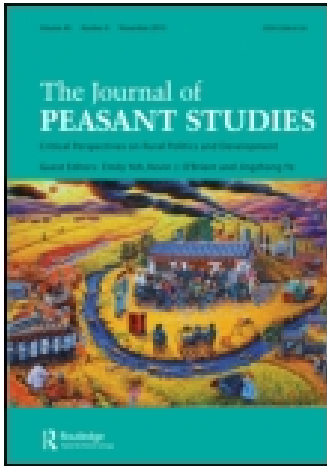


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Food sovereignty via the ‘peasant way’: a sceptical view

Henry Bernstein

This paper attempts to identify and assess some of the key elements that ‘frame’ food sovereignty (FS): (1) a comprehensive attack on corporate industrialised agriculture, and its ecological consequences, in the current moment of globalisation, (2) advocacy of a (the) ‘peasant way’ as the basis of a sustainable and socially just food system, and (3) a programme to realise that world-historical goal. While sharing some of the concerns of (1), I am sceptical about (2) because of how FS conceives ‘peasants’, and the claim of some of its leading advocates that small producers who practice agroecological farming – understood as low (external)-input and labour-intensive – can feed the world. This connects with an argument that FS is incapable of constructing a feasible programme (3) to connect the activities of small farmers with the food needs of non-farmers, whose numbers are growing both absolutely and as a proportion of the world’s population.

Keywords: food sovereignty; capitalist agriculture; peasants; class relations

Introduction

‘Food sovereignty’ (hereafter FS) is conceived as ‘the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments...as a critical alternative to the dominant neoliberal model for agriculture and trade’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010, 2). This conception is closely associated with *La Vía Campesina* and those who support it, and it serves simultaneously as a slogan, a manifesto and a political project, and aspires to a programme of world-historical ambition. This paper attempts to identify and assess some of the key elements that ‘frame’ FS:

A first version of this paper was written for the international conference on ‘Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue’ held at Yale University, 14–15 September 2013. I am grateful to Jens Lerche and Edouard Morena for recent stimulating conversations on this and associated themes, and to two anonymous reviewers of the first draft. The version published here had to be submitted in advance of the conference, and would have been further revised in the light of its stimulating exchanges. I am also fortunate to have received comments on the original draft (both before and after it was revised) from Jairus Banaji, Jun Borrás, Andries Du Toit, Deborah Johnston, Deborah Levenson Estrada, Peter Mollinga, Bridget O’Laughlin, Carlos Oya, Pauline Peters and Phil Woodhouse. Taken together they offered many valuable suggestions and asked pointed questions, which (always the way?) pulled in different directions. Several of those named asked (in the words of one of them): ‘now that we are convinced that these FS theorists are wrong, now what?’. Indeed, and the work of analysis, understanding and ‘critical dialogue’ continues. Of course, I remain solely responsible for shortcomings of exposition and argument.

- (1) as a comprehensive attack on corporate industrialised agriculture for its devastations, both environmental and social;
- (2) as the restatement and extension, in conditions of contemporary globalisation, of that foundational trope of agrarian populism: the social and moral superiority of ‘peasant’ (or ‘small-scale’) farming, and now centre-stage its ecological superiority too;
- (3) as a programme for the constitution of a new, sustainable and socially just world food order, ‘reconnecting food, nature and community’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010).

In effect, these elements constitute a kind of thesis and antithesis, although whether they satisfy the conditions of a transformational synthesis is another matter, considered below. They register the impact in recent decades of political ecology on political economy, while the classic questions of (activist) political sociology – what is to be done, by whom and how? – add to the mix of issues in advancing any programme of FS.

Trying to assess the claims of FS, both analytical and evidential, in the span of a single article presents certain difficulties. First is the sheer quantum of the literature generated by FS, magnified by the internet sites of the many organizations committed to it. Here the collection of popular essays edited by Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais and Nettie Wiebe (2010b) in which the principal North American, or North American-based, champions of FS are well represented, provides many of my examples of FS argument and prescription.¹

Second, the FS literature encompasses versions of virtually all processes and patterns of agrarian change in the world today, sweeping up many diverse dynamics and struggles into its overarching framework of the vicious and the virtuous. As a result, the exposition in this article connects, or collides, with a series of major issues, debates and relevant literatures – for example, concerning primitive accumulation, the theoretical bases of histories of capitalism, political ecology, ‘peasants’ and ‘rural community’ – that I can mostly only reference rather than deal with fully.²

Third, FS advocacy is typically constructed from statements about the global, on one hand, and, on the other hand, what I call ‘emblematic instances’ of the virtues of ‘peasant’/small-scale/‘family’ farming as capital’s other. The two are often connected, so that the individual ‘peasant’ farm (and ‘community’) exemplifies the way forward to save the planet, to feed its population in socially more equitable and ecologically more sustainable ways. Each of such ‘emblematic instances’ deserves further scrutiny and assessment, which cannot be undertaken here, although ways of doing this are illustrated. Interrogating the construction of capital’s other – in general and in particular – is the principal emphasis of the paper, at the cost of disregarding other aspects like those that seek to incorporate large(r) farmers and small-scale urban food cultivation (‘gardening’) into FS.

¹FS is experiencing its own ‘literature rush’, in the term applied by Oya (2013b) to the associated topic of ‘global land grabbing’ (see also note 5 below).

²Carlos Oya has pointed out to me that arguments and evidence from political economy may be less familiar to some readers than the stirring discourse and simplifications of much of the FS literature. I take his point and can only suggest that there are accessible introductions to some of the key ideas of both materialist and Chayanovian agrarian political economy in the first two titles of the series of ‘little books on big ideas’ about *Agrarian change and peasant studies*, namely Bernstein (2010a) and Ploeg (2013), respectively.

Food sovereignty: when and why?

The key historical focus of FS analysis and prescription is the conjuncture of ‘globalisation’ since the 1970s. There is a strong case that a new phase of global capitalism with new modalities of accumulation started to emerge from that time which, among other things, (belatedly) changed inherited conceptions of the agrarian question centred on ‘national’ paths of the development of capitalism in the countryside and its contributions to industrialisation (Bernstein 1996/7).³ A list of some of the key themes in the discussion of globalisation and its impact on agriculture comprises (drawing on Bernstein 2010a, 82–4):

- (1) trade liberalisation, shifts in the global trade patterns of agricultural commodities, and associated battles within and around the World Trade Organization (WTO);
- (2) the effects on world market prices of futures trading in agricultural commodities, that is, speculation spurred by ‘financialisation’;
- (3) the removal of subsidies and other forms of support to small farmers in the South as ‘austerity’ measures required by neoliberalism, thus reduction of government and aid budgets for (most) farming together with promotion of ‘export platforms’, especially of animal feeds and high-value commodities (horticultural and aquatic);
- (4) the increasing concentration of global corporations in both agri-input and agro-food industries (in the terms of Weis 2007), marked by mergers and acquisitions, and the economic power of fewer corporations commanding larger market shares;
- (5) new organisational technologies deployed by these corporations along commodity chains from farming through processing and manufacturing to retail distribution, e.g., the ‘supermarket revolution’ in the global sourcing of food and market shares of food sales, and the recent entry of major supermarket chains into China, India and other parts of the South;
- (6) how these technologies combine with corporate economic power to shape and constrain the practices (and ‘choices’) of farmers and consumers;
- (7) the push by corporations to patent intellectual property rights in genetic material, under the provisions of the WTO on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), and the issue of corporate ‘biopiracy’;
- (8) the new technical frontier of engineering plant and animal genetic material (genetically modified organisms or GMOs) that, together with specialised monoculture, contributes to the loss of biodiversity;

³‘Belatedly’ needs qualification in that Marxist (and marxisant) debate of the agrarian origins and development of capitalism has centred for some time on two contending models of (1) ‘national’ paths of transition and (2) the formation of a world market/world economy as intrinsic to transitions to capitalism (see Bernstein 2013a, a review essay of Banaji 2010). In the current context of globalisation, FS represents a re-turn to the national (and nationalist?).

(9) the new profit frontier of agrofuel production, dominated by agribusiness corporations supported by public subsidies in the USA and Europe, and its effects for world grain supplies available for human consumption;

(10) health consequences, including the rising levels of toxic chemicals in ‘industrially’ grown and processed foods, and the nutritional deficiencies of diets composed of ‘junk foods’, fast foods and processed foods; the growth of obesity and obesity-related illness, together with continuing, possibly growing, hunger and malnutrition;

(11) the environmental costs of all of the above, including levels of fossil-fuel use, and their carbon emissions, in the ongoing ‘industrialisation’ of food farming, processing and sales, for example, the distances over which food is trucked and shipped from producer to consumer, and for many high-value horticultural commodities air-freighted;

(12) hence issues of the ‘sustainability’ or otherwise of the current global food system in the face of its ‘accelerating biophysical contradictions’ (Weis 2010): its continued growth or expanded reproduction along the trajectories noted.

Each of these vast themes is well rehearsed today and constitutes an arena in which different perspectives clash and the assessment of relevant evidence is a demanding task, as ever. That challenge cannot be undertaken here, due to limits of space (and the author’s competence). Anticipating some of what follows, I note one instance in relation to arguments about continuing, possibly growing, hunger and malnutrition. This is often, and rightly, attributed to dynamics of inequality and poverty: who goes hungry and why is a matter of crises of reproduction within what I call ‘classes of labour’ (below), the millions who ‘cannot *buy* or produce enough food’ (Oxfam 2010, 2, emphasis added), of whom the former include many of the rural as well as urban poor. Further, in terms of the (in)capacity to buy food (enough food, good enough food), this is also often, and rightly, claimed as the result of relations of *distribution* (who gets what) across contemporary capitalism, *not* the result of any shortfall in aggregate world food production (e.g., Altieri and Rosset 1999). The difference between *buying* food and *producing* it for self-consumption is often elided, however (with a strong preference of FS for the latter). We can also note that the consumption of fast foods has particular class dimensions that vary across regions, and can ask, for example, whether the availability of a much wider range of foods, including those available year-round thanks to international trade, is intrinsically a bad thing.

In sum, the topics listed are central to the comprehensive opposition of FS to a ‘corporate industrialised agriculture’ that is increasingly global in its drivers, modalities and effects, that registers a ‘changing relationship to food imposed by the industrialization of (agricultural) production and the globalization of agricultural trade’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010a, 5), and results in ‘food insecurity, fossil-fuel dependence and global warming’ (McMichael 2010, 172).

On one hand, this encompassing criticism points to an intensification of some long-evident tendencies of capitalist agriculture, including the pace of technical change in farming (especially ‘chemicalisation’) and in its upstream and downstream industries driven by the accumulation strategies of agri-input and agro-food corporations (and their powerful lobbies in the formation of public policy); and the differential effects for farming and food consumption in North and South, and how they are shaped by international divisions of labour and trade in agricultural commodities.

