

# Land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism

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## (1) Introduction

There are important changes in land politics and agrarian movements that have implications in academic research and political actions: First, land politics today are more diverse than its conventional notion during the past century. Second, social movements that mobilize around land have been transformed in the context of their response to changing context, especially those related to environmental and food politics. Third, all these changes have inspired a new generation of highly energized agrarian scholar-activists. All these have contributed to a revival of critical agrarian studies, i.e., the study of dynamics of social change in -- and in relation to -- the countryside. I will discuss three topics, namely, land politics, agrarian movements, and scholar-activism.

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## (2) Land politics

### ***The Contemporary global land rush***

Mainstream narratives about the food, energy, finance and climate change crises tell us that there is a solution to these problems. The solution lies in the existence of marginal, under-utilized, empty and available lands. It is assumed that these lands can be put to productive use without displacing villagers because these lands are assumed to be empty and available. This has resulted in the current global landgrabbing phenomenon. Mainstream thinkers believe that land deals can be managed through good governance principles and instruments, like 'transparency instruments', 'business and human rights frameworks', and 'corporate social responsibility'. But this assumption is contested.

The narrative that supports large-scale land investments is anchored on an old assumption that the institutions of access to and control over land, and the way production is organized in agrarian societies are *economically inefficient*. The efficiency argument suggests that while the peasant economy may be able to help villagers to self-provision, it will not be able to feed the growing world population. Another assumption is that some forms of agrarian society's production systems are *ecologically destructive*. There have been cycles of campaigning to illegalize practices of shifting cultivation, livestock raising, artisanal fishing, and other types of livelihoods by forest dwelling communities. Today, this narrative has found a new justification in the climate change mitigation and adaptation discourse. What we are witnessing today is a double whammy: the fusion of the two narratives.

### ***Broadening the scope of land politics***

Table 1 ([Table 1 in powerpoint slide](#)). In critical agrarian studies, conventional land reform, namely, 'rural/agricultural in the South' (category I) is found in one of the four categories of land politics today. But the category

'rural/agricultural/South' (category I) remains probably one of the most politically significant categories, if not the most important, for the fact that it implicates perhaps the greatest number of poor people.

The other categories, which have always existed but were never hot topics in agrarian studies, have become increasingly politically important. The category 'rural/non-agricultural/South' (category II) has become -- or should become -- an equally compelling category in agrarian studies. Category II is implicated in a wide range of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies, neoliberal conservation, surge in hydropower projects, and the expansion of 'no dwelling zones' in 'fragile areas' in response to climate change.

Recent demographic changes and patterns of capital accumulation have altered some patterns in urban-rural links. The rural and urban categorization has increasingly become even more blurred. Categories III and IV (i.e. urban/agricultural and urban/non-agricultural) have become important land issues in their own right, where capital attempts to seize as much resources, space and people as it can capture in order to further accumulate. During the past two decades we saw an explosion of land conflicts worldwide that are located in urban/peri-urban places, involving both agricultural and non-agricultural issues.

Class antagonism rooted in land is more diverse today. Landowning classes remain entrenched, but the current context has brought in social forces that are equally, if not more, vicious. They include new corporate land grabbers, both transnational and domestic, non-corporate but pervasive individual land buyers (entrepreneurs, speculators, brokers, renters, scammers, swindlers), as well as financial entities that include pension funds, supermarket chains and 'food empires' (as Jan Douwe van der Ploeg calls them), and layers of non-traditional agricultural investors ranging from auto companies to livestock processors, plus big conservation groups.

In settings where the land is needed but the people are not, as Tania Li puts, it is likely that villagers would be expelled from their land. But capital is not committed to a particular mechanism or form of land control, as long as its venture generates profit. Hence, we also see land deals that incorporate poor villagers as workers or through contract farming.

### ***Reframing land policy discourse and political advocacy***

There are three political conditions of land access that require differentiated approaches to democratization of resource access and control. The first is where there is a mass of landless and near-landless people that needed land. In this context, the task is to *promote* redistributive land policies, like conventional land reforms, share tenancy and leasehold reforms. The second is where people have existing access to land but that it is threatened by various socio-economic and political processes. The task in such settings is to *protect* existing access through a range of institutional interventions: indigenous peoples' territorial rights, community land certification, leasehold reforms. The third is where people have been expelled from their lands through various forms of coercion. In such a situation, the task is to *restore* the access to land. This can be done various types of land restitution. All the three scenarios do happen in rural/urban and agricultural/non-agricultural settings, in the Global South and North. *Promote, protect and restore*

democratic land access then are the main challenges and political tasks in land politics today. Collectively, this includes conventional land reform -- but goes way beyond that.

