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Perils of Peasant Populism: Why Redistributive Land Reform and “Food Sovereignty” Can’t Feed Venezuela

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Abstract

Since 2001 the Bolivarian government of Venezuela has embarked on an ambitious agrarian reform project aimed at establishing food sovereignty and reducing overwhelming import dependency. This project has centered mainly on the reconstitution of the national agriculture system, which was destroyed over the course of the twentieth century by resource extraction, the petroleum economy and waves of neoliberal trade policy. Paying for food imports with revenue derived from the petroleum industry, at one point, Venezuela imported more than eighty-five percent of its food from foreign sources. Venezuela was effectively held hostage to price fluctuations on international energy markets and left in a precarious position. Realizing the tremendous vulnerability this created, the Venezuelan government wrote the concept of food sovereignty into its constitution in 1999 and began to take drastic steps to reduce imports.

This article explores the inherent contradictions in the transition from a food system based largely on imports to a model of agriculture grounded in the principle of food sovereignty. It takes as its case study the recent efforts of the Bolivarian government of Venezuela to shift to endogenous food production and build an agriculture sector oriented toward satisfying the food requirements of its majority-urban population. This article underscores the many challenges faced by the populist government after decades of economic policies designed to integrate Venezuela into global markets and the challenges involved in enacting redistributive land reform in this peripheral capitalist context. The failure of the Venezuelan government to recruit a labor force to reestablish peasant agriculture in the interior suggests that food sovereignty cannot be easily applied to every national context and that Venezuela lacked the basic preconditions for a model of agriculture based predominantly on peasant smallholders. This basic incompatibility accounts for the current turn toward a state-run food system incorporating aspects of the factory-in-the-field model and industrial enterprises and populist food distribution programs.

Introduction

The concept of food sovereignty has received critical attention from a variety of scholars and researchers working on questions of sustainable agriculture and rural development in the global south (e.g. Rosset, Patel and Courville, 2010; Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010; Altieri, 2009; Holt-Gimenez, 2006; McMichael, 2008). First articulated by activists of the international NGO La Vía Campesina in 1996, the concept of food sovereignty has become a favorite among activists working for more just food systems and livelihoods. The concept of food sovereignty is a critical elaboration of the concept of food security that oriented the debate on global hunger for many decades and has expanded the field of vision from the sphere of distribution to

production. Succinctly defined as ‘the right of peoples to raise food in their own territories, respecting productive diversity and local cultural knowledge,’ food sovereignty has served as the basis for agrarian reform projects in a variety of national contexts in Latin America (e.g. Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Nicaragua, Honduras) (Rosset, 2009b) and achieved near-hegemonic status among advocates for rural social movements. In many ways, the concept could be described as ‘the leitmotif of agrarian reform in the twenty-first century.’ With its ostensibly universal applicability, food sovereignty is presented as a global project capable of uniting agriculturalists across international borders and a path by which dependent nations can reclaim their economies from rapacious transnational corporations. Erasing inequalities brought about by the historical development of capitalism and unequal terms of trade, food sovereignty is couched in the language of anticolonialism and regarded as a strategy to fight land grabbing, level the playing field and erase the destructive penetration of capital into local and national food systems.

As the most articulate voice for this position, La Vía Campesina has worked closely with the Venezuelan government, providing expert advice on trade and land policy as well as agricultural subsidies and cultivation practices (Wilpert, 2005). Its spokespeople have lauded Venezuela’s policies as a model of food sovereignty in practice and have rightly noted the grand scale of the reform underway. Although government officials are often reluctant to use the term ‘agrarian reform,’ for fear of calling forth images of violence and the failures of the past, the agrarian restructuring currently underway in Venezuela is arguably the most radical and thoroughgoing of its kind in Latin America today. I would argue the reform process has much more in common with the agrarian upheavals of the mid-twentieth century (e.g. the Cuban Revolution, the Peruvian agrarian reform under Velasco and the Mexican Revolution) than with the so-called ‘market led’ agrarian reforms of the past few decades and the process has marshaled the landless and rural poor to attack entrenched property regimes. In my view, the reform represents a significant departure from the neoliberal model of agriculture, i.e. import of industrially produced food combined with production of specialty crops for cash/export (especially non-food crops and additives) and the preponderance of foreign capital, low paid wage labor and unregulated markets in such operations. The government has sought to replace an inefficient land tenure system with an organizationally advanced model of agriculture capable of feeding the Venezuelan nation, but it is not a model, I hasten to add, that is in fashion with many supporters of food sovereignty.

In this paper, I offer a critique of the prevalent idea that the agrarian reform and version of food sovereignty favored by the Venezuelan government are consonant with the vision of La Vía Campesina. I explore the recent experience of food sovereignty in Venezuela and suggest that the model has shifted from what was articulated in the early years of the reform, making it less recognizable to those who imagine peasants as the necessary guarantors of food

sovereignty. Based on empirical observations and data from more than a year and a half of fieldwork, I offer a few critical observations on the tensions in the reform process and the reasons for an at least partial shift away from the practice of “repeasantization” (Page, 2011). I provide an analytical framework from which to interpret the agrarian reform and construction of food sovereignty (i.e. Fordist-Neopopulism) and put forward an analysis that tries to pay attention to the social and class differentiation that inevitably accompanies the introduction of capital into rural areas. I ask to what extent food sovereignty might represent such a project and conclude with a few observations about the future of food sovereignty in Venezuela and lessons for the global south.

