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Plantationocene and Contemporary Agrarian Struggles

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Wolford's (2021) article on the Plantationocene compels us to reexamine the state of agrarian struggles today in relation to struggles within and against capitalism. Although contemporary agrarian movements are relatively vibrant overall, their movement organizations and alliances tend to be sectoral and localized, and plantation workers remain weakly organized. This commentary argues that agrarian struggles can become more relevant if they are better embedded within broader anticapitalist struggles; conversely, broad anticapitalist struggles are better grounded if they are linked to contemporary agrarian struggles. The Plantationocene scholarship validates this point; moreover, scholarship on the Plantationocene can be enriched by engagement with studies on agrarian struggles. *Key Words:* agrarian movements, agrarian struggles, plantation workers, Plantationocene.

This commentary has a modest objective, aiming to make a twofold contribution, namely (1) to point out that the rapidly expanding Plantationocene scholarship is yet to engage systematically with the literature on agrarian and farmworkers' issues; and (2) that although the scholarly excitement around the Plantationocene might have unintentionally exposed the “merely agrarian” character of contemporary agrarian movements, it might also show how to address, at least partly, this weakness.

Plantations and Global Social Life

Plantations have shaped global social life to a greater extent than previously understood, and Wolford's (2021) discussion on “The Plantationocene” explains why and how this is so. Plantation-linked commodity production, circulation, exchange, and consumption extend the reach and influence of “plantation life” beyond the specifically demarcated production spaces taken over by corporations—often in ways similar to the military occupation of a territory, as Li and Semedi (2021) argued. Sugarcane plantations enabled and shaped colonialism, capitalism, and global social life (Mintz 1986), just as current plantation-produced flex

crops and commodities such as palm oil and soya do today. Wolford's discussion of the Plantationocene has covered many fresh areas not previously addressed in the emerging Plantationocene literature, especially works linked to critical agrarian studies (Edelman and Wolford 2017; Akram-Lodhi et al. 2021; Borrás 2023b; Shattuck et al. 2023). In doing so, however, Wolford has also exposed a missing building block in the emerging Plantationocene architecture, namely, political struggles by agrarian social movements. This commentary offers a preliminary exploration of that gap.

In our view, Wolford's discussion of the Plantationocene indirectly highlights two important themes in agrarian politics and social movements, namely, plantation workers and the problem among contemporary agrarian movements of being “merely agrarian.” We use *agrarian* here in the broadest sense: social relations and dynamics that have to do with cultivating the land. Our argument is that these two themes do not receive consistent and systematic academic and political attention, leading to flaws in our scientific understanding of contemporary plantations, and relatively weak contemporary anticapitalist struggles. In this commentary we use *plantation* to refer only to big capital with direct control over the spheres of production, circulation, exchange, and

consumption of agro-food commodities. The setting is a monocrop or monoculture in a bounded space (León 2023). We refer only to contemporary plantations, some of which are outcomes of the recent and ongoing global land rush (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017). Thus, we are referring to a small section of the agrarian world, but one with a reach and influence in global social life that is far more extensive than its bounded space of production.

Plantations and Contemporary Agrarian Struggles

It is our contention that the issues flagged by Wolford (2021) in particular, and the emerging Plantationocene literature in general, will benefit from engaging the literature on plantation workers and agrarian struggles. In this context, we present a number of propositions for discussion. First, the contemporary wave of agrarian movements worldwide (Moyo and Yeros 2005) has coincided with the expansion of plantations for which the recent global land rush has provided a boost (Wolford et al. 2013; Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017). Political reactions to plantations from affected rural villages have historically been varied, centering on three broad currents: resistance against plantations; collective action seeking insertion into the plantations; and acquiescence. The same broad pattern of reactions is witnessed in response to the contemporary land rush (Hall et al. 2015). The first of the three currents (i.e., struggles against plantations) could manifest in demands under the umbrella of “agrarian justice” such as land restitution or the redistribution of plantation land to the landless. Historically, capitalist plantations proved to be too difficult to dismantle even where land movements were formidable (Borras and Franco 2005). Most land reforms, with the exception of revolutionary socialist types, have avoided expropriation of this sector. Marxist political parties consider it utopian and reactionary to subject productive capitalist plantations to land reforms (Borras and Franco 2005). In the few capitalist plantations that did see redistribution via land reforms, the peasant or worker beneficiaries struggled to sustain production, resulting in widespread land reform settlement desertion or successful manipulations by landed classes that effectively evaded wealth and power redistribution (Borras and Franco 2005).

