

Reframing development: global peasant movements and the new agrarian question

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Abstract

This paper criticizes the conventional conception of the agrarian question and argues that the way the “agrarian question” is traditionally understood should be revised. The role played by the agrarian movement, especially transnational agrarian movements such as the Vía Campesina, is underscored.

Keywords: peasant movement, development, food sovereignty, agrarian question, neo-liberalism.

Resumo

Recontextualizando o desenvolvimento: movimentos camponeses globais e a nova questão agrária

Neste artigo a concepção clássica de questão agrária é criticada e é defendido que o modo como a “questão agrária” é concebida tradicionalmente deve ser revisto. É destacado aqui o papel desempenhado pelos movimentos camponeses, especialmente aqueles com atuação internacional, tal como a Vía Campesina.

Palavras-chave: movimento camponês, desenvolvimento, soberania alimentar, questão agrária, neoliberalismo.

Résumé

Reformuler le développement: des mouvements paysans globales et la nouvelle question agraire

L’auteur critique la conception classique de la question agraire et soutient qu’il faudrait revoir la manière dont on comprend généralement « la question agraire ». Il souligne le rôle des mouvements paysans, en particulier ceux d’envergure transnationale comme Vía Campesina.

Mots clés : mouvement paysan, développement, souveraineté alimentaire, question agraire, néolibéralisme.

Introduction

“Development,” as currently projected by the development establishment, and articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000), has returned to “poverty reduction” as its core initiative. We might say that in the course of developmentalism, the world-historic fact of poverty appears, as Marx would say, “first time as tragedy, and second time as farce.” In the first instance, the mid-20th-century

development project exploited the tragedy of colonialism, whereby impoverished Third World populations were cast as “the wretched of the earth,” legitimizing First World intervention in context of Cold War containment politics. The tragedy of the colonial legacy was compounded by imposing a singular mode of development on a diverse world, via an inter-state system manipulated by power to ultimately deepen global inequality. The farce is that this global project continues, and poverty continues to be represented as an originating condition, rather than an outcome, of “development.”

At the dawn of developmentalism, political independence was viewed as a precondition for overcoming inequality. Today political independence has been subordinated to the more abstract and obfuscating trope of “governance.” Where once states were vested with the powers of managing national modes of accumulation and redistribution, now states are compelled, under the guise of governance, to embrace financial reforms to improve global market access. In other words, poverty reduction is unambiguously linked to the project of “market rule,”¹ which enlists the state in the privatization of public goods and the individualization of the entrepreneurial, or consumer, citizen (Drainville 1995). In this scenario of deepening market relations, the subject of development has shifted from collective to individual self-determination, further de-politicizing the official development narrative. And the terrain of development, including the ecological relationship between town and country, is flattened to accommodate market rationality, including the erasure of peasant subjectivities. Deborah Bryceson (2000, 315) remarks that

the neoliberalist perspective has crowded out debate about peasant transformation. Peasantscum-smallholders-cum-farmers are like anyone else, expected to meet the challenge of the market. If they fail in the agricultural commodity market, they can resort to the wage labour market or the informal sector and claw their way up the ladder of prosperity. Economic success is up to the individual.

An unofficial, but no less significant, development narrative contests the millennial project of poverty reduction in myriad counter-movements, most recently gaining political voice in the Latin American revolt (e.g., Kohl and Farthing 2006). One key dimension of that revolt is the global agrarian resistance, which reframes development in four senses. First, it inverts the current development *explanandum*, focusing attention on poverty as an outcome of, rather than a point of departure for, development (neoliberal style). Second, and related, it challenges the development telos of de-peasantization, revalorizing rural cultural-ecology as a global good. Third, it subverts the subjective focus of development on individual responsibility by reasserting a political culture of solidarity. And fourth, it practises a multi-perspectival politics, challenging the single-point perspective of the official development narrative (see Ruggie 1993).

