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**Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation:**

Tilzey, M 2024, 'Food democracy as radical political agroecology: securing autonomy (alterity) by subverting the state-capital nexus', *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, vol. 8, 1044999.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2024.1044999>

DOI 10.3389/fsufs.2024.1044999

ISSN 2571-581X

Publisher: Frontiers Media

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RECEIVED 15 September 2022

ACCEPTED 19 March 2024

PUBLISHED 04 April 2024

## CITATION

Tilzey M (2024) Food democracy as radical political agroecology: securing autonomy (alterity) by subverting the state-capital nexus. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 8:1044999. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2024.1044999

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# Food democracy as radical political agroecology: securing autonomy (alterity) by subverting the state-capital nexus

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Food democracy and political agroecology, as closely allied social movements, have become associated in the main with what may be termed 'agrarian populist' and postcolonial problematics. While certainly 'radical' in relation to hegemonic neoliberal, or sub-hegemonic 'national developmentalist', framings of contemporary agricultural and ecological crises and their mitigatory responses to them, populist food democracy and political agroecology, it is argued here, fail convincingly to identify causality underlying the 'political' causes of these capitalogenic contradictions. While more convincing in identifying such causality in the 'ecological' domain in terms of the need to 'localize' and 're-territorialize' food production and consumption networks, in its 'political' aspect populist food democracy and political agroecology demonstrate a failure to specify key ontological drivers of capitalogenic contradiction in terms of state, capital, class, and, more generally, power relations in their historical particularity. These shortcomings of 'populist' food democracy and agroecology in their 'political' aspect are exemplified by reference to key academic texts arising from the movement. The paper then proceeds to identify how these populist assumptions differ from a Marxian derived understanding of contradiction and the resulting proposal for a 'radical' political agroecology as substantive food democracy.

## KEYWORDS

food democracy, political agroecology, food sovereignty, autonomy, state-capital nexus

## Introduction

Food democracy, and its close ally political agroecology (and, indeed, the latter's close relation, food sovereignty), have, as social movements, become associated predominantly with what has been termed an 'agrarian populist' problematic (Bernstein, 2014). Such agrarian populism, or 'peasant essentialism', thus invokes political agroecology as the social means to secure sustainable food production and the democratic oversight of the wider alimentary system as food democracy (see de Molina et al., 2020). We describe these prevalent definitions or framings of food democracy (see Hassanein, 2008; Vivero-Pol et al., 2019), political agroecology (see Toledo and Barrera-Brasols, 2017; Pimbert, 2018; de Molina et al., 2020), and food sovereignty (see McMichael, 2013; Desmarais et al., 2017) as 'agrarian populist' because, we assert, they lack key analytical elements that help us both to understand the dynamics of capitalism and the state-capital nexus (together, the principal motor of ecological and political unsustainability globally), and, through such understanding, to subvert this dynamo of

planetary despoliation, at least so far as the agri-food dimension is concerned. While we will detail the analytical shortcomings of these prevalent definitions and framings in the course of this paper, it may be helpful to summarize their most salient deficiencies at the outset, albeit at risk of parody: thus, for ‘food democracy’, these shortcomings involve a focus on ‘political’ or formal democracy at the expense of constraining the economic powers of capital and their operation through market dependence – in other words, a lack of attention to ‘economic’ unfreedom and substantive democracy (Tilzey, 2019c); for ‘political agroecology’ they entail principally a focus on ‘localism’ and ‘re-territorialization’ at the expense of addressing capitalist social property relations upheld by the state-capital nexus; for ‘food sovereignty’ they involve a focus on the ‘progressive’ preoccupations of ‘democratizing’ and ‘greening’ food production and consumption networks to the neglect of ‘radical’ concerns to de-commoditize access to food and land by subverting capitalist market dependence (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; Tilzey, 2018a).

In order to confront capitalism and the state-capital nexus, and thereby to secure sustainability as ‘real autonomy’ (‘true alterity’), we will propose in this paper Marxian-derived definitions and framings of these terms in preference to their currently populist orientation. At risk of anticipating our argument, we will define what we propose to term ‘substantive’ food democracy as the institutionalization of deliberative/participative democracy in relation both to political process and to economic access to the means of production, thereby abrogating the operation of the ‘self-regulating market’ as capitalist market dependency and the dichotomy between the ‘political’ and the ‘economic’ in capitalist society; what we term ‘radical’ food sovereignty is the application of substantive food democracy to the production, distribution, and consumption of food (and associated land use) within states and territories, based on principles of social equity and ecological sustainability involving, perhaps most importantly, equality of access to the means of production for the de-commodified provision of use values; and ‘radical’ political agroecology is the political means to secure the above through agroecological principles.

We will start this paper with a brief clarification of what agroecology entails, and then proceed to delineate the linkages between the political advocacy of this ecologically-based mode of farming (political agroecology) and food democracy. Agroecology is the proposition that agroecosystems should aspire to replicate the biodiversity and functioning of natural ecosystems. In mimicking these natural models, agroecology, it is maintained, can not only be productive, but also pest-resistant, nutrient-conserving, and resilient to shocks and stresses. Emulating natural ecosystems, agroecology aspires to eliminate ‘waste’, such that all nutrients deriving from the soil are returned to the soil, thereby avoiding the phenomenon of the ‘metabolic rift’ (Marx, 1972) characteristic of industrialism and capitalism. The key elements of agroecology are the use of locally adapted and genetically diverse crops, trees, and livestock, the deployment of biodiversity to control pests and diseases, the recycling of nutrients within the local agroecosystem, and the proscription on the use of agrochemicals and fossil fuels (Altieri, 1995; Gliessman, 1998). Because of this refusal to rely upon agrochemicals and fossil fuels, agroecology is necessarily labour-intensive (and knowledge-intensive), and therefore requires large numbers of people on the land producing food, in stark contrast to the de-populated countryside of capital-intensive and fossil-fuel based agricultural

productivism. By the same token, the agrochemical-and fossil-fuel-based production of food by a few highly mechanized farms for a huge population of non-food producers, characteristic of industrial productivism, is a structural anathema to agroecology.

Agroecology thus represents not only a convincing and integrated ‘ecological’ and food production response, but also a profound challenge, to the ills of capitalist agrochemical productivism that underlie many of the principal biophysical and social contradictions of the Anthropocene (or, perhaps more accurately, capitalocene).<sup>1</sup> These we may enumerate as climate change, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, reliance on non-renewable resources, loss of cultural and traditional knowledge, erosion of indigenous/peasant knowledge and livelihoods, etc. As agroecology has moved toward the centre stage of international and national policy debate, however, the meanings and practices of agroecology have become increasingly contested by different interest groups. Here, even the ‘ecological’ tenets of agroecology have been subject to subtle, and less than subtle, appropriations and distortions by hegemonic (neoliberal) and sub-hegemonic (national developmentalist, and neo-mercantilist) interests (see Tilzey, 2020b; Wach, 2021). Agroecology has, of course, also a ‘political’ dimension, not only in terms of its analysis of politico-economic causality underlying Anthropogenic (or, more particularly, capitalogenic) contradictions (and, more specifically, how these are impacting food systems), but also its normative proposals, or imaginary, of how society might need to be organized to realize the agroecological bases of sustainable food production. Here the differences between agroecology (as above defined rather than in its latter day appropriations) and the neoliberal (*hegemonic*) and national developmentalist (*sub-hegemonic*) capitalist policies are pretty clearly drawn – both of the latter are premised on productivism, the first (ostensibly) ‘market productivism’, the second, ‘political productivism’ (Tilzey, 2000) [although it might be noted that the concept of ‘food sovereignty’, which is often taken to be synonymous with agroecology, has often been used by national developmentalist and market protectionist strategies as a counterpoint to neoliberal imperialism (see Tilzey, 2020b)].

What is less commonly appreciated are the differences *within* agroecology (as above defined) in its ‘political’ dimension between what may be termed an ‘agrarian populist’ position [which we might otherwise term ‘alter-hegemonic’ or ‘progressive’, and which has tended to appropriate the terms ‘food democracy’ (see Tilzey, 2019c) and ‘political agroecology’], on the one hand, and a ‘radical’ (implicitly or explicitly Marxian), or ‘counter-hegemonic’ position on the other (these mirror, unsurprisingly, similar differences within food sovereignty discourse) (Tilzey, 2018a).

1 The Anthropocene is a descriptive term denoting the period during which human activity has become the dominant influence on planetary climate and the environment (see Lewis and Maslin, 2015). It makes no attempt to identify specific causality underlying these human-induced impacts, however. The capitalocene, by contrast, (we use lower case since this term has not been adopted officially as a proper noun) does seek to identify specific causality underlying these impacts, that is, the rise of capitalism (see Moore, 2016). Ironically, perhaps, Moore misidentifies the nature of capitalism, conflating it with mercantile capital, or commercial exchange, a phenomenon with a far longer history than capitalism proper (see Tilzey, 2018a; Tilzey et al., 2023).

Thus, prominent usage of the term political agroecology to date, self-avowedly or otherwise, appears to conform to an agrarian populist approach (see for prominent examples Toledo and Barrera-Brasols, 2017; de Molina et al., 2020; Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2021). A possible exception here is that of Bottazzi and Boillat (2021) who deploy a more nuanced and differentiated categorization of the peasantry and subaltern classes than is common in the ‘peasant’ essentialization characteristic of agrarian populism, where ‘peasant’ is taken to refer to an undifferentiated corpus of small, family farms. Given this general equation of political agroecology with agrarian populism, the present paper is the first to articulate political agroecology in detail from a Marxian perspective and to employ this as a basis for identifying the shortcomings of the term when employed by agrarian populists.

