

Communication as Resistance in Food Politics

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Abstract

The global food system is a site of domination and resistance for those opposed to the conventional model of industrial agriculture. This article applies a political economy of communication lens to the relations of power that operate in the field of food politics where tensions involving food security, peak oil, and anthropogenic climate change present major challenges. At the heart of this trilemma social movements of small-scale farmers contest the dominant narratives that biotechnology, development, and free trade will feed the world. This article describes how farmers' movements in Brazil, Chile, and Cuba apply resistive epistemologies in to complement for agroecological production methods. The purpose is to develop political consciousness among rural food producers and workers who are subjugated under neo-liberalism. The article also presents the challenges that members of the international farmers' movement, La Via Campesina, face in advancing their political influence through participation in invited spaces such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's World Committee for Food Security.

Capitalism's agricultural model is approaching a critical juncture as climate change accelerates the collapse of a broken food system (Patel and Moore, 2017). To meet the needs of between 9.2 and 10.2 billion people in 2050 (Chappell, 2018: 16) food production will need to rise by up to 70 per cent (FAO, 2009). This will accelerate demands for agricultural land and energy in a food sector that already currently accounts for 30 per cent of the world's total energy consumption (FAO, 2011). The growing market for biomass alternatives to fossil fuels triggers land-use changes that take land out of agricultural production and threaten biodiversity, presenting what Harvey calls a food-energy-climate change "trilemma" (Harvey, 2014: 165; see also Clapp et al., 2018). In Latin America these effects are highly visible. Entire landscapes such as the Cerrado, Amazon and Pampa have been reshaped by agribusiness in a "brutal transformation" that began with sugar plantations under slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is now seen in the "endless fields" of sugarcane for ethanol production along with soya beans, maize, and intensive livestock farms (Rundgren, 2016: 104).

As these conditions extend across all farming regions and the entire food chain, their costs are externalised through territorial dispossession, loss of biodiversity, and the poisoning of water and soil. Further, the unequally distributed effects of climate change will be felt most severely in the areas where the hungriest and most malnourished live, compounding the structural inequalities that already impact on individuals and communities experiencing “food violence” (Eakin et al., 2010). Agricultural yields will decline by more than 50 per cent in particularly vulnerable areas (Patel and Moore, 2017) where hunger, obesity, and diseases of malnutrition will continue to disproportionately affect populations already subject to chronic economic marginalisation, social exclusion and discrimination.

Given these precarious futures it is clear that there is a need for more democratic governance of food systems that will accommodate “alternative perspectives on food and its value to society” and address “the differential power and political interests associated with different perspectives on food values” (Eakin et al., 2010: 263). Circumstances of crisis do provide opportunities for the presentation of ideological alternatives (Wade, 2009; Munck, 2010; Veltmeyer, 2010). This article considers how a transnational social movement of small-scale farmers is resisting the corporate food regime through communication (McMichael, 2005). Contesting prevailing ontologies, identities and the operation of power, they demand inclusive political spaces where they can expose the unsustainability of a food system dependent on liberalised markets, the increasing reach of transnational corporations, advances in biotechnical solutions, exploitation of labour, and the encroachment of public and private sphere regulations. They reject the notion of food as a commodity in favour of a right to food approach which is inseparable from other human rights including those involving gender and racial equality. Their efforts demonstrate that while hunger may drive violence and conflict, it can also drive new forms of collaboration and cooperation (Schiavoni, 2015; Mann, 2017).

To this end La Via Campesina (‘the peasant way’) claims to represent 200 million small-scale producers, fishers, and landless workers in over 70 countries. Its members promote the concept of food sovereignty, based on principles of agroecological production which will advance democratic political projects embracing the themes of diversity, inclusivity and social justice. This article applies a political economy lens to the grassroots communication strategies of three La Via Campesina member organisations: the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), the National Association of Indigenous and Rural Women (ANAMURI) in Chile and the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) in Cuba. In these examples, resistive pedagogical and communication models are put into practice to advance the cause of farmers and other citizens as technically proficient, politicised individuals who can help their communities sustain, or make the shift to, ecological farming. Embodying a post-colonial politics, new ethics, and a praxis based on moral economy, this strategic outlook contrasts sharply with vertical dissemination or top-down modes of operation witnessed in the conventional agronomy education that supports the corporate food system. Cuba provides a particularly unique case as its farmers were forced to shift away from chemical and machinery based agriculture during the so-called ‘Special Period’ which followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989. The revitalisation of traditional farming techniques and the removal of external inputs including chemical fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides generated a model of organic agriculture that is now an exemplar for other countries. Methods of knowledge transmission include *dialogo de saberes*, a Freirean form of farmer to farmer or *campesino o campesino* (CAC) knowledge exchange based on “horizontal dialogue between peers who have different knowledges and cosmovisions” (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2014: 4). The associated diffusion of practices and

innovations across the country constituted an “agroecological revolution” based on values of collectivism, solidarity and cooperation (Sosa et al, 2013).

