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## The 'non-economy' and the Radical Dreams of Food Sovereignty

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## Abstract

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This article discusses the radical nature of ideas of food sovereignty through an exploration of the history of peasant dispossession under capitalism. It uses as a starting point Fernand Braudel's discussion of the antagonism between the 'non-economy' of peasant production and the 'anti-market' of capitalism. Apologists for dispossession and enclosure asserted the naturalness of a world dominated by capital despite its obvious failings. The article explores such arguments and peasant resistance in Britain, Ireland, India and Guatemala and argues that food sovereignty's radical nature lies in its promise to curtail the power of capital to continue dispossession.

Those peasant and small farmers' organizations first involved in framing an idea of 'food sovereignty' were clear about what was needed for the idea to become a reality. They argued that food sovereignty must recognize the right of peasants and small scale farmers to produce food; for that to happen they needed control over land and there needed to be an effective dialogue between consumers of food and producers of food; a dialogue that allowed consumers to know under what social and environmental conditions food was produced and to make effective decisions about their food purchases based on such a dialogue. They argued that such conditions are more effectively and more easily met in the context of local, regional, and national decisions about agricultural and food policies and clearly not met in the context of international trading regimes. The arguments made at the meetings held among farm organizations were both thoughtful and broadly encompassing. (La Vía Campesina 1996; Our World is not for Sale, 2001; Wittman, Desmarais, Wiebe 2010; Patel, 2009)

Since then, the concept of food sovereignty has been embraced by a broad range of sectors: most importantly, perhaps, there has been a concerted attempt to engage with consumers—to broaden the concept in such a way as to reinforce the links between effective informed choice by consumers and the viability of peasant/ small scale agriculture. This has been very useful in promoting the idea that it is not just peasants and small- scale farmers who will benefit from the implementation of food sovereignty and that they are not the only ones who suffer through the current global industrial food system. In the process, however, there is, I think, some legitimate concern that the 'big tent' approach to food sovereignty threatens to dilute the very radical nature of the ideas that underpin it.

In this article, I want to return to the ideas expressed in the original discussion of food sovereignty and reinforce how truly radical they are by exploring them in a historical context. Most particularly what I want to do is to link peasant and small scale control over the means of

production—the most radical aspect of the food sovereignty idea—with arguments about limiting the scope of capital by drawing on histories detailing the links between the reification of capital and dispossession of peasants around the world over time. Most especially, I want to link the arguments of French historian Fernand Braudel with a history of peasant dispossession in Britain and its colonies (Ireland and India) and then turn to a discussion of Guatemala. As the argument progresses, I would like to suggest how conceptualizing this process as accumulation by dispossession—reflected recently in the work of David Harvey, but whose genesis rests in the work of Rosa Luxemburg—helps us understand the interconnectedness of the role of capital and peasant dispossession. It posits that peasant dispossession is not a product of the functioning of markets but rather of the perversion of markets through the ‘anti-market’ of capitalism. Food sovereignty, then, is radical not because of a rejection of the market, as some have suggested, but rather because of its dreams of ending enclosure and dispossession at the hands of capital.

What I wish to present here is not, by any means, a new argument. Indeed, I am treading on very old academic ground. I wish to argue that any understanding of the history of capitalism suggests to us that at its very heart is the need to eliminate the very thing food sovereignty proponents claim: peasant and small scale farmer control over the means of production and a direct, forthright link between production and consumption. As I said—old ground. But, I am hoping that old wine in new bottles—or perhaps better said, old wine in newly dusted off bottles—will help us understand the very radical nature of food sovereignty. If food sovereignty challenges that which was at the very heart of the historical construction of capitalism, it must be seen as a very radical challenge to the existing dominance of capital.

Anyone familiar with the history of capitalism is aware that central to that process was the dispossession of the peasantry. As Marx has so clearly argued this was essential to ensure that the labourer needed to ‘be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body.’ Moreover, the seizure of common or public lands, the removal of feudal rights and obligations, the denial of long held customary tenure rights, fencing off common pastures, etc. all formed part of the necessary ‘prior’ or ‘primitive’ accumulation Marx argued was a necessary spark for the formation of capital. (Marx 1967 vol.1, 224, 714-728)

But how was this to be achieved? If it was necessary for the dominance of capitalist relations of production, why did and have the peasantry survived around the world for more than two hundred years since this process began in earnest? What is the role of the market and of capital in this process and what might this tell us of the radical dreams of food sovereignty?

## The Anti-Market

To begin discussing these points I would like to turn to Fernand Braudel. In volume two of his opus on the history of Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Civilization and Capitalism*, Braudel argues that, contrary to those who see capitalism emerging at a particular moment tied to industrialization and the emergence of ‘market societies’, capitalist relations of production existed in diverse locales across much of Europe and elsewhere for centuries before its supposed emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, he says, it was always ‘a narrow platform...a world apart from and indeed foreign to the social and economic context surrounding it.’ (1982, 239) Understanding what kept capitalism ‘narrow’ is essential, Braudel argued, for understanding how it became dominant. I would argue that such an understanding is also essential to us in understanding how food sovereignty might constrain the continued dispossession of peasant and small scale farmers that is part of the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation.

