

# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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Re-peasantization/Dispossession/Agro-  
ecology versus Expanded Reproduction**

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**ABSTRACT**

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*This paper reviews recent critiques of the food sovereignty framework and elaborates on some of their key arguments. In particular it comments upon the different conceptualizations of agrarian capitalism and the supposed food regime crisis, the one-sided focus on enclosure/accumulation by dispossession that overlooks the importance of expanded reproduction, and the romantic optimism about a farmer-driven agroecological knowledge trajectory devoid of modern science.*

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Food sovereignty as a central concept of an anti-systemic movement refers to an alternative agrarianism contesting the corporate food regime (McMichael 2013a). To date, Bernstein (2013) provides the most systematic critique of the food sovereignty framework, while being sympathetic to many of the social struggles and political activism that have used the ‘food sovereignty’ label as signifier for a heterogeneous set of rights and objectives. This article elaborates upon the debate between Bernstein and some key authors defending the food sovereignty framework. It starts with reviewing Bernstein’s analysis and outlines the differences in understanding the nature of capitalism, agrarian capitalism in particular. Then two major arguments will be developed. First, the food sovereignty framework emphasizes struggles related to enclosure and dispossession, reflected for example in the multiple descriptions of objectionable cases of land grabbing. This zooming in on enclosure/dispossession hides from view the day to day operation of production relationships in capitalism and farmers’ role in shaping it. In theoretical terms I propose a better linking of the twin concepts of accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction. The second argument concerns the high expectations of agroecology. The food sovereignty framework not only claims right to land and more equal economic relations, but also promotes sustainable agricultural production, more concretely labelled as agroecology. I will question this uncritical technological optimism about agroecology and farmer-driven agroecological knowledge as an alternative to high input, science-driven technological innovation.

**Bernstein’s Critique of the Food Sovereignty Framework**

Bernstein’s (2013) discussion of the food sovereignty literature can be read as an effort to unravel linkages and similarities between populist positions and world systems theory in a single critique. In particular the work of McMichael is being addressed. Bernstein’s critique can be summarized in the following interconnected themes. The first major theme concerns the role of differentiated agrarian classes. Contemporary agriculture is shaped by the historical development of a wide range of social class relations (forms of agrarian capital, differentiated farmers –including capitalists, petty commodity producers, subsistence/ survivalist farmers and so on– and diverse types of labour relationships). According to Bernstein, food sovereignty authors neglect or overlook contrasts and contradictions between and within agrarian classes. They bundle these together and construct a peasant (on the farmer side) that is the other of capital, threatened by capital and endangered in its reproduction. The peasant way of life as proclaimed by agrarian populism, with its vision of peasant autonomy, diversity and cooperation (p.12; cf. van der Ploeg, 2013a, 2013b) is a problematic notion as it is ascribed to a large part of the farming population.<sup>2</sup> Too many

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Saturnino ‘Jun’ Borrás for encouraging me to write this paper and Antonio Castellanos-Navarrete for his comments. Of course, all inconsistencies, lacunae and errors are mine. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue Colloquium at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein (2013) is concerned about literature that lumps too many different types of farmers together as peasants, does neglect internal class contradictions, and opposes the peasant as a non-capitalist category to an external agrarian capitalism. He seems to exempt van der Ploeg writings on the peasantry from his critique (see his notes 23 and 44), but

categories are lumped together by the label ‘peasant’ (and re-peasantization) as a category distinct from and opposed to capitalism and capitalist entrepreneurs. The food sovereignty framework constructs a “common ‘other’ to large scale farming” (p.13). Bernstein follows here a well-established critique of agrarian populism, which dismisses the notion of ‘community’ (as hiding rural class contradictions) and instead points at differentiated agrarian classes (and thus struggles between types of farmers and between capital and labour) (Bernstein 1990, Brass 1990, Byres 1979, Kitching 1989, Watts 1983). In consequence, Bernstein reasons that “there are no ‘peasants’ in the world of contemporary capitalist globalisation” (p.15). This means that all farming operations are pre-dominantly driven by the dynamics of commodity production, even if they sometimes may appear to be located outside this sphere. The reproduction of the apparent ‘non-capitalist peasants’ or petty commodity producers is only possible by participation in commodity circuits, e.g. by selling products of the land, labour, or buying land and other inputs via generalized commodity markets.

The second theme concerns the interpretation of food sovereignty thinkers who would perceive continued ‘peasant’ production as resistance. This links to the use of world systems theory and the notion of capitalism it draws on.<sup>3</sup> Bernstein argues that McMichael “ties his analysis of food regimes, and especially the current corporate regime, to strong advocacy of food sovereignty, which connects with *celebrations of ‘resistance’*” (p.9; my emphasis). In this context, Bernstein identifies the presence of heroism and vanguardism in the food sovereignty narrative (cf. McMichael 2013a), as well as “aspirations to ‘grand theory’ and its feel-goodism”. He questions the proposed continuation of peasant farming, “informed by agroecological wisdom and values of autonomy, community and social justice, in the face of the corrosive effects of capital” (Bernstein 2013: 10). This critique of Bernstein is more suggestive than systematically elaborated. McMichael (2013a) argues that this view is a misunderstanding based on taking capital as the methodological point of departure, thus failing to acknowledge peasant struggles as “embodying or foreshadowing an alternative agrarianism” (p.21). However, both positions take capital as starting point (food regime vs. differentiated social classes) but have a different view as to how it is extended and how it is driven. Below I propose the further rethinking of the supposed connection, or in fact opposition, between food regime/system and food sovereignty/resistance as a way out of this ‘resistance’-controversy.