The Poverty of Development

Conventional wisdom on both left and right views poverty as the target of development - as Frans Schuurman has noted: “The very essence of development studies is a normative preoccupation with the poor, marginalized and exploited people in the South” (quoted in Saul 2004, 230). Not only did poverty constitute the birthright of development (see Escobar 1995), legitimizing the definition of the non-European world as “undeveloped,” but also the reproduction of poverty has animated development’s re-packaging across the last half century. The World Bank’s latest version of (neo-liberal) development appropriates the

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¹ This term comes from Arrighi (1982).

normative preoccupation with the poor via the “civil society revolution,” basing development on “inclusion and participation, bringing together civil society, local competition, NGOs, the private sector and the poor themselves ... in order to foster trust and sustainability” (Wolfensohn 2000).

Promoting market access as the key to elimination of poverty also entails disciplining the poor. While in the mid-20th century the task of alleviating poverty fell to states, as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948), it now falls on the poor themselves. Cameron and Palan (2004, 148) note that

the poor are presented as inhabiting a series of local places across the globe that, marked by the label “social exclusion,” lie outside of normal civil society. Their route back into the amorphous space of inclusion that the rest of us inhabit is through the willing and active transformation of themselves to conform to the disciplines of the market, since it is that which they are ultimately rejoining.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Panos Institute report on the Bank’s 1999 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers initiative (refashioning unpopular structural adjustment policies) should note that

most PRSPs [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers], for all their emphasis on “pro-poor” growth, do not include decisive measures to redistribute wealth and promote equality. Land reform, for example, is studiously avoided in the majority of plans, despite its importance for the reduction of rural inequality and poverty. (Abrahamsen 2004, 185)

Instead of land reform and the like, the direction favoured by the new project of “development governance” is to bring market disciplines, and possibilities, to the poor through market-led reform. The Bank’s 2003 Deininger Report, *Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction*, advocates “private property” as the solution to the “land question” (Moore 2004, 98), meaning land titling to facilitate a land market in turn to facilitate accumulation on the land. Analogous to Hernando de Soto’s proposal to codify extra-legal property relations among the urban and rural poor, the Bank views securing private property rights for “small proprietors” as a complement to micro-credit schemes, designed to induct the poor into the formal market economy, with assets to perform (2004, 98–99). Moore observes that “as the Bank notes in rural Africa, over 90% of the land has no staterecognised (or formal) tenure, be it ‘customary’ or capitalist, as well as in the ‘second-stage’ periurban areas in Africa and Asia wherein between 40% and 50% of residents have only informal land rights” (2004, 99–100).

While many have noted that micro-credit induction of the poor is ineffectual as a poverty reduction strategy, either because these assets are “dissipated” on daily livelihood needs (e.g., Menon 2001), or because securing property rights is a precondition for property concentration, the World Bank report is quite explicit, noting that “mechanization and the ‘scope to collateral ... to overcome imperfections... inherent to the credit market ... will favour farmers who own larger amounts of land’... [and] formalization of land tenure just might lead to a 50 per cent increase in the supply of labour to the market, as in Peru” (Moore 2004, 100). And, indeed, Saturnino Borrás’s (2003, 389, 385) careful analysis of the Bank’s Market-Led Agrarian Reform in Brazil, Colombia, and South Africa observes that in context of falling land prices resulting from exposure of Southern farming to global competition via adjustment policies, Market-Led Agrarian Reform has served, significantly, to enrich landlords who inflate sales prices, and disadvantage a structurally disempowered landless poor, only 2.5 per cent of whom actually received target land under the South African variant of this program in the second half of the 1990s. And where land transferred has often been relatively marginal, in Brazil, for example, “the diversified commercial farming required in the farm plans has not emerged and, instead, subsistence crop production has dominated the actual farm projects” (Borrás 380). Where re-peasantization does occur, extension packages

are heavily weighted towards promoting agroexporting (Rosset 2001), the very model that is symptomatic of the global farm crisis.