Revolutionizing Agriculture

At first glance Venezuela might appear an ideal candidate for the model of redistributive land reform advocated by supporters of La Vía Campesina and partisans of food sovereignty. The patently unequal distribution of land in Venezuela made for some of the worst rural poverty in Latin America, in spite of the relative affluence of the nation as a whole and historically, land has been highly concentrated in underproductive units. These units fail to provide the population with adequate food security (for a history of land tenure relations, see Delahaye, 2003) and Venezuela had large swaths of underused land ripe for use by underemployed people. It would seem Venezuela would be a perfect test case for food sovereignty. Yet it might also seem strange that Venezuelans would be preoccupied with the cost of food at this particular moment in history. The price of petroleum has been at near historic highs in recent years and has shown few signs of dropping (at least to previous lows) and the government has been awash in petrodollars, able to use the surplus capital to invest in social programs. Working to translate profits from the sale of oil into improved standards of living with basic income grants, the government has been able to subsidize incomes. So why is there such a concern with the global food crisis and local agriculture when Venezuela appears to have more than enough revenue to offset increases in the price of food? The answer lies with the widespread awareness of the history of food insecurity, which threatened the stability of the nation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Venezuela faced the most severe economic and social crisis of its history. After the extraordinary economic growth and progress of the seventies, when many Venezuelans actually believed the nation would achieve standards of living comparable to the global north, petroleum prices dropped precipitously and the ensuing crisis dispelled such fantasies, including the idea that the nation could have food security without a strong agriculture sector. By the early eighties, the Venezuelan countryside was effectively moribund and no longer provided any meaningful security. Far from a thriving peasant economy, by the end of the twentieth century, Venezuela was almost entirely incorporated into what Harriet

Friedman (1994) has called “the transnational food regime,” a system in which certain nation-states serve as export platforms for an integrated global market, while other nation states, which lack a comparative advantage forego domestic food production, specializing in a few crops for export. At the low point of the economic crisis, food imports were almost entirely cut off as the Venezuelan government struggled to service the balance of payments and its debt. The nation endured tremendous privations in the late eighties and hunger became widespread across the country. According to local sources, more than 40% of the population experienced malnutrition (Gutierrez, 1991). With the highest import dependency of any Latin American country, Venezuela was almost entirely dependent on what the country could afford to import. Black market speculation and profiteering were rampant in this period and this coupled with the austerity imposed by neoliberal governments of the decade spurred social unrest. In 1989, the capital and major cities exploded in riots known as *El Caracazo*. Ironically, rural areas often suffered hunger as much or more than urban areas due to lack of access to imports and a new generation of leaders and agrarian movements began to take drastic steps to reform the petrostate.

In 1998, Hugo Chavez was elected president on a wave of popular discontent with neoliberal economic policies and growing social inequality. Promising to stamp out corruption and return to the values of ‘the liberator’ Simon Bolivar, the Bolivarian Government of Venezuela introduced a new constitution and began to enact a series of reforms designed to reshape the agro-food system. In 2001, the National Assembly approved the *Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario* enshrining *the social use of land* over the rights of private property. The law provided for the seizure of lands deemed to be fallow, underproductive, or otherwise abandoned and created the government agency called the National Institute of Lands (INTI) to regulate land tenancy and bring underutilized lands under cultivation. With its basically sympathetic attitude toward the peasantry and rural poor, the Bolivarian government began to cultivate relationships with forces opposed to the neoliberal agenda of free trade and open markets and build coalitions with internal groups that shared an objective interest in challenging entrenched property regimes. The law and these efforts raised the ire of rural elites and they were motivating factors for the coup, which briefly deposed the government in 2002.

Yet in spite of the violent reaction it aroused, as DeLong (2005) writes, the initial phases of the reform were quite modest and the agrarian policies of the Venezuelan government were “more like Lincoln than Lenin.” The state was the largest landowner and held extensive acreage as part of its control of the petroleum industry and thus was able to distribute this land to *campesinos*. The agrarian reform consisted of a series of moderate measures designed to ameliorate the worst poverty in rural areas and regularize land titles. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, Venezuela did not have a mass of land hungry peasants waiting to take control of the land. The return of the land reform agenda in Venezuela was as much a product of the anxieties of

urbanites and fear of the loss of sovereignty as peasant activism. The preoccupation with petroleum dependency and the possibility of sudden reductions in revenue were foremost in the minds of state planners. The leadership rightly perceived the creation of an independent agriculture sector and food system as an existential question for the nation and a measure of its success in achieving sovereignty. And the behavior of its largest trade partner, the United States, was also a key motivating factor. As one expert told me in early 2009, an embargo by the US “could starve the country in a few weeks” and the friction between the two states made an embargo appear a realistic possibility. But the demographic revolution of the mid-twentieth century had left Venezuela without a substantial peasantry and even when aided with technical inputs, there was simply not enough peasant labor in the countryside to produce food for the mostly urban nation of 27 million. Recognizing this, agricultural reformers began to search for another labor force.

