

Laudatio for Jun Borrás
Professor of Agrarian Studies (ISS, The Hague)
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It is a distinct honor and a true delight to be here and to deliver the laudatio at the inaugural lecture of Prof. Dr. Saturnino M. Borrás, Jr. At the outset I would like to convey my profound thanks to the International Institute of Social Studies and to Rector Inge Hutter for the invitation to come to The Hague. I can assure those of you present today that there is nobody else in the world apart from Jun Borrás for whom I would cross the Atlantic to make a two-day cameo appearance in Europe.

The reason Jun Borrás occupies such an important place in my own “invisible college” — and in those of so many friends and colleagues here today — is that he embodies a uniquely dynamic, thoughtful, innovative and exciting combination of ground-breaking scholarship, mentorship, committed activism and field- and institution-building. There are so many strands to the complex web of Jun’s professional and political life that it’s difficult to know where to begin or how to represent such a reticulated reality in

linear form for a written text and oral presentation. It's also challenging for me because the *laudatio* or *laudation* is a genre that barely exists in my country. I understand that it's supposed to be rather like the academic introduction, but this is one of the most formulaic and predictable of the genres we academics work in and Jun, in the paper that forms the basis of today's lecture, invokes Saul Alinsky and calls on us to be irreverent. So what follows — and Jun Borrás is a hard act to follow — may or may not be a proper *laudatio*.

I won't elaborate in detail Jun's astonishingly prolific output of books, articles, edited journal issues, working papers and concept notes, most of them elegantly written in what he once told me is his third language. Nor will I dwell on Jun's impressive efforts to advance a progressive agenda within international policy and governance institutions, such as UNDP or the FAO's High-Level Panel of Experts on the land grabbing that occurred during and after the 2008 food crisis. I will mention now, but will not explore, Jun's institutional commitments, which, in addition to ISS, span the globe, from China Agricultural University in Beijing, to the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, to Food First in California. Instead I will try to address key achievements and themes and to compose a praise

song for Jun, one of my most valued interlocutors, collaborators, co-authors, friends and, as he might say, comrades.

The intertwining of intellectual accomplishment and political action characterize Jun's life from early on. When he graduated at the top of his high school class in the Philippines he was already deeply involved in the peasant movement and the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship. His early education and intellectual maturation are intimately bound up with those experiences. Some of his most important mentors, in addition to those he had here at ISS many years later, were organic intellectuals in the Philippine movements, people whose audacity, intellectual acuity and knowledge of politics and agrarian issues resulted from deep commitments, struggle, adversity and movement study, and not necessarily from years of university training.

Jun Borrás was part of a small group of utopian visionaries, activists from peasant movements in Europe, Latin America, North America and South and Southeast Asia, that in the early 1990s founded the international peasants' and farmers' movement La Vía Campesina. For several years he was a member of Vía Campesina's International Coordinating Commission. This work thrust Jun into the thick of transnational organizing and into a widening network of

extraordinary militants and thinkers of diverse points of view and from different world regions. It also gave him a profound understanding — from the inside — of the potentials, advantages, complexities and perils of linking and coordinating activist projects across borders. Many social movements have short lives, but Vía Campesina, despite some fits and starts, has grown remarkably over the past two decades.

Very importantly, even though Jun eventually left the peasant movement to pursue graduate studies and a career in academia, he never really left the movement. I knew this intellectually, but it became abundantly clear to me when Jun and I coincided at the Sixth International Conference of Vía Campesina in Jakarta in 2013, the twentieth anniversary of the movement's founding. Some 3,000 delegates attended, from every continent except Antarctica, and several times I heard one or another of them — the older movement veterans — approach Jun and express wonder and amazement at how the tiny seed they had planted so many years before had grown into this massive, worldwide process of struggle.

When I say that Jun never really left the movement I also mean something else that is very important to explaining his impact in academia and in what academics sometimes like to call “the real

world.” Jun is very much his own person in thinking through his many research and policy projects, but it’s also the case that he often follows the lead of and pursues the questions that are most pressing for the movements and that the movements pose to him. He sees himself, I believe, as being at the service of the movements, but he is far from being their uncritical servant. On the contrary, the trust and authority that he enjoys in movement circles allows him to engage in frank discussions with activists that other scholars might prefer to avoid or not be able to initiate in the first place. These interchanges in turn put the activists and movements on a more solid footing, as they are operating with a deeper, more solid knowledge base. Jun has a magnificent capacity for synthesis — he can almost always see the forest without getting hung up in the trees — and this benefits activists, practitioners, scholars, students and all of the rest of us.