The third theme concerns the nature of productivity and technology in capitalism and its imagined alternatives. The rejection of dominant agricultural forms of production and industrial agriculture as voiced by food sovereignty movements, is often connect to a delegitimization of the objective of food security. Speaking about the need for high productivity (either per labour input, unit of land, or other measure) is considered an old way of thinking; Weis (2010) speaks of “throwing out the dominant conception of agricultural productivity”. But is this not just a rhetorical bypassing of the serious issue of producing enough and accessible food? Bernstein comments upon the tendency in the food sovereignty literature to “view capitalism *only* as destructive” (p.11; emphasis as in original), thus neglecting the productive possibilities created through the dynamism of capitalist expansion. Bernstein states he does not want to return to the difficulties of pre-capitalist societies, recalling the low productivity of peasant farming. He raises the issue of the productivity of labour (i.e. the question how to feed the world’s population) and doubts if the ‘peasants’, as proposed in the food sovereignty framework, will be able to produce the demanded quantities and low food prices outside capitalist production and market structures. In somewhat sketchy terms, Bernstein points at the binary thinking about technology in some of the food sovereignty literature, in particular where it supports local farmer knowledge in face of modern technology such as GMOs, promoted by agrarian capital and imposed upon farming populations. Bernstein (2013: 26) seems to criticize rejectionist positions of modern techniques and the failure to address seriously the important question how poor farmers might

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without providing a coherent argument why. He only refers to the good quality of van der Ploeg’s work. In my reading of van der Ploeg (e.g. 2013a) all of Bernstein’s concerns seem to be represented in van der Ploeg’s work.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein comments on the periodization of the food regimes by Friedman and McMichael. He does not explain very well what is wrong with such a periodization.

benefit from modern agricultural technology.

In the next section I first elaborate the second theme and discuss the objectification, homogenization and externalization of agrarian capitalism in the food sovereignty framework: capitalism without local subjects. The third theme on productivity and technology will be discussed thereafter, where I question to what extent Bernstein's acceptance of the technological content and reasoning of agroecological thinking is in agreement with his remarks on labour productivity and technology in capitalism and peasant agriculture.

### Capitalism as food regime and the neglect of capitalism from below

Bernstein's short reference to the "relentless micro-capitalism of petty commodity production" (2013: 15) and his emphasis on class contradictions implies, in fact, a view on agrarian capitalism that differs from the food regime approach as used by McMichael. Bernstein's approach to capitalism is one of understanding class dynamics and concrete contradictions between different agrarian classes in the production process. McMichael (2013b) on the other hand emphasizes the analytical importance of relations of circulation (p.77). The following quote is McMichael's summary of his own position (2013a: p.13-4; emphasized words have been referred to above or will be discussed below):

*Returning to the food regime/food sovereignty dialectic, my overall point is that through the long-term agrarian crisis there have been various forms of peasant resistance (..) and movements for reform of the agri-food system (..). But it is only now, as a final enclosure ensues in the shadow of "the nemesis effect" (..), rising energy and food prices, and destabilization of human populations, that a more holistic ontological alternative is meaningful. The canary imagery [a metaphor McMichael uses to characterize the role of the peasant movement in responding to the current global agrarian crisis] is simply to establish that at a historical moment like this, with its destructive path-dependency and market obsession, a seemingly unthinkable vision can emerge with such power to remind us of our agrarian foundations. The reminder is driven by direct experience of dispossession, and the obvious deceit of feeding the world with exchange, rather than use, -value food. The absent subjects in the original agrarian question have spoken, shifting the focus from capital's subordination of landed property to the question of stewardship of the land as an act of social provisioning and human survival. If capital is our point of methodological departure we risk committing to an episteme that renders peasant struggles as resistance to agrarian transition only, not as embodying or foreshadowing an alternative agrarianism, at this moment of crisis.*

The role of peasant struggles is to signal an alternative agrarianism, to shape an unthinkable vision that emerges from destruction and a direct experience of dispossession. The quote starts with reference to the food regime – food sovereignty dialectic, build upon the crises generated by the corporate food regime. What is at stake in the debate between McMichael and Bernstein is a view on agrarian capitalism that is homogeneous, top-down, systemic, corporate, external and without subjects versus a view of agrarian capitalism that recognizes heterogeneity, is internal and emphasizes class differentiation, complex alliances and contradictions. With his reference to the "micro-capitalism of petty commodity producers" Bernstein refers, in fact, to the latter view, in which subjects are not absent in agrarian capitalism but precisely active in creating it. This contrasts with views that locate capitalism outside or external to bottom-up processes that produce or reproduce capitalist social relations of production. The latter construct an image of a systemic capitalism (without reference to a subject that creates it), followed by a critique that such capitalism negates the subject.<sup>4</sup> Less systemic and more dynamic interpretations of agrarian structures are thus excluded by

<sup>4</sup> A similar perspective can be found in actor-oriented approaches that first conceptualize a structure that exists without any agency, followed by a critique of explanations that refer to structures, arguing that such explanations neglect agency (e.g. Long and van der Ploeg 1989).

definition. Systemic capitalism is then the external entity constraining and subordinating the peasant, smallholder or ‘steward of farming’ (McMichael 2013b:64), the latter being the agent *pur sang*. The only agent that is being imagined does not want to be part of structure (i.e. capitalism, state intervention/‘seeing like a state’ or the wider political economy). What remains obscured is the historical development of class-differentiated agrarian structures with full, though uneven, participation of farmers of all kind. This can be a ‘nickel and dime capitalism’ where at the village level some farmers exploit the labour of others through multiple mechanisms; local people can feel intense differences while outsiders fail to observe large class contradictions (Jansen 1998). It also neglects that in many situations smallholders actively seek participation in commodity chains, such as Mayan broccoli farmers who connect to international trade infrastructure with desires to get ahead economically, not as victims but as agents looking for something better (Fischer and Benson 2006).

