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INTRODUCTION



## Converging social justice issues and movements: implications for political actions and research

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### ABSTRACT

We argue that the multiple contemporary converging crises have significantly altered the context for and object of political contestations around agrarian, climate, environmental and food justice issues. These shifts affect alliances, collaboration and conflict among and between state and social forces, as well as within and between movements and societies. The actual implications and mechanisms by which these changes are happening are empirical questions that need careful investigation. The bulk of our discussion is dedicated to the issue of responses to the crises both by capitalist forces and those adversely affected by the crises, and the implications of these for academic research and political activist work. More specifically, we explore four thematic clusters, namely (1) class and intersectionality; (2) sectoral and multisectoral issues and concerns; (3) importance of immediate, tactical and concrete issues of working people; and (4) links between national and global institutional spaces and political processes. We know only a little about the questions we framed here, but it is just enough to give us the confidence to argue that these questions are areas of inquiry that deserve closer attention in terms of both academic research and political debates and actions.

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## Introduction

Agrarian, food and environmental issues across the rural/urban and Global North/South divides have always been intertwined since they are all in part and to varying extents shaped by global capitalism. But the realities of contemporary capitalism have pushed such entanglement to new thresholds, as responses to the multiple and convergent crises especially since 2007/2008 fail to move beyond the logic that caused them in the first place. Two of the defining features of the contemporary conjuncture are a proliferation of natural resource enclosures and climate change politics. These two dynamics are inherently interlinked, but exactly how and with what implications are pressing questions facing scholars and activists today. Hence, this collection brings together some of the initial outcomes of at least three overlapping research initiatives, which have been grappling with such questions, each from different angles.

*First* is the initiative around rethinking critical agrarian studies in the era of climate change. This was born out of a need to make sense of rapidly changing dynamics of access and control of natural resources conditioned by climate politics. For example, the contemporary global land rush has been fuelled in many cases by the expansion of particular kinds of crops which are increasingly transacted not just in a single commodity chain but in an increasingly expanding and more complex commodity web, a chain of chains, involving what Borras et al.<sup>1</sup> call 'flex crops': crops and commodities with multiple and flexible commercial uses. These are crops that are flexibly used for food, animal feed, energy, liquid fuels and other commercial and industrial purposes. Such flexibility allows for production to respond nimbly to shifting market opportunities as well as demands that emerge in response to climate change, ie biofuels, depending on political and economic calculations in the spheres of processing, circulation and consumption.

The focus of this initiative is on the implications, for both academic research and political action, of the convergence of multiple social justice issues around agrarian, food, labour, environmental and climate justice themes. This is partly linked to a large research project tracking the convergence of climate change mitigation and adaptation narratives and how these intersect with land/resource grabbing, with a particular focus on Myanmar and Cambodia in 2014–2018, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).<sup>2</sup> Later a spin-off action research initiative in Mali and Nigeria in 2018–2020 was funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) with coordination by Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN-International). One of the objectives of these research initiatives is to have a better understanding of the implications of how various social justice movements, including transnational agrarian movements,<sup>3</sup> analyse and frame their demands in the era of the global resource rush and climate change politics.

*Second*, development and policy discourses are increasingly overlapping across agrarian, food, environmental and climate politics. Take for instance the notion of and current programme on Climate-Smart Agriculture as formulated by the World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).<sup>4</sup> It can be approached as an agrarian, or food, or environmental, or climate policy agenda or research theme, and each one is correct – but only partially. In fact, it is precisely the entanglement of these various sectoral issues that defines a generic 'climate-smart agriculture'. Because of the far-reaching implications of such policy discourses, international governance instruments related to land, water and forest tenure in the context of the global resource rush have become sites of contestation and highly politicised intervention by social justice movements. One process that has generated a lot of political interest, debate and initiatives on the ground among social movements working on resource politics has been the United Nations Committee for Food Security and Nutrition (CFS) Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (the Tenure Guidelines or TGs, more popularly known as VGGT) passed in 2012. The authors of contributions to this collection have been engaged in academic and action research around this theme, and some of them have also been deeply engaged in the CFS process itself. There are two important research initiatives from which initial outputs are included here. On the one hand is a large research project funded by IDRC on the Tenure Guidelines and other governance and accountability instruments related to resource politics, with country-level work in Uganda, South Africa, Mali and Nigeria in 2014–2017. This is the basis of the contribution by Franco and Monsalve<sup>5</sup> in this collection. On the other hand is a research initiative by some of the authors

in collaboration with FAO on how the Tenure Guidelines are being thought about amidst initial implementation in Latin America in general, together with two specific country cases: – Guatemala and Colombia – in 2015–2016. This is the basis of the contribution by Brent et al.<sup>6</sup> in this collection looking at Latin America as a region.<sup>7</sup>

*Third*, responding to the crises and contradictions of contemporary capitalism, political advocacy campaigns by activist groups and social movements have also been reframing their issues, refocusing their principal targets, recalibrating their demands, readjusting their spaces for political contestation, and dynamically changing the configuration of their coalitions. Even so, the expulsion or displacement of local communities affected by the contemporary global land rush, or their adverse incorporation into whatever emerging capitalist enterprises or neo-liberal big nature conservation have come to replace their productive undertaking in those spaces, has radically decreased the level of autonomy and ability of both rural and urban working people to construct or defend their livelihoods. Often they combine multiple sources of income or strategies for self-provisioning in circumstances that are increasingly determined not just by agrarian processes in rural settings, but more broadly.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the framing of ‘class versus identity politics’ that fuelled vibrant debates in the 1980s and 1990s seems to be outdated and irrelevant for these contemporary movements that appear to be operating within the politics of ‘intersectionality’ – of class and other social identities, eg gender, generation, race, ethnicity, caste, religion and nationality.

