

Peasants Make Their Own History, But Not Just as They Please . . .

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This essay employs contemporary peasant mobilizing discourses and practices to evaluate the terms in which we understand agrarian movements today, through an exercise of historical specification. First, it considers why the terms of the original agrarian question no longer apply to agrarian change today. The shift in the terms corresponds to the movement from the late-nineteenth century and twentieth century, when states were the organizing principle of political-economy, to the twenty-first century, when capital has become the organizing principle. Second, and related, agrarian mobilizations are viewed here as barometers of contemporary political-economic relations. In politicizing the socio-ecological crisis of neoliberalism, they problematize extant categories of political and sociological analysis, re-centring agriculture and food as key to democratic and sustainable relations of social production.

Keywords: food sovereignty, neoliberalism, peasant movement, dispossession, social reproduction, developmentalism

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of capitalist modernity has overwhelmingly regarded the peasantry as an historical anachronism, or as a receding baseline of development. Neo-classical economic theory and orthodox Marxism alike have reproduced this ontology, on the grounds of scale economies and/or marginality to a revolutionary class politics, respectively. This essay reflects on the conditions and consequences of such views, arguing that they share a Euro- and state-centric premise, which, in turn, has shaped a developmentalist episteme that is largely responsible for the contemporary rural crisis. Mazoyer and Roudart capture the essence of this crisis when they observe that

most of the world's hungry people are not urban consumers and purchasers of food but peasant producers and sellers of agricultural products. Further, their high number is not a simple heritage from the past but *the result*

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of an ongoing process leading to extreme poverty for hundreds of millions of deprived peasants. (2006, 10; emphasis added)

Compare this to Jeffrey Sachs' metaphor of the development ladder, where peasant poverty is an original condition: 'the move from universal poverty to varying degrees of prosperity has happened rapidly in the span of human history. Two hundred years ago . . . [j]ust about everybody was poor, with the exception of a very small minority of rulers and large landowners' (2005, 26).

Walt Rostow (1960) canonized the developmentalist view that peasants inhabit a baseline, traditional stage of human history. Development theory consigns peasants to a prior historical stage, and W. Arthur Lewis (1954) operationalized this episteme by portraying peasants as constituting 'unlimited supplies of labour' to industrializing economies. World-historical treatments notwithstanding (Wolf 1969; Walton 1984), standard social science deviates little from Barrington Moore's 1966 treatment of the political fate of the peasantry in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. While his implication that English liberal democracy is premised on the elimination of the peasantry is emblematic of the modernist perspective, there is an uncomfortable silence in a comparative method that separates England from its overseas empire, populated largely by peasants – those in India producing 20 per cent of England's bread at the turn of the twentieth century (Davis 2001, 299).

There are three key issues here. First, peasant trajectories are conditioned by world, rather than national, history. Second, as an instrument of legitimacy, the development narrative's enabling of an intensified peasant dispossession under a virulent neoliberal regime has become the focal point of a contemporary peasant mobilization. Third, conventional (liberal and Marxist) attempts to schematize modern history in developmentalist terms run aground on the shoals of stage theory – democratic outcomes, nationally imagined, are as partial as representations of peasants as historical relics. An interesting perspective on this imaginary is that of a contemporary Mexican peasant leader, who observes: 'a campesino comes from the countryside. There have always been campesinos. What did not exist before were investors, industrialists, political parties, etc. Campesinos have always existed and they will always exist. They will never be abolished' (cited in Desmarais 2007, 19). The question is what does being a '*campesino*' mean today? In his study of the farmer networks in Mexico and Central America, *Campesino a Campesino*, Food First Director, Eric Holt-Giménez observes:

Contrary to conventional wisdom, today's campesinos are not culturally static or politically passive. Nor are they disappearing as a social class. Campesino families across Mesoamerica and the Caribbean (and around the world) are constantly adapting to global, regional, and local forces . . . A story of unflagging resistance to decades of a 'development' that sought to eliminate peasants from the countryside and, more recently, to neoliberal economic policies that prioritize corporate profit margins over environment, food security, and rural livelihoods.

[It is] a struggle for cultural resistance because campesino culture has withstood both socialist and capitalist version of progress . . . Even today, campesinos across the Mesoamerican isthmus resist the devastating economic effects of globalization both from their home communities and from the fields, factories, and service sectors of the United States, to which they supply an inexhaustible army of cheap, expendable labour. (2006, xii)

That is, peasant mobilization within and against the neoliberal project,¹ on a world scale, is politically engaged in a way, and for a cause, rendered unthinkable by classical social theory.

The question becomes, is such peasant mobilization ‘casting a long shadow of nostalgia and melancholy over modern society’ (Bartra 1992, 17)? That is, is this a defensive, and/or reactionary impulse, or something completely different? I argue the latter. While there have always been, and continue to be, peasants, many of whom simply struggle to get by with a range of different livelihood strategies, there is a mobilized segment which is the subject of this essay. Peasant mobilization, as examined here, reaches beyond the daily round of survival on the land to linking that struggle to a reframing of what is possible on the land in contradistinction to what is being done to the land and its inhabitants by the neoliberal regime. Commentators have noted differences in consciousness, and tensions, between and among peasants, peasant activists and peasant leaders (Wright and Wolford 2003; Caldeira 2004; Wolford 2006; Desmarais 2007). The point here is that the ‘peasant mobilization’ is transcending conventional peasant politics, reframing its ontological concerns via a critique of neoliberalism, and reformulating the agrarian question in relation to development exigencies today.

Thus, rather than examine this new peasant question through the conventional lens of modern social theory, it is useful to shift epistemological gears and examine the peasant movement² through its own discursive practices, as it critically engages with capitalist narratives and their enabling policies. The critique of the neoliberal project by the peasant movement is a response which, invited by the general assault on peasantries in the name of the development narrative, posits future possibilities on the land that transgress the boundaries of conventional modernist theory.

¹ The ‘neo-liberal project’ is a cultural specification of what I have called the ‘globalization project’ (McMichael 1996) in order to avoid the economism associated with the colloquial term ‘globalization’. The concepts are essentially interchangeable, and refer to political restructuring of the relations of capital on a world scale, legitimized by the normalizing, privatizing creed of neoliberalism.