These kinds of desires for growth as part of capitalism receive little attention by McMichael. Van der Ploeg, still within a food sovereignty framework, uses them instead as a resource for building an alternative for agrarian capitalism through a Chayanovian road of a ‘system of cooperatives’ (Chayanov 1987, van der Ploeg 2013b). This means that family farmers form cooperatives to generate capital via collective savings and create economies of scales in input delivery and marketing, whereby such cooperatives integrate and cooperate at multiple levels. In many cases, however, one could read such a cooperative system as another form of extending capitalist relationships through exchange relationships (remark that this was how McMichael defined agrarian capitalism). In countries like the Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark, cooperatives have a market share that is larger than 50%; they are particularly active in dairy and fruit and vegetables (Bijman et al. 2012). The second bank of the Netherlands, the Rabobank, is a cooperative bank, emerging originally from farmer saving cooperatives at the local level, often started by farmer organizations. The bank is now an internationally operating bank. Many of these cooperative initiatives emerged as a response to usury, trade monopolies, or lack of infrastructure, among other reasons. They have shaped agrarian capitalism in the mentioned countries by playing a key role in product innovation, research-extension-policy making interaction, the restructuring and extending commodity chains and building business structures. This bottom-up construction of agrarian capitalism is at one place recognized by van der Ploeg when he refers to the peasantries that “help to shape and contribute to the further unfolding of forms of capital related to food and agriculture” (van der Ploeg, 2013a). But after this relevant introductory remark, van der Ploeg seems to retract his initial statement by rejecting that this sort of peasant-driven, cooperative based incorporation, is capitalist agriculture (2013a: 8). He reserves that term for farm units where all resources including labour are commodified, conceptualizing peasant and entrepreneurial agriculture where labour is not commodified as non-capitalist. By doing so, a big family dairy farmer in the Netherlands, member of an internationally operating dairy cooperative and cooperative bank, is put in the same position as a poor hillside farmer in Central America cultivating his maize for household survival on rented land. Both are attributed with a peasant logic that seeks for internal growth based on increased levels of production, embodies resilience, enriches nature, and contributes to society at large (van der Ploeg 2013a). Chayanov (1987) proposed this system of cooperatives based on the need for vertical concentration precisely as an alternative to the capitalist variant of vertical concentration. But this, as Chayanov remarks, requires a social cooperative economy founded on socialized capital. If this is not present or only marginally present, such a system of cooperatives may lead in the long term to just another form of agrarian capitalism (with Rabobank and the large dairy cooperatives as examples).

The key point to be made here is that the role of farmers, including smallholders, in creating agribusiness structures in many countries seems to contradict the view of a contemporary food regime that has “imposed a model of ‘agriculture without farmers’ ” (McMichael 2013a:13). The food regime did not undermine farming, as McMichael suggests, but shaped it and was shaped by it. This is not to deny that many were excluded, marginalized or exploited in this uneven process, or that large companies have become extremely dominant and powerful over time. But these developments often took place in the context of a strong current

of capitalism from below, which raises the question as to how food sovereignty movements relate to this current.

### **Crisis? What Crisis?**

The word ‘crisis’ figures 54 times in McMichael (2013a). These references to crisis create a narrative of urgency whereby the reader is asked to sustain a particular political project (Jansen, 2003). It seems therefore relevant to examine what crisis is precisely referred to. McMichael (2013a:18-19) describes how the food price inflation in the first decade of this century has led to a ‘global food crisis’ and food riots in a range of countries, which he pictures as rebellions against the political economy of neoliberalism. In this view, the recent ‘food crisis’ precipitated the current food sovereignty movement. But is this an agrarian crisis? Probably not from the perspective of agrarian producers, whether agribusinesses, entrepreneurial producers or petty commodity producers. Higher prices favour agricultural production and attract investors to the agricultural sector. The recent price surge is one of the reasons for the renewed interest in agriculture by agencies like the World Bank. It is a shift in terms of trade, or in balance of power, between other economic sectors and agriculture. That part of the classical agrarian question (e.g. Byres 1986) need not to be reformulated (cf. McMichael 2013b:63). Though the price shocks may be highly problematic, higher food prices do, in general, not lead to an agrarian crisis. Higher food prices will support not only the corporate food regime but also alternative agroecological and organic farming initiatives. Ideal type peasants (who, according to the food sovereignty discourse, are able to feed the nation and thus have to produce for the market) may like higher food prices, but semi-proletarians –whose own farm production is so low that they have to buy food on the market– may not. The current concepts of food crisis and agrarian crisis tend to neglect such social differentiation at the local level.

At other places, McMichael uses the word ‘crisis’ not in relation to high food prices but for precisely the opposite phenomenon: the corporate food regime dumping cheap food. Agrarian capitalists, however, do not necessarily seek low prices: if they are producers they can make more profit with high farm-gate prices and as marketers and retailers who calculate with proportionate profit margins, they gain more with generalized higher prices. It is for this reason that global food companies source and sell fair trade bananas (which are also organic) and some retailers stack their shelves with organic and fair trade products. This is not just greenwash but can be a good ‘business case’ (Jansen 2004, 2006). Against the direct interest of individual capitalists, prices tend to go down as a result of competition, whereby competition is not necessarily an a priori intention. Rather than competition, individual capitalists would prefer monopolies with its high prices (e.g., created virtually through branding). Historically, dumping, a core problem of the crisis to which McMichael refers, is often a consequence of subsidized agricultural production. But subsidized agriculture is not so much the result of a neoliberal food regime “enabled by the complicity of neo-liberal states”, but rather a result of populist agrarian demands and social-democratic or corporatist politics to protect family farmers and provide cheap food to the urban population at the same time.

