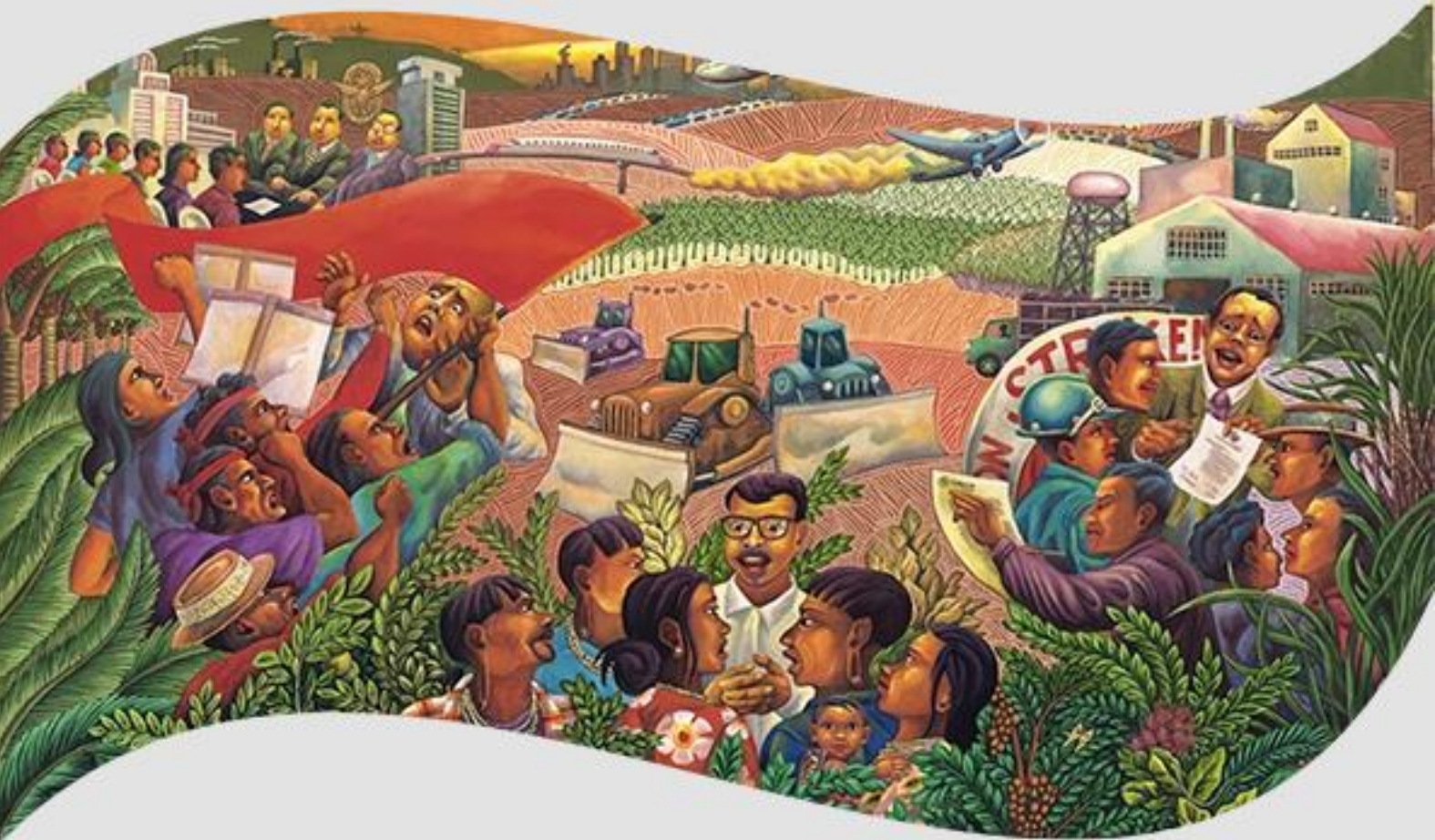


International  
Institute of  
Social Studies



Inaugural lecture 14 April 2016

**Professor Saturnino M. ('Jun') Borras Jr.**

**Land politics, agrarian movements  
and scholar-activism**

*Erasmus*

# Land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism

Saturnino M. Borras Jr.<sup>1</sup>

Inaugural Lecture<sup>2</sup>  
14 April 2016

## Abstract

This paper examines the recent changes in global land politics and agrarian movements and the activists and academics that mobilize around and study these issues. There are several arguments, or propositions for discussion, in this paper: (1) Land politics today are more diverse than at other points during the past century; (2) The changing character of land politics has shaped the broadening social movements that mobilize around land issues: some agrarian movements have transformed into environmental and climate justice movements as well as food sovereignty movements --or have moved on towards alliance-building (objective or subjective) with environmental and climate justice as well as food sovereignty movements; (3) During the past three decades, the transnationalization of agrarian movements has been one of the most significant shifts in agrarian politics, (4) The changes in land politics and agrarian movements in light of the changing global context have ushered in a new period and inspired a new generation of agrarian scholar-activists. By scholar-activism, I mean, rigorous academic work that aims to change the world, or committed activist work that is informed by rigorous academic research, which is explicitly and unapologetically connected to political projects or movements. There are three types of scholar-activists in this broad sense: (1) scholar-activists who are primarily located in academic institutions who do activist work and are connected to a political project or movement(s); (2) scholar-activists who are principally based in social movements or a political project and do scholar-activism from within; and (3) scholar-activists who are mainly located in non-academic independent research institutions who do activist work and connect with a political project or movement(s). The changes on the agrarian front have also altered the character and reshaped the agenda of scholar-activism, as well as the style, methods, strategy and tactics of work. It is thus important to have a better understanding of contemporary scholar-activists in general. However we must not see agrarian scholar-activists as a stand-alone category, but in relationship to their institutional location and in the context of their interaction with other scholars and activists, to highlight the tensions, synergies, limits, and possibilities for agrarian scholar-activism. I conclude by putting forward a proposition for discussion around the idea of an 'agrarian scholar-activist research movement.'

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<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this inaugural paper and lecture to the memory of Manuel 'Steve' Quiambao, Oscar 'Oca' Francisco', Basilio 'Bob' Propongo, and Ernest Reyes: comrades, mentors, friends; passionate, irreverent, subversive.

<sup>2</sup> The cover image is an original watercolor painting by the Filipino activist painter Boy Dominguez (2015) 20" x 30". It appeared as cover image of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 2015 special issue, "Global land grabbing and political reactions from below" guest edited by Marc Edelman et al.

## (1) Introduction

Land, peasantry, and peasant allies are recurring themes in agrarian studies. Among the key peasant allies are scholar-activists. They have generated a substantial body of knowledge that enables us to grapple with contemporary intellectual and political challenges on the agrarian front. They have enriched the sub-discipline of critical agrarian studies, i.e., the study of dynamics of social change in and in relation to the rural world.

Political debates about and academic research into the conditions of the agrarian world had been central in social science circles during the first three quarters of the past century. This period was bookended by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 on one end, and the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 together with the 1980 peace settlement in Zimbabwe on the other end. In between these bookends was a fantastic diversity of radical revolutionary political projects that transformed the agrarian world--from bourgeois democratic reforms to workers' proletarian revolution, from peasant-based socialist electoral victories to peasant-based national liberation wars. Some of them ended up in earth-shaking victories that seized state power, as in China and Vietnam (see Wolf 1969). Others ended up with peasants slaughtered in brutal military retribution as in the case of Indonesia in 1965-1966 (see White 2016). Social transformations triggered by these, often cataclysmic, events were not confined to rural areas. These agrarian transformations have significantly influenced the subsequent character and trajectories of national development and political culture in many societies.

Academics closely followed the unfolding agrarian politics of the first three quarters of the past century. Eric Wolf (1969) studied some of the major 'peasant wars' of the past century.<sup>3</sup> Key lines of debate at that time included questions about defining peasants (Wolf 1966), and the role of land and property in shaping peasant politics. The latter raised the issue of peasants' obsession with having a piece of land to farm, leading to what observers note as the inherently petty bourgeois politics of peasants, seen as permanently ambivalent toward revolutionary socialist political projects.<sup>4</sup> Classic studies of agrarian politics have revolved around problematizing the notions of a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself'.<sup>5</sup> The debate as to which strata of the peasantry has the potential to be the most open to revolutions divided radical thinkers, many identifying with Wolf's 'middle peasant thesis' on one hand, and others adhering to Jeffrey Paige's view that identifies landless proletarians as key.<sup>6</sup> How do peasants engage in radical politics to change their conditions? Some scholars focus on explaining collective actions that are organized, structured, overt, and at times armed in open defiance, while others study and explain 'everyday forms of resistance' that underscore villagers' agency seen through individual acts of contention that are unorganized, unstructured and

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<sup>3</sup> See also the classic collection by Stavenhagen (1970).

<sup>4</sup> See earlier related broader discussions by Shanin (1971, 1973), Mintz (1973) and Hobsbawm (1973). For specifically system-wide political transformations and the role of agrarian transformations, see Moore Jr. (1967), Byres (2009), Lehmann (1974) and Kay (2002) for various treatments, and countries and regions of the world.

<sup>5</sup> See Byres' treatment of this subject (Byres 1981).

<sup>6</sup> See Wolf (1969) and Paige (1975) for elaboration. Gerrit (1975) dedicated much of his scholarly work to researching answers to a closely related question that defined much of this period: when and why do peasants become revolutionary?<sup>6</sup> This question has provoked a polarized, and still open, debate--with James C. Scott offering a 'moral economy' perspective, while Samuel Popkin advances a competing perspective largely inspired by neoclassical economics (1976, Popkin 197, Kurtz 2000).

covert.<sup>7</sup> Who are the allies of peasants in their collective actions, and what are the terms of such alliances? These questions bring us back to earlier Marxist debates about peasant politics, including Engels' original formulation of the peasant question,<sup>8</sup> and the long and rich history of political debates and academic inquiry into communist and socialist parties' checkered relationship history with the peasantry.<sup>9</sup> Our understanding of questions of peasant agency has been radically transformed, and we are forever indebted to this body of literature.

Today, nearly half of the world's population remains rural. Three out of four poor people live and work in the countryside. Even if for only these two reasons, agrarian studies should remain a key pillar in social science scholarship. In a lot of ways, it still is. But not without significant changes from the past and unfolding challenges for the future. Peasant wars of the past century ended or waned at the same time that neoliberalism surged in the beginning of the 1980s. Soon thereafter a key context for peasant wars, namely, the Cold War, ended. Most socialist experiments collapsed, and so did their agricultural pillars such as the agricultural collectives and state farms. Conventional land reform disappeared from official policy agendas save for a few national initiatives. Promotion of market-based land reforms, land markets, formalization of private land property rights, and partial reversals of previous land reforms dominated the land policy thinking from the 1980s to the present.<sup>10</sup> Academics followed this trend.<sup>11</sup>

During this period, as national liberation movements and communist party-led insurgencies either took state power and got institutionalized in their own contexts, or were weakened and/or decimated, different types of agrarian movements started to emerge worldwide. These are largely autonomous agrarian movements that emerged in reaction to neoliberalism on the one hand, and with ideological and political orientations and organizational forms that are significantly different from the past national liberation movement-oriented groups on the other hand. Many of these agrarian movements would take varying forms of ideological inspiration from Marxism, but in less dogmatic and sectarian ways than their predecessors. Most are non-party social movements and are zealously protective of their autonomy from political parties.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Wolf (1969), Paige (1975) and Hobsbawm (1973) for a range of Marxist positions on agrarian politics. For the everyday forms of peasant resistance tradition, see Scott (1985, 1990), Scott and Kerkvliet (1986), Kerkvliet (2005, 2009), and Malseed (2009). See Brass (2000) for a Marxist critique of the latter, among others.

<sup>8</sup> See Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010).

<sup>9</sup> There is a subset of the Marxist literature on the role of peasants, agrarian classes and transitions to socialism. For various thematic angles, see, among others Saith (1985) on China, Wuyts (1994, 1981) on Tanzania and Mozambique, O'Laughlin (1995, 1996) on Mozambique, and Collins et al. (1982) on Nicaragua. Later, as most of these experiments faltered or even collapsed, a smaller subset of agrarian studies emerged focusing on post-socialist agrarian restructuring. See, among others, Spoor (2008).

<sup>10</sup> For a flavor of this period, see De Janvry et al. (2001), Deininger (1999) and Deininger and Binswanger (1999) for mainstream perspectives; and Borras, Kay and Lahiff (2007) and Zoomers and van der Haar (2000) for critical perspectives.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the last major intellectual gathering that was still part of the generation of peasant politics research mentioned earlier was the workshop organized by James C. Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague in 1985 on 'everyday forms of peasant resistance in Southeast Asia.' From the 1980s onward, we would not witness among radical agrarian political scholars the same extent and intensity of scholarly interest and inquiry into land politics, agrarian movements, and peasant alliances as it was during the first three quarters of the past century--until recently.

<sup>12</sup> For critical analysis and background on some of the iconic national movements, see Moyo and Yeros (2005) on international cases, Wolford (2010) on Brazil, Vergara-Camus (2014) on Brazil and Chiapas,

The emergence of these movements shows some contradictions: it is partly a reaction to neoliberalism,<sup>13</sup> but at the same time, it arguably benefited from neoliberalism. The latter can be seen in the form of the rise of the nongovernmental donor complex and NGOs whose fortunes are largely a result of the neoliberalization of the global aid complex and governance agenda. These donors and NGOs in turn funneled vast amounts of logistical and financial resources to the formation of agrarian movements who did not want or could no longer tap such resources from political parties. The reconfiguration of political parties and agrarian movements during this period has significantly redefined the terms of peasant alliance, with political parties increasingly relegated to the background, while NGOs and nongovernmental donor agencies becoming increasingly entrenched.<sup>14</sup> It was in this context that a significant development on the global agrarian front occurred, which would inspire deep and widespread interest and passion among the current generation of activists and researchers: the rise of transnational agrarian movements (TAMs).<sup>15</sup>

Academic work reflected this trend. Studies into conventional land reforms, class configuration and class politics of agrarian movements and their relationship to (revolutionary) political parties disappeared, save for some serious studies into specific national phenomena, such as those in Brazil, Chiapas in Mexico, Zimbabwe's land mobilizations post-1997, and the numerous pockets of individualized and localized upheavals among Chinese peasants whose land was being expropriated in the midst of industrial and commercial capital expansion in China.<sup>16</sup> The most significant aspect of this period for critical agrarian studies in terms of research on agrarian politics and questions of peasant agency was the extent of and momentum behind the study and documentation of La Via Campesina and the idea and practice of food sovereignty (Patel 2009). But this surge of intellectual energy cannot be solely claimed by critical agrarian studies because many of these works are coming from a range of disciplines and interests, including food studies, environmental, and human rights studies.

Recently, however, there has been a convergence of socio-political, ecological, and economic processes in the world that put agrarian studies back in the spotlight, while, arguably, redefining the field at the same time. There has been a convergence of food price, fuel and energy, and financial crises that exploded around 2007-2008.<sup>17</sup> This convergence was partly triggered by calls for solutions to climate change, such as biofuels, which triggered further crises in other sectors or areas, like the food sector.<sup>18</sup>

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Petras and Veltmeyer (2003, 2001) on Latin America, Harvey (1998) on Chiapas, and Bachriadi (2010) on Indonesia.

