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Food sovereignty

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Repeasantization, agroecology, and the tactics of food sovereignty

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When men take to buying and selling the land . . . they restrain other fellow creatures from seeking nourishment from Mother Earth . . . so that he, who had no land was to work for those, for small wages, that called the Land theirs; and thereby some are lifted up into the chair of tyranny and others trod under the footstool of misery, as if the Earth were made for a few and not for all (Winstanley, 1649, as cited in Berens, 1906, 70).

The struggle for popular control over food systems is present in all parts of the world today. As free trade agreements have come to include food as a major export-import commodity, strong social movements have emerged to challenge neoliberal policy and defend ecological family farming (McCune, Reardon, & Rosset, 2014).

From the dawn of the 21st century, we have seen and experienced at the global and local levels several severe world food crises, the advancement of global land grabbing and land speculation phenomena, the further entrenchment of the agribusiness model of agriculture and land/resource management, the repression and criminalization of peasant social movements, an increased forced migration of rural peoples, and the intensification of the global climate crisis. At the same time, food sovereignty, as a transformative methodology, political project, and social vision

introduced by the peasant social movement La Vía Campesina, has become the banner of struggle for social movements, civil society organizations, and grassroots groups the world over.

This social movement narrative includes the “radicalization” and “politicization” of agroecology as a comprehensive political, social and ecological proposal that is being constructed by peasant organizations within La Vía Campesina. From our experience we believe that agroecology is a concrete pillar in the construction of food sovereignty. As agroecology has been, and is being adopted by civil society organizations and scholars outside of La Vía Campesina, it is important for us to understand the nature of the “social movement experience” of agroecology to better understand how to support, ally with, and advance this movement-building process. Speaking from my experience as a black small-farmer, organizer, and youth based in North America, and as a co-representative of the Rural Coalition within La Vía Campesina, I will go into further detail about various dimensions of agroecological praxis—methodology, pedagogy, and the process of repeasantization in the rebuilding of the peasantry.

Within the social movement processes and methodologies of food sovereignty, there has been a gradual trend towards the articulation of a more ecological, transformative and politicized model of agriculture and food production that draws from the ancestral and cultural contributions of rural, peasant, and indigenous peoples. This model of agriculture is articulated as agroecology. This is not just a conversation about, or a process of, how food is produced; it is also a dynamic starting point for debating questions related to for whom and by whom food is being produced. It is a debate about the power dynamics of the industrial model, and the collective articulation of the institutional and social mechanisms necessary to support the small-scale, agroecological, family-based model of agriculture.

There are numerous tactics, methodologies, and strategies in the construction of food sovereignty. From the La Vía Campesina experience, agroecology is seen as a key pillar in the construction of food sovereignty. Agroecology is a movement to transform reality: it is about transforming our models of production and making material changes in the lives of the peasantry, rural peoples, and those who consume our food—society at large. In the struggle of agribusiness and capital against the small-scale, agroecological, and peasant model of food production, the analysis of civil society’s and scholars’ understanding of the peasant struggle for agroecology is paramount. This article seeks to give a brief glimpse into and popularize the social movement experience of agroecology and to situate it as part of the larger struggle to construct food sovereignty throughout the world.

What is agroecology?

The Green Revolution was a process that took a few years to be implemented and was accelerated afterwards, with the adoption of policies. We are in the same process with agro-ecology. We are

*planting the seeds, and after a certain time we begin to pick up the fruits that are the results of agro-ecology (Cited in Massicotte, 2014)*¹

There are many scholars, universities and NGOs that have various accreditation programs, academic programs and development programs built around the notion of agroecology, and in particular, “scaling-up agroecology”. By and large, these promote a limited view of agroecology, portraying it as a “more ecological” model of food production. They often focus their analysis on the “technological fixes” that a more ecological model of agriculture will bring, as compared to the current industrial model of agribusiness. This place of departure ignores the role that a political and social-organizing and learning methodology, combined with ecological tenets, can play in radicalizing one’s understanding of the current crisis of capital within agriculture. It also ignores the need for, and subsequent role of, agroecology as a political front and vision for an alternative to agribusiness—capital’s model of industrial agriculture (McCune, Reardon, & Rosset, 2014).

Just as agroecology is a model of ecological praxis, it is also a tool for social transformation, as it builds power and leadership and constructs infrastructure at the base. The latter is critical to allow agroecology to flourish and build food sovereignty. The base infrastructure projects that Vía Campesina organizations are working on include peasant seed systems and local seed banks; small-scale energy and irrigation systems; small-farmer cooperative and social organizations; resettlement and land access programs for youth; movement-based resource mechanisms that bring resources to small-farmer and rural communities; and the development of social, cultural, and ecological methodologies and technologies that will be at the center of agroecological knowledge into the future.