² By ‘peasant movement’ I infer to a generic global movement that is nevertheless highly diverse, localized with specific social and ecological projects, and yet with a historic and common politics of resistance to the commodification of land, seed and food, and to a WTO trade regime whose policies systematically disadvantage and dispossess small farmers across the world. Notwithstanding the divisions in and across leading organizations like Vía Campesina, there is a unity in diversity that informs the ‘food sovereignty’ project, which in turn constitutes (and advocates) a *process* politics (for an example, see Desmarais 2007).

SITUATING THE TRANSNATIONAL PEASANT MOVEMENT

In order to specify the transnational peasant movement historically, both temporal and spatial distinctions are necessary. The temporal distinction situates this movement in relation to the agrarian question, first formulated in the late-nineteenth century. The spatial distinction concerns the ontological relation of the peasant movement to capitalism and its future. As I will suggest, these distinctions are related, and it is in fact the peasant movement itself that underscores the new meaning of the contemporary agrarian question, politicizing agricultural and food relations within and beyond neoliberal capitalism.

Temporal Distinctions

Temporally, the peasant movement today fundamentally transforms the assumptions and projections of the classical agrarian question. Framed in relation to the politics of capitalist transition in agriculture, the original agrarian question concerned how peasants would identify politically within varying processes of 'differentiation' or 'disintegration' of peasant farming, as capital subordinated landed property (cf. Lenin 1972). Karl Kautsky, a 'proletarian exclusivist' (Alavi 1987), who nonetheless argued that centralization of landed property as capital in agriculture was contingent, rather than path dependent, argued peasant political allegiances with labour depended ultimately on the combined impact of food prices on the viability of peasant agriculture, and on labour's real wages (1988, 317).

As food regime analysis observes, food prices were increasingly governed by international trade relations (Friedmann 1978). Access to empire and cheap foodstuffs ironically blunted a potential contradiction between peasant and proletarian, keeping wages low for capital, but squeezing European peasantries. At the turn of the century, the separate and combined counter-movements of agrarians and workers diverged from the revolutionary projections of Marxists, contributing to the social-democratic resolution described by Polanyi (1957). Resolution acknowledged a dimension overlooked by the classical agrarian question, namely, the world-historical relations contributing to early twentieth-century social transformations. That is, part of the social-democratic compromise, based in the Fordist wage system, included agricultural mercantilism – in effect, publicly-financed protection of First World agriculture, idealized as family farming (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). Third World states have challenged such agricultural mercantilism ever since, culminating in the emergence of the G-20 in 2003 at the WTO's Cancun Ministerial.

The original, classical formulation of the agrarian question, now problematic in the twenty-first century, was governed by a state-centrism, reflecting the nation-building focus of the late-nineteenth century. As Henry Bernstein characterized it, the classical agrarian question concerned the development of a *home* market for capital as 'the *agrarian question of capital*, and specifically *industrial capital*. In the context of transition(s) to capitalism, this was also assumed to be the agrarian question of labour as well as capital, inasmuch as these two definitive classes of an emergent

capitalism shared a common interest in the overthrow/transformation of feudalism, and of pre-capitalist social relations and practices more generally' (2003, 209).

The irony of course is that just as the self-referential European project focused on modernization of the nation-state, pre-capitalist social relations and practices more generally were sustained, often in degraded form, in the empire (Davis 2001). Here, the peasantry was an object of exploitation, rather than elimination, as in the modernist scenario. In other words, while the colonial peasantry was a pedestal for metropolitan wage-labour, this role was invisibilized in social theories concerned with modern social forms of accumulation, predicated on a Eurocentric model of development as a national process.³

Arguably, developmentalism has institutionalized the trajectory of peasant redundancy across the now complete state system. Certainly, within the terms of the Cold War, under pressure from peasant insurgency, re-peasantization in the model of American family farming was projected through such public initiatives as the Latin American Alliance for Progress, the green revolution, and via foreign policy institutions such as USAID in Egypt (Mitchell 2002). But this phase of developmentalism was essentially an interlude of economic nationalism governed by peasant unrest, postwar mercantilism and the politics of decolonization, legitimized by the UN's 1960 Declaration of Independence.⁴ While re-peasantization accompanied what Araghi calls conservative 'first struggle, first served' land reforms in East Asia and Latin America (1995, 346), de-peasantization also proceeded across the Third World, under pressure from the food aid regime (Friedmann 1982), and the inequalities of the green revolution (Gupta 1998).

As the neoliberal project, colloquially known as 'globalization', has replaced the period of economic nationalism, de-peasantization in the global South has intensified under the combined pressures of evaporation of public support of peasant agriculture, the *second* green revolution (privatized biotechnologies and export agricultures to supply global consumer classes), market-led land reform,⁵ and WTO trade rules that facilitate targeting southern markets with artificially cheapened food surplus exports from the North. This 'corporate food regime', based in subsidies which reduce farm prices by as much as 57 per cent below actual costs (People's Food Sovereignty 2003), constitutes a 'world price' through trade liberalization, with devastating effects on small farmers everywhere (McMichael 2005).⁶ For example, Sharma (2004) reports:

³ Cf. Tomich (2004), who refocuses, and reformulates, a historical understanding of capitalism through the 'prism of slavery', arguing that the relationship between wage and slave labour was critical to this history, rather than presuming wage labour to be the definitive relationship.

⁴ For a comprehensive account of cases of agrarian reform during this period, see Rosset et al. (2006).

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of the 'marketing' of land as a neoliberal solution to rural poverty, see Borras (2006).

⁶ Elsewhere I have portrayed the 'world price' as the corporate food regime's instrument of dispossession (McMichael 2005). Pressure on food supplies from agrofuels, and from shifting social diets in India and China, in particular, are related to rising food prices – in the past year, maize prices doubled, and wheat prices rose by 50 per cent, bringing the world to a 'post-food-surplus era' (Vidal 2007). Whether and to what extent this new socially-constructed food scarcity will affect the 'world price' mechanism (created through decoupling of northern farm supports and commodity prices), remains to be seen.

Indonesia was rated among the top ten exporters of rice before the WTO came into effect. Three years later, in 1998, Indonesia had emerged as the world's largest importer of rice. In India, the biggest producer of vegetables in the world, the import of vegetables has almost doubled in just one year – from Rs92.8 million in 2001–02 to Rs171 million in 2002–03. Far away in Peru, food imports increased dramatically in the wake of liberalization. Food imports now account for 40 per cent of the total national food consumption. Wheat imports doubled in the 1990s, imports of maize overtook domestic production, and milk imports rose three times in the first half of the previous decade, playing havoc with Peruvian farmers.