McMichael hopefully states: “The peasant counter-movement had already anticipated the ‘crisis,’ as its members were already experiencing the contradictions of the food regime in a global agrarian crisis” (2013a:8). One could ask how people could read the future and anticipate the crisis. But a more pressing question concerns the nature of global agrarian crisis. From the perspective of capital, profits can be made in current times and there is a certain ‘progress’ and dynamism in relation to new cost-reducing, labour-replacing technologies, productivity increase, new industrial food products, new uses of land for non-food agricultural products and new logistics (standards and certification, transport infrastructure, exotic consumer demand) moving products around the globe. It is difficult to see what the current agrarian crisis would be for capital. In this sense it could be argued that we do *not* face a food regime crisis but a crisis of peasantism. The dynamics of capital in agriculture and the success of capital accumulation outcompete peasant agriculture

(whether on the markets for land, labour, technology innovation, or products).<sup>5</sup> Contemporary agrarian capitalism is innovative in terms of products and production technologies, it sets up new business, enrolls many regions, attracts new capital, is adaptive to the latest lifestyle concerns, takes up ecological challenges, and so on. If this is correct, it raises serious challenges for any alternative. It is not just waiting until the old system collapses under its own contradictions. Instead, it implies building an alternative while a very dynamic dominant system exists and is co-produced by the same constituency (at least in part) that has been targeted by the food sovereignty movement as the agency for endogenous growth. To summarize, one can question the notion of agrarian crisis as used by McMichael. The food sovereignty movement does not result from, or reveals a crisis in agrarian capitalism, but rather reflects a crisis of peasantism. It becomes impossible to produce outside the capitalist sphere, not just because of circulation regimes, but also of the deep penetration of capitalism in the sphere of production, whether or not it is in the wage labour form. This crisis of peasantism may explain why food sovereignty thinkers lay relatively so much emphasis on enclosure and dispossession.

### **Anti- Enclosure movements: Accumulation by Dispossession without Expanded Reproduction?**

Discontent with enclosure in the food sovereignty literature has increasingly taken up the notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Harvey (2003) introduces the concept accumulation by dispossession to extend Marx notion of primitive accumulation to modern neoliberal times. For the ‘normal’ process of capital accumulation and economic growth, encompassing the conflict between capital and labour, Harvey uses the term ‘expanded reproduction’. But he argues that we need a term for another mechanism that exists to solve overaccumulation/underconsumption crises in capitalism (resulting from expanded reproduction); he calls this accumulation by dispossession. This mechanism of grabbing or ‘accumulation by extra-economic means’ or ‘coercive expropriation’ (reflecting the need for repressive force or war), refers to a recurrent practice within capitalism. It becomes more to the fore in some periods (e.g., in the last two decades with the grabbing of oil resource after the war in Iraq, the raiding of pension funds, the mortgage crisis, and the grabbing of public resources in the transition of communism to capitalism). The concept has been used for labelling appropriation or dispossession in a wide range of contexts, for example around seeds (Kloppenborg 2010), post-communist transition (Toleubayev et al. 2010), environmental conservation (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012) and, in particular, land grabbing (e.g. Levien 2011 and several papers in the special issue of the Journal of Peasant Studies, 39/3-4, on land grabbing).

The issue I would like to raise here is that expanded reproduction in capitalism is little understood and theorized in the food sovereignty literature; the main political practice seems to focus on moments of accumulation by dispossession or enclosure. The view of a systemic capitalism, without any class agency that constructs it, carries with it a one-sided emphasis on top-down dispossession or the mechanism of enclosure.<sup>6</sup> An example is the otherwise good study by Veuthey and Gerber (2012) that describes enclosures by an expanding shrimp farming industry whereby customary community mangroves are privatized for the building of shrimp ponds. The blame is put on the expansion of the market (as an abstract entity) and the state with its monopoly on violence and definitions of legality. However, Veuthey and Gerber hardly expound on where these new shrimp farmers come from. It seems that shrimp farming is not done by international corporations: the study suggests a few times that shrimp farming is done by local elites. In the case description, however, the only agency is in the struggles of the environmental justice movement retaking the commons and replanting abandoned ponds (with an interesting difference between the local participants looking for production alternatives and the NGO activists doing “advocacy and political work with the media and the national and international networks”, p.619). What is absent is an understanding of how shrimp

<sup>5</sup> The third notion of crisis, an ecological crisis, will be discussed in the section below on agro-ecology.

<sup>6</sup> The iconic case for theorizing the emergence of agrarian capitalism has been the enclosure movement in England, cf. Marx (1887), Polanyi (1957) and (Wood 2000).



farming interacts with social differentiation within the village. The enclosure mechanism is clearly described but the process of local capital accumulation, class contradiction and local political struggles and identity formation is not fully understood. The only agency is a grassroots resistance of a small part of the population to protect their traditional livelihoods.

It seems to me that this reference to ‘accumulation by dispossession’ for enclosures, which often are painful processes and cause human suffering, is only a partial use of Harvey’s theoretical introduction of the notion of accumulation by dispossession. Indeed, Harvey’s observes that “capitalism internalizes cannibalistic as well as predatory and fraudulent practices” (2013, p. 148) and presents enclosure of the commons as one form of accumulation by dispossession. But Harvey ventilates a wider concern that seems to disappear in the enclosure literature: what he calls the dual domains of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. It is a concern about the “dismissal of the ‘organic link’ between accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction” (p.175). This is reflected in the tensions between social struggles within the field of expanded reproduction (the emphasis of the traditional left and unionized labour struggles) and the struggles against accumulation by dispossession, for example those of alternative globalization movements, but also the one described by Veuthey and Gerber mentioned above. Harvey (2003, p.165) remarks about this tension:

While, therefore, struggles against primitive accumulation could provide the seedbed of discontent for insurgent movements, including those embedded in the peasantry, the point of socialist politics was not to protect the ancient order but to attack directly the class relations and forms of state power that were attempting to transform it and arrive thereby at a totally different configuration of class relations and state powers. This idea was central to many of the revolutionary movements that swept the developing world in the aftermath of the Second World War. They fought against capitalist imperialism but did so in the name of an alternative modernity rather than in defence of tradition. In so doing they often found themselves opposing and opposed by those who sought to protect if not revitalize traditional systems of production, cultural norms, and social relations. (..)