The Return to the Countryside

In 2005, the Venezuelan government took a dramatic step, declaring the start of a “return to the countryside.” In a major speech on agriculture delivered that same year, then President Chavez declared, “...wherever there are *latifundios*, the hand of the state must arrive to give the land to those who work it.” The statement drew on the age-old call for “land to the tiller” and signaled reform efforts in Venezuela would concentrate on the reconstitution of the peasantry and its sovereignty over land, but the government was also concerned to rebalance the national territory and population. The *Vuelta Al Campo*—or return to the countryside—would attempt to draw urbanites to the interior with the offer of free land. These residents would then establish cooperatives and raise crops under the supervision of government experts.

After a few years of euphoria, it became clear however that the plan had failed to achieve its rather ambitious goals. Of the millions of migrants optimistically projected in the first years of the campaign, only a few hundred thousand relocated. I would be surprised if even tens of thousands of these migrants remain, or if these figures quoted by the government were even reliable in the first place. The rhetoric of millions of Venezuelans returning to the countryside was overblown and those who did return faced legions of problems. The relevant agencies did not create ideal conditions for the newly enfranchised agriculturalists and life in the *campo* diverged significantly from government rhetoric. As Tiffany Linton Page (2010) has suggested, the transfer of ecological and technical knowledges was a major obstacle to the advance of reruralization. Several generations removed from life in the *campo*, urbanites had lost many of the knowledges required to succeed in farming as well as knowledge of its rhythms and routines. The environments are hardly hospitable and knowledge of the ecology was a basic

requirement for success. In my research, agronomists underscored the many challenges of tropical agriculture, including excessive temperatures, intermittent rainfall and acidic soils. Project participants were inadequately prepared, but even in those instances where government functionaries invested significant time and energy I found the results were often lackluster.

Participants were often unaccustomed to the intense physical nature of the work and residents frequently decided they preferred life in urban areas. Having spent several generations in urban areas, they were far removed from the lived experiences of previous generations and were often promised conditions far different from what they encountered. The cooperatives were unable to generate meaningful surpluses and when I interviewed government functionaries in 2009, they presented me with “horror stories” from the campaign. Urbanites who knew little about agriculture or rural life were ill equipped to cope with the inevitable hardships and I was presented with pictures of vandalized and abandoned cooperatives, never seeing project that could be described as “highly productive.”

In an especially poignant example from the state of Aragua, a friend who worked with the project described the effort to establish a cattle project with a group of resettled urbanites. The project was composed of individuals with little practical experience in the field of agriculture and in spite of attempts to transfer knowledge, the project failed. After several months under their own supervision, he had returned to assess the state of the venture and found the cooperative completely abandoned—stripped of its assets. The machinery was gone and thieves had torn the wiring from the electrical system, taking anything of value. As he described the founding of the project: “They wanted to have a cooperative with cattle. But they didn’t know anything about cattle. We tried to teach them, but they wouldn’t tend them. The herd was infected with blood parasites and they eventually died” (fieldnotes, 2009). Over the course of nearly a year and a half of fieldwork conducted in multiple states, I never witnessed a single success story. In the state of Barinas, where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork, a farm under the auspices of *Plan Zamora* (another such program) had attracted urbanites from the state capital, but the problems were much the same. The farm project members were close to their home district and frequently packed up and left when faced with hardship, leaving the rural members of the cooperative to fend for themselves. Yet as rural members told me ruefully, “they returned when there was more money.”

I am skeptical that a lack of participation is at the heart of the failure of the *Vuelta Al Campo* campaign as many populists in Venezuela argue. While a lack of democratic consultation is a real problem with rural development projects and bureaucratization of the reform process certainly stifles popular creativity (see Rosset, 2003), many young Venezuelans I talked to did not want to be *campesinos*. Yet it would not matter how much dedication or individual

participation existed in the project, if they did not have the prerequisites for success. There were real structural constraints to the creation of this model of agriculture, which made this program less than viable from the outset. As a strategy designed to absorb surplus labor population in urban areas, the program had a few positive effects, but from the standpoint of lifting national production and raising yields, it could only be regarded as an abject failure. Public funds were wasted and lost through graft and many projects collapsed after a few years in existence. The farms connections with urban consumers were tenuous at best and I never witnessed a settlement that had anything more than highly opportunistic commercial relations. More often than not, the ventures produced just above what was required for the members' consumption or enough to earn extra cash on the side. They were nowhere near approaching the levels of effectiveness required to feed a city like Caracas.