The corporatization of agriculture - sanctioned by WTO trade rules, prosecuted by the development establishment via states requiring foreign exchange, and enabled by financial liberalization, has been globally synchronized to the detriment of farming populations everywhere. Rising agricultural productivity ratios across high-and low-input farming - from 10:1 in 1940 to 2000:1 in the early 21st century (Amin 2003, 2) - have underwritten and been underwritten by withdrawal of public support for small farmers, trade liberalization, and outright dumping of Northern food surpluses. This contributes to a radical decoupling of urbanization from industrialization, such that 43% of the global South's population dwells in slums (Davis 2006, 13; Vidal 2003). The transnational peasant coalition, La Vía Campesina, has noted that "the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increasing movement of people" (Vía Campesina 2000). Such a seemingly simple relationship goes to the heart of the global restructuring of capitalism, linking the commodification of food, a relentless assault on small/family/peasant farming, the "mass production of slums" (Davis 2006, 17), and the generation of a casualized, flexible labour force (McMichael 1999).

For Vía Campesina, then, the poverty associated with displacement is a palpable outcome, rather than the target, of neoliberal development. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, 2002, Vía Campesina observed,

The liberalization of trade and its economic policies of structural adjustment have globalized poverty and hunger in the world and are destroying local productive capacities and rural societies. It is unacceptable that the trade in foodstuffs continues to be based on the economic exploitation of the most vulnerable - the lowest earning producers — and the further degradation of the environment. Destruction of food production capacity in some regions is coupled with surpluses in others. Structural adjustment programmes, shifting domestic production to intensive production for exportation, are accelerated under the terms of the WTO and are forcing millions of peasants, small and medium-sized farmers and indigenous peoples into bankruptcy.

Programmatically, Vía Campesina, in demanding the exit of the WTO from agriculture, emphatically identifies the WTO not only with the intensification of corporate agriculture, but also as one of the key vehicles of impoverishment of agrarians. The global agrarian resistance, of which Vía Campesina is a significant element, is a direct expression of the destabilization of almost half of the world's population, and the ongoing generation of a global proletariat (in all its diversity). It gives voice to those who experience immiseration. But the voice carries a double message: commodification of food destabilizes peasant agriculture, and equating peasant agriculture with lack of development is impoverishing. It is impoverishing in reducing peasant farmers to individual market actors - considered superfluous if unable to compete in the (corporate) global market. This is not to say that the agrarian resistance does not recognize, or encounter, rural class inequalities. Rather, it politicizes impoverishment processes, relating them to the privatization of states and subordination of farming to the neoliberal model and its corporate beneficiaries (both foreign and domestic)².

One statement from a Vía Campesina chapter, the Thai Assembly of the Poor, notes,

The concept of neoliberalism aims at pressuring different countries in the world to open their domestic markets for international free trade based on the premise that "free markets" will foster higher investment, export, import,

² The Indian chapter of Vía Campesina, the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), for example, traditionally dominated by rich farmers (whose populist rhetoric obscures social/class divisions), nevertheless espouses a neo-Gandhian vision of modernity based in agro-ecology and village self-reliance, within the theme of delinking from urban elites who represent the "weak capitalism" (*badakalu bandavala*) by which the KRRS characterizes India's dependent political-economy (see Assadi 1994).

and world trade. This in turn will supposedly lead to a solution to poverty and to an increase of income for the world's population ... During the years 1995 to 2003 many Thai farmers became heavily indebted and were unable to repay their debts, a consequence of trade policies on food and agricultural products. Major production resources such as land were lost by the small farmers (over 1.5 million farming households either became landless or did not have enough farmland). Their rights to use resources related to production, such as water, forest, local genetic, and coastal resources were also infringed on. The government should introduce policies to restore the economic condition of small farmers by providing fair allocation of these production resources to farmers, recognizing their rights as producers of society, and recognizing community rights in managing local resources (2005, 25, 31).

