

Preface

Food Sovereignty Food Justice and the Agrarian Question: A struggle for convergence in diversity

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Family farms, modern agriculture and the production of hunger

Modern family agriculture in Western Europe and the United States is highly labor productive. Producing 1,000 to 2,000 tons of cereal equivalents annually per worker, it has no equal and has enabled less than 5 per cent of the population to supply whole countries abundantly and produce exportable surpluses. Though it is not necessarily the most productive form of agriculture measured in tons per hectare, modern family farming has an exceptional capacity for absorbing innovations and adapting to both environmental conditions and market demand.

Though deeply embedded in capitalism, family agriculture is different from industrial agriculture in that it does not share that specific characteristic of capitalist production: industrially organized labor. In the factory, the number of workers enables an advanced division of labor, which is at the origin of the modern leap in productivity. On family farms, labor supply is reduced to one or two individuals (the farming couple), sometimes helped by one, two or three family members, associates or permanent laborers, but also, in certain cases, a larger number of seasonal workers (particularly for the harvesting of fruit and vegetables). Generally speaking there is not a definitively fixed division of labor, the tasks being complex, polyvalent and variable. In this sense, family farming is not capitalist. Nevertheless, modern family agriculture in the Global North is an inseparable, integrated part of the capitalist economy, and its combined productivity and labor efficiency bring tremendous productivity and resiliency to the global agrifoods system.

The labor efficiency of the modern family farm is due primarily to its modern equipment and because it possesses 90 per cent of the tractors and agricultural equipment in use in the world. In the logic of capitalism, the farmer is both a worker and a capitalist and his/her income should correspond to the sum of their wages for work and profit from ownership of the capital being used. But it is not so. The net income of farmers is comparable to the average (low) wage earned in industry in the same country. State intervention and regulatory policies in Europe and the United States favoring overproduction (followed by subsidies) ensure that profits are collected not by the farmers, but by segments of industrial, financial and commercial capital further up and down the food value chain.

Despite its efficiency, the agricultural family unit is only a sub-contractor caught in the vise between upstream agro-industry (which imposes GMOs and supplies the equipment and chemical products), finance (which provides the necessary credits), and downstream by the traders, processors and commercial supermarkets. Self consumption has become practically irrelevant to the business of family farming because the family economy depends entirely on its market production. Thus, the logic that commands the family's production options is no longer the same as that of the agricultural peasants of yesterday or of today's Third World countries. Because of their absolute subjugation to market forces, family farmers are victims of capitalism's system of mass production—both as producers and consumers. This reality links them to peasant producers in the Global South and to the growing underclass of consumers of “mass food,” worldwide.

The Third World counterparts of northern family farmers are the peasant cultivators who constitute over a third of humanity—two and a half billion human beings. The types of agriculture vary, from the unmechanized use of so-called Green Revolution products (fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid seeds), whose production has risen to 100-500 quintals per laborer, to those caught in the Green Revolution's negative spiral of “involution” whose production has dropped to around 10 quintals per laborer and continues falling, despite costly increases in inputs. Another, growing category of productive peasant farmers, are the ‘agroecological’ producers managing farm and watershed scale ecosystem functions to maintain productivity and resilience, and to lower their production costs and

whose productivity—when measured in kilos per hectare—rivals both industrial and family farming. Nonetheless, the gap between the average production of a farmer in the North and that of southern peasant agriculture, which was 10 to 1 before 1940, is now 100 to 1. In other words, the rate of progress in agricultural productivity has largely outstripped that of other activities, that when combined with global overproduction, bring about a drop in real price from 5 to 1.

The peasant (family) agriculture in the countries of the Global South, like its Northern counterpart, is also well integrated into world capitalism. However, closer study immediately reveals both the convergences and differences in these two types of ‘family’ economy. There are huge differences, which are visible and undeniable: the importance of subsistence food for survival in the peasant economies; the low labor efficiency of this non-mechanized agriculture; the impossibly small land parcels and their systematic dispossession and destruction by urbanization, agrofuels and industrial agriculture; the vast poverty (three quarters of the victims of global under-nourishment are rural); and the sheer immensity of the agrarian problem (the peasantry is not a 2-5% sector of a larger, industrialized society, but makes up nearly half of humanity).

