, 1987; Shivji, 1998). Yet, it is nonetheless surprising that these ought to be the exception rather than the rule in scholarship around the global system, not least because the very movements and struggles which are examined in work around the international trade system, to take one example, have a much longer agrarian history than appears in the standard narrative. Just as Wood (2000) notes the agrarian origins of capitalism, contemporary anti-capitalism also has a long and obfuscated agrarian pedigree. Thus, at the same time as Bonanno et al.'s (1994) despair, years before Evans's biases, and seven years before the WTO's Seattle meetings, the Karnataka State Farmers' Association (KRRS) in India had educated, debated and mobilized 200,000 farmers around the Uruguay Round Dunkel draft text, which was to become the WTO (SUNS – North South Development Monitor, 1993). The KRRS march to Delhi in that year was the first large-scale protest against the WTO, and was substantially larger than the more publicized antecedent in Washington State in 1999, with clear and articulate demands for support of local and regional agriculture in India, and beyond. Within a year of this 1993 mobilization, meetings were well underway that were to result in the formation of the Via Campesina peasant movement, of which the KRRS formed an important part. Via Campesina is an international network of peasant movements that seeks to challenge the WTO together with a broader range of neoliberal politics and policies. The genealogy, use and representation of its moments of solidarity are the subject of this article.

II

A range of studies (Goodman and Watts, 1997; McMichael, 1998; Magdoff et al., 2000) stand as useful guides to the political economy of the world food system

after the Second World War, characterized by increasing US exports under the PL 480 programme. There is also a consensus within the literature that, with the currency crises of the early 1970s, there was a change in the configuration of the food system. Rather than using food aid to demonstrate its largesse, the USA developed sophisticated new trading arrangements, while continuing to support its farming industry. These trading arrangements were pried open by the ability of the financial sector to enforce its political preferences for certain kinds of political economic arrangements through the market, as a result of the oil crisis. In the post-oil-crisis world of development, this changed context ushered in a new role for international financial institutions such as the World Bank and, later, the WTO. The then-director general of the WTO, Renato Ruggiero (1996), put it well when he said, 'We are no longer writing the rules of interaction among separate national economies. We are writing the constitution of a single global economy'. This is not to underestimate the role of the nation-state in carrying out the implementation of this global economy – the state is an integral part of today's international economy. But, it does signal the fact that the role of individual national economies in shaping the architecture of the economy is less shaped by the direct demands of the population within their bounds than by the demands of certain kinds of global capital. Furthermore, Ruggiero's constitutional project had, in fact, been ongoing since the 1970s, and the WTO was both a fruit of it, and contained within it the seeds of yet further constitution writing – after all, globalization is both a project and an outcome.

The WTO is not alone in the world of trade. The European Union (EU) is, for example, constituted through a complex trade agreement, and is now the largest trading area in the world. Many countries have also developed regional trade areas, and countries from the Global North have instituted bilateral trade agreements with the Global South. This proliferation of trade agendas does, however, take the WTO as a bottom line, and negotiates up from it. Regional trade arrangements, such as the 2004 Central American Free Trade Area, for example, build more forcefully on the WTO, demanding the deregulation of government services. In its negotiations with its former colonies, the EU is seeking to impose an expanded version of the WTO's intellectual property rights agreement, as well as hollowing out the remainder of its responsibilities to the countries it once owned, by creating new Economic Partnership Arrangements. The WTO is, then, not merely a direct instrument of international economic discipline, and one that builds on the economic liberalization that was enforced through Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, but provides a springboard for yet more ambitious mechanisms.

It is in this miasma of synchronized agricultural policies that we are able to find the political economic context for the organization of sustained resistance to agricultural capitalism, a double-movement in the fields of the late 20th century. Karl Polanyi (1944) is the theorist to reference here. As Burawoy (2003) notes, Polanyi is centrally concerned with the way that the market is

experienced, with what it feels like, in this case, to undergo a transformation of political space in rural agrarian places that favours export-oriented agricultural production, and how groups have organized in these spaces. Polanyi's concern in the double-movement is to make explicit the contradictory forces and tendencies for and against 'fictitious commodification', to witness the processes through which alienation is facilitated and resisted. In the next section, I briefly examine these processes, paying attention to Polanyi's sensibilities of experience. Scott's (1992) feminist epistemological insights compound and explain the importance of looking at experience, because it is 'not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (p. 26). In other words, if we wish to consider the formation of rural activism, we need to pay attention to the experiences that constitute the subjects of our enquiry. The fusion of Polanyi with Scott provides us with an important epistemic insight, not only into the formation of certain kinds of subject-under-neoliberalism, then, but into the material politics of struggle that this subject in turn constitutes.