Another fundamental aspect of agroecology is the discourse around the progression of agricultural knowledge. Agroecology is a dialogue of the past with the future, of ancestry with youth. As a social movement proposal, agroecology—coupled with food sovereignty and agrarian reform—is a comprehensive proposal to society as a different way forward in agriculture, and as a process to heal the planet and humanity. On the one hand, as articulated by La Vía Campesina, agroecology is the accumulation of ancestral peasant knowledge and wisdom. On the other, it is the critical dialogue of this accumulated knowledge with modern ecological and natural sciences. In the middle is the critical role of youth in the development and evolution of this process: how is knowledge being transferred and evolving, and, how will this continue? This knowledge is fundamental, for it is the accumulation of the ways to exist harmoniously with the surrounding natural world, all the while producing food for people. This knowledge reflects a people’s culture and their ways of knowing, their wisdom and work. In this sense, agroecology is a process of continuously constructing a model of agriculture that can exist and co-evolve into perpetuity, while being in harmony with nature.

¹ This was quoted from an ELAA activist-student

In the past ten years, we have seen a phenomenal growth and radicalization of agroecology in small-scale farming and rural communities. Since 2004, many peasant movements—particularly those within La Vía Campesina and in the Americas—are constructing agroecological training courses, programs, and schools based on the history of struggle and resistance in their communities. These education processes—known in Spanish as *formación*—are built for and with youth and the rural communities of La Vía Campesina member organizations that are in the on-going processes of debate, dialogue, action and reflection. *Formación* is translated literally into English as training or formation, but it involves a deeper social vision of strategy that refers to the construction of a better human being through “critical reflections and actions” (McCune, Reardon, & Rosset, 2014). Coupled with the process of formation, La Vía Campesina organizations are creating various forms of *Formación Agroecologica*, or Agroecological Formation. This political evolution has created spaces where philosophical, pedagogical and ecological principles and methodologies are being constructed into comprehensive educational models to train movement activists who are using agroecology and food sovereignty as their frameworks for organizing and agrarian development (See Box 1).

Currently, there are roughly 40 different agroecological schools and training processes within La Vía Campesina, with the overwhelming majority of them based throughout the Americas and the Caribbean regions—and recently in Africa and Asia. The newest agroecological training school to sprout in the Americas is the Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA) in Nicaragua. After years of organizing and planning, this school opened in the Summer of 2014, coordinated by the Association of Rural Workers (ATC)—a La Vía Campesina member organization in Nicaragua. The school is located in the heart of Nicaragua’s coffee growing region, in a state called Matagalpa. In a recent newsletter, the IALA provided glimpses into their methodology and training approaches:

Another way that we tie our school into the quilt of agroecology being woven in Central America is by providing a technical and political education for rural young people. This agroecological education is broad, and includes topics such as biology, history, communication skills, ecology, nutrition, and sociology. These young Central Americans go on to become leaders in their communities, guiding the shift from chemical-dependent, monoculture production to agroecological, diversified farms (IALA, 2014).

This brief excerpt exemplifies a “social movement experience of agroecology” and highlights the nature of the organizing methodology being used in rural communities within the member organizations of La Vía Campesina in the region.

Together, these principles and methodologies are used to train and support the “militant-agroecological-educators” who are engaged in their peasant organizations and base communities, by encouraging their participation in collective action to transform their realities. The principles,

pedagogies and methodologies listed above are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive; they are meant only to provide a glimpse into the various efforts La Vía Campesina organizations are using as part of a “social movement experience of agroecology” to rebuild the peasantry, further our process of repeasantization, and make material advances in constructing food sovereignty and agroecology from the base outward.

Box 1: Principles and methodologies of *Formación Agroecologica*

Philosophical Principles:

- Education through and for Social Transformation
- Education through and for Diversity
- Education through and for Work and Cooperation
- Education through and for Rebellion (McCune, Munoz, & Reardon, 2014; Sosa et al., 2013)

Pedagogical Principles:

- Practice/Theory/Practice
- Education/Learning
- Diálogo de Saberes²
- Action-Based, Participatory, and Contextualized Research (Torres & Rosset, 2014)

We have also seen the development of agroecological principles and methodologies that—coupled with the philosophical and pedagogical principles shared above—form the basis to *formacion agroecologica*:

Agroecological Principles and Methodologies:

- Developing and maintaining ecological biodiversity
- Diversification; intensification of agrobiodiversity
- Soil conservation and recycling of biomass
- Use of renewable, local and on-farm resources
- Reduction of toxic and synthetic chemical inputs
- Social and ecological framework for transformation of reality, and building power
- A social and political project, movement, and vision for the transformation of reality
- Empowering the individual and collective
- Revalorization of peasant and local/regional seed varieties and seed systems
- Revalorization of tradition and ancestral peasant knowledge and wisdom (Sosa, Jaime, Lozano, & Rosset, 2013)

² As described in Torres and Rosset (2014, p. 4), Diálogo de Saberes is fundamentally a “dialogue among different knowledges and ways of knowing”.