In spite of these differences, peasant agriculture is part of the dominant global capitalist system. Peasants often depend on purchased inputs and are increasingly preyed on by the oligopolies that sell them. Further, these farmers feed nearly half of the world’s population (including themselves). For Green Revolution farmers (approximately half of the peasantry of the South), the siphoning off of profits by dominant capital is severe, keeping them desperately poor (as evidenced by the epidemic of bankruptcies and farmer suicides in India, for example). The other half of the peasantry of the South, despite the weakness of its production has a combined annual income of US\$ 2.3 trillion and is growing at a rate of 8% a year (and is therefore seen as a \$US 1.3 trillion/year potential market).

The industrial colonization of peasant-based and family food systems

In response to the global food crisis, capital’s corporate food regime—made up of northern governments, multilateral institutions, agri-food oligopolies and big philanthropy-capital—propose using public tax revenues to modernize areas in the Global South of high agricultural potential (i.e. “breadbasket” regions with good land and access to irrigation) to bring them in to global markets. This, we are invited to believe, will eradicate rural poverty and lead to national economic development for poor countries in the Third World, thus bringing an end to world hunger.

This strategy is supported by the ‘absolute and superior rationale’ of economic management based on the private and exclusive ownership of the means of production. According to conventional economics, the unregulated market (i.e. the transferability of ownership of capital, land and labor), determines the optimal use of these factors of production. According to this principle, land and labor become merchandise like any other commodity, is transferable at the market price in order to guarantee its best use for its owner and society as a whole. This is nothing but mere tautology, yet it is the one upon which all a-critical economic discourse is based.

The global system of private land ownership required for the free movement (and concentration) of capital is justified in social terms with the argument that private property alone guarantees that the farmer will not suddenly be dispossessed of the fruit of his or her labour. Obviously, for most of the world’s farmers, this is not the case. Other forms of land use can ensure that farmers (as well as workers and consumers) equitably benefit from production, but the private property discourse uses the conclusions that it sees fit in order to propose them as the only possible ‘rules’ for the advancement of all people. To subjugate land, labor and consumption everywhere to private property as currently practiced in capitalist centres is to spread the policy of monopoly ‘enclosures’ the world over, to hasten the dispossession of peasants and to ensure the food insecurity of vast poor communities. This course of action is not new; it began during the global expansion of capitalism in the context of colonial systems. What current dominant discourse understands by ‘reform of the land tenure system’ and ‘new investments in agriculture’ is quite the opposite from what the construction of a real

alternative based on a prosperous peasant economy requires. This discourse, promoted by the propaganda instruments of collective imperialism—the World Bank, numerous cooperation agencies—and also a growing number of NGOs with financial backing from governments and philanthropy capital—understands land reform to mean the acceleration of the privatisation of land and nothing more. The aim is clear: create the conditions that would allow modern islands of agribusiness to take possession of the land they need in order to expand.

But is the North's capitalist modernization of the South's agriculture really desirable? Is it even possible?

One could easily imagine that by concentrating the production of 2.5 billion people onto 50 million new modern farms on large areas of prime agricultural land with access to subsidized credit, could certainly produce that half of the world's food currently obtained from peasant agriculture. Perhaps this might even free up some of the the estimated 276 million hectares needed to meet the North's agrofuel demands (though it might not provide enough water). But what would happen to the livelihoods and food systems of the billions of 'non-competitive' peasant producers? They would be inexorably pushed off the land and eliminated in a short period of time, a few decades at most. What would happen to these billions of human beings who, for better or for worse, have the capacity to feed themselves? Within a time horizon of fifty years, no marginally competitive industrial development—even under a far-fetched hypothetical scenario of 7 per cent yearly growth, could begin to absorb even a third of this massive labor reserve. They will be condemned to hunger, migration and suffering, not because of lack of food, but because they will be forced off the land and into a dysfunctional food system that keeps them in intractable poverty and food insecurity.