Harvey recognizes the neglect of the traditional socialist movement for the relevance and the embeddedness of movement struggles against accumulation by dispossession in the politics of daily life. But he also points at a loss of focus, away from state power and labour organization. He identifies the risk that this movement find “it hard to extract itself from the local and the particular to understand the macro-politics”. He is particularly critical of approaches that seek the answer in the ‘localization of everything’ and declaring the struggle to command the state apparatus as irrelevant or illusory diversion (p.175). Struggles over dispossession often are locally focussed, inchoate and fragmentary. The question that arises is how to link the different kind of struggles; Harvey does not provide a clear answer but one lesson to be derived from his work is that such a political search for linkages require recognition of the analytical distinctions<sup>7</sup> and concrete contradictions.<sup>8</sup> One could raise the question why in many areas we observe little direct political interference in expanded reproduction (a reformist strategy?) and much more concern about enclosure (a rejectionist strategy?)? May it be that expanded reproduction is not as apparent evil as accumulation by dispossession? Do farmers once liberated from the danger of enclosure, in large numbers opt for a strategy of accumulation within existing markets as soon as they have access to resources (called ‘endogenous growth’ when they are successful in

<sup>7</sup> Such an analytical distinction may be helpful in the land grabbing debate. Many reported cases are examples of brutal processes of dispossession or privatization of common or state land made possible by corrupt and/or neoliberal states. But many other cases are not examples of enclosure of the commons or accumulation by dispossession but a result of expanded reproduction: petty commodity producers or capitalist entrepreneurs selling or renting their land to large firms. In the context of capitalist property relations and capitalist markets these are entirely legal land transactions. The social struggle regarding the former may need to be different from the development of an alternative for the latter.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey (2003:176) considers that such “differences cannot be buried under some nebulous concept of ‘the multitude’ in motion”.

doing so)? Market mechanisms are mostly embraced by petty commodity producers and they engage in multiple ways with capitalism, as argued by Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen (2013): “Emphasis on enclosure occludes from view the material and political responses deployed by vast numbers of peasants and farmers to new economic and technical opportunities” (p.17). The point of technological opportunities brings us to central role of agroecology as a sort of technological programme in the food sovereignty framework.

### Agroecology and the gradual disappearance of science

Agroecology is considered one of the three key pillars in the construction of food sovereignty, besides the defence of land and territory and national and local markets (Rosset 2013:7). The notion of agroecology therefore deserves some closer scrutiny, which includes consideration of some of the technical claims made by social movements and scholars.<sup>9</sup> In technical sense, agroecology has brought together and developed knowledge on nutrient cycling, pest-plant interactions, succession (of different plant species in a natural ecosystem) (Hecht 1987), the role of plant traits in plant community structures (Garnier and Navas 2012), and energy efficiency of, and biodiversity in, agricultural systems (Altieri 1987), in particular soil biodiversity (Giller et al. 1997). Agroecology has also brought farmer knowledge back into agronomic and ecological science (Bentley 1994, Jansen 1998, Richards 1985, Toledo 1990). Another main justification for agroecology is the need for an alternative to industrialized agriculture based on high input levels and monocultures, which contributes to an ecological crisis due to soil degradation, nutrient losses, environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity (Weis 2010). Agroecology is a widely used term reflecting, for example, an alternative approach to technology development for the food sovereignty movement, a more system oriented approach in agronomy, a contribution to sustainable agriculture, or a synonym for organic agriculture. The discussion below focusses primarily on some shortcomings in the uptake of agroecology in the food sovereignty framework.

### Productivity and autonomy

The first problem is the ill-considered optimism about the potential productivity of low external input farming. Altieri, a prominent agroecologist, seems to have changed his mind on the issue of productivity. His seminal book of 1987 assumes that modern monocultures produce a ‘high yield to humankind’ (p.40) and are more productive on a per-crop basis than traditional polycultures (though he considers the latter to be generally more stable and more energy efficient; p.41). In this early work, Altieri is mainly concerned about the trade-offs of such a high productivity: a lower diversity, lower energy efficiency, and a lower stability. Later work (e.g. Altieri 1999, 2009), however, argues that small farms that adopt agroecological practices are more productive. The question is more productive than what? The suggestion is more productive than conventional high input agriculture, but the examples which should prove the success of agroecology are often of another kind. One of the examples used by Altieri is the often cited innovation in Guinope in Honduras where the introduction of velvet bean (*Mucuna pruriens*) led to a reported triplication of maize yields and a cut in labour requirements for weeding by 75% (Bunch 1990, Altieri 1999). It is an enigma why such a supposedly miracle technology is not being massively adopted in Honduras. It may be that the reported benign effects on productivity are not reached so easily elsewhere –which makes the example a limit case– or the farmer-to-farmer knowledge transfer of agroecological practises, encouraged by the food sovereignty perspective (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013), fails to take place, even despite a large number of NGOs promoting it in Honduras in the 1990s and 2000s. The data on this case are fragmentary, incomplete and lack proper controls and replication. One thing is to argue that agroecology offers fresh insights and can potentially contribute to improved production systems under marginal conditions, but another thing is at what costs in terms of extra labour input and external resources and whether it can beat high input industrial

<sup>9</sup> Rosset (2013: 13) correctly remarks that technological choice always ‘brings political and ideological baggage with it’. This truism, however, does not make critical examination of agroecology’s technical merits impossible.

agriculture that takes up environmental issues in terms of sustainability and within capitalist markets that coordinate the flows of food from producers to consumers. Agroecological practices may not easily and dramatically improve output of very marginal hillside farming systems without external inputs (e.g., manure from the chicken industry) or increased input of labour (Jansen 1998). The issue of productivity remains connected to the demand for adequate food production for the population at large.<sup>10</sup> These observations do not turn experimentation with agroecological practices into futile efforts, but they contest the false belief that agroecology seen as an autonomous process of low external input farming will beat capitalist conventional agriculture in terms of productivity (cf. van der Ploeg 2013b) and will be capable in the nearby future to feed all ‘peoples and nations’ (as claimed by Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013). That said, overoptimistic beliefs in a different agronomic approach, stripped of any doubt about its potential, can function as utopias that create the effervescence that sustains social movements to develop political action on technological alternatives for conventional agriculture.