Under these circumstances, through which food dumping dispossesses millions of peasants (Madeley 2000), the agrarian crisis of the late-nineteenth century, precipitated by cheap foodstuffs from the New World and the colonies, has been generalized – notably through the centralization of capitalist agriculture in the global North, via the mercantilist resolution following the collapse of Britain's free trade regime. That is, while the resolution of the classic agrarian question was mediated politically by GATT protectionism, institutionalizing increasingly corporate farm lobbies across the Northern world, the current agrarian question has now been globalized through the medium of the corporate world market. But rather than play a conservative back-up role in the class politics of capitalist modernity, the peasant movement is transforming the terms of the question. It is no longer about agrarian transition via the path dependence of a theory of accumulation privileging capital, rather it is about agrarian transformation against the accumulation imperative, championed by a transnational coalition of peasants and other social justice movements, busy defetishizing accumulation.

Instead of defending a world lost, transnational movements such as *Vía Campesina* advocate a world to gain – a world beyond the catastrophe of the corporate market regime, in which agrarianism is revalued as central to social and ecological sustainability. More than a self-protective manoeuvre, the peasant movement proclaiming food sovereignty⁷ calls into question the neoliberal 'food security' project, and its trope of feeding the world with food surpluses generated in the North (McMichael 2003). As the *Vía Campesina* website (2003) observes:

Neo-liberal policies prioritize international trade, and not food for the people. They haven't contributed at all to hunger eradication in the world. On the contrary, they have increased the peoples' dependence on agricultural

⁷ First articulated at the 1996 World Food Summit, by the transnational peasant movement *Vía Campesina*, the concept of food sovereignty initially proclaimed 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity . . . and the right to produce our own food in our own territory' (cited in Desmarais 2007, 34). In elaborating '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' (cited in Ainger 2003, 11), the concept of food sovereignty particularizes the socio-ecological function of agriculture to territorial coordinates (as a political tactic).

imports, and have strengthened the industrialization of agriculture, thus jeopardizing the genetic, cultural and environmental heritage of our planet, as well as our health. They have forced hundreds of millions of farmers to give up their traditional agricultural practices, to rural exodus or to emigration. International institutions such as IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, and WTO (World Trade Organization) have implemented those policies dictated by the interests of large transnational companies and superpowers . . . WTO is a completely inadequate institution to deal with food and agriculture-related issues. Therefore Vía Campesina wants WTO out of agriculture.⁸

All over the world, low priced agricultural imports are destroying the local agricultural economy; take for instance European milk imported in India, American pork in the Caribbean, European Union meat and cereals in Africa, animal food in Europe, etc. Those products are exported at low prices thanks to dumping practices. The United States and the European Union had a new dumping practice ratified by WTO, which replaces export subsidies by a strong reduction of their agricultural prices combined with direct payments made by the State. To achieve food sovereignty, dumping must be stopped.

The critique of dumping is not simply about unfair trading practices. It illuminates the politics of circulation – in effect the institutional construction of a corporate market premised on ‘naturalizing’ peasant redundancy, through political means. The contemporary rural crisis supersedes the original agrarian question concerning the political implications of agrarian class transformation for national political alliances. Home markets are no longer coherent, and political regulation of the global market essentially has been privatized, with states playing a ‘clean-up’ role, where they are involved at all. In the classical version, food registered only through the impact of its price on class identity and/or accumulation patterns. In the current agrarian question posed by the food sovereignty movement, food embodies a broader set of relations, becoming a window on the social, demographic and ecological catastrophe of neoliberalism.

As Vía Campesina put it: ‘the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people’ (2000). Trade in food surpluses contributes to cycles of dispossession, which in turn make land and agricultural labour available for corporate and export agriculture as Northern labour costs, land rents and environmental regulations rise and encourage the spread of

⁸ Desmarais notes the slogan ‘WTO out of agriculture’ was a compromise among Vía Campesina chapters. While India’s Karnataka Rjya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) advocated dismantling the WTO, Canada’s National Farmer’s Union (NFU) and Mexico’s *Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas* (UNORCA) favoured reforming the power relations of the international trade regulatory system, and the French *Confédération Paysanne* proposed human rights conventions for the WTO. Thus, ‘the Vía Campesina demanded a reduction in the organization’s powers by taking agriculture out of its jurisdiction, as well as the building of new structures within a transformed, more democratic, and transparent UN system’ (2007, 111).

agribusiness (including agrofuel)⁹ estates and food processing plants across the South – a foundation on which the recent retailing revolution is being built (McMichael and Friedmann 2007). Further, de-peasantization contributes to the swelling ranks of casual labour in the world labour market at large. While on a national scale there may be a radical decoupling of industrialization from urbanization (Davis 2006, 17), on a global scale the accumulation of capital depends on these cycles of dispossession (McMichael 2005). Temporally, the scale of the agrarian question has shifted from the problematic of nation-building to that of global political-economy.

Through capitalist transition on a global scale, based in a corporate-led process of agricultural commodity production on a ‘least-cost’ supply principle,¹⁰ recursive world price dynamics confound the path-dependent national model of the classical agrarian question. Overproduction and a generalized regime of agro-exporting artificially depress agricultural commodity prices and undercut farming everywhere. Thus:

Thailand is known as one of the top food exporters in the world, particularly in rice. But a study on Thailand shows that while the country experiences an increase in its rice exports, farmers do not benefit from this success. The farm gate prices have not increased over the last decade. The stagnation in real income has been accompanied with a sharp rise in the debt burden of rural households. In short, more exports do not lead to an increase in farmers’ welfare . . . (Jacques-Chai Chomthongdi, cited in NGOs 2004)

By denaturalizing the phenomenon of a ‘world price’, drawing attention to the corporate subsidy system as a foundation of the WTO trade regime, the food sovereignty movement has transformed the agrarian question. It accomplishes this by revealing a capital/state nexus (in the multilateral institutions) as a *global* force, generating a labour reserve of dispossessed peasants for a corporate development project, expressed in the ‘mass production of slums’ (Davis 2006, 13).