Capitalism, by its nature, cannot solve the global hunger crisis because it can't resolve the historical agrarian question of how to mobilize the surplus from peasant agriculture to industry without eliminating that same peasantry from agriculture. Although capitalism did accomplish this transition for the industrial societies of the Global North, this proposition does not hold true for the 85% of world population in the Global South. It has now reached a stage where its continued expansion requires the implementation of enclosure policies on a world scale similar to those at the beginning of capitalist development in England except that today the destruction on a world scale of the 'peasant reserves' of cheap labour will be nothing less than synonymous with the genocide of a third to half of humanity. On one hand the destruction of the peasant societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America; on the other, billions in windfall profits for global capital derived from a socially useless production unable to cover the needs of billions of hungry people in the South, even as it increases the number of sick and obese people in the North.

We have reached the point that to open up a new area for capital expansion it is necessary to destroy entire societies. Imagine fifty million new "efficient" modern farms (200 million human beings with their families) on one hand, and two billion excluded people on the other. The profitable aspect of this capitalist transition would be a pitiful drop of water in a vast ocean of destruction. The effect of increased out-migration from the countryside will shift capital's social misery to new and existing urban communities of poor and underserved 'surplus people.' The breakdown of the global food system reflects the fact that, despite its neoliberal bravado, capitalism has entered into its phase of senility because the logic of the system is no longer able to ensure the simple survival of humanity. Capitalism's continued expansion into southern agriculture will result in a planet full of hungry slums. Once a creative force sweeping away the bonds of feudalism, capitalism has now become barbaric, leading directly to genocide. It is necessary to replace it—now more than ever before—by other development logics which are more rational and humane.

What is to be done? Different movement leaders address this historical question in different ways within this volume. I also wish to address it also—as they do—without falling into past or modernist romanticisms but by advancing a new vision of food sovereignty.

There is no alternative to food sovereignty

Resistance by the peasants, small family farmers and the poor consumers most affected by the dysfunctional global food system is essential in order to build a real and genuinely human alternative. We must ensure the functionality and resilience of family and peasant agriculture for the visible future of the 21st century quite simply because they allow us to resolve the agrarian question underlying world hunger and poverty. Peasant, family and improved, agroecological agriculture—along with a new relation with consumers and labor—are essential to overcome the destructive logic of capitalism.

I personally believe this operation will entail a long, secular transition to socialism. The initial weight of this transition will be primarily in the South, but will also need to address both rural and urban food systems in the North. We need to work out regulatory policies for new relationships between the market and family agriculture, between producers and consumers, between the North and South and the rural and urban.

This is a historically large, multi-faceted task that must address the structural rules governing capitalist food systems. To begin with, the agenda of the World Trade Organisation and its attendant global market model must quite simply be refused. At the national, regional and sub-regional levels, regulations adapted to local food systems must protect national, smallholder production and ensure food sovereignty—in other words, the delinking of internal food prices and the rents of the food value chain from those of the so-called world market.

A gradual increase in the productivity of peasant agriculture based on different combinations of agroecological and input-mediated strategies will doubtless be slow but continuous, and would make it possible to control the exodus of the rural populations to the towns (in the North and South) and provide opportunities to construct mutually-benefitting autonomous food systems in underserved communities in regards to local economies, food supply and diet. At the level of what is called the world market, the desirable regulation can probably be done through inter-regional and rural-urban agreements that meet the requirements of a kind of sustainable development that integrates people rather than excludes them.

At global scales food consumption is assured (through competition for 85 per cent of it) by local production. Nevertheless this production corresponds to very different levels of satisfaction of food needs: generally good for North America and West and Central Europe, acceptable in China, mediocre for the rest of Asia and Latin America, disastrous for Africa. The United States and Europe have understood the importance of national food sovereignty very well and have successfully implemented it by systematic economic policies. But, apparently, what is good for them is not so for the others! The World Bank, the OECD and the European Union try to impose an alternative, which is ‘food security’ (A similar prescription is applied by national governments to the slums of the Global North where the food security of low income communities is achieved through the industrial production of low-quality “mass food.”) According to them, the Third World countries, do not need food sovereignty and should rely on industrial agriculture, mass food and international trade to cover the deficit—however large—in their food requirements. This may seem easy for those countries which are large exporters of natural resources like oil or uranium, or to affluent consumers who can afford to eat outside the circuits of mass consumption. For the others, the advice of the Western powers is maximum specialization of agricultural commodities for export, such as cotton, tropical drinks, oils, and increasingly, agrofuels. The defenders of ‘food security’ for others—not for themselves—do not consider the fact that this specialization, which has been practiced since colonization, has not improved the miserable food rations of the peoples concerned and has resulted in a global epidemic of diet-related diseases.