Comparative analysis between high input modern (i.e. with a focus on sustainability) farming<sup>11</sup> and agroecology as low external input farming that is not based on limit cases hardly exists to my knowledge. The only source we can draw upon is the research and debate on comparing organic farming (with most cases in the global North) and conventional agriculture. In between advocates of organic farming (Badgley et al. 2007; whose research methodology and calculations have been seriously questioned by, amongst others, Goulding et al., 2009) and rejectionist positions of organic agriculture (e.g., Connor 2008), we find the more impartial and comprehensive meta study of de Ponti et al. (2012) covering 362 cases of comparison. De Ponti et al. find a relative yield of 80% for organic compared to conventional agriculture. They also point at a lot of unanswered questions before anything conclusive can be said about productivity. A reduction of worldwide production with 20%, in case of full conversion to organic farming, would probably have a tremendous effect on food prices, possibly further leading to the social and political problems described by McMichael (2013a). Before formulating low external input agroecology as the single technological option for food sovereignty movements, many questions should be seriously addressed. The above mentioned yields of organic farming are often obtained with external inputs: manure and fertilizers (e.g., rock phosphate or bone meal) for organic nutrients, crop protection products, and so on.<sup>12</sup> When organic farming is able to reach high outputs, this is may be a result of a natural resource rich environment (for example, on soils with high natural phosphorus content or because they have been overfertilized in the past under conventional agriculture) not reproducible in the marginal areas of the world. High output may also reflect a relatively higher labour input (Jansen 2000), maybe wanted in an alternative scheme (Weis 2010) but problematic to ask from farmers if it does not increase the output of their farming. Higher labour requirements with less output, in a context where competitive capitalist agriculture determines the price levels, will not keep younger generations in agriculture. Yield comparisons are mostly made on a crop basis and not a long term system basis. Comparisons on a system basis will not necessarily be in favour of those agroecological strategies that include fallow periods and cover crops to naturally restore fertility; it means that land is then not available for crop production. In short, there are so many unresolved issues that claims about agroecology’s higher productivity and its potential to outcompete capitalist agriculture should not be taken for granted.

Low external input farming is sometimes presented as an issue of autonomy. Autonomy is then not just a

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<sup>10</sup> One should not infer from the critique of Malthusian thinking that total food production is never a problem. Political economists face the task of combining a critique of unequal distribution with a positive thinking on how much should be produced and how. Agroecology produces ingenious ideas and methods regarding the *how* but remains silent or is too optimistic about the *how much*.

<sup>11</sup> This includes precision agriculture to reduce fertilizer and pesticide application and water use, integrated pest control, recycling nutrients and residues in run-off water, biodiversity conservation, and so on.

<sup>12</sup> Organic farming may be as driven by external input supply, commodity markets and agribusiness (Guthman 2004) as conventional farming

political concept indicating the right to decide independently from larger powers, but also a technological notion regarding type of inputs and an economic notion regarding withdrawal from input markets. Rosset and Martinez-Torres defend a “transition from Green Revolution-style farming – in which families depend on input markets–, to more autonomous agroecological farming” (p.13), which they relate to struggles for re-peasantization. They argue for “*a transition from input-dependent farming to agroecology based on local resources*” (p.14). The intrinsic link between social movement struggles and the promotion of low external input farming based on local resources should be up for debate. Where low external input farming is viable and contributes to the principle of approaching stability of natural ecosystems (Altieri 1987), it should not be seen as a problem, but where low external input means low output or depletion of natural resources it may be a problem. In most systems, high yields are currently only possible with external inputs and/or resources, in particular under adverse conditions (e.g. soils with low phosphorus levels, acid soils, dry areas that need extended irrigation structures, crops with high disease pressure, and so on). Farmer collective action often aims to get access to such external inputs and resources, wanted to increase productivity. This is not because farmers have been misguided by corporate capital, but because these external inputs have an agronomic effect in their fields. And yes, the result may be, or generally is, that their farming system becomes dependent on such external inputs.<sup>13</sup> Many forms of production, of life, of existence outside agriculture are dependent upon something else in the world. This interdependent world is a result of the division of labour and technological complexity in modern times.

### **Farmer knowledge, science and modern biotechnology**

The notion of autonomy has also been linked to an ideal of being independent from universal science. There is a strong belief in farmer knowledge (e.g., Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013). Again, in terms of political representation and recognition, a revaluation of farmers’ knowledge has been important, but in other aspects it may be highly problematic.<sup>14</sup> Agroecology is ambivalent about science, though it is less pessimistic about it as some of the contemporary relativist social constructivist approaches that also revalue farmer knowledge. Negative simplifications about science can be encountered in the literature. For example, Rosset and Martinez-Torres (2013) write “The unifying, economic and ‘scientific’ rational is not only divorced from any social commitment to solve real problems of real people and the real environment (..), but imposes a knowledge monoculture that annuls diverse local and traditional knowledges” (p.3). Van der Ploeg (2013a) refers to ‘imperial science’.<sup>15</sup> But in other places agroecology seems to emerge as much from science as from farmers’ knowledge. Altieri (1987) and Hecht (1987) firmly root agroecology in the agricultural sciences, in

<sup>13</sup> A lot of farmer activism has focused on organizing input delivery under control by farmer associations to become (more) independent from powerful traders or corporate capital and not to become independent from external inputs.

<sup>14</sup> Agroecology fits in a broader trend that reevaluates indigenous technical knowledge in the late 1980s and 1990s (Jansen et al. 2004).