We may take a recent paper, namely *The Global Status of Agroecology: A Perspective on Current Practices, Potential and Challenges* (Pimbert, 2018), as an exemplar of agrarian populist political agroecology and food democracy (and indeed food sovereignty). Some of the key principles of agrarian populist agroecology in its political dimension (as food democracy) are delineated here:

- (i) Farmers distancing themselves from markets supplying inputs (hybrid seeds, genetically modified organisms, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.), reduced dependence on commodity markets for inputs enhances farmers’ autonomy and control over the means of production;
- (ii) Farmers diversifying outputs and market outlets, a greater reliance on alternative food networks that reduce the distance between producers and consumers while ensuring that more wealth and jobs are created and retained within local economies, for example, short food chains and local procurement schemes that link organic producers with schools and hospitals;
- (iii) Active citizenship and participation in decision-making are rights that are claimed mainly through the agency and actions of people themselves; they are not granted by the state or the market;
- (iv) Empowering farmers as well as other citizens in the governance of food systems and the wider ecosystems they are embedded in (grasslands, forests, wetlands, etc) requires social innovations that: (a) create inclusive and safe spaces for deliberation and action; (b) build local organizations, horizontal networks and federations to enhance peoples’ capacity for voice and agency; (c) strengthen civil society and gender equity; (d) expand information democracy and citizen-controlled media (community radio and video film-making); (e) promote self-management structures at the workplace and democracy in households; (f) learn from the history of direct democracy; and (g) nurture active citizenship;
- (v) Diverse agroecologies and re-territorialized food systems in which economics is re-embedded in society (Polanyi, 1957), all require inclusive participation and collective action to coordinate local adaptive management and governance, across a wide range of food systems and associated landscapes (forests, wetlands, grasslands, etc);
- (vi) Strengthening citizen-centered food systems and autonomy calls for forms of political and social organization that can

institutionalize interdependence, without resorting to the global market or the central state.

In the present paper, we suggest that there are a number of theoretical ‘absences’ and shortcomings underlying the above principles. We propose to examine these asserted political/ontological absences and shortcomings by means of critique through development and deployment of an ecological and political Marxian frame to articulate a ‘radical’ (or counter-hegemonic) positionality with respect to political agroecology and autonomy (alterity), which, we maintain, comprises the key basis for *substantive* food democracy (see Tilzey, 2018a, 2019c for fuller delineation of this position). While we may concur normatively (and enthusiastically) with most of the above principles, especially in relation to local and deliberative/participative democracy, and above all in the need for the adoption of agroecology both ecologically and politically, the ontology of society and the model of social dynamics that they embody are, nonetheless, asserted to be in certain important respects deficient and politically naïve. We demonstrate the shortcomings of agrarian populist and related postcolonial framings of political agroecology, food sovereignty, and autonomy in terms of both analytics and political praxis by, first, defining an alternative and Marxian-derived ontology of agrarian class dynamics, and, second, drawing out the implications of this ontology for the notion of autonomy (alterity). We also point out the dangers of peasant agrarian populism and indigenous (postcolonial) ‘culturalism’<sup>2</sup> in both fragmenting and obfuscating the forms of autonomy required to subvert the state-capital nexus and build ecologically sustainable and socially equitable livelihoods through ‘radical’ political agroecology.

It is important to note here that while this paper draws on illustrative examples principally from the global South, its theoretical arguments are of profound relevance to debates around agrarian autonomy and alterity in both South and North. This is so because geographical context in this paper is not merely a contingent backdrop, but rather of deep structuring importance to agrarian dynamics and associated discourses. This is the case because, as we will seek to demonstrate in this paper, the features that lend the South and the North their distinctive characters (peasant persistence and ‘disarticulated’ capitalism in the former, peasant disappearance and ‘articulated’ capitalism in the latter<sup>3</sup>) are not contingently but rather dialectically related, arising from historical and contemporary relations of imperialism and colonialism between the latter and the former (see also Tilzey, 2020a; Tilzey et al., 2023; Tilzey and Sugden, 2023). These relations profoundly shape the differing configurations of agrarian politico-economic interest groups and their discourses in

2 That is, the essentialization of culture and cultural ‘difference’ such that questions of power, class, status differentiation, exploitation and, above all, historical and social dynamics are excluded from anthropological analysis. See Eric R Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History* as an example of Marxian-based and historically-informed anthropological theory.

3 Where we define ‘peasant’ not as a generic small family farmer, whether market dependent or not, as do the agrarian populists, but rather as conforming to Eric Wolf’s characterization of ‘peasant’ in his *Peasant Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Wolf, 1999) as an essentially non-market dependent producer of use values for family and community, equating to the ‘middle peasant’ (see below).

each pole of the global capitalist system. Overall, our purpose in this paper is to bring into greater dialogue theoretical positions – agrarian populism and Marxian political economy/ecology – which have become unhelpfully polarized and which have tended increasingly to ‘talk past’ one another.

## The ontological shortcomings of agrarian populist political agroecology as food democracy

The first two principles delineated in the work of Pimbert (2018) above build on the work of agrarian populists such as van der Ploeg (2008). Agrarian populism, we may recall, regards ‘family farms’, otherwise erroneously equated with the ‘peasantry’ *tout court*, to comprise an essentially undifferentiated class, which reproduces itself despite capitalism, and represents a distinct and enduring mode of production that both resists, and is autonomous from, capitalism (Brass, 2000; Kay, 2006). It considers capitalism, and more especially neoliberalism<sup>4</sup>, to represent a monolithic phenomenon which, while remaining external to the internal dynamics of family farms/the ‘peasantry’, nonetheless acts to constrain and compromise their putative autonomy (Bernstein and Byres, 2001; Jansen, 2015; Tilzey, 2017; Habibi, 2023). Family farms/the ‘peasantry’ are regarded as lacking in class fractional economic, ideological, and political differentiation, as coherently opposed to capitalism (and, more especially, to neoliberalism) (Bernstein, 2014; Habibi, 2023), and, therefore, as representing consistent agents of counter-hegemony. While self-avowedly populist political agroecologists such as de Molina et al. (2020) do recognize class fractional differentiation among the peasantry and family farms, this is considered to be of lesser significance than the ideological and political factors that supposedly unify these class fractions. Because agrarian populism fails, however, to theorize the essence of *capitalism* (as opposed to neoliberalism), which, for populists, is a problem principally of scale and not of social production relations, the result is that ‘peasant’ or ‘family farm’ alterity involves, not the abrogation of capitalist social property relations, but rather the localization and re-territorialization of production and consumption networks. Alterity is thus seen to comprise market relations that are ‘embedded’ in local ecology and society, rather in the manner of Polanyi (1957). In a similar way, populism fails to understand the *internal* and class relation between capitalism and the state (or the ‘state-capital nexus’), conceiving them, respectively, as a reified private/market domain counter-posed to an essentialized public domain (see Tilzey, 2018b, 2019b for discussion).

Thus, principles one and two above assume that reducing dependency on upstream inputs and greater reliance on ecological

processes and local markets generates autonomy from capitalist markets. While the family farms attempting to reduce such upstream dependency may not be strictly capitalist (that is, not employing off-farm labour) and may thus be described as petty commodity producers, their central reliance on the sale of petty commodities into markets, even where local and ecologized, renders them subject to capitalist market dependency (Wood, 2002). This not only fails to differentiate reliance on petty commodity production for livelihood from peasant production of use values for self-subsistence, it also fails to appreciate that such market dependency is actually a form of entrepreneurialism. The author (Pimbert), like van der Ploeg (2008), thus appears to equate peasant production *tout court* with petty commodity production. In this way, there is a conflation of two separate categories: on the one hand, a structural reliance on petty commodity production arising from capitalist market dependency in order to secure family reproduction by means of commodity sales (at least on the ‘downstream’ side) and frequently with a view to capital accumulation; and, on the other, peasant family/community use value production to secure simple reproduction needs in episodic combination with the opportunistic, not compulsive, sale of surplus on the market. Capitalist *market dependency*, in other words the market acting as a compulsive force rather than as a non-essential opportunity (Wood, 2002), thus marks the key difference between peasant production of use values, a characteristic principally of the ‘middle’ and ‘lower’ peasantry, and market reliant petty commodity production, a structural feature of the ‘upper’ peasantry and family farms.<sup>5</sup> These market dependent petty commodity producers may be defined as small entrepreneurs since their production is intended to yield a market surplus both to reproduce the economic unit of the family and to accumulate capital.

There is a marked similarity here with the ‘entrepreneurial’ category of van der Ploeg (2008), who likewise gives insufficient weight to the importance of differentiating capitalist market dependency (the imperative to realize exchange value) from use value production for simple reproduction. Van der Ploeg (2008: 1) maintains that, as an apparent generality, peasant ‘production is oriented toward the market as well as toward the reproduction of the farm unit and the family’ (in other words, *all* ‘peasants’ are fully oriented toward the market). This basically fails to appreciate, however, the desire of (lower and middle) peasants for predominantly non-commodified production of food staples as an ideal, and therefore fails again to discern the difference between market ‘as opportunity’ and market ‘as compulsion’. Also, the differentiation between ‘orientation toward the market as well as toward the reproduction of the family unit’ is

4 Neoliberalism is a form of capitalism wherein the state-capital nexus re-regulates tendentially in favor of private capital, and ‘corporate’ and transnational capital in particular, at the expense of publicly owned or subsidized institutions and legal frameworks that may act to inhibit surplus value generation by these private enterprises. We define the class discourse of neoliberalism as ‘hegemonic’. Neoliberalism may be contrasted with a more state-centric and market interventionist form of capitalism termed ‘national developmentalism’. This is associated with what we term a ‘sub-hegemonic’ discourse.