<sup>13</sup> One of the best books on how this generation of agrarian movements was a reaction to neoliberalism is Edelman (1999) on Costa Rican agrarian movements.

<sup>14</sup> For detailed critical analysis of this subject, see Chapters 5 and 6 of Edelman and Borrás (2016). For a Central American flavor in this regard, see the various contributions in Biekart and Jelsma (1994). See Borrás (2008a) for a critical reflection on some of the contradictions in the narratives by agrarian movement activists about autonomy and the ensuing role of NGOs.

<sup>15</sup> TAM here is used in a loose way--to include movements, movement of movements, coalitions and networks. For a nuanced discussion about this, see Fox (2009).

<sup>16</sup> For authoritative studies, see Wolford (2010), Pahnke, Tarlau and Wolford (2015), Carter (2015) on Brazil; Harvey (1998) on Chiapas (and the special issue in 2005 of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 32, issue nos. 3-4), Camus-Vergara (2014) on comparing Chiapas and Brazil; Moyo (2011), Scoones et al. (2010), Cliffe et al. (2011) on Zimbabwe; O'Brien and Li (2006), Le Mons Walker (2008), and Yeh et al. (2013) on China.

<sup>17</sup> See Vanhaute for a good historical context.

<sup>18</sup> For a broader analytical treatment of climate change in the context of human development, refer to Gasper et al. (2013). For an elaboration on the specific example of biofuels, refer to Franco et al. (2010) and Borrás et al. (2010).



This convergence is also intertwined with the rise of newer hubs of global capital (BRICS and some middle income countries) that partly altered the international and regional imperatives for and patterns of agricultural production, trade, and consumption (Scoones et al. 2016). These shifts ushered in an era of renewed corporate global land grabbing instigated and largely carried out by nation-states.<sup>19</sup> They also signaled important changes in the character of commercial crops and commodities produced in the form of 'flex crops and commodities'--crops and commodities that have multiple and flexible uses as food, feed, fuel, and other industrial and commercial goods. Implicated sectors include sugarcane, soya, oil palm, and corn, among others, many of which can be flexibly used for biofuels, billed as a solution to climate change, or as other food or feed commodities, and other commercial and industrial commodities. While this phenomenon has affirmed the relevance of studying sectoral commodity chains or value chains, it has also challenged us to trace and examine emerging 'chains of chains', or 'value webs' (Borras et al. 2016a).<sup>20</sup> This convergence has complicated questions of politics around (global) governance for (inter-)governmental entities and policy advocacy for activist watchdogs and social movements.<sup>21</sup> In this convergence, climate change discourse is becoming increasingly entangled with agrarian justice narratives and food politics. The intertwining of agrarian, food and climate justice issues has also provoked a similar process among the ranks of social justice movements.<sup>22</sup>

These recent political developments on the global agrarian front have partly recast the units of analysis and the ways in which we study dynamics of social change in and in relation to the rural world. These transformations have generated synergies, and at the same time provoked tensions, within and between agrarian movements and other social justice-oriented movements, i.e., food justice and food sovereignty movements, environmental justice, labor justice, and more recently, climate justice movements. These changes--materially, discursively and politically--have far-reaching implications for how we understand and carry out critical agrarian studies today.

These changes have affirmed the continuing relevance of scholar-activism, that is, rigorous academic work that aims to change the world, or committed activist work that is informed by rigorous academic research, which is explicitly and unapologetically connected to a political project or movement. The changes on the agrarian front have also altered the character and reshaped the agenda of scholar-activism, as well as the style, methods, strategy and tactics of work.

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to White et al. (2012), Edelman et al. (2013), Keene et al. (2015) for general politics and political economy background, and Wolford et al. (2013), Levien (2012, 2013), Moreda (forthcoming), and Moreda and Spoor (2015) for background on the role of the nation-state in current land grabbing.

<sup>20</sup> See Alonso-Fradejas et al. (2016) on oil palm, Oliveira and Schneider (2016) on soya, Gillon (2016) on corn, McKay et al. (2016) on sugarcane, Kroger (2014) on industrial trees, and Hunsberger and Alonso-Fradejas (2016) on policy narratives around these flex crops and commodities with specific comparative reference to oil palm and jatropha.

<sup>21</sup> For global governance questions, see Margulis et al. (2013); for national governance questions, see Wolford et al. (2013).

<sup>22</sup> For initial tracking on intersecting narratives among social justice movements, see Claeys and Delgado (2015) and Tramel (forthcoming). A more systematic and empirically grounded articulation of the intersecting agrarian, labor, environmental/climate justice issues, see Borras et al. (2016b) with specific reference to Myanmar. Partly building on food justice narratives and partly in reaction to converging contextual issues, food sovereignty has expanded its appeal so widely across academic disciplines and sectoral advocacy groups, spanning agrarian justice and climate justice themes. Relevant discussions include Brent et al. (2015), Brent et al. (2016), Shattuck et al. (2015), Alonso-Fradejas et al. (2015), Edelman et al. (2014).

The remainder of this paper is an explanation of and argument for a research agenda and strategy regarding why and how we study contemporary land politics and agrarian movements, and the location of academic research and political activism in the changed and changing global context. Section 2 will focus on land politics, Section 3 will be devoted to agrarian movements, and Section 4 will examine scholar-activism. Section 5 is a short concluding section where I sketch some ideas on how to bring forward a broader conversation in the form of academic research and political activism about land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism.

## **(2) Land politics**

Was a high wall there that tried to stop me  
A sign was painted said: Private Property,  
But on the backside it didn't say nothing —  
This land was made for you and me.

- Woody Guthrie, *This land is your land*

"Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land... We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours.... That's what makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it."

"We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man."

"Yes, but the bank is only made of men."

"No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."

- John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

### ***The contemporary global land rush***

A key element of the current mainstream narratives about the food, energy, and climate change crises claims that there are too many of these problems, and the solution lies in the existence of marginal, under-utilized, empty, and available lands.<sup>23</sup> The idea is to put these types of land to efficient productive use. This can be done without displacing local communities because these lands are assumed to be empty or under-utilized. This assumption and call to action ushered in the era of contemporary global land grabbing. While acknowledging that there are many problems in terms of processes and outcomes in large-scale land deals, mainstream thinkers believe these issues can be managed by applying fashionable win-win ideas promoting 'business and human rights' and 'corporate social responsibility' as middle ground strategies to expand business while respecting human rights and promoting poor people's livelihoods. Hence, there has been a proliferation of voluntary corporate self-regulating initiatives such as the Roundtable for Responsible Palm Oil (RSPO) and others.<sup>24</sup> Such initiatives have legitimized

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<sup>23</sup> See Deininger (2011) for a position approximating the World Bank's. See Borras and Franco (2012), Li (2011), Zoomers (2010), and De Schutter (2011) for critical contextual discussions—all in the context of how to interpret the meanings and implications of the global land rush.

<sup>24</sup> For a critical theoretical analysis, see O'Laughlin (2008). But this has also provoked a social movement demanded reframing of UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) endorsed the Voluntary

ongoing corporate and nation-state land grabbing, and have opened the door for others to follow suit in the current global land rush.

Thus, since 2008 land politics are back in the global spotlight. The narrative that frames the current dynamics of global land grabbing has remained firmly anchored on an old assumption or claim that disparages the peasant economy. Meaning, the institutions of access to and control over land, and the way production is oriented and organized in peasant societies are economically *inefficient*.<sup>25</sup> The efficiency argument has again become one of the powerful narratives that justify, implicitly or explicitly, the contemporary global resource rush, suggesting that while the peasant economy may be able to help poor rural villagers to self-provision, it will not be able to feed the growing world population that has now become largely urban.

The other old, but persistently lingering claim is one that maligns some forms of rural villagers' production systems as something ecologically *destructive*. In the past, mainstream conservation organizations and central-states had launched campaigns to delegitimize and illegalize traditional practices of mobile farming, livestock raising, artisanal fishing, and forest dwelling. They have deployed various schemes based on rehashed version of sedentary farming and animal raising often using individual private land titles to entice communities to agree.<sup>26</sup> Such campaigns resulted in livelihood disruption and displacement in many rural communities. But many of these communities have resisted and persisted. Today, in an effort to resurrect old tactics, this mainstream narrative has found a new justification in the climate change mitigation and adaptation discourse. For example, shifting cultivation is framed as one of the causes of climate change, and so must be stopped.

Either of the two narratives, namely, that peasant production is *economically inefficient* or *ecologically destructive* was, and still is, powerful. What we are witnessing today is a double whammy: the fusion of the two narratives--justifying the need to seize resources (land, water, forests) from poor rural communities. In the context of political claims about land, this recent development has altered the basis for redistributive land policies. Conventional land reform is based mainly on the idea of redistributing large landed estates to previously landless or near-landless peasants to create either a mass of small family farms or state farm collectives or both, largely framed as a question of economic and productive efficiency (Griffin et al. 2002). The new context for land today requires building on the conventional land reform--but going far beyond it.

The contemporary land rush is global and implicates a wider range of natural resources than just land. It is global in the sense that it is happening in both poor developing (e.g. African countries) and OECD countries (e.g. European countries), as well as inside the countries well known as home to land grabbing corporations (e.g. China, Brazil and India).<sup>27</sup> While the resource rush is largely focused on acquiring some

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Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) that was passed in May 2012, and is now a reference point in terms of transnational and national mobilizations by agrarian movements to promote, protect, and rights in land struggles. See McKeon (2013), Duncan and Barling (2012), Brem-Wilson (2015), and Brent et al. (2016) on CFS and VGGT; see Franco (2014) on FPIC in the context of land grabs.

<sup>25</sup> Inefficient in any of the three, or all of the three, types of economic efficiency, namely, technical, allocative and distributive.

<sup>26</sup> See Cramb et al. (2009).

<sup>27</sup> See Transnational Institute (TNI) report on land grabs in Europe (Franco and Borras 2013) and van der Ploeg et al (2015), Sauer and Leite (2012) on Brazil, and Borras et al. (2012) on Latin America more generally. India is one of those implicated in the global land rush, especially in Africa. But see Levien (2012, 2013) for land grabs inside India.



form of land control, the logic driving this rush now goes beyond the conventional notion of land-for-agriculture. Water, forest and subsoil minerals, and other resources are also being grabbed.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the current land rush is also not just about land-for-agriculture in the sense that contested lands now include non-agricultural rural lands such as indigenous people's territories and rural spaces. And these lands are coveted for a variety of purposes including housing, climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives like hydropower dams or wind farms, and a surging interest in urban agriculture and community green spaces. Indeed, many are old issues taking place in new contexts, while others are new issues taking place in old contexts.

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

As already mentioned the relevance of conventional land reform has been reaffirmed, but at the same time it also shrinks in relative importance in the realm of global land politics.

Table 1: Categories of contemporary land issues

Land	South	North
Rural/agricultural (I)	☑	☑
Rural/non-agricultural (II)	☑	☑
Urban/agricultural (III)	☑	☑
Urban/non-agricultural (IV)	☑	☑

Conventional land reform in critical agrarian studies, i.e. 'rural/agricultural in the South' (I) is relevant to only one of the six categories of land politics today as outlined above in Table 1. Nonetheless, 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. In terms of academic research, it demonstrates the relevance of political economy perspectives in agrarian studies that stress the importance of understanding dynamics of agrarian transformation brought about by capitalism's penetration of the countryside. However, it is likely that the relative weight and political location of the 'rural/agricultural/South' category (I) has been altered in light of the changes in the global political economic and ecological contexts.

The remaining categories (II), (III), and (IV), which arguably have always existed but were never key themes in agrarian studies, have become relevant and relatively important. The category 'rural/non-agricultural/South' (category II) has become--or should become--an equally compelling category for academic research and political action in the context of agrarian scholar-activism. This category (II) is implicated in a wide array of climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives and issues, notably the dramatic expansion of non-agricultural neoliberal conservation initiatives, resurgence of hydropower projects and solar and wind farms, and the massive expansion of 'no dwelling zones' in 'fragile areas' due to climatic change. The sheer number of rural people directly affected by these policies and initiatives, and the logic underpinning such initiatives, require full incorporation of this category into critical agrarian studies.

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<sup>28</sup> On the water angle, see Mehta et al. (2012), Woodhouse (2012), Franco et al. (2013), Kay and Franco (2012); on forests, refer to the specific angle on green grabbing (Fairhead et al. 2012; Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012); on varying forms of land control these all entail, see Peluso and Lund (2011) and Hall, Hirsh and Li (2010).

The issue of rural-urban links, including agriculture-industry labor flows, (Kay 2009) has remained relevant, and recent developments have rendered it even more central to agrarian studies--but in a significantly revised way. Recent demographic changes and patterns of capital accumulation have altered some of the traditional urban-rural links and flows including those related to land, labor, dwelling, food, water, forests, the environment, and finance. Rural and urban categories have never been as blurred, and the same can be said about the politics around rural-urban links. Categories (III) and (IV) have thus become important land issues in their own right, where capital attempts to seize as many resources, spaces, and people as it can in order to further processes of accumulation. During the past two decades we saw an explosion of land conflicts worldwide that are urban/peri-urban based, involving both agricultural and non-agricultural issues.

The main antagonism in the countryside as framed in classic agrarian studies was centrally about peasants versus landowning classes or the state representing the landed interest. Antagonisms rooted in land are more diverse today. Landowning classes, including *latifundistas* and agribusiness plantation owners, remain entrenched and are key reactionary classes in many societies today. 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,<sup>29</sup> cross-border non-corporate, but pervasive individual land buyers (farmers, brokers, renters, swindlers),<sup>30</sup> financial entities that include pension funds,<sup>31</sup> supermarket chains and 'food empires',<sup>32</sup> an array of non-traditional agricultural investors ranging from auto companies to livestock processors,<sup>33</sup> as well as big time conservationists.<sup>34</sup> Most of the lands that are coveted are those being claimed by the central-state. Thus, the central-state has actually become the key land grabber today. In settings where the land is needed but the people are not, as explained by Tania Li (2011), 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. Thus, we can see a variety of mechanisms and forms of land control grabbing that often involve violent extra-economic coercion akin to what Marx described in his formulation of primitive accumulation--but not always and not everywhere.<sup>35</sup> All of these dynamics have revived old and provoked new axes of political conflict. Contemporary land-related political conflicts can be seen in four broad axes: (1) poor people vs. state; (2) poor people vs. corporations; (3) poor people

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<sup>29</sup> See White et al. (2012) and Edelman et al. (2013) for relevant background discussion.

<sup>30</sup> This category refers to many non-corporate land acquisitions that are done in a variety of ways, from legitimate land transactions often involving distress sales to explicitly fraudulent schemes.

<sup>31</sup> See the range of discussions by Fairbairn (2014), Clapp (2014), Isakson (2016), and Visser et al (2015).

<sup>32</sup> Jan Douwe van der Ploeg has coined the term and advanced the notion of 'food empires' (van der Ploeg 2008). Refer to a similar broader treatment by Friedmann (2005) from a food regime theoretical perspective.