Even more frequent was the practice of turning government credit directly into consumption. Peasants often did with government credit support what they do best: subsist. The government was not particularly stringent when it came to credit repayment and projects were often living off credit, supplementing household income, rather than raising output. To be clear, one can hardly oppose credit programs or aid from the standpoint of social wellbeing. It is just to have a basic income, but this benefit does not reduce import dependency. There is merit to the assertion that state credit supports and markets can slow or even halt the process of rural class differentiation: such markets provide stable prices and reduce the competition among farmers that lead to indebtedness and foreclosure. But in Venezuela they did not solve the problem of Dutch Disease and the history of peasant cooperatives in the first years of the reform (quietly referred to as 'the disaster of the cooperatives' by state employees) left the government searching for a new model.

At the start of my research in 2007, then President Chavez declared, "The war for the countryside has begun." The speech put rural landowners on notice and signaled that their lands would be subject to evaluation and expropriation. The Bolivarian Government was speeding up its policy of expropriations and imposing greater scrutiny on land use practices. But the writings of pro-government activists and international writers frequently assumed that the expropriation or nationalization of estates in hands of foreign corporations and low intensity ranching operations would directly benefit the peasantry. A great deal of the writing on agriculture and rural development in Venezuela written by partisans of the government basically takes Chavez at his word and behaves as if the government is following through with this vision. But what I found in my fieldwork was very different from the officially adopted rhetoric of 'the peasant way.'

I heard this kind of rhetoric from engineers and agronomists in the *campo*, but the estates that I visited were never turned over to local peasants—at least in their entirety. Indeed on one

occasion, I witnessed an incident in which the National Guard had violently confronted activists of the local peasant league, which had occupied an estate destined for transfer to the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation. The Venezuelan government had stepped into the vacuum created by the neoliberal regime, but it seemed there was not enough space for both peasants and the state.

The Peasant Way Blocked

In stark contrast to the agricultural policies pursued by many of the socialist states in the twentieth century, Venezuela selected a path to agrarian reform that involved enfranchising and reconstituting the peasantry. Advancing the growth of agricultural surpluses on the basis of small and medium-sized holders, the Venezuelan government rejected the high modernist vision of agrarian reform as the dissolution of the peasantry and its “pygmy forms of property” (Marx, 1867: 844). Favoring more populist solutions, the government rejected the idea that collectivization or increasing the land allotment size would necessarily increase the efficiency of production. Instead, the Venezuelan government valorized the actors who had been historically threatened by modernization practices or treated with prejudicial neglect by much of the urban population.

Unlike other developing states, Venezuela was in the unique position of being able to restructure agriculture and carry out development programs without resorting to a “socialist primitive accumulation” (see Preobrazhensky, 1965). With the revenue from the petroleum industry ‘lubricating’ the process, the Venezuelan state was able to invest capable and resources into expanding the acreage under cultivation and technicize the process of production without dispossessing peasants. As one INTI functionary adamantly emphasized to me “*This is not Russia!* We do not force anyone to collectivize” and she went on to say that the rights of productive property owners would be respected in the process (fieldnotes, 2007). Yet in spite of this unique advantage, their vision of agrarian cooperativism proved more difficult to realize than originally hoped.

Whether the Venezuelan government ever completely embraced the peasant line or provided the small holder and medium holder with sufficient resources and support is a subject of ongoing debate (see Hernandez-Navarro, 2005; Rossett, 2009), but state officials eventually realized the scale of production required to feed a large urban population (to say nothing of the distribution networks and processing required to deliver to perishables to urban centers) were beyond the immediate capabilities of the existing peasantry. Such groups could not be responsible for the entire nation (especially when urbanites failed to join them) and one of the basic prerequisites for a “return to the countryside” had failed to materialize. Marginalized

urbanites were supposed to provide the necessary labor force and receive state support for their activities. But the difficulties in recruiting this population to peasant agriculture were soon readily apparent. Problems of the “bureaucratic inefficiency and inertia” have been listed as major causes of the weakness of redistributive land reform in Venezuela (e.g. Rosset, 2009). It is hard to dispute the existence of bureaucratic attitudes or inertia (and deeply ensconced property regimes), but the exigencies of the petrostate and hyper urbanization are also as critical to grasping the inability of the government to attract urbanites to rural areas.

It is difficult to make a peasant lifestyle attractive to urbanites when capturing part of the oil rent circulating in society is often easier than sweating in a field. It is also more expensive to incentivize this kind of production than to pay for imports and Venezuela thus had a powerful economic incentive to remain urban. Many activists told me that they would overcome this difficulty with “faith in the revolution and the *pequeño productor*,” but I often questioned the extent to which this voluntarism was a realistic response.