Spatial Distinctions

The ‘spatial distinction’ of the transnational peasant movement refers to its ontological relation to the neoliberal project. As suggested above, the food sovereignty movement engages critically with the political infrastructure of neoliberal

⁹ See, for example, the special issue on Agrofuels in *Seedling*, July 2007, available at <http://www.grain.org>.

¹⁰ As noted, farm subsidies in the global North overwhelmingly support agribusiness, by decoupling prices from farm support, allowing market prices to fall to a fictitious low cost (to traders and processors) which in turn depresses prices throughout the world market. The food sovereignty movement – whether in Europe or the global South, favours social payments for producing public goods such as staple/cultural foods, environmental services, and so on. Thus the *Coordination Paysanne Européenne* (CPE) claims: ‘Public support to agriculture may well be legitimate, for instance for sustainable family farming to exist in every region, provided that this support is not used for low-price exports’ (cited in Madeley 2006).

capitalism, denaturalizing the market narrative as a precondition for elaborating an alternative narrative. That is, the challenge to capital occurs within its relations, but not its terms, of subjection (cf. Beverley 2004), positing a different agrarian ontology. The spatial dimension concerns the re-centring of the agrarian question – not as a political sideshow in an industrializing political culture, but as a political solution to the catastrophe of neoliberal industrialization.

This spatial distinction is framed usefully through Harvey's juxtaposition of contemporary ('anti-globalization') resistances as 'movements against accumulation by dispossession' and movements around 'expanded reproduction' (2005, 203). The former refers to peasant movements, insofar as they oppose displacement, withdrawal of public support for small farming, and the appropriation of environments, knowledges and cultures, amplifying values and cultural practices outside of the capital accumulation relation. The latter includes movements where 'the exploitation of wage labour and conditions defining the social wage' are central (2005, 203). Harvey claims finding the organic link between these different movements is 'an urgent theoretical and practical task' (2005, 203).

Arguably, *Vía Campesina's* politics unites these resistances, organically, in linking the accelerated movement of food with the accelerated dispossession of the peasantry. Neoliberal industrialization of agriculture on a world scale simultaneously generates casual labour and reduces capital's wage costs. Combining a politics of circulation with a politics of production and reproduction offers a world-historical critique of the conditions and consequences of the corporate food regime (cf. McMichael 2005). *Vía Campesina* de-reifies the euphemism of 'free trade', revealing its corporate/state origins and its unequal and devastating consequences. Further, to show that the expanded reproduction of capital depends upon the generation of an expendable global wage-labour force, also shows that corporate agriculture, as such, is not simply about producing cheap food, it is also about securing new conditions for accumulation by lowering the cost of labour worldwide. It is in this sense that agriculture is central to the solution.

In building an organic link between movements against dispossession and against the relations of expanded reproduction, *Vía Campesina* importunes us to recognize that accumulation is not simply about the concentration and centralization of the power of capital, but also is about dispossessing alternative practices and foreclosing options for alternative futures. In particular, the ontology of capitalist modernity, rooted in economism, rules out a place for peasants, physically expelling them from the land, and epistemologically removing them from history. Conversely, the ontology of the food sovereignty movement critiques the reductionism and false promises of neoliberalism, positing a practice and a future beyond the liberal development subject, and the science of profit. This emerging ontology is grounded in a process of revaluing agriculture, rurality and food as essential to general social and ecological sustainability, beginning with a recharged peasantry.

Economic theory posits the disappearance of peasants as a consequence of the law of rising productivity, reinforced by the low-income elasticity of demand for food, so that farm populations decline in relative and absolute terms. Unexamined

here are assumptions about the conditions and consequences of rising agricultural productivity. Economic logic fetishizes growth in quantitative terms, standardizing agriculture in input–output terms. In externalizing ecological effects such as chemical pollution, soil and genetic erosion, carbon emissions, and discounting energy costs and subsidy structures for agribusiness, this logic seriously undervalues the economic costs of agro-industrialization (Martinez-Alier 2002, 146–7). In so doing, small-scale agriculture is presumed to be inefficient – as evidently confirmed by de-peasantization trends. While such abstract economic valuation is artificial, it nevertheless has real, and violent, consequences.

Alternatively, a grounded ecological perspective offers a range of values concerning the multifunctional and epistemic contributions of agriculture to humans and nature alike. This is the ontological break that informs the food sovereignty movement and its advocacy of revaluing small farming. Even where neoliberalism attempts to overcome the limits of its economism, as Martinez-Alier reminds us:

The monetary values given by economists to negative externalities or to environmental services are a consequence of political decisions, patterns of property ownership and the distribution of income and power. There is thus no reliable common unit of measurement, but this does not mean that we cannot compare alternatives on a rational basis through multi-criteria evaluation. Or, in other terms, imposing the logic of monetary valuation . . . is nothing more than an exercise in political power. Eliminating the spurious logic of monetary valuation, or rather relegating it to its proper place as just one more point of view, opens up a broad political space for environmental movements. (2002, 150)

Building such a political space is a component of the food sovereignty movement's consolidation of an ontological detour that rejects the grand narrative of modernity, industrialism and proletarianization as an unfulfilled dream/palpable nightmare, and affirms an alternative, historically-grounded narrative sensitive to place and value incommensurability, as concrete universals, rather than the abstract logic that justifies accumulation by dispossession. This is an ontology that offers a politics of voice and struggle *on* the land, in addition to struggle *for* land (Flavio and Sanchez 2000), thereby politicizing the social-ecology of property relations. Thus Paul Nicholson, European representative to the International Coordinating Committee of Vía Campesina, notes: 'to date, in all the global debates on agrarian policy, the peasant movement has been absent: we have not had a voice. The main reason for the very existence of the Vía Campesina is to be that voice and to speak out for the creation of a more just society' (cited in Desmarais 2002, 96). Further, the International Planning Committee (IPC) for Food Sovereignty (a 500-strong coalition of heterogeneous organizations, to which Vía Campesina belongs) 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. (2006, n.p.)