Second, to be sufficiently grounded, struggles within and against capitalism have to gain more relevance and momentum in plantations. Struggles cannot be framed in either-or terms—that is, struggles within plantations only or struggles against plantations only—or in oppositional terms, as struggles within plantations versus struggles against plantations. Some radical movements demand the dismantling of a plantation and the restitution of land to the villagers who claim that land (Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman, and Dwyer 2018), whereas other groups demand to be inserted into the plantation through fairer terms of contract farming or wage labor and working conditions (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017). The two are not mutually exclusive, though. For example, in Meta, Colombia, Indigenous communities are struggling to reclaim their ancestral land, grabbed from them by an investor. This investor has accumulated about 45,000 hectares of land that has been transformed into a modern plantation producing assorted agricultural commodities. The Indigenous communities have been persistent in their land-reclaiming struggle. At the same time, their daily conditions are so precarious that they are desperate to get whatever wage work they can find. Some regular plantation company workers (Venezuelan migrants) started to subcontract wage work to them, with very low pay and insufficient working days in a year¹ (Arango 2022). Consequently, the Indigenous communities are engaged in the simultaneous but contradictory struggles against (reclaim the land) and within (better wages and working conditions) the plantation. Both types of struggles are important, and the combination of the two becomes especially so, because it inherently goes beyond the labor justice–agrarian justice divide. Struggles within plantations, when they occur, are framed within labor justice perspectives for wage work relations (Pye 2021), or around improvements in the terms of production and exchange for those involved in contract farming (Vicol et al. 2022). Efforts to organize work and struggles by farmworkers in contemporary plantations have been feeble and slow relative to the wide-scale and rapid expansion of the sector (more on this later).

Third, plantations are often outcomes of fiercely contested land politics, with the result that companies are wary of recruiting hostile local populations in and near the plantation site. This has led, historically, to the plantation practice of hiring migrant workers from geographically distant communities or

from other social groups (race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality; Stoler 1995). Local smallholders who manage to hold on to their lands find themselves, at some point, in a political, economic, institutional, or geographical situation that forces them to enter into a variety of often disadvantageous contractual arrangements with big capital, as stand-alone smallholder farming becomes unfeasible, especially when the plantation is monoculture such as oil palm and the stand-alone smallholding involves subsistence crops (Li and Semedi 2021). One outcome is the rise of monocultures (León 2023). As Li and Semedi (2021) demonstrated in the case of Indonesia, these form a collage of big capital plantations and owner-cultivator farms where social life is organized largely in, through, and around the monoculture complex, with workers and farmers completely dependent on external capital for wages and for input–output farm markets. As Li (2018) elaborated, this is the structural and institutional context within which the individual and collective agencies of villagers are activated and enhanced—or not—thereby shaping possibilities for and limits to political struggles within and against plantations (see also Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman, and Dwyer 2018).

Fourth, the rise of plantations has coincided with an increase in the number of working people facing precarity amid jobless economic growth worldwide, and the collapse of infrastructure for social life in rural communities (Scoones et al. 2018). Among other impacts, the geographic expansion of plantations occurs directly at the expense of the villagers' means of production and social reproduction—that is, the loss not only of farmland and grazing spaces, but of community forests, rivers, and lakes, and village public spaces such as “right of way” (access and routes to school, public markets, etc.). This makes the difficult task of combining a range of productive and social reproductive activities to survive even more challenging (Bernstein 2006; Shivji 2017). These working people might engage simultaneously in a bewildering array of livelihood activities: farming, seasonal (migrant) wage work, street peddling, or lumpen activities. This renders conventional trade union and movement organizing methods relevant but insufficient.

Fifth, we focus our attention on two broad types of plantations: monocrop plantations built through a variety of contract farming schemes, as recently surveyed by Vicol et al. (2022), and corporate direct takeovers of large tracts of land on which a plantation then emerges.

The former type relies on the labor of contracted farmers, and is notoriously nonorganized in the anticapitalist struggles framework. The latter recruits mostly seasonal workers who are usually not from among the local population. In cases involving cross-border seasonal migrant farmworkers, it is not uncommon to find them working without proper legal work documents. Neoliberal labor contractualization has consolidated the long-standing practice of labor contracting of (illegal) migrant farmworkers, as demonstrated in classic works such as McWilliams ([1935] 2000) and contemporary studies such as Ngai (2014). As Pattenden (2023) recently argued, the enormous number of relative surplus population globally—estimated by Davis (2006) at not less than a billion—makes it politically compelling to organize this largely informal sector, or Bernstein's “classes of labour.” The structural and institutional conditions within which these (seasonal) plantation workers are embedded, however, make it difficult to organize them (Shah and Lerche 2020). The challenge in building movements and alliances is no longer limited to agrarian spaces; rather, as Borrás (2023c) explained in detail, it requires systematic work in agrarian, nonagrarian rural, and rural–urban corridor sites, taken together as inseparable elements within a matrix.

In the context of land struggles, Levien, Watts, and Yan (2018) argued, “Struggles over means of both production and social reproduction remain as important as ever, but are not playing out in remotely the same way as Marx predicted. Land remains an important focus of such struggles, even if its precise significance remains fiercely debated” (876). The contradictions abound: Land and agrarian justice struggles against plantations might advance the interests of dispossessed peasants, but be at variance with the class interest of landless rural laborers; conversely, struggles within plantations involving labor justice demands for employment and better wages could run counter to demands by the dispossessed peasants for land restitution. These class contradictions have been used by the plantation elites to divide and weaken the ranks of working people. They can also raise difficult questions for popular political projects such as food sovereignty and agroecology that are headlined as all-encompassing alternatives. The labor deficit is significant in food sovereignty and agroecology, and the notion of the Plantationocene has reminded us of this (Borrás et al. 2022). Ultimately, conditions for class solidarity and cross-class coalitional politics are

currently not favorable for working people. Then again, as Marx (1968) reminded us, working people make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing.

