

The Struggle for Food Sovereignty

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Alternative Development and the
Renewal of Peasant Societies Today

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INTRODUCTION

Family Agriculture in the Present World: Regional Perspectives

Rémy Herrera and Kin Chi Lau

This book, driven by a collective reflection within the framework of the World Forum for Alternatives, is dedicated to the problems faced by Southern and Northern family farms in the current neoliberal era of financial capital domination worldwide, and to the revival of peasant struggles for their social emancipation and legitimate right of access to land and food. Obviously, such struggles also concern all categories of workers and the people as a whole because what is at stake is the challenge to reach food sovereignty and to build our societies, at the local, national and global levels, on the principles of social justice, equality and real democracy.

The food and agricultural crises, which erupted in 2007–08 and resulted in catastrophic effects on the peoples of numerous countries of the South, especially Africa, as well as popular rebellions, represent two of the many dimensions of the crisis of the capitalist world system. Other very worrying aspects include socio-economic, political and ideological ones, energy and climatic ones. The food and agricultural dimensions of the current systemic crisis reveal the global failure and deep dysfunctions that characterise the agricultural ‘model’ imposed worldwide by financial capital and transnational agribusiness corporations since the beginning of the neoliberal era in the late 1970s, along with the implementation of austerity policies in the North and the structural adjustment plans (SAPs) in the global South. For more than three and a half decades the peasantries of the world have been suffering an intensification of attacks by capital on their land, natural resources and means of production. These attacks have also been eroding national sovereignty and the role of the state, destroying individuals, families and communities, devastating the environment, and threatening the survival of huge numbers of human beings across the world.

The dysfunctions affecting the agricultural sectors can be perceived by identifying a series of striking paradoxes. As a matter of fact, approximately three billion people on the planet today continue to suffer from hunger (one-third) or malnutrition (two-thirds), although agricultural production greatly exceeds food needs, with an effective overproduction of at least 150 per

cent. Furthermore, a huge majority of these people are themselves peasants or living in rural areas: three-quarters of those suffering from undernourishment are rural. Meanwhile, the expansion of the areas for cultivation worldwide is accompanied by a significant decline in peasant populations compared to the populations in the urban areas, which absorb the massive and persistent rural exodus, mainly into growing miserable slums. Moreover, an increasing proportion of land is cultivated by transnational corporations which do not direct their agricultural production towards food consumption, but rather towards energy or industrial outlets (for example, agro-fuels). In most countries of the South that are excluded from the benefits of capitalist globalisation, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia, a relative dynamism of agricultural exports derived from rental commercial crops coexists with increasing imports of basic products to meet food needs. Clearly, and urgently, things must change.

This project was initiated as an attempt to make sense of how these urgent global problems are manifested in the North and the South, and while there are common traits in how global capital goes after profit, the effects on the ground differ. Hence, it is important for struggles in different parts of the world – affected differently but also sharing related features – to develop a concerted understanding of the problems and prioritise strategies that take heed of the differences, and to share common visions for the future. Thus, in this book, authors from different continents have been invited to make their contributions and offer different perspectives and reflections and to relate their local struggles and immediate concerns to a global and long-term vision.

Theoretical and Historical Framework

The first chapter provides a broad theoretical and historical framework for the book. Samir Amin proposes a series of analytical elements to answer major questions about the appropriate kind of agriculture (capitalist, socialist or peasant) to guarantee the objective of food sovereignty; the agricultural productions to be prioritised to reach a development model, which is able to conciliate the improvement in food supply and the preservation of the environment for the generations to come; and to reflect on the resolution of the agrarian question by constructing convergence of struggles within diversity.

First, he analyses family agriculture in the present world and the differences between the North and the South. In the North (North America and Western Europe), a modern and highly productive family agriculture largely dominates, absorbs technological innovations, efficiently supplies these countries' food demands and produces exportable surpluses. However, while totally integrated into the capitalist system, this agriculture does not share a key characteristic of

capitalism: its labour organisation generally requires a reduced and polyvalent workforce. Furthermore, within the capitalist logic, a significant part of the income generated by farmers – even when they own land and equipment and receive subsidies – is controlled and collected by segments of commercial, industrial and financial capital, implying that their remuneration does not correspond to their productivity. Therefore, family agriculture can be assimilated to the status of a subcontractor or an artisan working in a putting-out system, and squeezed between supermarkets, agribusiness and banking.