<sup>33</sup> For a range of biofuels-related companies that are not traditionally engaged in agriculture, but have since been implicated to the emerging biofuel complex, see Franco et al. (2010) and Borrás et al. (2010), and refer to Weis (2014) and Schneider (2015) on the rise of the meat and livestock complex and how these link back to debates about the 2007-2008 food price spike and land grabs, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Big conservation has increasingly been implicated in current global land grabbing through a variety of ways and mechanisms. For a comprehensive analysis from this perspective, see Fairhead et al. (2012).

<sup>35</sup> See Marx's primitive accumulation in *Capital I* (1976: 873-940) and Harvey (2003) on accumulation by dispossession. For related framing discussions, see Hall, Hirsch and Li (2010), Hall (2013), Hall et al. (2015), and Peluso and Lund (2011). For some country cases, see Levien (2013, 2012) on India, Alonso-Fradejas (2015) on Guatemala, (McKay and Colque) on Bolivia (2016), Brent (2015) on Argentina, and Woods (2011) on Myanmar.

vs. big conservationists; and (4) poor people vs. poor people.<sup>36</sup> When land deals hit the ground, they impact already socially differentiated and differentiated communities<sup>37</sup> Land deals thus affect various social groups in a variety of ways, provoking differentiated political reactions that have multiple, and often contradictory, dynamics in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and generation—according to each of these axes of conflict.<sup>38</sup>

In short, the dynamics of conflict in the four categories outlined above are all fundamentally about land politics but cannot be subsumed in the conventional land politics narratives or political agitation of the past. The difference is not only semantic. The social structures implicated and the institutional requirements for expanding into new categories are significantly different from the conventional narratives around land politics. Hence, while old ways of asking questions are still relevant, new ones are required. While classic tools of analysis remain relevant, tools that are yet to be imagined or created have become urgent and necessary, if we are to have a better understanding of the meanings and implications of what is happening on the global land front.<sup>39</sup>

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

There are three political conditions related to land access and control that require distinct but interrelated institutional interventions in order to recast patterns of land control towards democratic land control.<sup>40</sup> The first situation, which requires institutional intervention is the one cited above: where there is a mass of landless and near-landless people that need land amidst land monopoly. In this context, the task is to *promote* redistributive land policies, mainly through conventional land reforms, but also through other land policies such as shared tenancy and leasehold reforms, as well as forestland reallocation programs. The second relevant situation is where people have existing access to land but that access is threatened by a variety of political processes,

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<sup>36</sup> Borras et al. (2013) put forward an initial discussion about this theme, but did not cover poor/conservation axis. The fourth one is picked up and discussed in Borras et al. (2016b).

<sup>37</sup> See Lenin (1964) for a foundational treatment and White (1989) for a methodological engagement on this question. In the context of contemporary agrarian transformations, refer to the excellent book by Tania Li (2014) in the context of Indonesia.

<sup>38</sup> See Oya for a broader treatment of the current land rush from an agrarian political economy perspective, with special attention to labor. See Borras and Franco (2013) for a general analytical framing. Refer to some illustrative cases: Alonso-Fradejas (2015) on Guatemala, Brent (2015) on Argentina, Mamonova (2015) on Ukraine, Moreda (2015) on Ethiopia, Martiniello (2015) on Uganda, Lander (2015) on Mali, Fameree (forthcoming, 2016) on Peru, and Milgroom (2015) on Mozambique.

<sup>39</sup> The situation is hopeful because of the surge of energy and excitement among the younger and older generations of radical and progressive academics and scholar-activists in rediscovering classics in agrarian political economy, along the various strands of Marxist and Chayanovian thought. Important recent synthetic works include: Bernstein (2010), Bernstein and Byres (2001), van der Ploeg (2013), McMichael (2013), Li (2015), Kay (2008), and Fairbairn et al. (2014). Harriss (1982) is an excellent collection of key lines of debates in classic agrarian political economy, and remains handy and useful to be referred to dealing with relevant agrarian issues today. Even the rather descriptive and often boring 'sustainable rural livelihoods approach' is getting its share in this excitement, generated by the tendency that is moving towards agrarian political economy made possible by the great intellectual effort by Ian Scoones. See Scoones 2009 article and 2015 book (Scoones 2009, 2015), partly as a serious response to the critique raised by O'Laughlin (2004).

<sup>40</sup> It is 'democratic' in the sense that it is should be conscious of and address socio-political divides along class, ethnicity/race, gender and generation that routinely result in an exclusionary and undemocratic distribution of access to land (Borras and Franco 2010; Franco et al. 2015). This is broadly building on Ribot and Peluso (2003). Conventional land reforms and mainstream land policies were notoriously gender and generation blind (see Deere 1985, Agarwal 1994, White 2012), which is another reason to seriously rethink land policy framing.

and/or, by the current global land rush. The task in such settings is to *protect* existing access through a variety of policy interventions: indigenous peoples' territorial rights, community land certification, leasehold reforms, and a range of institutional mechanisms that strengthens people's claims over their lands. The third situation that calls for institutional measures is where people have been expelled from their lands through various forms of coercion, including land grabbing or militarization of the countryside where villagers have been involuntarily displaced. In such a situation, the task is to *restore* access to land. This can be done via different forms of redistributive land restitution and other similar policies. All of these three broad scenarios can happen in rural or urban and agricultural or non-agricultural settings, in the Global South and North. *Promote, protect and restore* democratic land access across these geographic, hemispheric and political economic settings then are the main tasks at hand today. Collectively, they define contemporary land politics. However these efforts often require a related but even more fundamental struggle--for the right to have rights. Questions remain as to whether these three policy and political frameworks, separately and/or collectively, will gain traction in hotspots around the world? And if so, what are the chances this will make significant impact towards greater social justice?

As is well known now, many of the gains towards democratic (re)distribution of land seen since the early part of the past century have been reversed by cycles of land re-concentration where recipients of land reforms were differentiated out socio-economically and had to abandon farms, or later became victims of land grabs, and/or households quit farming and migrated out of the countryside. It is important to note conventional land reforms and mainstream land policies were notoriously 'gender blind' (see Deere 1985, Agarwal 1994). In addition, land reforms and land policies are 'generation blind' (White 2012). Land reserves for future land demands including possible future farmers were rarely part of the deal. As a result many rural youth have no possibility to gain access to land of their own, and leave the countryside, prompting Ben White (2012) to ask: "Who is going to continue farming and inherit the countryside?"<sup>41</sup> In order to avoid repeating the pattern of 'land redistribution-re-concentration', democratic land access initiatives have to consider land reserves for future land demands. In this context non-capitalist, non-individual private property rights-based alternatives as part of land policies should be seriously considered, preferred or prioritized even. These can be in a variety of institutional arrangements including community, communal, cooperative or collective forms--whether in a broadly capitalist or socialist system.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, without a democratic agrarian and ecological transformation that includes transforming the broader agriculture and food system, any reforms gained in pushing for democratic land access so far suggested will only result in the stubborn recurrence of landlessness and land monopoly. It is in this context where democratic land access has to be paired with a vision of a democratic alternative food and agricultural system. It is argued here that 'food sovereignty'--despite many conceptual, political and operational challenges and contradictions--is a relevant starting point.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In an extreme situation, this question is most problematic in contemporary China where the left-behind population in the countryside is made up of children and the elderly. See Ye and Lu (2011).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example the recent discussion by White (in press, 2016) in the context of the global land rush and his work on rural youth.

<sup>43</sup> For critical reflection on the idea and practice of food sovereignty, see the special issues in *Journal of Peasant Studies* (2014), *Globalizations* (2013), and *Third World Quarterly* (2013), with special attention to some contributions there, especially Bernstein (2014), Agarwal (2014), Edelman (2014), Kloppenburg (2014), Burnett and Murphy (2014), Alonso-Fradejas et al. (2015), Robbins (2015), Schiavoni (2015),

Food sovereignty is broadly defined here as the right of people to produce, trade and consume food and other products in or near their territory in safe, healthy, culturally appropriate, and ecologically sustainable ways (Nyeleni 2007).<sup>44</sup> While food sovereignty was originally framed from a narrow agrarian perspective, it has since then become a much broader political project co-owned, reinterpreted and reframed by other social movements and organizations coming from diverse social classes and groups in different societal contexts, urban and rural, and production and consumption sites, in Global South and North. Without a strategic vision of a broad agrarian and food system transformation, like food sovereignty, occasionally rebooting land control systems is likely to quickly revert back to new land monopolies. Conversely, without democratic land control, the political project of food sovereignty will be a nonstarter in most settings, or incredibly weak in others.<sup>45</sup> How does such a relationship actually unfold in the real world today is a question that needs to be empirically investigated rather than theoretically--or politically--assumed.

How land politics can be transitioned from the current state towards a greater degree of democratic access depends largely on the balance of power among state and social forces at a given moment in a given place. Within such a balance of forces, how and to what extent organized agrarian movements are able to strengthen and expand their ranks, and link up with emergent land struggles will be a key factor to shifting the balance of power in favor of working class claim-makers from below. We now turn our discussion to this topic.

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

The changing context of land politics discussed in the previous section has far-reaching implications on how agrarian movements have emerged, how their political character has evolved, and subsequent forms and levels of movement building and collective actions.<sup>46</sup> There are three key lines of political transformations of agrarian movements during the past two to three decades that require careful investigation: (a)

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Brent et al. (2015), Park et al. (2015), Shattuck et al. (2015). See also: Jansen (2015), Li (2015) and Hospes (2014).

<sup>44</sup> For critical reflections on food sovereignty, refer to the three journal special issues that are framed within the spirit of 'critical dialogue', namely Edelman et al. (2014), Holt-Gimenez et al. (2015), and Shattuck et al. (2015). Refer also specifically to individual articles Bernstein (2014), Agarwal (2014) and Kloppenburg (2014) in the Edelman et al. collection, as well as to Hospes (2014) Jansen (2015), Li (2015) and McMichael (2015a).

<sup>45</sup> For an initial exploration of the relationship between food sovereignty and land politics, see McMichael (2015b), Borras et al. (2015), and Roman-Alcala (2015). Two analytical angles are equally relevant in the current discussion: (a) the role of the state and questions of sovereignty (in food sovereignty)--and for this, refer to McKay et al. (2014), Schiavoni (2015), and Roman-Alcala (2016); and (b) the localization problematic in food sovereignty politics and scholarship--and for this see Robbins (2015).

<sup>46</sup> Two important political reference points are class and identity politics. The polarized, 'either/or' take in the literature on class and identity politics in agrarian movements was short-lived, although it flagged the relevance of both class and identity. For a general background, see Escobar and Alvarez (1992) on new social movements more broadly, and Brass (1994) on a class-based critique of new farmers' movement literature with specific reference to Indian movements but with broader resonance. Refer also to Edelman (1999) and Yashar (2007) for nuanced discussions. The starting point of this paper is that both class and identity politics are important realities in contemporary agrarian movements. The challenge is to examine how they intersect, and with what political implications. This partly takes a cue from Bernstein (2010) who argued that class intersects with other social identities. Refer also to the discussion by Veltmeyer (1997) and Edelman and Borras (2016: 49-53).

transnationalization; (b) diversification of land struggles; and (c) broadening and deepening of cross-class and multi-sectoral alliances around social justice struggles.

### ***Transnationalization***

Neoliberal globalization had, and continues to have, far-reaching impact on working people worldwide, provoking a variety of reactions the below (see Waterman 2001). Specifically for the peasantry and the rural world, these impacts have been mostly negative.<sup>47</sup> Threats of and real, lived negative impacts provoked the transnationalization of many agrarian struggles. While the internationalization of peasant struggles did not begin with the founding of La Via Campesina in 1993, as clarified by Edelman (2003), classic agrarian studies on the politics of agrarian movements almost always focused on the local-national levels. The political dynamics between local and national politics was the central preoccupation of most studies, given the geographic and political isolation of many peasant societies from the political centers of state power, and the latter being a key reference point for agrarian movements.<sup>48</sup>

From the 1980s onward, nation-states have been squeezed three ways by neoliberalism: (1) 'from below' through a widespread push for political and fiscal decentralization and administrative de-concentration; (2) 'from the side' through far-reaching privatization of governance structures and responsibilities; and (3) 'from above' through globalization and the partial giving up of significant state powers to international inter-governmental and financial institutions (Fox 2001). Nation-states and modes of governance have been partially transformed. As a key reference point for agrarian movements, the transformation of nation-states subsequently transformed agrarian movements. Many movements have followed the three trajectories of state transformation. Some agrarian movements started to focus on subnational, local arenas of contestations, while others followed the state's privatization spin and got inserted into the emerging complex of state-substitution initiatives such as micro finance and self-organized irrigation associations. Others boldly crossed borders, built international networks and coalitions, but abandoned local and national fronts. Agrarian movements have generally abandoned the national center--but not all them have done so. Some have attempted to establish a common political and organizational thread that would string together movements and collective actions from the local communities to the national and all the way to the international arenas (Borras 2004). This type of (agrarian) social movement that has been vertically networked (Gaventa and Tandon 2010) extending the arenas of struggle for citizenship rights (Fox 2005, 2009) is what we are interested in.

The most politically coherent and significant group among the contemporary transnational agrarian movements (TAMs) is La Via Campesina (LVC). It was founded in 1993, and is an international movement that is mainly based among landless and poor peasants as well as small and medium farmers in both the Global South and North. Its mass base is diverse in terms of ideology but its global leadership has been firmly in the hands of radical agrarian populists of a type that is broadly inspired and informed by combined sets of Marxist and Chayanovian ideas. The leadership is deeply

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<sup>47</sup> See Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2008) and Edelman (1999).

<sup>48</sup> See Hart (1989) and Scott (1998) for broader discussions on the centrality of the state in discussing the politics of agrarian transformations.



committed to the notion of 'autonomy' of agrarian movements from political parties.<sup>49</sup> There are arguably two defining moments in LVC's recent history that contributed to its current politically influential position among global social justice movements. The first moment was during the World Food Summit in Rome when LVC introduced to the world the alternative idea of 'food sovereignty.' This would kick-start what would become a far-reaching convergence of forces among different movements and political projects worldwide. The surprising appeal of food sovereignty might be partly explained by the fact that, after the collapse of actual experiments in socialism, social justice movements were in search of an alternative vision to back up the slogan 'another world is possible', or the vague but powerful notion of Walden Bello's 'De-globalization' idea (Bello 2003). The second moment is not so much of an introductory moment, rather it was a closure in many ways--the mobilization against World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Cancun, Mexico in 2003 where and when an LVC farmer member from South Korea killed himself in protest against the WTO. This would be the ultimate highlight of a long journey for so many national agrarian movements, many of which were united under the banner of LVC because of the trade liberalization issue--from the 1980s Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations, to the WTO launch in 1995, to the Battle of Seattle in 1999, and to Cancun in 2003. This was an issue that created the spark in the 1980s against what was perceived to be a pro-GATT farmers' movement, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP). Whatever victory LVC achieved in the struggle against GATT/WTO would, paradoxically, also mean a relative loss of a key unifying issue and battle cry afterwards. Other issues such as GMOs 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 can match the anti-WTO historical highlight remains to be seen.