First, then, it is important to note key tropes within this process of subject formation. Within the domain of agrarian change, the experiences that seem to have been central to the experience of people working in agriculture under neoliberal transformation are: concentration, dumping, inequality, consolidation, deskilling, dispossession and amnesia. Although this is not the venue for a full exploration of the minutiae of these experiences, it is important to catalogue them, for their combined effect in constituting certain kinds of subjects comes to be important in the subsequent consideration of the struggles that these subjects wage.

Concentration

By concentration, I mean the concentration of control over the means of production at different levels of the food system. Most pressing to the majority of poor people in rural areas has been the concentration of control over land, through private ownership and state protection of private property rights. This concentration and control is echoed higher up the food system, through direct ownership and other means. In the USA for example, corporations have succeeded in a subtle strategy of control not through ownership, but through subcontracting – a process that allows them to exercise sovereignty, without responsibility or risk (Heffernan, 2000). This concentration is not limited to production, but to retail distribution (Murphy, 2002; Schwentesius and Gomez, 2002).

Dumping

This technical economic term refers to the practice of selling goods in foreign markets at less than the price in the home market, and is the descendent of the pre-oil-crisis food aid complex. It describes the practices of US and EU

agricultural policy very well, but not completely. This is because, for key agricultural goods in the USA and EU, the domestic price is lower than the cost of production. The vast agricultural subsidies given to agribusinesses (the 2002 Farm Bill alone appropriated \$180b over ten years, heavily frontloaded – EU figures are similarly high, with the most often cited example being the subsidy to cattle producers in the EU amounting to \$2 per cow, per day) have created massive surpluses that are redistributed through predatory dumping and food aid (Lappé et al., 1981).

Inequality

With the fall in world agricultural prices (from a mean of 100 in 1975 to 61 by 1989 [McMichael, 2004]), came increasing rural poverty at the same time as cheap urban food. With an intensification of export agriculture comes increasing poverty for the poorest agricultural workers. In India, an example often heralded by proponents of neoliberal policy during the 1990s, the rural-to-urban poverty ratio has jumped from 1.1 to 1.4. Moreover,

... malnutrition *increased* during the 1990s, with a declining average calorie intake among India's poorest. Today, 233 million Indians are undernourished, suffering from inadequate intake of calories and micro nutrients. There has been no improvement in health for women and children, who suffer from higher rates of anaemia than their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa. Production of some of the most important staples has declined as agricultural land is increasingly used for export crops. Net availability of foodgrains per person plummeted to levels unheard of since the 1930s economic depression under British colonial rule. (Müller and Patel, 2004: iv)

Consolidation

Yet not all agriculturalists are in crisis. Again, Lenin (1956) makes an important observation:

If capital in our countryside were incapable of creating anything but bondage and usury, we could not, from the data on production, establish the differentiation of the peasantry, the formation of a rural bourgeoisie and a rural proletariat; the whole of the peasantry would represent a fairly even type of poverty-stricken cultivators, among whom only usurers would stand out, and they only to the extent of money owner and not to the extent and organisation of agricultural production. (p. 188)

The creation of export markets for Third World agriculturalists has systemically benefited those agriculturalists with access to land, capital and government protection.

Deskilling

The processes of production concentration, by creating an environment in which monoculture is encouraged and lucrative, have also extended to include corporate control over seed. The Green Revolution was supported by the producers of pesticides and industrial chemicals without which the revolution's productivity bursts would have been impossible (see Shiva [1989] for more on how these gains have proven, in the longer run, to be empty). These pesticide companies have now developed seed that integrates pesticides, and they are busily in the business of promoting these products, with the mantra: 'the technology is in the seed'. The slogan is intended to suggest that the seed is simple enough to deploy that folk with limited farming skills can use it. The corollary, however, is that farming is so simple, that few skills are necessary in order to perform it.

Dispossession

Industrial agriculture requires scale economies in order to be economically viable. And this means that industrial agriculture requires a great deal of land. In some countries, notably Brazil and South Africa, the longer historical inequalities of land have been consolidated by the advent of industrial agriculture (Cassel and Patel, 2003). In others, such as the USA, the transition has been a little more rapid (Hoppe and Wiebe, 2003), and in the Iberian states, it has only been in the past 40 or so years that agriculture has dwindled in economic significance (Hobsbawm, 1994).