5 ‘Lower’ peasants have plots of land of insufficient size to support the family unit through subsistence production throughout the year – they are therefore obliged to sell their labour power off-farm, commonly to ‘upper’ peasants or to larger landowners. ‘Middle’ peasants have access to land of sufficient size to support the family without essential recourse to the market or to the sale of labour power – this represents the peasant ideal of autonomy and market independence; ‘upper’ peasants own sufficient land to be able to produce a consistent surplus for sale onto the market, such that their production tends to be increasingly oriented towards the realization of exchange value. They also frequently employ labour power from poorer peasants and may thus be described as small capitalist farmers.

non-sensical, because the latter is dependent on the former; the family unit may be reproduced on the basis of market-dependence or non-market-dependence. The key issue, however, is whether the peasant family unit can reproduce itself on the basis of non-commodified use value production, or whether it needs to sell commodities (including labour power) in order to realize exchange value so as to reproduce itself, i.e., market dependency. This differentiation is not really picked up at all by van der Ploeg. That is why there is a conflation between his categories of 'entrepreneur' and 'peasant', so that, in effect, all of van der Ploeg's peasants could actually be market-dependent upper peasants. This conflation leads van der Ploeg to describe market dependent petty commodity producers as the 'new peasantry', when this category might be more appropriately nominated 'ecologically-oriented family farm entrepreneurs'. Eric Wolf (1999), in his *Peasant Wars of the 20th Century*, supplies a rather more useful and accurate definition, clearly differentiating (non-market dependent) use value producers from (market-dependent) petty commodity producers. Here, 'peasants' may be identified with the former, and 'farmers' with the latter categories (this, of course, is *not* to suggest that non-market dependent peasants do not produce commodities to generate additional income to purchase goods that they cannot produce on the farm – this, however, is undertaken as an opportunity, not as a compulsion).

In a recent work, another author, Otero (2018), articulates a similar view to van der Ploeg (2008) and Pimbert (2018). Thus:

*there is the possibility for petty commodity producers to become peasant entrepreneurs successfully incorporated into the market. These are family farms and farmers whose activities may include export-oriented monocropping as well as mixed farming for local, regional, or even national markets. These producers are embedded in the market without being capitalist corporations... Entrepreneurial farmers may be best suited to engaging in a food sovereignty programme as such agriculture can also be ecologically sustainable. Their production is oriented to the market, but their logic of production is still imbued with a moral economy. In this moral economy, the market will no doubt represent an ongoing and harsh context in which only a few will win. Because entrepreneurial farmers are content with recovering costs and gaining the equivalent of self-attributed wages, however, their numbers could be much greater than only capitalist farms; they seek simple rather than expanded reproduction, as in capital accumulation. (p. 48, 49)*

The full implications of this line of argument are not really drawn out, however, and, as such, Otero's position appears somewhat naïve. The farmers in question are subordinate to the compulsive and competitive pressures of capitalist market dependency. This obliges them, whether they seek simple or expanded reproduction, to minimize costs and maximize exchange value, leading to the same strategy as van der Ploeg's 'entrepreneurial' farmers. This leads, in turn, to tendencies of farm amalgamation and consolidation. This process also entails farmer differentiation, with smaller farmers falling by the wayside and larger farmers engrossing and strengthening their 'entrepreneurial' strategy, or transforming into capitalist farmers employing labour. We can see, then, that the condition of market dependency generates a continuum between capitalist, 'entrepreneurial', and petty commodity production. Where it is based on these assumptions, it seems clear that political agroecology/food

sovereignty cannot be considered to be anti-capitalist. Rather, it may be considered to be 'progressive' or populist ('alter-hegemonic') according to Tilzey (2018a). By contrast, peasant use value production autonomous from the capitalist market, Tilzey describes as 'radical'. Like van der Ploeg and Pimbert, then, it appears that Otero fails to differentiate 'progressive' (populist or 'alter-hegemonic') from 'radical' ('counter-hegemonic') food sovereignty, an assumption reinforced when Otero states that 'the food sovereignty program strongly advocated by *La Via Campesina* is the safest policy route for developing [sic] countries to take, raising small-scale and entrepreneurial peasants to a central productive and environmental role' (p. 57). By conflating 'progressive' (populist) and 'radical' food sovereignty, the populism of Otero and others thwarts attempts to move beyond capitalist market dependency, and the compulsion to realize exchange value rather than meeting social and ecological needs. Like that of Pimbert and van der Ploeg, Otero's critique appears to be directed more against neoliberalism than capitalism *per se*.

More specifically, Otero invokes a variant of agrarian populism which may be identified as 'national-popular' (Tilzey, 2019a), or what otherwise may be termed a 'sub-hegemonic' agricultural policy stance (see Tilzey, 2006, 2017, 2020b) associated with the 'developmentalist' state.<sup>6</sup> Family farms are here viewed as the pivot of national development, fomenting a 'farmer road' to capitalism (Lenin, 1963; Byres, 1996) by means of a process de Janvry (1981) has described as 'sectorally and socially articulated development'. It was the re-invocation of this development model against the neoliberal tide in 1980s' Mexico (and elsewhere in Central America) that gave rise to the term 'national food sovereignty' (Edelman, 2014), a strategy of an interventionist and reformist state to engender synergistic domestic relations between the agricultural and industrial sectors and rising employment. This was seen to entail a virtuous spiral of increased food production, industrialization and off-farm employment, increased farm productivity, income, and mechanization, further surplus to feed a permanent off-farm workforce, and so on. Such a 'farmer road' to capitalism tends to involve, however, the *demise* of the (middle and lower) peasantry (if not of family farming), since it entails, through class fractional differentiation, the transmutation of the upper peasantry into fully-fledged commercial petty commodity producers, on the one hand, and the lower and middle peasantry into wholly proletarianized workers, on the other. Such a 'farmer road' transition has occurred to its fullest extent in the global North, and is indeed a defining characteristic of the North, with the full commercialization of farmers, and the full proletarianization of the former peasantry

<sup>6</sup> Sub-hegemonic agrarian class positionality envisages the commercialization of peasant production as productivism through state protection from overseas competition and state support for agricultural intensification. It thus focuses on the preservation of an upper peasantry against hegemonic agrarian oligarchies and transnational corporations, but this focus at the same time entails the tendential elimination of the middle and lower peasantries. Alter-hegemonic positionality is similar to sub-hegemonic in terms of peasant dynamics, but focuses on 'conventionalized' agroecological or organic production rather than productivism. Counter-hegemonic positionality envisages an abrogation of capitalist market dependency by a reversal of primitive accumulation so that there is generalized access to land for agroecological use value production.

linked strongly to imperialism and nationalism (see Tilzey, 2020a). While Otero is evidently an advocate for the peasantry, and even for an agroecologically-oriented peasantry, he appears unaware of the adverse policy implications of national developmentalism ('national food sovereignty') for the bulk of lower and middle peasants.

Otero's sub-hegemonic policy stance may be differentiated from, although overlapping in certain respects with, one more characteristic of agrarian populists such as McMichael (2013), van der Ploeg (2008), and Pimbert (2018). This, as noted, we nominate an 'alter-hegemonic' positionality (Tilzey, 2017, 2018a) in which family farms are considered emblematic of an essentialized 'peasantness' as an autonomous 'mode of production' to which the principles of localism, 'territory' and ecological sustainability are key. Alter-hegemonic discourse, as noted earlier, may be seen not so much as anti-capitalist as anti-neoliberal, constituting an important strand of food sovereignty and food democracy thought which, again, we have identified as 'progressive' (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; Tilzey, 2017) rather than 'radical'. A sub-hegemonic positionality may also be distinguished from counter-hegemony. The latter we consider to be anti-capitalist, involving transformation of social property relations through the assertion of common and democratic control over the means of production. Such control is directed to the production and distribution of use values for fundamental human need satisfaction (while taking full account of non-human nature), rather than to the generation of exchange values for private appropriation (see also Wach, 2021). Where this counter-hegemony is implicated in food sovereignty, it entails agroecological and family/communal-based production to meet fundamental food needs of all citizens as a matter of priority, and represents what may be termed 'real' autonomy, or 'true' alterity (from/in relation to capitalism), radical food sovereignty, and *substantive* food democracy (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; Tilzey, 2017, 2018a, 2019c).