The United Nations FAO has pointed to Venezuela as one of the nations with the greatest success in reducing hunger (2012), but much of what has improved the food security situation has little to do with the sphere of cultivation (PDVSA, 2008). The global food crisis of 2007 compelled the Venezuelan government to re-evaluate many of its food security policies and take concerted action. The rising food prices caused the Ministry of Agriculture to develop new strategies to deal with insecurity. The policies enacted thus far had not offset the negative effects of resource dependency. Increasing tariffs and price controls had created serious distortions in prices and the government was forced to contend with the fallout of its own reform efforts. Filling in the gaps with populist aid programs as well as appeals to national identity and solidarity on the part of the population, the population needed to endure certain privations in the name of sovereignty and have faith that enforced savings would pay off. In 2009, when I asked an agronomist working for INTI when Venezuela would achieve food security, he told me “the government can give us food security tomorrow. They could just import food and distribute it. But sovereignty means *we are sovereign*—we have to eat what we produce—and that will take time” (original emphasis, fieldnotes 2009).

If the majority of marginal urbanites were not willing to pay the price of relocation, perhaps they would endure the pain of transition, if the government eased it with targeted distribution of subsidized food. The Mercal program was one of several government food programs targeted at the poorest sectors of society. Much lauded in the international press, the Mercal program was one of the first programs put forward by the government after its election in 1998. The program offered food below the cost of production as part of a large and growing network of grocery stores and delivery programs. Mercal significantly improved food security, but as the crisis progressed the government created new programs, which were broader in

scope. Originally supervised by the state oil company PDVSA, the PDVAL program actually taking profit to finance their operations.

Although the food programs partially undercut the class of compradors that managed the food system and replaced them with a far more accessible network, the programs were effectively operating according to the same logics. Large portions of the food consumed by urban and rural poor came from one of three state programs, only one of which exclusively distributed internally produced food. These projects have been billed as contributing to “food sovereignty,” but the networks of distribution merely replaced dependency on chief foes like the United States and Colombia with imports from other regional states. Government functionaries readily admitted the meat in the PDVAL program was imported from Argentina and Brazil and that the milk came from trade partners in the Caribbean. The program was certainly providing cheaper products to the food insecure, but it also had a de-incentivizing effect on domestic growers. It also the case that many ostensible growers found it more convenient to partake in these programs than to produce for them. Just as often peasants were the passive recipients of food aid as producers of food and this was accepted by program employees who viewed as patently unrealistic the idea that these demographically and often physically weak (i.e. elderly, disabled) subjects would ever be able to engage in the kind of farming required to feed millions of urbanites. This established the legitimacy of their approach and was the basis of reshaping of the mission of the state agriculture corporation. The Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation, renamed “The Venezuelan *Food* Corporation” was competing with other state programs for customers. It gave the impression that one hand of the state didn’t seem to know what the other hand was doing and that “the socialist economy” was not particularly social.

Fordist Neo-Populism

The existing analysis of the Venezuelan agrarian reform (when it is not outright hostile to the process) has seldom focused on the agro-industrial sites created by the government where much of the food production in fact takes place. Instead, analysis has tended to center on locations where more egalitarian relations of production prevail. Excellent scholarly accounts of the politics of cooperatives and microenterprises have been written (see for example, Schiavoni and Camacaro, 2009; Harnecker, 2008; 2003; Larrabure, 2005; Purchell, 2013), but this focus can lead to a rather distorted picture of the agrarian reform, if it is not paired with an analysis of the larger-scale projects that have been initiated. There have been few studies of the large industrial enterprises where the bulk of state capital is invested and to have a fuller or more complete picture of the reform, we have to interrogate the spaces.

In 2007, I arrived on the scene of a large agroindustrial enterprise in the central plains of Venezuela. Located in the state of Barinas, the enterprise had been built on the ground of a former *latifundio* that was expropriated from its owner in 2005 after an evaluation by the National Institute of Lands. The evaluation had stated that roughly 40% of the original acreage of the estate was underutilized and therefore eligible for expropriation. The owner had refused to accept the ruling and in a much-publicized altercation with the National Guard, engineered a media spectacle in which he attempted to physically blockade the entrance of his estate. His attempt failed, however, and the estate was taken over.

Over the course of the 14 months I spent living and working in the enterprise, I discovered that the unit (and others like it) was organized along Fordist lines. In spite of the presence of several smallholder cooperatives in the area, the local *campesinos* were dwarfed by the massive state investment in such factory-in-the-field operations. In the early years of the reform, the government had divided the land from estates among landless workers and peasants in hopes they could convert ranching land into vegetal crop production, but this model encountered serious difficulties (the most famous and well-publicized case was *El Charcote* see Lemoine, 2003). In the case of my fieldsite however, the government had given smaller portions of the estate to local *campesinos* as a kind of sop, turning the rest of the farm into an enterprise that followed all the logics and rationales of high modern capitalist farming. The farm had a large stable workforce in excess of 350 and used machinery, chemicals and petroleum-based fertilizers as part of the production process. The enterprise had a strict hierarchy of job types and roles, ranging from manual laborers and janitorial staff, to mechanics and maintenance crews. These laborers were, in turn, supervised by department managers trained in agronomy, mechanical and agricultural engineering and agroforestry. The attitudes of the supervisors were extremely authoritarian, with the environment feeling very close to a military or industrial setting. The directors were drawn almost exclusively from the university educated, middle and upper classes and were almost invariably “white” or *mestizo* males. The different castes of employees rarely mingled with one another in the center and only the most ideologically driven ever attempted to bridge the social divides in the workplace. The technical experts or *tecnicos de campo* held the special corpuses of knowledge required to run the production unit and such knowledges were jealously guarded from workers. There were few if any efforts to convey these knowledges to the lower ranks of the workforce and a frequent refrain I heard among the workers in the enterprise was “*en esta empresa, no hay socialismo*”—“In this enterprise, there’s no socialism.” Threats of firing and run-ins with higher-ups were frequent and the result of these confrontations was often frustration and the eventual exit of critical individuals from the enterprise. Repeated attempts on the part of workers to organize “labor committees” into effective organs of governance for the center were repeatedly stymied by managers. For the workers, among the most galling abuses in the enterprise were the absence of opportunities for promotion, favoritism and instances of nepotism in hiring.