The political economy of the food system

Political economists of food systems analyse the commodification of productive resources including land, water, seeds, forests, and human resources such as farmer labour. In these analyses scholars investigate how “commodity production, use and consumption are tied into webs of political-economic inequities that extend far beyond individual consumers or commodity purveyors” (Schortman, 2010: 333; see also McMichael, 2005, 2009; de Schutter, 2017; Watson, 2017; Otero et.al., 2013; Swinnen, 2011, 2015; Mellor and Adams, 1986). The concept of food regimes provides a “comparative-historical lens on the political and ecological relations of modern capitalism writ large” (McMichael, 2009: 142). A food regime is defined as a “rule-governed structure of the production and consumption of food on a world scale” (Friedmann 1993 in McMichael, 2009: 142). The first food regime (1870-1930) was based on colonial tropical imports including grains and livestock produced in settler colonies through monocultural agriculture which threatened biodiverse and sustainable agriculture. In the second food regime (1950-1970s), surplus flows of food were sent to postcolonial states as food aid as part of the development model. This power structure creates needs and then proposes to satisfy those needs; a subtle strategy that enables interventions by nation-states, NGOs and multinational corporations in the guise of benevolence (Giraldo and Rosset, 2017). Green Revolution technologies accelerated yields while transnational linkages between national farm sectors grew into global supply chains and created a new international division of labour in agriculture. Commodity markets grew and, through financial speculation, contributed to food price hikes such as those experienced in 2007, 2008 and 2011. Overproduction by the grain-livestock complex was manifested in exported surpluses that continue to propel the expansion of agribusiness transnationals (Weis, 2007). The third food regime (late 1980s-) is characterised by Phil McMichael (2008) as a deepening and expansion of the existing regime incorporating economies such as China and Brazil, accompanied by a power shift to the retail sector via the ‘supermarket revolution’. This era is further characterised by the emergence of a global food/fuel complex and the demise of the liberalised trade regime as exemplified by the demise of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The notion of a corporate food regime captures the contradictions between a “world agriculture (food from nowhere) and a place-based form of agroecology (food from somewhere)” (McMichael, 2009: 147). The former promotes industrial agricultural production and trade liberalisation as a solution to food security (Lang and Heasman, 2004). This productionist approach is committed to monocultures of intensified farming, raising output, mass processing, mass marketing, homogeneity of product, and a reliance on chemical and pharmaceutical solutions largely driven by profit-making corporations. It is supported by initiatives including the OECD’s *Alternative Futures for Global Food and Agriculture* (2016) and the World Economic Forum’s *Achieving the New Vision for Agriculture: New Models for Action* (2012), led by 28 global corporations including Bayer, Cargill, Monsanto, Nestlé, the Coca-Cola company, and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. The large-scale, monocultural production model is based on an instrumental and economic rationality that has its roots in the colonial food regime (McMichael, 2009). This regime, and those that have followed, is based on Western science or “monocultures of knowledge” that have been granted “epistemological privilege” from the seventeenth century (Santos, 2008). Modern science effectively suppressed subaltern knowledges and practices. The subsequent domination of the global North in food production systems was justified

by the need to ‘develop’ less economically advanced societies through the industrialisation of agriculture and the advancement of urbanisation, higher standards of living, and the imposition of ‘modern’ methods of education and culture.

Recognising that “reality...has been colonised by the development discourse” (Escobar, 2011: 6) is vital in enabling us to understand the role of communication in producing versions of social reality. For example, the ideology of free trade as a means of promoting economic growth has become explicit in the discourse of development yet it is a misnomer (Gonzalez, 2004). By imposing a double standard that incorporates protectionism in wealthy economies and open markets in those less mature it effectively “reinforces pre-existing patterns of trade and production that undermine the livelihoods of rural smallholders, degrade the natural resource base necessary for food production, and impede the economic diversification necessary for food security at the national level” (Gonzalez, 2014: 421).

With the advent of neoliberalism, small-scale food producers across the Global North and South confronted “unprecedented concentrations of wealth and power and the rapid destruction of life-ways and livelihoods, eco-systems and species” (Reitan, 2007: 16). Free trade ideology facilitates the smooth functioning and expansion of a grain-livestock complex geared for corporate profit. The United States, in particular, has achieved “tremendous productivity gains, exported surpluses, industrial innovations and the rise of its agro-TNCs”, resulting in extreme concentration of production and insurmountable inequality among producers (Weis, 2007: 86–7). As a result, farmers throughout the Global North are trapped in a cost-price squeeze, while distorted competition from cheap exports and internationally sourced food aid has decimated unsubsidised farmer livelihoods in the Global South (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). This highly inequitable food economy also has serious political-economic implications for human health. The growth of transnational fast food firms in impoverished regions in Honduras, for example, favours wealthy entrepreneurs who enjoy benefits under free trade legislation while leading locals to shun traditional foods in favour of junk food. Children’s preferences, in particular, are “markers of social and economic change...a move away from a world built on subsistence farming, and so-called traditional values (and foods), to one built on waged work and imported food” (Schortman, 2010: 332). Further, the reaction of the WTO, World Bank and G8 governments to the crippling escalation of food prices in 2007-08, when the price of wheat and maize doubled and rice tripled, included further trade liberalisation and more industry-NGO and public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Watson, 2017). These measures have been heavily critiqued for representing a continuation of the development project (McMichael, 2005).

Capital and concentration

It is no secret that financial markets have developed as means of accumulation for transnational agribusiness companies (Clapp, 2014), as they have for media barons. The global food system is subject to the same concentrations of power and ownership as media systems, tendencies that pose equally serious challenges to democratic governance. In both media and food systems corporate actors dominate supply chains – in the case of food from field to fork - and seek to commodify audiences, producers and eaters. The concentration of capital in the agri-food sector has given rise to “multibillion-dollar oligopolies that control credit, farm inputs, services, processing, distribution, and retail” (Holt-Giménez, 2017: 126). This has caused agriculture and labour processes to “conform to the capitalist logic of appropriation and substitution, and increasingly, global finance capital” (126) leading to forms of vertical integration such as contract farming which gives firms greater control over production processes and burdens farmers with the risk. Farmers are locked into contracts, some

of which resemble debt-bondage, in industries such as poultry, palm oil, chocolate, and grains by companies including Tyson, Del Monte and Cadbury. Four firms control 70 per cent of world grain trade while in the retail sector Walmart alone controls 33 per cent of the US grocery market (Howard, 2016). In Australia concentration in supermarket retailing is higher than other comparable economies; four chains possess 90% of the market and 70% are dominated by Coles (Wesfarmers) and Woolworths (Minifie et al. 2017). These supermarkets use their power to “squeeze not the customer but those who make and distribute the goods”- farmers (Knox, 2014).