Aside from linking rural impoverishment to development outcomes of the neoliberal model, this kind of statement underlines Vía Campesina's view of "food sovereignty" as an alternative model based in the restoration of farmers' rights to be "producers of society." The most recent declaration of Vía Campesina concretizes this conception:

In the context of food sovereignty, agrarian reform benefits all of society, providing healthy, accessible and culturally appropriate food, and social justice. Agrarian reform can put an end to the massive and forced rural exodus from the countryside to the city, which has made cities grow at unsustainable rates and under inhuman conditions. (2006)

The attempt here is to transcend the reductionist discourse of development — in reducing peasant producers to individual market maximizers, in representing peasant agriculture as the poverty baseline upon which the "development ladder" rests (Sachs 2005)³, in assuming the singular viability of agribusiness in a world in which almost half of its population lives (precariously) by the land, and, finally in disregarding the link between agro-industrialization and the explosion of urban slums.

The Agrarian Question and Development

Current academic debates over the contemporary agrarian question are framed by an economic reductionism shared by neoliberal and orthodox Marxist perspectives on the transience of the "peasantry" (Araghi 1995). Arguably, this perspective is governed by the lens of capital accumulation - essentially that capitalism follows a path-dependent resolution of social forms into the capital-labour relation⁴, and/or that "peasants" are a historical anachronism, as scale is necessary to survive in the market or to realize the potential of "social labour." But the contemporary agrarian resistance challenges this ontology, confronting real material constraints, policy-driven assaults, and the ideologies that inform and legitimize these constraints and policies. The confrontation takes the form of an alternative politics and set of assumptions about what is possible on the land, and other forces and relations of social development⁵. This epistemic challenge perhaps constitutes the 21st-century variant of the agrarian question.

The classical conception of the agrarian question was capital's to resolve, through particular class transformation processes and political alliances within each nation-state. This

³ For an elaboration of this point, see McMichael (2005c).

⁴ Lenin made this claim in his richly documented scholarly polemic with the Narodniks, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (see McMichael 1977). Note that this application of a theory of the development of capitalism, by deepening a home market, was specific to the period of nation-building in modern capitalist history, and that Lenin deployed Marx's theory to frame a political interpretation of Russian conditions. This was not a blueprint for other times and spaces.

⁵ For a comprehensive, historical representation of the late-20th-century agrarian question along these lines, see Araghi, 2000.

state-centric view discounted the role of imperialist relations during the era in which the agrarian question emerged. Clearly, England's agrarian question was resolved through its ability to colonize Ireland and its overseas empire through farmer settlement patterns or extraction of foodstuffs (Davis 2001; Denoon 1983), and resolution in Europe was conditioned by significant competition from the state-supported family farming system on the U.S. frontier transmitted by the competitive relations of a world wheat price (Friedmann 1978). Post-colonial states, with few exceptions (e.g., Tanzania, China) constructed in the Western image, adapted the idealized national economic development model, founded in a dynamic commercial relation between national industrial and agricultural sectors. Within this framework, green revolution technology was transferred to the Third World to modernize its farm sectors by constructing a capitalist farming class to provide urban classes with food. Land reform was implemented, with varying degrees of success, to transfer land from export to domestic staple crops, and to undercut rural rebellion. Complementing this development was a transnationalization of production and consumption relations, presaging a global food system institutionalized by the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). In sum, despite, and perhaps because of, the attempt to construct home markets across the post-colonial state system, agriculture in the global South is subject to global political economic forces, including price and policy relations. Those forces constitute the "corporate food regime," which juxtaposes new circuits of food and of labour in the reproduction of global capitalism, dispossessing farmers as a condition for the consolidation of corporate agriculture, appropriating local knowledge, and eliminating local marketing systems with cheapened food imports and a "supermarket revolution" (McMichael 2005a).