When looked from a broader vantage, this state enterprise and others like it had not *reduced* divisions of labor in the agriculture sector (as many supporters of food sovereignty suggest is required), but replaced one set of tensions with another. The struggles *within* the enterprise were the classic struggles of organized labor, including demands for higher wages, reduction in work hours, less strenuous labor and greater respect from superiors. This differed markedly from the relations of the enterprise with laboring groups outside its confines. Experts in the enterprise were reluctant to call what was transpiring “agrarian reform,” in part because the words had a radical connotation, but also I suspect because it implied a peasant-driven process. In the area where I worked, the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation (CVA) had established what were essentially “contract relationships” with a number of peasant cooperatives. Local cooperatives were selling harvests to the state and their harvests were making their way into state food networks and the staffs of technical experts of the enterprises were often enlisted to supervise cultivation. As I traveled around multiple states, I found this was a ubiquitous, if emergent, pattern.

The land might be owned by *campesinos*, but the cooperatives were treated like extensions of the larger enterprises and cultivation processes were largely directed by a caste of technical experts serving as “advisors.” Where various peasant cooperatives were selling to the state, the enterprise staff selected the crops, provided the mechanization and set the prices. Experts selected cooperatives, which they felt merited assistance and frequently imposed their preferences on them. The contracted production of the cooperatives was usually corn, which was easily integrated into the plan and didn’t interfere with the economies of scale of the larger enterprises. The grain was shipped along with the harvest from the state enterprises and processed elsewhere (usually a state owned mill). The cooperatives, in other words, were augmenting what was already taking place in the state centers, or at least acting in concert with them. Scholars inspired by the agrarian political economy of Alexander Chayanov (1966) have called cultivation activities that treat land like a vehicle for peasant labor, as “hidden proletarianization” (see Little and Watts, 1994). In my experience, technical experts were generally more concerned with meeting production quotas and higher yields than questions of democratic organization and peasants had little control over the terms of marketing and were almost acting as employees of the state.

By the end of my fieldwork in 2010, the state enterprise where I worked had succeeded in reproducing itself, implanting its hierarchical model of organization in other states. The enterprise had acquired a number of farms or estates in the local area and several large farms were seized and placed under the supervision of farms’ President. Some of the farms were later spun off into enterprises of their own. The pace of expropriations, meanwhile, was increasing compared to the first years of the reform. By the end of 2011, the Venezuelan government had expropriated more than 4 million hectares of land with plans to seize an additional 300,000

hectares the following year (Pearson, 2011). The model of use of the expropriated land had also shifted. The enterprises did not have the classic “agrarian problem” of the ownership of land or struggle for direct control of its surplus. Instead the concerns of wage laborers predominated, driven in part by the organizing logic of the project.

Radicals within the government have argued that the basic industry and land should be expropriated and the productive base of the nation should pass into the hands of the direct producers. The peasants were more or less working for the state and the Bolivarian Government spent a great deal of time and energy promoting the idea of workers control in the state enterprises. But in practice this has rarely materialized and the logic of the project: increasing divisions of labor to improve efficiency, investing in fixed capital and mechanization to streamline the process of planting and harvesting—lent themselves to another logic: profit.

Gregory Wilpert (2006) has argued the Venezuelan agrarian reform is driven by an ethos of “Land for People, Not for Profit.” This description is basically inaccurate with regard to the state enterprises, however. The global market and its exigencies were no longer the undisputed driver of these projects, but these projects were not state farms. The enterprises were taking a profit from sale on the open market and the provision of certain services. Indeed, officials explained to me that the principle guiding the operation of the state enterprises was something called “a social profit.” This form of profit allegedly recognized the *social obligation* to raise food for the population, but also generated a profit to free the agriculture sector from its dependency on petroleum. It was supposed to pay for itself so the system could progressively wean itself off petroleum. In other words, the Bolivarian government was taking land for profit—albeit a profit which they could rationalize as helping to recover economic sovereignty.