On the other hand, recent FS (and other ‘green’-inspired) analysis has highlighted novel features of the current order of globalisation, in which perhaps quantitative now transforms into qualitative change, especially concerning key aspects of technology, for example, the growing privatisation and corporate control of seeds⁴ together with their genetic engineering and associated consequences (spanning 4–8 in the list above), generating the concept of ‘seed sovereignty’ as a component of FS (notably Kloppenburg 2010a, 2010b); and the ‘agrofuels boom’ (9 in the list above) which Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2010, 80, 86 and *passim*) characterise as a distinct and profound new ‘agrarian transition’, driven by ‘classic capitalist overproduction’ and a falling rate of profit in agribusiness, and collapsing the (previous) ‘industrial link between food and fuel’ (see also McMichael and Scoones 2010, Weis 2010).

In combination with this thrust of argument from political ecology, FS similarly emphasises the social effects of ‘neoliberal globalisation’, for example, the dietary and health consequences of industrialised food (10 in the list above; and see Lang and Heasman 2004); a rising incidence of hunger and malnutrition, whether aggregate world food availability is adequate (as suggested above) or declining due to the diversion of grain to animal feeds and agrofuels (again 9 and 10 above; see Bello and Baviera 2010); and the ongoing or intensified dispossession of the world’s peasants or small farmers: ‘the literal displacement of millions of families from the land and their rural communities’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010a, 9), ‘the present massive assault on the remaining peasant formations of the world’ (Friedmann 2006, 462), the ‘corporate food regime’ that ‘dispossess[es] farmers as a condition for the consolidation of corporate agriculture’ (McMichael 2006, 476), and ‘absolute depeasantisation and displacement’ through a wave of ‘global enclosures’ that marks the current moment (Araghi 2009, 133–134).

The last is the most central theme of that major (principal?) strand of FS literature that appeals to peasant farming as the alternative to (increasingly) corporate, industrial and global capitalist agriculture. Displacement of peasant farmers today is presented as a consequence of pressures on their social reproduction from the withdrawal of public support (3 above; Desmarais 2007, Bello and Baviera 2010) and from trade liberalisation (1 above; and see Bello 2009) – both standard components of neoliberal policy agendas, albeit ‘dumping’ of subsidised food exports from the North has a longer history. Further, dispossession is also a direct consequence of ‘land grabbing’: a new wave of ‘global enclosures’ [in Araghi’s (2009) term] by transnational agribusiness, sovereign wealth funds and private financial entities, in collusion with governments in (and beyond) the South to establish large-scale enterprises dedicated to export production of food staples and agrofuels (Borras *et al.* 2011).⁵

In short, considering world agriculture today entails a far larger cast of agents/‘actors’ than those who feature in debates of the origins and early development of capitalist farming as processes ‘internal’ to the countryside and centred on classes of landed property, labour (both peasant and wage labour) and emergent agrarian capital. They now incorporate, on one hand, an enormously wide range of types of farming by social class relations (capitalists, petty commodity producers, ‘subsistence’ or ‘survivalist’ farming, each with their own specificities and diversity), and diverse (rural) classes of labour including ‘subsistence’ or ‘survivalist’ farmers. On the other hand, they also incorporate, as indicated, different types

⁴Which started from the 1930s in the USA with the development of hybrid maize seed, hence anticipating the subsequent Green Revolution, as detailed in the outstanding study by Kloppenburg (2004).

⁵Edelman (2013) and Oya (2013b) provide necessary and valuable correctives to typically exaggerated claims about ‘global land grabbing’, including important issues in producing and using evidence.

(and scales) of capital in the various moments of the overall circuits of capital and its expanded reproduction – financial, productive, commercial – as well as states and supra-state bodies (the WTO, the World Bank).

The highly topical (and contested) contemporary themes outlined connect, of course, with longer histories of capitalism and agriculture, aspects of which I sketch next.

Capitalism versus the peasant

The genesis of ‘capitalism versus the peasant’ (Bello and Baviera 2010, 69) is Marx’s famous sketch of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ as ‘... nothing else than the process which divorces the producer from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour’ (Marx 1976, 874 and Ch. 27 *passim*).⁶ Bello and Baviera (2010, 73) refer to a ‘centuries-long process of displacement of peasant agriculture by capitalist agriculture’, and Handy and Fehr (In Wittman *et al.* 2010) sketch English enclosures from the sixteenth century (before Britain’s ‘first industrial revolution’) and especially between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, when (capitalist) ‘high agriculture’ emerged (in tandem with industrialisation). They also contest views that capitalist farming achieved any advances in yields over contemporary small-scale farming in the period(s) in question.

Beyond continuing debate of the origins of capitalist farming, stimulated especially by the work of Robert Brenner (1976, Ashton and Philpin 1985), some variant or other of primitive accumulation is widely applied in analyses of the restructuring of social relations of land and labour, its drivers, modalities and effects (intended and unintended), in the vast and diverse colonial zones of the ‘three continents’ (Latin America, Asia and Africa) at different historical moments of the formation of a capitalist world economy.⁷

Industrialisation of the food system

Wittman *et al.* (2010a, 5) suggest ‘two hundred years of industrialization of the food system’, that is, several centuries after the original emergence of agrarian capitalism and

⁶Marx regarded dispossession of the peasantry as a necessary but not sufficient condition of the development of capitalist farming: ‘the only class created directly by the expropriation of the agricultural population is that of the great landed proprietors’ (Marx 1976, 905), hence something further is required for a transition to capitalism. For some scholars (e.g., Byres 2006, Heller 2011), this came about, in effect, through ‘primitive accumulation from below’. The concept of ‘primitive accumulation’, not least as necessary to capitalism throughout its history, has made a major comeback, stimulated by David Harvey’s notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in a crisis of over-accumulation in global capitalism since the 1970s (Harvey 2003). ‘Is there any busier notion at the moment than that of primitive accumulation (and its analogues and extensions)? That is, busy in the elasticity of its definitions, its expanding range of applications and the claims made for it. To make sense of the proliferating claims for, and debates about, primitive accumulation, it helps to distinguish different ways in which the concept is put to work: a combination of the substance given to the concept, how it is deployed, and the evidence used to illustrate or support its different uses’ (Bernstein 2013c, a preliminary survey that I hope to develop). The most lucid guide to, and assessment of, this current busyness that I have read is by Derek Hall (2012).

⁷See Bernstein 2010a (Ch. 3), and references therein. In a passing acknowledgement of longer histories of class-based agrarian civilisations, Raj Patel (2010, 191) suggests that ‘the political situation has *never* been favourable to those who produce food; its new global context merely compounds a millenia-old disenfranchisement’, although the meanings of ‘disenfranchisement’ and spaces for enfranchisement today are very different from, say, medieval India or Europe or Egypt in late antiquity (Banaji 2001).

about a half-century or so before the periodisation suggested below.⁸ Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2010, 85–6) propose that current neoliberal globalisation, specifically the ‘agrofuels boom’, ‘closes a historical chapter in the relation between agriculture and industry that dates back to the Industrial Revolution’ – a chapter with two parts. Initially ‘peasant agriculture effectively subsidized industry with cheap food and cheap labour’, while ‘Later on, cheap oil and petroleum-based fertilizers opened up agriculture to industrial capital. Mechanization intensified production, keeping food prices low and industry booming. Half of the world’s population was pushed out of the countryside and into the cities’. The motif of ‘cheap food’ signalled by Holt-Giménez and Shattuck is a central thread running through the political economy of capitalism and agriculture with implications for FS, as we shall see.

International food regimes (IFRs)

The FS framework is typically informed by notions of capitalism as ‘world system’ that occupy a spectrum from agit-prop invocations to the more analytical. ‘Capitalism’ – or its current phase of globalisation – is named as the source of corporate industrialised agriculture, with different emphases on various aspects or moments of the histories of capitalism, as just illustrated. Sometimes ‘capitalism’ becomes simply a synonym for industrialised agriculture, or is interchangeable with ideologies of ‘modernity’ (and modernising projects) – based in certain conceptions of rationality, efficiency and the conquest of nature – held to constitute (and explain?) the global food order (thesis) that FS defines itself against (antithesis).⁹

The most potent analytical framework available to FS is that of the political economy of international food regimes (IFRs) from the 1870s, developed by Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael (and deployed by Weis 2007 and Fairbairn 2010, among others). McMichael has recently provided a ‘genealogy’ of the concept, in which he considers its origins and its subsequent developments and extensions to include ‘social movement, ecological and nutritional science relationships’ (2009, 140). The IFR approach offers ‘a unique comparative-historical lens on the political and ecological relations of modern capitalism writ large’ (McMichael 2009, 142).

Here there is space only for some brief observations. First, it is interesting that Friedmann’s and McMichael’s original work was historical research on agriculture in two sites of the first ‘settler-colonial’ IFR from the 1870s to 1914, namely the USA (Friedmann 1978a, 1978b) and Australia (McMichael 1984), as distinct from the great agrarian zones of the ‘three continents’ where the ‘peasant question’ was manifested most sharply in colonial conditions and thereafter. In effect, peasantries are largely missing from the first century of Friedmann and McMichael’s accounts of IFRs, other than as affected by the patterns of trade they established.¹⁰ McMichael observes that ‘the twentieth-century ideal typical model’ of ‘national agro-industrialisation’ (2009, 145, 141) was prefigured by ‘settler

⁸Wittman (2010, 92) also suggests the ‘turn of the twentieth century’ as a key moment marked by ‘the invention of the internal combustion engine and innovation in affordable gas-powered farm implements...’, while Ploeg (2013) dates the promotion/generalisation of ‘modernisation’ of farming from around the mid-twentieth century.

⁹The implicit reduction of capitalism to particular conceptions of modernity is a common Foucauldian syndrome, in which forms of ‘governmentality’ generated by different historical experiences of capitalism are treated as detached from it, as are the beliefs and practices of bureaucrats and planners who exercise ‘the rule of experts’ (Mitchell 2002).