Arguably, the corporate food regime catalyzes a new agrarian question, infused with, but not limited/reducible to, class relations, and certainly not resolvable within the framework of the national state (see also Araghi 2000). One key mechanism that disciplines states in the new poverty reduction-based global development project is monetary relations. In an era of financial deregulation (cf, sterling, or the Bretton Woods/dollar, monetary orders), states have surrendered sovereign ability to regulate the value of their currency to the financial markets, speculators, and credit-rating agencies alike, with the IMF performing the function of restructuring states to reproduce money⁶, by exploitation of labour and land across the world with decreasing regard for their sustainability. Here, not only is the "home market" an economic and political atavism, but ecological limits also expose the destructive relations of competition that have hitherto defined the capitalist state. For our purposes, the most obvious contradiction is the proliferation of what *Vía Campesina* chapters term "globe trotting food" (*Vía Campesina* (2006, 8 July) or "food from nowhere" (Bové and Dufour 2001), deepening agro-exporting patterns initiated in the colonial era, and contributing to redundant "food swapping" and destructive "food miles" that intensify the energy-intensive impact of industrial agriculture. Thus Greenpeace's recent report, "Eating up the Amazon," notes that "Europe buys half the soya exported from the Amazon state of Matto Grosso, where 90% of rainforest soya is grown. Meat reared on rainforest soya finds its way onto supermarket shelves and fast food counters across Europe" (Greenpeace 2006, 5). And within this agro-export system, represented as the solution to food insecurity, transgenic agricultures are promoted at the expense of systems of biodiversity managed for centuries by local farming populations (see McMichael 2004).

Identifying the ecological dimension of the agrarian question, Candido Grzybowski, director of IBASE (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis) in Rio de Janeiro, observed,

Probably in Brazil there exists no greater taboo than that centuries-old question, the agrarian question. But there is no question that is more current because it is not limited to the coun-tryside itself, to its population ... The modernity of the MST [Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem

⁶ This function is no longer uncontested, as, since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, following Malaysia's example of avoiding structural adjustment, some states have either ceased borrowing (e.g., Thailand, the Philippines, China, and India) and some (Brazil and Argentina) have discounted their liabilities to the IMF.

Terra (Landless Workers' Movement)] consists in questioning us about this, about the past of our agrarian origins and about the future in the use of our natural resources, with the question of land at the center. Even directly confronting the land owners... the landless, on occupying ranches, bring to the surface a fundamental question about the possibility of sustainable democratic development in Brazil. We are, of the large countries of the world, the least demographically dense, the most privileged in terms of natural resources - land, water, biodiversity - and at the same time, the most unequal and tragically, the most predatory. For how long, in the name of an even more narrow vision, will we be able to maintain the right to act on this part of Planet Earth in a way that is so socially and ecologically irresponsible? (2004)

Perhaps the Brazilian landless-workers movement, the largest of the *Vía Campesina* chapters, did not set out originally to resolve the ecological crisis. Nevertheless, “scaling down” is a condition for global environmental responsibility. While the MST is now experimenting with agro-ecological methods, its social challenge to the agribusiness model includes the possibility of reducing the unsustainable, centralizing extractive methods of global agro-industrialization.

The social challenge is to reverse the patterns of social reproduction visited upon rural (and urban) populations by the corporate food regime. In addition to the conversion of producing regions to agro-exporting, and the undermining of local provisioning, farmers are displaced en masse into new off-farm labour circuits (retailer-controlled plantations, new rural industries, migration). Whether peasantries are being eliminated, semi-proletarianized, or reproduced through “petty commodity production” is the subject of continuing debate (see Moyo and Yeros 2005). In this debate, the agrarian question is posed either in its classical form, where capitalism follows a pathdependent pattern (Brass 2000), resolving all social forms into the capital-labour relation, or as an as yet unresolved “agrarian question of labour,” reflecting a central contradiction of global capitalism, namely its failure to adequately reproduce its labour force (Bernstein, 2004). Either way, the agrarian question is viewed primarily through a lens that presents the capital/labour relation. Bernstein, in characterizing the agrarian question as a one of social reproduction rather than simply capitalist transition, acknowledges the global conjuncture whereby capital is centralizing by fragmenting labour under conditions of “massive development of the productive forces in (advanced) capitalist agriculture” (2004, 202). Under these conditions, Bernstein claims, the “agrarian question of labour” asserts itself, “manifested in struggles for land against ‘actually existing’ forms of capitalist landed property” (2004, 202). If one asks why labour would struggle for land, rather than adequate employment, the limits of this formulation become clear.