The period ahead

There are clear and concrete challenges ahead as we enter the next phases of our struggles for food sovereignty. In the global North, we face the challenge of changing society at large. That is, we are confronting the agribusiness control of agriculture, and a dismantled peasantry—especially in the U.S., Canada and parts of Europe, where only small fractions of the population are engaged in food production. Therefore, agribusiness is well positioned to control the media, as well as dominant political and agricultural institutions and mechanisms. The extent to which peasant organizations are able to engage in the debates over how “healthy” food is produced—and do so in ways that intersect with other civil society organizations allied with food sovereignty and agroecology—will determine their ability to garner public support, which is critical. After all, one of the main tasks of a popular social movement is to win the hearts of the people, and to show that our struggle is theirs. Certainly, the struggle to construct food sovereignty and agroecology is not just the peasant struggle alone; it is a people’s struggle for democratic and autonomous control of their food system and the transformation of society.

Specifically speaking to the political, social, and agrarian context in the United States, the moment for agroecology and food sovereignty to flourish is now. The United States was built upon the plantation model of agriculture—which is the structural basis to the industrial model of agriculture we see around the world. This plantation model was built upon four pillars: the dispossession and forced resettlement of native Americans and Africans; the exploitation of enslaved peoples (Africans); the widespread use of monocultures; and the use of racism and white supremacy as the aids to create social justification and stratification of such a system. This unique historical context has created a unique place for agroecology and food sovereignty to flourish within the very groups who have been historically oppressed. Within the United States, this means that the focus and support of rural peoples of color and farmworker organizations are essential in the process of social mobilization and agrarian transformation. The future of agroecology and food sovereignty in the U.S. is inextricably tied to the success of those organizations and peoples.

Another important consideration is the degree to which peasant organizations and movements within *La Vía Campesina* receive support from allied organizations and networks. This support will be critical in the coming years, as the various economic, political, and climate crises continue in the face of the aggressive advancement of capital. It is important to see the efforts mentioned above as part of peoples’ struggles, because in order to truly support the development of agroecology from the base, it will take the collective efforts and support from both scholars and civil society at large. From transportation to finance, from academic institutions to trade agreements, every aspect of society is currently built to support capital’s industrial model of agriculture. To confront the alliance of capital and the state, we must build broad alliances that support base-building strategies and actions, such as:

- Allocating financial and human resources to peasant social movements and peasant organizations;
- Dedicating resources to the development of training centers, schools, and institutional programs based on “social movement experience of agroecology”, in partnership with allied organizations;
- Supporting the development of peasant seed systems, local seed banks, and local infrastructure projects being advanced by rural, farmworker and farm organizations within La Vía Campesina;
- Establishing research alliances to support and strengthen the research processes of peasant organizations and movements advancing food sovereignty and agroecology;
- Inviting peasant organizations and leaders to strategic conversations and meetings on agriculture being organized by civil society and scholar-activist communities;
- Developing financial mechanisms and legal-support systems geared toward creating and strengthening small-scale farming communities.

As we move forward, the struggles will only intensify with the continued imposition of capital in agriculture, degradation of the planet due to the industrial model, increased severity of hunger/poverty, and forced migrations of rural, youth and small-farming communities due to the reinvestment of capital in land. It is clear that food sovereignty and capitalism are destined for a clash. Fundamentally, agroecology and industrial agriculture (as a project of capital) cannot coexist, for the very existence of the industrial model of agriculture threatens life on this planet and the future of humanity.

As social movement actors, NGOs, and scholars, we must prepare ourselves for the struggles ahead. Everyone in this world is affected by the battle of the two opposing models of agriculture: that of agribusiness and its industrial production, and that of the small-scale and peasant-based agroecological model of production and organization. This ultimately is the struggle over different realities—the struggle to build food sovereignty.