¹⁰Not least ‘cheap’ wheat exports in the second IFR (to which they were central) and thereafter, as noted above.

states'. This is all the more poignant as in effect those states lacked peasantries, hence a need for 'peasant elimination', as Kitching put it (2001, 148 and Chapter 10 *passim*).¹¹

Second, the first IFR coincided with (1) the transition from the first to second industrial revolution, that is, from an economy based in iron, coal and steam power to one increasingly based in steel, chemicals, electricity and petroleum, which vastly accelerated the development of the productive forces in farming,¹² as well as in food processing, storage and transport: conditions of the first IFR, (2) a shift in the locus of the development of modern capitalist agriculture or 'agribusiness' (as distinct from farming, see further below) from the western European sites of early agrarian transitions to the USA (on which see Cronon 1991, Post 1995), and (3) a new tripartite international division of labour in agricultural production and trade, centred on the USA and other settler-colonial countries (Canada, Argentina, Australia), Europe, and the (mostly) colonial tropics (Friedmann and McMichael 1989).¹³

Third, there are differences between Friedmann and McMichael concerning what has replaced the second IFR, the 'mercantile-industrial food regime' (in Friedmann's term) under US hegemony from the 1940s to early 1970s. These differences are discussed by McMichael (2009, 151–4), in which he argues that a third 'corporate' IFR has consolidated, while Friedmann proposes an emergent 'corporate-environmental' food regime:

Led by food retailers, agrofood corporations are selectively appropriating demands of environmental, food safety, animal welfare, fair trade, and other social movements that arose in the interstices of the second food regime. *If it consolidates*, the new food regime promises to shift the historical balance between public and private regulation, and to widen the gap between privileged and poor consumers as it deepens commodification and marginalizes existing peasants.' (Friedmann 2005, 227–8, emphasis added)

Two points to conclude here. One is that the collapse of the second IFR in the early 1970s (Friedmann 1993) coincided exactly with the moment of the emergence of 'neoliberal globalisation' (above). The other is that McMichael now ties his analysis of food regimes, and especially the current corporate regime, to strong advocacy of FS, which connects with celebrations of 'resistance'.¹⁴

¹¹None of this means that such settler states did not engage in the violent dispossession of indigenous peoples; on the USA see Byres (1996, Ch. 5), and on slavery, while 'non-capitalist' in his view, as nonetheless central to the development of American capitalism, see Post (2003, 2011). Rosa Luxemburg's view of primitive accumulation in North America and South Africa as 'the struggle against peasant economy' signified the destruction of largely subsistence-oriented *settler* farming (1951, Ch. 29).

¹²The invention of chemical fertilisers, and other agricultural chemicals, and their impact on the productivity of land (yields); the development of scientific plant and animal breeding (facilitated by new knowledge of genetics and its applications), similarly impacting on yields; the invention of the internal combustion engine and its use in tractors and other farm machines, transforming the productivity of labour.

¹³This also corresponds, of course, to the periodisation of Lenin's *Imperialism* (1964). Coming from a different direction, Jairus Banaji (2010, 333) designates the late nineteenth century as 'the watershed of agrarian capitalism' marked by the 'rapid evolution' of the 'discernibly modern' capitalist agricultural enterprise and its labour regimes; the 'gravitational pull of European and American industry wrought changes in the distant countrysides they drew on through local trajectories of accumulation and dispossession' (Banaji 2010, 360).

¹⁴In effect, a 'greening' of food regime analysis through the 'discovery' of peasant virtue, especially as articulated by *La Via Campesina*.

'Resistance'

There are many and complex debates concerning the 'persistence of the peasantry' in the epoch of capital, including its current phase of globalisation, in which peasant 'resistance' features in different registers and on different scales:

manifested in struggles over land, rent, taxes, debt, forced cultivation, labour conscription, and the various forms of control that colonial and independent states sought to impose on small farmers in the name of progress – whether the mission of colonialism to 'civilize' peoples of colour, or 'modernizing' agriculture as an element of strategies for economic development. (Bernstein 2010a, 96, and 95–7 *passim*)

The larger and heroic scale of resistance is exemplified in Eric Wolf's *Peasant wars of the twentieth century* (1969) with its case studies of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba from the 1900s to the 1960s. The smaller, mundane, scale is exemplified by James C. Scott's *Weapons of the weak* (1985), a study of a village in Malaysia in the late 1970s. Scott argued, with intentional provocation, that the continuous and cumulative effects of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' within socially differentiated rural localities do more to improve the conditions of peasant farmers than occasional, more widely recognized, episodes of overt conflict and rebellion.

'Resistance' invoked in FS discourse resonates both these scales; on the smaller scale the commitment of peasants to continue farming in certain ways, informed by agroecological wisdom and values of autonomy, community and social justice, in the face of the corrosive effects of capital and 'modernising' states. As, it is claimed, corrosion becomes onslaught in the current neoliberal moment of intensified global enclosure/dispossession (above), then peasant resistance – to cheap food imports, land-grabbing, tendencies to market monopoly and other impositions of agribusiness on ways of farming – has become more widespread, connected and organised, leading to the heroic scale of a 'global agrarian resistance' (McMichael 2006) in which *La Vía Campesina*, in the vanguard of 'transnational agrarian movements' (Borras *et al.* 2008a), is usually credited with coining the slogan of FS.

One should also note here the more recent coinage of 'resistance of the third kind', which refers primarily to how (small) farmers exploit any 'room for manoeuvre' (or 'adaptive' rather than 'reactive' change and innovation) in the commodity markets they inhabit (Schneider and Niederle 2010). Somewhat confusingly, this is framed by Ploeg *et al.* (2012, 153–7) with reference to 'everyday forms of resistance', as restated by Kerkvliet (2009) – that is, Scott-type 'resistance' of the mundane kind – and to the Chinese notion of 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien and Li 2006).¹⁵ I return to 'resistance of the third kind' below.

And (any) 'achievements' of capitalist agriculture?

In 1750 (roughly the onset of the first industrial revolution) world population was some 750 million people (approximately half of whom were Chinese). In 1950, world population was 2.5 billion. It grew to 6 billion in the next 50 years, and is projected to rise to some 9 billion

¹⁵The most common causes of protest in rural China that O'Brien and Li (2006) consider are illegitimate types and levels of taxation demanded by various tiers and agencies of the local state, other deprivations by party and state cadres, and corrupt practices in village elections. Two of their key concerns are the analysis of opportunities for such rightful resistance and perceptions of its promises and dangers.

by the middle of this century. Such expansion was not possible without the extraordinary development of productivity in capitalist farming. As Robert Brenner (2001, 171–2) put it, only capitalism was able to generate ‘a process of self-sustaining economic development characterized by rising labour productivity in agriculture’ that overcame the two great prior obstacles in world history: the long-term tendency of population to outrun food supply and the inability of urban population, and non-agricultural labour, to grow beyond a highly limited proportion of total population, in effect phases A and B of the Malthusian cycle.¹⁶ This does not mean that the development of capitalist agriculture provides the sole explanation for the growth of world population any more than other important elements of this ‘big picture’, namely greatly improved levels of nutrition for many, if not all, and the contributions of forms of medicine generated by capitalist ‘modernity’. Nevertheless, both point towards the remarkable development of scientific knowledge and its applications in the era of capital, and the multiple and interrelated social innovations that made possible the expansion of the scale of human existence and, I would argue, its richness.

Of course, none of this is the consequence of any intent on the part of capital to improve the human condition. Its driving force, from its emergence to today, is profit, or in Marx’s terms, the necessary and ever-growing expansion of value. This works through contradictions intrinsic to, and connecting, the constitutive dynamics of capital (competition between capitals, tendencies to crisis), between capital and those it exploits (class conflict) and oppresses (democratic struggles), and between capitalism and nature (O’Connor 1998, Foster 2000, J.W. Moore 2010, 2011). Any dialectical view of the historical career of capital as both destruction and creation (Berman 1983) provides a different perspective to those binaries that view capitalism *only* as destructive.

And destructive of what? To put the question differently, and more specifically: when did the rot of capitalist agriculture set in? (1) Is it inscribed in (all) experiences of capitalist agriculture from its very beginning?¹⁷ (2) Is it inscribed in capitalism more generally? (3) Does it ‘only’ become an issue with the industrialisation of farming and/or its corporatisation and/or its globalisation (depending on how these three dimensions of contemporary capitalist agriculture are periodised, individually or jointly)? The arguments for FS, as noted, typically focus most strongly on the current period, while its most comprehensive elaborations – declaring an alternative episteme and rationality in the relations (or mutual constitution) of society and nature – point towards an affirmative answer to the first two versions of the question, hence lead to another: what was it that ‘the rot’ of capitalist agriculture set into, that is, what forms of precapitalist society?¹⁸ Were the latter always and necessarily ‘superior’ to capitalism, on social, moral and/or ecological

¹⁶Wittman (2010, 92) recognises that with the industrialisation of farming, at least from the early twentieth century (see note 8 above) ‘the ability to produce more food, faster and with less labour, became a reality’. Her timing falls exactly within the period of the first IFR, spearheaded by a ‘historically unprecedented class’ of commercial *family* farmers in the settler colonial countries (‘diasporas’) of the Americas and elsewhere (Friedmann 2005, 295–6).

¹⁷From which Duncan’s idiosyncratic and original argument dissents (Duncan 1996).

¹⁸In a sense this is to ‘scale up’ Oya’s point (2013b) that so many claims about ‘global land grabbing’ proceed without any adequate ‘baseline’ evidence of what is deemed to change (for the worse) as a result of ‘land grabs’ that actually happen. The logical implication of some ‘green’ analysis, whether explicit or implicit, is to turn the clock back on industrialisation itself (and to return to pre-industrial levels of population?).

grounds? In turn this leads to a further question, and the most central: who or what is capital's other in the current stage of world history?

Capital's other

In the discourse of FS, capital's other is personified by 'peasants', 'poor' peasants, small farmers, sometimes small- and medium-scale farmers, 'peasants, farmers, farm workers and indigenous communities' (McMichael 2010, 168), and (most generically?) 'people of the land' (Desmarais 2002). They qualify as capital's other by virtue of an ensemble of qualities attributed to them, which include their sustainable farming principles and practices, their capacity for collective stewardship of the environments they inhabit (Wittman 2010, 94), their 'peasant frugality' (McMichael 2010, 176) and 'their vision of autonomy, diversity and cooperation' versus the dependence, standardisation and competition imposed on farming by 'the forces of capital and the market' (Bello and Bavieri, in Wittman *et al.* 2010, 74). They are the bearers of 'indigenous technologies' that 'often reflect a worldview and an understanding of our relationship to the natural world that is more realistic and sustainable than those of western European heritage' (Altieri 2010, 125), and provide the basis for 'revalorizing rural cultural-ecology as a global good' (McMichael 2006, 472). All these and other such qualities combine to represent, or express, a radically different episteme to that centred in market relations and dynamics, an 'alternative modernity' to that of capitalist agriculture based in an ecologically wise and socially just rationality (McMichael 2009).