Braudel argues that attempts to assert the dominance of capitalist relations of production were ‘elusive...nine times out of ten.’ His answer to why that was the case was deceptively simple: ‘[O]ne could not simply walk into the countryside and do as one pleased.’ Braudel argues that pre-industrial Europe was characterized by three sectors of the economy: the ‘non-economy’, ‘the soil into which capitalism thrust its roots but which it can never really penetrate’; the ‘market economy’, and above that the zone of the ‘anti-market, where the great predators roam....This...is the real home of capitalism.’ (229-230) It strikes me that as we contemplate rural social relations from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and begin to consider what food sovereignty might mean, Braudel’s model is of some interest. For Braudel, the antagonism existed not between peasants and the market. Indeed, he argued, there was a natural symbiosis between the two; the market provided peasants with the opportunity to ply the ‘hundred different trades’ they used to survive. Indeed, the history of Europe provides innumerable examples of peasants intimately involved with the market. Braudel even talks about ‘peasant shipping’ and ‘peasant sailors’. What makes these peasants for Braudel, was the relationship between labour, the means of production, and the intimacy of trade and the market: peasant sailors built their own boats, or combined with others to build boats, sailed with their own goods, and engaged in selling their own merchandise.

Certainly, this was not simply a European phenomenon. Robert Marks talks about the intimate connection between peasant households and the market in the Pearl River delta in China, arguing that by the 13<sup>th</sup> peasant households produced a myriad of cash crops, many engaged in textile, especially silk, production and—by the 18<sup>th</sup> century,---many were also building ships and sailing the South China Sea. (Marks 1998) Similarly intimate relations existed between peasant

households and the market---and various forms of non-agricultural labour--- almost everywhere we might explore.

So, in this agricultural world described by Braudel for Europe between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, but applicable, I would argue, *mutatis mutandis* for much greater swathes of humanity: peasant production and the market lived side by side, if not exactly harmoniously at least symbiotically. The key to such symbiosis was the intimate nature of the market, the real connection---symbolized most assuredly by the ‘peasant sailors’ ---between production and the market.

For those familiar with a conceptualization of ‘market societies’ as typified by Karl Polanyi in his description of the ‘great transformation’ this seems counter-intuitive and, indeed, Braudel savages Polanyi’s argument particularly brutally. But he does so unjustly since in many ways they were making the same argument. What Polanyi outlined in his discussion of the shift from societies with markets to societies dominated by the ‘market’ was the process of the domination not of the ‘market’ but what Braudel called the ‘anti-market’, ‘where the great predators roam’; societies dominated by those with and employing capital; societies constructed around the greatest possible return to capital. The process of the domination of capitalism, was tied clearly in Braudel’s conception to three necessary preconditions: the reification of capital, the extinction of peasant liberties---‘suppressed, contained, outmaneuvered’, and long distant trade. (Polanyi 1957)

What most prevented the anti-market of capitalism from dominating was the continued, unrelenting resistance of peasant producers. It was only in those places where ‘one could walk into the countryside and do as one (more or less) pleased’ that agrarian capitalism could take root, shift from being a narrow platform to dominating society. For Braudel, that first occurred *en masse* in new world plantations, ‘capitalist creations par excellence.’ The plantations of the new world were such wonderful stomping grounds for the great predators because the land had been cleared; the labour plundered first from communities in the Americas and then from their homes in Africa and dehumanized, commoditized superbly and as completely as possible; and the consumer and producer separated completely from each other, tied together only tenuously through capital. But even here both peasant production and the intimacy of the market began to conspire to thwart the intentions of the anti-market. Soon, and determinedly, slaves proved equally as determined to exert their rights---not to liberty, that is a modern anti-historical myth---but to being peasants; that is, to the very rights to land and to participate in the market that peasants guarded jealously everywhere in the world. (Schwartz1996; Dubois, 2004) As they did so, the severed connections between consumers and producers also began to be overcome; as European consumers began to identify and reject the

exaggerated human costs of sugar and, to a lesser extent, cotton production. (Hochschild 2005; Blackburn 1998)

We could provide a multitude of other examples where European (and other) colonial powers used either colonial distance, technological or organizational dominance, or racism to attempt to create similar pockets of capitalism, attempted to ignore or suppress peasant resistance to the anti-market. In numerous locations they were briefly successful. In most they were not; thwarted by the necessity to keep the means of production in the hands of peasant producers and dominate only the (anti) market for the goods they produced or, just as often, stymied by the continued resistance of peasants to such force.