The problem with formulating the agrarian question as one to be resolved by capital and/or labour is that it reproduces the reductionism in conventional conceptions of development. In either case, peasants are ultimately redundant within the march of capitalist modernity. Certainly, where peasants reproduce themselves with off-farm labour, they inhabit capitalist relations, but this is a concrete, historical circumstance, not necessarily a *historicist* trend. Where the abstracted condition of labour under 21st century capitalism is increasingly casual, flexible, and mobile, the participation of peasant households in these circumstances does not necessarily alter the *concrete* value peasants ascribe to retaining their relationship to the land. Labour struggles to limit the working day revealed “for Marx [that] the history of capital is not a teleology independent of class struggle ... but is precisely the conjunctural and concrete result of class struggle” (Beverly 2004, 265). Analogously, peasant resistance to global capital occurs within its relations of subjection, but not necessarily within the *terms* of those relations, in particular the ontology of capitalism and its accumulation imperatives (Beverly 266). As suggested earlier, the modernity of the MST, and its agrarian allies, is not limited to or by a modernity premised on the progressive “development of the forces of production.” *Vía Campesina* movements question the singularity of that vision by practising

an alternative form of modernity based on reversing, or denaturalizing⁷, the act of dispossession, and limiting their subjection to capital. This, arguably, is the new agrarian question.

Central to this new agrarian question is recognition that capital's power depends on the social discipline of the market, and its political instrument, the WTO, as the "collective state" that concentrates the rationalizing force of capitalist modernity, producing the autonomous liberal subject as the (abstract) embodiment of development. By reasserting the politics of the "peasant way," in this conjuncture, the agrarians reformulate the political terms of resistance (Patel 2006; Petras 1997). Neither labourers demanding a limit to the working day, nor a revolutionary subject formed by capital, the agrarian resistance rejects the temporality of capitalist modernity that regards peasants as pre-modern, and the spatiality that removes and divides humans from nature. In fact, the modernity of the "peasant way" is precisely to reassert concrete solidaristic subjectivities that reintegrate the human/ecological divide through reconstituting spaces of resistance (McMichael 2006). Thus *Vía Campesina* (2006)⁸ states,

No agrarian reform is acceptable that is based only on land distribution. We believe that the new agrarian reform must include a cosmic vision of the territories of communities of peasants, the landless, indigenous peoples, rural workers, fisherfolk, nomadic pastoralists, tribes, afro-descendents, ethnic minorities, and displaced peoples, who base their work on the production of food and who maintain a relationship of respect and harmony with Mother Earth and the oceans.

In countering formal understandings of land reform, whether state-sponsored or market-sponsored in the "willing seller, willing buyer" version promoted by the Bank, the agrarians draw on *substantive* conceptions of rights, economies, and ecological relations (see Otero 2003). Place, with its concrete value, is opposed to the abstractions of capitalist modernity. Annette Desmarais, chronicler of the *Vía Campesina*, reports that this peasant model

does not entail a rejection of modernity, technology and trade accompanied by a romanticized return to an archaic past steeped in rustic traditions [but is based on] ethics and values where culture and social justice count for something and concrete mechanisms are put in place to ensure a future without hunger. (2003, 110)

Rather, a privatized modernity that erases local knowledge is the modernity in question, and the *Vía Campesina* is "engaged in building different concepts of modernity from their own, alternative and deeply rooted, traditions" (Desmarais 110). The *Vía Campesina* vision is for "the right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances" (quoted in Ainger 2003, 11). In other words, while demanding that such rights be formally guaranteed, the substantive content of rights remains to be determined by the communities and countries themselves (see Patel and McMichael 2004, 249).