Questions for further research

... in order to envision other modes of governance and development, it is essential to expand our theoretical framework as researchers and to listen to the voices of those who are already engaged in alternative practices and epistemologies (Massicotte, 2014)

As we continue to debate, dialogue, and construct the areas of agroecology, food sovereignty, and other concrete proposals for progressive agrarian transformation, there are several questions and proposals for further research to consider. First is the importance of basing research means

and ends on the ultimate strategic goal of constructing food sovereignty. As a result, the research methodology needs to be contextualized to the social, political, economic, and ecological dynamics of each “place of study”. Furthermore, the neo-liberal paradigm of “study subjects” that places the peasant and rural actor as the “object” of study must be transformed so that smallfarmers, peasant organizations, and food sovereignty activists are central protagonists of the research. In this sense, the goal of research geared to constructing food sovereignty and agroecology is liberation and social transformation, whereas in the neo-liberal (and agribusiness) model of research, the goals are profit and maintaining power. Below are several suggestions on areas for future research and academic support.

- *How is agroecology and food sovereignty being advanced, articulated, and expressed in the United States; and who is leading those efforts?* This point is critical, for within the historical context of U.S. agriculture, the twin pillars of racism/white supremacy and colonialism/dispossession of native lands and peoples were the basis to the development of industrial agriculture. As such, key focus needs to be placed on farmer of color organizations and farmworker organizations that are organizing within the context of food sovereignty and agroecology. The key question is: what kinds of support do they need to be successful?
- *How do food sovereignty and agroecology movements present alternative forms of land use, conservation and preservation?* There is often tension between the narrative of major environmental and land conservation groups. The latter argue that “conservation” land³ and agriculture do not mix and are antagonistic. The food sovereignty/agroecology narrative suggests that people can and do co-exist/co-evolve in harmony with nature; and that the agro-biodiversity we know is intimately tied to the historic management and knowledge systems of indigenous and rural peoples around the world. Obviously, this consideration will require a reframing or rearticulation of the concepts of “preservation” and “conservation”.
- *What are the financial and economic mechanisms, and markets needed to support the development of food sovereignty and agroecology?* How do these markets behave? By whom and for whom are they organized? What are historical and contemporary examples of markets based upon food sovereignty and agroecology? What are concrete examples of alternative⁴ financial and institutional mechanisms that support the development of food sovereignty and agroecology in various regions and countries?

³ Land that is not under any form of use or is limited to a small category of permissible uses.

⁴ By alternative, I am alluding to other forms of financial and institutional support outside of the traditional capitalist forms of financial and institutional support, i.e., high-interest loans, big-banks, conventional agricultural agencies, conventional credit circuits, etc.

- *What measures, programs and structures are being used by food sovereignty, agroecology, and social movement/peasant organizations to support the resettlement of youth, and the empowerment of women in the countryside, peasant organizations, and farming?* Within La Vía Campesina, there are many organizations and members like the Basque Farmers Union (EHNE – Bizkaia) with processes guided by youth and geared towards supporting them—i.e. re-peasantization. There are also various organizations in La Vía Campesina that have training programs and specific processes led for and by women. How do these initiatives compare to efforts from the state? What are the concrete victories and needs of these efforts, and how can scholar-activists support their development?

Links and Suggestions for further reading:

- The declaration of the first agroecology encounter in the United States hosted by the Farmworkers Association of Florida and the Rural Coalition, with La Vía Campesina North America: *Campesino-a-Campesino Encuentro de Agroecología*.
<http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/sustainable-peasants-agriculture-mainmenu-42/1757-statement-of-the-meeting-of-agroecology-farmer-to-farmer>
- The network of agroecology schools in Mesoamerica (website is in progress).
<http://ialamesoamerica.wordpress.com/>
- The Movement of Landless Rural Workers of Brazil (MST) has recently released an online library covering topics from Agroecology to Agrarian Reform to Rural Development. All the articles have been produced by or in conjunction with the MST. This link will take you to the section on agroecology.
<http://www.reformaagrariaemdados.org.br/tema/agroecologia>
- “Agroecological Formación in Rural Social Movements” by Nils McCune, Juan Reardon, and Peter Rosset. *Radical Teacher*, Vol. 98, (Winter 2014), Available at
<http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/radicalteacher/article/view/71/42>
- “Agroecological Revolution: The Farmer-to-Farmer Movement of ANAP in Cuba” is a book documenting the agroecological transition that took place in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Block. It highlights in greater detail some of the methodologies and principles mentioned in this paper. <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/publications-mainmenu-30/1448-agroecological-revolution-the-farmer-to-farmer-movement-of-the-anap-in-cuba>

- “Agroecological Formación in Rural Social Movements” by Nils McCune, Juan Reardon and Adriano Munoz (2014). Note: This article was written for the Nyelini Newsletter edition on Youth in Agriculture. <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/agroecological-formacion-for-food-sovereignty/>

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