In part, this has been accompanied by ongoing critical dialogue between academic and social movement activists in the tradition of ‘scholar-activism.’<sup>9</sup> The common denominator among all authors in this collection is the fact that everyone is engaged in various forms of political activism for social justice. In a way, this academic collection is, unapologetically, a logical extension of their individual and collective political activist work. The authors, however, vary greatly in terms of what kind of researchers they are in the context of the movement they engage with, as explained by Edelman,<sup>10</sup> or what principal institutional base they have, as explained by Borras.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, they all experience the synergy and tension – and contradictions – inherent in such work, as explained by Hale<sup>12</sup> and Piven.<sup>13</sup>

This collection is the initial outcome of these three overlapping initiatives. This means that thematically, there are three interrelated sets or clusters of papers in this collection. The first cluster explores the convergence of issues around agrarian, food, environment and climate politics in today’s current conjuncture, and the political interactions across diverse (trans)national social justice movements that are emerging. These include those between transnational agrarian justice and climate/environmental justice movements; between fisher peoples’ movements and other social justice movements; between food justice and food sovereignty movements; and among agrarian justice, environmental justice and indigenous peoples’ movements and the role of the state.<sup>14</sup> The second cluster engages with issues of political dynamics around some of the main progressive instruments of so-called ‘global governance’ of the world food and agro-commodity system (partly from a radical interpretation of the ‘right to adequate food and nutrition’), and of the tenure of land, fisheries and other natural resources, particularly the Tenure Guidelines.<sup>15</sup> The third cluster is comprised of shorter pieces that are reflection essays by key activists in the transnational climate justice, agrarian/fisheries justice, and food justice/food sovereignty movements: Sara Mersha of Grassroots International,<sup>16</sup> Sherry Pictou of international fishers’ and indigenous peoples’ movements,<sup>17</sup> and Paula Gioia of the European Coordination Via Campesina or ECVC.<sup>18</sup>

Taken together, this collection includes contributions that are (1) aimed at understanding new ways of asking questions rather than at offering definitive answers; and (2) primarily aimed at putting forward propositions that help to reframe research and rethink political actions. The rest of this introductory paper is organised as follows: The next section is an abbreviated discussion of the current world conjuncture and the crises and contradictions that define it. The aim is to help situate the key themes for discussion in this collection. The following section is dedicated to discussing the implications for political actions and research, organised into four subsections. The paper ends with some short concluding remarks.

## Conjuncture – crises and contradictions

The multiple and converging crises were caused largely by capitalism. The dominant responses deployed to address these crises are capitalist strategies. This is akin to dousing a burning house with gasoline hoping to stop the fire. The contradiction is fundamental, sharp and unmistakable.<sup>19</sup> It is this conjuncture that constitutes the stage on which key actors and alliances are recast, and the context for and object of political contestations are reappraised and recalibrated. These can be seen in many ways. For the purposes of our collection, we briefly discuss three interrelated ways in which crises and contradictions that define the current global conjuncture are presented and examined.

*First* is the industrial food and agro-commodity system and climate change. The industrial food and agro-commodity system's contribution to climate change is a fundamental issue that should be one of the key starting points of any serious discussion about the converging crises and how to address them. The greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the sphere of production of industrial food and other agro-commodities are quite significant – emanating from the fossil energy used to clear-cutting forest to open up large-scale monoculture, to all sorts of livestock emissions such as methane.<sup>20</sup> 'Distance' is a defining feature of the industrial food system. As Clapp<sup>21</sup> explains, 'the growth of the global industrial food system has encouraged increasingly complex forms of "distance" that separate food both geographically and mentally from the landscapes on which it was produced'.<sup>22</sup> One effect of this is the rise of transport, processors, packaging and refrigeration industries associated with the industrial food system that in turn burn more fossil energy and increase exponentially the production of and trade in single-use plastics, among many other things. This has highlighted the importance of taking seriously the 'localisation' pillar of food sovereignty, as Robbins<sup>23</sup> has argued. Distance has also produced an inherent problem in the system: food waste and loss, estimated to be the fate of at least a third of the total food produced.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, food has always been embedded in capitalism primarily as a way to provision the working class cheaply and keep wages low.<sup>25</sup>

The kind and quality of food consumed, as well as systems of distribution, pricing, subsidies, marketing and so on, are critically embedded in the broader capitalist system. Consumption is thus highly differentiated according to social class, highly racialised, and gendered, among other divisions,<sup>26</sup> and how to address all these overlapping dimensions on the consumption side has become even more complicated in the current conjuncture.<sup>27</sup> This includes the issue of changing diet preferences and volumes especially in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and other middle-income countries that are fast becoming wealthier and urbanised.<sup>28</sup> This has, in turn, created various sub-complexes in the global food system, including the meat complex, which has far-reaching environmental implications.<sup>29</sup>

The spheres of production, circulation and consumption of food – and the creation or invention and appropriation of value in each of these spheres – are all key sites of converging crises and contradictions. In this system, we see that a significant portion of the billion hungry people worldwide are net food buyers in the countryside, and a good number of those are the ones previously rendered vulnerable in climate crisis conditions largely due to their structural and institutional conditions.<sup>30</sup>