⁷ Gill Hart (2005) argues that dispossession is not necessarily a 'natural' precursor of industrial development, based on the Taiwanese model of land reform subsidizing rural industrialization, reproduced in South African experience by Taiwanese émigré industrial capitalists. While this is an interesting formulation for the specific case of land distribution to those dispossessed by previous apartheid policies (beyond creating a black commercial farming class), it maintains the industrial dimension of the development narrative, and is perhaps an example of Bernstein's "agrarian question of labour."

⁸ Technically this is not a *Vía Campesina* document and position alone. The document cited here and elsewhere is by the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, a coalition of more than 500 (highly heterogeneous) rural organizations. *Vía Campesina* is just one of these organizations, although quite influential within.

Ultimately, the preservation, or reclamation, of the peasant way is entwined with a politics framed by dispossession (both material and ideational/spiritual) and its enabling institutional politics. This is not an abstract ideal, rather a historically specific form of struggle. Here *Vía Campesina* politics challenges the modern state: its authorship of WTO rules, its complicity in the deepening of global circuits of food, its historic erasure of differential ethnic histories through the citizenship relation, and its reduction of contemporary citizenship to a relationship of individual consumption of market services under the auspices of “governance.” But, as the MST experience shows, while the agrarians may challenge the neoliberal dimensions of the modern state, they cannot ignore its jurisdictional authority. Rather, they seek to transform that authority by a historic intervention⁹. The most recent *Vía Campesina* declaration of March 2006 challenges states to respect food sovereignty, but, by challenging the state *system* to enable this goal observes that the “state must play a strong role in policies of agrarian reform and food production,” and to accomplish this,

states have the right and the obligation to sovereignty, to define, without external conditions, their own agrarian, agricultural, fishing and food policies in such a way as to guarantee the right to food and the other economic, social and cultural rights of the entire population.

On the other hand, the obligation to sovereignty entails recognizing the “laws, traditions, customs, tenure systems, and institutions, as well as the recognition of territorial borders and the cultures of peoples” (2006). The appeal to territoriality represents a substantive demand to affirm citizenship as a basic national and human right, but also as a vehicle for the sovereign rights of minorities (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2003, 195), creating pluri-national states as a precondition for protecting and sustaining peasant spaces to overcome the crisis that is neoliberal development.

Reconstituting peasant spaces is both material and ideological — and ranges from land reform through land occupations to cross-border networks of farmer-knowledge (Holt-Giménez 2006) and *domestic* fair trade schemes (Barkin 2002). Regional autonomy movements, such as the Zapatista rebellion, combine territorial mobilization with “historical memory, cultural practices and political norms as much as on legal norms” (Harvey 1999, 28). And national movements pursue political strategies geared to reconstituting the state. Thus Mexico’s El Barzón debtor insurgency in the 1990s linked *campesinos* with other social groups suffering from withdrawal of public subsidies (Williams 2001), and the MST redefines the “rural” as an occupied civic base challenging Brazilian class and neoliberal politics. From here the MST links “what it calls the struggle for the land with the struggle on the land” (Flávio de Almeida and Sánchez 2000), developing co-operative forms of rural labour, producing staple foods for the working poor, and building alliances with, and offering livelihood security to, the urban unemployed (Wright and Wolford 2003).

Territorialism and “food sovereignty,” while obtaining meaning, and implemented, within states, directly implicate international political economic relations. Food sovereignty counterpoints corporate relations of production and consumption of food, and its enabling neoliberal infrastructure and discourse of “food security”¹⁰. Realization of food sovereignty in its multiple guises on local and national scales expresses an alternative and decentralized implementation of food security, where material needs are not subordinated to the global market, but embedded in agro-ecology and the ecology of co-operative labour and knowledge systems¹¹. The *Vía Campesina* maintains that “food sovereignty is not just a

⁹ Petras and Veltmeyer (2003) rightly situate peasant resistance in relation to the state, but I would develop this by arguing that the agrarians are politicizing “the state” through attempts to transform its internal and external relations, within this world-historical juncture. For elaboration, see McMichael (2005b).

¹⁰ For elaboration, see McMichael (2003).