### The 'subtle ether' of capital

Where the great predators of the anti-market were most successful over the long term was in those places where they were able to use the reification of capital and 'progress' to normalize both the dispossession inherent in capitalist production and the disconnect necessary for capitalist market relations to occur. For this, they relied on those great propagandists of freedom: freeing trade, the market, and capital. This was a generalized European phenomenon, but it reached its height, of course, in Britain where the particular and peculiar combination of Enlightenment ideas, a British pre-occupation with agricultural improvement as a practical symbol of racial superiority and an orderly mind, an obsession with the benefits of trade, and a reification of capital found expression in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition. While not particularly noted before his death, Adam Smith's confident expression of the 'absolute liberty' to be found in the free market soon became, by the end of the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most influential of these works.

We need not rehearse here Smith's argument, the contradictions buried in virtually every page of the argument itself, nor the (mis)use to which his work was subsequently employed. What is of most interest here, is how Smith's work became one of the corner stones for an argument about the 'naturalness' of a political economy that reified capital, disparaged peasant producers and commoners, and sought the complete dominance of a market in which only capitalist could determine what was produced, what was sold, and to whom.

Enclosure of British common lands---that is, land held in common or through long established customary tenure---began in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Initially such enclosures were used in an unruly and often illegal manner as lords and large scale tenants turned out commoners and replaced them with sheep. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this process was regularized---

given parliamentary approval---and used more often to 'improve' agricultural production through the implementation of the 'high' agriculture and the application of capital to the land.

This history is, of course, well known and not particularly useful to survey in this paper. What is interesting, however, is how this process was normalized and then exported, providing the ideological and intellectual justification for the dominance of the anti-market. Enclosure was fervently supported by virtually all the major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. The most common element in all their writing was the need to demonstrate progress through dominance over nature, felt most appropriately through high or, what we might now call, scientific agriculture. High agriculture required the elimination of long held tenancy rights and common land. It required that large scale tenant holders have freedom to alter both the physical and social landscape through large swathes of the countryside. And, it required capital.

Largely complete by the end of the century, the remaking of British agriculture was tenuous and often disputed well into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the reason for the still tentative hold of the anti-market was that the results of such changes were increasingly becoming apparent: a 'deluge of paupers' flooding into British cities along with increased mortality rates, heightened child mortality rates, and dramatically shortened life expectancies as the effects of poor working conditions and industrial pollutants became widespread. Even British agriculture, the epicentre of such progress, was disappointing. Britain became increasingly reliant on imported food as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on---by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British agriculture had suffered a spectacular collapse. (Allen 2009; Woods 2000, 364-371; Belich 2009, 448-449)

Still the example of British agricultural 'success' became part of a broader discourse, championing capital, the market and the end of the peasantry. This was substantially the result of the success of the apologists for capitalism in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The crude reading of Smith that became in vogue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on the so-called 'self-regulating' market and expounded from that arguments that such a 'free' market was both 'natural' and that it functioned in the absence of government regulation: that is, that a free market demanded the withdrawal of all attempts to 'regulate' not just the market but aspects of society that might have an impact on such a 'natural' market. The 19<sup>th</sup> century 'principles of political economy' especially championed capital.

By the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, capital had been imbued with almost mystical qualities, inspired partly by its ephemeral qualities and partly by the constant assertions of the reality of its magic. As Piercy Ravenstone (a pseudonym for an early 19<sup>th</sup> century political commentator, perhaps Richard Puller), argued: 'It is not an easy matter, however, to acquire an



accurate idea of the nature of capital....It has none but a metaphysical existence. Though its effect is everywhere felt, its presence can nowhere be detected. Its incorporated nature for ever eludes our grasp.' (Ravenstone 1821, 293) But, the constant references to the magic of capital were essential in crafting a discourse that portrayed enclosure and the creation of this reserve army of labour in a more positive light. As Marx suggested, 'He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to the market and knows he has nothing else to expect but—a tanning.' (Vol.1, 173)

Not everyone was infatuated with capital's promise or its genealogy, but Ravenstone (again) captures well the inflated expectations:

Capital is like the subtle ether of the older philosophers; it is around us, it is about us, it mixes in every thing we do. Though it is invisible, its effects are but too apparent. It is no less useful to our economists than that was to the philosophers. It serves to account for whatever cannot be accounted for in any other way. Where reason fails, where argument is insufficient, it operates like a talisman to silence all doubts. It occupies the same place in their theories, which was held by darkness in the mythology of the ancients. It is the root of all their genealogies, it is the great mother of all things, it is the cause of every event that happens in the world. Capital, according to them, is the parent of industry, the forerunner of all improvements. It builds our towns, it cultivates our fields, it restrains the vagrant waters of our rivers, it covers our barren mountains with timber, it converts our deserts into gardens, it bids fertility arise where all before was desolation. It is the deity of their idolatry which they have set up to worship in the high places of the Lord; and were its powers what they imagine, it would not be unworthy of their adoration. (Ravenstone 293-4)