Concerns regarding consolidation across the agri-food sector are expressed by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems. They reports that farmers are increasingly reliant on a handful of suppliers and buyers, “further squeezing their incomes and eroding their ability to choose what to grow, how to grow it, and for whom”. Further, dominant firms have become “too big to feed humanity sustainably, too big to operate on equitable terms with other food system actors, and too big to drive the types of innovation we need” (IPES-Food, 2017: 5). Yet corporate actors are continuing to drive out competition within the biotechnology industry. In 2013, 175.2 million hectares of biotech products with a market value of \$15.6 billion were grown in 27 countries (Lamphere and East, 2015: 75). Nearly half of those products were grown in the United States, where Monsanto Company dominates the ever-shrinking market as one of the world’s largest and most powerful agricultural companies. Capitalist agriculture is dependent on synthetic inputs owned by juggernauts such as Monsanto, which merged with Bayer in an \$88 billion merger in 2017 (Mann, 2017a). Once publicly shamed for its overblown claim to “feed the world” Monsanto continues to promote the discourse of food scarcity, itself a socio-political construct that legitimises further intensification of production at the expense of people and environments (Mann, 2017b). Monsanto marketers have framed the poverty of the Global South as a moral platform to justify the public acceptance of technologies, and to pacify consumers with a form of mediated transparency that is being questioned at the highest levels of food and agriculture policy (Mann, forthcoming). Concerns over the continued expansion of these companies was voiced by the UN special rapporteur for the right to food, Hilal Elver in 2018. In her report on the manufacture of pesticides by global corporations, she states that companies are guilty of “aggressive, unethical marketing tactics” (Elver, 2018: 4). Condemning lobbying practices that have “obstructed reforms and paralysed pesticide restrictions” (Elver, 2018:18), Elver accused corporates of infiltrating federal regulatory agencies via “revolving doors” and cultivating “strategic public-private partnerships that call into question their culpability or help bolster the companies’ credibility” (Elver, 2018: 19). She goes on to argue that this credibility is bolstered by academics and regulators who accept corporate funding and sign confidentiality agreements, and engage in disinformation campaigns that support Big Ag agendas.

Advances in biotechnology have undoubtedly improved, and continue to improve productivity and quality in both livestock and crop yields (see Copeland, 2016). However, concerns regarding the safety of technologies to human health and the environment, and the increasing power of corporations at the expense of small-scale farmers remain (Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology, 2016). Even as farmers around the world focus on improving and rehabilitating soils and landscapes by adopting No Till methods and reducing chemical inputs the danger accumulates. At the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation Second Symposium on Agroecology in April 2018 Pesticide Action Network’s senior scientist Marcia Ishii-Eiteman stressed that the spread of more natural farming methods is threatened by “the power and influence of transnational corporations over public policy, research, extension and markets – especially the multinational pesticide, seed and

chemical corporations that are directly blocking or subverting agroecology, or attempting to co-opt it” (Pesticide Action Network, PAN, 2018).

A political economy analysis exposes how the corporate-driven institutions and ideologies of the food industry contribute to overproduction, food insecurity, and environmental degradation. In countering the industry’s powerful discourses social movements such as La Via Campesina seek to harness civil society’s “generative power” (Mansell, 2017). They do so through decentralised, territorially-based and, increasingly, online and virtual communities that promote food as a natural resource, rather than as a commodity. The expansion of alternative communication networks and the emergence of new invited spaces for policy-making is central to this disruption, which has deep roots in resistive epistemologies that are the foundation of movement-building. Further, an “informational turn” in food politics (Frohlich, 2017) is revealed by the growing reliance of consumers on digital media for information about food (Lupton, 2018; Rousseau, 2012) and the advent of digital food activism (Schneider et al., 2018). “Governance by campaign” (Schneider et. al., 2017) focuses on the use of new information technologies to facilitate solidarity and create political spaces for resistance against the neoliberal control of food systems. Digital platforms enable activists to create political spaces, connect, share strategies, and engage in “networked framing”, a “process through which particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations attain prominence through crowd-sourcing practices” (Papacharissi, 2015: 75). International environmental campaigns link local food practices to global issues such as loss of biodiversity, climate change, and genetic modification. Through their digital engagement with platforms promoting alternative foodways and notions of food justice, activists revise, rearticulate and redisperse frames that challenge specific aspects of the industrial food system. This connective action embodies self-motivated participation through the sharing of personal content that may be co-produced and co-distributed among peers, non-government organisations (NGOs) and other groups with congruent ideas, plans, resources and networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Benkler, 2006).

Digital technologies enable diverse and geographically distant actors to engage within transnational protest networks (Cottle and Lester, 2011) on food issues such as genetic modification of crops and foodstuffs (Mann, forthcoming). A de facto ban on GMO food crops throughout Europe is led by the online anti-biotechnology campaign Combat Monsanto (<http://combat-monsanto.org/>). Encouraging eaters to avoid GMOs on health and cultural grounds, the campaign challenges the agribusiness framing of genetically modified foods (GMFs) as safe and crucial to ‘feeding the world’. Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE) raises public awareness of the environmental threat that GMOs pose to biodiversity. Digital applications are also increasingly prominent in the food hubs sector in the Global North. Food hubs are deliberate interventions to provide fair returns to producers and supply urban citizens with access to healthy ‘farm-gate’ produce. Their establishment is underpinned by a strong narrative “linking the production and consumption of local organic food to positive economic, environmental, and social changes” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011: 2).

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) such as food hubs provide consumers, particularly in developed economies, with ways to reconnect with and reconstitute local human, cultural and land ecologies as a means to create and connect new spaces and models for engaging publics in debates over environmental sustainability, social justice and economic viability (Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996). As new forms of “food citizenship” (Renting et al., 2012) they seek to reshape the relations between food practices and markets beyond material exchange toward a ‘moralisation’ of food economies. They are lauded as alternative forms of food provisioning and as spaces of counter-power to the industrial food system. However, they tend to reflect a political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003)

perspective that we can ‘buy our way’ to a more equitable world through a consumption practice that “literally defines away the power of the poorest to change the system” (Chappell, 2018: 4). Further, the co-optation of discourses such as sustainability, localism and organics (Mann, 2013) by Big Food raises questions of the extent to which these discourses actually “reproduce neo-liberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities” (Guthman, 2008: 1171). These co-opted discourses commonly ignore critical questions of difference, including gender, race, class, and legacies such as colonialism. They therefore close down possibilities for systemic and structural change.