Whether and how land politics can be democratized depends on the balance of power among state and social forces. How organized agrarian and land movements are able to strengthen and expand its ranks and link up and speak to the more widespread amorphous and spontaneous rural villagers' land struggles will be a key factor to shifting the balance of power in favour of working class claim-making from below. We now turn our discussion to this topic.

### **(3) Agrarian movements**

The changing context has implications on how agrarian movements emerged, and how their political character has evolved. This can be seen in three ways: first: transnationalization; second: diversification of land struggles, and third: broadening of cross-class and multi-sectoral movements and alliances around social justice struggles.

#### ***Transnationalization***

In the late 1980s, some agrarian movements started to establish common political threads that would string together movements and collective actions vertically -- giving rise to contemporary transnational agrarian movements. This was in reaction to the adverse impact of neoliberal globalization on the rural world. The most politically coherent and significant group among the contemporary transnational agrarian movements is La Via Campesina (LVC), founded in 1993. La Via Campesina reframed contemporary agrarian struggles in at least two strategic ways. First when it launched food sovereignty during the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, kick-starting food sovereignty as a political project and polycentric movement. Second is its anti-WTO struggle that started in the 1980s during the GATT negotiations and peaked at the WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico in 2003. But whatever victory LVC achieved in the struggle against GATT/WTO would, paradoxically, also mean a relative loss of a key rallying issue and battlecry afterwards. Other issues like GMO and land grabbing would not have the same universal effect of solidarity, mobilizing energy, and militancy among LVC members and beyond. Whether emerging issues and struggles around climate change could match the anti-WTO historical highlight remains to be seen.

But while LVC is the most famous TAM, it is not the only important group. There are more than a dozen politically important radical TAMs, and most of these are members of the IPC for Food Sovereignty. [See Table 2 \(table in Powerpoint slide\)](#). Individually and collectively, the listed TAMs in Table 2, except for LVC, are all academically under-studied and politically under-appreciated. Just looking at the list in Table 2 tells us how little we know about transnational agrarian movements, and how lopsided research and political attention has been.

There are aspects of the current agrarian movements that remain under-studied. I'll briefly discuss one. Ebbs and flows are permanent aspects of agrarian movements. That organizations rise and fall is nothing extraordinary or surprising. What is problematic is when TAMs are unable to institute mechanisms that enable them to adjust to constant political

dynamics. For example, a dead organization continues to occupy a privileged seat at the table, while a newly born vibrant organization is denied entry, or the old guards refuse to share power with the younger generation. These issues are seldom critically examined partly because they are awkward and sensitive matters. Yet, movements risk and face more embarrassment when they are forced on occasion to expel or suspend some members, as the history of La Via Campesina has shown us, or self-liquidate, as demonstrated in the case of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), a powerful rich farmers' international federation that imploded in 2010.

### ***Diversification of land issues, struggles and movements***

Agrarian movements interested in land issues are no longer confined to farmers' movements calling for conventional land reform in order to establish small-scale family farms. What we are witnessing is the emergence of social movements that reflect the changing character of land politics. This can be seen in at least four ways.

First: *agrarian movements rooted in and oriented towards farming* remain a key pillar in agrarian movements today. But it has to be noted that the current agrarian movements heavily oriented towards conventional land reform struggles in the South are generally thin -- despite celebratory claims about some of the most famous country cases. Meanwhile, significant re-concentration of land in the North has triggered renewed interest and mobilizations of farmers around land in this part of the world -- all these involve land struggles, but not in the context of South-oriented conventional land reform.

Second: *the rise of agrarian movements rooted in the countryside but whose principal interests and demands are not agricultural in character* is a significant development in the global agrarian movement front during the last three decades. Examples include movements against big conservation and mining. These movements are agrarian because the contestation remains centrally about land control and they are primarily located in the countryside. This type of agrarian movement is likely to become more important in the era of climate change and land grabs. As capital widens its geographic area of target to secure cheap, if not free, natural resources and labour and open up new markets, more spaces are penetrated by and people are integrated into capital accumulation processes.