The remaining principles delineated by Pimbert above, relate to issues of democratization, local/ecological embedding, and an assumed dichotomy between 'state' and 'market'. The first two of these are laudable enough as normative aspirations, but, unfortunately, they give us virtually no idea as to the nature of the politico-economic systems (social-property relations) that both structure, and act as formidable constraints on, the transformation of agrarian social-property relations toward such radical and deliberative/participative democracy. Similarly, to invoke localization and ecological 'embedding' places an emphasis above all upon geographical scale (important though this may be) to the neglect of a consideration of differential power and class relations within 'local' social-property relations which may serve to seriously subvert, and which themselves need to be subverted by, transformational movements toward a politically egalitarian agroecology/food sovereignty. Rather than being exceptions, such differential power in social-property relations is actually pervasive in both the global South and North – but these realities are elided in the 'rose-tinted' view of local and grassroots initiatives expressed above, routinely deploying unspecific and populist terms such as the 'people' and 'citizens'. This then informs the assumed dichotomy between 'state' and 'market' in this populist ontology, with 'civil society' occupying those spaces unoccupied by the former. In reality, state and market are intimately interwoven in capitalist social formations (states) as the 'state-capital nexus' (see Tilzey, 2018a, 2019b), their *appearance* of separation being a reification of liberal and neoliberal episodes in capitalism, whereby the state 'retreats' from more 'positive coordination' of the economy in order to 're-regulate' in relative favor of private capital (Tilzey and Potter, 2007).

The commensurate retreat of the capitalist state under neoliberalism from welfare and social functions at local level (Jessop, 2002 terms this 'de-stationing') simultaneously leads to the 'occupation' of the resulting 'vacuum' by NGOs, volunteer organizations, self-help groups, etc., – in short, what is now commonly referred to as 'civil society'. The appearance of 'autonomy' of such groups is largely illusory, therefore, since they are at base functional to neoliberalism by stabilizing those parts of society vacated by the state and of little interest to capital. Should such 'autonomy' and associated groups prove too 'radical' and start to question or challenge the circumscribing parameters of existing social-property relations, the state-capital nexus then typically steps in to find ways and means to re-stabilize the status quo in favour of capitalist social-property relations (This has happened widely in Latin America, for example, where a focus on 'ethno-development' initiatives and cultural recognition of indigenous peoples, within the context of so-called 'neoliberal multiculturalism', has attempted to deflect more radical demands for transformational change to social-property relations by the indigenous peasantry [see, for example, Bretón, 2008]).

Salient among the shortcomings of the above 'populist' ontology informing 'food democracy' is, then, the assertion that discursive, deliberative democracy can of itself foment a transition toward a more ecologically and socially sustainable mode of production, embodied in agroecology, with the 'food citizen' here acting as the main political protagonist of 'food democracy' (Hassanein, 2008; see Holt-Gimenez and van Lammeren, 2019, and Tilzey, 2019c for critique). Symptomatic of this focus on discursive to the neglect of material power, it is the strength of democratic argument of itself, divorced from issues of ownership of, and access to, the basis of livelihood (that is, to the 'means of production'), that is asserted to be the way to ensure transition to 'food democracy'. By divorcing discursive democratic praxis from the transformation of wider social-property relations, 'populist' agroecology leaves much of capital's power, and more broadly that of the state-capital nexus, intact. We should recall again that capitalism and market dependency are predicated on the separation of the mass of citizenry from the means of production, most importantly from land; unless this basic social property relation of capitalism – the private appropriation of land – is addressed and redressed, the democratic praxis of 'food democracy' will be of little avail. In the same way, the promotion of ('subjective') citizen 'positionality' to the detriment of ('objective') class 'position' obscures deep-seated power imbalances, resulting in their perpetuation. This refers especially to the deep power imbalances between the global North and global South [in reality a relation of imperium to periphery (see Tilzey, 2020a)], which proposed unity of 'citizen interest' between the two functions acts only to disguise and, therefore, to reproduce.

Populist discourse as food democracy continues to be trapped, therefore, in the problematic of 'right to benefit', consequently effacing the material bases of 'ability to benefit' (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Stated otherwise, the capacity to derive wellbeing and livelihood from institutions and resources is moulded strongly by class (here subsuming relations of exploitation that are manifested in racial, ethnic, gender, etc. discrimination), together with contextual social-property relations upheld by the state-capital nexus. Thus, subverting the neoliberal food regime requires the dismantling of essential, material, or *structural* (politico-economic), and not simply discursive, underpinnings of capitalist social-property relations. Stated differently, building an anti-capitalist food regime, or *substantive food democracy as radical agroecology*, will rely upon 'class struggle' to challenge both the

discursive *and* material predicates of capitalism, the latter entailing the re-unification of the mass of citizens with land as the basis for ecologically sustainable and socially equitable production of use values (Tilzey, 2019b,c).

Thus, even at the 'anti-market', communitarian end of this 'alter-hegemonic' spectrum, such as entirely laudable initiatives in, for example, 'proto-regenerative' farming based in cooperative and non-market-dependent agroecological production, there is a tendency to over-emphasize the actual and potential impacts of such alterity on the status quo, as a result of a failure to understand the *material* (as well as the discursive/ideational) foundations of prevailing social-property relations and the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen, 2018). The post-Marxian frame deployed to analyze such 'alternative food network' initiatives typically assumes, erroneously, that capitalism is merely an ideational (discursive) system, and that, consequently, a mere shift in ideology can secure the necessary transition to agroecologically-based sustainability (see, for example, Leitheiser et al., 2022).<sup>7</sup> Thus, 'local action' by, and 'local autonomy' for, 'communities' through 'territorialization' are seen to be key desiderata for sustainability, effectively ignoring the material constraints of social-property relations defined by the state-capital nexus that define the possibilities for such action. 'Progressive' ideas that motivate alternative initiatives in agri-food are reconfigured in ways that fail to challenge the state-capital nexus and remain, wittingly or unwittingly, conformable to market dependency. Thus, 'alternative' forms of agri-food production and consumption such as fair trade, organic, geographical identification, re-territorialization, etc. conform to the assumptions of market capitalism (albeit of a more 'embedded' variety) while masquerading as alterity. Even where overtly critical of capitalist market dependency, the post-Marxian frame of alternative food network (AFN) discourse effectively hobbles deep critique of capitalist social-property relations and, thereby, thwarts deeply transformative praxis. Such praxis then becomes part of protest (negativity) that is artificial, since it has lost the capacity to critique both the hegemonic material *and* discursive structures of capitalism [this is termed 'artificial negativity' by Bonanno and Wolf (2018)].

Two recent interventions in the AFN literature attempt to address some of these deficiencies. Misleh (2022) engages with the structuring constraints of the neoliberal food regime while recognizing the dialectic of varying forms of opposition as a Polanyian 'double movement'. While thereby recognizing the 'compromise' as the outcome of contestation that food regimes represent, and therefore the inherent 'incoherence' of these entities (see Tilzey, 2018b), the Polanyian approach adopted by her nonetheless loses focus on what the class content and interests of these constituent contestants might comprise, for example, as hegemonic, sub-hegemonic, alter-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic concerns as we define them in this paper. While the resulting hybridities as the outcome of interest group contestation have an undoubted empirical reality as food regimes or national food systems, the Polanyian double-movement problematic fails to

pinpoint what real autonomy or true alterity in relation to capitalism and the state-capital nexus might entail (see Tilzey, 2017, 2018b). Empirical reality should not be conflated with normative critique.

More promising in this regard is the intervention by Rosol (2020). She points both to the nature of true alterity as requiring profound changes in economic practices as alternative economies (in effect, a change in social productive relations/social property relations in Marxian terminology), and to the severe constraints upon the realization of such alterity, as cooperative non-capitalism, within the global Northern context she examines – especially access to land that is largely monopolized by capitalist agricultural enterprises. Unusually for the AFN literature, Rosol's approach may be described as one approximating to counter-hegemony on our definition, although one that could perhaps be strengthened by a greater focus on class relations and a contextualization of the global North (characteristically the home of AFN discourse) in relation to the global South by reference to the imperial mode of living (see below).

The elaboration of political agroecology by de Molina et al. (2020) constitutes an important intervention in this debate *on alterity*, and it is vital to note strong overlaps in normative position between this paper and that articulated by these authors, especially in the foregrounding of autonomy from capitalist market dependence a key desideratum of political agroecology. These authors thus appear to lie at the radical end of the alter-hegemonic spectrum. However, while concurring with the normative political agroecology that de Molina et al. envisage, we discern a number of shortcomings in the ontology of social relations delineated by the authors, deriving from their self-avowedly agrarian populist stance, that have the unfortunate effect of rather compromising the possibility of attaining their proposed societal and ecological ideal. These deficiencies we may identify as:

- In typical agrarian populist fashion and following McMichael (2013), a strong and simple binary between trans-nationalized and essentially stateless capital, embodied in the so-called 'corporate food regime', on the one hand, and a 'multitude' of potentially counter-hegemonic citizens on the other. There is thus no conceptualization of differentiated capitalist interests (for example, contestation between nationally-oriented capital and transnational capital) or of differentiated farmer/peasant interests, such as we have delineated in this paper, between hegemonic, sub-hegemonic, alter-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic class fractional positionalities. Thus, for de Molina et al. all family farmers are really at heart peasants just waiting to break out of capitalist market dependency to which they have been subordinated 'against their will';
- In line with the above binary and the assumed plenipotential character of capital, no real understanding of the state, in its relation to capital, as the *causal* motor of food regimes and their dynamics. We maintain, however, that the state and capital are not mutually exclusive entities but are rather conjoined as the 'state-capital nexus'. De Molina et al. (2020) portray the 'corporate food regime' as all-powerful and as something that imposes itself on states. However, in reality it is the state-capital nexus, and, in particular, the *imperial* state-capital nexus, that generates food regimes, and which controls their dynamics, not the other way around. It is therefore the state (the state-capital nexus) which needs to be the object of anti-capitalist movements, not the vague abstraction of a 'global' and stateless food regime;

<sup>7</sup> In fairness to Leitheiser et al., Leitheiser's subsequent work with Vezzoni (Leitheiser and Vezzoni, forthcoming) recognizes that transformative social praxis needs to operate both on the political ideational and economic levels to effectively reorganize social relations.