Amnesia

Even in states that historically have placed a high premium on rural constituencies, such as China (Eisenburger and Patel, 2003), we see the beginnings of a turn towards export-oriented agriculture and dispossession. And, as Kynge (2004) notes, this is beginning to have impacts inconceivable 10 years before: total imports of farm produce in the first half of the year have risen 62.5 per cent to \$14.35bn, while strategic grain stocks have fallen because of declining annual harvests every year since 1998. The forgetting of rural populations, and their downgrading as political priorities is also a global phenomenon, one perhaps best articulated by the Canadian economic advisor to successive Colombian autocrats, Lauchlin Currie, who flatly stated that there were 'too many peasants' retarding Colombia's growth, and that their removal from the land was key to an economic take-off he dubbed 'the breakthrough' (Mondragón, 2000; Brittain, 2005).

III

This catalogue is gloomy, but helpfully so. It is a corrective to dominant portrayals of success, and a reminder that the cheap food on northern plates is bought at a high cost. The primary purpose of painting this picture, however, is to note that trends worldwide are extremely similar, even if specific circumstances vary. These synchronized ‘pathologies of development’ are, in fact, symptoms of the development project.

There is one symptom that a conventional political economic analysis is wont to omit: *demobilization*. Yet the containment of the contradictions of development is an integral part of the policy package. The synchronization of agrarian policies, begun in the 1970s, had already generated sufficient criticism such that, even while new structural adjustment policies were being drafted in the early 1980s, modifications were made so that adjustment happened with a human face (Cornia et al., 1987). The introduction of these kinds of variations on the theme of adjustment marked a crucial epistemic moment, for it signalled the concession that economic policies crafted in Washington DC required a ‘social’ component. This demanded social monitoring and surveillance of a kind that meshed with the epistemic constraints of the economic policies. Social scientific reporting and analysis which fits the demands of power is, of course, as old as social science itself (Bock, 1979). But this variant on it consolidated, *and funded*, specific trends in sociology, geography, and anthropology; trends that placed a premium on specific interpretations of local context and knowledge (Chambers, 1983). With the admission of the ‘local social’ into the economic development programme, a vibrant political economy of representation became possible. It is a political economy that encouraged the growth of organizations that were able to make claims to represent a constituency in the Global South. But representation is never pure, there is never a single ‘truth’ of representation. As Krog (2002) notes, truth does not float freely, ready to be harvested:

[T]here is also the invisible audience – the imagined audience on the horizon somewhere – the narrator’s family, colleagues, the new Government. And every listener decodes the story in terms of truth. Telling is therefore never neutral, and the selection and ordering try to determine the interpretation. (p. 85)

The audience for the telling of development in the Global South, for this particular exercise, had strict parameters of acceptability. There were, and continue to be, truths that cannot be told, for example, to the World Bank (Rademacher and Patel, 2002). This particular regime of truth, and I use Foucault’s (1980) formulation here, conditions the kinds of organizations that can be given audience. Some organizations tell the truth ‘truthfully’, and others unacceptably. Some organizations are able to accommodate the regime under which they tell, and others are not. This differentiation of organizations is a product of the political economy of contemporary capitalism.

To put it slightly differently, the political economy of representation has become not incidentally remedial to the development project, but integral to it. With this integration has come a differentiation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a preponderance of NGOs mortgaged, with various degrees of sincerity and freedom, to the agenda of large development institutions. The ability of these organizations to deliver 'the peasantry' in order to comply with the strictures of 'accountability', 'transparency' and 'participation' that have emerged in response to the criticisms received by these international financial institutions, is the key to the survival of these NGOs. In order to be able to do this, a demobilized and depoliticized spectacle of the peasantry needs to be created and represented. This spectacle cannot coexist with genuine engagement by poor rural people in these development processes, as to accept this would be to accept the messy business of politics, power and democracy that development institutions are singularly designed to avoid. Recall that the central development problem is the management of contradiction around the ownership of property. When these problems are raised, and when the legitimacy of private property is challenged (as many campesino organizations do), development institutions cope badly. A simulacrum of democracy is far more compatible with the development project than the real thing. And this is why NGOs that can deliver a body count that resembles democratic engagement, through mass rural-based consultative exercises, are indispensable to agrarian restructuring. This is the effect of development technologies such as 'rapid rural appraisal' (McCracken et al., 1988).