Third: *emerging urban agriculture-oriented initiatives and movements* are another important trend to note. As cities get packed, many urban poor people creatively or desperately struggle to self-provision in any way imaginable, including food production in and around the city, planting food crops in any small patch of land that they can find (on roadsides, alongside railroad tracks, in vacant lots), often informally and/or illegally. Recently this phenomenon has begun to run parallel to and, at times, to overlap with a more consciously organized and orchestrated urban agriculture movement. This emerging trend is of small and scattered efforts, often amorphous in form, but the logic giving birth to them deserves attention.

Fourth and finally, *emerging land oriented urban mobilizations and movements that are not agriculture-oriented* are worth noting. Capital encroaches into urban non-agricultural spaces and people, provoking mobilizations by local communities. These are people with obvious land

questions in urban spaces, but different from the conventional notion of the land question in agrarian studies.

### ***Broadening of multi-sectoral movements: transformation and convergence***

Contemporary agrarian movements increasingly find themselves transformed or forming alliances with two other social movements, namely, environmental and food movements.

*First:* As capitalist encroachment heightens in rural spaces, agrarian and environmental movements are linked more closely. The transformation of some agrarian movements into environmental movements, or the emerging coalitions between agrarian and environmental justice movements may be heading towards a new frontier because many of the environmental justice movements are now forming the basis for climate justice movements. Agrarian movements are increasingly framing their current narratives as 'agrarian issues in the era of climate change'. How such a convergence will unfold is likely to transform the way we carry out academic research on, and political activism around, agrarian politics.

*Second:* the transformation of many agrarian movements into broad food sovereignty movements, and/or, the coming together of these two sets of movements, concretely and discursively, is probably one of the most politically significant and academically exciting developments at the agrarian or food politics research fronts. This transformation and/or convergence has brought so much fresh energy into the political activist and scholarly work. The synergies between these movements, and by extension, research interests about these have been rejuvenating in many ways.

One of the difficult questions for these movements to address is whether environmental and climate justice and food sovereignty are possible to achieve within capitalism. The flipside of this question is our conversation around reimagining a socialist alternative.

In short: land politics and agrarian movements have been transformed, and such transformation has generated academic and political interest especially among younger generations of engaged researchers. We now direct our discussion to agrarian scholar-activism.

## **(4) Contemporary scholar-activism**

### ***Scholar-activists in the emerging literature***

By scholar-activists I mean those who explicitly aim not only to interpret the world in scholarly ways but who also aim to change it, and who are connected -- unapologetically -- to political projects or movements. The category of scholar-activists is a subset of academics when they work in academic institutions, or of activists when they work in activist organizations or agrarian movements. This means, they are just a small subset of a bigger category -- and they are not the only relevant actors generating radical and progressive ideas. Progressive and radical academics and activists are even bigger knowledge producers. But my paper, or this talk, refers only to a smaller section of this wider community.

There are three types of scholar-activists, all of which are connected to political projects and movements, namely, (i) scholar-activists who are primarily located in academic institutions who do activist work; (ii) scholar-activists who are principally based in social movements or political projects and do scholar-activism from within; and (iii) scholar-activists who are mainly located in non-academic independent research institutions. Frances Fox Piven (2010) explains that tensions arise --"when we commit ourselves to the more troubling sorts of demands that advance the interests and ideas of groups that are at the margins of public life, the people who are voiceless, degraded and exploited... When we commit ourselves to the often *disorderly movements* that try to advance the political causes of these groups, when we join our critiques of the institutional arrangements that the movements are trying to change -- to *commitment to the movement itself*... It is this sort of divided commitment, between an academic career and dissident activism, that provokes reflection on how to do both."

For Charles Hale, 'dual commitments' is the defining character of scholar-activists: to the academia and the political struggle. Hale's argument is

neither that activist research methods are appropriate to all academic projects nor that all innovative, radical, or transformative knowledge is produced in this way. Rather, activist research methods stand as one option among many, but they are especially appropriate to employ when an organized group in struggle is intensely concerned with the analytical question at hand and when the very conditions of their struggle involve a challenge to the existing analytic paradigms.