These representations, of course, are located in older, and much contested, notions of 'peasants' and a (or the) 'peasant way', proclaimed by agrarian populism, namely

the defence of the small 'family' farmer (or 'peasant') against the pressures exerted by the class agents of... capitalism – merchants, banks, larger-scale capitalist landed property and agrarian capital – and indeed, by projects of state-led 'national development' in all their capitalist, nationalist and socialist variants, of which the Soviet collectivisation of agriculture was the most potent landmark. (Bernstein 2009, 68)

Much FS advocacy amounts to a topical restatement of 'taking the part of peasants' (Williams 1976), now informed by political ecology, in a new period of globalising capitalist agriculture. As is common with (binary) conceptions of such an entity and its 'other', it is not always clear which comes first; there is always the intriguing question of the materials from which, and method by which, the other is constructed.¹⁹ In this case, I suggest, the wholly positive construction of the other incorporates an abstraction of 'peasant economy' (or 'peasant mode of production') combined with what one may term 'emblematic instances' of the practices of the peasant 'rank and file' (McMichael 2010, 168), whether within or without the FS 'movement'.²⁰ Here I confine myself to several kinds of issues concerning who the 'peasants'/small farmers/people of the land are,

¹⁹Another intriguing question, also beyond the scope of this paper, is the formation of discourse (ideology) through the mutual interactions of farmers' organisations and sympathetic intellectuals. The latter typically claim only to articulate in more scientific language what farmers already think, do, feel and say, which farmers' organisations then adopt and recycle to show that intellectuals ('experts') support their views and demands. Morena (2011) is an illuminating exploration of this dynamic in the French *Confédération Paysanne*.

²⁰The most significant theorisation of 'peasant economy' remains that of A.V. Chayanov (1966), first published in 1924–5. Chayanov was committed to the development of peasant farming through new ('modern') technologies and forms of social organisation.

before moving on to consider the kinds of measures envisaged to turn FS into a viable movement of transformation of the ‘world food system’.

Who are the ‘peasants’?

The first issue is (1) whether peasants’, ‘poor’ peasants/small farmers, sometimes small farmers or small- and medium-scale farmers or all (?) farmers, farm workers, indigenous communities, ‘people of the land’, are synonyms;²¹ (2) if so, whether they are adequate synonyms for *social* categories that we can recognise and use to think with, and (3) whether the social categories indicated, or implied, by these labels are internally coherent and useful.²² For example, are there differences between ‘peasants’ and ‘small farmers’?²³ Who are ‘poor peasants’, and does the signifier ‘poor’ distinguish those so described from others who are not ‘poor’? If so, what is the substance of that distinction?²⁴ On the other side of this ‘stretching’ of categories, are there social differences between small and medium farmers? Or does their lumping together simply serve to construct a common ‘other’ to large-scale farming?²⁵ And what of farm workers? Borras and Franco (2010, 116) note ‘the distinct class interests of the rural labourers’, and Patel (2010, 190) signals the centrality to agrarian capitalism of the relation between ‘farm owner and farm worker’ who have different interests (‘farm owner’ here presumably encompassing small and medium farmers).

²¹Jack Kloppenburg (2010a, 370) is unusual in confronting, and trying to deal with, this issue (as others): ‘Whatever their differences, all producers of horticultural and agronomic crops put seeds in the ground. A Nicaraguan *campesino* might plant soybeans by hand on half a hectare, while an Iowa farmer could be using John Deere’s DB60 planter to simultaneously sow 36 rows of soybeans on 2500 acres. But both producers could well be planting seed purchased from Monsanto – or saved from a previous harvest. They find themselves in similar structural positions in relation to Monsanto and Syngenta and DuPont...’. This statement thus encompasses *all* farmers from very small to very large, illustrated by a commodity that itself may be part of the problem for many FS advocates, and certainly when it is monocropped on 2500 acres.

²²Patel (2010, 186) notes ‘tensions between different geographies of citizenship...not only between producers and consumers but within the bloc of “small farmers” itself, along axes of power that range from patriarchy to feudalism’, although he does not pursue this further nor consider dynamics of commodification and their effects, notably differentiation (on which see below).

²³‘What constitutes a ‘small farmer’ is properly a *social*, hence relational, issue. To simply use *size* measures of farm – say, 2 ha (Altieri 2008, also cited by McMichael 2010) – across the vast range of ecological and social conditions of farming is not helpful. The ‘smallest of the small’ by average farm size is no doubt in China where 50 percent of farmers cultivate only from 0.03–0.11 ha of arable land, and less than 3 percent cultivate more than 0.67 ha, according to Li (2012, 15; see also Li *et al.* 2012). Whether such small (tiny)-scale farming offers support for the ‘peasant way’ is another matter. The extremely high yields of such small farms in China are based in irrigation, widespread use of hybrid seeds [and, increasingly, genetically modified (GM) seeds?], massive (excessive?) applications of chemical fertilisers, and extremely intensive labour. This means that gaps between yields in China and sub-Saharan Africa, say, are much greater than gaps in labour productivity (Bernstein 2012c, and calculations from Li 2012). A revised version of Bernstein (2012c) will appear in a volume edited by Lawyer Kafureka and Giuliano Martiniello, to be published by the Makerere Institute of Social Research, Kampala.

²⁴According to the claims of the ‘peasant way’, those small farmers who are willing and able to practise agroecological farming will be less poor than those who are not (see further below). One wonders if the persistence and centrality of evocations of (unspecified) ‘poor’ farmers resonate another central motif, that of their ‘exploitation’/oppression by corporate agribusiness capital.

²⁵In the interests of coalition building? And especially in farming zones in the North where *La Vía Campesina* is present or wants to be?

Are all peasants the same (doing things the same way)? #1

Do all peasants/small farmers exemplify the qualities of the ‘other’ listed above? If not, then those who do might be regarded as a kind of vanguard of the ‘peasant way’. There are occasional glimpses of this issue. For example, Miguel Altieri, a leading exponent of agroecology within FS, recognises that ‘a proportion of medium- and small-scale farmers are conventional’ (2010, 122).²⁶ He then gives the (‘emblematic’) instance of farmers using polycultures on Central America hillsides, and in the face of adverse climatic conditions thereby incurring ‘lower economic losses than *neighbours* using monocultures’ (Altieri 2010, 124–5, emphasis added).²⁷ One would like to know more about those who practise diversified farming and those (including their neighbours) who practice ‘conventional farming’: whether they differ in any significant socioeconomic terms. If not, then presumably they do what they do as a result of *choice* – ‘good’ choice and ‘bad’ choice respectively.²⁸

Further, one should ask whether the fact that some (‘vanguard’) peasants/small farmers exemplify the virtues of ‘autonomy, diversity and cooperation’ (separately or jointly) in their farming, while others do not, is a result of ‘choice’ or *lack of choice*. Certainly both are possible, but to understand when, where and why they occur (and may change), requires close investigation of the conditions of constraint and opportunity that different categories of small farmers confront. In turn this entails consideration of ecological and market conditions, and of the class differentiation of small (and medium) farmers.

²⁶And a major proportion? Elsewhere (Bernstein 2010a, 97), I noted that some ‘peasants’ in colonial Africa ‘themselves initiated new paths of specialized commodity production. Polly Hill’s study (1963) ... provides a well-known example of the self-transformation of “subsistence” farmers into commodity producers. Moreover, Hill was clear that over time the more successful [cocoa growers]...became capitalist farmers. More generally, rather than simply being either passive victims or active opponents of colonial imposition, many peasants tried to *negotiate* the shift towards commodity production (commodification of subsistence) they confronted, in more or less favourable circumstances, mobilizing larger or smaller resources of land and labour, with greater or lesser success. The same applies to responses to the impositions of “national development” following independence from colonial rule.’ A key suggestion in this passage can be extended, namely that not all small farmers are either *passive victims* or *active opponents* of neoliberal globalisation (or different phases of capitalism that preceded it). This binary of victim/resistance hero further breaks down when, as so often, the leaders of specific moments and movements of ‘resistance’ come from the ranks of the rich and middle peasantry or more successful commodity producers, for example, the central role of ‘middle peasants’ in Wolf’s political sociology of ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ (1969), and for a more recent example, the case of ‘New Farmers’ Movements’ in India in the 1980s (Brass 1994), led by rich peasants/capitalist farmers, which campaigned for better producer prices and larger input and other subsidies, much like farm lobbies in the North.

²⁷Altieri draws on a survey of hillside farmers after Hurricane Mitch in Central America, reported in Holt-Giménez (2006, 67–76); see also the latter’s careful Appendix B (Holt-Giménez 2006, 89–97), which includes some indications of reasons given for adoption and non-adoption of agroecological practices – among the latter is shortage of household labour time.

²⁸This also seems to be the thrust of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg’s proposal of ‘new peasantries’ in both South and North (2008, see especially Ch. 2 and 10), and his contrast between ‘the peasant principle’, aiming for at least ‘relative’ autonomy from markets, and ‘the entrepreneurial mode’ of farming which embraces commodity production. Both apparently are a matter of ‘choice’ (values, etc.) – again ‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively – with his most interesting discussions centred on the conditions and effects of such choice in very different types of farming. The value of his work over a long period is that it combines knowledge of farming practices – what farmers do – in different parts of the world, often from first-hand research, and taking seriously (diverse) patterns of commodification.

Are all peasants the same (doing things the same way)? #2

My basic position in this last regard is that there are no ‘peasants’ in the world of contemporary capitalist globalisation. The reasoning of this position has been argued extensively elsewhere (in most accessible fashion in Bernstein 2010a), and would be tedious to repeat here. Its principal points include processes of the ‘commodification of subsistence’ in capitalism, the transformation of peasants into petty commodity producers, the consequent internalisation of commodity relations in the reproduction of farming households, and inherent tendencies to class differentiation of petty commodity production, whether farming is practised as the sole or principal basis of household reproduction or combined with other activities – in other branches of petty commodity production (including crafts and services) and/or, most importantly, the sale of labour power. Other closely related dynamics are the (near) ubiquity of ‘off farm’ income for all classes of farmers (albeit typically from different sources, and for different purposes, according to class) – so-called ‘pluriactivity’ (below) – and of rural labour markets on which much ‘peasant’ farming depends, including in sub-Saharan Africa where it has been largely ignored in both research and policy (Oya 2013a).

All these processes generate a ‘relentless micro-capitalism’ of petty commodity production in the countryside (in the term applied by Mike Davis 2006, 181, to the urban ‘informal economy’), that long preceded the ‘macro-capitalism’ of corporate agriculture/agribusiness, if now increasingly connected with it. Of course, such processes, so schematically outlined, work in extremely diverse ways between and within different farming groups and areas and over time. Their concrete investigation, I suggest, provides an essential component of understanding who farms, in what conditions, and in what ways – issues signalled above – and how that affects how much they produce for their own consumption and for commodity exchange, hence available to non-farmers, on which more below.