Robust movement organizations and alliances by various agrarian classes are a necessary but not sufficient force for effective struggles within and against plantations and capitalism. This is because vibrant agrarian movements and alliances might well be just that: “merely agrarian.”

Going Beyond “Merely Agrarian”

The Plantationocene scope of analysis is global, and its spheres of inquiry are necessarily wide ranging geographically, temporally, and institutionally. The domains of production, circulation, and consumption that make up plantations and associated social life are inherently multisited geographically. The agrarian and nonagrarian rural character of working classes implicated in the production sphere of plantations is another geographic basis for the uneven impacts of plantations and the diverse political reactions to them. Moreover, a political economy analysis of plantations requires a “historical conjuncture” perspective (Li 2014) that understands history in the sense used by Bloch and by Hobsbawm, that is, as the unity of the past, present, and future (Bloch [1954] 1992; Hobsbawm 1971). One implication of a Plantationocene-inspired inquiry is the drive to look at agrarian struggles from the *problematique* of going beyond the “merely agrarian.” This on Fraser’s (2021) discussion of climate politics, and specifically on her critique of existing environmental struggles as being “merely environmental,” implying that they are unable to connect to broader class struggles within a society to become antisystemic, anticapitalist struggles. Fraser argued that “to become counter-hegemonic ... a new commonsense must transcend the ‘merely environmental,’” and she continued:

it must connect its ecological diagnosis to other vital concerns—including livelihood insecurity and denial of labour rights; public disinvestment from social reproduction and chronic undervaluation of carework; ethno-racial-imperial oppression and gender and sex domination; dispossession, expulsion and exclusion of migrants; militarization, political authoritarianism and police brutality Only by addressing *all* major facets of this crisis, “environmental” and “non-environmental,” and by disclosing the connections

among them, can we begin to build a counter-hegemonic bloc that backs a common project and possesses the political heft to pursue it effectively. (Fraser 2021, 96)

Building on Fraser, we agree with the observations of a number of scholars working on contemporary plantation workers’ issues, such as Pye (2021), that current efforts in organizing plantation workers worldwide are relatively thin and weak, and contemporary agrarian movements tend to be too “middle peasant-centric” in narrative and actual organizing work, as flagged by Li (2023). In practical politics there is a need to address these weaknesses; academic research can help by pointing out research gaps, which is what we are trying to do here.

At the production site, four of the groups linked to plantations are (migrant) farmworkers, smallholder farmers in contract arrangements with the plantation, villagers expelled by and never inserted into the plantation, and nonagrarian rural working and lower middle classes. Each has a distinct class interest. All of them are affected when big capital reorders social life around the plantation. It is not easy to organize any one of these groups for political struggles. The most organized group among the four, relatively speaking, is those displaced by plantations who then mount antiplantation struggles. Even if, hypothetically speaking, these groups are separately organized, the bigger challenge remains bringing them together into a multisectoral movement and coalition or alliance to elevate their demands into class demands, their specific site struggles into a “landscape” struggle (Mitchell 1996), and their local struggles into antisystemic struggles, broadly discussed by Fraser (2021) and specifically argued in the agrarian context by both Pattenden (2023) and Borras (2023c). Yet, without such movements and alliances, struggles within and against capitalism will remain weak. In the current political configuration of social movements and alliances broadly linked to plantations, these are agrarian movements that tend to remain “merely agrarian.”

Contemporary agrarian struggles have made important contributions to anticapitalist struggles during the past thirty years, as a historical survey by Borras (2023a) has shown. Nevertheless, they remain, to a large extent, “merely agrarian.” They are particularly weak, as Pattenden (2023) and White, Graham, and Savitri (2023) demonstrated, in building movements and alliances in nonagrarian

rural spaces, in the rural–urban corridor, and most especially in the agrarian, nonagrarian rural, and rural–urban matrix. As a consequence, they are too weak, politically and organizationally, to undo and roll back the inroads made by plantations or to block plantations’ future advances. This is not to downplay the inspiring, even dramatic, rise of agrarian movements during the past decades, but most of these struggles and initiatives do not occur directly within the spaces and logic of plantations. Most plantation agrarian struggles are sectoral and localized, not scaled-up spatially or politically. Borrás (2023c) argued that the challenge in building agrarian, rural, and rural–urban anticapitalist movements and alliances within and between these spheres “calls for more—not less—attention to agrarian movements seen from the inseparable domains of the agrarian, rural, and rural–urban continuum.” The issue of plantation workers exemplifies the need to strengthen agrarian movements; the nonagrarian rural and rural–urban political economic and spatial dimensions of plantations highlighted in the Plantationocene scholarship (e.g., Wolford 2021) locate the challenges to and tasks of agrarian movements within their historical and broader context.

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Note

1. This observation is from field work by one of the authors in Meta, Colombia, in February 2023.

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