'The NGO problem' has, in conversation and interviews, recurred as a theme in the agrarian politics of resistance to neoliberalism, and has produced some fairly Manichean thinking. Social movements and their members are keen to position themselves as occupants of spaces of unassailable political purity, with NGOs relegated to a far more contaminated realm. Criteria, such as membership, funding and location of offices, are sometimes used to drive a schematic wedge between social movements and NGOs. Drawing on examples from the South African context, Pithouse (2004) unties this particular knot with grace, by observing that:

... mass movements can be entirely membership driven, NGO supported or NGO directed and anywhere on a continuum from fully donor funded to fully membership funded. And NGOs range from organizations like the Centre for Public Participation that are clearly implicated in the imperialist project, to organisations like the Freedom of Expression Institute that are deeply supportive of overt opposition to market fundamentalism and state authoritarianism. Moreover many NGOs are sites of contestation. Consequently a false binary between social movements and NGOs is utterly unhelpful. But what is useful is a distinction between projects, however organized, that pathologize the violence on which capitalism depends while valorizing mass resistance and

those that pathologize direct mass resistance while pursuing a limited reformism that effectively normalizes the bulk of capital's violence. (p. 11)

While it seems as if Pithouse has replaced one binarism with another, the approach is more subtle – it encourages a heuristic and contingent engagement with the politics of organizations, rather than their form, with context rather than covering law. It is just such an engagement that animated the formation of Via Campesina.

Desmarais (2003) has traced more fully the origins of Via Campesina in these synchronized machinations, and hers is a superlative analysis, recently complemented by a characteristically fine paper by Borrás (2004). A central feature in their description is the process through which Via Campesina was constituted, in explicit rejection of 'the paternalism of NGOs'; a rejection of a specific form of appropriation of voice by NGOs that, in Pithouse's terms, are positioned to engage only in limited reformism:

Some NGOs took advantage of new spaces and opportunities created by the new economic and political context of the 1980s and 1990s to better 'represent' and 'speak on behalf' of peasant organizations in development negotiations. Some, engaging in 'participatory development' used their association with peasant organizations to gain access to precious funds available for work in the countryside then channeled these to pursue their own goals rather than meeting the needs of peasant organizations. Others used financial resources to coopt peasant leaders; still others undermined peasant organizations by bypassing the decision-making processes and structures that ensured accountability within peasant organizations. (Desmarais, 2003: 121)

Desmarais locates the formation of Via Campesina in a political economy dominated by a range of organizations claiming to speak on behalf of farmers and landless people, notably the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP),¹ and a range of NGOs. The private sector and third sector play an important role in the political economy of representation under neoliberal economic transformation – a role that Robinson (1996) locates as a broad solution to the crisis of legitimacy that such a project seeks to forestall through the substitution of 'polyarchy' for democracy. The profiteering from this representation, and the concomitant undemocratic misrepresentation of the needs of rural people, prompted Via Campesina, as a founding constitutional principle (Via Campesina, 1996), to ban NGOs from ever being members of the federation, insisting instead that only member organizations committed to key political principles (thus excluding the pro-liberalization IFAP organizations) be allowed to join.

The experiences of international development hegemony were constitutive for Via Campesina, and provide a case where Burawoy's Marxist sociological programme can provide some theoretical guidance. Understanding the

conditions under which Via Campesina was founded requires a monitoring of historically specified domestic and international conditions. Such an analysis demonstrates that the possibilities for social change, far from natural, came as a result of a contingent dialectic of social forces. These forces have 'to be seen as a hierarchical combination of disparate elements rather than, as it is too often understood, a dense cloud that descends from above to envelope all subaltern classes' (Burawoy, 2003: 225). As we shall later discuss in this article, Via Campesina's socioeconomic policy response to this hegemony involves an adaptation and deepening of existing tropes of social justice, democracy and rights. Via Campesina, however, complicates the space of civil society in which Burawoy vests his hopes for socialism, by demanding that we differentiate and qualify the kinds of organization, and organizational projects, that can create effective counter-hegemonies.

It is important to parse more fully Burawoy's distinction between a 'hierarchical combination of disparate elements' and 'a dense cloud that descends from above to envelope all subaltern classes'. This difference is one that can be traced to ambiguities within Polanyi's problem of the counter-movement moment in *The Great Transformation* (1944). In that work, Polanyi argues for a moment of struggle in response to the fictitious commodification of the social world. While it is clear from his argument that this is reactive, the suggestion is also that it might be reflexive – that some reified social world, sprung with self-protective instinct mobilizes to preserve itself, and the social nexus that ultimately supports the mechanisms of commodification. Yet this dense cloud is nowhere to be seen. Instead, the counter-movement emerges contingently as a result of wise or unwise choices made by groups and individuals, consciously or unconsciously fighting the market. This is not to argue for some social invisible hand – rather it is to note that precisely because the double-movement is an artefact of historical contingency, it does not arise out of any kind of necessity at all, and when it does, it is shaped precisely by contingency. Applying this to Via Campesina's experience, we can begin to uncover the difficulties of engineering international solidarity.

Neoliberal agrarian restructuring does not advance through nebulous cloying processes of commodification, but through discrete acts, fixed in time and space, producing and produced by relations of power. The engineering of struggle against this project and process is no different – there is no distinct historiography of struggle separable from the forces of oppression, precisely because the sites of oppression are sites constituted in conflict.