On top of this, the economic crisis initiated by the financial collapse of 2008 is already aggravating the situation and will continue to do so. It is sad to note how, at the very moment when the crisis illustrates the failure of the so-called food security policies, the partners of the OECD cling to them. It is not that government leaders do not ‘understand’ the problem. This would be to deny them the intelligence that they certainly possess. But we cannot dismiss the hypothesis that ‘food insecurity’ is a consciously

adopted objective and that food is being used as a weapon. Without food sovereignty, no political sovereignty is possible. Without food sovereignty, no sustainable food security or food justice—national or local—is possible.

While there is no alternative to food sovereignty, its efficient implementation does in fact require the commitment to the construction of deeply diversified economies in terms of production, processing, manufacture, and distribution.

New peasant organisations exist in Asia, Africa and Latin America that support the current visible struggles. In Europe and the U.S., farmer, worker and consumer organizations are forming alliances for more equitable and sustainable food systems. Often, when political systems make it impossible for formal organisations to form (or have any significant impact), social struggles take the form of "movements" with no apparent direction. Where they do exist, these actions and programmes must be more closely examined. What social forces do they represent, whose interests they defend? How do struggle to find their place under the expansion of dominant global capitalism?

We should be wary of over hasty replies to these complex and difficult questions. We should not condemn or dismiss many organisations and movements under the pretext that they do not have the support of the majority of peasants or consumers for their radical programmes. That would be to ignore the formation of large alliances and strategies in stages. Neither should we subscribe to the discourse of "naive alter-globalism" that often sets the tone of forums and fuels the illusion that the world would be set on the right track only by the work of disperse social movements.

Convergence in Diversity

Whether it was growing pauperisation, growing inequality, growing unemployment, or growing precariousness, it's only normal that people started resisting, protesting and organizing around the world. People are struggling for rights, for justice. Social movements are by and large still on the defensive, facing the offensive of capital to dismantle whatever they had conquered in the previous decades, trying to maintain whatever could be maintained. But even if perfectly legitimate social movements of protest are growing everywhere, they remain extremely fragmented. What is needed is to move beyond fragmentation and beyond a defensive position into building a wide progressive alliance emboldened with the force of a positive alternative.

The balance of forces cannot be changed unless those fragmented movements—such as the movements for food sovereignty, food justice and food democracy—forge a common platform based on some common grounds. I call this convergence with diversity—that is, recognizing the diversity, not only of movements which are fragmented, but of political forces which are operating with them, of ideologies and even visions of the future of those political forces. This has to be accepted and respected. We are not in a situation where a leading party alone can create a common front. It's very difficult to build convergence in diversity, but unless this is achieved, I don't think the balance of forces will shift in favor of the popular classes.

There is no blueprint for convergence in diversity. Forms of organization and action are always invented by the people in struggle—not preconceived by some intellectuals to then be put into practice by people. If we look at the previous long crisis of capitalism in the 20th century, people invented efficient ways of organizing and of acting that worked well at the time: e.g., the trade unions, political parties and wars of national liberation all produced gigantic progressive change in the history of humankind. But they have all run out of steam because the system has itself changed and moved into a new phase. And now, as Antonio Gramsci said, the first wave has come to an end. The second wave of action to change the system is just starting. The night has not yet completely disappeared; the day has not yet completely appeared, and in this crisis there are still a lot of monsters who appear in the shadows... To move from that fragmented and defensive position into some kind of unity and to build convergence with respect of diversity with strategic targets requires the *re-politicization* of the social

movements. Social movements have chosen to be depoliticized because the old politics—the politics of the first wave—have come to an end. It is now up to the social movements to create new forms of politicization.

It is the responsibility first of activists in the grassroots movements to see that however legitimate their action, its efficiency is limited by the fact that it doesn't move beyond a fragmented struggle. But it is also the responsibility of the intellectuals. Not the academics, but those thinkers and political people operating in politics must consider that there is no possibility of changing the balance of powers without joining the struggle being carried forward by the social movements—not to dominate them or seek their own fame, but to integrate the activity of grassroots social movements into their political thinking and strategies of change. The activist-intellectuals in this book have taken up both of these challenges. We would all do well to follow their example.