One important conclusion of applying this perspective from political economy is that there are far fewer petty commodity producers able to reproduce themselves primarily, let alone exclusively, from their own farming in the world today than the numbers of ‘peasants’ claimed by FS advocates. Those numbers typically include all those who engage in some farming, however marginal, as an element in their reproduction (estimated at over 60 percent of ‘farmers’ in India, for example), and who do not contribute to the net marketed surplus of food. Sometimes such numbers also count all enumerated as ‘rural’ in censuses and surveys including those without access to land, those not engaged in (‘own account’) farming, and those who otherwise rely on ‘footloose labour’ for their reproduction (Bremen 1996). This also means that large sections of rural people in today’s South, perhaps the majority in most places, are better understood as a particular component of ‘classes of labour’ rather than ‘farmers’ in any determinate and useful sense.²⁹

²⁹Classes of labour comprise ‘the growing numbers ... who now depend – directly *and indirectly* – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction’ (Panitch and Leys 2001, ix, my emphasis). There are no reliable estimates of the numbers of rural labour migrants in the two countries with the largest ‘peasant’ populations in the world, China and India. In China official statistics count as farmers ‘those formally registered by the government as rural residents’, including some ‘150 million people registered as peasants who work away from home in industry and services ... and another 150 million who work off-farm near home’ (Huang *et al.* 2012, 142). In this extreme case, ‘rural labour beyond the farm’, as I term it, comprises perhaps some 300 million workers officially designated as ‘peasants’! On rurally-based classes of labour in India, see Lerche (2010, 2013); also Harriss-White (2012) who ‘takes the part of the petty commodity producer’, both rural and urban, while arguing that the peasantry in India has disappeared even though class differentiation in the countryside measured by agrarian accumulation is more or less frozen, in her view.

For this reason I am also sceptical about many guesstimates of the number and proportions of populations (especially non-farmers) supplied with food staples from small-scale farming, together with associated claims that because there are so many peasants/small farmers even modest increases in their output would add substantially to aggregate food supply (e.g., Altieri 2008, 2010). Is there any systematic evidence for either of these crucial positions? In posing this question I should make it clear that my scepticism does not extend to those I would classify as dynamic petty (and not so petty) commodity producers. As an agricultural economist wrote about sub-Saharan Africa:

if access to markets [as promoted by neoliberal 'reform' but long preceding it] were much or all of the story, then all farmers in any given locality should be able to benefit. But do they? Social differentiation among the peasantry is no longer a fashionable area of inquiry, so case studies published during the last decade tend to be weak on such differences. What is reported, though, confirms our worst fears: differences are substantial. When and where farm economies blossom, it seems that *the great bulk of the marketed surplus comes from a small fraction of the farmers ...* (Wiggins 2000, 638, emphasis added)

And peasant 'community'?

Peasant 'community' is another central and potent trope in (some) discourses of agrarian populism that is carried into FS. The principles attributed to it include cooperation (as above), reciprocity, egalitarianism and the values of (highly) localised identity.³⁰ Its emblematic instances frequently centre on food, for example in the sharing and exchange of seeds (Isakson 2009, Altieri 2010, Bezner Kerr 2010), pooling of labour in cultivation,³¹ and redistribution of food from households with a surplus, when this occurs, to those with a deficit, as well as instances of (political) solidarity. At the same time, 'community'

³⁰Among the many discursive functions of notions of 'community' is that of an original state of grace, whose integrity can only be violated by 'external' malevolence. This was a common trope in 'doctrines of development' (Cowen and Shenton 1996) applied in colonial Africa to try to limit class formation and manage social order, based in ostensibly indigenous authority ('indirect rule'; see also Cowen and Shenton 1991, and note 33 below). There is more than an echo of this in some populist views of the subversion of peasant community by the 'external' forces of market and state. More generally, invocations of 'community' (and the local) often seem to resemble the young Marx's view of religion as 'the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions' (Marx 1843/2009) – and the opium of some intellectuals? There is a broader theoretical issue here which can only be signalled rather than discussed further, stemming from the Chayanovian construction of 'peasant economy' from a model of the *individual* household. This generates two problems. One is the analysis of the 'inside' of the household: its mode of economic calculation or its 'logic', 'rules' and the 'balances' it strives for, in the terms of Ploeg's restatement of a Chayanovian perspective (Ploeg 2013), but *not its social relations*, most evidently those of gender which Ploeg largely omits. The other is the problem of formulating on this basis any adequate collective notion of 'peasants' beyond an aggregate of individual households. Is it significant that the collective term 'peasantry' is relatively little used these days (an exception being the title of Ploeg 2008)? 'Peasantry', in fact, tends to be applied much more, and more accurately, to those historic cases in which peasants *can* be defined as a *class* (of labour) in relation to classes and institutions of surplus-appropriating (precapitalist) landed property (feudalism, and the like). In short, there is a strategic analytical vacuum here which generalised and ideologically appealing, if little specified, notions of 'community' serve to fill (or conceal).

³¹Although pooling of labour, once a reciprocal customary practice, can become a means of 'disguised' exploitation between households differentiated as a result of commodification, as Mamdani (1987) pointed out and illustrated.

usually exemplifies a ‘strategic essentialism’ (Mollinga 2010) in FS discourse, as in populist discourse more widely, which obscures consideration of contradictions within ‘communities’.

In short, it remains (like so much else) under-theorised; whether class differentiation is strongly marked or not, ‘community’ and its reproduction is always likely to involve tensions of gender and intergenerational relations. The former are widely recognised, the latter less so.³² In their brilliant comparative essay on ‘intergenerational tensions resulting from two differently configured crises of social reproduction’ in Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone, Chauveau and Richards (2008, 546, emphasis added) conclude that

In the one case (class-stratified agrarian communities on the western flank of the Upper Guinea Forest), failure fully to incorporate a social underclass has resulted in iconoclastic violence targeting customary rural institutions.... In the other case – the egalitarian communities at the core of the UGF – room for expansion on an extensive forest frontier gave lineage heads scope to adapt custom to their financial requirements for reproducing a younger generation. Urban economic failure then forced this younger generation back home, and a crisis of reincorporation resulted.... A fundamental contrast between the ethnic violence associated with the war in Côte d’Ivoire and the class-based violence targeted against chiefly families in Sierra Leone, perpetrated by *two groups of young men otherwise similar in their poverty and hyper-mobility*, thus comes into focus.

The point, of course, is not that this applies in the same ways and in equal measure to all rural communities, rather that Chauveau and Richards theorise and distinguish, in considerable depth, two particular instances of the contradictions of rural community that may be ‘extreme’ but are not necessarily ‘exceptional’, to deploy the formulation of Mahmood Mamdani (1987). A similar point seems to be implied by Saturnino Borrás and Jennifer Franco (2010, 115, emphasis added) when they note that in many places the ‘rural poor do not have access to and/or control over land resources, which are usually under the control of landed classes, the state *or the community*’, the last presumably referring to those ‘local elites’ constituted within, or through, the social inequalities of ‘community’.³³

Capital’s (agroecological) other and its ‘emblematic instances’

There have been important developments in agroecology in recent decades that subvert inherited equilibrium concepts of environmental processes, not least in the semi-arid

³²In FS literature, see, for example, Bezner Kerr (2010) and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem terra (Landless Workers Movement - MST) activist Itelvina Masioli, who emphasises ‘all the patriarchal values that are so strong in our rural societies’ (Masioli and Nicholson 2010, 41). Theorising gender relations involves more than acknowledging their centrality, of course; for a fine example of confronting the intricate ways in which gender and class dynamics intersect in a particular social context, see O’Laughlin (2009).

³³This is a hot topic in South Africa and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, because of the (growing?) claims on ‘community’ land and other resources made by chiefs – on South Africa, see Claassens (2013), and, on Ghana, Grischow (2008), who shows the alarming replay of ideologies of colonial indirect rule in the 1920s and 1930s in today’s development discourses of ‘community’ and its ‘social capital’. In her essay on Malawi, Rachel Bezner Kerr (2010, 134, 147) suggests that ‘the social dynamics surrounding seeds are an important element in struggles for food sovereignty between men and women, different generations, [and] communities’ as well as ‘the state, scientists and private corporations’, and that while ‘Community and kin networks remain a viable and important source of seed for many smallholder farmers... these networks are fraught with contestations that leave landless peasants, young women and AIDS-affected families with less access and control over seed’.

tropics, and contribute to a better understanding of the farming practices of those who inhabit them. For sub-Saharan Africa, a key work in this respect was the long-term historical study by Fairhead and Leach (1996) of the ‘forest-savanna mosaic’, albeit a study limited by its neglect of political economy as was much of a collection they inspired to challenge ‘received wisdom on the African environment’ (Leach and Mearns 1996, and see Bernstein and Woodhouse 2001). Interestingly, some key ‘emblematic instances’ of the virtues of small-scale farming centre on areas of high population densities, for example ‘along the Sahara’s edge, in Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Kenya’ (Lim 2008), and in the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso and southern Niger (Reij 2006; both authors cited by McMichael 2010).

All this research contributes to longstanding debate between views of Africa as both ‘over-populated’ and ‘under-populated’. The former is associated with Malthusian ‘crisis narratives’ of environmental degradation (‘over-grazing’ and ‘desertification’, ‘deforestation’ in the expansion of cultivation frontiers). The latter is associated with various counter-Malthusian currents. For example, Boserup (1965) famously associated African female-centred farming systems with low population densities, hence the lack of demographic pressure on land-intensive types of technical innovation, while the study of Machakos District in Kenya by Tiffen *et al.* (1994) reported a six-fold growth of population over six decades with increases in the productivity of land as well as growth of incomes, signalled in the title of their book as *More people, less erosion*.³⁴

This study serves as an emblematic instance for Lim (2008), although he does not cite it (and strangely includes Machakos on the edge of the Sahara). How convincingly Tiffen *et al.* (1994) provide an example of capital’s other is another matter. First, their thesis is that this happy outcome – ‘Malthus controverted’ (Tiffen and Mortimore 1994) – is driven by neither agroecological nor ‘community’ values but is the result of farmers seizing *market* opportunities and investing in conservation to enhance land-intensive productivity and the profit it yields, helped by provision of such public goods as education which do not ‘distort’ market signals. In short, they did not see farmers in Machakos as capital’s other but rather as exemplars of *Homo economicus*. Second, and putting aside this interpretation, a subsequent study by Andrew Murton (1999) presented three strategic qualifications to the *evidence* for the Tiffen thesis. First, he investigated the distribution of non-farm income, of investment in conservation and farm productivity, and of land, in Machakos, which revealed aspects of social differentiation missed (or ignored) by Tiffen and her co-workers.³⁵ Second, funds from urban employment provided the strategic source of farm and conservation investment. Third, this has an important historical/generational aspect (easily and often overlooked), namely that the pioneers of such investment were in a far stronger position to reproduce and expand their farming enterprises than poorer contemporaries and subsequent generations. Murton presents a picture of Machakos comprising both Boserup-type innovation under demographic pressure and productivity growth by wealthier farmers (the success story highlighted by Tiffen) and a reproduction

³⁴Note also Clark and Haswell (1964), one of a number of counter-Malthusian, and indeed natalist, texts by the Roman Catholic Clark, a pioneering economic statistician and development economist, in this case co-authored with an agricultural economist of West Africa. The ‘under-population’ position has been overtaken by current rates of demographic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, the highest of any major region, as are its rates of urbanisation (Severino and Ray 2011). Pauline Peters (2004) provides a valuable survey and analysis of class and other social dynamics driving increasing conflict over land in sub-Saharan Africa.