But while LVC is the most high profile and famous TAM, it is not the only important group. In fact, LVC was partly a reaction to a pre-existing TAM--the now defunct International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which was a powerful organization of largely commercially oriented medium and large farmers in industrialized countries that tended to take contrary positions to LVC. IFAP for example broadly supported WTO and endorsed biofuels. It imploded in 2010 due to internal quarrels and financial troubles. A new organization with similar ideological orientation emerged out of the ashes of IFAP called the World Farmers Organization (WFO) (Edelman and Borras 2016: 62-68). Whether WFO will become as relevant as IFAP during the latter's time and fame (1946-2010) remains to be seen. How and why IFAP imploded should be a subject of serious academic investigation. What WFO means, and whether it is a serious initiative or not, deserves more scholarly inquiry.

Beyond IFAP and WFO, there are a dozen or so politically important radical TAMs with ideological orientation similar or close to that of LVC's, and most of these are members of the International Planning Committee (IPC) for Food Sovereignty (see Table 2). Individually and collectively, the listed TAMs in Table 2, except for LVC, are all under-studied academically--even within critical agrarian studies--and under-

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<sup>49</sup> Useful historical accounts of the rise of LVC and its key features include Desmarais (2007), Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010), Borras (2004), Deere and Royce (2009), Borras et al. (2008) and Edelman and Borras (2016).

appreciated politically. Just by looking at the list in Table 2 tells us how little we know about TAMs, and how lopsided scholarly research has been.<sup>50</sup>

Table 3: Social Movement Members of IPC for Food Sovereignty

<b>International movements</b>
La Vía Campesina (LVC)
World Forum of Fishers people (WFFP)
World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF)
World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous People (WAMIP)
International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco & Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)
International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)
Habitat International Coalition (HIC)
World March of Women (WMW)
International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements (FIMARC)
International Movement of Young Catholic Farmers (MIJARC)
<b>Regional Movements</b>
Network of Peasant and Agricultural Producers Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA)
Regional Platform of Peasant Organizations of Central Africa (PROPAC)
Asian Rural Women's Coalition (ARWC)
Coalition of Agricultural Workers' International (CAWI)
Arab Network for Food Sovereignty (ANFS)
Latin American Agroecological Movement (MAELA)
Continental Network of Indigenous Women (ECMI)
Coordinator of Andean Indigenous Organizations (CAOI)
Coordinator of Organizations of Family Producers of the Mercosur (COPROFAM)
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)
US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA)

Source: Edelman and Borras (2016: 69).

Classic studies about agrarian movements come from the broad disciplines of agrarian politics and agrarian political economy, and are marked by a preoccupation with the penetration of capitalism into the countryside and its implications for class configuration, class politics, revolutions, state power, and socialist alternatives, with iconic reference points of revolutions and socialist experiments: from China to Cuba, from Vietnam to Mozambique, from Russia to Nicaragua.<sup>51</sup>

The emerging scholarly interest in TAMs is in a different league. Central themes are far more diverse and include identity politics, agrarian movements' autonomy from political parties and states, ambivalence toward questions of state power, food and urban issues, and environmental issues. They tend to pay less attention to class politics—which was a topic at the heart of critical agrarian studies in the past. The relative absence of communist or socialist political parties working with agrarian movements

<sup>50</sup> There are very few existing scholarly studies of some of these organizations. On WFFP and WFF, see Sinha (2012); on the US food sovereignty and food justice movements, see Brent et al. (2015) and Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011); on ROPPA, see McKeon (2009).

<sup>51</sup> Two important academic journals, namely, *Journal of Peasant Studies* (since 1973) and *Journal of Agrarian Change* (since 2001) have filled their pages over many years of scholarly publications on these topics.

in the current period also meant the loss of 'politburo' type of leadership structures run by a corps of party cadres. But orchestrating large movements and widespread mobilizations require not just horizontal coordination but some degree of vertical leadership structures as well. Replacing the traditional party cadres, now orchestrating coordination are layers of powerful organizers and brokers, ranging from what Tarrow (2005) calls 'rooted cosmopolitans' to transnationalized versions of caudillo-cum-cacique type of agrarian movement brokers. This is apparent despite frequent claims by movement insiders and outside cheerleaders of perfectly democratic and horizontal processes in contemporary national and transnational agrarian movements.<sup>52</sup>

The emerging literature on agrarian movements today is just as rigorous and admirable as its predecessor, although: (a) it tends to be lopsided in terms of focus, privileging a few famous movements; and (b) it tends to be a bit on the celebratory side. The earlier studies of this current generation of agrarian movements tend to be descriptive, more like documenting than analyzing movements. This is changing now, towards becoming more analytical and sympathetic, and some are slowly raising difficult questions. Yet, there are under-studied aspects of the contemporary agrarian movements. These include the following: *First*, the class character and class politics of TAMs remain empirically under-investigated. Having a better understanding of class politics will help us understand some of the contradictory political stances among rural villagers: why some sections of rural villagers mobilize to oppose a large land investment, while others support the same investment; why some are able to mobilize and succeed, while others fail; why the material benefits of development intervention, whether public or corporate, are usually spread differentially among various social classes and groups in the countryside. *Second*, how does actual transnationalization--or failure to transnationalize--happen? Most accounts tend to take at face value official narratives of social movement activists. In general, only movements with a solid track record in political actions and political and ideological tendencies that are closely aligned with the rest of the TAM become affiliated. In this tradition, incorporation occurs through layers of common acquaintances, allies and supporters. While this can account for many of the transnationalization cases, it has difficulty accounting for obvious outliers: there are many national agrarian movements that fit all the criteria but have remained blocked from entry into a TAM. At the same time there are some obvious cases, that should not have been inserted into a TAM but the members are fully embedded. How do TAMs engage with struggles on the ground that take forms which are not familiar to TAM brokers, as Malseed (2008) asks in the context of Karen people's struggle against the Burmese army? It is argued in this paper that these are not mere administrative aberrations in TAM building, instead they are suggestive of deep ideological, political and institutional issues that need to be examined more carefully and honestly.

*Third*, and closely related to the second, ebbs and flows are permanent aspects of agrarian movements. That we constantly witness how organizations rise and fall--some are born while others die, some get stronger while others get weaker, some expand while others shrink, some get external funds one day and lose them the next--is nothing extraordinary or surprising. What is problematic is when large coalitions of social movements, especially TAMs, are unable, inadvertently or by design, to institute

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<sup>52</sup> Classic studies in agrarian politics have generated rigorous scholarly works, both sympathetic and critical. Weaknesses, internal problems and cleavages within and between agrarian movements were a critical subject in classic studies (See, for example, Lansberger and Hewitt (1970) in the context of Latin America) and problems in the relationship between agrarian movements and communist parties. See, for example, Putzel (1995) in the context of the Philippines.

mechanisms that enable them to easily adjust to these constant political dynamics. This is important because the history of large movements and coalitions is a history of disconnection between mass membership and leadership bodies. One impact of this for example: a dead organization continues to occupy a privileged seat at the table, while new vibrant organizations are denied access. In many cases, old guards continue to entrench themselves and not share the political space and power with the younger generation of leaders. These are some of the prevailing conditions that hound transnational agrarian movements today, yet these are rarely examined, partly because these are awkward and sensitive matters. Yet, movements face more embarrassment if they were forced to expel or suspend members, as the history of La Via Campesina has shown us, or altogether self-liquidate, as the case of IFAP has demonstrated.

*Fourth and finally*, the current state of TAMs needs closer scholarly scrutiny in order to understand the real condition of the movements' political and organizational health. Movement leaders would always claim that the movement is fine and great, and the leadership is fantastic. But internal realities do not always conform to such claims. It is also about 'political momentum'. It could be that at a particular moment, movements are indeed large and widespread still, but it could also be that the momentum is heading towards weakening, or isolation, or even implosion. No one, for example, had anticipated the implosion of IFAP in 2010 (Edelman and Borrás 2016), as no one in 1995 predicted that the then mighty ASOCODE (the Central American alliance of peasant organizations, and a key founding pillar of La Via Campesina) would implode just a few years later.<sup>53</sup>

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

As a result of the changed global context, agrarian movements that have an interest in land issues are no longer limited to farmers' movements that call for land reform in order to establish small-scale family farms. What we are witnessing is the emerging, albeit uneven, of social movements that reflect the changing character of land politics. Capitalist penetration of the countryside comes in more diverse forms and via new mechanisms, including those that are discursively linked to climate change imperatives such as big conservation initiatives and flex crops and commodities. This has in turn provoked reactions from a range of social groups and classes that are confronted by a variety of different land issues. This can be seen in the emerging political mobilizations and contentions around themes that are: (a) rural/agricultural; (b) rural non-agricultural; (c) urban/agricultural; and (d) urban nonagricultural--in the Global South and North.

*Agrarian movements rooted in and oriented towards farming* in the Global South and North remain a key pillar in agrarian movements today. As in the past, mobilizations gravitated towards contestations over property and/or issues of production. But as compared in the past, contemporary agrarian movements that are heavily oriented towards land reform struggles are generally few.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the significant re-concentration of land in the North has triggered renewed interest and mobilizations by farmers. In part this has been triggered by lopsided subsidies for

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<sup>53</sup> Biekart and Jelsma (1994) provided an excellent historical contextual discussion about ASOCODE and it was released in 1994, not far apart from the publication date of Edelman (1998). But by the time these relatively excited accounts were published, there was already a rapid momentum toward implosion within ASOCODE.

<sup>54</sup> There were pockets of dramatic national agrarian movements that in their own national context have made an important impact and generated varying degrees of international attention and inspiration. The agrarian movements in this category include the MST in Brazil, several land movements in Indonesia and India, amorphous land claim makers in Zimbabwe, and a range of national movements in the Philippines.

commercially powerful medium and large farms, as well as industrial food and agribusiness giants, and the inability of young aspirant farmers to get access to land or gain entry into the agricultural sector.<sup>55</sup> The specific context for ex-socialist countries in the North has also opened up renewed debates about and mobilizations around land policies and agrarian movements.<sup>56</sup>

Many contemporary agrarian movements have also mobilized around production and trade related issues, including especially around GMOs and biotechnology, corporate capture of agriculture, trade, and the construction of alternative agricultural and food systems, or food sovereignty.<sup>57</sup> A few movements have managed to combine land oriented mobilizations with productivist issues, like Brazil's MST. North-based farmers' organizations have been particularly active around these issues. However, while mobilizations around international trade, biotechnology/GMOs, and the corporate capture of agriculture were particularly intense and the movements' ability to use the issues to mobilize protests were great in the 1990s, in recent years, we have witnessed the relative waning of mass mobilizations and agitation oriented towards these issues.<sup>58</sup>

*The rise of agrarian movements rooted in the countryside but whose principal interest and demands are not agricultural*, in the Global South and North, is perhaps one of the most significant developments among global agrarian movements during the past three decades. These movements are arguably agrarian because the contestation remains centrally about land control and are primarily located in the countryside. This type of agrarian movement is likely to become even more important in the era of climate change and the global resource rush. As capital widens its geographic target area to secure cheap, if not free, natural resources and labor and open up new markets, more spaces are penetrated and more people are integrated into capital accumulation processes.<sup>59</sup> Non-agricultural forms and mechanisms of capitalist intrusion into the countryside have proliferated in recent years. These include most especially big conservation initiatives (forest, fisheries, biodiversity, wildlife) REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and other carbon-offsetting schemes including 'blue carbon' that have been greatly strengthened politically and logistically by mainstream climate change discourses and emerging policies around

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<sup>55</sup> See a multi-country study by European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) and the Transnational Institute (TNI) (Franco and Borras 2013; van der Ploeg et al. 2015).

<sup>56</sup> See Mamonova (2015) on Ukraine; Visser et al. (2012) on Russia.

<sup>57</sup> See Scoones (2008) on biotechnology, GMOs and agrarian movements, and Burnett and Murphy (2014) for a critical reflection on agrarian and food movements and trade.

<sup>58</sup> The KRRS of Karnataka, India is an example: it garnered international fame in the late 1980s and throughout 1990s in its militant agitation and actions against TNCs, trade and GMOs. Such agitation and mobilizations subsided many years ago, and the movement apparently weakened. See Brass (1994) for a contextual analysis, and Scoones (2008) on specific anti-GM and anti-TNC campaign, and Pattenden (2005) on the most recent political situation of KRRS. Furthermore, labor justice is central to classic agrarian studies. The mass of rural workers in the countryside--both in the Global South and North--is a key issue in agrarian politics (see Welch and Sauer 2016 for a Brazilian historical perspective). It is largely missing in political discourse and actions of agrarian movements today. Not surprisingly, it is also missing in contemporary scholarly studies. Its resounding absence also demonstrates the overly 'middle peasant' centered discourse and platform of today's agrarian movements, and lack of interest by academic researchers on the subject.

<sup>59</sup> An inspired surge of political debates and scholarly research partly provoked by the global resource rush is linked to Marx's formulation of primitive accumulation and Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' (Marx 1976, Harvey 2003). For a synthetic analytical overview, see Hall (2013); and for a particular take informed by empirical case in India, see Levien's work (2012, 2013).

mitigation and adaptation.<sup>60</sup> Some conventional large-scale modernist development projects are even being relabeled as climate change mitigation projects such as hydropower mega projects, alongside industrial tree plantations that have witnessed an unprecedented expansion in terms of forest cleared and area planted during the past decade or two.<sup>61</sup> There is a global trend of rezoning and reclassifying spaces, especially those in what are deemed fragile spaces due to climate change and people are being either expelled or prohibited from maintaining access to such spaces (land, water or forestry).<sup>62</sup> In addition, the renewed demands for subsoil minerals have resulted in a surge of mining activities worldwide. These are carried out usually in spaces that are (re)classified by nation-states as marginal, empty, under-utilized and available--despite widespread protests from affected villagers.

These types of capitalist penetration into the countryside have triggered the recent rise of agrarian movements whose issues, demands and struggles are not principally agricultural in nature. For example, indigenous peoples mobilize to defend their territory, agrarian movements emerge out of anti-dam campaigns, mobilizations escalated against industrial tree monocultures, coastal communities are fighting enclosures that are being carried out in the name of climate change adaptation, and many communities have formed movements to oppose various forms of intrusive and extractive mining explorations in their communities. As mainstream climate change discourse continues to gain momentum (Ribot 2014), we are likely to witness more enclosures and expulsions, as well as political mobilizations and contentions, giving further rise to more of these movements that have a variety of land struggles, but not strictly or classically agrarian in nature.

*Emerging urban agriculture oriented initiatives and movements are another important trend to note and examine.* As urban sprawl has expanded exponentially, especially in the BRICS and middle income countries (MICs), rural and urban issues have become ever more intertwined via agriculture and industry, labor flows, and food politics (Kay 2009), and as more agricultural lands are swallowed up by urban sprawl, more rural and agricultural spaces are included in officially urban classified spaces; or the reverse--with urban populations spilling over into the countryside, expanding suburban/peri-urban communities, or indeed the phenomenon of the Russian dachas (Mamonova and Sutherland 2015). As mega cities get packed, with a good share of population closer to Marx's definition of 'relative surplus population' (Li 2010), we have seen unorganized, amorphous self-provisioning initiatives by urban dwellers in cities in the Global South and North. They plant food crops in small patches of land they can find in every possible nook and cranny (roadsides, the edges of railroads, vacant lots), often informally and/or illegally. Recently this phenomenon runs parallel and, at times, overlaps with a more organized and consciously orchestrated type of urban agriculture.<sup>63</sup> This emerging movement is small, scattered, and often taking an amorphous form, but the logic that has given birth to many of these initiatives and these

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<sup>60</sup> See related discussions in Fairhead et al. (2012), Arsel and Buscher (2012), Buscher et al. (2012), Pellegrini et al. (2014), Corbera (2012), Barbesgaard (2015), Franco, Buxton et al. (2014), (Ribot (2014) for a general overview of competing assumptions and debates.