In these senses, the food sovereignty movement is constituting an increasingly significant political economy of representation (Patel 2006) that combines politicization of neoliberal policy, claiming rights beyond market rights, with an agrarian identity based in a value complex weaving together ecological subjectivity and stewardship as a condition for social and environmental sustainability. Defending the peasant way is not just about preserving a 'culture', but strengthening cultural practices committed to transcending the subordination of food and agriculture to the price form. In so doing, the food sovereignty movement asserts the incommensurability of diverse agri- and food-cultures with a monocultural exchange-value regime that objectifies food, incorporating its production, and consumption, into the process of capital accumulation in general. At the same time, it is a politics of 'agrarian citizenship' (Wittman 2005), based in coalitions with other social justice movements on the margins, or in the centre, of the expanded reproduction of capital. Thus, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) reconstitutes the 'rural' as a civic base through which to confront Brazilian class and neoliberal politics, by developing cooperative 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). And the IPC for Food Sovereignty maintains that 'food sovereignty is not just a 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, n.p.).

Arguably, in creating a space for an alternative ontology, the food sovereignty movement not only occupies a pivotal perspective challenging neoliberal capitalism (cf. Starr 2001, 224), but also reasserts the 'centrality of agriculture' in a post-capitalist modernity (Duncan 1996). The re-centring of agriculture within this political vision constitutes, then, an 'agrarian question of food' (McMichael forthcoming).

THE AGRARIAN QUESTION OF FOOD

Reformulating the agrarian question as a question of food shifts epistemological gears, switching focus from production to social reproduction. In the classical agrarian question, the politics of agricultural transition presumed a base/superstructure model in which emergent capitalist production relations would develop possibilities for a proletarian politics. The terms of reference were governed by a narrative of expanded reproduction of (industrial) capital, which in turn *enclosed*

the meaning of 'social reproduction', limiting it to the reproduction of labour-power through the wage relation. Notwithstanding the marginalization of household labour, Polanyi understood capitalist ontology as 'fictitious', insofar as it at one and the same time limited and stimulated the 'discovery of society' – institutionalized in the resolution of the 'double movement' via the social contract associated with the mid-twentieth century citizen-state. While Polanyi's vision was framed in the state-centric terms of the time, it underlined the question of social reproduction discounted by the logic of capital accumulation. Furthermore, the appeal of Robert Owen's cooperatives, within a general conception of socially-embedded material relations, counterposed an alternative subjectivity to the liberal one of 'economic self-interest'.

Arguably, the food sovereignty movement is making an analogous claim, namely, that the neoliberal project of installing a 'self-regulating market' on a world scale *encloses* questions of social reproduction within a legitimating rhetoric of 'feeding the world'. In other words, in an era in which the market, not the state, is the organizing principle, social reproduction is fetishized as a market function. The WTO plays midwife to this project, managing a trade regime dedicated to 'food security' through market access. The food sovereignty movement argues, in contrast, that 'family-farm and peasant-based production for domestic purposes is responsible for approximately 90% of the world's food production, much of which does not even pass through markets' (People's Food Sovereignty 2003).¹¹ Accordingly, social reproduction through the world market is both ineffectual and licenses an ongoing violence against *extant* forms of social reproduction, as well as enlarging spaces of 'social exclusion' in the countryside and planet-wide urban slums (Davis 2006; Cameron and Palan 2004). The IPC's response to this consequence is both programmatic and subjective.

Programmatically, from a global perspective, it argues that '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' (IPC for Food Sovereignty 2006).

And its confederation within the European context, the *Coordinacion Paysanne Européene* (CPE), proposes:

The European Union would benefit a lot by maintaining sustainable family farming, not only for guaranteeing food supply (food security), but also as regards the social and multi-functional role of agriculture. The present trend must be reversed: instead of concentrating the farms, an important fabric of small and medium-sized farms should be maintained, since they play an irreplaceable role in the following fields: a quality and diversified

¹¹ According to McCalla (1999), about 90 per cent of the world's food consumption occurs where it is produced; while urbanites depend on the market for almost all their food consumption, rural populations consume 60 per cent of the food they produce.

food production, landscape upkeep, wood and forest clearing, human territory occupation, etc. Maintaining the number of people working in agriculture is not a sign of economic backwardness but an added value. (2003, n.p.)

Subjectively, *Vía Campesina* echoes Polanyi's 'discovery of society' through the catastrophe of disembedded markets, qualifying a state-centric protectionism with a programme of substantive rights:

The government should introduce policies to restore the economic condition of small farmers by providing fair allocation of these production [water, forest, local genetic and coastal] resources to farmers, recognizing their rights as producers of society, and recognizing community rights in managing local resources. (2005, 25, 31)

The right to produce society, and manage local resources, is a claim underscoring the ontological distinction with which *Vía Campesina* works. This is the broader meaning of Wittman's term, 'agrarian citizenship'. It involves the re-territorialization of states through the revitalization of local food ecologies under small-farmer stewardship, in the interests of society at large. Polanyi's claim that the social impulse to protect against, and re-embed, the market, resulted, for him, in the 'discovery of society', realized through the citizen-state. The food sovereignty movement, by contrast, recognizing the complicity of states in the neoliberal market project,¹² 'rediscovers' society through a substantive, rather than formal, set of rights, to be exercised as a means to the end of social reproduction, rather than an end in themselves (McMichael 2005). As Raj Patel puts it, the food sovereignty movement views rights as a 'means to mobilizing social relations', in turn 'a call for a mass re-politicization of food politics, through a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities, bearing in mind the community's needs, climate, geography, food preferences, social mix and history' (2007, 88, 91).

What is at issue here is a departure from the problematic that the agrarian question is for capital, or labour, to resolve. Rather than view the peasantry as an enabler or spoiler of a revolutionary class politics, *Vía Campesina* ruptures the social time-space assumptions of classical social theory, politicizing the meaning of the 'expanded reproduction' of capital. To view peasant dispossession through the capital/labour prism is to discount agrarian cultures and to characterize the dispossessed as unemployed labour. Arguably, peasant mobilization articulates a more complex perspective on the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. It rejects teleological assumptions about class and accumulation deriving from a productivist understanding of the movement of capital, and views capital as a relation of production *and circulation*. In this way, it politicizes the privatized

¹² Contrary to the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which accepts neoliberal principles, and works within the WTO, seeking to enhance farmers' opportunities (Desmarais 2007, 105).