Jun Borrás is, of course, well-known at ISS, where he obtained his doctorate, worked as a lecturer and, after a stint of several years in Canada, returned as an Associate Professor and, most recently, as Professor of Agrarian Studies, the appointment that we are honoring and celebrating today. While he was Canada Research Chair at St. Mary’s University in Nova Scotia, Jun set up a network that he called Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies or ICAS. From the

beginning, “critical agrarian studies,” as Jun conceived it, sought to pose an intellectual, political and policy alternative to the hegemonic paradigms about the rural world, particularly those copiously-funded free-market-based analyses and prescriptions emanating from mainstream development institutions, such as the World Bank. Like “critical legal studies” or “critical race theory,” critical agrarian studies has emerged as a dynamic field with many branches and many geographical and institutional locations that together form a broad progressive challenge to the conventional wisdom. I should add, in fairness, that Jun is not averse to dialoguing with proponents of the conventional wisdom. Indeed, it was in this building, at a conference ten years ago, that I first met Jun — and also Klaus Deininger of the World Bank, who tried to make a case to a largely unsympathetic audience for unleashing market forces to facilitate agrarian reform.

Field-building occurs in a context, in this case a growing convergence of environmental, economic and social crises that contributed to alliances and more wide-ranging thinking among agrarian, food justice and food sovereignty, environmentalist and women’s movements, as well as those of indigenous peoples and of other oppressed groups. Critical agrarian studies existed before Jun Borras, but its strength today and its future promise, represented in

new generations of scholar-activists, owe a huge amount to his efforts.

What are the mechanisms of this field, critical agrarian studies, which Jun Borras has infused with so much dynamism? There's the ICAS "little books on big ideas" series, which has now published six volumes and which appears in eight languages other than English. There's the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, which under Jun's editorship vaulted to the absolute pinnacle of the impact factor ratings for virtually all social science journals. More important to me, and I suspect to other people here today, than the impact factor is that Jun's leadership of the *JPS* collective showed that an academic journal could actually be interesting to read and politically relevant and exciting to work on. In the increasingly rarified atmosphere of elite universities and with increasingly specialized forms of knowledge production, "interesting academic journal" usually seems like an oxymoron. But with *JPS*, Jun's extraordinary vision and capacity for hard work proved that there could be meaningful exceptions. *JPS*, together with Jun and his collaborators, has contributed very significantly to reshaping understandings of land grabbing and land governance, environmental politics, food sovereignty, flex crops, biofuels, and peasant and farmer movements, among other important topics.

There are the networks that Jun was instrumental in conceptualizing and organizing, such as the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) and the BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS). LDPI and BICAS have played important roles in Jun's field-building efforts. LDPI, for example, helped to reset the research agenda on land grabbing, raising new questions, proposing new methods and — probably most important — linking activists, practitioners and scholars from different generations, language groups, geographical locations and institutions.

The conferences that Jun has organized, including those done as part of these networks, accomplish multiple objectives. They provide for the quick online presentation of high-quality, cutting edge working papers on pressing issues of immediate policy relevance. They encourage young scholars to showcase their findings and help to launch their careers in or outside of academia. They set research agendas that provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms and conventional wisdom. They provide fodder for the publication of multiple special journal issues and other papers that give a scientific imprimatur to empirically-grounded analyses that, again, constitute alternatives to mainstream, dominant assumptions. Very importantly for many of us in this room, these events break down barriers of nation, language, generation and political

affiliation and nurture rich dialogues and communities of scholars, activists, scholar-activists, practitioners, public intellectuals, friends and comrades. These communities give many of us the strength to go on. They foster optimism of the will in troubling times when many of us are understandably afflicted with pessimism of the intellect.

I think it is fair to say that Jun Borrás broke the intellectual monopoly that the proponents of conventional wisdom and the magic of the marketplace hoped that they would enjoy around these issues. Jun didn't do this singlehandedly, because he is very much a catalyst for collective action, but his leadership has been essential and I can't think of anybody else in our community who has the mobilizational capacity or who inspires such loyalty that they would have been able to pull this off.

I'll refer to just one more mechanism of Jun Borrás's field-building efforts that also blends intellectual-political work with community building. Jun has a well-deserved reputation as a phenomenal mentor. It is said, though I have yet to experience this myself, that he holds marathon twelve-hour study sessions at his home, where he cooks for and feeds his graduate students and not only mentors them about abstract notions of theory and practice, but

also shows them in his typically understated way how to infuse academia with humanity and how to live in this unforgiving and cruel world as if it were the kind of world that we would all like to live in.

I was deeply touched that Jun ended the paper that forms the basis of his inaugural lecture with an exhortation from Fran Piven, my colleague at the City University of New York Graduate Center. I won't repeat the quotation here, but it should suffice to say that Piven reminds us of the joy that political work gives us, of the satisfaction that comes from struggling for a better society and of the special friendships that are built in intellectual and activist struggles.

It has been a true pleasure and a tremendous privilege to have come to The Hague to pronounce this *laudatio* on the unique, varied and voluminous accomplishments of Saturnino Jun Borrás, one of the most distinguished scholars in our field, who is a social justice activist of extraordinary insight, energy and persistence and who also happens to be one of the warmest and most generous and inspiring colleagues I know. So Jun, I congratulate you and salute you on this wonderful occasion. ISS and the broader communities of

critical agrarian studies and agrarian movements are blessed and fortunate to have you among us.