<sup>61</sup> See Hunsberger et al. (2015) and Borrás et al (2016b).

<sup>62</sup> For instance, in the post-Haiyan climate change adaptation strategy in the Philippines many coastal community dwellers suddenly realized that their communities were declared 'no dwelling' zones, effectively expelling people who were in these communities and/or prohibiting Haiyan displaced communities from returning to their homes. At the same time, many of these coastal areas were then awarded to corporate giants for tourism enclave development (Uson, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> See McClintock (2014) for a comprehensive overview.



initiatives themselves constitute an interesting phenomenon that requires closer scholarly and political scrutiny.

*Finally, emerging land oriented urban mobilizations and movements that are not agriculture-oriented* are worth noting. Urban coastal populations in many developing countries are being expelled or threatened with expulsion from their communities by governments who use climate change adaptation discourses as a pretext. Capital continues to gobble up any remaining public green space or future public parks--with governments using lack of public funds as an excuse for privatizing remaining public lands or grabbing the commons and selling them to corporations. We have witnessed these trends worldwide, especially more recently. This phenomenon has also inspired a lot of mobilizations by local communities fighting against such enclosures. These are people with obvious land questions, in urban spaces, but certainly quite different from the conventional notion of the land question in agrarian studies--but land questions nevertheless.

What we are seeing is the emergence of more diverse people's mobilizations and movements centered on land, still significantly anchored on agriculture-oriented issues, but going beyond that, in both rural and urban spaces in the Global South and North. It is also important to note that there are some significant changes, even if slow and tentative, in terms of political reframing by social movements about land. Land and territory, which is broader than the conventional land reform, seems to be taken more seriously now among key movement cadres (Rosset 2013). In recent years, rights talk and rights-oriented analytical and policy framing has grown in popularity.<sup>64</sup> Part of this process and partly in reaction to it, human rights has become a key framing and organizing narrative for agrarian movements. This is largely attributable to the work of FIAN International in close collaboration with IPC for Food Sovereignty and LVC, the exceptionally excellent and effective work for six years by Olivier de Schutter as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food at a time when land grabbing exploded globally, and LVC's efforts to pass a UN declaration on the right of peasants.<sup>65</sup> It will be important to launch a more systematic academic inquiry into these emerging agrarian and land movements.

### ***Broadening of multi-sectoral movements: transformations and coalitions***

Contemporary agrarian movements increasingly find themselves in alliance with other social movements, the two most politically significant ones being environmental justice movements and food sovereignty movements. This is not to say that agrarian movements and these other sectoral and thematic movements have necessarily always been materially separate. On many occasions, food movements and environmental justice movements emerged from agrarian movements (and vice versa). In this context, we speak about transformation of movements. But there are also many instances, historically and concretely, in which these have indeed truly been separate. In this context, we speak about coalitions or alliances. Where alliances have been pursued, these can be objective and subjective alliances depending upon the specific political context and moment. There are two research interests relevant to critical agrarian studies here: (a) whether the increasing sensitization of agrarian movements to environmental justice as well as food sovereignty movements will transform the

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<sup>64</sup> There is a huge body of literature on 'right talks' and 'rights-based' development discourse. See Cousins (1997) for something relevant and useful for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>65</sup> For relevant discussions, see Monsalve (2013), Franco, Monsalve and Borrás (2015), Seufert (2015), Künnemann and Monsalve (2015), De Schutter (2011), and Edelman and Carwil (2011).

character and orientation of contemporary agrarian movements, and if so, how and with what implications, and (b) what are the implications of the broadening cross-class and multisectoral movements for critical agrarian studies in terms of conceptual frameworks and methodology for research? It has become perceptible too that in both emerging broader movements, human rights as a both a defensive and pro-active mobilizing narrative and strategy for mobilizations has become important (Monsalve 2013; Franco et al. 2015), although the political process and interpretation of this is open to further scrutiny and discussion, as flagged by Claeys (2015).

#### *Agrarian movements and environmental movements*

Many of the environmental issues that exploded in recent decades and ushered in an era of the rise of environmental movements have been closely linked to issues in the countryside, and almost always related to resource conflicts -- land, water, forestry.<sup>66</sup> Many of the implicated areas have involved indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities as well as pastoralists and artisanal fishers. The earlier environmental movements were those protecting the forest against logging encroachment, pollution, and issues caused by mining activities, as well as advocacy groups on a variety of biodiversity protection issues, including seeds and wildlife. The material basis for alliances to emerge and even flourish is concrete and logical: capitalist encroachment occurs in rural spaces, linking agrarian movements and environmental movements together in a united front. This was, and is, never a tension-free alliance. There are situations where issues are partly resolved and agrarian movements are fine, but environmentalists are not, and vice versa.<sup>67</sup>

The transformation of and/or increasing convergence between agrarian movements and environmental movements may be heading toward a new frontier when many of the environmental 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' (Claeys and Delgado 2015). This is strategically important because issues in agrarian political economy are increasingly embedded within climate change, whether materially and discursively, while climate change discourse is increasingly encroaching into agrarian politics. Agroecology is one strategic theme around which such converging of issues and framing is happening (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset et al. 2011). How such a convergence will facilitate, block, inspire, and/or provoke synergies and tensions is likely to transform the way we carry out academic research on and political activism around agrarian politics. There is thus great potential for further deepening and broadening of alliances between agrarian movements and environmental/climate justice movements. Whether this will indeed be the case, and if so, what ideological and political trajectories such alliances would take, is to be empirically investigated rather than theoretically or politically assumed.

#### *Agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements*

The transformation of many agrarian movements into being more like food movements, and/or in other instances, the coming together of these two sets of movements, concretely and discursively, is probably one of the most politically significant and academically exciting developments on both the agrarian politics and food politics research fronts. This transformation/convergence has brought so much fresh energy and

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<sup>66</sup> See Martinez-Alier et al. (2016) for a comprehensive, cutting edge framing of the notion of environmental justice movements.

<sup>67</sup> See a related discussion in Borrás and Franco (2012) in the context of political reactions to the contemporary resource rush.

young blood into both the political movement part of it and the scholarly research side of it. The synergies between these movements, and by extension, research interests about these, have been rejuvenating in many ways. This is not to say that potential and actual tensions are not palpable and serious.<sup>68</sup> Schiavoni's framing of it, that is, 'from Nyéléni (Mali) to New York' nicely captures the political trajectory and breadth of food sovereignty as a political project and social movement (Schiavoni 2009).

The global contexts for these two generations of agrarian movements are significantly different. What made the peasant movements of the past century great was partly that these were rarely stand-alone agrarian movements to speak of, as they were part of larger people's revolutionary movements and almost always linked to communist or socialist parties that provided broader and longer perspectives in terms of vision and platform. Most contemporary agrarian movements are not politically embedded in such a way—and are missing out on a number of critical ideological, political and organizational inputs from broader political projects and movements. This is especially true in terms of a vision for a broader alternative utopia. In some ways—though smaller in scale and intensity—food sovereignty is providing some ideas about a broader strategic alternative and immediate broader political community to agrarian movements.<sup>69</sup> But in my view, this can only amount to something long-lasting and truly strategic if food sovereignty and food sovereignty movements themselves are in turn embedded in a broader socialist alternative movement and vision.

There are non-agrarian movements that are into food politics issues (e.g. consumers movements, public health inspired food politics initiatives), which are mainly, though not only, located in urban spaces, that have received much-needed inspiration and allies from agrarian movements. This has occurred through a variety of objective and subjective, as well as explicit and amorphous, coalitions and joint actions around the issues of food justice and food sovereignty.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the scaling up of some of food sovereignty initiatives into official formal public policies and platforms involving national governments has brought such convergence of agrarian and food movements and the strategic issues they address into unprecedented political spotlights, with new opportunities amidst important contradictions, as in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua.<sup>71</sup> A broader convergence around food sovereignty would provide a political boost for these fledgling disparate initiatives, groups, networks and movements worldwide.<sup>72</sup> The connections made with agrarian movements have helped provide a longer thread to bring together key actors in the key sites of food production, trade and consumption. This has brought enormous energies and synergies, but important tensions as well. All these have generated great research interest in agrarian studies recently, and yet the politics of such convergence of movements remain significantly under-studied and under-explored.

During the past three decades, land politics have been transformed, and so as agrarian movements. Old issues persisted in new contexts, while new issues emerged in old contexts. Activists struggled to find ideological and political handles on how to

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<sup>68</sup> See relevant discussion in Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) and Brent et al. (2015).

<sup>69</sup> This is especially the case when a food sovereignty initiative is at least embedded within a broader context of what Kay calls 'positive investments,' which are generally strategic public investments (Kay 2012).

<sup>70</sup> See excellent analysis and insights by Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) and Brent et al. (2015).

<sup>71</sup> For excellent analysis, see Schiavoni (2015) on Venezuela; Giunta (2015) and Clark (2016) on Ecuador; McKay et al. (2014) on Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador; Godek (2015) on Nicaragua.

<sup>72</sup> See Wittman, et al. (2010).

navigate such changes that brought threats to the lives and livelihoods of working class people, rural and urban, worldwide. But such transformations also brought about unprecedented political opportunities for social justice struggles. Academics have scrambled for theoretical and methodological frameworks for making sense of the meanings and implications of these global transformations. Some are holding on to classic tools of analysis, some are searching for brand new analytical handles, while others are combining classic frameworks with new ones while trying to imagine frameworks and methods that are yet to be constructed. This changing context has provided a fertile ground for a possible resurgence of scholar-activism in critical agrarian studies. How this unfolds is the subject of the next section.

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

Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

— Karl Marx<sup>73</sup>

I am still irreverent. I still feel the same contempt for and still reject so-called objective decisions made without passion and anger. Objectivity, like the claim that one is nonpartisan or reasonable, is usually a defensive posture used by those who fear involvement in the passions, partisanships, conflicts, and the changes that make up life; they fear life. An "objective" decision is generally lifeless. It is academic and the word "academic" is a synonym for irrelevant."

—Saul Alinsky<sup>74</sup>

The treatment of scholar-activism in this paper is broader in some ways and narrower in other ways than the treatment in the emerging literature on this topic. On the one hand, there are three types of scholar-activism<sup>75</sup> that I refer to in this paper, and only one of these is the subject of emerging literature and debates. On the other hand, this paper addresses only a small subset of scholar-activists, i.e. *agrarian* scholar-activists. Scholar-activists are not treated in this paper as a stand-alone category, but in a relational way. This can be seen in three inter-related ways: scholars-activists with fellow scholar-activists (within agrarian themes and beyond), scholar-activists with radical academics, and scholar-activists in mainstream partnerships among academics, development practitioners and policy experts, including a subset of academic-corporate partnerships.

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

By scholar-activists I mean those who explicitly aim not only to interpret the world in a scholarly way but to change it, and who are connected to a political project or social justice oriented movement. There are three types of scholar-activists in this broad sense, namely, (i) scholar-activists who are primarily located in academic institutions who do activist work and are connected to a political project or movement(s); (ii) scholar-activists who are principally based in social movements or a political project and do

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<sup>73</sup> Marx (1980: 30).

<sup>74</sup> From his "Introduction to the Vintage Edition" (1969) of the 1946 book, *Reveille for Radicals*.

<sup>75</sup> Scholar-activism and scholar-activists are the terms used in this paper, which includes 'scholar activist' and 'activist-scholar', or 'scholar-activism' and 'activist scholarship' variants. Scholar-activism/scholar-activist terms were chosen for convenience.

scholar-activism from within; and (iii) scholar-activists who are mainly located in non-academic independent research institutions<sup>76</sup> who do activist work and connect with a political project or movement(s).<sup>77</sup> This is a smaller subset of the broader notion of 'intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1971). The categorization put forward and used heuristically here has been inspired in part by Edelman (2009) -- and in part by my own history of having been an activist located in these three different sites across different time periods. In examining the relationship between academics and activists in the context of agrarian studies and activism, Edelman's (2009: 246) explanation,

starts with an analytical distinction between three categories of people: movement activists, academic researchers in universities and similar institutions, and professional researchers in other kinds of institutions, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It then argues, however, that the distinction is partly, though not entirely, a heuristic one and that the lines between activist researchers and other researchers are in practice often blurred. To make matters worse, or at least more complicated, another useful heuristic that breaks down under even minimal scrutiny is central to the way the problem here is framed. That is, the distinction between activists and researchers (of all kinds) rests to a large extent on a spurious distinction between 'doing' and 'thinking'. While such distinctions are dubious in practice, they nonetheless retain some limited analytical value inasmuch as activists and professional researchers (of both academic and other varieties) often occupy different social roles and institutional spaces and emphasize different kinds of social action.

By scholar-activists, the literature generally refers to academics who do activist academic research by/while linking up with social movements or political projects—who, as Hale (2008: 3) explains, "are still mainly located at the margins of mainstream institutions and often prefer to speak from these locations." A key subject of inquiry and topic for discussion is how scholar-activists emerge and survive, or can even flourish, inside the academy, the tensions and synergies in their engagement with political projects and social movements, and with what implications for both the academy and social movements. There is an implicit bias here that proper academic research is, and can only be, done by academics inside the academy.

Who are the contemporary scholar-activists? Piven (2010: 806) offers a US-centered perspective that is useful for this paper for its broader resonance. She explains that scholar-activists are "academics [who] want their work to be politically relevant ('relevant' was the code for scholar-activism in the 1970s.) They see themselves as part of the political left, and they want to make a contribution to left reform efforts." She explains that, "many people enter the academic world determined to become scholars because they want to be both scholars and activists." She observes that this has become a trend in the aftermath of the 1960s-1970s protest movements in which many young people had participated. She further explains that the motivation comes from the idea that "academic work can be useful in ameliorating the big problems of our society," and many academics work to influence policy (ibid.: 806). Peters (2005: 46), meanwhile, outlines some tasks that do not necessarily make an academic a scholar-activist. She

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<sup>76</sup> This is a broad category and can be research think tanks and NGOs, and some of them might not even consider themselves as doing some kind of academically passable research.

<sup>77</sup> Croteau (2005: 32-35) has offered a partially similar typology of scholar-activists: SCHOLAR-Activist, ACTIVIST-Scholar, and SCHOLAR-ACTIVIST.

explains that more generally, "Being an activist does not mean studying... someone else's struggle...." She goes on to argue that regular tasks of academics even when these are politically radical and relevant do not make one a scholar-activist. For Peters, "real activism means actually taking on an organizing challenge yourself, working collectively with others, and doing the slow, plodding, tedious work of bringing people together to make change" (ibid.).