Having established the analytical point, the practical comes as a corollary. If the neoliberal agrarian project is experienced differently in different places, by dint of discrete processes and relations of power, then the mere naming of the project as 'neoliberal' cannot be expected to generate robust solidarity by itself between these places. If this were the case, the authorization of solidarity would lie in a sign for oppression, an 'enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend' politics. Such

politics exist, no doubt. But for alliance to become solidarity requires an optic of mutual recognition. The constitutive rejection of NGOs by Via Campesina, and the rejection of economic liberalization programmes to which NGOs became integral, presented a moment for leveraging this solidarity. (Indeed, the deep mistrust of NGOs has been embedded in Via Campesina's foundational policy prescriptions.) But the mutual recognition of subjects has not been found in a firm rejection of neoliberalism, but in a constructive, programmatic process of policy formation.

The policy framework that Via Campesina has advanced to counter the development project is extremely innovative, and was first advanced at the 1995 World Food Summit. This conception, which they have termed 'food sovereignty', has an excerpted definition that runs:

Food sovereignty is the peoples', Countries' or State Unions' RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries. Food sovereignty includes:

- prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for fighting against GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.
- the right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.
- the right of Countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports.
- agricultural prices linked to production costs: they can be achieved if the Countries or Unions of States are entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favour of a sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid structural surpluses.
- the populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices.
- the recognition of women farmers' rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food. (Via Campesina, 2003)

This is a systemic challenge to the predominant neoliberal mode of food production, conceived in opposition to 'food security' – a term with origins in the food rights movement, which has since been successfully co-opted by neoliberal institutions. Food security is a minimal second-generation right, defined as the situation that arises when 'access to food is available to all people, at all times, in order to have an active, healthy life'. Note that the definition of food security is agnostic about the system of production and distribution through which its condition would be fulfilled. To put it slightly differently, a situation of food security is theoretically compatible with an economy in which everyone was

eating only welfare handouts of junk food. The agnosticism about production systems within 'food security', in other words, gives tacit cover for an export agricultural model of production and consumption purchase. Via Campesina's formulation contrasts with the food security model in a number of ways (see Table 1). Note, however, that this tension is centrally not a conflict between the global North and the global South, but rather between two models, and the blocs that support them.

If we look at the heart of the definition for food sovereignty, there are two striking features. First, the substance of the call itself covers a very wide range of government policy: from intellectual property, to state credit provision, to land reform, to gender. This is crucial – too often the protests at the WTO have been slandered as crude calls for tariff protection. Certainly there is a need for national support for agriculture in which tariff protection will play a part, argues Via Campesina, but the food sovereignty programme is far more comprehensive than that – its scope matches that of the neoliberal programme it seeks to supplant, but its fundamental politics and ethics are quite different. Between the various development institutions and government departments involved in agricultural production, everything from production health and safety standards to microcredit has fallen under the regulatory shadow of what Rosset (2003) calls 'the dominant model'. Equally significant, the politics and policies advocated by food sovereignty are not an unreconstructed return to some bucolic idyll:

It is important to stress that the peasant model advocated by the *Vía Campesina* does not entail a complete rejection of modernity, technology and trade accompanied by a romanticized return to an archaic past steeped in rustic traditions. Rather, the *Vía Campesina* insists that an alternative model must be based on certain ethics and values where culture and justice count for something and concrete mechanisms are put in place to ensure a future without hunger. (Desmarais, 2002: 101)

But there is an important addition to the food sovereignty counter-hegemony – a radical call for autonomy that draws on, and seeks to deepen, an existing vocabulary of rights and democracy. In defining food sovereignty as the 'peoples', Countries' or State Unions' right, Via Campesina is inviting a charge of contradiction, not in the logical positivist sense, but in a charged democratic one (Mao, 1967; Gramsci, 1971). To ascribe rights to different scales of collectivity is to invite a series of conflicts – within each of these levels of analysis, power is multiply contested, not least by the very blocs that food sovereignty attempts to counter. Between these blocs, conflict is magnified further. No one people, country or state union has a unique vision of food policy, and to suggest that these constituencies each have simultaneous and unalienable rights is to open the door to a great deal of contention over priority, jurisdiction and authority.

This is precisely the point.