In describing the convergence of two seemingly opposed tendencies, Terry Byres (2004; 1979) has termed the valorization of the egalitarian nature of peasant agriculture and support for entrepreneurial practices favored by orthodox economics as “neoclassical neo-populism.” Neo-populism refers to the belief that peasant agriculture represents a radically political project, while the word “neoclassical” represents the view that the peasant is more efficient and productive *per acre* than larger landholdings, and therefore, more profitable. Writ large, the agrarian reform in Venezuela could be described as a kind of Fordist-Neopopulism. The government generated mixed systems in which the populist or neo-narodnik line was not entirely opposed to the large-scale industrial model. Indeed, the two were conceived to work together. The large-scale industry was the anchor of the system with state enterprises serving as “centers of gravity” for the agrarian reform. Peasant cooperatives were arrayed around these centers so they could take advantage of the technical services provided by experts and receive aid, but the state was never entirely reliant upon the actors it claimed to defend. The agriculture system had the virtue of creating most of the conditions agrarian populists argued

were required and state holding companies and technical experts purchased the harvest under conditions favorable to smaller producers, but the economies of scale and exploitation of labor in the enterprises made calls for “peasant socialism” as the basis of food sovereignty appear rather strange and incongruous. It begged the question as to whether other logics helped make this appeal sensible.

Putting the *Sovereignty* in Food Sovereignty

The existing literature on food sovereignty has frequently portrayed the concept as a strategy for peoples to regain control of their land and exercise democratic decision-making with regard to social resources. In such readings, the peasantry is portrayed as the leading actor in a democratic coalition of ‘the people,’ striving to reassert its control over society and the economy. This reading has a populist edge and the peasantry is viewed as coterminous with *el pueblo* and the material interests of the peasantry are viewed as an extension of interests of ‘the people.’ Peasants are taken to be the majority, or at least implicitly as representative of the majority of the population and food sovereignty is defined the right of the peasantry to control/own land and dispose of its various yields. The conflation of the peasantry with ‘the people’ appears in nearly all discussions of food sovereignty and the interests of the nation are almost always imagined to be one with the peasantry, but there is a notable ambiguity in this conflation. The category of “the people” is rather nebulous and the concept of food sovereignty is open to significant (re)interpretation on this basis (for a discussion of populist discourse, see Laclau, 2005).

It is natural to assume the existence of peasant relationships with land and an important set of interests to be considered, but how *national or popular* sovereignty intersects agriculture is rarely explicitly theorized. Is it the case that the right to land or food sovereignty only applies to those who derive their livelihoods from the land or who have a close relationship to it? Or is food sovereignty the right of the whole nation to decide how the land is used? If it is the latter—and this seems to be most consonant with a definition of food sovereignty as “popular sovereignty”—the contradiction of a redistributive land reform in a mostly urban society becomes readily apparent.

If the concept of food sovereignty is about the right of nations to self-determination, then the part of the nation that makes decisions regarding the use of resources is a critical question to address. A mostly urban population may decide that a peasant based agriculture system does not serve the society well and decide in favor of foreign imports. Presumably the nation includes all sorts of urban and non-peasant groups that may have conflicting interests with regard to agriculture and food policy. Part of the nation is already invested in the system of

import dependency and invested in the present set of economic arrangements (i.e. the class of compradors who profit from the import of foreign products, low income urbanites who may not be able to tolerate even temporary increases in the cost of food, large-scale corporate firms that monopolize domestic markets, e.g. the *Polar* company in Venezuela). An agriculture and food system based on the material interests of the peasantry (which may include small organic subsistence farmers and opportunistic market relations) thus may not correspond with the food interests of the mostly urban nation.

Using peasant ownership of land and resources as a measure of progress toward food sovereignty can ignore the larger inequalities in which seemingly egalitarian peasant systems are embedded and the needs of other marginalized groups. If food sovereignty is a democratic project, it begs the question as to whether such a model can correspond to the interests of a society as a whole in such highly urbanized context like Venezuela. Who has sovereignty and who are the legitimate representatives of the nation? And who is the final arbiter of the nation? This very quickly becomes a discussion of the state and various social and political classes and their relationship to sovereignty

The traditional idea of sovereignty is effective control of national territory and the exclusive right to the resources and productive systems in the bounded geography (see Weber, 1978 [1922]). Ironically, the national scale is missing from many discussion of food sovereignty and it is curious that theories of national sovereignty and population demographics haven't figure more prominently in discussion of the concept. National case studies are frequently short on discussions of the labor forces and political systems required to organize organic agriculture and discussion often starts with the assumption that peasants are capable of establishing adequate productive systems in their respective national contexts (with varying degrees of government aid and support) and having posited the idea *a priori*, moves on to localized practices and techniques.