*Second:* And yet the solutions being put forward purportedly to address the converging crises are essentially victimising the victims of the industrial food system and climate change – that is, making the same working people pay for the crises caused by capitalism. These contradictions are evident in solutions labelled as ‘win–win’ for those who created the crises in the first place, ie corporations at the forefront of capitalist accumulation, but which are ‘lose–lose’ for the working people who already suffered under capitalism and now are forced to become the collateral damage of recent capitalist restructuring. Paula Gioia of the ECVC, in her contribution to this collection, narrated how they (La Via Campesina and allies) converged in Paris in 2015 for the the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21):<sup>31</sup>

We went to Paris to tell the world that small-scale food producers, including peasants, indigenous peoples, hunters and gatherers, family farmers, rural workers, herders and pastoralists and fisherfolk, are increasingly confronted with the grabbing of natural resources and with systematic violations of human and environmental rights. We are also among those most severely affected by the impacts of climate disruption...peasants and other workers in rural areas also represent the largest group of people in the world suffering from hunger, poverty, social and cultural discrimination, lack of prospects and public negligence. ... Despite the hard realities faced by our communities and the big civil society mobilisations in Paris to bring attention to those topics, the climate agreement signed by governments opened even more the door to financial speculation on nature, industrialisation of agriculture, and the acceleration of resource grabbing. La Via Campesina interprets the Paris Agreement, which came into force just before the COP22 in Marrakech, as a failure.<sup>32</sup>

The industrial food system produces more food than the world’s population can possibly consume.<sup>33</sup> But at the same time, it causes the hunger of a billion people, a significant number of whom are net food buyers from the rural communities. The market solutions to these crises then require taking more lands, displacing already marginalised rural people – supposedly to produce more food through the industrial food system to address hunger (except for the hunger of those who are displaced!). Despite the harm to the environment and climate, and to people’s livelihoods, caused by powerful corporations, often with impunity, they seem to be rewarded with even more cheap means of production and the labour to transform these into commodities for incessant expanded capital accumulation uninterrupted in capitalism’s history, as Patel and Moore<sup>34</sup> explain. The increasing financialisation of agriculture, food and land has added intensity and complexity to the current conjuncture.<sup>35</sup>

The territories and natural resources (land, water, seas, forests, minerals) that are accessed, controlled and inhabited by working people in the countryside used to sit just on the boundary between the centre and the periphery in terms of capitalist accumulation. In a sense, these are land frontiers.<sup>36</sup> In the current conjuncture, the lands that working people have are being dragged from the outside periphery of the industrial food and agro-commodity system into its centre through a variety of mechanisms,<sup>37</sup> often facilitated by the state.<sup>38</sup> These mechanisms include contract growing schemes, joint ventures, and a variety of

partnerships aimed at inserting smallholder agriculture into the global value chains, or webs, of the industrial food system. What is happening is that the capitalist solutions to capitalist crises include taking more land to produce more food, which means taking the lands of those already precarious in their social reproduction; stuck in indebtedness,<sup>39</sup> many are in a desperate situation, including small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, the industrial food system contributes up to a third of total GHG emissions, while those in the periphery of the industrial food system – small-scale farmers (many of whom are shifting cultivators), artisanal fishers and nomadic pastoralists whose production system has existed for centuries and is deemed to be socially and ecologically self-regenerating – are now being pointed to as the culprits of agriculture's contribution to environmental degradation and climate change, and are being prohibited from pursuing their way of life and social reproduction. Several contributions in this collection highlight these contradictory processes. Schiavoni et al.<sup>40</sup> and Moreda,<sup>41</sup> respectively, examine the large-scale modernist capitalist ventures in Tanzania through the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT), and the peripheral lowland regions in Ethiopia through the original plan by the government to resettle tens of thousands of rural villagers in a political process that has a significant ethnic political dimension.<sup>42</sup>

The era of climate change politics has also caused the rise of big neoliberal nature conservation, whether of the 'fortress' type or the 'partial incorporation type' as in Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) or REDD+-like projects.<sup>43</sup> The idea is simple: global capitalism can go on doing business as usual as long as some social classes and communities, especially in agrarian societies, can be persuaded or coerced to go into voluntary market-based carbon offsetting arrangements – which is like saying, Let's conserve here, and pollute over there. And again, rural poor communities in the Global South are understood to be the collateral damage in this arrangement. La Via Campesina leader Paula Gioia<sup>44</sup> exclaims:

What are the current mechanisms to challenge climate change that governments and the private sector propose? They have fancy names such as Climate Smart Agriculture, REDD+, agro-fuels or Blue Carbon. But these cannot be accepted as solutions to the climate crisis, because they all serve basically the same purpose: reinforcing the very practices driving climate change and social and environmental injustice under a green (and now also blue) façade. Furthermore, they undermine peasant agriculture.

In their contribution to this collection, Borras and Franco<sup>45</sup> argue that the global land rush is underpinned by the assumption or insinuation by mainstream neoliberal economics that many resource uses and users are *economically inefficient*, while reasserting that many of them are also *ecologically destructive*. Iconic targets are peasant societies: shifting cultivators, artisanal fishers and nomadic pastoralists, among others. These twin narratives have fused together, and the World Bank's and FAO's version of Climate-Smart Agriculture represents its current expression in policy framework.<sup>46</sup>