The overall treatment in the literature of the concept of scholar-activist, however, remains too academy-centered, that is, examining scholar-activists based in academic institutions. This represents only one of the three types. The other two are as profoundly important, but they are largely undervalued and understudied. What we know about them is limited, but enough to convince us that they play a critical role in knowledge production and political action. The *interplay* between these three categories is another matter that is probably least known and understood. [Figure 1 \(Powerpoint slide\)](#). I suspect that such an interaction actually plays a critical role in academic research and political work.

### ***Agrarian Scholar-activists***

It is important that agrarian scholar-activism be approached partly in reference to agrarian movements and questions of external alliances. The organization of production, impoverishment and drudgery, insertion into particular social structures, and agrarian institutions all conspire to put huge constraints on the ability of rural villagers to engage in contentious politics. There is the need for external allies who could help address constraints and obstacles. During the past century, the most consistent allies for the peasantry and agrarian movements were revolutionary communist and socialist political parties. That era has ended.

Today, critical agrarian studies and agrarian scholar-activism are carried out in partly different terms and topics. Most agrarian scholar-activists emerged from post-political party social movement initiatives of the 1980s

onward, and have been recruited into, or have joined, social movements from different entry points. An important source of the surge of agrarian scholar-activism comes from the food movements that have seen great dynamism from the 1990s onwards. Recently, there seems to be another wave of expansion of agrarian scholar-activism from the environmental and climate justice front. The academic fields that are getting drawn into critical agrarian studies have also expanded beyond the conventional parameters of agrarian studies -- while reaffirming the centrality of agrarian political economy.

But all types of scholar-activists have to contend with the academy and agrarian movements. I'll discuss each of the two.

### **(i) Scholar-activists and the academy**

A good activist is irreverent, subversive and passionate -- at least in Alinsky's definition. A good academic is prim, respectful and clinical -- at least in a stereo-type profile. These contradictory qualities are what define scholar-activists. This leads to a permanent tension and contradiction faced by scholar-activists. The challenges for scholar-activists in dealing with the requirements of academic work can be seen in at least two ways.

First, and on the one hand is *academic rigor*. This means being thorough, meticulous, precise, careful, and convincing—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. There are academic arbiters including peer review panels, editorial committees, and research councils to judge the rigor of a research grant application or manuscript. *Academic rigour* is easy for a dedicated academic to deal with. It becomes complicated when the dual commitments of scholar-activists come into the picture. Hale argues that "how political commitments... *at times prioritize analytical closure over further complexity* -- make activist research difficult to defend in an academic setting".

*Political rigor*, on the other hand, is the benchmark for agrarian movements. It means being politically informed and thorough, nuanced and sharp, and relevant and timely. It should be the opposite of a postmortem way of thinking and doing things. Some political movements have longstanding traditions that function in some ways similar to the academic peer review. In Maoist-inspired movements, for example, the principles of "unity-struggle-unity" and 'criticism/self-criticism' are aimed at achieving theoretical and political rigor. There are movement arbiters of political rigor: movement leaders, cadres, militants, and bewildering layers of movement brokers, gatekeepers and cheerleaders.

Academic and political rigor may not sit well with each other, and can even be contradictory—although they can also be complementary and synergistic. The most difficult challenge for scholar-activists is how to address academic *and* political rigor simultaneously.

Second: *impact*. There are different traditions among and between the agrarian movements and the academy in terms of understanding and measuring research impact, and these can be contradictory, although not always necessarily so. For social movements, it can be straightforward: making some real-life change, such as actually stopping a dam construction, or redistributing land to peasants. Or producing reports that reframe not only international policy and academic debates -- but the very political opportunity structure for agrarian movements to mobilize-- such as the land grabs report

by Grain in 2008, or the series of reports by the drugs and democracy program of the Transnational Institute (TNI). It is quite different on the side of academics. Impact measurement in academic terms include publication points that are dependent on publication outlets ranked according to their "Impact Factor" (IF). Citation impact is also valued. There is a citation impact tracker called *h-index*, which is a measure of the extent to which your publication has been cited by other publications.

Often these two seem to be operating in different dimensions. But they really don't have to because they can be complementary. This is especially so because academics can be outperformed by nonacademy-based scholar-activists on some academic metrics. I'm sure we can quickly recall many of the classics in the field produced by scholar-activists based in institutions like the Transnational Institute and Food First. Or that many nonacademy-based public intellectuals have citation metrics higher than the average academic. Conversely, there are academy-based researchers whose works have major impact in reshaping public actions.