The constant barrage of argument in favour of the dominance of capitalism through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had one intent: ensure the dominance of capitalism. For that to occur the peasantry needed to be dispossessed, the 'deluge of paupers' needed continually to flood into cities to provide an increasingly cheapened industrial labour force, and government needed to be trained not to introduce legislation to restrict trade. None of this is particularly surprising. What is surprising, perhaps, is how successful they were; how completely these propagandists were able to discredit peasant and small scale agricultural production in the name of the 'supposed' efficiencies of 'high' agriculture; how so quickly they were able to generalize an argument that peasant and small scale agricultural production was synonymous with poverty and 'backwardness'--with 'almost idiotic wretchedness' as one description of Irish

cottier suggested; that any government intervention controlling trade was evil; and that the evident suffering this created was necessary in the name of progress.

Two aspects of this campaign in Britain are worth mentioning here: the inculcation of this argument among the mid-level career politicians, and its diffusion through the articulate, politically active upper and middle class. One key element in the former was the continued influence of the East India Company College at East Hailybury, founded in 1806. While ostensibly formed to train civil servants for service in India, its alumni and its influence soon pervaded not just colonial governance but British government administration as well. It is not surprising that the first professor of Political Economy at the College was the Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus. Indeed, Malthus' argument about the propensity of the poor to propagate unless constrained by the most desperate poverty, and the imminent danger of over-population, became both a central plank in what soon came to be called the 'principles of political economy' and a clear argument for how, despite all apparent logic, a wide spread peasantry led not only to poverty but to famine. His pupils pop-up in unexpected places causing havoc throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Perhaps most important in proselytizing these ideas among the influential members of the public and government service from the 1840s onward was *The Economist* magazine. Started in 1843 as an anti-corn law publication, arguing for free trade in grain, by a bankrupt hat-maker named James Wilson and financed by the anti-corn law advocate Lord Radnor, *The Economist* brought together a motley crew of editors, journalists and men of letters, including between the 1840s and 1860s, Herbert Spencer; the renown anarchist writer, Thomas Hodgskin,; an ardent pro-Malthusian believer in phrenology, close friend to Charles Darwin, named William Rathbone Greg; and various other suitors to Wilson's many daughters. Nonetheless, throughout, until his death in India in 1860, the paper very much reflected the ideas and interests of James Wilson. The paper was a major success. It not only made a profit but also became a key influence on public opinion about economics and public policy, especially among a particularly important sector of the 'progressive' upper and middle class. While its circulation numbers never matched those of some other papers, its cost three to eight times as much as those papers and was read avidly. It also sparked a very successful political career for James Wilson. (Edwards 1993; Monsure 1960))

Wilson's *Economist* was intent on proving to its readers that the 'masters of economic science'--Smith and Malthus--- had created clear but 'abstract rules of political economy' that were not just common sense but gave room for a natural order created by Providence. This natural order occurred whenever politicians did not 'interfere with and artificially supersede the far more perfect laws which Providence ordained for the natural government of the world.' For

*the Economist* such a natural order meant that farming was to be ‘a business undertaken by capitalists’, that enclosure in Britain had ‘broken down the parochial and patriarchal barriers which made each spot of land a gaol, though a home, for a particular portion of the community, and the same progress will cause them to be entirely removed.’ (The Economist, Feb. 1847, 169-172, Sept. 16, 1848) High agriculture, particularly with the benefit of imported guano from Peru, would mean that ‘the growth of corn may be enlarged to an extent that for all practical purposes we may call it unlimited.’ (Sept. 6, 1851)

### ‘They lie beyond the Pale’

The Economist was not content to clear the way for progress in Britain alone. It sought to export the arguments. It was, perhaps, most effective in doing so in Ireland. The paper wrote frequently about Ireland, especially during the famine years of 1845-1848. It was the Irish famine that prompted success in the paper’s initial goal; the Corn Laws were revoked in 1846 by the British government as part of their response to the famine. In all of its stories it sought to promote among the British and Irish population an understanding that despite the evident suffering of the population, progress in Ireland required the dispossession of the Irish cottier. As the paper said, “By giving security to property of Irish landlords and so promoting agricultural improvements...we shall infallibly doom the bulk of the Irish peasantry, like the Indians, to extermination...This is the main source of the disorder in Ireland. The peasantry stand in the way...they lie beyond the pale.” (April 11, 1846, 467-68) Its clearly stated intent to turn cottiers in labourers was so important that it even advocated that government be armed with ‘apparently despotic’ powers to force the transition. (Oct. 3, 1846, 1281-1284)