*Third*, anti-capitalist struggles and alternatives themselves are marked by convergences and contradictions. There are alternatives that challenge the foregoing mainstream narratives and accumulation projects. Most of these alternatives are, not surprisingly, broadly anti-capitalist. A concrete example is food sovereignty, which converges with other anti-capitalist food movements, as well as with others that are not necessarily anti-capitalist in orientation,



as Holt-Giménez and Shattuck<sup>47</sup> have explained. Food sovereignty has gained momentum in many societies,<sup>48</sup> despite the persistence of important examples where food sovereignty as advocated by organised global movements has not (yet) gained ground, such as Russia<sup>49</sup> and China. Yet alternatives such as food sovereignty either are ignored and dismissed by governments as unfeasible, or receive less enthusiastic reception from other radical intellectuals for being too ‘populist’, or too ‘restorative’, as in the case of agroecology.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, in some cases, these alternatives are being co-opted by some governments and corporations and reoriented towards something else.<sup>51</sup> The checkered record of food sovereignty in the ‘pink tide’ states in Latin America, especially Venezuela,<sup>52</sup> Bolivia<sup>53</sup> and Ecuador,<sup>54</sup> has been marked by stark contradictions: funding food sovereignty from state income derived from extractivist development activities, amid lukewarm transformation of the global–national dominant industrial food system despite the publicly declared goal of food sovereignty.<sup>55</sup>

### Implications for political action and research

The converging crises discussed briefly above have significantly altered the context for and object of political contestations around agrarian, climate, environmental and food justice issues. These shifts affect alliances, collaboration and conflict among and between state and social forces, as well as within and between movements and societies. The actual implications and mechanisms by which these changes are happening are empirical questions that need careful investigation. In an initial attempt at making sense of these dynamics and what they might imply, politically and academically, we have identified four broad themes for discussion that are highlighted by this collection.

### *Reaffirmation of class politics in the context of intersectionality*

Perhaps one of the most significant impacts of contemporary capitalism is that ordinary working people have increasingly been forced to combine various strategies to construct and defend a livelihood in order to survive, dynamically straddling the rural/urban divide and across sectors of the economy. Bernstein’s notion of ‘classes of labour’<sup>56</sup> and the similar argument by Shivji<sup>57</sup> for revaluing the notion of ‘working people’ are among the more systematic theoretical reflections on the altered conditions of the working class. The formulations by Bernstein and Shivji may have far-reaching implications as to how to empirically study the changing class configuration and relations, and what these imply for class agency and class politics. Shivji calls for a transition from the conventional class basis of revolutionary political projects founded on the basic worker–peasant alliance towards one that is anchored on the idea of ‘working people’.<sup>58</sup> What this implies for how we understand questions of agency and politics will require further and more systematic empirical research. Does the fragmentation of labour automatically and always weaken the chances for coherent and vibrant class-based movements, or will it necessarily lead to newer forms of movements and political contentions of the oppressed?

There are two possible implications of this reflection that we would like to put forward for further political discussion and academic research. On the one hand, if taken seriously, questions related to ‘What then would be the most potent social forces open to the most radical political struggles and alternatives?’ become relevant. On the other hand, while such



a reflection reaffirms the relevance of class, class agency and class politics, there has been an increasing realisation among the most committed Marxist scholars that class alone cannot possibly account for everything that matters in politics. Other social identities that intersect with class matter just as profoundly: gender, generation, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, nationality and so on. The notion of 'intersectionality' has thus become increasingly central to efforts at making sense of the political implications of the current conjuncture. An analytical lens from an intersectional perspective has become strategically important to our efforts at having a better understanding of the interlinked multiple crises and converging political actions. This is partly because working people experience oppression, adverse effects of climate change, and so on in plural ways on the basis of class and other social identities. Sara Mersha of Grassroots International, in her contribution to this collection, emphasises the connection between climate justice and racial justice, and the importance of intersectional thinking, in a powerful, illustrative manner. She argues:

Each of these movements make a clear connection between climate justice and other aspects of the struggle for racial justice – whether for community health and development, economic justice and solidarity economies, against militarisation and police brutality, housing and gentrification. *The recognition of the interconnectedness of these struggles as part of a climate justice struggle make their efforts stronger and more grounded in the realities that Black communities are facing, and it's important to support this type of intersectional approach.*<sup>59</sup>

On one hand, this reality highlights the importance of future inquiry into the differentiated and intersectional impacts and ways that capitalism's converging crises and contradictions are lived by different people and groups. On the other hand, remaining questions about whether, how exactly, and to what extent intersectionality is understood, valued and practiced by various social justice movement activists also reveal important directions for future empirical research.

### **Validation of sectoral concerns, but moving towards multisectoral issues**

One of the implications of the current global transformations discussed here is to highlight sectoral issues and concerns, providing institutional platforms for advocates to make their case concrete, clear, and compelling. The global land rush, for example, has put the question of peasants' and pastoralists' sectoral agendas back on the centre stage, as explained in the paper by Borrás and Franco.<sup>60</sup> The current conjuncture has pushed the issue of fisheries and fishers' movements from the periphery increasingly to the centre of global development and political debates, as Mills<sup>61</sup> has shown in her contribution to this collection. Meanwhile, Moreda<sup>62</sup> and McKay<sup>63</sup> have argued in their contributions to this collection about the issues of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, including questions of territory, indigeneity, pluralism and democratisation that have recently received global attention largely because their communities have become principal targets for state and corporate expropriation.<sup>64</sup> Food politics have cornered a massive share of the global spotlight in recent years and this has something to do with the persistence of widespread hunger amid plenty, and all sorts of public health issues related to food, among others. This issue has been addressed, to varying extents, by all the contributions in this collection. Finally, one of the sectors that has probably received the most significant attention in the current conjuncture is the issue of 'nature conservation' – broadly cast – and this has a direct link to the exponential rise of climate change politics.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, sectoral issues and initiatives have also been enriched by the current conjuncture – meaning some activities remain sectoral, but the reach of these activities cuts across food, labour, environmental and climate justice issues. A good example is the agrarian sector and agroecology. If taken seriously, in both its science and its politics as argued by Rosset and Altieri (2017) and shown empirically by Holt-Giménez (2006) from the farmer-to-farmer movement in Central America, agroecology can potentially be a potent and deeply anti-capitalist political action that addresses sectoral concerns, with far-reaching multisectoral implications.