Piven reminds us that tension arises "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" (2010: 808). She adds that this becomes even more problematic "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*" (ibid.; my emphasis). She concludes that, "It is this sort of divided commitment, between an academic career and dissident activism, that provokes reflection on how to do both" (ibid.). David Meyer (2005: 193) points out the challenge of performing such dual commitments because the two spaces of activities have different requirements, even when both demand intellectual rigor and honesty. He says that, "one likely outcome of the separation of intellectual inquiry about political activism from activism itself is that activists or scholars who try to do both jobs at the same time do neither well."<sup>78</sup>

Charles Hale, writing from out of his own experience in activist research in the context of a Nicaraguan land struggle, elaborates on this question in a manner that converges with my own take. He defines activist research as a "method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process..." (Hale 2006: 97). For Hale, 'dual loyalties' is the defining character of scholar-activists:<sup>79</sup> to the academia and the political struggle (ibid.: 100). He argues that, "these dual political commitments transform our research methods directly: from the formulation of the research topic to the dissemination of results, they require collaboration, dialogue, and standards of accountability that conventional methods can, and regularly do, leave out of the equation" (ibid.: 104). Hale underscores tensions: "Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction" (ibid.: 105). But Hale also points out that tension does not always have to be necessarily negative. He says: "such tension is often highly productive. It not only yields research outcomes that are potentially useful to the political struggle with which one is aligned; but it can also generate new insight and knowledge that challenge and transform conventional academic wisdom" (Hale 2006: 105). Hale concludes by coming back to the broader intellectual and political location of an activist researcher. His 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

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<sup>78</sup> Meyer (2005: 193) elaborates further, saying: "Activism and academic study of activism become dichotomous, such that activists don't have time to think beyond the instrumental demands of the current campaign, and scholars veer into theoretical abstractions that, while potentially useful to building basic knowledge, are so far removed from often urgent contemporary questions that their works are easily ignored with no risk but to those who may have initially inspired them."

<sup>79</sup> Or, in Hale's term, 'scholars who practice activist research.'



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. (Hale 2006: 108)<sup>80</sup>

The discussions by Hale and Piven and other scholars looking into this subject matter are critically important to our understanding of contemporary scholar-activism. However, their overall treatment of the concept of scholar-activists remains too academy-centered, that is, examining scholars based in academic institutions who are engaged in scholar-activism or activist research. This is important, as already explained. But this represents only one of the three types of scholar-activists. While the other two types (those primarily based in social movements, and those primarily based in non-academic independent research institutions) are likely to be not as large in number as compared to those based in the academy, their role—politically and for the purposes of analyzing scholar-activism more broadly—is just as profoundly important and compelling. The last two categories play critical roles in both academic and activist research and political work, and yet they are significantly undervalued and understudied. This paper calls for a better understanding of scholar-activists more broadly and inclusively.

What we know about the non-academy-based scholar-activists—those based in non-academic research institutions and those based in social movements—is limited, but enough to convince us that they play a critical role in knowledge production and political action. They are broadly distinct from, even when they regularly overlap with, their academy-based counterparts. The boundary between the two broad types of non-academy-based scholar-activists is blurred and porous<sup>81</sup> and there is regular crossover.<sup>82</sup> The emerging academic literature on scholar-activism, by omission or

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<sup>80</sup> Piven takes the conversation on this matter a little further, along the lines of Alinsky, and in a way that I align with myself. She argues that the "personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount" (Piven 2010: 808), "if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path." This is so, according to her, because "we are constantly confronted in our daily routines with the rewards and punishments doled out by our colleagues and our larger scholarly reference groups....And every day we are surrounded by the people who will reward or punish us" (ibid.). This is not the case with the commitment to activism, according to Piven, as one does not usually interact with movements on a daily basis, and movements are not in a position to provide incentives or rewards to researchers the way universities are. When this is the prevailing condition of one's activist commitment, the pressure from inside academy to do what normal academics do becomes significant. "The intensity of our political commitment can matter in tempering these constraints," according to Piven, and "for some people it actually can be determining" (ibid.: 809). There are certainly examples of scholars who have invested themselves in the movements with which they are affiliated, for whom the movement and its mission are its own reward. Finally, Piven argues for working to partly shape the institutional setting within which activist commitment can flourish. She explains that, "we also to varying degrees choose our colleagues and reference groups, and select our associations and journals." Furthermore it is strategically important to consider "where we place ourselves in a complex...academic world, and choosing where we place ourselves with a mind not only to the prestige of the institution, but to how it will affect our ability to do the political work to which we are committed" (ibid.: 809).

<sup>81</sup> An illustrative example is Susan George. She was a long time president of the independent radical research institution, the Transnational Institute (TNI) headquartered in Amsterdam, and author of numerous influential academically rigorous and politically relevant books. She was at the same time a key leader of the French section of the international social movement ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne).

<sup>82</sup> Peter Rosset was the Executive Director of the California-based Institute for Food and Development Policy or Food First, which is one of the most important independent research institutions working on radical food politics, and after leaving Food First he joined the International Secretariat of the international peasant movement La Via Campesina (and is now simultaneously based in a public research center, El Colegio de la Frontera Sur in Mexico, as a professor). Meanwhile, Eric Holt-Gimenez was for

silence, tends to: (a) implicitly treat social movements and independent research institutions as one, and (b) does not accord explicit and appropriate value to scholar-activists based in these two nonacademic sites. Without a doubt this happens inadvertently. I argue that it is important to always define scholar-activists or activist researchers by looking at the three broad categories largely defined by their primary institutional location, and principal intellectual and political work. Each category generates academically rigorous research that is politically relevant and is engaged in political movements or projects that aim to interpret and change the world—albeit in ways and with traditions and institutional constraints and opportunities distinct from one another.

Non-academic independent research institutions are relatively autonomous and thus have more room to maneuver in terms of activist research, research strategies, and for what political ends research outputs are to be made to serve. They are generally less formal and bureaucratic. They have provided institutional homes to public intellectuals, most of whom consciously chose to work in politically and institutionally less constrained settings while remaining committed to the rigor of academic research. Among these are some of the world-leading public intellectuals who have contributed greatly to the work of scholar-activism and are more famous than most academy-based scholar-activists. But many rank-and-file scholar-activists in this category do not have the stature and prestige of their leaders. It is not uncommon that academy-based scholar-activists do not treat them as equals, but as second-rate scholar-activists, often in a patronizing manner. This has generated the usually distant and cold relationship between these two types of scholar-activists. Many of these institutions have published research outputs that have become classics in the field, outside and inside the academy. Political autonomy and flexibility in funding are key issues for these institutions to be able to carry out their radical political agendas.<sup>83</sup> One of the challenges is not only stable funding, but the constant pressure from some types of funders and knowledge users for this type of scholar-activists to produce *academically rigorous outputs*, while their comrades from social movements want them to produce *politically rigorous research*. They are constantly hounded by the pestering 'either/or' questions such as: Are they academics or activists? Are they a research institution or an advocacy group? Will they give in to the funders' pressure or to the movements' expectations? Thus, while they have a great privilege of having access to both social movements and academic circles, they are constantly pulled towards either greater academic or greater political rigor.

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many years a scholar-activist within the farmer-to-farmer agroecological movement in Central America (see Holt-Gimenez 2006). After he left that movement, he became the Executive Director of Food First.

<sup>83</sup> There are various types of funding bases: (a) membership fees and regular individual donations - which is probably the most ideal type for the obvious reason that it allows for the greatest degree of autonomy in terms of how to use the funds for what political activist goals; (b) from non-governmental donors - which saw an expansion in the 1980s and are in general relatively politically flexible; (c) a version of this second type are the nongovernmental donors that get government money, and used to be relatively flexible, but recently shrunk, and are transitioning towards political conservatism as the mechanism for their fund sourcing changed; (d) research granting institutions that used to be purely academic-oriented that have increasingly opened up to non-academic research institutions. Several research institutions have a combination of these funding sources. The problem is that in general, funding for politically independent research think tanks got substantially reduced and has been dwindling further. Even with those that ended up giving funds for scholar-activist work, the terms of engagement with them are not always smooth, as these are politically contested and negotiated. This problem is not the monopoly of non-academy-based scholar-activists, because those based in the academy are constantly pressured by research grant institutions, directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, sometimes even in tyrannical ways.

Finally, there are some scholar-activists who are primarily located within social movements. They are not many in number. Perhaps the biggest reason for this is that there is no institutional stability, no clear plans or funds for in-house scholarly research, and no steady source of even the most minimum income for researchers. Questions of creativity and autonomy are also critically problematic for aspiring scholar-activists in agrarian movements run by *caudillos* or undemocratic and even despotic movement leaders and brokers who behave like *caciques*—and there are definitely far more movements in this category than is often openly acknowledged. Furthermore, scholar-activists located in agrarian movements are often (inadvertently) treated as second-rate scholar-activists by their fellow scholar-activists based in the academy and prestigious non-academic research institutions. Many scholar-activists whose primary intellectual and political work are within social movements are young scholar-activists who still do not have families because otherwise they have to have income-generating work elsewhere, or someone else is paying their bills (e.g., a partner who has a stable job), and who do not put much value to prestige and stature. One of the reasons for this is that many of their regular written outputs do not have their personal by-line, and are published in the name of the movement. Only a few have the ability and stature to walk on two legs: writing anonymously for movements as well as personally authored articles or books for academic or general circulation outlets. But while the ranks of such type of scholar-activists are thin, key social movements almost always have a core group of in-house scholar-activists: activists who remain committed to and do serious activist research with academic rigor in the midst of their daily work inside the movement. In some cases, some of the scholar-activists in sectoral movements are quite organic.<sup>84</sup> Some of them may fit in Baud and Rutten's notion of 'popular intellectuals' (Baud and Rutten 2004: 8). That makes this category strategically significant politically despite their minimal number, and is thus extremely important to closely study and understand. Among the three categories of scholar-activists, they are perhaps the least distinctly recognized as such.

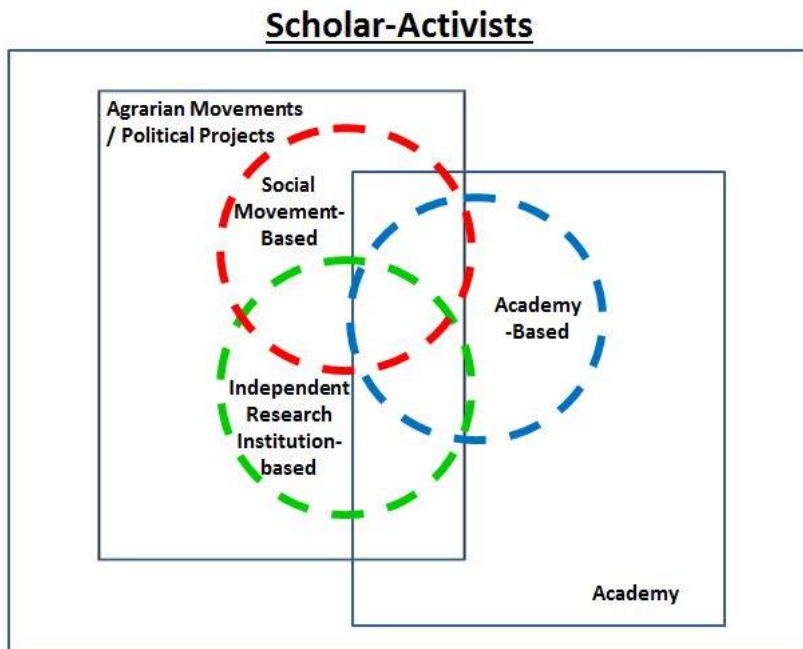
The lopsided interest in academy-based scholar-activists in the emerging literature on contemporary scholar-activism prevents us from having a deeper understanding of scholar-activism in non-academic institutions and organizations in particular, and scholar-activism in general. The interplay between these three different categories of scholar-activists is another matter that is probably least known and understood. See Figure 1 to illustrate possible points and spaces of interaction. 'Interplay' can be examined from at least four perspectives: (non-)complementary engagement, non-engagement, crossover/revolving door, and presence in two or even all three sites simultaneously. It is important to probe this angle because there is a good reason to believe that scholar-activists located in different institutional settings actually interact and engage in objective and subjective alliances in knowledge generation and

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<sup>84</sup> In the context of agrarian movements, and thus, agrarian scholar-activists (which will be discussed further below), there are intellectuals whose work could more or less qualify as 'scholar-activism'. Thus they are in many ways 'organic' in agrarian movements. In La Via Campesina network, one can quickly think of several leaders, including Nettie Wiebe, Paul Nicholson, Rafael Alegria, Jose Bove, and Joao Pedro Stedile. But whether they qualify in the Gramscian strict definition of an 'organic intellectual' is open for discussion. In detail Gramsci (1971: 6) noted that, "it is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own 'organic' intellectuals, nor does it 'assimilate' any stratum of 'traditional' intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin." Pending discussion about this Gramscian notion of organic intellectuals among the peasantry, Nettie Wiebe and others definitely fit, however, the interesting framing of the notion of 'popular intellectuals' by Baud and Rutten (2004).

political action, and I suspect that such an interaction actually plays a critical role in academic research and political work more generally.

Figure 1



***Scholar-activists in critical agrarian studies and agrarian movement activism***

While the earlier discussion attempts to broaden the definition and scope of scholar-activism, the discussion now moves quickly to look into a much narrower section of the broadly defined scholar-activists, namely, those who work in the area of critical agrarian studies and agrarian movement activism. The terms "agrarian scholar-activists" and "agrarian scholar-activism" will be used in this paper to refer to this subset of scholar-activists and type of work. The overwhelming majority of scholar-activists and social movements studied in the emerging literature on scholar-activism are in disciplines that are not directly related to agrarian studies, and are generally on peace/anti-war, labor, race, gender, and environmental themes. Studies on scholar-activism that takes agrarian issues and movements as context are rare. Scholar-activists working on critical agrarian studies and with agrarian movements may face additional challenge for a variety of reasons. These may include questions of 'distance' (geographic, logistical and institutional, intellectual and political).

It is important that agrarian scholar-activism be approached partly in reference to agrarian movements and questions of external allies and alliances. The organization of production, impoverishment and drudgery, insertion into particular social structures, and agrarian institutions all conspire to put huge constraints and obstacles to the ability of rural villagers—most especially those within the ranks of the agrarian working class and even more so pertaining to particularly excluded or discriminated social groups (though gender, caste, religious, or ethnic attributes among others)—to activate their agency to interpret and change their conditions. Thus, there is the need for external allies who could help address such constraints and obstacles to collective actions. This is a topic that has been hotly debated politically and extensively researched academically, especially in the context of Marxist-informed political projects and agrarian studies. External allies come in a variety of forms. During the past century, the

most consistent allies for the peasantry and agrarian movements were revolutionary political parties. Within and outside the parameters of formal alliances with political parties, there are other equally important allies that figure in the everyday lives of the previously mentioned groups of rural villagers, involving peasants' relationships with the local intellectuals: teachers, Church leaders such as priests and nuns and monks, lawyers, doctors, union leaders, and university students who can deal with complex state and corporate documents, help analyze cases and formulate petitions; provide logistics to travel to the centers of authority; or write straightforward agitation-propaganda (agitprop) materials.<sup>85</sup> Many others are included and implicated in the context of allies viewed from this perspective: singers, songwriters, poets, painters, photographers, journalists, filmmakers, storytellers, novelists, playwrights, actors and actresses, theatre performers, human rights activists. How such encounters and alliances between peasants and other agrarian working class sympathizers and supporters have been achieved and forged, and with what political implications, have been the subject of activist discussions and academic research.