Toward Food Sovereignities

When Marx articulated his vision for a post-capitalist agriculture, he suggested that a future system might be based upon "small farmers working for themselves or the associated producers" (1981: 216, quoted in Clausen, 2007). This formulation, characteristic of Marx and his approach to 'political predictions,' leaves open the question as whether he imagined the eventual dissolution of the peasantry, the supplanting of one system by the other, or whether he believed the two might be able to co-exist happily. In many ways, the debate on agrarian reform in the twentieth century revolved around one of these two poles. Writers and political leaders often cleaved to one side with tragic consequences for subject populations (see for

example, Scott, 2001; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Figes, 1989), but in the twenty-first century we should ask if we have paid enough attention to this latter option—a system of the associated producers including peasants—and what such a system might look like and if it might not better fit nations where the peasantry has already been decimated by neoliberal globalization and dispossession. Such a system could at least theoretically integrate peasant smallholders, independently or in cooperatives, with industrial enterprises providing the advantages of economies of scale—essentially what the Venezuelan government has attempted in its reform. Where the peasant is sufficiently numerous and mobilized to make a claim on underutilized land, the state has responded and facilitated the purchase of land after a compensated expropriation and it has responded to land occupations with redistribution and technical aid and assistance (with all the power and authority that implies, of course).

Although official rhetoric rarely if ever acknowledges the divergence of reality on the ground from the peasant line of *La Vía Campesina*, in practical terms, the model of agriculture created by the government represents a distinct form of food sovereignty. The model implicitly recognizes the Venezuelan population as the guarantor of food sovereignty, rather than the peasantry and the centrality of technical experts to the success of the project. The government has not ceased making concessions to the *campesino* movement and the aspirations of the population at large, but the bulk of the resources have been allocated to state enterprises. After more than a decade of agrarian reform, the tenure pattern in Venezuela has changed dramatically. The Venezuelan state, which was already the largest landholder has further consolidated its position and taken direct control of cultivation in many states. *Latifundios* have not entirely disappeared and large private landholdings persist in many states (especially in the states of Lara and Zulia where dairy and sugar estates are prevalent), but they are now part of a more variegated picture. The large private landholdings whose potential was severely constrained by lack of capital and foreign imports have been and will likely continue to be replaced by state agro-industrial enterprises. Further seizures could result in the eradication of the *latifundio* as the basic unit of landholding and foreign transnationals will likely continue to be targets, but the construction of food sovereignty is not preceding as many food sovereignty activists had initially conceived—nor with the impetus they imagined.

Conclusion

My plea in this paper has been to avoid imposing a one-size-fits all approach to food sovereignty on the global south. The diversity of the nations in the region make it critical to pay attention to local, regional and national scales and the ways in which food sovereignty and agrarian reform projects intersect increasingly complex systems of production and exchange at the global level. The example of Venezuela and its recent experiment with agrarian reform

offers a critical counterpoint to conceptions of food sovereignty that have figured in recent debates on the restructuring of agriculture from the market orthodoxy of the World Bank to the activists of La Vía Campesina.

The rural areas of many nations in the global south are far removed from the forms of traditional subsistence agriculture that sustained previous generations and may therefore be ill-suited for food sovereignty policies based on peasants. As national states in the global south begin to reassert control over their productive systems and protect themselves from the vicissitudes of the global market, they may find that populist frameworks are inappropriate and hybrid models are more practical. A populist government cannot simply raise tariffs and hope peasants will sprout from the ground. A program of food sovereignty in a mostly urban, developing context, requires more realistic measures that accord with the aspirations of its population. If applied un-reflexively to national contexts across the global south, constructions of food sovereignty as intrinsically based upon peasants are likely to encounter many of the same difficulties Venezuela has faced. The Fordist-Neopopulist strategy adopted by the Venezuelan government represents one of a range of potential responses for those seeking to alleviate poverty and hunger and it is my belief that states and social movements may have to find still more flexible ways to enact food sovereignty. I should emphasize that the recent path to food sovereignty taken by Venezuela is not without its own perils.

In recent years there have been significant food price spikes in Venezuela (a product of shortages, rising production costs, and market manipulation) threatening to weaken support for the government (see for example, Robertson, 2013; Armas, 2013). It remains to be seen whether the Bolivarian government can establish effective control over the food system and meet the needs of the population through further expropriations. It is extremely doubtful, however, that a system entirely based on the peasantry and relocated urbanites would have fared any better. It may be the case, as the laudable activists of La Via Campesina assert, that “the corporate food system cannot feed the world” (2010), but it may also be the case that in many nations the peasantry cannot either.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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[Aaron E. Kappeler](#), then a student at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, was awarded a grant in April 2009, to aid research on ‘Sowing the State: Land Reform and Hegemony in Rural Venezuela,’ supervised by Dr. Tania Murray Li. This research provides an ethnographic account of the restructuring of agriculture and nation-state in the Bolivarian Revolution. This project investigates the transformation of land tenure relationships and productive activity in light of the challenges faced by reformers after decades of neoliberal policy. Based on 18 months of fieldwork in El Centro Tecnico Productivo Socialista Florentino (an agricultural enterprise located in Barinas in the central plains), the account centers on the enterprise, its operation, and the openings created for subaltern actors in its relations with producer communities and the wider context of state formation.