What is equally important, however, is the increasing realisation among activists and academics alike that while sectoral concerns and issues are key, political actions limited within a sector have become less effective because they are increasingly entangled with the concerns of other sectors. The issue of flex crops and the political actions required on such crops illustrate quite powerfully the complexity of the current conjuncture: What actions to take, and where and how within the chain of chains, or within the ‘web’ of biofuels, food, animal feed, or other commercial and industrial agro-commodities when mobilising around the issue of sugarcane, soya or palm oil?<sup>66</sup> For example, the way we see activist campaigning in the European Union on biofuels issues related to palm oil and forest destruction in Indonesia is less straightforward now than how we may have thought about it a decade ago. How and to what extent do commodity substitution and indirect land-use change (ILUC) within the flex crop complex alter the terrain for demanding transparency and accountability? How does the financialisation of the flex crop complex render efforts towards tracking accountability of corporations and governments exponentially more difficult? Again, these are complex questions made more complicated by the converging crises, and, importantly, they are empirical questions.

The situation points to the need for increasing multisectoral or cross-class coalitions in political actions. Mersha<sup>67</sup> states: “Linking movements and struggles together across sectors and geographies is not only beneficial, but also necessary.” How and with what concrete political platforms are not obvious and cannot be assumed a priori. The contribution by Tramel<sup>68</sup> suggests some promising trends, and outlines further sets of questions on how we can understand such converging multisectoral forces and initiatives.

### ***The importance of immediate, tactical and concrete issues of working people***

Between dispossession and adverse incorporation into the current capitalist trends, working people struggle to get by whether in urban or rural spaces, or straddling the two. They have immediate and concrete issues: daily survival. The need for and urgency of system change, whether through radical reforms within capitalism or an alternative non-capitalist project, have been made crystal clear in the current conjuncture. There is little doubt that real and strategic solutions to the converging crises are to be found in anti-capitalist struggles and alternatives, and that, as Borras<sup>69</sup> argues, ordinary people are increasingly getting frustrated with ‘petty reform incrementalism’ as a dominant response to the massive impoverishment and inequality brought about by neoliberal capitalism, and have taken the risk of voting into office problematic right-wing populists.<sup>70</sup> The rise of right-wing populism worldwide has, among other things, posed a difficult challenge for left-wing activists, movements and political parties, which is how to strike a balance between immediate and long-term issues, strategic and tactical political manoeuvres, sectoral and multisectoral issues, policy change and system change, reform or revolution.

The dilemmas faced by ordinary people are complex and difficult, yet real and palpable. Entering into a contract growing arrangement for corn production provides the desperately needed daily cash for survival, but in doing so the household joins the thousand others in contributing to the liquidation of a biodiverse, ecologically self-regenerating production system, and facilitating the rise of massive chemical-based monoculture based on these thousands of individual household contract growers, as Borrás and Franco<sup>71</sup> demonstrate in the case of Myanmar. But at least we are conscious of the serious dilemmas that the converging crises have implied for political actions and research today. Though it is easier said than done, the way forward is figuring out how to avoid an 'either/or' take on these dilemmas, and to navigate the difficult challenge of addressing short-term issues that reinforce long-term interests, exploring tactical maneuvers that strengthen strategic positioning, and pursuing reforms that advance revolutions.

This brings us to a closely related issue of trying to strike a balance in political calculations within broad political coalitions: from progressive-centre to radical-left positions – on agrarian, food, environmental and climate issues. Historically, left politics (communist and socialist) have been hounded by persistent sectarianism and elitism, largely emanating from a fundamental assumption that only one ideological position and analysis is correct. Contemporary non-political party activist movements, networks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), associations and coalitions are not completely different. Food movements are a good example, as illustrated by Holt-Giménez and Shattuck,<sup>72</sup> where you find movements that call for dismantling the current global food system and replacing it with food sovereignty on one end of the spectrum, and food movements that seek minor reforms and concessions within the current industrial food system on the other end of the spectrum – and a great diversity in between. Environmentalist civil society groups are also marked by palpable tension in their positions, as seen for example between World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

Our take here is that ideological differences are not necessarily always bad for the cause of progressive politics, and an open admission of such differences is not always counterproductive in cross-movement conversations. Frank communication can help clarify the varying positions of different groups. What the current conjuncture calls for is the forging of the broadest possible multisectoral, cross-class alliances that are more or less anti-capitalist – whether these are communist, socialist, anarchist, feminist, environmentalist, de-growth advocates, and so on. This does not mean that all members of every broad coalition have to be anti-capitalist; it only means that the dominant politics of such a coalition should be anti-capitalist, or they should be consistent allies of anti-capitalist coalitions. Such is the case, in our view, of large movements, alliances and coalitions such as La Via Campesina,<sup>73</sup> International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC),<sup>74</sup> US Food Sovereignty Alliance, and various other coalitions around climate and environmental justice movements and networks, as partly discussed by Tramel and Mills in this collection. This necessarily clarifies relatively antagonistic class differences between some movements, as in the case of the international rich farmer movement the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP, and what replaced it after its demise in 2010) on the one hand, and La Via Campesina on the other hand.<sup>75</sup>

In global land rush politics, there are three broad political currents, namely (1) 'regulate in order to facilitate' (status quo), (2) 'regulate in order to maximise opportunities while mitigating adverse impacts' (reformist), and (3) 'regulate to stop and roll back' (revolutionary) land grabs.<sup>76</sup> And, indeed, splitting the ranks of the political tendency in two, so that its more

progressive wing can ally with the groups pushing for more revolutionary change, becomes a practical and important possible united front.