The analysis that follows foregrounds the turn to ‘standpoint theory’ in contradistinction to the dominance of capital and corporations that elides standpoints of resistance including gender, class, race, and labour relations (Winseck, 2011; Mosco, 2008). The farmers’ organisations that comprise La Via Campesina privilege the perspectives of women, the Indigenous, and subaltern in critiquing the commodification of food, labour, and education systems. These standpoints contribute to “understanding capitalism at many different levels including the personal, experiential, institutional, and structural” (Mosco, 2008: 52).

Framing food sovereignty

Civil society campaigns against biopiracy, land-grabbing, and genetic modification eschew simplistic linkages between population growth, climate change conflict and resource scarcity. They remind us of the unequal power relations in food systems and the non-neutrality of technological solutions proposed by private actors. The NGOs and social movements driving these campaigns provide “access to information, advice and analysis [and] access to debate on areas that involve political choices” (Murdock and Golding, 2005: 65-66). Defending producer and eater rights to information against powerful actors such as agribusiness companies, the movements seek to disrupt and reorient the power relations that underpin production, distribution and marketing of food through ideological contestation. They contest what David Harvey (1996) calls dispossession by accumulation; in this case the exploitation of small scale farmers by profit-making corporate actors. They aim to demonstrate that cheap food is not so cheap when its social, cultural, and environmental impacts are taken into account (Rundgren, 2016; Patel and Moore, 2017).

Food sovereignty, described as “a set of reactions to neoliberal globalisation and the industrial food system that is presented as an alternative approach predicated on the dispersal of power” (Andr e et al., 2014: 11), is an accommodating master frame for the mobilisation of La Via Campesina as a transnational coalition (Mann, 2014). Its members argue that neoliberal policies contribute to hunger and poverty by “prioritis[ing] international trade, and not food for the people”:

They haven’t contributed at all to hunger eradication in the world. On the contrary, they have increased the peoples’ dependence on agricultural imports, and have strengthened the industrialisation of agriculture, thus jeopardising the genetic, cultural and environmental heritage of our planet, as well as our health. They have forced hundreds of millions of farmers to give up their traditional agricultural practices, to rural exodus or to emigration (La Via Campesina, 2003).

A utopian vision, the concept is problematised by the relational nature of sovereignty. Does it operate on the scale of the nation, region, or local community, or is it a peoples’ sovereignty and, if so, what does this mean? (Edelman, 2014; Patel, 2009). Arguably, popular sovereignty has been adapted or ‘abused’ by nation-states to accommodate shifting relationships within global markets while corporate actors have become sovereign powers “akin to powerful feudal lords” in the neo-liberal era

(Conversi, 2016: 488; see also George, 2015). This scenario is complicated by the sub-state nationalism and territorial claims of indigenous peoples. These remain unresolved but are essential to the concept of food sovereignty in many nations including Australia and New Zealand (Mayes, 2018). The ontological basis of food sovereignty lies in respect for different knowledges and ways of knowing. It therefore necessitates encounters between groups who have historically been in conflict over territory, such as pastoralists and indigenous people, for example. Further, while the struggle for food sovereignty is rooted in conflicts over land, soil, and territory it is increasingly relevant in cities where urban eaters now contemplate the impact of climate change on food supply (McMichael, 2014). All of these elements give rise to complicated, often overlapping sovereignties.

In *La Via Campesina's* framing, food sovereignty celebrates these complex identities and evokes a transformative, democratic style of politics that offers a stark alternative to the vertically organised industrial food system. It is employed by member organisations to suit specific contexts, and assumes national, ethnic, universal and/or cosmopolitan features (Patel, 2009). Food sovereignty also suggests that nations assume control over their food security policies. This includes the right to impose protective tariffs against the dumping of subsidised exports, and the defence of local markets. It also puts the onus on governments to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of citizens to food and to establish the productive resources to produce it, including land. This, in turn, ought to be part of a larger project to change the neoliberal economic model.

Fundamental to the political project of food sovereignty is the principle of agroecology. This operates as “an alternative value system” (Meek, 2014: 48) with which to counter the industrial model of agricultural production. Defined as “a way of redesigning food systems, from the farm to the table, with a goal of achieving ecology, economic, and social sustainability” (Gliessman, 2016: 187), agroecology is widely cited by a growing number of international agricultural experts as a viable solution to a conventional production model that is resource-intensive and environmentally destructive (Valenzuela, 2016). More than a technical program, it is part of a larger movement toward an “emancipatory rural politics” (Scoones et al., 2017). By means of “the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agricultural ecosystems”, it is claimed that small-scale farmers can lay the foundation for an “epistemological, technical and social revolution...from below” (Altieri and Toledo, 2011: 587). According to its advocates, the approach represents a solution to declining local economies and rural unemployment. As a response to a production model that relies on fertilizers, seeds, and herbicides as well as high levels of regulation and certification, agroecology is affordable and sustainable. Its methods are knowledge-based rather than input-intensive. They “improve links between the land and consumption”, reduce waste and risk, and empower producers (Lang and Heasman, 2004: 32). Further, members of the movement promote the method as a mitigation of climate change. Small-scale agriculture returns energy to the soil, in contrast to the poor energy efficiency of industrial agriculture. The movement proclaims that “small scale farmers are cooling down the earth” while industrial agriculture is inherently destructive.

Corporate food production and consumption are significantly contributing to the global warming and the destruction of rural communities. Intercontinental food transport, intensive monoculture production, land and forest destruction and the use of chemical inputs in agriculture are transforming agriculture into an energy consumer and contributing to climate change (*La Via Campesina*, 2007).