*The Economist* was equally concerned to ensure that relief did not allow the cottier to ‘cleave to their home’ nor that it prevent the market from determining the value of labour. It urgently sought to prevent any concern for feeding the population getting in the way of free trade in agricultural goods. When some in Ireland raised concern that, in the midst of the famine, Ireland was shipping over 300,000 tons of grain a year to England, *The Economist* dismissed calls to restrict such shipments as ‘wild schemes’ and asked ‘Is it possible to pronounce more foolish sentences?’ Finally, it turned to one of the ‘masters’ to argue that attempts to feed the starving population of Ireland would undoubtedly ‘aggravate the evil...We thought that this had been so clearly demonstrated by Mr. Malthus...that we feel astonishment at its being proposed.’ (Oct. 3, 1846, 1285-1286; March 21, 1846, 369-370)

*The Economist* was not alone in proselytizing for an early scorched earth campaign in Ireland that would make the island a comfortable home for the great predators of the anti-market to roam. Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury in the British administration of

Lord Russell and the man most responsible for British policy in Ireland, was knighted for his service to the crown during the famine. He was also a graduate of East Hailybury, a student of Malthus. He argued, 'The famine is a direct stroke of an all-wise and all merciful Providence, which laid bare the deep and inveterate root of social evil (unchecked population growth and the stubborn resistance of the Irish cottier to removal). The famine was the sharp but effectual remedy by which the cure is likely to be affected....God grant that the generation to which this opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part.' (Ranelagh 1994, 117)

### 'Saving India from herself'

Trevelyan was, primarily an India hand, that is, a British civil servant trained for service in India and his life in intertwined with that of Wilson's in interesting ways.

Wilson had been intimately connected to India, although never having visited there, since 1848. Elected to parliament in 1848, Wilson had been named Secretary of the India Board of Control (the government body named to supervise East India Company activities) and had run the Finance and Revenue Departments. There he had strongly supported a scheme whereby the East India Company would guarantee a set rate of return, usually 5%, for British investors in Indian railways. The railways were designed with multiple purposes: military control over the sub-continent and facilitating administration of the vast region important among these. Equally important was the desire to stimulate the export of Indian cotton to Britain and to facilitate increased penetration of the Indian internal market by East India Company and other British traders. Railways were also to provide clear lessons in progress and civilization. *The Economist* put it clearly, 'We hold this undertaking, and the support it has received from the East India Company to be of the first importance. Not only as a source of supply for cotton, and other valuable raw material, but as a market for our manufactures. Our possessions in India hold out prospects of increase yet undeveloped, of which, even our present extensive trade gives no adequate notion.'" (Dec. 5, 1846, 1583)

The scheme was ingenious in many ways; it fostered increased British penetration of interior markets of India, and provided a risk free vent for surplus capital for British capitalists. Perhaps most ingeniously, because the return on investment was guaranteed by the effective government of India, it was paid for primarily through taxes on Indian peasants and farmers: one of the clearest expressions one could imagine of the multiple ways accumulation by dispossession was felt in India. And, all of this was championed by someone who could argue, apparently sincerely, that 'the greatest social inconveniences' were caused by government interference in the market. (April 20, 1844)

Yet, of course, India was different. Forgetting the way the paper had championed dispossession in Britain and in Ireland, and the often draconian ways their own population had needed to be, often brutally, disciplined to accept the civilizing influence of capitalism, *The Economist* sought to excuse the use of force and the weight of government legislation in fostering such a ‘natural’ system in India through reference to racial difference: ‘The Hindus are like young children; they have no distinct idea of what they want; they know they are miserably poor and wretched; they abide and seek no remedy. Put easy remedies in their way and they will slowly avail themselves of them.’ (July 25, 1857, 810-811)

After the Great India Rebellion in 1857 and 1858, the paper reasserted these racial differences and saw in the Rebellion a powerful force in strengthening the British claim to India. “No events less horrible” it said, “could have strengthened our hands so powerfully.” “Everywhere it is felt that England, and England alone, can now save India from herself” because now all Europeans see “how helpless are the Indian races to restrain their own superstitions and their own passions.” (Jan. 2, 1858, 4)

In pursuit of saving India from herself, *The Economist* was a strong advocate of the ‘permanent settlement’—whereby zamindars in Bengal were essentially given ownership or long lease holds over extensive swathes of land they had formerly collected taxes on in the name of the Diwan--- , perhaps the single most important act in the dispossession of Indian peasants. Much has been written about this and it need not be reiterated here, except to say that among its complicated effects was dramatically increased pressure to prompt Indian farmers to grow export crops to pay for lease rates to the new ‘owners’ of the land. *The Economist* saw in this only improvement and progress, arguing that the ‘incessant and inextricable insertion of capital into land’ was the ‘mainspring of civilization’ which Britain was bringing to India. (Sept. 13, 1862, 1009-1011; Guha 1996) With this dispossession, coupled with the promise of railways and the abandonment of internal customs and tariffs, trade was now opened up to such an extent that British imports of raw material from India had more than quadrupled between 1834 and 1850, the largest increases coming in cotton and wool. *The Economist* rejected any argument that such increases came even partially from ‘increased exactions of the Government’. (April 24, 1852, 445-446)