### **Connections among national, transnational and global spaces and processes**

The inherent *institutional and political links* between national and global institutional spaces and political processes have become even more important for political action in some particular ways. Our perspective on this does not downgrade the distinct importance of each of the national, transnational and global spaces and processes, but rather complements them all. This is because the logic that has given birth to the multiple crises, namely capitalism, is necessarily located in multiple sites and in the *politico-institutional channels that link these sites*. Rules on capital flows and investments, for example, are always the outcomes of interactions between global and national entities, institutions and processes. The institutional spaces and dynamic processes that link these three sites together have become even more important in the context of converging crises because the latter partly imply that solutions can be found, to some extent, in such connecting spaces and processes. National laws, policies, procedures, norms and programmes are critically important, and so are international treaties, agreements, policy frameworks and geopolitical processes. How and to what extent these sites shape one another in response to the converging crises, and, in turn, how and to what extent such political processes shape the political responses to the converging crises, are critical empirical questions that have to be investigated more carefully.

The current collection offers extensive and rich discussion about these broad questions. Franco and Monsalve,<sup>77</sup> in their contribution, ask, Why wait for the state in trying to interpret and use the Tenure Guidelines in the context of social movements' struggles against the global resource rush in Uganda, Mali, Nigeria and South Africa, involving peasants, pastoralists and fishers, both men and women? It is an iconic case of trying to use one set of governance instruments developed in one sphere (global) in order to fill some gaps in or strengthen another set in another sphere (national).<sup>78</sup> In their contribution to this collection, Brent and her co-authors<sup>79</sup> show how the Tenure Guidelines serve as a potential channel between regional (transnational) and national institutional sites for protecting, promoting or restoring democratic access to natural resources, but caution that like all state laws, the Tenure Guidelines can be, and have been, interpreted in various competing ways in the context of responses to the global land rush: from aiming to facilitate large-scale land investments, to stopping them. Coming back to the three political tendencies in the call to regulate land grabs, each of these tendencies has its own interpretation and appreciation of the Tenure Guidelines, often in opposition to and in tension with the others. The same situation occurs with regards to the competing interpretations and use of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), as argued by Franco<sup>80</sup> – it has been used to facilitate the entry of a mining company into a territory, and it has been used to oppose such an entry. Indeed, it is not an issue of the mere presence or absence of institutional instruments; it is also about the balance of state and social forces in favour of or against such accountability instruments being used in favour of the oppressed and the impoverished.<sup>81</sup> Thus, what we see in the current conjuncture are sectoral and multisectoral policies, programmes and projects that are inherently neither good nor bad per se – but what becomes of these ultimately depends in part on what broader purposes they serve (remember our discussion regarding short-term versus long-term) and the balance of state and social forces that coalesce in order to swing the

interpretation and implementation of such governance instruments towards one particular perspective or another. Our sense is that this might be the case whether we are talking about Tenure Guidelines, FPIC or other global governance instruments – but this needs to be further empirically investigated in the context of our current discussion.

Furthermore, as one of the possible complementary frameworks for sectoral struggles, human rights-based demands and analyses have steadily gained momentum in recent years, coinciding with the converging crises and responses to these. The pattern is similar to those discussed above: it is the sectoral movements and campaigns that first picked up the importance of incorporating elements of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) or even carrying sectoral campaigns within an ESCR framework. Monsalve<sup>82</sup> argues in favour of the use of broad human rights principles not just for the ‘right to food’, but in the broader context of agrarian struggles, including land struggles, as an antidote to the mainstream ‘land rights’ framework that is almost always interpreted to mean ‘individual private property rights’. Pictou,<sup>83</sup> in this collection, has made a similar argument, but in the context of indigenous peoples and fishers’ movements. She says:

One of the major challenges for Indigenous [Peoples] and [small-scale fishers or SSF] is how Indigenous and Human Rights are pitted against or co-opted by individual corporate property rights within national and international political and legal contexts – creating a hierarchy of rights. Therefore, SSF Peoples object to what has become known in state-driven fisheries management practice as rights-based approaches (RBA) or ‘rights-based fisheries’.<sup>84</sup>

Olivier de Schutter, when he was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, came up with a compelling position arguing for a human rights framework in addressing the problem of global land grabbing.<sup>85</sup> Claeys<sup>86</sup> offered the most systematic analysis of the theoretical and practical connection between food sovereignty, food movements and human rights, arguing why food sovereignty movements and human rights actually shape one another. In this context and in this collection, Schiavoni et al.<sup>87</sup> and Moreda<sup>88</sup> use the lens of ‘right to food’ in understanding the political dynamics of specific cases of large-scale land grabs via growth corridors or hubs, which necessarily examines the converging crises and responses to these at a subnational-national level. Schiavoni et al.<sup>89</sup> show how global concepts, specifically ‘right to food’ and ‘food sovereignty’, that do not necessarily share the same institutional or ideological provenance can be deployed in a complementary, and mutually reinforcing, manner, heuristically and politically. In their case, they were using these frameworks to critically examine SAGCOT in Tanzania. Moreda,<sup>90</sup> in the context of the large-scale relocation of tens of thousands of villagers in the peripheral lowland regions of Ethiopia to pave the way for foreign land investments, argued that the state has exposed itself to a fundamental contradiction: as a signatory to international agreements, the universal declaration of human rights and the Tenure Guidelines, among others, it has the obligation to ensure that its citizenry’s ‘right to food’ is realised on the one hand, and to push for a large-scale development strategy that it thinks is desperately necessary and feasible on the other hand. What has become clear, Moreda<sup>91</sup> argues, is that the latter undermines the former. It is partly this contradiction that has led to the recent political upheavals in Ethiopia.