organization, and fetishized representation, of the global market, proposing a restoration of public, rights-based international institutions. In thereby reformulating questions of rights, social reproduction and sustainability, the peasant movement poses an ‘agrarian question of food’, where food embodies social, cultural and ecological values over and above its material value. Thus a farmer participant in an E-Forum for farmers’ views, from movements including *Vía Campesina*, claimed:

people must re-establish the link with their mother earth – which nourishes them – by practicing farming in balance with natural elements, farming that must be sparing and respectful of natural resources . . . Above all, what we eat must meet our physiological needs (not too much, not too little). Still today, 843 million people in the world, of whom three-quarters are small farmers, suffer from hunger (malnutrition or under-nutrition). The first challenge is therefore to meet the physiological needs of the world population through access to food of sufficient quality and quantity, sharing natural resources and practicing sustainable farming based on fair market rules. What we eat is also shaped by cultural, agricultural and culinary factors. These cultural aspects need to be retained by respecting other people’s different beliefs and dietary habits. This is what contributes to the wealth of our planet. (Jean-Baptiste Pertriaux, cited in Pimbert et al. 2005, 15)

From here it is but a short step to reasserting the foundational role of agriculture in civilization – in the epistemological, rather than simply the chronological, sense. Thus another farmer proclaimed:

Anyone who speaks of life must speak of water and land, elements as vital as air to living. Farming came into being by combining these elements to make life last longer while constantly improving it. From subsistence farming, necessarily more self-contained and sparing of resources because of space and quantity restrictions, from that pure function of nourishment, we went over to ‘commodisation’ . . . Then we found globalization, a big word that could have meant discoveries and exchanges, but instead became a vector of slavery, competition, expropriation and exploitation (not that exploitation has not always existed . . .). And delusions of grandeur, constantly wanting more, took over the world. As a result water and land ceased to be vital elements for life, being turned into accessories in the pursuit of profit and market shares. The very notion of food no longer counts, as small farmers themselves have lost the notions of rights and duties, self-respect, respect for their labour, for others, for water and land. (Chantal Jacovetti, quoted in Pimbert et al. 2005, 10–11)

MAKING HISTORY

The agrarian question of food inverts the original focus of the agrarian question, on agrarian transition. Rather than raising questions about the trajectory of a

given narrative, the food sovereignty movement questions the narrative itself. In a sense, a mobilized peasantry is making its own history. It is 'mobilized' precisely because it cannot do this just as it pleases – its political intervention is conditioned by the historical political-economic conjuncture through which it is emboldened to act. And it is emboldened precisely because neoliberal capitalism's violent imposition of market relations, with severe social and ecological consequences across the world, is catastrophic. Capitalism is evidently deepening its internal contradictions, but this process is complicated by a politics of dispossession that complicates and/or transcends class analysis. The commodification of natural and intellectual (*qua* social labour) relations crystallizes material and cultural values distinct from those of the dominant economic discourse. Such values are fundamentally ecological, and concern how humans construct, understand and experience their relations of social reproduction.

In addition to undermining social reproduction on the land, in generating a 'planet of slums' neoliberal capitalism reveals the social and ecological limits of the development narrative. The so-called 'unlimited supplies of labour' from the countryside metamorphose into a seemingly unlimited supply of unemployed slum-dwellers, exiting increasingly degraded habitats. Certainly, as Marx (1967) argues, capital precedes landed property as the proper methodological point of departure, for analysis, but this does not mean that its subordination of landed property is ecologically, or even socially, appropriate, even in advancing the socialist ideal. As Duncan claims:

The proper scaffolding for a well-founded, hence potentially permanent, socialism would be a complex pattern of federated interacting elements of the world's dispersed population, each of which would be aware that they severally and collectively live within a living environment into whose local cycles they must insert their agricultural and industrial activities. There would be a complex division of labour but it would involve several scales of social entity – neighbourhood, municipality, region, and so on up to global levels – many tied to places. . . . This conception, which accords centrality to agriculture, must explicitly deal with the obvious, albeit misconceived, charge that it tends to counsel an antimodern, even 'peasantist,' approach to social questions. . . . The key point is denial of the claim that all cases of modernity depend(ed) necessarily on marginalizing agriculture. (1996, 48–9)

The significance of the food sovereignty movement is that, in the narrative of capitalist modernity, its project is virtually unthinkable (cf. Trouillot 1995). Social scientific categories, including the market episteme, render a 'peasantist' approach to social questions almost incomprehensible, since agriculture is ultimately viewed as a branch of industry divorced from natural cycles of regeneration. Thus analysis of the peasant question through the capital/labour lens posits an 'agrarian question of labour' (Bernstein 2004), with peasants recast as semi-proletarian (Kay 2006; Moyo and Yeros 2005). However, while the peasant movement may frame its struggle in conventional terms (sovereignty, agrarian

reform, citizenship, rights), these terms assume new meanings in an alternative 'peasantist' ontology (cf. Mitchell 2002; McMichael 2006). Arguably, food sovereignty discourse offers a method of developing an alternative modernity, re-centred on agriculture and food.

'Food sovereignty' itself is a problematic term, as it evokes protectionism. However, a reflexive understanding of this concept situates it in relation to the politicization of 'food security' as the neoliberal design on feeding the world through the market. Judit Bodnar argues that Bové's activism against McDonalds was about resistance to agro-industrialism, rather than a territorialist response to a symbol of US/market culture threatening French cheese producers. It elevated democratic economy and fair trade principles over the reactionary 'link between land and nation' (Bodnar 2003, 143). The identification with a global civil society in formation is confirmed by *Vía Campesina's* uncompromising opposition to state complicity in the neoliberal project (including its opposition to G-20 'free trade' politics at Cancun), and political goal of 're-territorializing' states from within ('agrarian citizenship'), and from without, through multilateral institutions dedicated to fair trade and global justice (Bové and Dufour 2001). Essentially, 'food sovereignty' serves to appropriate and reframe dominant discourse, as a mobilizing slogan, and as a political tactic to gain traction in the international political-economy *en route* to a global moral economy organized around 'cooperative advantage' – as a counterpoint to 'comparative advantage' and its licensing of corporate manipulation of the state system and world economy as a chessboard for accumulation.

In world-historical terms, the peasant movement stands on the shoulders of previous movements for rights of self-determination. Of course, *what* is to be self-determined is the question, which can only be posed, and answered, historically. My argument is that it is not a question of peasant rights, *per se*. Rather, the rights discourse also concerns questions of social and ecological sustainability, as undermined by the neoliberal project. Reversing dispossession and reclaiming the right to farm, as a general act of social and ecological reproduction, is also critical to provisioning the 2.5–3 billion rural poor immiserated by the corporate food regime.