It was in this broad political context that at the height of critical agrarian studies during the past century, leftwing radical intellectuals who were able to secure positions or political shelter within academic institutions worked largely on questions of revolutionary potential of the peasantry and the working class as well as their politics towards socialist alternatives. The Institute of Social Studies (ISS) hosted several of such stellar scholar-activists.<sup>86</sup> The era of that brand of scholar-activism ended in the 1990s.

The global contextual changes discussed earlier were paralleled in scholar-activism in the context of critical agrarian studies. Today, there are emerging vibrant pockets of communities of scholar-activists inside and outside the academic institutions getting into critical agrarian studies but in significantly different ways than the past generation—at least in the specific context being explored in this paper, i.e. shifts in land politics and agrarian movements: (a) broader framing of land politics, (b) transnationalization of agrarian movements, (c) evolving character of agrarian movements toward strategic interaction with emerging food movements and environmental/climate justice movements. These changes have inspired and brought in a broader constituency of critical agrarian studies and agrarian scholar-activism. There is definitely a global revival of critical agrarian studies and agrarian scholar-activism but carried out in significantly different terms and topics, ideological persuasions, visions of alternatives, and strategies to pursue such alternatives. This implies negotiating and re-imagining the units of inquiry and frameworks of analysis, even when classic agrarian political economy remains foundational.

The one thing that is similar to scholar-activism in critical agrarian studies of the past is that the current phenomenon also involves some of the best and brightest and most politically committed and dedicated younger generation of intellectuals. The challenges and difficulties faced by scholar-activists working inside academic institutions remain largely similar to those faced by the past generation of scholar-activists. Academic institutions are not always comfortable with and supportive of radical scholar-activism for various reasons, partly because of their institutional provenance and the character of the source of their logistical and financial income or support. Two particularly difficult challenges for academy-based scholar-activists are:

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<sup>85</sup> For a relevant and interesting treatment by Gramsci on peasants' attitude to and relationship with such intellectuals, see Gramsci (1971: 14-15).

<sup>86</sup> Gerrit Huizer, Ernst Feder, Ken Post and Peter Waterman were among them. Waterman worked more on trade union movements.

(a) institutions run by politically conservative executives, or at least those who have decided to be politically neutral in situations of great inequality in the world, which effectively means taking the side of the oppressors, or (b) institutions run by apolitical technocrats who are guided by some notion of financial productivity and efficiency, and do not really care much about the politics of emancipatory scholarship. The ideal setting is an institution that is committed to social justice and is run principally by dedicated academics supported by technocrats who are at least tolerant if not respectful and appreciative of the work of scholar-activists. But ideal settings do not emerge from a vacuum; these are products of contestations and negotiations.

Who are the contemporary agrarian scholar-activists? They are a broad and diverse kind of people, perhaps more diverse than their predecessors. They are a mixture of people across generations, academic disciplines, ideological/political persuasions, and sectoral/thematic interests. A few are holdovers from the past generation of activists who were deeply involved in the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and/or in national liberation revolutionary projects. They are the veterans, and many of them have transitioned themselves into contemporary scholar-activists inside or outside the academy. The bulk of current agrarian-scholar activists emerged from post-political party social movement initiatives of the 1980s onward, and have been recruited into, or have joined, social justice movements from different entry points, including various thematic and sectoral struggles and solidarity work: land struggles, indigenous peoples' advocacy work, or environmental advocacy organizations. An important part of the surge of agrarian scholar-activism comes from the food movements that have seen great dynamism and expansion from the 1990s onwards, partly inspired and sustained by a range of advocacy issues ranging from anti-GMO campaigns to advocacy for community supported sustainable agriculture to food sovereignty. Most recently, there seems to be another wave of expansion of agrarian scholar-activism via the climate justice front that revived old and inspired new advocacy issues such as agroecology. The academic disciplines that are getting drawn in therefore have also expanded beyond the conventional parameters of agrarian political economy, to include political ecology and a broader take on food political studies across world geographic regions.

The ability to transmit news and information from the countryside to the outside world, and the question of its timing and speed, are key reference points in both agrarian academic research and political activism, past and present. This is partly because of the multidimensional distance of the agrarian world from the centers of power, and how it impacts poor villagers' autonomy and capacity to engage in contentious politics. One of the obvious changes in the way scholar-activists carry out their work is also reflected in the preferred medium of knowledge exchange and dissemination: social media. There is extensive use of the internet, Twitter, Facebook, audio/video conferencing such as Skype, WhatsApp or Viber, texting, and electronic versions of publications than can easily be sent around by email. All of these have radically altered the way interactions are done among and between scholar-activists and agrarian movements around knowledge production and exchange and political action compared to just two decades ago. Speed and timing are key to the efficacy of activist research, and contemporary agrarian scholar-activists are maximizing the available communication technology for the service of scholar-activism—whether towards reaching the broader public or bringing research output back to agrarian movements. Non-academy-based scholar-activists are way better than their academy-based counterparts with regards to popular knowledge dissemination and use. Let us take a quick look at some data: the Transnational Institute (TNI) has active subscribers of more than 12,000 for its



electronic newsletter, and more than 6,000 followers on Twitter; Food First has more than 16,000 followers on Twitter, while Grain has more than 4,000 and La Via Campesina has more than 9,000. The internet download statistics of their publications run in the thousands. Meanwhile, an author of an academic journal article will be delighted if an article is downloaded more than 300 times during a five year period. But of course speed and timing of scholar-activist work is one thing, while the political power to make such interventions effective is another thing.

*(i) Scholar-activists and the academy*

What are the qualities of an activist? In his 1971 classic book, *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky outlined the key qualities of a good radical activist. These qualities include curiosity, irreverence, imagination, a sense of humor, and a bit of a blurred vision of a better world. In part, he said, a radical activist community organizer,

detests dogma, defies any finite definition of morality, rebels against any repression of a free, open search for ideas no matter where they may lead. He is challenging, insulting, agitating, discrediting. He stirs unrest. As with all life, this is a paradox, for his irreverence is rooted in a deep reverence for the enigma of life, and an incessant search for its meaning. (Alinsky 1971: 73).

A good activist is irreverent, subversive and passionate. A good academic is prim, respectful and clinical. Is it possible to combine these seemingly irreconcilable defining qualities of each—in a person? This is almost a meaningless question because in reality scholar-activists strive to always combine these features wherever they are institutionally based. The day they stop doing so is the day that they cease to be scholar-activists. These contradictory qualities are what define scholar-activists. The category of scholar-activists is a subset of either academics when they work in academic institutions, or activists when they work in activist organizations or agrarian movements. One source of permanent irritancy is that when one is based in the academy, their work can be unfairly dismissed by fellow academics as being 'not very academic/too activist'; and when they are based in a non-academic research institution or social movement, their work can be looked down upon by comrades as 'too academic/not activist enough'. This is a permanent tension faced by both types of scholar-activists, and each has the challenge of walking on two legs.

The challenges for scholar-activists of dealing with the dynamics and requirements of academic work can only be understood in relation to their effort at navigating their 'dual loyalties' (Hale 2006) or 'dual path' (Piven 20010) and can be seen in at least the following:<sup>87</sup> (i) rigor of work, (ii) impact, and (iii) reward and punishment. We turn to discussing each briefly, with emphasis on how these influence scholar-activists' ability to address academic requirements. (An exploration of how scholar-activists address matters related to agrarian movements takes place in the next subsection.). The argument here is that often such polarization is unnecessary, and processes and outcomes in each of these areas can be mutually beneficial to both academic *and* political work.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Research process (methods, funding and fund allocation, research questions, and so on) has been identified in most literature on scholar-activism as one of the contentious points between academics and activists—pulled in the competing directions of academic and political rigor. This is not explored in detail here. See Hale (2006), Edelman (2009) and Fox (2006) for excellent discussions.

<sup>88</sup> But the dilemma is that, as Croteau emphasizes: "work that is well rewarded within the academy may be largely irrelevant to the real-world concerns of movement activists, while work that is grounded so as

First, academic research and publication have to be *rigorous*. This generally means being thorough, meticulous, precise, careful, and convincing—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. It is not always straightforward what this actually means and what it looks like because it can be quite context specific. What is straightforward however is the process that determines what is academically rigorous. There are standard arbiters including academic reviewers and review panels, editorial committees, and research councils to judge the rigor of a research grant application, manuscript for publication, and hiring or promotion. Key in determining what is and what is not academically rigorous is a reference group or peer reviewers who usually carry out their task in a double blind review process. Different disciplines, institutions, publishing outlets, and journals have different traditions on how they determine what is, and what is not, academically rigorous. They also decide whether a particular work makes a real 'contribution.' Some value fresh theoretical contributions, others privilege empirical richness. This is relatively easy for a well-trained, dedicated academic to deal with. It becomes complicated when the dual commitments of scholar-activists come into the picture. Political rigor is the benchmark for research as far as agrarian movements are concerned. It means being politically informed and thorough, sensitive and nuanced, and timely and relevant. It should be the opposite of a postmortem way of thinking and doing things. It means taking a position on political processes that are being researched<sup>89</sup> which in turn runs the risk of compromising the rigor of the academic dimension of the research. Some types of militant mass movements have longstanding traditions that function in some ways similar to the academic peer review and critical self-reflection. Particularly in Maoist-inspired movements, the principle of "unity-struggle-unity" is one that is aimed at achieving academic—or rather, theoretical and political—rigor, where debates and critical scrutiny are encouraged. This is usually paired with the principle of "criticism/self-criticism" which is a combination of peer review and critical self-reflection. There are arbiters of political rigor as well: the agrarian movements, specifically movement leaders, cadres, militants, and bewildering layers of movement brokers and cheerleaders. Isolating and satisfying the requirement for either academic or political rigor is probably the easiest thing to do for any well-trained and grounded scholar-activist. But 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, regardless of their institutional base, is how to address academic *and* political rigor simultaneously in such a way that would satisfy the arbiters of both sides.

Second, arbiters from both paths tend to ask a basic question: what will be, or what is, the *impact* of scholar-activist research? There are different traditions among and between the academy and agrarian movements 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 at least in the immediate, effectively helping social movements frame a more convincing argument and campaign.<sup>90</sup> It is quite different on the side of academics.

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to contribute to the strategic advancement of movement efforts is not recognized as significant within the academy" (Croteau 2005: 20).

<sup>89</sup> For example, researching a land struggle, but at the same time supporting the struggle; or being a militant in the movement while trying to do academically rigorous research about/for that movement.

<sup>90</sup> This is quite important for movements and those studying these movements, especially because as Tarrow (2005) notes, social movements fail more than they succeed. Keck and Sikkink (1998) in their pioneering book on transnational social movements also noted that measuring and assessing the impact

Evaluation norms of impact in academic terms include publication points that in turn are dependent on publication outlets that are ranked according to their "Impact Factor" (IF) as well as quantity of fulltext downloads of an article. But these days, it is no longer sufficient to just get published, even in highly rated outlets. The extent to which one's publication is cited has become even more important for academic arbiters. There is a more recent impact tracker, namely, *h-index*, which is a measure of the extent to which your publication has been cited by other publications. Important academic research councils that give grants give a lot of weight to publications in academic journals with high impact factor. Scholar-activists have to contend with this requirement on impact measurement if they have to be loyal to this other half of their two-sided world. This may not be easy for various reasons. Reacting to criticisms that activist research is simplistic, unproblematized, and under-theorized (and thus assumed to likely score low in academic impact measurements), Hale argues that "how political commitments transform research methods and *at times prioritize analytical closure over further complexity* -- make activist research difficult to defend in an academic setting" (Hale 2006: 101, emphasis supplied). He explains that, "activist research involves commitments that are not accountable to arbitration, evaluation, or regulation from within academia." "Instead," he adds, "it requires constant mediation between these two spaces, insisting that one need not choose between them nor collapse one into the other" (ibid.: 105).

This brings us back to questions of academic and political rigor: it is not an either/or question, and if a scholar-activist manages to address this dual task satisfactorily, there is no reason why they could not be on par with—or even better than—the best and brightest in the academy in terms of research and publication impact measured in academic terms. There are some developments that may be good news for scholar-activists, three of which are briefly cited here. First is that 'societal impact' is now given a greater weight inside the academy, at least in the Dutch system. What this means is open to interpretation and is contested, but at least it can be a platform through which scholar-activists are able to collect necessary points for their work at the same time that it helps legitimize the notion of scholar-activism. Second is that academic journals are now tracking an article's *Altmetric score*, which is a measure of the quantity and quality (different categories get different scores) of the extent to which a publication has been mentioned in the news, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other social media.<sup>91</sup> Third is the mainstream push for 'open access' publications. These metrics also put non-academy-based scholar-activists at a fairer position in terms of impact recognition relative to their academy-based counterparts. These three impact-enhancing and impact-tracking systems may work in favor of scholar-activists to defend, legitimize and entrench themselves inside the academy.<sup>92</sup>

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of transnational social movements is complicated, but initial scanning shows that reframing discourse seems to be their biggest strength (see also McMichael 2008, Borras 2008b, and Borras et al. 2008 with reference to transnational agrarian movements).

<sup>91</sup> The publisher Taylor & Francis explains that, "Altmetric collects relevant mentions from social media sites, newspapers, policy documents, blogs, Wikipedia, and other sources" (<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fjps20/current>, downloaded 31 March 2016).

<sup>92</sup> There are countless examples of scholar-activists based in non-academic research institutions and agrarian movements performing many times better than their counterparts who are primarily based in the academy on some, if not most, of the academy-centered research and publication impact measurements. For sure the total citations and h-index of scholar-activists who have written on agrarian related issues such as food politics and trade like Susan George, Frances Moore Lappe, Walden Bello, Raj Patel, Eric Holt-Gimenez, Pat Mooney, and many others are much higher than the average academics.

Another impact that is not easily quantifiable but is so highly valued within the academy is the extent to which a publication has inspired a whole new generation of and surge in a particular research theme. Citation tracking can only partially capture this. Scholar-activists tend to have a good historical claim in this regard. Some of the most important non-academic research institutions working on broad issues that include agrarian issues have produced some of the classics in the field that have influenced entire generations of research, academics and scholar-activists over the years. Recall some of the classic and contemporary works produced by scholar-activists at the Transnational Institute (TNI), Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First, Focus on the Global South, Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), GRAIN, The Corner House, FIAN International, among others. Not only have many of the scholar-activists in these institutions produced high impact publications partly seen from statistics on internet document downloads and citations, but many of these publications have also set strategic research agendas. GRAIN's trailblazing work on global land grabs that started with its report in 2008 and TNI's cutting edge work on the politics of drugs and illicit crops, farming villages, and democracy are good examples. Finally, scholar-activists have also played a role in redefining what societal impact means, to include not just impact of post-mortem studies, but tracking-and-studying moving targets in order to intervene in actual policy and political process.