The movement condemns ‘false’ solutions to the energy crisis, which include biofuel production, carbon trading schemes, GMO technologies and land grabs. In response to the 18th Conference of

Parties (COP 18) and the Eighth Meeting of Parties (CMP 8) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Doha in 2012, La Via Campesina warned of “climate-smart” solutions such as “sustainable intensification” which were designed to increase the yield per unit of land.

This will open the door for carbon markets in agriculture, will allow for carbon accounting to determine agricultural policy, will open the door to the further propagation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and other technological fixes such as synthetic biology, and will favour agribusiness over small farmers and peasants (La Via Campesina, 2012).

Agroecology is an alternative system based on small producers using sustainable and local resources in production for domestic consumption and demands that peasant- and farmer-based sustainable production methods be supported and strengthened (La Via Campesina, 2008).

Resistive epistemologies in action

Agroecology is a resistive epistemology that “resumes the indigenous, black, feminist, anticolonial and any-imperialism struggle of more than 500 years...[agroecology] defends the great popular diversity of humanity, biodiversity as the organising principle of Mother Earth and the plurality of knowledge” (ANAMURI member cited in Garrido, 2016). As an ideology opposed to the expansion of capital, oppressive patriarchies and hierarchically-organised food systems, agroecological knowledge must be disseminated in a horizontal and experiential manner, where spaces for the learning process are opened up. Conversely, “if the practice is imposed and didactic, instead of endogenous and participative, it contradicts the democratising potential that this social-economic and ecological approach has...converting [it] into another form [of] epistemological imperialism” (Chohan, 2017).

In La Via Campesina’s National Schools of Agroecology throughout Latin America the education of teachers is not limited to curriculum development but “speaks from a critical perspective to the way knowledge is produced in society and how this process can contribute to either merely reproducing relations of power or to the creation of new knowledge and to the transformation of society” (O’Cadiz et. al, 1994: 89). This methodology is based on the teachings of Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire, leader of the Movement for Popular Culture from 1960s and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire established the ‘literacy circles’ programme with sugar cane workers in Pernambuco, North Eastern Brazil, an initiative that spread across the country. In his brief tenure as Education Minister of Brazil, Freire worked with local communities to establish the Popular Public Schools “built on participative planning and delivery” with support from civil society groups including NGOs and social movements (O’Cadiz et.al, 1994: 209).

Aiming to revolutionise educational practices, Freire sought to eliminate hierarchy in the classroom by bringing students in as equal participants in the learning process. He insisted that the curriculum must reflect and respond to the lived experience of learners so that they would develop “an awareness of the dialectical relationship of local and global contexts with an orientation towards action” (Bolin, 2017: 757). By linking learning to cultural politics and class struggle, Freire encouraged students to challenge the dominant ideology through critical engagement or “conscientization” (Freire, 1998). This was a three-stage project involving investigation, thematisation, and problematisation of the practical needs and daily concerns of peasant farmers. This serves, ideally, to develop “understanding of the interrelation of local and global issues” (Bolin, 2017: 758). Students are encouraged to create a common vocabulary and shared understanding and to

rethink meaning-making systems and engage in an informed way with issues identified in and by the community. This directly contradicted what Freire termed the top-down, teacher-as-expert, “banking approach” to education that feeds knowledge down from experts to the rural poor and serves to integrate them into the structure of oppression, rather than “transform that structure so they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Freire, 1970: 47). This critical pedagogy focuses on how education is connected to broader social change, and how schooling itself can serve as an “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 1970). Accordingly, students need tools to reflect on the realities of knowledge production, culture, racialisation and gender identities (Tarlau, 2014) They need to recognise that the food system is an “ecological, social and economic system and needs to be viewed as such in all its complexity” (Rundgren, 2016: 106).

The Freirean approach helps “students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognise authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice and democracy” (Giroux, 2010: 1). It addresses the need to embrace transdisciplinary strategies that “incorporate non-academic ways of knowing into knowledge generation activities, acknowledging that certain research problems or objectives requires engagement beyond narrowly defined expert knowledge” (Valley et al., 2017: 6). This recognition of other standpoints and ways of knowing, coupled with the sharing of knowledge horizontally, both locally and in transnational circuits, directly contradicts the “hierarchical concentration of knowledge production by agro-business” (Cid Aguayo and Latta, 2015: 404).

For instance, food sovereignty recognises that Indigenous peoples worldwide have suffered from European colonisation leading to the removal or alteration of traditional lands that produced a variety of traditional foods, and the obliteration of their foodways. Environmental degradation, neoliberal trade agendas, lack of access to land, the breakdown of tribal social structures and socio-economic marginalisation are among the barriers to healthy and culturally adapted Indigenous foods. Aboriginal people have been subjected to a “de-culturing from within [where] State technologies of order were designed to smash the Indigenous systems of food production, consumption, celebration and identity, to replace them with the civilising forces of modernity” (Grey and Patel, 2014). The discourse of food sovereignty privileges Indigenous views, knowledge and practices in biodiversity conservation and recognises the “remarkable overlap between Indigenous territories and the world’s remaining areas of highest biodiversity” (Alteriri and Toledo, 2014). Aboriginal conceptions of food sovereignty emphasise food as sacred, reflect deep connections/kinship with the environment and rely on intergenerational transmission of food-related knowledge.

The theories of Marx and Engels (including the division between the countryside and the city) and indigenous cosmovisions are similar and complementary in agroecological thought and in the unity between culture and the dialogue of ways of knowing. Our agroecological proposal regenerates agroecosystems, including plant, animal and soil biodiversity, as well as indigenous cultures with their diverse ways of producing in harmony with Mother Earth (La Via Campesina, 2017a).