In the South where peasant families constitute almost half of humanity (three billion people), the types of agricultural systems vary widely, with considerable differences in productivity among them (from mechanised latifundia to small or micro-parcels, with lands for self-consumption or cash crop exports, etc.). But, taken as a whole, these Southern farms – which are more often than not peasant ones – suffer from a huge and growing productivity gap as compared to those of the North. Most family farms of the South are under-equipped, non-competitive and destined for subsistence food, which explains the poverty of the rural world, the inefficiency to supply food to cities, and other serious problems affecting these societies. However, the Southern peasant agriculture is also largely integrated into the local and dominant global capitalist system and their profits are consequently siphoned off by dominant capital.

Here, the crucial question is whether agriculture in the South could be modernised by capitalism. Amin says no, and demonstrates why this is so. He criticises the notion of ‘food security’ – as an alternative to food sovereignty – disseminated by international organisations and Northern governments, according to which the South should rely on a specialisation in cash-crop products for export to cover food deficits. This results in disaster, as the recent food crisis has shown. What is absolutely necessary is food sovereignty. For that, a *sine qua non* is access to land for all peasants, to be considered a goal towards which most struggles in rural areas are oriented. For this reason Amin differentiates the types of land tenure systems in the South, depending on the ownership status.

The first system is land tenure based on private ownership – ‘absolute right’, only limited by public laws and eventual environmental regulations. Since the ‘enclosures’ process in early capitalism in Western Europe, this is seen as the ‘modern’ form of landownership by the ‘liberal’ ideology’s rhetoric and management rationale by making land a ‘merchandise’ exchangeable at market price. Opposing this idea, Samir Amin asserts that it is unsustainable to draw from the construction of Northern modernity rules for the advancement of the peoples of the global South. To change land into private property, the present reactivation of the ‘enclosures’ process involves dispossession of peasants, as in the colonial times. Other forms of regulating the right to use

land are conceivable and can produce similar results, avoiding the foreseeable destruction by capitalism.

Land tenure not based on private ownership is the second system, which takes heterogeneous forms and where access to land is simultaneously regulated by various rules that are derived from institutions involving individuals, communities and the state. Among these are 'customary' rules that traditionally guarantee access to land to all families – but this does not mean equal rights. These rights of use by communities are limited by the state and only exist today in deteriorated forms, attacked by capitalist expansion and its associated private appropriation. Amin gives several past and present examples of such situations in Asia and Africa. Frequently, European colonial powers left customary practices alone, allowing them to retain their domination (like '*économie de traite*' in the French colonial administration). The same phenomenon is occurring today under imperialist pressures.

However, popular revolutions in Asia or Africa sometimes challenged this legacy. Among them, China and Vietnam (we might add Cuba in Latin America to this list too) constitute unique examples of the success of a land system based on the rights of all peasants within the village. This constitutes equal access to and use of land, with the state as the sole owner and equal land distribution among usufructuary peasant families. Amin examines the evolution of this system based on the suppression of private landownership, up until the present times, as well as its viability and ability to resist the attacks it is suffering in rural China and Vietnam nowadays. Peasant struggles are currently active in these two countries to defend the most precious accomplishment of their revolutions.

Elsewhere, agrarian reforms implemented by non-revolutionary hegemonic blocks generally only dispossessed large landowners to the benefit of middle (or even rich) peasants, ignoring the interests of the poor. However, Samir Amin affirms that new waves of agrarian reforms are needed today to meet the legitimate demands of the poorest and landless peasants in India, South-East Asia, Kenya, South Africa, the Arab countries and many parts of Latin America. This is true even for other Southern regions where capitalist private ownership rights have not yet penetrated deeply (or formally), such as in inter-tropical Africa.

This could be done through an expansion of the definition of public property to include land, along with a movement of democratisation (and not 'retreat') of the state and the minimisation of inequalities. Nevertheless, the success of these agrarian reforms always remains uncertain, because such redistributions maintain tenure systems led by the principle of ownership and even reinforce the adherence to private property. In the dominant discourse, serving the interests of capital and its agribusiness model, a 'modern reform' of the land tenure system means privatisation, which is the exact opposite of what is actually required by the challenges of building democratic and alternative agricultural projects based on prosperous peasant family economies as a whole. Consequently, the

only obstacle to the fast trend of commodification and private appropriation of landownership is the resistance and organisation of its victims: the peasants.

Regional Perspectives

The following parts of the book present and analyse, by region, the experiences of peasant struggles to defend their inalienable rights for access to land and food sovereignty. The regions covered are Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Europe.