- Perhaps surprisingly, no understanding of the relationship between agricultural intensification, the tendential disappearance of the peasantry, and the development of urban-industrial modernism. These elements are intrinsically linked, however. The intensification and capitalization of agriculture are necessary counterparts of high entropy urban-industrial capitalism and modernism more widely. This whole edifice (not merely the food system) needs to be confronted through a programme of equitable de-growth if agroecology and sustainability are to be secured;
- Because the putatively stateless corporate food regime, rather than the state-capital nexus, is seen to be the prime mover of unsustainability, consequently no understanding of the differential power of the state within the global capitalist system manifested as imperial-peripheral relations. It needs to be emphasized that the peasantry has a differential location in the periphery because of the existence of these imperial-peripheral relations (see Tilzey, 2020a). Again, de Molina et al. assume that the state is simply subordinate to the 'corporate food regime' and that all states and citizens are equally 'victims' of it whether in the global North (imperium) or global South (periphery). This, we suggest, is profoundly to misidentify causality.

We are now in a position to summarize the above political/ontological shortcomings of agrarian populist or alter-hegemonic food democracy and political agroecology:

Firstly, the 'political' region is reified, leading to a focus on discursive elements at the expense of the material, or structural, social-property relations underpinning capitalism. That is, 'populist' food democracy highlights the 'democratic deficit' while ignoring 'relations of production and exploitation';

Secondly, a theory of the state is lacking, or is very truncated. The state is conceived in an essentialist manner, commonly as a 'public' entity counter-posed to the 'private' market, rather than as a 'social relation condensing the balance of class interests in society' (Poulantzas, 1978; Jessop, 2016). An exemplar of this approach is the volume entitled *Public Policies for Food Sovereignty: Social Movements and the State* (Desmarais et al., 2017). Alternatively, the state may be seen as intrinsically autocratic and oppressive as per the anarchist tradition (for example, Scott, 2009) which, while of course frequently true, fails again to understand the state as a class relational entity [embodied in the notion of the state-capital nexus (Tilzey, 2019b)]. These autocratic and oppressive characteristics are seen to be the result of scalar aggrandizement, such that a 'return to scale', that is, 'localization' and 're-territorialization', is construed to be intrinsically beneficial. While this may well be true 'ecologically', 'politically' this is less convincing since power differentials and exploitation frequently exist at the 'local' level;

Thirdly, and closely related to the foregoing, there tends to be a denial of the significance, or even existence, of 'class' and 'class struggle', the assumption being that 'civil society' and 'democracy' have somehow transcended 'class', and that issues of gender, ethnicity, and race are now more 'important' than class, as if they can somehow be conceptually divorced from the latter as a power relation;

Fourthly, and related again to the above, there is a binary conceptualization of contestation between the so-called 'multitude' of civil society and the 'corporate food regime' (McMichael, 2013). Here, the 'state' is enjoined to 'regulate' corporate capital and 'protect'

'citizens' in the manner of a Polanyian 'double movement'. This is symptomatic of a portrayal of class-divided society as a unified citizenry, a deficient conceptualization of the state-capital nexus (see above), and a simplified theory of capital's nature as putatively unified, corporate, and thoroughly transnational;

Fifthly, an appreciation of the division of the capitalist world system into an imperium (the global North) and a periphery (the global South) is essentially lacking. Under the system of the 'new (neoliberal) imperialism' (Biel, 2000; Smith, 2016), however, the imperium sustains consumer, welfare, and liberal democratic benefits at cost to the periphery, whence the majority of primary commodities and surplus value is now extracted by 'unequal exchange' (Carchedi and Roberts, 2021). The imperial state-capital nexus is also the author of food regimes. It is a common assumption of proponents of populist agroecology, by contrast, that the 'multitude' as a whole, whether in the global North or South, suffers equally from the depredations of the 'corporate' food capital, and that the responses of each will, or should be, of a similar kind;

Sixthly, there is a tendency to inflate the significance of the challenge that local and 'autonomous' agroecological initiatives may pose to neoliberalism/capitalism. Frequently, however, such initiatives have an existence that is marginal to capitalism. Indeed, these initiatives may often be accommodated to processes of neoliberal 'de-statization', in which selected state responsibilities are devolved and divested by the state-capital nexus to community-based schemes, but commonly without requisite levels of funding and political control. This is related to the quest for indigenous autonomy, encapsulated in the notion of 'neoliberal multiculturalism'. In asserting political authority in selective areas of state territory and/or over particular state decentralization initiatives, indigenous movements have placed faith in their capacity to moderate the impacts of capitalism, and, more specifically, state support for extractivism (especially in the global South), while failing to give due consideration to the ways in which this might compromise their potential role as agents for a radical transformation of social property relations. Indigenous groups have striven for ethnic autonomy, both discursively and materially, by means of asserting claims to discrete spaces 'apart' from the state and associated with calls for 'autonomous' governance of territory – the 'defence of territory' problematic. This comprises the quest for 'autonomy' 'outside' capitalism and the state, not by confronting capitalism/the state. This differs from other subaltern actors (mainly semi-proletarian peasants lacking access to 'autonomous' spaces) directly impoverished by the neoliberal state-capital nexus, and this interest difference weakens coalition building between indigenous and non-indigenous subalterns. Thus, struggles for peasant 'autonomy' (that is, adequate access to land) have not necessarily attracted strong solidarity from indigenous movements, and vice versa (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2019; Bretón et al., 2022).

## Constructing a Marxian conceptualization of substantive food democracy as radical political agroecology and understanding its social relational basis

By contrast to the agrarian populist, or alter-hegemonic, conceptualizations of agroecology and food sovereignty, substantive

food democracy as radical (counter-hegemonic) political agroecology (or radical food sovereignty) invokes, in practice or by implication, a Marxian, or social relational, understanding of capitalism and agrarian transitions (Tilzey, 2018a, 2020b). Capitalism, according to this understanding, arises from labour power commodification as a result of expropriation of peasants from their means of production – or what Marx termed ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx, 1972). This process of expropriation subordinates the ‘classes of labour’ to the condition of capitalist market dependency (Kautsky, 1988; Wood, 2002; Bernstein, 2009) as the only means of survival. Radical political agroecology/food sovereignty envisages an abrogation of this condition, or the prohibition of its realization (in the case of ‘kin-ordered’ indigenous groups), as a prerequisite for social and ecological sustainability through supersession of capitalist social-property relations, and of the state-capital nexus as the bulwark underpinning these relations. To understand the causal basis of radical political agroecology/food sovereignty and to take a strategic relational perspective (Jessop, 2016) on the opportunities and constraints surrounding its potential realization requires, we suggest, an improved theorization of capital-state dynamics as nationalism, imperialism, and now sub-imperialism. This confers a better understanding of character and importance of market dependency and primitive accumulation as the basis for their own subversion through counter-hegemonic agency (Tilzey, 2019a,b, 2020b).

In developing this Marxian conceptualization of capitalism and agrarian class dynamics, we articulate theory which integrates so-called ‘Political Marxism’ (Brenner, 1977, 1985; Wood, 1995, 2009; Mooers, 2014), neo-Gramscian International Political Economy (Cox, 1987; Bieler and Morton, 2004), Regulation Theory (Boyer and Saillard, 2002; Sum and Jessop, 2013), Poulantzian state theory (Poulantzas, 1978), and the work of Wolf, especially as embodied in his *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). This conceptualization also draws on the important work of Marini (1972, 1974, 2022) on dependency, imperialism and sub-imperialism, in which he sees the peripheral super-exploitation of labour and nature undertaken by export-oriented capitalism as being necessary to sustain the industrial capitalism and high consumption of the imperium and sub-imperium.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, ‘class struggle’, capital, and the state remain central and dialectically related categories. These ‘political’ dynamics of ‘structured agency’ (Potter and Tilzey, 2005) are conjoined to the ‘ecological’ dynamics of biophysical ‘sources’ and ‘sinks’ (and related and discounted ‘costs’ and loss of livelihood which are located differentially in the global South) through political ecology (Tilzey, 2018a). These analytical tools enable key parameters of the agrarian question, the peasantry, and food security/food sovereignty within capitalism to be defined as approximately state-level arenas of contestation within the global centre-periphery structure. Here the state, despite differential power and capacity between core (imperium) and periphery and the global disciplining force of imperial capitalism, is considered to remain the key medium for the regulation and

institutionalization of social-property relations and, hence, for understanding the possibility for any social relational change toward substantive food democracy and radical political agroecology (Tilzey, 2017, 2018a).

Poulantzas (1978) and Wolf (1982) are especially helpful in this conceptualization, since they consider the state itself to be a social relation, comprising the condensation of class forces and interests in the social formation. Here, the state affords the institutional space in which the various fractions of the capitalist class, in addition possibly to other classes, conciliate or compromise to form longer-term strategies and alliances, while simultaneously disorganizing non-capitalist classes through various means of co-optation and division. Here, to recapitulate our earlier points, we may define the principal class groupings as *hegemonic* (neoliberal, export-oriented), *sub-hegemonic* (nationally-oriented capital and national food producers), *alter-hegemonic* (‘green economy’ producers), and *counter-hegemonic* (anti-capitalist groups demanding equality of access to the means of production, and production to meet social [and ecological] use values, rather than exchange values).