The food sovereignty vision, contesting the subjection of food to an unequal and unsustainable trade regime, calls into question the subdivision of the world into competing states, beholden to stabilizing their national accounts and currencies by authoring rules of economic liberalization. Such rules undermine principles of human solidarity, and decimate rural populations. Thus José Bové's comrade, Francois Dufour claims: 'the market has abolished frontiers, and seeks to impose uniformity on the planet. It's up to us, as citizens of the world, to raise the question of rights for everyone. Human rights don't stop at frontiers; we must globalize them' (Bové and Dufour 2001, 190). While demanding a *formal* guarantee of food sovereignty rights (including a certain measure of protection), the movement maintains that the content of these rights (access to land, credit and fair trade, and to decisions about what food to grow and how) is to be determined by the communities and countries themselves – thereby asserting a *substantive* reformulation of sovereignty through context-specific rights, situated in particular, historical subjectivities (cf. Patel 2007).

How to realize and sustain new subjectivities is a key question. This is a long-term process, and various constituents of the food sovereignty movement are so engaged – not only with struggles for land, but also with the ‘struggle on the land’, informed, or overdetermined by the collective struggle against neoliberalism (Desmarais 2007; Wright and Wolford 2003). Across space, politicization of subjectivity is enacted differently, since, in the first place, chapters of the food sovereignty movement bear different relations to the state system. Bové notes a basic division: ‘for the people of the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us [in Europe], it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming’ (Bové and Dufour 2001, 96). And, ‘the strength of this global movement is precisely that it differs from place to place . . . The world is a complex place, and it would be a mistake to look for a single answer to complex and different phenomena. We have to provide answers at different levels – not just the international level, but local and national levels too’ (Bové and Dufour 2001, 168). Within Europe, the struggle over subsidized farming takes the form of revealing how the rhetoric of ‘multi-functionality’ of agriculture (rural employment, environmental services, food provision, landscape) conceals a form of European protectionism (via the infamous WTO ‘green box’), which directly favours agribusiness and industry, with detrimental consequences for small farmers in Europe and across the world. The food sovereignty movement advocates alternative farm subsidies, delinked from trade liberalization, especially in the global South, as necessary to survival of small farmers and the elaboration of a ‘development box’ (McCarthy 2005; McMichael 2007).

Ultimately, the realization of multi-functionality via the principles of food sovereignty involves an ‘uneven and combined’ approach within the movement at large. Solidarity, based on mutual recognition of different struggles, is the ideal:

The difficulty for us, as farming people, is that we are rooted in the places where we live and grow our food. The other side, the corporate world, is globally mobile . . . The way in which we’ve approached this is to recognize there are people like us everywhere in the world who are farming people, who are rooted, culturally rooted, in their places. And what we need to do is build bridges of solidarity with each other which respect that unique place each of us has in our own community, in our own country. These bridges will unite us on those issues or in those places where we have to meet at a global level. (Vía Campesina founding member, Nettie Wiebe, cited in Ainger 2003, 10–11)

Thus, Laura Carlsen (2007) reported from a 2006 Vía Campesina international forum in Mexico City:

For most peasant farmers in Mexico, Asia has always seemed literally and figuratively a world apart. But when Uthai Sa Artchop of Thailand described how transnational corporations sought to patent and control their varieties of rice seed, Mexican peasants realized that the Thais’ rice was their corn. When Indonesian farmer Tejo Pramono spoke of how remittances from

sons and daughters working in Hong Kong and the Middle East subsidize a dying countryside, Mexican farmers thought of their own relatives forced to migrate to the United States.

Both sides nodded knowingly at the other's descriptions of the loss of markets to imports, the drop in producer prices due to unfair competition, and government cutbacks to producers except the large exporters. The January tortilla crisis in Mexico found its counterpart in the May palm oil crisis in Indonesia, when the price of both staple foods soared due to diversion to agrofuels and transnational control of markets.

The transformation of subjectivity operates simultaneously across and within particular chapters of the food sovereignty movement. Carlsen's report rehearses the co-production of peasant subjectivity within the neoliberal conjuncture, and its various negative impacts on farmers across the world. As she asks, 'who would have thought that in the age of globalization, small farmers' weaknesses would prove to be their strength?' – another way of observing the transnational convergence of a peasant politics via the shared experiences of neoliberal rule. This represents the unifying dimension in the 'unity of diversity' politics of the food sovereignty movement.

Within movement organizations, the transformation of consciousness is neither an overnight accomplishment nor necessarily pre-ordained, and its trajectory varies by spatio-economic and cultural history. Because of distinct experiences, the transformation project involves interpretive ambiguities, as shown in Wolford's research on the Brazilian landless-workers' movement. For example, in the sugarcane region of northeastern Brazil, where the MST's organizational difficulties are interpreted as foundering on the shoals of 'individualism', Wolford notes that settlers' tenuous relationships to the movement are filtered through their experience of land rights on the margins of the plantation system, where land embodies cultural values beyond being simply a means of production. In this case, contrary to the leadership's ideological investment in the collective value of land settlement, movement settlers value land access via individual forms of "localized" common sense', deriving from an historic desire for privacy from the 'captivity' of planter patronage (Wolford 2005, 2006). Peasant subjectivity in southern Brazil differs, where 'small farmers who decided to join the MST were tied into a spatially expansive form of production that they valued as a part of a broader community. Family and community ties that were forged and re-forged through everyday practices working on the land helped to lower the threshold for participation in MST' (Wolford 2003, 202). Thus subjective conditions can neither be presumed, nor separated from their spatial and temporal coordinates.

In making this observation, Wolford poses important methodological and interpretive questions. She refocuses the conventional, structural question regarding the origin and impact of social movements, to the ethnographic question of why people join (and leave) the movement. Comparative ethnography across space reveals the fallacy of base-superstructure predictions or interpretations of the transformation of consciousness. It also contextualizes why it is that settlers do

not automatically embrace the vision of the leadership (Caldeira 2004; Wolford 2006), and underscores the importance of continuous struggle on the land, once land has been occupied by the landless movement. Struggle on the land of course means different things in different places, lending complexity (and a multi-perspectival politics) to a movement that is represented on the world stage via the 'single-point perspective' of 'food sovereignty' – as a political intervention in the 'food security' discourse (cf. Ruggie 1993).