Women’s knowledge, values, vision and leadership are also central to agroecology as a “socially activating” form of agriculture (Warner, 2008). La Via Campesina emphasises that food sovereignty is “only possible with a fundamental transformation of unequal gender relations within and beyond movements themselves” (Desmarais and Nicholson, 2013: 6). The movement’s World Campaign to

End Violence Against Women identifies neoliberalism with patriarchy, linking local struggles against everyday forms of dominance by the capitalist market.

Along with the struggle for land and against the criminalisation of social movements and transnational agribusiness, it is necessary to stop the violence against women that invades their bodies, subjectivities and social, cultural and symbolic goods. It is necessary to confront this reality as the movements, peasant women's collectives and rural organisations that make up *Vía Campesina International* (La *Vía Campesina*, 2012).

The following cases describe how the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty are applied in three different contexts: Brazil, Chile, and Cuba.

Brazil

Brazil's Landless Peoples Movement (MST) argues that productive peasant farms are more valuable than cash crops such as those harvested from the green deserts of sugarcane, for example. The 'moral economy' concept, which was first applied to popular protests against capitalist expansion in the eighteenth century and was later applied to forms of tenure enforced by the French and Dutch colonial powers, is the foundation of MST's argument. Agroecology is employed as the "moral economic basis" (Meek, 2014) for the political ideology of this rural proletarian movement, and is sustained by farmer-to-farmer research and grassroots extension approaches. In the 1980s MST observed that the occupation of land would need to be supported by a parallel occupation of the school system to counter these negative framings of campesinos in media discourse and the government's increasingly narrow focus on urban priorities. Education of the Countryside (*Educação do Campo*), based on Catholic liberation theology and Frierean-based study groups, was developed to advance MST's political struggle to obtain agricultural land and promote peasant agriculture as an oppositional territorial paradigm to agribusiness (Meek and Tarlau, 2016; Fernandes, 2015). It was the basis of the Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform (PRONERA) in 1998 and informed a series of national guidelines in 2001 and 2008. It also involved the creation of an Education of the Countryside office in the Ministry of Education in 2005 and a presidential decree of support in 2010. The Federal Institute of Pará – Rural Campus of Marabá (IFPA-CRMB) was established on an MST settlement in 2007, with the objective of educating a "critical citizenry that is capable of understanding the social, economic, and political contexts of their home community and its relations to the state" (cited in Meek and Tarlau, 2016: 249). Encouraging cooperative initiatives, worker organising and solidaristic economy approaches alongside agroecological land management practices, the curriculum is based on an "alternating pedagogy". Students share their time between the campus and their own community, conducting place-based research to identify the sources of oppression, violence and dispossession that pre-date settlements. Interviewing farmers about their land management decisions, they engage in experiential learning that legitimises ordinary knowledges and lived experience while also connecting local struggles to the wider food sovereignty movement. One example is a seed saving bank project in response to concerns regarding transgenic seeds supplied by corporates in packages of inputs, including pesticide, herbicide and fertilizers. Students also critically examine farmer reliance on agribusiness companies for a resource that has traditionally been the common property of communities. Gathering, planting, preserving, and sharing local varieties among the communities, the students engage in transformative pedagogy and practice, articulating that "seed sovereignty is about resisting the market control of common resources, breaking farmers' reliance

upon the agroindustrial system, and helping them regain their agency over the production, management, and preservation of traditional seed stocks” (Meek and Tarlau, 2016: 252).

Chile

Chile’s Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI) exemplifies the intersection of gendered and indigenous standpoints within La Via Campesina. The organisation emerged in 1998 as a grassroots opponent of transnational agribusiness in a country widely celebrated as the neoliberal success story of Latin America. Since the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 1990s, Chilean elites have promoted the agro-export model as “an unquestionable success” even though “peasant families are being driven out of the countryside because they have no land or because the abuse of intermediaries- especially supermarkets – and the absence of local commercial channels does not allow [farmers] to sell at fair prices” (Garrido, 2016). Employers exploit the poor information base available to peasants and take advantage of a situation whereby male and female farm workers lack mobility and are left vulnerable to pesticide poisoning, unfair employment contracts and child labour. Less than a decade ago 75 percent of the owners of family farms were men and only 25 percent women. They owned just nine percent of Chile’s farm and forest land (Sepelveda, 2009).

A longstanding strategy of ANAMURI has been to promote of female leadership through Sustainable Agriculture Internships that include workshops on nutrition, women’s rights and personal development. The National Schools were originally based on this internship model, whereby two weeks of face-to-face learning would be followed by blocks of three weeks in the community. This curriculum was modified to better suit the needs of the targeted group - peasant women 20-50 years of age. Important factors here included family dynamics, caring responsibilities, and work commitments. The challenge for the Schools is to adapt training modalities for the specific needs of rural women with diverse racial and cultural heritages.

ANAMURI is the main driver of the network of seed curators or ‘healers’ (the curadoras de semillas) who protect and share a wide variety of seeds in communities. The healing communicates a sense of care which informs an agro-ecological response to the creation of transgenic ‘terminator’ seeds genetically modified to grow plants with sterile seeds. The networking activities of the curadoras challenge the sense of displacement felt by farmers who depend on the generative abilities of the seeds. They offer an alternative epistemological model to the homogenisation of practice and product witnessed in the corporate food regime. The linking of identities among gardens, kitchens and peasant farms foster “resurgence, transmitting the enjoined agencies of soil, climate, seeds, and peasant producers into place-based experiences of food” (Cid Aguayo and Latta, 2015: 402). Activities include the planting of organic gardens, farmers’ markets, food-tasting and seed exchange fairs. These patterns of exchange may not always operate outside the formal economy but they “politicise consumption and reconstruct food exchange as a space of trust, solidarity, and proximity, against the grain of the industrial food complex and globalised circuits of capital accumulation” (402), as well as serving as a practical measure to protect biodiversity.