In the previous section, we deployed this body of theory to critique agrarian populism (principally, alter-hegemony) as a putative resolution to the ‘political’ and ‘ecological’ contradictions of capitalism in its alimentary dimension. It is important to note here that this body of Marxian theory, while having certain analytical similarities to the influential work of Bernstein (2010, 2014), in actuality differs from his oeuvre in three important respects:

First, conceptually and normatively, the advocacy of radical political agroecology in this paper (and arising from a particular understanding of political ecology developed in Tilzey, 2018a) as a response to the existential crisis of climate change, ecosystem collapse, and endemic food/nutritional insecurity and precarity, is quite ‘un-Bernsteinian’. Bernstein still cleaves at base to a productivist ‘progressivism’ to the extent that development of the forces of production and industry is seen to be a necessary prerequisite for poverty alleviation and a transition to socialism. This is quite an ‘orthodox Marxist’ position and ultimately differs little from the sub-hegemonic ‘national developmentalism’ described earlier. Here, the peasantry, analytically and normatively, is seen to be an unnecessary anachronism, an irrelevance surviving by default, and awaiting transformation into an agrarian or industrial proletariat. By contrast, the present paper advocates an ‘alternative-developmental’ (as opposed to ‘post-developmental’, see, for example, Vergara-Camus, 2014) position founded in eco-socialism, in which the peasantry and indigenous people are *pivotal* to socially equitable and ecologically sustainable ‘alternative’ development;

Second, Bernstein tends to adopt quite a narrow ‘social relations of production’ approach which fails insufficiently to theorize the relation between class position (‘class-in-itself’) and class positionality (‘class-for-itself’), a vital consideration in attempting to delineate ‘political’ responses to ‘economic’ contradiction, marginalization, and exploitation of subaltern classes. This is where the present paper, by contrast, starts to deal with issues of ‘structured agency’ and the articulation of reflexive political discourses and action as unrest, rebellion, revolution, etc. This relationship between material circumstance and discursive response is to articulate a ‘cultural political economy’ somewhat akin to Sum and Jessop (2013), for example, something that takes this paper beyond Bernstein’s purview. It is worth noting here, with respect to the well-known debates

<sup>8</sup> The sub-imperium comprises states, such as China, India, and Brazil, which, though subject to exploitation by the imperium of the global North, themselves exploit other states in the periphery and their subaltern classes. Thus, China is now prominent in neo-extractive activity throughout much of the global South.

between Bernstein and McMichael, the essential non-resolution, and polarized nature, of this dialogue within the parameters defined by these two scholars, and the consequent perpetuation of a 'binary' between the agrarian populists (McMichael) and the proletarianists (Bernstein). The present paper attempts to carry the debate forward into new conceptual areas: by accepting Bernstein's differentiated class positions within the peasantry, but advancing this by means of articulating 'political' class positionalities and discourses in terms of what are here termed counter-hegemonic, sub-hegemonic and alter-hegemonic oppositional interest stances. This attempt to translate 'objective' class position into 'subjective' class positionality in relation to food sovereignty discourses, especially at the level of state politics, has not really been undertaken before (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011 make a start, but their framework is pretty broad brush and only defined at international level). These class-based discourses are developed at greater length in Tilzey, 2017, 2019b.

Thirdly, Bernstein, with his focus on social relations of production 'narrowly conceived', does not really concern himself with the relationship between capitalism and state dynamics, this relationship being a logical step from point two above. This, however, is a major preoccupation of this paper and marks out the present work clearly from Bernstein – as noted, this paper draws on neo-Gramscian theory, Regulation Theory, Poulantzian state theory, so-called 'Political Marxism', and on the anthropologically informed Marxian perspective of Wolf (1982). This development is innovative, and takes the arguments surrounding food sovereignty, and its multiple and contested understandings arising from differentiated oppositional discourses, in directions significantly beyond the polarized Bernstein and McMichael debate. We attempt below to delineate the relations between class positionalities (in relation to food sovereignty discourse, these comprise sub-hegemonic [national-popular], alter-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic discourses) and understandings of and advocacy of forms of autonomy (alterity), building on, but taking further forward, the thinking of Bretón et al. (2022).

Having differentiated the theoretical position of this paper from that of Bernstein (while simultaneously acknowledging our debt to his class fractional acuity), we assert that the agents of counter-hegemony in the form of substantive food democracy, radical political agroecology and food sovereignty have a differential location in the global South, since this is the locus of the bulk of the peasantry, semi-proletariat, and indigenous groups whose enduring ties to non-commodified land provide escape routes from, or continued security against, the precarity of 'disarticulated' capitalism (de Janvry, 1981). This differential location of subaltern classes is intimately related to the imperialistic and sub-imperialistic character of capitalism as the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen, 2018). These escape routes of subaltern classes take the form of the *synthesis* of the strategies of autonomy discussed in the next section (*viz.* 'political', 'economic' as market avoidance, and 'cultural/territorial' autonomy), while cautioning against strategies of market creation and integration within a capitalist context.

We contend that this differential location of the peasantry, semi-proletariat, and indigenous people (collectively, the subaltern classes) arises due to the failure of capitalist 'agrarian transition' in the global South to generate the complete proletarianization of subalterns (complete separation of workers from the means of production) that has typically characterized the global North (imperium) and parts of the sub-imperium (especially China). Rather, the agrarian transition

has commonly been incomplete, with the peasantry, most often as a semi-proletariat, frequently retaining some measure of access to land, however residual. This desire to retain land is hugely reinforced by the general absence in the periphery of secure employment opportunities both within and outside the capitalist agricultural sector (de Janvry, 1981; Vergara-Camus, 2014; Vergara-Camus and Kay, 2017; McKay, 2018). This is largely due, in turn, to the dependent nature of capital accumulation in the periphery (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2000; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2016; Marini, 2022), enforced by the imperium and endorsed by the national agro-export oligarchies. The implication is that, while essentially the whole of Latin America, for example, has undergone a capitalist transition, the socially and sectorally disarticulated nature of the transition (de Janvry, 1981; McKay, 2018) entails a substantial percentage of subaltern class members retaining access to land and engaging in *non-capitalist* forms of production. These subaltern class members (principally the middle and lower peasantry) tend to sustain, not a proletarian, but rather a peasant class positionality. This is a crucial factor in explaining causality underlying radical agroecology/food sovereignty as social movements differentially located in the periphery. As a result of semi-proletarianization and precarity, we suggest that there is a *tendency* for a radical imaginary of food democracy, political agroecology and food sovereignty to emerge. This constitutes a counter-hegemonic positionality in which there is a demand for the equitable redistribution of land from capitalists and the upper peasantry (market-dependent petty commodity producers) to the middle and, especially, lower peasantry and precariat principally for the purposes of self-subsistence, at least in the first instance, as an insurance against market-dependent precarity. Such an aspirational agrarian transition represents a reversal of primitive accumulation and capitalist market dependency.

For indigenous and non-peasant populations (that is, populations that have retained 'kin-ordered' modes of production, as in much of the Amazon Basin, for example, and have never been subordinated, as peasants, to hierarchical 'tributary' or capitalist modes of production as in the Andes, for instance), the concern has been to 'defend the territory', along with cultural identity, against the incursions of the state and modernism – that is, to obviate the possibility of primitive accumulation occurring in the first place, rather than, as with the peasant claims, seeking appropriate access to land. While it might seem that peasant and indigenous non-peasant resistance to the state-capital nexus would be aligned, this has not always been the case, as we have elsewhere demonstrated (see Tilzey and Sugden, 2023). While the former tends to demand land reforms in their favour through change to social-property relations within the context of the state (in other words, autonomy from capitalist market dependency enabled by an interventionist state), the latter frequently advocate territorial integrity 'outside' the state (albeit with the acquiescence of the state) with an emphasis above all upon cultural identity and self-governance (in other words, autonomy from the state). Despite these differences, considerable potential for synthesis between the two does exist, as articulated, for example, in the foundational rationale of CONAIE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*) in Ecuador (see Tilzey and Sugden, 2023 for detail). *Inter alia*, this entails both resistance to, and reversal of, primitive accumulation in the form of egalitarian access to land and resources for sustainable living as *buen vivir*. Concurrently, this entails subversion of the state-capital nexus and termination of relations of subordination to the imperium and

sub-imperium manifest in destructive programmes of neo-extractivism that undergird the perpetuation of the imperial mode of living of the global North (Brand and Wissen, 2018; Tilzey, 2020a).

We argue that the capitalist agrarian transition in the global North (and increasingly in the sub-imperium) has, by contrast, involved full proletarianization, entailing full peasant expropriation and the general occupation of the land by capitalist and market-dependent petty commodity producers. The potentially counter-hegemonic nature of the proletariat here has characteristically been blunted by class co-optation into the state-capital nexus as 'labour aristocracy', as 'consumers', and by nationalism (often taking the form of social imperialism). These 'material rewards', the predominantly urban nature of the imperium, and the frequent subordination of class to nationalism, have been facilitated by 'unequal ecological exchange' (resource imperialism in the form of neo-extractivism), financial and industrial imperialism with the global South, sustaining the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2018; Marini, 2022). These dynamics imply that, as a result of the general expropriation of the peasantry, rural anti-capitalist protest in the imperium is negligible in comparison to the periphery. In the global North, protest tends to take the shape, not of radical, but rather of progressive or populist anti-neoliberalism (rather than anti-capitalism): sub-hegemonic family farm-based productivism (neo-mercantilism) on the one hand (see Potter and Tilzey, 2005), and 'post-productivist' or 'green' farming on the other, undertaken by what we have chosen to term 'alter-hegemonic' (localized but market-dependent) producers, exemplified by the 'new peasantries' of van der Ploeg (2008). The deep irony here is that, although the imperium helps to sustain 'disarticulated' and distorted 'development' in the periphery and hence the continued, albeit precarious, survival of a largely semi-proletarianized peasantry, it simultaneously tends to thwart the resulting counter-hegemonic aspirations toward market autonomy by perpetuating peripheral state export and neo-extractive dependency.