¹¹ See Rosset (2006) for an extended account of the environmental, and productivity, benefits of small-holding, offering “a powerful argument that land reform to create a small farm economy is not only good for local economic development, but is also more effective social policy” reducing pressure on cities.

vision but is also a common platform of struggle that allows [us] to keep building unity in our diversity ... Agrarian reform and food sovereignty commit us to a larger struggle to change the dominant neoliberal model ... [and] we will carry these conclusions back to debate with our social bases, and will use these ideas to confront the policies of international bodies like the FAO, and our governments” (2006). Food sovereignty would subordinate trade relations, re-politicizing access to credit, land, and viable prices to be set by rules of fair trade negotiated in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, rather than the WTO, subject to farmer input (see Bové and Dufour 2001). These interventions amount to a “political economy of representation,” focusing on counter-posing the “peasant way” to the corporate food regime, uniting distinct and autonomous struggles anchored in a “practical ethics of peasant movement solidarity” (Patel 2006, 71). Thus the agrarian question is informed by a distinctive and strategic revaluing of (rural) diversity across the state system, to be sanctioned by a democratic multilateralism based in a transformation of the state/development project.

Conclusion

In this world-historical conjuncture, agrarian resistances hold a mirror to the dominant narrative, both left and right, that views the future of the peasantry through the lens of capital accumulation. The political economy of representation animating the agrarian counter-movement problematizes this narrative and its telos regarding the transience of peasantries, foreclosing *campesino* futures. In contesting the policies and effects of neoliberal capitalism, the agrarians reorient the future by weaving an alternative, agrarian-centred narrative to the capitalist narrative. Stalling the conventional scenario of the twilight of the peasantry (see Hobsbawm 1994; critiqued by Bernstein 2000), by reasserting political identities combining culturally informed themes with conjunctural politics, the agrarians offer alternatives to the social and ecological catastrophes of neoliberal capitalism¹².

This historic intervention is formed and informed by the failure of neoliberalism to realize its ideologized promise of development, and its explicit betrayal of that promise through schemes of poverty reduction that ruthlessly attack the poor under the guise of empowerment and market access (Cammack 2002). At the same time, *Vía Campesina* has always situated that failure in relation to a longer-term assault on indigenous peoples, formerly known, in post-colonial language, as the “wretched of the earth.” In 1996, at its International Conference in Mexico, *Vía Campesina* declared,

Land, wealth and power in the hands of large land owners and transnational corporations unjustly denies peasants and farmers the possibility of controlling their own destinies. The policies of dumping, endemic situations of poverty and marginalization, increased in the third world by foreign debt, are destroying the hope of millions. Serious social deficiencies and lack of basic services together with the oppression of ethnic minorities and indigenous populations aggravate situations of injustice and frustration. The prevalent and increasing incidence of racism in the rural world is unacceptable.

The 21st-century agrarian question, based in the multiple peasant forms of resistance, combines class, ethnic, gender, and ecological perspectives in a solidary attempt to reframe the discourse and material relations of “development.” In representing “peasants” and ecology as casualties of neoliberal development, and yet as foundations of a new development trajectory, the agrarian countermovement problematizes development’s fixation on accumulation and the construction of the rational, developed subject. The implication is

¹² While the future does not depend solely on the agrarians, one might say that this counter-movement represents the “canary in the mine” insofar as the colonization of the countryside, via the neo-liberal project, registers a significant threshold of destabilization of social, demographic, and ecological relations.

that the lens of capital is no substitute for Marx's methodical demystification of the accumulation imperative and its fetishisms. Once accomplished, such demystification replaces historicist representations of capitalist modernity with an alternative paradigm based in the multi-perspectival politics (Ruggie 1993) of globally networked movements such as Vía Campesina. The tactical, single-point perspective to challenge corporate "food security" with the unifying principle of "food sovereignty" complements and enables the realization of a multiplicity of social and ecological relations that, together, seek to survive and transcend the crisis of the neoliberal project. To reverse the modernist assumption that the agrarian question is for capital to resolve is a significant step in that direction.

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