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the centrality of science in the modernization of agriculture, authors sometimes introduce the notion of farming (by peasants) as an *art* or *craftsmanship*, which is disappearing because of the scientification of agriculture (e.g. van der Ploeg 2013b). This notion of art seems appealing to many deeply involved in agricultural practice. But what does it tell us? The art or craftsmanship metaphor is appealing to many professions; expressions such as ‘the art of investment banking’, ‘the art of science’ or the ‘art of the entrepreneurial marketer’, which emphasize personalized approaches, can be found all over. Revealing in our context is Trusler (1810) on the *art of farming*. Trusler aims to give gentlemen who take up farming “insight into the nature of farming, as will enable them to check the negligence, correct the ignorance, or detect the imposition, of servants”. As an early lesson in capitalist entrepreneurship and the technicalities of agricultural production, the book opens with a cost-benefit analysis (showing that profits can be made even in a context of rising rents and input prices) and emphasizes that the art of farming starts with proper bookkeeping. Moreover, the art of farming is about controlling servants, expressed in sentences like: “All that is necessary for a master to take care of, is, that his ploughman does not ride upon the handles of the plough, but plough the ground as deep as the plough will effect it, or as the upper staple or layer of the land will admit” p.118).

particular in agricultural system approaches (Conway 1985), entomology, and ecology, amongst others.<sup>16</sup> The subtitle of Altieri's 1987 book was 'The Scientific Basis of Alternative Agriculture'. However, in the recent food sovereignty literature this rootedness in an integrative science is absent and replaced with local knowledge, local realities and farmer networks.

There is a risk of reducing agroecology to a sort of uncritical standpoint approach regarding peasant agency and farmer's ecological knowledge, in which "the movement privileges peasant agency in a programmatic approach to restoring the viability of the country side for farming and addressing domestic food security. (..) This has been a first step, anticipating ecological initiatives" (McMichael 2013a:4). One may wonder how this approach considers small farmers' knowledge and practices that do not fit very well in the agroecological approach. How would the standpoint approach regard farmer manifestations in Costa Rica demanding less stringent risk regulations on the import of generic pesticides, organized by UPANACIONAL – a member of Via Campesina –, in order to realize lower prices for pesticides (Jansen 2011)? Such a collective support for more pesticides does not fit into agroecological thinking. What about the generation of local farmer knowledge, autonomous from any knowledge transfer by industry or state, which denies possible risks of pesticide use and creates false beliefs about individuals being resistant to pesticide hazards (Barraza et al. 2011, Ríos-González et al. 2013, Stadlinger et al. 2011)? In the domain of traditions in agriculture the same point can be made; for example, farmers profound and very detailed knowledge of burning to clear fields –fully based on local knowledge, deep insight into local realities, passed from generation to generation, and so on (Jansen 1998)–, is not really consistent with current agroecological thought. Farmer to farmer knowledge exchange (social learning), a core notion in standpoint approaches, does not automatically foster practices welcomed by agroecologists. For example, Stone (2007) has pointed out how farmer to farmer spread of the word was the principal reason why small farmers in India planted different GMO varieties each year. In sum, an autonomous farmer knowledge creation and diffusion may or may not contrast with agroecological principles. Like with science in general, there is nothing in farmer knowledge and local farming practices that make them *a priori* and in a generalized way ecological. Finally, the argument that small farmer knowledge is ecological and scientific, industrial agriculture not, may generate the idea that it is the intention or large plan of industrial agriculture to provoke an ecological crisis. Probably no or very few businesses or smallholders would want to destroy or endanger one's productive resources. But as an unintended or unwanted consequence, whether know or unknown, it happens in all forms of production.

### On GMOs

The anti-GMO position of food sovereignty movements has a problem with understanding smallholders who adopt GMOs. It would be too easy to dismiss such adoption as only a matter of deception by corporate powers. Small cotton farmers of the Makhathini flats in South Africa recently adopted second generation GMO cotton with stacked Bt and RoundUp Ready genes as a way to deal with high labour demands in weeding. Doreen Shumba (personal communication) will argue in forthcoming work that first generation GMO cotton was adopted not so much because of beneficial transgenic traits, but because of the new infrastructure introduced together with GMO cotton, making it an interesting option for farmers (cf. Glover, 2010b, for a thorough critique of the business claims that adoption in the Makhathini flats prove the superiority of transgenics in solving smallholder cropping problems). The initial adoption of GMO cotton rapidly declined after institutional failure. However, it was followed by the more recent resurgence of new, stacked genes GMOs, not transferred through large industry campaigns but through farmer to farmer spread of knowledge regarding the new GMO's possibilities.

This raises the issue what is precisely rejected by the food sovereignty approach. In agroecology, GMOs are

<sup>16</sup> The same Conway has been an influential advocate of genetically modified crops for poor farmers (Jansen and Gupta 2009).

seen as ‘false solutions’ (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013). The food sovereignty movement is ‘fighting against transgenic crops and the patenting of life forms’ (Patel 2009). Although these two aspects –transgenic crops and intellectual property rights– are mostly linked, they are not necessarily so.<sup>17</sup> The strongest, and probably most successful, opposition to GMOs to date with participation of food sovereignty movements has been the campaign against the so-called Terminator gene (making seed reproduction by farmers impossible when they adopt GMOs with this trait), which caused a backlash against biotechnology business (Glover and Newell 2004). Interestingly, the case is about a particular trait that constrains farmer practices and its main concern is property rights: who owns the seed? It is not about a trait that may be wanted by farmers. Many farmers are less concerned about the reduction of genetic diversity (remark that this also happens when landraces are being replaced by non-GMO, improved varieties) and the unwanted genetic pollution that is of concern to Altieri (2009). It is the property rights issue that heightens most the emotions about GMOs.