How might it be possible to engender counter-hegemonic change, then, in the form of substantive food democracy and radical political agroecology and food sovereignty? We argue here that it is the role played by the precariat, peasantry, and indigenous people of the global South that may be pivotal. The differential location in the global South of these actually or potentially radical counter-hegemonic classes carries with it the opportunity to exploit weaknesses in the state-capital nexus, as demonstrated by the history of peasant wars (for example, Wolf, 1999; Vergara-Camus, 2014), all symptomatically occurring in the periphery of the imperial system. However, the difficulties involved in subverting the state-capital nexus even in the global South (let alone the global North) are daunting. These are amply exemplified by reference to the experiences of counter-hegemonic mobilizations in the Latin American 'pink tide' states, such as Ecuador and Bolivia. In these states, national-popular programmes of reformist capitalism have attempted to replicate the imperial mode of living (Tilzey, 2019a; Tilzey and Sugden, 2023), and have tended progressively to co-opt the counter-hegemonic groups (advocating substantive food democracy and radical political agroecology/food sovereignty) which had subverted neoliberalism in the early years of the new millennium. This is an essential characteristic of 'national-popular' alliances, entailing collaboration between sub-hegemonic (nationally-oriented bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, including market-dependent petty commodity producers) and

counter-hegemonic (anti-capitalist) movements to constitute political parties such as the MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*) in Bolivia and AP (*Alianza País*) in Ecuador. 'Reformist', or sub-hegemonic, capitalism comprises a more socially inclusive variant of the state-capital nexus, whereby the state redistributes to subaltern classes a percentage of the surplus value or rents it appropriates from capital, both for reasons of political legitimacy and in an attempt to widen the market for consumer goods.

Despite their socially inclusive motivations, these 'national-popular' regimes remain capitalist, however.<sup>9</sup> In alliance with imperial and sub-imperial capital, and to feed generalized consumerism in the global North, they have deployed the proceeds of neo-extractive accumulation to subvert agrarian radicalism through welfarism and job creation (in effect, proletarianization). Meanwhile, they have supported the upper peasantry through farm credit to foment productivism, while furthering primitive accumulation and the destruction of ecological ways of living in respect of the middle/lower peasantry and indigenous groups through the very process of extractivism, and by the failure to undertake egalitarian land reform and respect land rights (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2011; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014; Tilzey, 2019a). This has entailed both the fragmentation of the strategies of autonomy detailed below, together with emphasis upon those elements of 'economic' autonomy (market creation and market integration) that encourage conformism to capitalist rationality and the de-radicalization of counter-hegemony. We argue in this paper that such de-radicalization is, however unwittingly, aided and abetted by agrarian populist and postcolonial interpretations of agrarian dynamics and framings of food sovereignty/democracy.

## Populist and Marxian understandings of autonomy in agrarian livelihood strategies

The concept of autonomy is pivotal to understandings of the status of agrarian livelihoods in relation to the state-capital nexus, and therefore underlies all attempts to foster food democracy, agroecology, and food sovereignty. This section addresses some of the key differences in the conceptualization of autonomy between agrarian populist and Marxian frames (see Popay, 2022 for detailed examination of this concept in relation, especially, to the work of Tilzey and van der Ploeg).

Autonomy represents the demand for self-determination or self-definition against an entity (typically, the state/market, or state-capital nexus) that appears to thwart, or to actively undermine through exploitation, the aspirations and livelihood sustainability of certain classes, ethnic groups, etc. which suffer increased 'economic', 'political', and 'cultural' marginalization as a consequence. 'Economically',

<sup>9</sup> The food systems of these regimes could be taken to represent examples of the empirical Polanyian hybridities, the outcome of contestation and compromise, referred to by Misleh (2022). However, the ongoing capitalist character of these systems and regimes, albeit mitigated by their reformism, continues to generate severe ecological and social contradictions, thus in no way diminishing the need for counter-hegemony as real autonomy or true alterity.

‘politically’, and ‘culturally/discursively/symbolically’, ‘autonomy is presented as a political project that will address the grievances of subaltern classes which have been marginalized by capitalism and the colonial and post-colonial state by regaining collective control of their lives and becoming historical subjects’ (Bretón et al., 2022: 5). This means, essentially, that the state-capital nexus fails to fulfill, or actively ignores/suppresses, its putative vocation of satisfying the aspirations and needs of all its citizenry – in other words, it differentially satisfies the interests of some of its citizens to the neglect or detriment of others. This reflects the class-bound and culturally conformist character (a certain permissible latitude notwithstanding) of the state-capital nexus, and the concomitant difficulty of building national consensus and sustainable livelihoods for all (within the peripheral social formation especially) when the national project remains one of building ‘prosperity’ through consumerism, economic growth, and capitalism (whether ‘market oriented’ or ‘state regulated’).

Autonomy may be seen to have three primary dimensions, the first two involving the ‘political’ and ‘economic’ dimensions between classes in the state-capital nexus (typically, in the global South, between the class triad of the peasantry, landed oligarchy, and the domestic bourgeoisie), the third involving the relationship between the state-capital nexus and indigenous ‘kin-ordered’ societies, the latter typically occupying areas remote from the main power and economic centres of the state. Autonomy, reiterating the previous paragraph, may, in the global South, be ‘understood as a political project, a practice, and utopian horizon of the agrarian subaltern classes and marginalized ethnic groups. First, in its strictly political dimension, it [implies control of] the decision-making process and active participation in policy-making [affecting] the nation’ (Bretón et al., 2022:1), including agrarian issues. Closely related to this is the concept of autonomy as a social/political *praxis* of social movements which, although realized differentially from organization to organization, is founded on the principle of horizontal participatory decision-making, marking a distinct departure from the traditional hierarchical relationships between leaders and membership of the ‘old left’. The latter acts as a template for participatory and devolved governance of the state.

Second, in its ‘economic’ dimension, autonomy implies the ability to exercise governance over productive resources (means of production) such as land and water, entailing, *inter alia*, varying degrees of intervention in, regulation or transformation of, markets with a view, in many instances, to the defence, rehabilitation, and re-affirmation of communitarian principles of reciprocity, redistribution, and solidarity (Bretón et al., 2022). These may include structural transformation measures such as egalitarian land reform. Depending upon the depth of critique of the ‘market’ and upon class positionality (see Tilzey, 2017), movements may seek autonomy on the basis of three basic strategies: market avoidance, that is autonomy in relation to the capitalist market by the enactment of non-capitalist modes of production and distribution, and often underpinned by structural changes in social-property relations such as land reform – in other words, a *counter-hegemonic* strategy to confound market-dependency; market creation, that is autonomy within the market by creating new niches for ‘re-territorialized’, re-localized, and ‘ecologized’ food consumption, while minimizing dependence on ‘green revolution’ inputs – in other words, an *alter-hegemonic* strategy principally for market-dependent petty commodity producers (upper peasantry, small family farms) as advocated most notably by van der Ploeg (2008) (see discussion above); and market integration, that is integration into nationally defined,

protected, and supported food production, distribution, and consumption using principally green revolution technologies and insulated from neoliberalized overseas competition – in other words, a *sub-hegemonic* strategy, the principal beneficiaries of which are the market-dependent upper peasantry and commercial family farms (as with the alter-hegemonic strategy above). Market integration may also of course entail integration into neoliberalized/globalized food circuits (a *hegemonic* strategy) – for smaller producers, however, longer-term survival in such a context can only be secured through sub-contracting arrangements with larger producers (in the absence of other strategies as per those above), since the economies of scale that undergird the logic of such market productivism sooner or later spell the demise of the smaller family farm. Indeed, the use of the word ‘autonomy’, in an oppositional sense relation to the market in this context, clearly loses any meaning.

Third, autonomy, in its cultural and nationalist dimension, is proposed by indigenous people (or other ethnic groups such as afro-descendants) claiming and exercising collective rights to self-determination in relation to specific ‘territories’ (Bretón et al., 2022). In Latin America, for example, this quest for autonomy has been undertaken by both protest and negotiation with a view to reforming the nation-state and securing varying degrees of cultural recognition and devolved governance in favor of indigenous ‘nationalities’, in some measure ‘insulated from’ or ‘outside’ the state-capital nexus. While there may be strong overlaps here with agrarian issues pertaining to the peasantry in respect of the market avoidance strategy above, especially when the peasantry in question is largely indigenous (as in much of Mesoamerica and the Andes, with the Zapatistas in Chiapas perhaps being the archetype here), this form of autonomy may also be quite distinct from the ‘peasant question’ as ‘market avoidance’. This is principally because ‘cultural’ autonomy is invoked in the main by non-peasant and traditionally ‘kin-ordered’ indigenous peoples (from the Amazon Basin, for example) which have never been integrated on a class basis into the colonial and post-colonial state, in marked contrast to the indigenous and non-indigenous peasantry which has had the status of an exploited subaltern class *within* the state-capital nexus. While there can, and should be, complementarities between ‘peasant’ and ‘indigenous’ autonomy, in practice they have often been distinct and, not infrequently, antagonistic. This antagonism has been abetted by a postcolonial and post-modern problematic that suggests the issue of indigenous autonomy is best studied and addressed through an ‘anthropological’ rather than a ‘political economy’ lens, focusing on questions of identity formation and cultural politics (Bretón et al., 2022). While there are certainly real differences between the two forms of autonomy as identified above, the postcolonial problematic reifies these divergencies as simply questions of ‘cultural politics’, failing to discern a ‘cultural political economy’ (Sum and Jessop, 2013; Tilzey, 2017, 2018a) that attaches equal importance to material *and* discursive dimensions in social dynamics and power (see notably Wolf, 1982 for an anthropology that integrates the ‘cultural’ and ‘political economy’ dimensions).