³⁵See also the critical comments by Dianne Rocheleau (1995).

squeeze on the poor who experience ‘a detrimental and involutory cycle of declining yields, declining soil fertility and diminishing returns to labour, as first phase conservation and productivity gains are overtaken by population growth’ (Murton 1999, 34). This example illustrates issues of political economy that need to be investigated for (other) ‘emblematic instances’ of the rationality (‘good practice’) of (undifferentiated) ‘peasants’/small farmers claimed by FS advocates.³⁶

This applies to another pertinent African example, concerning land rehabilitation and water conservation in the Sahel following the droughts of the 1970s, presented as an emblematic instance of peasant ‘adaptation’ to adverse ecological conditions by McMichael, above, citing a two-page presentation by Reij (2006). In a fuller study, published by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (a CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) institution), Reij *et al.* (2009, 1) analyse ‘two agro-environmental success stories in the West African Sahel’: ‘the relatively well-documented story of farmer-managed soil and water conservation...in the densely populated Central Plateau of Burkina Faso’, and ‘the still incompletely documented story of farmer-managed restoration of agroforestry parklands in heavily populated parts of Niger’ since the mid-1980s. They attribute success to a ‘win-win’ coalition of ‘charismatic leaders, both farmers and development agents’ who ‘played key roles in diffusing the innovations’, Reij *et al.* (2009, 9) supportive government policy and public investment, the role of NGOs, and Dutch, German, IFAD and World Bank project funding; in short, a rather broader coalition of actors than the peasants exclusively highlighted by McMichael (2010, 175–6) – and a coalition that transgresses the boundaries of the FS binary?

Whatever the achievements of land rehabilitation in the Sahel, they are highly labour-intensive and the aggregate yield gains reported by Reij *et al.* (2009) in a region of growing population, and population density, do not suggest a sizeable surplus available to feed non-farmers.³⁷ The last also applies to a different kind of emblematic instance, in a very different context, provided by Ryan Isakson’s account (2009) of *milpa* – maize, legumes, squash and herb polyculture – in the highlands of Guatemala. He argues that *milpa* cultivation contributes to (global) ‘food sovereignty’ through the ‘conservation of agrodiversity’. At the same time, he shows that it is ‘subsistence-oriented’ and ‘self-sufficient’, and combined by those who practise it with the sale of labour power, increasingly through long-distance labour migration, and petty commodity production in farming and crafts (as well as active involvement in land markets, both locally and further afield in Guatemala). In effect, the reproduction of *milpa* cultivation is possible only through (necessary) engagement in commodity relations. How, and how much, its practitioners are able to negotiate such engagement may leave them some space for ‘choice’, including their rejection of ‘the complete commodification of food’ and the uncertainties of dependence on markets for obtaining food (Isakson 2009, 755). However, and the other side of this same coin, *milpa* cultivation does *not*

³⁶In this respect, contrast, for example, the study by Fairhead and Leach (1996), cited earlier, with that of H.L. Moore and Vaughan (1994). The issues advised here are exemplified in a new generation of theoretically informed and empirically grounded agrarian political economy, for example, the important series of articles on Senegal by Carlos Oya (2001, 2004, 2007); see also Mueller (2011), Oya’s more general surveys of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (2010, 2012), and the excellent survey of Southeast Asia by Hall *et al.* (2011).

³⁷Also, the ‘relatively high labour demand of “improved indigenous” methods used in the Sahel to bring “degraded” soils back into cultivation – between 40 and 80 work-days per hectare treated with *tassa* or *zwai* pits – will evidently strongly favour those capable of hiring labour’ (Woodhouse 2012, 109).

contribute to FS in the sense of producing food surplus to the needs of those who pursue 'self-provisioning'.

In short, what I termed above an abstract and unitary conception of 'peasants' is actualised in FS discourse through farming practices that exemplify their virtues as capital's other: the 'emblematic instance' of agroecological principles at work. Many (most?) of these instances or illustrations concern what Robert Chambers (1983) called 'resource poor farmers' who, in his conception, typically inhabit difficult (and remote) rural environments, thereby leaving out those who are 'resource poor' because of processes of differentiation.³⁸ These emblematic instances deployed by FS are usually short on socioeconomic detail (Isakson being an exception), but they suggest that (1) virtuous farming is practised mainly by the poorest farmers who confront major ecological and social constraints rather than 'choosing' to farm how they do and 'choosing' to remain poor, *pace* the virtues of 'frugality';³⁹ (2) what they do is mostly low-(external) input and highly labour-intensive 'subsistence' farming – precisely the virtues acclaimed by FS, and undoubtedly requiring great knowledge, ingenuity and skill,⁴⁰ and/or (3) a key condition of possibility of these ways of farming is activity in, and income from, other types of integration in commodity relations, and especially labour migration (often not reported or considered).

For FS, those viewed as the rearguard of farmers, the standard of 'backwardness', in conventional narratives of modernity, become the vanguard; in Robert Chambers' biblical invocation, 'putting the last first' (1983). When capital's (agroecological) other is exemplified by practices of 'subsistence', 'self-sufficiency' and 'self-provisioning' versus surplus production, this suggests a fundamental problem for FS.

A different kind of emblematic instance is provided by a sub-category of farmers different from the great majority in arid West Africa and Central American uplands. They are no doubt mostly 'dynamic petty (and not so petty) commodity producers' (above), held to exemplify Ploeg's 'peasant principle', that is, they aim to (1) minimise external inputs, hence the degree of their integration in upstream markets (domination by upstream capitals), (2) find ways of selling their commodities other than in markets dominated by food 'Empire' capitals, and (3) create new (commodity) products and services, both food and non-food (e.g., agro-tourism). This is the space of 'resistance of the third kind', manifested in 'adaptive' change and innovation as noted earlier, on which I can only comment briefly here.

First, one must note that some of these emblematic instances centre on highly specialised commodity production, like the Parmesan cheese and *Chianina* beef producers of Italy (Ploeg *et al.* 2012). Second, some rely on state support of various kinds, and indeed small- (and medium-) farmer-friendly policies and funding are a central plank of (new) 'Rural Development' (Ploeg *et al.* 2012). Third, spaces of 'room for manoeuvre' in markets are

³⁸Indeed the (second) 'emblematic instance' of land reclamation in the Sahel (above) fits very well with concerns and programmes within 'mainstream' development to reach and support 'resource poor farmers', and to ameliorate/end rural poverty, especially when this proceeds through 'participatory' methods of research, innovation and community mobilisation, of which Chambers (1983, Chambers *et al.* 1989) has long been a leading advocate.

³⁹And, of course, 'choosing' to leave the countryside and/or to leave farming, not the same thing as Murphy's ethnography of Wanzai County, Jiangxi Province, China, shows so well (Murphy 2002). For different views of rural out-migration as an issue in the generational reproduction of farming by two scholars of Southeast Asia, see Rigg (2006) and White (2011).

⁴⁰As well as 'drudgery', in Chayanov's term. Kitching (2001, 147) suggests that peasants are 'the historically classical and demographically dominant example of people who are poor *because* they work so hard'.

a concern for capitals of all scales – large, medium and small. Some large-scale farmers, depending on circumstances, have shifted to low- and no-tillage cultivation when subject to cost-price inflation of machinery and fuel. Fourth, the pragmatic edge of ‘resistance of the third kind’/‘rightful resistance’ is subsumed, together with many types of economic calculation and practice, under the encompassing belief that what unites all farmers, at least potentially, is the pursuit of more or less significant ‘autonomy’ from markets, their ‘dull compulsions’ (in Marx’s term) and disciplines. This claim from first principles that what farmers do (throughout modern history? history *tout court*?) is driven by the desire for autonomy is a matter of faith, in which there are believers and non-believers. Fifth is the vexed question of so-called ‘pluriactivity’ (a term of bureaucratic resonance and maybe provenance too?), and the highly contentious assumption that periodic or regular waged and salaried work is a(nother) kind of *choice* that rural families make in order to continue to produce, and to live, as more or less autonomous/independent farmers.⁴¹ This leads Ploeg and Ye (2010) to a strikingly benign interpretation of rural labour migration and its driving forces in China since the 1980s.⁴²

Finally, the principal thrust here is again to champion the success of yield-enhancing types of farming, largely ignoring issues of labour productivity which, nonetheless, is likely to be substantially higher in emblematic instances of the second kind than of the first.⁴³

Transforming the world food system?

FS aims for an ‘ecological basis of citizenship’, an ‘agrarian citizenship’ that responds to ‘specialization with diversification, to efficiency with sufficiency and to commoditization with sovereignty’ (Wittman 2010, 91, 95) and calls for a radical ‘democratization of the food system in favour of the poor and underserved’ (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2010, 76, also McMichael 2010, 174), that includes relocalising markets and governance (Fairbairn 2010, 27). How this might be achieved includes the challenges of regulating transnational agribusiness and international trade in order to ‘protect’ ‘domestic food production’ and small farmers as ‘guardians of the commons’ (McMichael 2010, 170–2), and the challenges for ‘agrarian citizens’ to enact ‘horizontal relationships within and between communities (social capital) and local ecologies (ecological capital) as well as connecting vertically with broader communities encompassing “humanity” and the “environment”’ (Wittman 2010, 103).⁴⁴ A common term for realising the ambitions of the passage from local to national and global is ‘scaling up’.

⁴¹A step forward, in my view, would simply be to replace ‘pluriactivity’ with the descriptive term ‘part-time farmers’. The latter, of course, would contain a very wide range of types in class and other social terms from, say, urban professionals who do ‘weekend farming’ to the marginal farmers/‘footloose labour’ of the countryside of the South. They could then be identified, distinguished, researched and explained more adequately, rather than subsumed as so many instances of ‘pluriactivity’.

⁴²Interpretations of change in contemporary rural China as part of a process of primitive accumulation, variously conceived but centred on industrial and urban development, are provided by Harvey 2003, Walker and Buck 2007, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin 2010, and Webber 2012; see also Rachel Murphy’s ethnography of *How migrant labour is changing rural China* (2002; cited in note 39 above) and note 29 above.

⁴³Schneider and Niederle (2010, 390, note 11) point out that one ‘Rural Development’ initiative, Brazil’s ‘More Food Programme – linked to the second kind of emblematic instance – ‘financed the purchase of almost 13,000 tractors for family farmers across the country’ in the space of nine months.

⁴⁴To characterise local farming systems in terms of ‘social capital’ and ‘ecological capital’ is a discursive own goal – seeing like capital? (McMichael 2009, 162).