The question now is whether the property rights and corporate control argument should automatically lead to a full rejection of all forms of genetic modification or even biotechnology in general. Herring (2007a, 2007b) has argued vehemently against claims put forward by the food sovereignty movement that transgenics ‘undercut our future food producing capacities, damage the environment and put our health at risk’ (Patel 2009) by referring to bottom-up appropriation of genetic modification technologies and peasant action in India (see Glover 2010c for a critique based on the argument that the positive effects for smallholders are not as unambiguous as Herring and other authors suggest). One does not need to subscribe to Herring’s optimistic view about the pro-poor possibilities of GMOs to accept the point that many smallholders may be interested in some of the traits in new GMOs. However, the anti-GMO stance seems to be so ingrained in the food sovereignty movement that there is little reflection on how and under what conditions modern biotechnology might be useful, resulting in little strategic thinking on this domain. Is this a wise strategy in the long term? Whatever one thinks about transgenics, it will become impossible to not use the insights of modern biotechnology. For example, some advocates of organic farming, who reject the use of GMOs in organic agriculture, explore possibilities for using molecular markers and marker assisted selection from the most modern biotechnological toolbox, as well as closer cooperation with molecular scientists (Lammerts van Bueren et al. 2010). It will be difficult for the food sovereignty movement to develop the capacity to set its own goals and strategies within science, but a more serious debate engaging with recent scientific findings and disentangling biotechnology from corporate power has yet to be started.

In short, agroecology (in the farmer-centred sense) will benefit from better scientific study and joint farmer-science experimentation to explore what, where, and when it works. The standpoint approach to agroecology may be appealing for short term mobilization and feel-good motivational work, but has serious shortcomings in addressing complex problems. Rather than turning agroecology into a belief or a mantra that rhetorically bypasses the problem of low system output, it may be relevant to appreciate the diversity in agroecological practices themselves, whereby science is a useful instrument for identifying, comparing, testing and discussing possible production processes and outcomes.

## Conclusions

The food sovereignty literature emphasizes the movements’ opposition to global depeasantization (Claeys 2013) and proposes ‘repeasantization’ as an anti-capitalist strategy (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013; van der Ploeg 2013b) and its technical companion: anti-agro-industrialization (McMichael 2013b). The observations above could have implications for two aspects of the proposed repeasantization strategy. The first concerns the imagined future of this repeasantization. Is this re-peasant supposed to return to the disrupted ‘traditional’ culture and agriculture or to become the individual actor who balances and seeks gains

<sup>17</sup> Corporate dominance in the production and distribution of GMOs has been well documented and need not to be repeated here (see, for example, Glover 2010a, Harvey 2004, Otero 2008, Pelaez and Schmidt 2004).

and endogenous growth? It is unlikely that farmer organizations who first intend to create the conditions that this re-peasant is able to grow and to increase productivity (needed to feed the population), will later impose limits on further growth and capital accumulation. Does the repeasantization programme propose that this re-peasant will remain a non-capitalist producer who is nevertheless competitive in an otherwise agribusiness-dominated sector? The latter miracle will probably not happen unless there is a larger process of socializing the management of the economy. The question is if this challenge will be taken up in the food sovereignty debate. This is not an argument against the possibility of improving smallholder agricultural productivity. Improvement is well possible through knowledge innovation (e.g. Novo et al. forthcoming) or by removing constraining state regulation (van der Ploeg 2013b). It is also not an argument to get rid of the huge number of ‘peasants’ in the world as a sort of genocide of half of humankind (Amin 2012). But it is an argument that the food sovereign re-peasant is as much subject to capitalist dynamics as the disrupted peasantry. Many of them aspire to become successful agricultural producers, escape the marginality of rural life and become competitive in the wider national and international market. Many agrarian demands, such as support for innovation, credit, low input prices and high product prices, and additional supporting policies (i.e. demands beyond the direct demand for access to land, e.g. once land has been obtained through land reform) as expressed by farmer associations, will in the current context lead to further integration into, and reproduction of wider capitalist commodity chains.

Secondly, only repeasantization in a modernist rather than traditionalist outlook may be able to work on the “necessary progress of productivity of peasant family agriculture” (Amin 2012, p.14). But as Amin states, this needs industries to support it. He also adds that the process of continuous technological change and progress is needed at a rate which would allow a progressive transfer to non rural – non agricultural employment.<sup>18</sup> This raises serious questions about the anti-agro-industrialization position in the food sovereignty literature. Should intensifying smallholders really farm without external inputs? And if they will do so, will they then be able to increase productivity in the short term (both as labour and land productivity) and respond to market demands? No use of external inputs would imply no machinery, no fertilizers, no plastics to pack their produce, no fuels for their machines or those of the transporters, no new seeds, and so on. One may also ask by whom and how the required new knowledge will be generated. A purely endogenous approach, devoid of science, is not propagated here. The early phase of agroecology, which thrive on new insights from ecology, entomology, and complex systems theory may provide important lessons. One of the contentions will remain to what extent the latest molecular bioscience can be incorporated. Such issues do not have easy answers. Answers may not be given by single authors but only emerge in concrete processes of social and technical transformation. This paper asserted that some crucial questions are now too easily overlooked or unsatisfactorily addressed in the food sovereignty literature. Alternatives for current agricultural regimes cannot simply withdraw from capitalism and return to the peasant past and the local. Instead, they have to respond to three challenges: the desires of farmers to be incorporated into larger commodity networks, the importance of industrialization and complex chains for feeding the world population, and the central roles of the state and science, besides social movements, in making any food sovereign alternative possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Netting (1993), one of the key advocates of smallholders’ farming rationality celebrates the intelligent peasant rationality to limit inheritance to a single heir (e.g. primogeniture), thus maintaining a minimal farm size needed for good farming. Netting does not discuss what happens with the rest of the siblings but it implies that they need to find employment elsewhere. This is de facto a form of depeasantization and not a repeasantization.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

## INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM 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” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought 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 was 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.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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