Agrarian populist agroecology, due to its failure to understand the capitalist market as a social relation exercising control through market-dependency (and instantiated in social-property relations upheld by the state-capital nexus) (Tilzey, 2017), tends to place emphasis upon the above strategies of market creation (alter-hegemony) and, to some extent, market integration, as significant means to secure autonomy [although we would again point to the strong focus of de Molina et al.

(2020) on political agroecology as entailing the abrogation of market dependence]. Postcolonial agroecology, for its part, involving an inclination to cultural essentialism, has tended to emphasize the third strategy of autonomy above, underlining the importance of cultural identity and territorial integrity at the expense of social equity and equality of rights to land (see, for example, Copeland, 2019a,b in relation to Guatemala). As suggested above, this selective emphasis has tended to militate against coalescence between non-peasant indigenous groups and peasant movements (even when largely indigenous in character), the latter seeking to address the agrarian question of egalitarian land redistribution and the socialization of the market. Through these selective emphases and the failure to appreciate potential synergies between 'peasant' and 'indigenous' strategies of autonomy, agrarian populist and postcolonial approaches have tended both to thwart subversion of, and to render movements vulnerable to co-optation by, the state-capital nexus.

CONAIE, in Ecuador, may be taken to represent an organization embodying mobilization to secure counter-hegemonic autonomy as substantive food democracy and radical political agroecology. CONAIE has recently re-emerged as a powerful indigenous/peasant agent advocating for equitable, anti-colonial/imperial, and ecologically sustainable (alternative) development. This 'resurgence' of CONAIE as a potent political force is attributable to the accumulated contradictions and resentments embodied in the unrest of impoverished semi-proletarian (and mainly indigenous) peasantry and peri-urban precariat, and the continued erosion of the land rights and livelihoods of lowland (kin-ordered/non-peasant) indigenous groups. This has arisen from the failure, first, of neoliberalism and then of neo-developmentalism (and now neoliberalism again) to address the livelihood needs of the majority peasant/indigenous population on an ecologically sustainable, socially equitable, and culturally diverse/inclusive basis. Following its long period of marginalization and crisis of representation during the Correa era of national-populism, CONAIE now appears to be recovering some of its former power and original vocation.

CONAIE, in its foundational vision, had sought to merge all indigenous (and peasant) people into a large, united pan-Indian movement dedicated to the defence of indigenous (and peasant) concerns and to agitation for educational, political, and social reforms, including recognition of land rights and a programme of land redistribution, funding for alternative development, recognition of indigenous languages, and support for bilingual education (Becker, 2008, 2012). Given that CONAIE was constituted as an expressly indigenous movement, postcolonial and 'new social movement' theorists have, however, tended to interpret it as an embodiment of the victory of ethnic discourse and identity politics over class analysis. Scholars such as Becker (2008, 2012), Ibarra (1992), and Zamosc (2004), among others, point out, however, that this assumption has always represented a spurious dichotomy and that CONAIE actually embodies a successful melding of ethnic and class positionalities. In fact, CONAIE proclaimed itself as an 'organization of oppressed and exploited people', and defined itself as 'anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist' (CONAIE, 1989: 281). In addition to demands for pro-peasant land reform, CONAIE also levelled criticism at industrialization, unemployment, racial discrimination, and existing housing, education, and health policies, while rejecting, at the same time, the 'racist' position of propounding an indigenous versus mestizo/white struggle that 'in its most extreme position advocated the expulsion of the invaders and a

return to *Tawantinsuyu*' (the Kichwa name for the Incan Empire) (CONAIE, 1989: 281). Rather, CONAIE proposed a synthesis of class and indigenist positionalities in which struggle was to be organized on a class basis for the social relational transformation of society (that is, transformative social praxis operative at both the political/ideational and economic/material levels) while fostering independent ethnic organizations to defend indigenous cultures (Becker, 2008). As Zamosc (2004: 132) has noted 'the Ecuadorian case calls attention to the fact that class conflict continues to be a relevant factor in Latin American politics' and, far from being confined to 'indigenous rights' issues 'the Indian movement has transcended them, involving itself in broader battles over social issues and becoming a player in the contest for political power'. Becker (2008) suggests that, while ethnicity has a proven ability to engage and mobilize people in the shorter-term, it has demonstrated less success, when lacking a class dimension, in sustaining organizational energy over the longer-term. Specifically, he maintains that CONAIE realized greatest success when embracing, rather than denying, the class character of indigenous oppression. Among other authors contesting the dichotomization of ethnicity from class, Roper et al. (2003: 10–11) assert that 'the privileging of identity construction has...obscured the material conditions and structural challenges that shape social movement dynamics'.

Despite such debilitation of counter-hegemonic movements due both to sub-hegemonic national populism and to postcolonial 'ethnicization' of indigenous/peasant politics, resistance to the material basis of marginality manifest in primitive accumulation and precarity is again resurgent. Consequently, the delegitimation of the peripheral state-capital nexus is an ever-present possibility. While right-wing populism and a more extreme authoritarianism remain continual threats, as current events in Ecuador sadly demonstrate, it is probable that such delegitimation anticipates another surge of counter-hegemonic mobilization. This is indeed manifest in the current revival of CONAIE (and its political arm *Pachacutik*) in Ecuador and its re-articulation of counter-hegemony centered around opposition to neo-extractive accumulation, mobilization for equitable land redistribution, land rights, and political agroecology/food sovereignty, and advocacy of plurinational territorial autonomy, all entailing trenchant critique of capitalism and imperialism (Riofrancos, 2020; Cuvi, 2021).

## Conclusion

This paper has suggested, *inter alia*, that agrarian populist claims that the state/market can simply be bypassed to secure agroecological 'autonomy' as a matter of democratic 'will' are either illusory, or are confined to those spaces somehow 'outside', or yet to be exploited by, the state-capital nexus.<sup>10</sup> This is captured in the aphorism: 'you may not want the state, but the state wants you'. This paper suggests that, ultimately, there is no alternative other than to challenge the state-capital nexus through 'class struggle' if the social-property relations of capitalism are to be subverted. We have suggested that this ambition,

<sup>10</sup> This orientation towards interstitial local 'autonomy' is reinforced by the agrarian populist claim that it is not the state-capital nexus that needs to be confronted but rather an abstract entity denoted as the 'corporate food regime' (see de Molina et al., 2020).

entailing the subversion of capitalism's essence – primitive accumulation and market dependency – has been compromised by key elements of agrarian populism embodied in sub-hegemonic and alter-hegemonic ideologies. Salient among these elements are: a reification of the political 'region' and an accompanying failure to comprehend the material social-property relations underpinning capitalism; a lack of appreciation of the internal relation between capitalism and the modern state; a dominant binary conceptualization of contestation between the so-called 'multitude' of civil society and the 'corporate food regime', wherein a generalized citizenry acts to protect society and environment in the manner of a Polyanian 'double movement'; and a failure to appreciate the division of the capitalist world system into an imperium (the global North) and a periphery (the global South), with affluence in one pole dialectically related to poverty and precarity in the other. In relation to the latter, it is the imperial state-capital nexus which comprises the principal motor of capitalogenic 'political' and 'ecological' turbulence, generating the externalization of many ensuing contradictions onto the peasant/indigenous precariat of the global South. This, in turn, helps to explain the differential presence of counter-hegemonic political agroecology and food sovereignty in the global South; and the predominant (although by no means exclusive) locus of sub-hegemony and alter-hegemony (agrarian populism) in the global North, accompanied by a preoccupation with formal, rather than substantive, rights and democracy crystallized in the received discourse of 'food democracy' itself.

If, due to the operation of the 'imperial mode of living', the global South is indeed the predominant locus and the vanguard of counter-hegemony as defined in this paper, this then deepens the need for a coalescence of peasant and indigenous subaltern opposition both to comprador<sup>11</sup> and imperial (hegemonic) interests. Such

counter-hegemony entails, in turn, a re-articulation of agroecology as an issue, not merely of strengthening democracy around the 'right to (ecologically sustainable) food' principle, but also, crucially, of confronting the capitalist social-property relations and resource imperialism that underpin ecological unsustainability, social inequality, and cultural marginalization. This, we argue, is ultimately an issue involving opposition to primitive accumulation and resulting capitalist market dependency by means of radical political agroecology and food sovereignty to secure substantive food democracy as real autonomy, through subversion of the state-capital nexus.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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<sup>11</sup> Export-oriented domestic capitalists.

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