Following the Great India Rebellion, with a new Liberal government in power in Britain, Wilson was appointed to be the Financial Member of the Council of India. Despite its prosaic sounding name, this was a new and powerful position; essentially that of co-governor of the Council which ruled India. On arriving in India, almost his first words back to family at home were, this is “a fine country to tax”. (Memoir of James Wilson, *The Economist*, Nov. 17, 1860, 1297) Wilson’s efforts in India were focused primarily at introducing a series of heavy taxes, designed

to help Britain pay the extraordinary costs of putting down the Rebellion. These should be seen most clearly as payments made by colonized subjects to compensate the colonial master for the costs of suppressing opposition to colonial rule; as well as further measures designed to compensate British capitalists through exactions from colonial subjects. However, Wilson's tax plan met much opposition, most famously by in a public telegram from the governor of Madras, Charles Trevelyan. Wilson prevailed; Trevelyan was recalled, but soon after, in 1860 Wilson died from complications related to dysentery. Two years later, Trevelyan was put in his position.

But India was not Britain; it was not even Ireland. Despite intense EIC and British government measures to foster a landowning class capable and willing to invest capital in the land and turn *ryots* into labourers; despite increased levels of taxation to pay the pensions for British army officers, and the returns on failing British owned railways; despite the permanent settlement; despite government intervention to end local tariffs and taxations which had operated, partly, to protect local markets and producers; despite huge swathes of land given over to European planters; and despite the demand for Indian cotton in Britain and Indian opium in a China forced to embrace its trade through war: despite all of that Indian peasants by and large stayed put; resisted British measures and British rule and 'cleaved to their homes.' As Ranajit Guha has so clearly shown, peasants in India revolted continually and often effectively to reassert peasant rights to land and to market relations, to strengthen community ties and to contain the power of capital. (1983; Chatterjee 1993 165-168)<sup>1</sup> They could be impoverished by British policy and the demands of a new landowning class and hundreds of thousands of them were impoverished sufficiently to sell themselves into a limited slavery to replace African slaves as labour on sugar plantations. Nonetheless, they remained a large, community- rooted, peasantry. Capitalism was reduced to exacting from them a form of tribute: the continued re-enactment of primitive accumulation---tribute paid not through the 'market' but through the artificial, purposeful, and violent actions of the 'anti-market'.

### 'The Indian is a pariah'

The experience of India in the context of the extension of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism is both unique and illustrative. In very few places on the globe was the anti-market able to as thoroughly dispossess the peasantry as they had done in Britain and Ireland. In neo-Britains---settler colonies in which the original populations were so thoroughly decimated by disease and repression that European colonies could claim (and act as if) the land was empty of inhabitants-

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<sup>1</sup> As Chatterjee convincingly argues, this should not be taken to mean peasants in India, or elsewhere, responded in a uniform manner in their battle with capital but rather that we can identify similar processes. Particular histories generate particular consciousness and specific struggles.

--they could create agricultural regimes which almost from the outset had no peasants and in which even small farmers were tied to export markets. Even in these new landscapes, the interests of the anti-market were served by creating peasants in specific locations: cotton sharecroppers in the US south, New England farm families who could provide textile mills with the labour of their daughters, aboriginal cultivators in western Canada specifically targeted to be 'peasant farmers' in a sea of commercial farms.

Elsewhere, the anti-market functioned through on-going accumulation by dispossession. Dispossession took the form of a continual and only apparently contradictory process of undermining the peasantry while allowing for the continual renewal and reconstitution of peasant livelihoods, constantly impoverished. One might explore that process most clearly by examining the example of peasant livelihoods in Guatemala through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, flushed with excitement from gaining independence from Spain and then from Mexico, Guatemala liberals developed their own particular understanding of the 'principles of political economy'. They shared many of the ideas enunciated in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, driven by common grounding in Enlightenment thought. But, they were dealing with their own particular circumstances; especially a population deliberately separated through Spanish colonial policy between Creoles of European descent, a majority aboriginal population, and those crouched uneasily somewhere in between either racially or culturally. The most pressing needs, liberal rulers believed, were therefore a combination of capital and civilization, linked inextricably. Early liberal governments in Guatemala sought wholesale cultural, social and economic change, fuelled by the provision of 'wilderness empires' to European endeavours which promised substantial investments in both: that is, capital and civilization. There are few clearer examples historically of attempts at wholesale dispossession by Braudel's 'great predators' at the expense of peasants and of the quixotic nature of those attempts. Little capital and certainly less civilization arrived, and the attempt at dispossession was relatively quickly curtailed by widescale peasant revolt, culminating in a new 'Conservative' government led by a mixed blood swine dealer from a peasant village, Rafael Carrera. This government---led by Carrera and, after his death, by his lieutenant, Vicente Cerna--- held power, with one short interlude, until 1871.