In Chapter 2, João Pedro Stedile examines the forms and tendencies of capital penetration in the agricultural sector in Latin America, especially through transnational corporations. Stedile also studies the current challenges imposed on peasant movements of this continent and their programmes, in particular those of the international movement La Via Campesina.

Stedile begins by analysing the mechanisms through which capital accumulated outside of agriculture has taken control of this sector and concentrated it worldwide in the current phase of financialised capitalism. Discussing the consequences of the recent capital crisis and the intensified assault of financial capital on agriculture and the environment, Stedile elaborates how, due to the crisis, large Northern corporations fled to peripheral countries to save their volatile capital by investing in fixed assets, such as land, minerals, raw materials, water, biodiversity territories, or tropical agriculture, and by taking over renewable energy sources, particularly productions of sugar cane and maize for ethanol or soybean and African palm for vegetable oil (agro-fuels). This generated huge speculative operations in the futures markets and a rise in the prices of agricultural (and mining) goods traded in the global futures stock exchange markets, without any correlation to production costs and the actual value of the socially needed labour time.

Stedile then analyses the consequences of the imposition of corporate private ownership of natural resources on the life and organisation of the peasants, with peoples and states losing sovereignty over food and productive processes. The destructive ‘model’ of capital for agriculture – agribusiness, or ‘agriculture without people’ – brings deep and insuperable contradictions that need to be understood in order to act upon them.

With this aim, Stedile defends what could be the main elements of a peasant programme that promotes workers’ control, anti-capitalist agriculture, food sovereignty and environmental protection in the countries of the South where the peasantry predominates and suffers. This alternative platform, promoted by La Via Campesina, among others movements, includes: prioritising policies of food sovereignty and healthy foods; preventing the concentration of private land and nature ownership; diversifying agriculture; increasing labour and

land productivity and adopting machines that respect the environment; reorganising agricultural industries into small- and medium-scale units controlled by workers and peasants; controlling food production by domestic social forces and prohibiting foreign capital from owning land in any country; stopping deforestation; preserving and disseminating native improved seeds and preventing the spread of genetically modified seeds (GMOs); ensuring access to water as the right to a common good for every citizen and developing infrastructure in rural communities; implementing a popular energy sovereignty and reviewing current models of transportation; ensuring the rights of indigenous communities; promoting socially oriented public policies for agriculture; universalising social welfare for the entire population; generalising educational (and literacy) programmes in rural areas and enhancing local cultural habits; changing the international free-trade agreements that function to the detriment of the peoples; and encouraging social relations based on human values built over millennia, such as solidarity and equality – which are the very values of socialism.

Stedile presents some organisational and political challenges for peasant movements, at the local and global levels, in order to face the current disadvantageous balance of power, where global capital is on the offensive to control nature and agricultural goods. Such an analysis results from the experienced realities in Latin America, especially in Brazil, and from the struggles and resistances of these peasant movements against capitalist destruction. And last, Stedile suggests addressing the interests of transnational capital and its control mechanisms by: building a popular, alternative development model of agricultural production managed by the peasants and workers; by transforming the struggle for land into a struggle for territory; developing a technological matrix based on agroecology, free schools in the countryside, training programmes at all levels and alternative means of mass communication; and creating opportunities for mass social struggles and building alliances against the class enemies with all sectors living in rural areas as well as city workers, nationally and internationally.

In Chapter 3, with a specific focus on Southern Africa, Sam Moyo presents an overview of the African peasantries who have suffered repeated attacks under colonialism, post-independence and neoliberal capitalism. He goes on to outline the perspectives of rebuilding them on the reaffirmation of the inalienability of land rights and collective food sovereignty. His starting point is the desperate situation of most African peasants, who are facing a crisis of social reproduction, food insecurity and insufficient incomes from farming, and their survival strategies despite the state's withdrawal. Regardless of the diversity of African agriculture, its persistent and generalised failure to increase productivity and supplies as well as to resolve key agrarian questions of enhancing the social

reproduction of the majority of the peasantries – conceived as elements of democratisation and national development – is clear and dramatic.