Cuba

The importance of grassroots social processes for building the capacity of farmers was quickly recognised in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the strengthening of the US trade embargo. The National Association of Agricultural Producers (ANAP) adopted farmer-to-farmer methodologies to enhance food production in the so-called Special Period. To convert a system previously reliant upon Green Revolution technologies provided by the USSR it was necessary to

disseminate knowledge rapidly and effectively. Substituting imports with ecological inputs enabled agroecology to demonstrate itself as a political movement embodying “economic, social, and ethical principles that are required to fulfil the number one patriotic duty of rural farmers, which is to produce for the people” (Lugo Fonte, cited in Sosa, 2013: 91). Further, ‘massification’ through school and communities as well as campesino networks become a key element of the methodology.

Horizontal training systems in farmer education schools (FFS) such as the Niceto Perez, founded in the province of Villa Clara in 1996, and Cuba’s specific farmer-to-farmer agroecological movement (MACAC) drove the diffusion of knowledge. This process later extended to the University of Havana where seminars in agroecology and sustainable agriculture were taught in person and via correspondence. Leaders of the ANAP participated in environmental policy courses alongside farmer-to-farmer practices to learn about relevant legislation. In 2009 provincial coordinators of all municipalities were taught, and the Niceto Perez has delivered education to other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A noteworthy achievement of the ANAP is the coordination and extension of the MACAC movement throughout the provinces. Diffusion of the movement was accelerated beyond pre-existing farmer networks through newly appointed ANAP coordinators who served as connectors between geographically distant groups. They were skilled at organising working groups and were able to ‘streamline’ training. A further innovation was the formalisation of the Five Steps of farmer-to-farmer methodology. The first step relies upon participation on the ground including identification of problems, the sharing of experiences between a farmer and a ‘promoter’ (another farmer who has implemented a solution on his or her farm). This is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue (or step two) as one solution might not suit another farmer’s circumstances. The third step involves methodological tools such as workshops, exchange training sessions and farm visits to develop solutions appropriate to different contexts. Experimentation and innovation to broaden the spectrum of techniques is the fourth step. The final stage is reflection and feedback, to review achievements and set new priorities. Further refinement of the methodology such as the Banes Method, named after its province of origin, enables the systematic identification of the problems on specific farms to facilitate more targeted training and problem solving (Sosa et al., 2013).

Driven by necessity, the growth of the agroecology movement was faster in Cuba than in other Latin American countries. The number of farming families participating in MACAC reached 110,000 in the decade 1999-2009; and the number of campesino promoters grew from 1,600 in 2002 to 11,935 in 2008; facilitators from less than 500 to more than 3,000; and coordinators from 14 to 70 (Sosa et al., 2013:105). While the Special Period provided initial urgency for the transformation of Cuban agricultural systems to agroecology, many supporters joined the movement in years of economic growth because of the “dynamism... and persuasive power” of the movement. Undoubtedly, the highly organised ANAP network provided the infrastructure, funding, and the ideological foundations for an “incubator for the mass movement...highly organised at the grassroots, with many members” (Sosa et al., 2013: 104). It has since been claimed that agroecological plots better resist the impact of hurricanes such as Mitch in 1998, by retaining more fertile soil and vegetation through contours planting, gully control and greater ground cover. Hurricane Ike in 2008 devastated industrial monocultures while agroecological farms lost just 50 per cent of their productivity and visibly began to recover within 40 days (Sosa et al., 2013).

Invited spaces for policy-making

The need to mitigate the effects of climate change has become an important argument for supporters of agroecology in global arenas. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), “agroecology is fast gaining interest worldwide among a wide range of actors as a holistic response to the multiple and interrelated challenges facing food systems – not least of which include continued poverty and hunger in the context of degrading natural resources and climate change” (FAO, 2018: vii). The potential value of non-expert knowledge, and the explicit focus of agroecology on the social and economic dimensions of food systems, the right to food as well as equity, plus gender and indigenous issues, has further contributed to an opening up of ‘invited spaces’ in global policy arenas. In 2009 the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC) facilitated the participation of La Via Campesina and its allies in international governance through the reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS, 2012; Duncan and Barling, 2012). Supported by reports from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2015) and independent scientific studies including the *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development* (IAASTD, 2009; see also Valenzuela, 2016), agroecology is now recognised as a possible alternative to crises of the Green Revolution. It enables the advancement of food sovereignty and the protection of farmers’ rights, including the rights of crop producers, livestock keepers and pastoralists, fisherfolk and local and indigenous communities to natural resources (land, water, forest and genetic resources). The 2014 Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition held in Rome and a general meeting of the IPC in Gujarat, India in August 2015 highlighted that small-scale producers everywhere, especially those in the Global South, experience the negative impacts of trade liberalisation, land-grabbing and climate change. Regional meetings on agroecology, such as that held for the Asia Pacific Region in November 2015, have developed support for agroecology in locations where traditional agricultural methods are threatened by the move to industrialised food production systems. At that particular meeting it was agreed that supporting agroecology would protect cultural heritage, food sovereignty and local rights to natural resources in the region. Importantly, it was noted that agroecological initiatives can play a significant role in the reduction of rural poverty and in the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. Such initiatives also enhance the resilience of agriculture against climate change, promote sustainable agricultural development, and offer employment opportunities for rural youth in island nations. All these factors contribute to the prospering of alternative livelihoods in the food production system and can help prevent the rural exodus taking place in Asia and the Pacific. At this meeting it was proposed that the FAO set up a new regional initiative on agroecology that includes also a monitoring system (of FAO activities and governments in the region). The FAO launched the Scaling up Agroecology Initiative at its Second International Symposium in April 2018 (FAO, 2018).

While this wider, formalised engagement with the agroecology concept is welcome, La Via Campesina is equally wary of the co-option of the concept by elites. The World Bank, for example, have enabled corporate actors to successfully enter niche organic markets and capture the concept of sustainable development (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2014; Mann, 2013). This capitalisation of nature aims to reconcile economic growth with respect for natural limits. Sustainability has become central to the discourse of ‘ecological modernisation’ that promotes proactive regulation to safeguard both the environment and economic growth (Hajer, 1995). It is a discourse that relies on scientific evidence that reinforces rather than challenges the capitalist economic system and its persuasive ‘win-win’ rhetoric regarding the efficiencies of ecological control (Wright and Nyberg, 2015).