The Conservative governments of Carrera and Cerna were less intent on wholesale dispossession of peasant and indigenous land. It did seek to promote agricultural production for the market and for export and capital investment in the land. This period of slightly less than half a century is of tremendous interest and is one that is understood poorly in the Guatemalan literature. Part of the reason for this is a focus in the literature on the question of whether 'indigenous' land was more or less protected by these regimes rather than an examination of

how peasant production in general fit into the Guatemalan economy during this period. It is a simplification, but perhaps a permissible one, to say that peasant production, livelihoods, and well-being all benefited during this half century. They did so not because they were divorced from or immune from market forces, but rather because they were integrated into those markets in ways that permitted peasant producers to engage appropriately and to negotiate effectively. Peasants produced for their own consumption, for widespread and flourishing internal markets for foodstuffs and textiles, and for the export market, primarily in cochineal. Guatemalan peasants during this period were subject to all the vagaries that afflict peasant and small scale farmers' lives: fluctuating prices for foodstuffs, good and bad weather, problems with transport and credit and ill-health. But, a diverse range of products and markets, land in different climatic zones facilitated by Guatemala's broken topography, and only a very limited reliance on export markets allowed for a relatively flourishing (and increasing) peasant sector. (Woodward 1993; Handy 1984; Solorzano 1977)

There were tensions that became more apparent as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on. The government sought to foster increased production for the market, especially for export. Various institutions within the administration sought first to make legible and then to reconstitute elements of rural society. In official surveys it refused to recognize land devoted to subsistence crops---land in milpa---while enumerating land devoted to the production of single cropped market products. The next logical step from formal recognition of one and non-recognition of the other was to develop mechanisms to shift production from one to the other. Very often this meant facilitating the transfer of land from one owner to the other. At the same time, the administrative apparatus was intent on classifying and making legible populations; growing milpa became synonymous with being Maya; concentrating on market crops, 'made' one non-indigenous (in Guatemala by this time, this meant being 'Ladino'), because as everyone knew; Maya grew milpa. This distinction was often simply an identity on paper: temporary, indefinite, and not particularly important. People had multiple identities---or identities formed in the spaces between these multiple positions---and many, it appears, welcomed the 'official' shift from Maya to Ladino as a way to avoid community strictures on the use, sale, and inheritance of land. Over decades of official attempts at classification, the divisions became more real, identities less fluid. This occurred concurrently with a hardening of racial attitudes around the world as racial 'science' flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Still, these tensions were contained; peasant production more or less thrived, tied symbiotically to the market, in continual but not unbearable tension with the state. (Gallini 2009; Handy, 2011)

These tensions became unsustainable by the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The catalyst is the dramatic insertion of Guatemala into international trade through coffee. Through a combination of intense capital investment---for a period in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the



coffee crescent was the most heavily capitalized region on earth---, slavish accommodation to a fickle international market, and dramatically escalating levels of dispossession, Guatemala became home to the great predators of the anti-market. It is in this context that the earlier division between land that is recognized and 'owned' by Ladinos and unrecognized land controlled by indigenous villages becomes gravely significant. It is in this context that identities 'fixed' in official ways become increasingly rigid. Through the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being Maya becomes synonymous with providing reluctant labour on coffee estates, being impoverished peasants when not so employed, and with being the antithesis to civilization, modernity and a sense of Guatemalan nationalism. As one editorial in Guatemala's major newspaper said at the turn of the century:

'The India is a pariah, stretched out in his hammock and drunk on chichi, his natural beverage. His house is a pig sty; a ragged wide and six or more naked children live beneath a ceiling grimy with the smoke of a fire that burns night and day in the middle of the floor; some images of saints with the faces of demons, four chickens and a rooster and two or three skinny dogs. Yet in this state the Indian is happy.' (McCreery 1994, 175)

This, of course, is a racialized image---fitting for a country which by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was fundamentally divided by race---but it is also the universal image of the peasant. For much of Guatemala, the racial divide neatly approximates the division between peasants and farmers in the countryside.

Guatemala's place in the international market for coffee was forged through dramatic levels of dispossession and repression. Indigenous, peasant communities lost land to coffee, most often not part of the 'core' land around the central community in the highlands---too high and cold to grow coffee---but land in different climatic zones that had been used by community members to diversify consumption and produce for the market. Land dispossession meant peasant communities became poorer and more subsistence oriented at the same time as coercive labour demands on coffee estates enforced by the state further impoverished highland peasants. Peasant poverty and reluctant labour reinforced negative stereotypes and racial divisions, prompting the state to imagine the need for even more repressive policies.