Farming and agriculture

It is useful to start here with a distinction between ‘farming’ and ‘agriculture’, alluded to earlier but not yet explained. While farming is what farmers do and have always done – with all the historical diversity of forms of farm production, their social and ecological conditions and practices, labour processes, and so on – agriculture or the ‘agricultural sector’ emerged in the period of industrial capitalism from the 1870s sketched above, and was manifested in the first IFR. By ‘agriculture’ I mean

farming *together with* all those economic interests, and their specialized institutions and activities, ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ of farming that affect the activities and reproduction of farmers. ‘Upstream’ refers to how the conditions of production are secured before farming itself can begin. This includes the supply of instruments of labour or ‘inputs’ (tools, fertilizers, seeds) as well as markets for land, labour, and credit – and crucially, of course, the mobilization of labour. ‘Downstream’ refers to what happens to crops and animals when they leave the farm – their marketing, processing and distribution and how those activities affect farmers’ incomes, necessary to reproduce themselves. Powerful agents upstream and downstream of farming in capitalist agriculture today are exemplified by agri-input capital and agro-food capital respectively. (Bernstein 2010a, 65 and Ch. 4 *passim*)

This gives an analytical purpose to the distinction, which I have followed consistently in the text of this paper, rather than the common practice of using ‘farming’ and ‘agriculture’ as synonyms.

The distinction is highly relevant to any FS programme, and also points towards another fundamental problem signalled earlier. First, capital’s other in FS discourse centres above all (and sometimes, it seems, exclusively) on (re-)affirming particular types of *farming* against *agriculture* in the forms of its most recent development: corporate, industrial and global. What then are its programmatic proposals?

‘Scaling up’ #1

The answer appears more straightforward, ‘upstream’ when the model of virtue is farming that is intensive in terms of (indigenous) knowledge *and* labour, and using ‘organic and local resources’ hence independent of ‘external inputs’, especially agro-chemicals (Altieri 2010, 120). In effect, little is required upstream than cannot be sourced locally, and enhanced via the ‘scaling up’ of ‘farmer-to-farmer’ networks to share and disseminate knowledge of agroecological good practices, including sharing seeds.⁴⁵ At the same time, it is often explicit that the goal of this type of farming is indeed self-provisioning of households and local communities, for which food sovereignty guarantees their food security (and social reproduction).

‘Scaling up’ #2

There remain two further critical questions, therefore. The first, already touched on, is whether a surplus to their own food needs, and how much of a surplus, low (external)-

⁴⁵ ‘Family’ labour supply as an ‘upstream’ constraint is often overlooked, though see notes 27, 31 and 37 above; also, for example, in Brazil ‘When the [MST] communities...do achieve access to land, the huge majority hardly have enough labour power’ (Masioli and Nicholson 2010, 36). A major issue lurking here, hinted at earlier and that remains unavoidable, and perhaps irresolvable, for a general (Chayanovian-type) model, is the supply and uses of labour, and returns to labour, within the individual ‘family’ labour farm.

input, labour-intensive producers, geared to ‘self-provisioning’ (and autonomy), can provide to those who are not food growers, the majority of the world’s population today, to satisfy their food security. Even supposing that an adequate surplus was possible, the second question that follows is the downstream one: how will that surplus reach non-farmers and on what terms? In effect, the rather large jump in ‘scaling up’ from individual and local small farm production to feeding ‘broader communities’ like ‘humanity’ (*sic*, Wittman, 2010) points to ‘the market question’ in which capitalism registers an unprecedented achievement in human history, resolving Phase B of the Malthusian cycle (above) if, as always, in profoundly contradictory and unequal ways. This also points to relations between the (non-identical) pairings/oppositions of rural and urban, and agricultural and industrial, on which FS has little to say to date, other than to remark on the predatory nature of the urban on the rural, and to hope that ‘protecting’ more labour-intensive (and presumably more remunerative) small-scale farming would help stem migration from the countryside (and encourage ‘re-peasantisation’). Some FS advocates recognise the urgency of the downstream, for example, ‘Food sovereignty was not designed as a concept only for farmers, but for people...[there is a] need to strengthen the urban-rural dialogue’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010, 7, quoting *La Via Campesina*), and FS advocates ‘technical and material alternatives that suit the needs of small-scale producers and low-income consumers’ Altieri (2010, 129).

However, does FS have any answer to the downstream question, other than formulations of more ‘equitable’ (socially or nationally ‘owned’?) markets: ‘the right of nations and peoples to control...their own own markets’ (Wittman *et al.* 2010, p. 2), ‘marketing and processing activities’ that operate through ‘equitable market opportunities’: ‘fair trade, local commercialization and distribution schemes, fair prices and other mechanisms that link farmers and consumers and consumers more directly and in solidarity’ (Altieri 2010, 130), and so on? This is a wish list that slides past, rather than confronts, the contradictions intrinsic to all commodity relations and markets, and expresses the larger problem of FS before the central issue, explained so clearly by Woodhouse (2010). That concerns the relationships between (1) the productivity of labour in farming, (2) farm incomes, and (3) food prices for those who have to buy their food (including many rural people) – what can (approximately) be termed the questions of production, rural poverty and food distribution.

The first, productivity of labour, is key because it focuses attention on how many people each person farming (or farming household, community, etc.) can feed beyond satisfying her/their own food security.⁴⁶ This does not require embracing any ‘hyper-productivity’ of labour in industrial agriculture (Weis 2010), but it does require avoiding the fetish of the inverse relationship of farm size and yield (commended by Altieri 2010, 122; see Woodhouse 2010 and references therein). The second element – farm incomes – is, or should be, central to the FS programme [as it is to Ploeg’s (2013) ‘Chayanovian manifesto’; Altieri (2010), 126, 130, on the ‘very poor’, also emphasising rural employment creation], however tempered by favoured ‘values’ of frugality and sufficiency; indeed, as noted earlier, it resonates a longstanding concern within ‘standard’ development

⁴⁶Acknowledged implicitly by Altieri (2010, 126–8) who contrasts the case (limiting case, in my view) of (now rare) *chinampa* wetland cultivation of maize in Mexico from which ‘each farmer can support twelve to fifteen people’, with terrace cultivation in highland southern Peru ‘requiring about 350–500 worker days per hectare in a given year’. Most cultivation by poor farmers in the South, like the large numbers in the arid and semi-arid tropics, comes much closer to Altieri’s second example of labour intensity (and productivity) than his first example.

discourse to ameliorate/end rural poverty (famously, Lipton 1977 and the debate on 'urban bias' it provoked; see more recently IFAD 2011). The third element centres on how markets would work, and what kinds of market reforms could plausibly meet the needs of *both* small farmers and food consumers, especially low-income consumers (Altieri 2010). If capital has a long history of sacrificing ecology in order to make food 'cheap' (to reduce the reproduction costs of labour, hence wages), the vast numbers of poor (net) food consumers today, urban and rural, need affordable as well as adequate supplies of (healthy) food. The most obvious way to try to end the poverty of small farmers is to *subsidise* their production; there are various historical examples of this, and it is recommended once more in contemporary conditions by Julio Boltvinik (2012).⁴⁷ Other things being equal, however, this would raise the price of food (as Boltvinik recognises), hence a need too to *subsidise* the food requirements of the vast numbers of poor consumers (of which there are also some experiences). This seems to be a nettle that FS prefers to avoid grasping. It certainly implies a central role for governments that I come back to shortly.

Traditional and modern technologies

Altieri (2010) uses the term 'traditional' comprehensively to characterise and commend the virtues of 'peasant'/small-scale farming, and the agroecological wisdom accumulated in its knowledges and practices. Its productivity 'may be low, but the cause appears to be social, not technical' (Altieri 2010, 126), although what this means is not clear. Beyond enhancing the capacities of small farmers based in 'tradition' through farmer-to-farmer 'scaling up', he also refers to 'the millions of poor farmers yet untouched by modern agricultural technology' (Altieri 2010, 131), although it is not clear here whether he considers this a good thing or a bad thing. If the latter, then what 'modern agricultural technology' might poor farmers benefit from, and how will it reach them?

Probably the single most potent focus of current dispute concerning the virtues and vices of 'traditional' and 'modern' technologies is GM seed. GMOs are almost universally condemned by FS, but a more nuanced view is found in the innovative and careful work of Jack Kloppenburg. In exploring the concept of 'seed sovereignty' as a programmatic possibility in the form of a 'protected' versus 'open access' commons, he points to a wider potential constituency than farmers, especially progressive plant scientists (one of the inspirations of ideas about 'open source' seed innovation, exchange and multiplication). He also advises rethinking 'rejectionist positions towards the techniques and products of biotechnology... A failure to distinguish between biotechnology and *corporate* biotechnology has too often led to impoverishment of debate' along the fault lines of binary utopias and dystopias (Kloppenburg 2010a, 381). Kloppenburg's approach suggests a perspective on farming

⁴⁷Boltvinik's paper will be published in a forthcoming collection from Zed Books, edited by him, Farshad Araghi and Susan Archer Mann, which also contains a revised version of Bernstein (2012b) that engages with Boltvinik's argument concerning 'peasant persistence and poverty'. More generally, the exposure of farmers to the vagaries of both subsidy regimes and price fluctuations seems to have been considered more concretely for market dynamics in the North, for example, by Nicholson (Masioli and Nicholson 2009, 40) on milk production in the Basque country where 'the bad news is that we are losing a lot of farmers today. And not only small family farmers, but big farmers also cannot compete'. He also points to the problem of European countries like Austria and France that have (some) policies apparently conducive to sustainability and others that encourage agro-industry and competitive export agriculture.

technologies that transcends the binary of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, itself inherited from much criticised paradigms of ‘modernisation’.⁴⁸

And the state...

This is really ‘the elephant in the room’ of the programmatic aspirations of FS, and one little problematised or explored beyond appeals to states to intervene to support small farmers, and more broadly to resolve the ‘tensions between socially equitable development and ecologically sound conservation’ (Altieri 2010, 131). This would encompass a range of effective policies and practices, from regulating international (and domestic) trade in food commodities, to protecting and promoting small-scale farming, to ‘scaling up’ from the local to the national – *and* to subsidise both (small) farm incomes and consumer prices for food sourced from small farmers (above)? – in short, a list of demands that no modern state has satisfied.

This appeal to such comprehensive and progressive state action is launched in a historical context in which most states most of the time are deeply implicated in the ongoing march of capitalism (and once state socialism) ‘against the peasant’, as some FS analyses emphasise. Indeed, as indicated earlier, the immediate target of much agrarian populism historically – as movements as well as ideology – was not capitalism but rather the state. Perhaps this is why McMichael (2010, 171, emphasis added) describes ‘agrarian citizenship’ as a ‘*tactic*’ appealing to the authority of the state to protect farmers’, albeit a ‘*tactic*’ that has to confront a fundamental *strategic* lacuna in any plausible political programme.⁴⁹

There are few examples to date of governments claiming to adopt FS. Wittman *et al.* (2010a, 9) provide a summary of Ecuador where the ‘Organic Law on the Food Sovereignty Regime’ in 2009 was partly vetoed by the country’s president ‘citing concerns about the ban on GMOs, consequences of changes in land ownership structures and issues related to the production of agrofuels’. Moreover, the month before the law on FS, the National Assembly passed a new Mining Law ‘to spur extraction in new areas by national and international companies’. Probably Venezuela is a more appropriate test case, with very different assessments of its experience in pursuit of (national) FS since the late 1990s by Schiavoni and Camacaro (2009) and Kappeler (2013).⁵⁰

⁴⁸If now stood on its head: from modern ‘good’/traditional ‘bad’ to traditional ‘good’/modern ‘bad’. This is a common effect of how such binaries work in the construction of ideology; see also Oya (2013b, 514–5).