Moreover, *national* plans, even those by left-wing governments, are in turn enabled or constrained, reshaped and reoriented by *global* political economy and geopolitical forces, as in the case of Evo Morales, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) and plurinational Bolivia as examined by McKay<sup>92</sup> in this collection, where ‘extractivism’ has become an attractive

development strategy.<sup>93</sup> This is also seen in the case of Venezuela, specifically regarding how the abundance of petro dollars and cheap industrial food in the global market, combined, allowed the Chavista government to do much less than promised to radically and quickly transform its food system towards food sovereignty;<sup>94</sup> and later, during the post-2014 collapse of the oil prices, such reliance on the industrial food system partly facilitated the political maneuvers of anti-Chavista forces using the food system as a political weapon.<sup>95</sup>

Stepping back and looking at the big picture, our main message in this specific point is that the global–national institutional linkages should be treated not only as context for either national or global inquiries into political actions, but as a distinct unit of inquiry in themselves. This particular inquiry can complement either national-level or global-oriented views on political actions as responses to converging crises for a more robust analysis. Politically, this is captured in what Franco and Monsalve<sup>96</sup> suggest:

But whether and how subaltern groups can make use of even selected international instruments to claim their human rights and their rights to specific lands or territories – and to what ends from a broader strategic perspective – is still a relatively new area of inquiry and remains an open question empirically.

While the implications for public policies, internationally and nationally, are complex and far reaching, the implications for social movements of their issue analysis, demand making and political actions might even be more complicated. The convergence of themes has forced social justice movements across spheres to converge too: climate justice, agrarian justice, food justice/food sovereignty, labour justice and gender justice, among other things. Solidarity such as this is not new. But the current convergence has a significantly different character, influenced by the past and shaped by the present and future, as argued by Brent et al.<sup>97</sup> in the context of food movements in the United States. There are unprecedented political opportunities for greater synergies, including global governance instruments that facilitate multisectoral mobilising. But such converging themes also bring with them tensions and contradictions within and between these social justice movements. What are the synergies and tensions ushered in and provoked by the converging themes among social justice movements worldwide? This question remains empirically under-explored.

## Conclusions

That multiple crises caused by capitalism converge is neither new nor surprising. What we have emphasised in this paper, partly framing and partly introducing the current collection, is that the converging multiple crises have changed the landscape on which social justice organising, coalition building and identity formation are taking place. As in activism from any period, we see the features of today's conjuncture reflected in the converging politics of movements, policy discourses and strategies for change. For the specific purposes of our collection, we see the fusion of the climate crisis and the contemporary global resource rush as inherently intertwined processes that together define the distinct character of the current conjuncture. The situation, in short, is not like before in at least two ways: (1) climate change politics became a dominant organising narrative for political actions only during the past couple of decades; and (2) the land and territories that capitalist accumulation projects are trying to appropriate cheaply or for free may prove to be the last remaining frontier for working people – which means, in moral economy terms, it is likely to directly and



fundamentally undermine the autonomy and capacity of millions of working people to ensure their social reproduction. It increasingly becomes a desperate question of how much is left, and less about how much was taken, as James Scott<sup>98</sup> put it. Sara Mersha, in the context of struggles for climate justice and racial justice, warned: 'Without resistance, our [Black] communities stand to lose too much...'<sup>99</sup> But whether the affected working people, and their movements, allies and advocates, will be able to influence the current conjuncture's balance of power among and between state and social forces nationally and globally remains to be aspired to. Understanding, interrogating and analysing what promising building blocks towards this aspiration may already exist is an urgent and empirical question for academic researchers and activists that needs to be carefully investigated rather than assumed a priori.