Centuries of systemic land alienation and exploitation of peasantries' labour, through unequal integration into the capitalist world system during colonial and post-independence periods, has resulted in the underdevelopment of the agrarian systems. SAPs exacerbated extroversion, extraction of surplus value, land concentration, food imports and aid dependency. Recently, a new assault led by foreign land-grabbing actors dispossessed the peasantry of its lands and natural resources and intensified its labour exploitation. Such accumulation processes undermine the social value of peasant production based on self-employed family labour and self-consumption as well as its ability to adopt technologies and crops to expand low energy-intensive production for its social reproduction. These evolutions, which are driven by financialised capital and agribusiness at the expense of the poor and marginalised peasantries, fuel local conflicts and accentuate the polarisation of agrarian accumulation (from 'above' rather than from below).

Moyo examines the long-running history of the destruction of African food production systems by analysing the trajectory of primitive accumulation and disarticulation of these agrarian societies. He describes the various phases, forms and trends of land alienation, dispossession and incorporation of the peasantries, from colonialism, post-independence developmentalism, to neoliberalism and its re-institutionalised primitive accumulation. He finally touches upon the current crisis involving land grabbing and 'contracted farmers'. Then, he explains the underdevelopment of the agrarian productive forces, using examples from country members of the malintegrated Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the persistence of qualitative changes in the agrarian surplus extraction and its externalisation through the unequal world and subregional trade regimes under neoliberalism. Here, the recent global food price and agrarian crisis, especially in the SADC region, as well as South African capital's hegemony are studied. Moyo assesses the social consequences of such processes on the collapse of basic food consumption and the fast increase in food-related poverty – except in a few 'secure' enclaves (in South Africa) – and on the more recent alternative strategies within the neoliberal context and the 'push' to universalise the commodification of land.

Moyo concludes that the real alternative is one that supports priorities given to food sovereignty and a sustainable use of resources by autonomous small producers, in which democracy is inclusive and solidly founded on social progress. This requires a wide range of public policy decisions of restructuring these food systems, including the choices of the basic commodities to be produced in order to satisfy social needs, a redistribution of the means of food production, especially land, inputs and water, substantial infrastructural investments, and enhancing the peasantries' human resources. If the state pursues

more systematic and voluntary agrarian reforms to sustain rural development at the national level, this task will also include regional integrations. As a consequence, a reorientation of the SADC region's agricultural (and industrial) policies towards more collective strategies to defend food sovereignty and land rights is needed, in order to reverse the present free-trade and market-based approach of this regionalisation.

Chapter 4 moves to Asia, where Erebus Wong and Jade Tsui Sit, following Wen Tiejun's theses, attempt to rethink the main problematics of 'rural China' in the development of the country in order to argue for rural regeneration as an alternative to a destructive 'modernisation'. The latter is often reduced to industrialisation and the empowering of the state, pursued through several phases from the middle of the nineteenth century to the revolutionary period with its radical social changes. It seems to be relevant to reconsider the intellectual heritage of the rural reconstruction movement – active during the 1920s and 1930s but much neglected today – in post-developmental China, where the rural sector has been historically exploited.

To understand the present situation of China's peasantry – which is the majority of its population – it is necessary to examine in depth the mechanisms involved beyond the collectivisation–liberalisation dichotomy. Land is a key issue for China, which has to nourish 19 per cent of the world's population with 8 per cent of its arable land. In spite of considerable agricultural output, only 13 per cent of its total land area can be cultivated. The explanation is to be found in the fact that land is collectively owned by village communities and distributed within peasant households, who use it mainly for food production to maintain self-sufficiency. Wong and Sit propose a historical overview of China's modernisation to capture the essence of its developmental trajectory in the last 60 years. After 1949, the new regime underwent a period of Soviet-style industrialisation, installing an asymmetric dual system clearly unfavourable to the peasantry. However, despite the industrialisation strategy, the peasantry has benefited from the radical land reforms.

Nowadays, many peasants (and workers) are increasingly suffering from exploitation and injustice, but a few residual socialist practices subsist, including the legacy of land reforms. In the mid 1980s, the promotion of export-oriented growth generated flows of migrant workers from the rural areas to cities – mostly consisting of surplus labour force from rural households that owned a small plot, without land expropriation. The rural sector took up the cost of social reproduction of labour and served as a buffer to absorb social risks in urban areas caused by current pro-capital reforms. It also revealed its stabilising capacity by regulating the labour market and reabsorbing unemployed migrant workers in cities during cyclic crises.