Table 1
Key differences between the food sovereignty and dominant industrial conceptions of agriculture

Issue	Dominant model	Food sovereignty model
Trade	'Free trade' in most commodities and services	Food and agriculture exempt from trade agreements
Production priority	Food for export and foreign exchange	Food for local markets
Crop prices	'What the market dictates' (leave intact mechanisms that enforce low prices)	Fair prices that cover costs of production and allow farmers and farmworkers a life with dignity
Market access	Access to foreign markets	Access to local markets; an end to the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
Subsidies	While prohibited in the Third World, many subsidies are allowed in the US and Europe – but are paid only to the largest farmers	Subsidies that do not prejudice farming in other countries are allowed, e.g. grants to family farmers, for direct marketing, price/income support, soil conservation, conversion to sustainable farming, research, rural education, etc.
Food	Chiefly a commodity; in practice, this means processed, contaminated food that is full of fat, sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, and toxic residues	A human right: specifically, it should be healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and locally produced
Being able to produce	An option for the economically efficient	A right of rural peoples
Hunger	A problem of high prices and therefore of inadequate supply and insufficient production and productivity	A problem of access and distribution; due to poverty and inequality
Food security	Achieved by importing food from where it is cheapest	Greatest when food production is in the hands of the hungry, or when food is produced locally
Control over factors of production, e.g. land, water	Privatized	Local; community controlled
Access to land	Via the market	Via systemic and state-supported agrarian reform
Seeds	A patentable commodity	A common heritage of humanity, held in trust by rural communities and cultures; 'no patents on life'
Rural credit and investment	From private banks and corporations	From the public sector; designed to support family agriculture
Monopolies	Rarely an issue	A systemic and pathological feature of international food system

Table 1 Continued

Issue	Dominant model	Food sovereignty model
Overproduction	No such thing, by definition	Drives prices down and farmers into poverty; we need supply management policies for US and EU
Farmers	Anachronisms; the inefficient will disappear	Guardians of culture and crop germplasm; stewards of productive resources; repositories of knowledge; internal market and building block of broad-based, inclusive economic development

Source: Adapted from Rosset (2003).

One of the explicit goals of food sovereignty is to politicize an agrarian policy that has for too long been depoliticized, and rendered a merely technical exercise (Ferguson, 1990). In demanding the creation of domains of contention that are autonomous from the imperial international institutions responsible for neoliberal agricultural policy, the Via Campesina policy takes a calculated risk in the possibility of a permanent and radical agrarian politics; a politics, as Hall et al. (1996) would say, *without guarantees*. The success of the Via Campesina model is contingent on a faith in a radical democratic political imaginary in which even, especially, the deepest relations of power come to be contested publicly.²

IV

Having detailed what might broadly be termed the political economic dimensions of agrarian resistance, I want now to return to the issue of the construction of subjects through struggle, and the politics of solidarity. Although food sovereignty is an important intervention in the politics of agrarian change, Via Campesina also takes the politics of experience, and the subjects produced by it, very seriously. Again, the issue is how to create and maintain a counter-movement based not on an oppositional alliance of convenience, but on the more enduring mutual recognition provided by solidarity. When international conditions are so very particular and varied, this is a central problem for international peasant solidarities. To examine this with appropriate analytical tools, I turn to consider recent innovations in philosophy by Alain Badiou (2001, 2003a, 2005). His intellectual trajectory, through Maoist-inspired student organizing, informs an understanding of the radical character of international solidarity.

In his *Ethics*, Badiou (2001) pours scorn upon the monomania of capital, and through it the development project that seeks to render the majority of economic participants as hapless onlookers to their fate:

The modern name for necessity is, as everyone knows, economics. Economic objectivity – which should be called by its name: the logic of Capital – is the

basis from which our parliamentary regimes organize a subjectivity and a public opinion condemned in advance to ratify what seems necessary. Unemployment, the anarchy of production, inequalities, the complete devaluation of manual work, the persecution of foreigners: all this fits together as part of a debased consensus regarding a state of things as changeable as the weather. Parliamentary politics today . . . consists of turning the spectacle of the economy into the object of an apathetic (though obviously unstable) public consensus. (pp. 30–1)

This should sound familiar – the experiences of agrarian transformation catalogued above are presented as necessary epiphenomena on a broader programme for ‘the public good’. Badiou’s call for a rejection of totalizing monothetic ethics becomes, then, a call for a rejection of the development project’s originary assumptions of singular and uniform good. In fact, read through the lens of Badiou, the attempt by development to position itself as a destiny without conflict can be seen as a Betrayal, and therefore as Evil:

Every fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance. Contrary to consensual ethics, which tries to avoid divisions, the ethic of truths is always more or less militant, combative. For the concrete manifestation of its heterogeneity to opinions and established knowledges is the struggle against all sorts of efforts at interruption, at corruption, at the turn to the immediate interests of the human animal, at the humiliation and repression of the Immortal who arises as subject. (p. 75)