⁴⁹He continues that agrarian citizenship is ‘a strategic intervention in the politics of development insofar as it advocates for peasant-farmer rights to *initiate* social reproduction of the economic and ecological foundations of society’ – an eloquent formulation that makes no advance concerning the modalities of achieving the (programmatic) aim it articulates.

⁵⁰Analysing the effects of government policies always presents demands of methods and evidence. A topical instance relevant here is the critical assessment of the FAO’s latest *State of Food Insecurity* (2012) by a collective organised by Small Planet (2013). The latter suggests seven countries as examples of reducing hunger significantly, a somewhat unlikely group comprising Ghana, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, China and Bangladesh (and from which Venezuela is absent). Their success is attributed to progressive policies concerning farming and/or social protection, and the report cites Oxfam (2010) as one of its sources. Here is part of what Oxfam (2010, 25–6, emphases added) said about Vietnam: ‘The take-off started with agricultural land reform, followed by labour-intensive manufacturing development and, more recently, promotion of electronics and high-tech sectors in *the hope of becoming an industrialized country by 2020. Integration into the global market* facilitated the increases in exports and foreign investment. Once a rice importer, Viet Nam

And some boundary issues

FS distances itself from other perspectives on farming, agriculture and food, to reinforce its distinctiveness and its radicalism – to guard its ‘boundaries’, so to speak. Thus its central binary: agroecological ‘peasant’ farming versus corporate industrial agriculture, the (rural) local versus the global of capital, sustainability versus unsustainability, and so on. One important instance of this is the opposition to ‘food security’ as articulated by ‘mainstream’ international organisations (e.g., Fairbairn 2010, McMichael 2010). Another is the dangers of the ‘greening’ of agribusiness and parts of its food system to defuse the demands of environmental movements and to maintain/expand market shares and profits (Fairbairn 2010, 18, citing Friedmann 2005). More specific examples include warnings against the seductions of promoting niche production in the South for the higher end of Northern consumer markets (Altieri 2010, 130–1), ‘green’ land-grabbing that displaces farmers (and pastoralists), turning them into ‘conservation refugees’ (Wittman 2010, 102, see also Brockington 2009, and the contributions to the themed issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(2), Fairhead *et al.* 2012); the methods of ‘climate proofing’ advocated by ‘the development industry...as a new profit frontier’ (McMichael 2010, 174), and the problems of ostensibly more inclusive (private) property rights in biological materials (Kloppenburger 2010b).

However, the radical project of FS cannot be adequately imagined, let alone feasibly pursued, while ignoring or bypassing so much of the agrarian history of the modern world, other than to frame it through selective aspects of agriculture in contemporary neo-liberal globalisation, and sometimes in the longer histories of ‘capitalism against the peasant’. Several relevant examples noted in passing include the apparently dismissive stance of FS advocates towards the wide range of perspectives and policies concerning farming and agriculture in modern history, and the rich and complex *experiences* of their operation, for example, in support of the interests of (small) farmers/petty commodity producers and/or food consumers, or against them, or – as is so common, or ubiquitous – contradictory in their conceptions, modalities, and effects.

As a political project, FS both promotes emblematic instances of (organised) political ‘resistance’ (among others, Desmarais 2002, McMichael 2006, Wittman 2010 on campaigns against ‘green deserts’) and confronts a classic issue of radical politics: how the FS movement positions itself in relation to the established powers of states and international bodies (the UN, the FAO, IFAD, the CGIAR, the World Bank) in order to try to push them in the direction it desires, with all the dangers of co-option and compromise, of the blurring of boundaries, that might entail.⁵¹

From project to programme?

The ‘downstream’ problem is well stated by Altieri (2010, 128–9, emphases added):

is now the *second biggest exporter* in the world. How has this been achieved? Public support to small-holder agriculture was an important factor. The de-collectivization of property and the *opening up to fertilizer imports (use of which tripled due to lower prices)* allowed food production to increase exponentially.’

⁵¹In the specific case of the struggle against agrofuels, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2010, 87) attempt to grasp this nettle with their (unlikely) suggestion that there are ‘potential allies from those sectors in the food and energy industries (e.g., some petroleum companies, the meat industry and supermarket chains) that oppose agrofuels’ albeit that they also ‘seek to concentrate their own power over food systems’.

The development of sustainable agriculture requires significant structural changes *in addition to* technological innovation and farmer-to-farmer solidarity. This is impossible without *social movements* that create the *political* will among decision-makers to dismantle and transform the institutions and regulations that presently hold back sustainable agricultural development...ecological change in agriculture cannot be promoted without comparable *changes in the social, political, cultural and economic* arenas that conform [sic] and determine agriculture.⁵²

Here I can only note the complexities inherent in the sociology of such movements, and that bear on the politics of forging and pursuing a viable programme. Some of that analytical agenda has been well defined by some FS advocates, or at least sympathisers, concerning movements at local and national levels (e.g., Edelman 2002, Conclusion) and transnationally (e.g., Borras *et al.* 2008b). One aspect of complexity is the intricate class contours of ‘peasant’ countrysides, how they intersect with inequalities of gender, generation and ethnicity (for example, *indigènes* and ‘strangers’ in so many rural locales in sub-Saharan Africa), and the effects for multi-class social movements. Another aspect of complexity is the diverse range of issues and sometimes conflicting goals – more and less specific, larger and smaller, bearing on different social interests – that are bracketed together as expressions of a unitary ‘peasant way’.

A different issue in the construction of a (global) social movement focussed on a common programme is that of international leadership, organisation and direction, especially in the face of the massively concentrated powers invested or complicit in the global food system, and the global effects of its ‘accelerating biophysical contradictions’. Here it is striking that one of *La Vía Campesina*’s ‘central characteristics is the in-principle absence of a policy-making secretariat...of a sovereign authority dictating what any member organization can do’ (Patel 2010, 193). There may be very sound grounds for this, philosophically and practically, but it also has consequences, as indicated by Joan Martinez-Alier. A central foundation of his construction of Ecological Economics is the incommensurability of values, hence opposition to the market-based ‘pricing’ (or shadow pricing) of environmental ‘goods’ and effects central to conventional Environmental Economics. Nonetheless, he concludes *The environmentalism of the poor* (Martinez-Alier 2002, 271, emphasis added) with a notion of ‘procedural power which, in the face of complexity is able nevertheless to *impose* a language of valuation determining which is the bottom-line in an ecological distribution conflict’, and then asks ‘Who then has the power to decide the procedure ... ? Who has the power to simplify complexity, ruling some languages of valuation out of order?’. Could it be that a new FS ‘International in the making’ or ‘global agrarian resistance’ needs a politbureau after all?

Conclusion

This paper concludes, for better or worse, with a stronger scepticism about aspects of FS than I had when I started writing it, albeit with considerably more interest in, and sympathy for, its agroecologists, their empirical knowledge of what farmers do and their activities as practitioners, than for its aspirations to ‘grand theory’ and its feel-goodism, sacrificing pessimism of the intellect to optimism of the will.⁵³ The grounds for that scepticism, I trust, are clear. They include a critique of any ‘peasant way’, of beliefs that ‘peasants’

⁵²And Patel (2010, 194): ‘the prerequisites [for FS]...are a society in which the equality-distorting effects [sic] of sexism, patriarchy, racism and class power have been eradicated’.

⁵³On which see, in a different context, some sharp reflections by Michael Burawoy (2010, 2011), on which I draw in Bernstein (2013b).

practising low (external)-input and labour-intensive farming, can feed current and projected world population, and of a failure of FS on the ‘downstream’ side necessary to move it forward from its constitutive binary, thesis and antithesis, towards a synthesis that yields a programme of ‘transformation’. Moreover, I have argued that this failure is *intrinsic* given that FS discards crucial elements of agrarian political economy, of the political economy of capitalism more broadly, and of modern history, in order to establish its thesis and especially its antithesis: capital’s other. And I have found the failure particularly surprising, and alarming, in relation to both the theorisation and historical investigation of the conditions of reproduction of peasantries (small farmers/petty commodity producers), including the lack of socioeconomic analysis of those acclaimed for their agroecological virtue. This might, in part, be an effect of the role in providing a key analytical ‘frame’ for FS of food regime analysis, given that its origins are located above all in the shaping of world food markets by the development of export agriculture in ‘settler colonies’ that lacked peasantries (as noted earlier).⁵⁴

However, this scepticism is *not* a rejection of all that FS advocacy points to and bundles together. First, FS is only one instance, albeit a potent one, in challenging materialist (agrarian) political economy to take environmental change seriously, and in doing so to abandon mechanistic conceptions of farming in its own heritage (see Bernstein 2010b). Second, as noted, FS sweeps up so many topical issues and instances of struggle on which one can take a differentiated, and sympathetic, stance without accepting the overarching (‘totalising’?) ambition of FS to transform the world food system via capital’s other. Examples range from opposition to the inequalities of international trade in food and other agricultural commodities (and its highly selective ‘liberalisation’) and to aspects of international agribusiness, to support for resistance to ‘land grabbing’ for food farming, agrofuels, and mining. Such resistance is typically socially heterogeneous, involving multi-class movements, whose assessment always requires a ‘concrete analysis of a concrete situation’ rather than the (‘verificationist’) accumulation and celebration of the ‘emblematic instance’. What counts here, as always, is trying to grasp the social dynamics and contradictions that generate such movements and that pervade them. Third, scepticism about FS does not preclude support for some instances of redistributive land reform, nor for those among (rurally-based) classes of labour whose farming, however marginal, is often crucial to their reproduction.⁵⁵ The point is that sympathy and solidarity in all such instances does not have to be predicated on, nor lead to, any belief in humanity’s salvation through small-scale farming, and indeed is obscured by it.

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⁵⁴It might also be seen as ‘ethnocentric’ in this respect, as Peter Mollinga suggested to me (personal communication). The colonies in question were those of European settlement, and farming in Asia and Africa is largely ignored (more so perhaps than Latin America given its proximity to the North American epicentre of the first two IFRs).

⁵⁵As should be clear from my review (Bernstein 2012a) of Scoones *et al.* (2010) on Zimbabwe, the world’s most comprehensive redistributive land reform for a long time, creating spaces for the revival and expansion of dynamic petty commodity production and ‘accumulation from below’ (see also Scoones *et al.* 2012, and Hanlon *et al.* 2013) and for ‘survivalist’ farming that contributes to the reproduction of (rural) ‘classes of labour’.

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