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## Notes

1. Borras et al., "Rise of Flex Crops and Commodities."
2. Borras and Franco, "Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation"; Hunsberger et al., "Climate Change Mitigation."
3. Edelman and Borras, *Political Dynamics of Transnational Agrarian Movements*.
4. World Bank, *Climate Change Action Plan*; FAO, *Climate-Smart Agriculture: Policies, Practices and Financing*; FAO, *Climate-Smart Agriculture Sourcebook*.
5. Franco and Monsalve Suárez, "Why Wait for the State?"
6. Brent et al., "'Tenure Guidelines' as a Tool."
7. See also McKay, "Democratising Land Control," in the context of Colombia.
8. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*; Shivji, "Concept of 'Working People.'"
9. Hale, *Engaging Contradictions*.
10. Edelman, "Synergies and Tensions."
11. Borras, "Land Politics, Agrarian Movements."
12. Hale, *Engaging Contradictions*.
13. Piven, "Reflections on Scholarship and Activism."
14. Tramel, "Convergence as Political Strategy"; McKay, "Politics of Convergence in Bolivia"; Borras and Franco, "Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation"; see also Claeys and Delgado, "Peasant and Indigenous Transnational Social Movements"; Martinez-Alier et al., "Is There a Global Environmental Justice Movement?"
15. Schiavoni et al., "Analysing Agricultural Investment"; Moreda, "Right to Food"; Franco and Monsalve Suárez, "Why Wait for the State?"; Brent et al., "'Tenure Guidelines' as a Tool."
16. Mersha, "Black Lives and Climate Justice."
17. Pictou, "Origins and Politics."
18. Gioia, "Pathway to Resilience."
19. See also Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I."
20. Weis, "Accelerating Biophysical Contradictions"; McMichael, "Contemporary Contradictions."
21. Clapp, "Distant Agricultural Landscapes," 305.
22. See also McMichael, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*; Friedmann and McMichael, "Agriculture and the State System."
23. Robbins, "Exploring the 'Localisation' Dimension."
24. See Hodges, Buzby, and Bennett, "Postharvest Losses and Waste," although we do not completely agree with their analysis about food losses and wastes and how to address these.
25. McMichael, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*; Friedmann and McMichael, "Agriculture and the State System"; Patel and Moore, *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*.
26. Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*.
27. Dauvergne, "Problem of Consumption."
28. Cousins et al., "BRICS."
29. Schneider, *Feeding China's Pigs*; Weis, "Accelerating Biophysical Contradictions."
30. Ribot, "Cause and Response."
31. See Tramel, "Road Through Paris," for a background on social movements' political actions during COP21.
32. Gioia, "Pathway to Resilience," 3.
33. Holt-Giménez et al., "We Already Grow Enough Food."
34. Patel and Moore, *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*.
35. Clapp and Isakson, *Speculative Harvests*; Visser, Clapp, and Isakson, "Introduction to a Symposium on Global Finance."
36. Li, *Land's End*.
37. Ibid.
38. Wolford et al., "Governing Global Land Deals"; Moreda, "Right to Food"; Schiavoni et al., "Analysing Agricultural Investment."
39. Gerber, "Role of Rural indebtedness."
40. Schiavoni et al., "Analysing Agricultural Investment."

41. Moreda, "Right to Food."
42. Moreda, "Large-Scale Land Acquisitions."
43. Brockington, Duffy, and Loge, *Nature Unbound*; Büscher and Fletcher, "Accumulation by Conservation"; Corbera, "Problematizing REDD+."
44. Gioia, "Pathway to Resilience," 4.
45. Borrás and Franco, "Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation."
46. Taylor, "Climate-Smart Agriculture"; Newell and Taylor, "Contested Landscapes."
47. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises, Food Regimes."
48. Shattuck, Schiavoni, and Van Gelder, "Translating the Politics of Food Sovereignty."
49. Visser et al., "Quiet Food Sovereignty."
50. Jansen, "Debate on Food Sovereignty Theory."
51. Desmarais, Claeys, and Trauger, *Public Policies for Food Sovereignty*.
52. Schiavoni, "Contested Terrain of Food Sovereignty Construction."
53. McKay, "Politics of Convergence in Bolivia."
54. Henderson, "State–Peasant Movement Relations"; Clark, "Neo-Developmentalism."
55. See also Vergara-Camus and Kay, "Agribusiness, Peasants, Left-Wing Governments"; Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini, "Extractive Imperative in Latin America."
56. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*.
57. Shivji, "Concept of 'Working People.'"
58. Ibid.
59. Mersha, "Black Lives and Climate Justice," 10–1, emphasis added.
60. Borrás and Franco, "Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation."
61. Mills, "Implicating 'Fisheries Justice' Movements."
62. Moreda, "Right to Food."
63. McKay, "Politics of Convergence in Bolivia."
64. See also Moreda, "Large-Scale Land Acquisitions."
65. Arsel and Büscher, "Nature™ Inc."
66. See for example Alonso-Fradejas et al., "Inquiring into the Political Economy of Oil Palm"; McKay et al., "Political Economy of Sugarcane Flexing."
67. Mersha, "Black Lives and Climate Justice," 12.
68. Tramel, "Convergence as Political Strategy."
69. Borrás, "Understanding and Subverting Contemporary Right-Wing Populism."
70. See also Scoones et al., "Emancipatory Rural Politics."
71. Borrás and Franco, "Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation."
72. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises, Food Regimes."
73. Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, "Origins and Potential of Food Sovereignty."
74. Edelman and Borrás, *Political Dynamics of Transnational Agrarian Movements*.
75. Ibid.
76. Borrás, Franco, and Wang, "Challenge of Global Governance of Land Grabbing."
77. Franco and Monsalve Suárez, "Why Wait for the State?"
78. See also Cotula's relevant discussion: Cotula, "International Soft-Law Instruments."
79. Brent et al., "'Tenure Guidelines' as a Tool."
80. Franco, *Reclaiming Free Prior and Informed Consent*.
81. Fox, *Accountability Politics*.
82. Monsalve, "Human Rights Framework."
83. Pictou, "Origins and Politics."
84. Ibid., 2.
85. De Schutter, "Large-Scale Land Acquisitions and Leases."
86. Claeys, "Creation of New Rights."
87. Schiavoni et al., "Analysing Agricultural Investment."
88. Moreda, "Right to Food."
89. Schiavoni et al., "Analysing Agricultural Investment."
90. Moreda, "Right to Food."

91. Ibid.
92. McKay, "Politics of Convergence in Bolivia."
93. See also McKay, "Agrarian Extractivism in Bolivia."
94. Schiavoni, "Contested Terrain of Food Sovereignty Construction."
95. Felicien, Schiavoni, and Romero, "Food Politics in a Time of Crisis."
96. Franco and Monsalve Suárez, "Why Wait for the State?" 12; see also Franco, Park, and Herre, "Just Standards"
97. Brent, Schiavoni, and Alonso-Fradejas, "Contextualising Food Sovereignty."
98. Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*.
99. Mersha, "Black Lives and Climate Justice," 11, emphasis added.

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