This aspiration to conflict also does violence to the idea of good invoked in the name of a community. But this passage also hints at Badiou’s conception of subject-hood; one that is of great value when considering the politics of solidarity. As we have seen through Scott (1992), all experience generates subjects, simply through the logic of language. Badiou is interested in thickening this understanding of subject, arguing that as far as an ethical relation to ourselves is concerned, most of us are merely automata, receptacles of opinion which we recycle in various ways, contributing not to ethical life, but to the shoring up of a moral conservatism. Badiou (2001) reserves the term ‘subject’ for someone who has experienced truth through an ‘event’ – a technical term that he discusses thus:

We must suppose, then, that whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for. Let us say that a *subject*, which goes beyond the animal (although the animal remains its sole foundation [*support*]) needs something to have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in ‘what there is’. Let us call this *supplement* an event, and let us distinguish multiple-being, where it is not a matter of truth (but only of opinions), from the event, which compels us to decide a new way of being. (p. 41, emphasis in original)

For an instantiation of a truth to occur, the subject of truth must be created by an *event*, a specific lived experience of transformation – subjecthood in Badiou’s philosophy involves the production of individuals transformed by ‘truth’ into ethical agents willing to universalize their experiences of the truth. In so far as the event that calls subjects into being is necessarily plural (Nancy, 2000), a community is always in attendance. But the community cannot be the grounds of the event, as Badiou (2003b) demonstrates in his treatment of the life of St. Paul, analysed as a *subject* of the Damascene *event*.

This would seem to leave a politics of re-regulated international agriculture a little high and dry. After all, in the invocation of a ‘peoples right’, the call for food sovereignty can be read as a retreat to a nebulous populism that instantiates a logic of communitarianism as the grounds for an ethics of a new political economy. The text of the declaration can support such a reading, but only if one leaves the ill-defined subjects of food sovereignty unproblematized. If, however, one accepts the multiple levels at which sovereignty is expressed as contradictory, the question of the exercise of sovereignty becomes one that cannot be addressed outside of a radically localized context. This meshes well with Badiou’s insistence on a rejection of totalizing covering laws of ethical engagement, and a return to the particular.

This is not the appropriate venue to begin a discussion of the status of ‘truth’ in Badiou’s work, but it is important to note that, for him, ‘truth’ is unmoored from its traditional ontological foundations and instead reconstituted in temporal events that spawn certain kinds of militancy. For those who have experienced these kinds of events, life is never the same afterwards, which is why I turn now to think about a certain death. At the WTO Ministerial meeting in Cancún, Mexico in 2003, a Via Campesina farmer, Lee Kyung Hae, killed himself. On the day of his suicide he handed out a pamphlet from which the following excerpts are drawn:

Once I went to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I could do nothing but listen to the howling of his wife. If you were me, how would you feel? . . .

Widely paved roads lead to large apartments, buildings, and factories in Korea. Those lands paved now were mostly rice paddies built by generations over thousands of years. They provided the daily food and materials in the past. Now the ecological and hydrological functions of paddies are even more crucial. Who will protect our rural vitality, community traditions, amenities, and environment?

I believe that farmers’ situation in many other developing countries is similar. We have in common the problem of dumping, import surges, lack of government budgets, and too many people. Tariff protection would be the practical solution.

I have been so worried watching TV and hearing the news that starvation is

prevalent in many Less Developed Countries, although the international price of grain is so cheap. Earning money through trade should not be their means of securing food. They need access to land and water. Charity? No! Let them work again!

My warning goes out to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation. That uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO Members are leading an undesirable globalization that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing, and undemocratic. It should be stopped immediately. Otherwise the false logic of neoliberalism will wipe out the diversity of global agriculture and be disastrous to all human beings. (Hae, 2003)

On 10 September 2003, while the WTO ministerial was underway, Lee, a Korean farmer and peasant organizer, carrying a sign saying 'the WTO kills farmers', climbed a truck near the razor-wire fencing surrounding the WTO conference zone, produced a small pocket knife, flipped open the blade, and stabbed himself in the heart. Within hours he was pronounced dead. Within days, from Bangladesh, to Chile, to South Africa, to Mexico, tens of thousands of peasants mourned (see, e.g. AFP, 2003), and marched in solidarity, their own calls for national support for agriculture interspersed with the chant: 'We Are Lee'. Although recognized as a leader in his field and well respected within the circuits of peasant organizers, his was not well known outside South Korea, and little better known within his home country. The mourning for Lee was a collective grief for a fallen comrade. The WTO protests in Cancún in 2003 were profoundly shaped by Lee's death, and those who were there speak of a transformation following the news that he died, of a collective experience that rippled the ruffled crowd into unity. What is striking about this is how those ripples spread, both how far away, and how across distance and culture and history, the comradeship extended.