But, unlike the enclosure movement in Britain or the clearance of cottiers during the Irish famine, dispossession was never 'complete' in Guatemala. Requiring labour for only a couple of months of the year and with a repressive state ready to enforce coercive labour tactics, there was no pressing imperative for coffee estate owners to complete the process. This relationship---apparently beneficial to the coffee estate owners who could employ highland peasants during the harvest and rely on peasant production in highland communities to pay the

reproductive costs of labour for the rest of the year---has often been described in the literature. Usually employed is some version of Rosa Luxemburg's discussion of the relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist relations of production in the context of colonialism. Her discussion helped foster the development of ideas of 'articulation of modes of production' espoused most effectively by Pierre Phillipe Rey in the contest of Africa. These explorations are interesting and useful and, I think, help us theorize how continual accumulation by dispossession is possible. (Luxemburg 1972; Rey 1976)

Before doing that, however, we need to question the basic premise in the Guatemalan case. The often described symbiotic relationship between highland peasant subsistence and temporary labour on coffee (and later other export crops) should not be overstressed. The enforcement of debt bondage as the primary tool of coercive labour recruitment was costly and never completely satisfactory to estate owners. A quiescent reserve army of labour with nothing to sell but their labour power would have been preferable. But, it was not possible. The state did not have the power, capital did not have the resources, and peasants were never quiescent. The maintenance of peasant livelihoods in highland communities through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was as much a function of the determination of peasants to resist dispossession as it was a matter of the inability of the state and capital to engage in such wholesale dispossession. It was certainly much more important than any supposed symbiotic relationship between peasant production and export agricultural labour.

Nonetheless, the history of struggle in Guatemala through the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly demonstrates a process of continued dispossession, of peasant resistance and---on occasion---recuperation, to be followed by further dispossession. In the 1940s and 1950s, temporarily sympathetic governments provide the opportunity to retake land; followed by dispossession and deeper repression; in the 1970s co-operatives and community organization re-energize peasant production; followed by the destruction of co-operatives and even fiercer repression; in the 1990s international conventions on indigenous rights and agrarian reform provide a theoretical opportunity to reassert control over land, followed by actual real dispossession at the hands of mining concessions and a state sympathetic to that particularly rapacious iteration of international capital. (Forster 2012) The continual, on-going nature of that process and its all-encompassing brutality should make clear that this is not a case of the inability or unwillingness of Guatemalan peasants to efficiently produce for 'the market'. Large agricultural concerns in Guatemala are not 'efficient' in the use of any of the scarce factors of production and do not, anyway, produce food; the landscape is increasingly dominated by sugar cane produced for bio-fuels. Dispossession occurs in 21<sup>st</sup> century Guatemala, as it does elsewhere in the world, through the hands of the 'great predators of the anti-market.'

## The Radical Dreams of Food Sovereignty

Commoners, cottiers, ryots and campesinos: around the world and over time, peasants and small scale farmers have been subject to the predations of the anti-market; that is, those wielding the combined clubs of state power and capital. When most successful, the anti-market has simply disposed of them: forcing them from the land through the ultimate dispossession. Where capital has been less successful--- reinforced by less powerful states, more constrained by peasant resistance---it has replenished itself ---as Marx suggests, 'vampire-like'--- through a continual process of dispossession, impoverishing that on which it feeds and blaming the victim for its consequent weakness.

As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary propagandists for capital would have us believe that it is the spread of capitalism itself that lessens poverty, builds stable states, and fosters peace and security. (Barnett 2003) But, then as now, such analysis is skewed, essentially reiterating *The Economist's* 1858 argument that Britain was necessary to save India from herself. Peasants and small-scale farmers remain monetarily poor not primarily because of any inherent inefficiency in their production, not because of a lack of innovation, certainly not because of a propensity to propagate too frequently, and not because they cannot and do not engage with the market in effective ways. They remain poor because they are actively impoverished through the processes of capitalist accumulation and on-going dispossession; heightened at every turn as the power of the anti-market of capital grows around us. (de Angelis 2004; Hart 2006)

Many critics of food sovereignty similarly confuse the disease with the cure. Such critics have denounced food sovereignty for its 'peasant romanticism'; argue that food sovereignty rejects the market; is only interested in protectionism; ignores or is unaware of the 'rigorous economic analysis undertaken by well-known economists' that proves the benefits of globalized free trade in agriculture; or that peasant production will simply never be able to feed a growing and hungry population. (Desmarais and Handy forthcoming) Consciously or not, these arguments effectively countenance continued dispossession and expanding the range of the 'great predators' of the anti-market. But, the proponents of food sovereignty remind us it need not be so. Food sovereignty proposes to strengthen the hands of peasants and small scale farmers not by curtailing the market, as some have suggested, but by invigorating the market in the face of the anti-market of capital, by reducing the ability of capital to live continually off the blood of its victims through effective limits on its ability to continue centuries of dispossession, and by strengthening the mechanisms through which the 'non-economy' prevents the domination of capital. Michael Watts has suggested that any claim to being 'radical' in today's world must entail a 'refusal of capitalism's basic impulse.' (2009, 23) Fighting the anti-market of capital, countering the continued accumulation by dispossession that feeds it, providing for a political

economy of non-enclosure---all essential elements of the dreams of food sovereignty---  
certainly qualifies.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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