Corporations have adopted sustainable development as a means to “legitimate a global grab to manage all the world’s resources” (Harvey, 1996: 382). According to this discourse, environmental management becomes reliant on government policy and therefore subject to the hierarchy of powerful elites. Looking after the environment is good for business and “only minor adjustments to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental considerations without substantial reform” (Escobar, 1995: 197).

The social movements are wary that institutions including the FAO may dismiss the “transformative potential” of agroecology and instead focus on it as “a way of making industrial agriculture less unsustainable” (Giraldo and Rosset, 2017: 2). For La Via Campesina agroecology is a “multidimensional space of social processes, sharing, culture, and art” that should be led by farmers and their families. In these processes there is no place for biotechnological solutions as “agroecology is incompatible with genetic engineering, there can be no agroecology with agrochemicals or with the transnational agribusiness corporations” (La Via Campesina, 2017a). Whether this wholesale rejection of biotechnology is a strategic means to “challenge the ideological system that protects the corporate food regime” (Gliessman, 2015: 310) remains highly contestable.

Conclusion

Communication is one of the primary sources of resistance to power, particularly in the context of class, labour, and land struggles (Mosco, 2009; see also Mattelart, 2000). Dependency theory and Marxism inform the movement for food sovereignty, which proposes a transformative economic and political framework that demands culturally appropriate food produced through culturally appropriate agroecological methods based on principles of pluralism and inclusivity. It is as a precondition to achieving the right to food, and to ending food violence through dialogue, collaboration and cooperation with those experiencing it. It offers a roadmap in a time of crisis, and a powerful counter to the dominant discourse of corporate elites who propose to “feed the world” (Weir Schechinger and Cox, 2016). The agroecological paradigm recognises that “food embodies social, cultural and ecological values over and above its material value” (McMichael, 2008: 49) and demands a revitalised politics of “agrarian citizenship” (Wittman, 2009) within which conventional terms such as sovereignty, citizenship and rights need redefinition. For La Via Campesina, the question is fundamentally social – who should provide food, and how? Whose livelihoods should be protected?

Analysing food sovereignty through a political economy of communication lens reveals how different values about food are produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed. Power within the global food system is revealed to be the product of structures and processes governed by actors who seek to commodify food. Structuration processes that engineer social relations around class, race, and gender require researchers to focus on the role of social movements in contesting hegemony (Mosco, 1996). This includes embracing standpoint theory, alternative ontologies and cosmologies, and questioning what counts as evidence in a policy-making arena where intersectional analyses are secondary to neoliberal economics.

Cuba provides the most prominent example of a radically different model to that of the industrial agricultural paradigm. Isolation from the global trade regime makes the country a unique case for understanding how lack of integration into global trade and financial circuits protects them from the dumping of commodity crops that ruins local markets and small rural-based economies (Gonzalez, 2004). Cuba is food insecure; relying on high food imports, it offers an attractive potential market for

the United States in particular, an opportunity already exploited by large food firms (Graddy-Lovelace, 2018). This raises important questions about whether the notion of agroecology has the scale and sovereignty to challenge a crisis-ridden global food system.

Legitimisation of the agroecology concept brings with it dangers of fetishisation, depoliticisation and co-optation. Engaging youth in alternative, collective agricultural practices through a critical food systems education is one way in which social movements such as La Via Campesina aim to retain agroecology as a politically mobilising concept rather than as “a few more tools for the toolbox of industrial agriculture” (Giraldo and Rosset, 2017: 1). The shared vision of agroecology and the systematic dissemination of agroecological farming practices through the farmer-to-farmer methodology, is a “socially activating tool” in consolidating and mobilising the food sovereignty project (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2014: 994). It is both “an objective and a strategy...not only a means of production but also a praxis of change: the building of autonomy from the production systems of the hegemonic model...a form of resistances and of deconstruction of dependence on commercial seeds, pesticides and fertilisers which are becoming increasingly expensive, and of the possibility of building and salvaging knowledge which is part of a sustainable relationship between humans and nature, based on ancestral knowledge, culture and territorial diversity” (La Via Campesina, 2017c: 36). It represents what Mosco (1996) describes as a critical epistemological framework comprised of “multiple dynamic interactions”, based on an ontology that stresses “social change, social processes, and social relativism” (137-8).

The emergence of social movements such as La Via Campesina is a direct response to the corporate food system. Beyond seeking to understand this system, they recognise that “the point is to change it” (Wasko, 2005: 27). Recognising that the market has “abolished frontiers, and seeks to impose uniformity on the planet” the movements insist that “human rights don’t stop at frontiers; we must globalise them” (Bovè and Dufour, 2002: 190). Ultimately, they aim for their message to resonate beyond rural sectors to increasingly urbanised populations:

The struggle for the implementation of land reform cannot be cloaked as a peasants’ exclusive need or banner, *but as a social solution for the whole of society’s problems*. From this perspective, it would become viable if it were inserted as a claim, a platform of struggle for wide popular sectors in our countries. We have to propose changes in agriculture, in the land ownership and in rural development processes, *as part of a wide popular project for our peoples, where there would be a new economic, social and political order* (La Via Campesina, cited in Reitan, 2007: 175).

Engaging with “basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good” (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 18-19), the movement represents the standpoints of those most affected by hunger and those marginalised, to date, in agricultural policy-making. Declaring that “patriarchy is an enemy of our movement”, La Via Campesina recognises that “the lack of tolerance for diversity is part of the process of dispossession of rural youth...a diverse, non-violent and inclusive countryside is fundamental” (2017b). Central to these claims is “the right to participate fully in social life and to help shape the forms it might take in the future” (Murdock, 1999: 8). This right is fundamental in the design and governance of food systems that will enable us to meet the challenges encapsulated by the Anthropocene.

Author Bio

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