Nevertheless, mainstream intellectuals support the neoliberal ideology to advocate land commodification. Under the pressures of construction projects

led by fiscally constrained local governments and real-estate speculators, land expropriation accelerated in the 1990s. Between 40 and 50 million peasants lost their land; the landless appeared in the 2000s, especially after the 2003 law modifying collective arable land legislation and excluding a new generation from land allocation through redistribution. Wong and Sit explain the dangers associated with such evolutions, which weaken the mechanisms of risk management through internalisation in rural community, in a time when 200 million peasant migrant workers are living in cities and evolving into the working class. This is why, inspired by Wen Tiejun's analysis of the agrarian and rural sectors of China, which are considered to have played the role of social stabiliser by absorbing the cost of crisis, they defend collective landownership in rural areas as the most precious legacy of the 1949 revolution.

China's take-off is largely based on the exploitation of its rural sector. Today, the export-oriented model has become such a path-dependency model and internal disequilibriums are so deep that China has to make great efforts to switch its trajectory of development in order to invest into rural society, to guarantee social progress and to preserve the environment. According to the authors, solutions for an alternative path could be to reactivate and revalorise the status of the peasantry, to rediscover the pioneering ideas of the rural reconstruction movements (promoted by Liang Shuming and James Yen, among others), and to support the experiments of rural regeneration currently developed in the country, as renewed and powerful insights, both popular and ecological, to overcome the destructive aspects of contemporary global capitalism.

In Chapter 5, Utsa Patnaik exposes the political-economic context of the peasant struggles for livelihood security and land in India. She begins by recalling that the peasantry and rural workers of the global South are under historically unprecedented pressures today from attacks by capital, especially on the means of securing livelihood – among these is an assault on land – in order to divert its use for capital's own non-agricultural purposes. Such a movement looks similar to that of primitive accumulation in Western Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, but today, the Southern peasantry has nowhere to migrate, except to the immense slums of the megalopolis. However, peasants are now turning from passive resistance to active contestation of global capital domination, transforming themselves from objects to subjects of history.

Patnaik examines, in a first part, the agrarian distress, suicides and unemployment in India. She points out that inequalities have increased considerably in the country from the early 1990s under neoliberal policies and that the living condition of the masses of the labouring poor today is globally worse – except where positive interventions have taken place to stabilise livelihood. In rural India, this situation results from attempts to take over peasant lands and resources by domestic and foreign corporations, supported by the state. In parallel, unemployment is partly due to the inability to translate

higher economic growth without income redistribution into job creation, while purchasing power has been eroded by the inflated prices of basic needs for ordinary people, forgotten by the ruling classes' strategy of submission to financial capital.

The author points out that the main trend observed in the Indian economy – which has two-thirds of its workforce occupied in agriculture – is that the relative share of agriculture, forestry and fishing in the gross domestic product, especially for key crops like food grains, has declined; industry's share has stagnated, but that of services has increased fast. In a general context of trade openness, fiscal contraction, price-stabilisation system dismantling and land acquisition for special economic zones (SEZs), the state has launched an attack on small farmers, in the name of 'development' but in fact for the benefit of a small minority of real estate speculators, thus creating an agrarian crisis intensifying into the struggle for land.

As a consequence, small producers have been exposed to the ups and downs of prices, have been forced into debt to money lenders and banks, have lost lands against unpaid debts or have even committed suicide. With the implementation of the neoliberal agenda, land ownership concentration is happening at an all-India level and livelihood insecurity is spreading. Therefore, farming is becoming unviable. The author analyses the ongoing resistances of farmers to land acquisition (particularly when the state creates SEZs) or to change in land use (setting up extractives). She describes the repression suffered by peasant rebellions, in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh for instance, and also the victories won when the state governments have had to withdraw their projects or concede the right to compensation, as in West Bengal.

Patnaik recalls the fundamental economic characteristics of land, which is not produced by human labour, and the implications of its pricing, which is completely different from that of agricultural commodities (prices are anchored to amounts of labour used for producing them). Based on market capitalisation of incomes, the price of land – in a capitalist system – can vary considerably, depending on its use and the associated yield. Here lies the root of the discontent of farmers, constrained (and cheated) by the state governments to sell their lands at extremely low prices, that is, with compensation far below the profits earned by private investors or speculators (sometimes subsidised), who parcel them for lucrative commercial or residential purposes. One adverse effect (among others, including environmental ones) is that the total cropped area becomes stagnant and the growth in output slows down, leading to inflation in food prices and a contraction of demand. The author finally asserts that to think – like the corporates in collusion with the state do in India – that peasants can be treated as dupes is a mistake; they are now aware of their rights and are strongly resisting their exploitation.