Third, *reward and punishment* are powerful formal and informal norms and rules inside the academy and social movements, partly as an instrument of accountability, that largely determine what scholar-activists can do and cannot do. Inside academic institutions, what is rewarded are works that are deemed to have academic rigor translated to actual publication outputs that in turn make significant impact based on academic criteria. Even when the institution's leadership does not agree with one's brand of politics, they can look the other way, and tolerate, a scholar-activist—as long as the university can claim the productivity points. Performing below the minimum level of what they require academic staff to produce and accomplish, punishment kicks in swift and decisive, and one can lose a job.

Meanwhile, if one is a non-academy-based scholar-activist, acceptance within the academic circles is probably the greatest reward one can get from academics, for example, getting invited to give a keynote at a major academic conference, which is an important way for academics to express gratitude and affirmation to non-academy-based scholar-activists. This is taken seriously, although not egoistically, by scholar-activists because acceptance and affirmation constitute legitimation of and great opportunities for radical political agendas. Non-acceptance by academics of non-academy based scholar-activists is sometimes the former's way of punishment, but more often is just an expression and extension of the everyday elitism within the academy.

On the side of agrarian movements, they are not in a position to reward or punish institutionally or materially, but they can and they do so politically in ways that are profoundly important to scholar-activists. A movement reward usually comes in the form of further and sustained access to the movement, and at times one can even get invited into a movement's 'politburo' and 'central committee' meetings. The trust that they can have, and the openness they can offer are rewards like no other. Punishment is done when violation of trust, or suspicion of such, occurs. Punishment comes in quick and complete—and almost always comes in the form of abrupt suspension of access, at times complemented with broader political isolation among other movements.

*(ii) Scholar-activists and agrarian movements*

That agrarian movements need scholar-activists as allies is not an issue for the former. The issue is the 'terms' of that relationship. Autonomy—the degree of external influences within one's internal decision making—becomes a key reference point. But it is not a one-way question. Autonomy is just as important to scholar-activists as it is to agrarian movements. One-way instrumentalist relationships have marked many of the interactions between scholar-activists and agrarian movements. There are two dominant variants.

First, is the tendency that is based on an implicit assumption that poor people and their agrarian movements are ill informed and have low levels of knowledge and capacity to understand and change their situations. The task for scholar-activists is to do research for these rural poor people and their movements, use the knowledge to inform their political work or official policy process, and thereby help build poor people's capacity. Knowledge generation remains primarily the domain of scholar-activists. This patronizing attitude towards peasants and agrarian movements comes from a long tradition of viewing the mass of poor peasants as without much agency to understand their situation as well as having low autonomy and capacity to change it. This was part of the checkered history of many radical left political parties and projects in the past, and partly why post-political party agrarian movements are generally averse to vanguardism, or any hint of it, by scholar-activists in particular and intellectuals more generally. This tendency by scholar-activists is not the monopoly of those who are based in the academy. Many of those based in non-academic independent research institutions and social movements may not be that different from their academy-based counterparts in this regard. This approach has too little faith in poor people, assigns a subordinate role to agrarian movements, and accords scholar-activists a vanguard role in terms of knowledge generation. In this tradition, agrarian movements are essentially treated as adjunct to the intellectual and/or political agenda/project of scholar-activists, and many of the former, for various reasons, tend to be compliant. The extreme version of this tendency then is a dual problem of 'vanguardism' by scholar-activists and 'tailism' by agrarian movements.

Second, and the opposite of the first, and perhaps as a reaction to it on many occasions, is a tendency for agrarian movements set the agenda and scholar-activists just follow. This is based on the basic and romanticized idea that everything that agrarian movements say and do is good and correct, and should be supported unconditionally by scholar-activists. It is arguably a kind of 'mass line', in Maoists' terms, in the extreme or out of context.<sup>93</sup> When this happens, it shows a rather naive understanding of the political dynamics and actual workings of agrarian movements. The inner workings of agrarian movements are not only far from perfect but are power-ridden processes, manipulated and contested by competing actors and factions within and from outside the movements. Representation is not always democratic, and internal accountability not always a strong point in agrarian movements. Taking at face value what the movement leaders say or show often leads scholar-activists to write about or support processes that were not deserving of support, or results in the failure to support deserving ones. Scholar-activists in this mold tend to reinforce the problematic leaderships by caudillo-cum-cacique types of leaders, or strengthen and legitimize problematic roles played by undemocratic and even despotic movement brokers, or support a problematic political position. They inadvertently dismiss fascinating

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<sup>93</sup> Mao declared: "The masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant, and without this understanding, it is impossible to acquire even the most rudimentary knowledge" (Mao Zedong 1975: 12).

movements and collective actions just because these movements do not have leaders who are able to express and amplify important accomplishments, while scholar-activists pick up on movements that are actually empty shells simply because these have excellent propagandists.<sup>94</sup> The worst combination in this situation is when there is a triangular reinforcing interaction between caudillo agrarian movement leaders promoting often empty movements, layers of movement brokers and cheerleaders, many of whom are naive and/or impetuous petty bourgeois intellectuals, and uncritical scholar-activists who take the grand claims by movement leaders, brokers and cheerleaders at face value. In this context, it is not uncommon that scholar-activists become either a victim of or party to a 'political pyramid or ponzi scheme.' This tendency accords a vanguard role to agrarian movements, and a subordinate role to scholar-activists. Scholar-activists are treated or relegated to an adjunct role to the political and logistical agenda of agrarian movements, and the former accepts in acquiescence. The extreme version of this tendency is a dual problem of 'vanguardism' of agrarian movements and 'tailism' of scholar-activists.

Both dominant tendencies are instrumentalist and problematic. There is a need for a third approach that is a two-way, mutually reinforcing interactive approach to agrarian movement and scholar-activist relationships. On the one hand, this approach values the importance of the expertise of scholar-activists to help agrarian movements overcome constraints and obstacles to, and be able to extend 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. Realizing that there is great potential for mutually reinforcing synergies in joining forces, scholar-activists and agrarian movements can forge a rewarding alliance. As Edelman (2009: 247) explains, "some important synergies between social movements and academics could involve exchanges of knowledge and contacts, joint strategy discussions, publicizing organizations' platforms and activities and analyzing their histories, and engaging in collaborative research and training." An important starting point for such an approach is an honest and clinical understanding of where each is coming from and what their agendas in the partnership are. It is an approach that recognizes the autonomy of both parties, and thus should negotiate the terms of their engagement. It is an approach that recognizes the capacity of agrarian movements and scholar-activists to generate knowledge, albeit in different ways, and that such knowledge can be more powerful when combined.

The two sets of actors have different provenance, and have different institutional starting points and interests in generating knowledge and engaging in political struggles. This becomes even more complicated when we take a disaggregated perspective on scholar-activists. Scholar-activists might be thinking of theorizing food

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<sup>94</sup> Based on three decades of closely following agrarian movements in Latin America and internationally, Edelman (2009: 249) cautions us about

the activists' investment in presenting overly coherent 'official narratives' about their movements and in making representation claims that may or may not have a solid basis. At times academic researchers and other professional intellectuals knowingly or unknowingly collude in producing and propagating those narratives and in 'airbrushing' (or, to be more up-to-date, 'photo-shopping') out dimensions of activists' biographies and of social movement practice that conflict with or complicate the 'official' picture or line. Whether or not this cosmetic approach, which in its more extreme manifestations critics sometimes characterize as 'self-censorship', 'uncritical adulation' or even 'cheerleading', really serves the needs of social movements is an important question...

sovereignty as an alternative food system, while agrarian movements may be interested in an immediate issue such as public school free meal program. Or, it may be the opposite, i.e. scholar-activists may be interested only in concluding a one-year research project and getting some journal articles published, while agrarian movements may be thinking of a larger goal such as a society-wide land redistribution program. These different starting points and institutional interests make the engagement between agrarian movements and scholar-activists inherently filled with both synergy and tension. Croteau et al. (2005: xv-xvi) explain that, "both social movements theorists and movement activists are located in structural systems that create constraints on our efforts as well as provide possibilities for action." They further argue that, "The tension between theory and practice needs to be understood in relation to larger structural forces rather than being individualized as the problem or vision of a single academic or activist" (ibid.). For Fox (2006: 30), both parties are in the best position "to find positive synergy between the needs of activist partners and the empirical and analytical rigor of scholarship if [they] recognize the tensions between the forces that shape the two sets of agendas." Studying agrarian movements in Latin America, Edelman (2009: 247) explains that, "tensions between activists and academics... tend to revolve more narrowly around the research process and the purpose and methods of knowledge production and dissemination." Such differences are not insurmountable. Fox (2006: 31) reminds us thus that, "Activist-scholar partnerships, if they are to work, need to be based on an understanding of the other, respect for difference, shared tractable goals, and a willingness to agree to disagree." He concludes that:

Ideas like partnership and coalition – more than the term solidarity, for example – recognize that the participants are autonomous actors that each bring their/our own agendas, priorities, and – whether we recognize it or not – baggage to the table. Coalitions and partnerships that last are grounded in more than shared values, but in shared interests as well. (Fox 2006: 32)

A two-way, mutually reinforcing approach to scholar-activist/agrarian movement relationships necessarily leads to a mutual internalization of passions and contradictions of both sets of actors. In his involvement with land struggles in Nicaragua, Hale (2006: 98) reflects as follows:

These movements are both inspiring and compromised; movement activists are courageous advocates of local and global justice yet partly implicated in the very systems of oppression they set out to oppose. My argument takes shape by viewing these two lines of inquiry through a single lens. To align oneself with a political struggle while carrying out research on issues related to that struggle is to occupy a space of profoundly generative scholarly understanding. Yet when we position ourselves in such spaces, we are also inevitably drawn into the compromised conditions of the political process. The resulting contradictions make the research more difficult to carry out, but they also generate insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve. This insight, in turn, provides an often unacknowledged basis for analytical understanding and theoretical innovation.

## **(5) Concluding remarks: towards a scholar-activist research movement on land politics and agrarian movements**

Land politics as an academic theme and political item have been resurrected back onto the agenda. Classic research and political questions remain and continue to be relevant, but new ones have emerged. These are far broader than what they used to mean in conventional agrarian studies. This shift partly shapes and has been shaped by the changing character of contemporary agrarian movements. Agrarian movements have witnessed the usual ebbs and flows experienced by any social movement over time. While the era of peasant wars and agrarian movements linked to national revolutionary political projects ended three decades ago, a significantly altered type of agrarian movements has emerged since then, and the recent transnational expressions and extensions of these have been among the most exciting developments in the global front of agrarian politics. The agrarian movements today have a much broader class and identity politics. Their transformation into and/or overlapping with environmental/climate justice movements as well as food (sovereignty) movements is among the most important shifts in agrarian movement politics. In short, in land politics and agrarian movements there are new processes that are occurring within the old context, coinciding with old processes that are transpiring in a new context. This calls for combining classic and contemporary theoretical and methodological tools of analysis in agrarian studies, with tools that are yet to be imagined and forged.

The forces that put land politics and agrarian movements back onto the center stage of debates and research are both intellectual and political. Land politics and agrarian movements have been put back on the agenda and redefined by activists and academics through their own autonomous initiatives, and by parallel corporate and/or conservative and reactionary versions of such initiatives. The objective condition at the global agrarian front requires broader and more flexible analytical frameworks and political pitches on land politics and agrarian movements, as well as analytical frameworks that could capture the nuances of academic exploration and urgency of political action. This reaffirms the relevance of scholar-activism that champions both academic and political rigor in work.

What may be relevant as a strategy to pursue agrarian scholar-activist work in the contemporary context is one that is 'movement oriented.' This can be understood in two senses. 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. On the other hand it is movement oriented because it aims to carry out research both individually and collectively within and through a research and researchers' movement. The research and researchers' movement being floated here has the characteristics of a social movement: based upon shared broad assumptions and visions about the world as we know it and the world we want to build and shared interests, and is amorphous, fluid, informal, inspired and inspiring, creative and irreverent. It should be like a loose collective, a community of colleagues, comrades and fellow travelers. It is less individualistic and less proprietary. It entails and involves formal research networks, but should not end there. It should be both orchestrated and spontaneous, should be able to navigate the difficult terrain between vanguardism and tailism in relationship with agrarian movements, and should be diffuse but with clear hubs of intellectual-political imagination and creativity in an operationally polycentric manner. It should be democratically shared and dispersed across the three key sites: academy-based, non-academic independent research institution-based, and social movement-based research hubs. Only then can we go beyond individual agenda setting



and individual accomplishments in scholar-activist research—and transform scholar-activist research into a real force for social justice.

In closing: agrarian scholar-activists, wherever they are located, sometimes think and feel that they are like the Chayanovian peasants they study and advocate for: their production is not commercially oriented or viable, much of their labor non-remunerated, their contribution to broader society unrecognized, their operation always on the edge, and breaking even considered a great accomplishment to be proud of. In order to survive, they have to resort to further self-exploitation, combining extended long working hours with self-denial of some basic necessities in life. Yet they feel a profound sense of fulfillment that cannot be measured in any material way. But Frances Fox Piven (2010: 810) puts it better, in a way that captures fully and powerfully what I think most agrarian scholar-activists actually 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.

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He has authored/(co-)edited books, and (co-)guest edited journal special issues. He has published a variety of articles, papers, and book chapters; many of these are in academic journals. His thematic area of work is on agrarian politics, specifically: land politics and policies, (trans)national agrarian movements, food politics, forestland politics, state-society interactions in rural development, rural conflict, biofuels, 'flex crops', land grabbing and food sovereignty. Geographic areas of research interest include Southeast Asia, China, Southern Africa, and South America. He also studies international 'spaces' of state-society interactions. He is at present writing a monograph entitled *Food Sovereignty: Ideas and Movements* together with co-authors Zoe Brent, Martha Robbins and Christina Schiavoni for Polity Books.

The emphasis of his work is on bridging academic research, development policy practice and social movement activism. This has been influenced by his professional and political background: He has been deeply involved in agrarian movements since the early 1980s in the Philippines, and later, internationally. He was part of the core organizing team that established the international peasant and farmers' movement La Via Campesina (LVC), and was a member of LVC's International Coordinating Commission in 1993-1996. He has helped establish a global network of academics, development policy experts and social movement activists, the Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS), and helps coordinate its work ([www.iss.nl/icas](http://www.iss.nl/icas)), and helped in setting up the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) ([www.iss.nl/ldpi](http://www.iss.nl/ldpi)), a global network of researchers and activists studying land grabbing. He has helped in establishing a network of scholars and activists working on the theme of the rise of the BRICS countries and middle income countries (MICs) and its implications for global agrarian transformations, the "BRICS Initiatives for Critical Agrarian Studies" or BICAS ([www.iss.nl/bicas](http://www.iss.nl/bicas)).

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He has taught at the graduate level in the Netherlands, Canada, Mexico, China, Switzerland, Portugal and Finland on the politics of agrarian transformation. He is currently (co-)supervising about 20 PhD students at ISS as well as in others universities in Canada, USA, Spain, Belgium, and The Netherlands, and currently supervises four post-doctoral fellows.