Yet news of the immolation did not cross the waves spontaneously. Those present at the protests spread the news, sending word via the Internet to their organizations back home. We may be familiar with the deaths of protesters in the line of peaceful protest, of the sacrifices of Rachel Corrie or Carlo Giuliani. But unique to Lee was the character of action *in requiem*. His death, I suggest, can be thought of as an *event* in Badiou's sense, producing particular kinds of subject. The adoption by a range of peasant organizations of the slogan 'We are Lee' is a symptom of a new kind of rural globalization. In Cancún, while half the chants for Lee were in English, half were in Spanish: 'Todos Somos Lee', together with 'Lee, hermano, te has hecho Mexicano' (Lee, brother, you have become Mexican) and 'Lee no murió OMC lo mató' (Lee didn't die, the WTO killed him). The hybridization of these chants, the crossing of linguistic lines, and the national appropriation of Lee signals a process of solidarity, of the mutual recognition of Burawoy's post-communist politics – a recognition based

on clear material facts, and shared experiences of the market within different contexts.

Now, it is clear that, even after his death, many have not heard of Lee, or of Via Campesina, who were responsible for bringing the Korean Peasant League and the Korean Women Farmers' Association to Cancún.³ The protests that followed elsewhere in the world, in predominantly urban areas, were not some moment of 'collective effervescence', unplanned and spontaneous. Marches take planning, organization, logistical support and, most of all, commitment by those marching. But by the same token, the overwhelming support and identification with Lee, while having received a great deal of institutional encouragement since his death, could not have been predicted in advance. Via Campesina has gone out of its way to 'carry on', in Badiou's terms, to inculcate and communicate ethical behaviour beyond the event, animated by the truth. Protests against the WTO were certainly on the cards in many cities, but the specific form of the protests, and specifically *the articulation of local and national demands with an international biography*, reflect the contemporary politics of food sovereignty very closely indeed. The demands of solidarity, together with a sincere wish to commemorate his death, explain why one year later, Lee's death was used as a mobilizing event by the Via Campesina secretariat. Lee's image has been used as a vector for the creation of a new international solidarity, with Via Campesina delegates from across the world visiting South Korea, and reporting back to their constituencies. Through solidarity work like this, the memory of Lee seems to have found purchase in a range of national campaigns, with local, democratically deliberated demands being articulated with contingent international recognition of similarity. One would like to think he might have approved.

In conclusion, Via Campesina constitutes an important new space for, and agent of, transnational contention. Its modes of operation and its policies are far more sophisticated than canonical theories of transnational social movements admit (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2001). The genesis of the organization owes as much to the international political economy of representation, as to the more material political economy of export agricultural transformation. The policies that it has advanced and iterated since its creation are policies that are keen to avoid reinscribing a politics of international authoritarianism – beyond a core set of basic food sovereignty associated rights, decisions on the specific shapes of domestic policies are decentralized through a *de facto* principle of subsidiarity. This subsidiarity is an outcome of a political imaginary that resembles radical democracy, a political culture of constant engagement and commitment. The criticisms of radical democracy, and Badiou's criticisms of community as a basis for ethical ontology, are also reasons to be sceptical of the food sovereignty model. Its call for politics, particularly in the realm of gender politics, assumes too much about the possibility of transformation, in assuming precisely the monadic agent of change against which Hart (1991) cautions. Yet, while it is important to flag the dangers of the radical democratic project, it is also

important to argue for its superiority over the current modes of politics, and to recognize that perhaps the most systematic and comprehensive organic and living alternative to existing hegemonies comes not from the ivory towers or the factories, but the fields. It is an irony on which the Left ought to enjoy dwelling.

Notes

1. IFAP is a federation of larger-scale commercial farmers who are positioned to benefit from agricultural liberalization.
2. This is a key feature within Via Campesina's internal politics; a mechanism of creating constantly resolved spaces of conflict. Within the movement, certain national organizations work as gatekeeper members, policing the entry or exclusion of other national groups from Via Campesina. For organizations like the Karnataka State Farmers' Association, for example, the issue of land reform has been one from which they have fought shy, to the consternation of Via Campesina and Indian landless organizations.
3. At the time of his death, some (though few) activists reported discomfort with the extent that this event had trumped, and provided moral authority for Via Campesina activists to take a lead in marshalling the protests. The issue of moral authority itself is vexed: questions over the complex and gendered politics of martyrdom continue to tax activists within and outside Via Campesina. I record these moments of unease not to indict or diminish Lee's death, but to observe that his death has been contested, and continues to be contested, in a variety of ways.

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