What this means is that while the food sovereignty movement is dedicated to mobilizing peasants and landless peoples around peasant rights versus the deprivations of neoliberal rule, it must of necessity model subjective consciousness-raising to reveal and dispel the ways in which neoliberal subjectivity articulates with long-standing undemocratic cultural values in particular locales. Movement learning networks attempt to internalize and concretize the democratic principles that animate 'food sovereignty', via workshops and programmes on addressing unequal gender, class and ethnic relations (Swords 2007; Desmarais 2007; Eber 1999).

Micro-politics articulate with macro-politics in the sense that the strength of these individual movements draws on the ability of members to recognize and connect their particular conditions and political projects. Immediate goals of access to land as property or as a condition for exercising labour on the land (cf. Wolford 2007), or of protecting an *extant*/tenuous peasant culture, are distinctive. Nevertheless, in all cases, the struggle on the land (e.g. MST cooperatives, cross-border peasant learning networks, local wisdom networks,¹³ small farming unions like Brazil's *Movimiento de Pequeños Agricultores* against the agribusiness juggernaut) endures through the cultivation of reflexive subjects with the capacity to refract their struggle through questions of development, sociality, citizenship and co-production of sustainable living patterns. While micro-politics are the substance of movement, macro-politics constitute the social and world-historical frame, through which to situate, and develop, new subjectivities. By the same token, macro-politics are filtered through particular, or localized, experiences.

Thus, in representing the 'environmentalism of the poor', Martinez-Alier claims environmental conflicts are often expressed through the dialectic of 'macro/micro' value disputes, rooted in 'a clash in the standards of value to be applied, as when losses of biodiversity, or in cultural patrimony, or damage to human livelihoods, or infringements on human rights or loss of sacred values, are compared in non-commensurable terms to economic gains from a new dam, from a mining project or from oil extraction' (2002, 47–8).

¹³ In Thailand, for example, farmers in the semi-arid Northeast organize 'local wisdom networks' using the concept of 'learning alliances' to rehabilitate local ecological relations and promote health before wealth in agricultural practices. Since the 1997 financial crisis, these alliances have supported partnerships between farmer networks and government, dedicated to improved water conservation, participatory technologies, community forest management and biodiversity promotion. The goal is to convert monoculture to integrated, diversified farming and community development, and to convert state agencies to a rural sustainability paradigm (Ruaysoongnern and de Vries 2005). See also Holt-Giménez (2006).

Further, *Vía Campesina*'s ecological critique 'localizes' universal themes:

Issues of global environmentalism such as biodiversity conservation, threats from pesticides and energy saving, are transformed into local arguments for improvements in the conditions of life and for cultural survival of peasants, who are learning to see themselves no longer as an occupation doomed to extinction . . . This is not a phenomenon of post-modernity, in which some live (or try to make a living) by buying Monsanto shares, others eagerly eat hogs grown with transgenic soybeans, others are macrobiotic, and still others do organic farming. It is rather a new route of modernity, away from Norman Borlaug, a modernity based on scientific discussion with, and respect for, indigenous knowledge, improved ecological-economic accounting, awareness of uncertainties, ignorance and complexity, and, nevertheless, trust in the power of reason. (Martinez-Alier 2002, 147)

Ultimately, this is a politics that, in rejecting the uniform vision of capitalist modernity and the singular liberal subject, articulates distinct social, cultural and ecological realities as part of a complex movement in process. Constructing another world, with diversity as its durable theme, depends on the articulation of values concretizing a global macro-politics in micro-settings.

CONCLUSION

Interpretations of contemporary peasant movements that process them through the lens of capitalist modernity and/or view them as a romantic phenomenon may render them historically redundant, even as they collectively reveal the crisis of neoliberalism (cf. Bernstein 2004; Petras 1997; Otero 1999). In arguing that *Vía Campesina* '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', Desmarais emphasizes its critique of capitalist modernity through its engagement 'in building different concepts of modernity from their own, alternative and deeply rooted, traditions' (2002, 110). But this alternative modernity, including the politicization of subjectivity, is fully engaged with addressing, rather than simply revealing, the crisis of neoliberalism.

When the food sovereignty movement claims 'hunger is not a problem of means, but of rights' (cited in Starr 2005, 57), it reveals not just the crisis, but the evident limits, of the neoliberal project. That is, it focuses attention on the reductionism of the market paradigm, by which the achievement of 'food security' is reduced to a question of quantity and market 'supply'. As the food sovereignty movement demonstrates, market supply meets corporate, rather than human, needs – corporate food production does not address or generate demand so much as generate hunger. Market control in the name of development systematically violates the rights of people of the land to co-exist and secure the social reproduction of the majority of the world's people, and practice ecological sustainability.

As above, the food sovereignty movement is not without its tensions and contradictions, and its world-historic impact is yet to be determined. What appear to be small victories in the larger scheme of things (e.g. land settlements, reinforcement of the ‘development box’ discourse at the WTO, incorporation of ‘food sovereignty’ into FAO debate, agro-ecological learning alliances, witness to violence, etc.) represent the combined faces of a world movement, with an agenda dedicated to denaturalizing the neoliberal order. But more than a question of restoring the state, over the market, as a just organizing principle, the food sovereignty movement’s strategic intervention not only problematizes the ‘market’ as a corporate project, but also problematizes the ‘state’ as complicit in this project. While *Vía Campesina* recognizes the jurisdictional authority of the state, it also seeks to transform that authority, by challenging the state *system* to enable states ‘to 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’ (IPC for Food Sovereignty 2006, n.p.).

At the same time, the obligation to sovereignty entails securing the ‘laws, traditions, customs, tenure systems, and institutions, as well as the recognition of territorial borders and the cultures of peoples’ (IPC for Food Sovereignty 2006, n.p.) – repositioning citizenship as a vehicle for minority, as well as human, rights. In advocating an alternative modernity, including ‘re-territorialization’ of, and among, states, the food sovereignty movement fundamentally challenges the institutional relations of neoliberal capitalism that contribute to mass dispossession – paradoxically reproducing the peasantry as an ‘unthinkable’ social force, as a condition for its emergence as a radical world-historical subject.

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