### ***(ii) Scholar-activists and agrarian movements***

That agrarian movements need scholar-activists as allies is not an issue. The issue is the 'terms' of that relationship. One-way instrumentalist relationships mark many of the interactions between scholar-activists and agrarian movements. There are two variants.

First is a tendency based on the implicit assumption that agrarian movements are ill-informed and have low levels of knowledge and capacity to understand and change their situation. The task for scholar-activists is to do research *for* these movements, to inform their political work, and build the movement's capacity. Knowledge generation remains primarily the domain of scholar-activists. This approach gives scholar-activists a vanguard role in terms of knowledge generation, and many agrarian movements, for various reasons, tend to be compliant. The extreme version of this tendency is a dual problem of 'vanguardism' by scholar-activists and 'tailism' by agrarian movements.

Second is a tendency where agrarian movements set the agenda and scholar-activists just follow. This is based on a romanticized idea that everything that agrarian movements say and do is good and correct. In a way it is a distorted version of a generic Maoist notion of 'mass line'. Taking at face value what the movement leaders say or show sometimes leads scholar-activists to support processes that do not deserve support, or in the failure to support deserving ones. The worst combination is when there is a triangular interaction between (1) undemocratic and despotic caudillo agrarian movement leaders, (2) layers of movement brokers, gatekeepers and cheerleaders, some of whom are naive and/or impetuous petty bourgeois intellectuals, while others are entrepreneurial opportunists, and (3) uncritical scholar-activists who take the grand claims by these layers of movement elites at face value. In this context, sometimes scholar-activists become either a victim of or a party to a 'political pyramid or ponzi scheme.' The extreme version of this tendency is a dual problem of 'vanguardism' of agrarian movements and 'tailism' of scholar-activists.

Both tendencies are instrumentalist and problematic. But there is a third approach that exists, and most of the scholar-activists gathered here



today belong to: that is, a two-way, mutually reinforcing interactive approach. On the one hand, this approach values the importance of scholar-activists to help agrarian movements overcome constraints and obstacles to extending the reach of their political struggles. On the other hand this approach values the autonomy of agrarian movements in the conduct of their movement building and collective actions. An important starting point for such an approach is an honest, transparent and clinical understanding of where each is coming from and what their agendas are. It is an approach that recognizes and respects the autonomy of *both* parties -- not just the autonomy of agrarian movements. A two-way, mutually reinforcing approach to scholar-activist and agrarian movement relationship necessarily leads to both parties internalizing their contradictions. The coexistence of synergy and tension defines such a healthy --but inherently conflict-ridden -- relationship.

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### **(5) Concluding remarks**

The recent changes in land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism reaffirm the relevance of critical agrarian studies as a field that champions both academic *and* political rigor in work.

A strategy to pursue scholar-activism around agrarian movements and land politics is one that is 'movement oriented.' On the one hand, it is movement oriented because it should not shy away from linking up with and contributing to emancipatory agrarian movements and political projects however imperfect and flawed these are. On the other hand it is movement oriented because it aims to carry out research both individually and collectively within and through a research movement; a research movement that has the characteristics of a social movement, that is, based upon shared assumptions and visions about the world as we know it and the alternative world we want to build. It values formal research networks, but goes beyond them. It is amorphous, fluid, informal, inspired and inspiring -- and is able to connect to younger generations of creative and radical thinkers. It should be orchestrated and spontaneous, able to navigate the difficult terrain between vanguardism and tailism among scholar-activists and agrarian movements. It should be diffuse but with clear hubs of imagination and creativity in an operationally polycentric manner. It should be dispersed across the three key sites: academy, non-academic independent research institutions, and social movements. Only then can we go beyond individual agenda setting and individual accomplishments — and transform agrarian scholar-activist research into a real force for social justice.

In closing: the dual commitments by scholar-activists to the academia and the political struggles can sometimes lead to scholar-activists feeling the task of confronting a double burden. But Frances Fox Piven puts it in a way that captures what I think most agrarian scholar-activists think and feel. She says:

scholar activists should stop regarding themselves as martyrs. We are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like no other, because the comrades we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can.