

# Agroecology and Radical Grassroots Movements' Evolving Moral Economies

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■ **ABSTRACT:** I focus on the role of agroecology in rural proletarian social movements in this article. First, I highlight these movements' conception of agroecology as an important element of their political ideology. Second, I explore the value of agroecology in helping maintain the permanence of the peasantry. Third, I show that rural proletarian movements emphasize agroecology because it is key to attaining sovereignty. I draw upon the geographic lenses of territory, the production of space, and autonomous geographies in positing these arguments. Throughout the article, I draw upon a case study of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, one of the most vocal agroecological social movements, to illustrate these arguments.

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■ **KEYWORDS:** agrarian question, agroecology, Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, food sovereignty, moral economy, repeasantization

## Introduction

Agroecology, which can be defined as the integration of ecological principles into agricultural systems (Gliessman 2007), is the focus of an exploding literature (see reviews in Wezel et al. 2009; Wezel and Soldat 2009).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, academic analyses of agroecological social movements are also increasing, as these movements adapt their tactics and discourses to changing agricultural policies (Martinez-Alier 2011; Altieri and Toledo 2011; van der Ploeg 2012; Guzman and Woodgate 2013). Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2014: 10) argue that Latin American radical agroecological activism is made up of three types of movements: indigenous, peasant, and rural proletarian groups.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this article is to synthesize the interdisciplinary literature on agroecology in rural proletarian movements, and extract the reasons why these movements promote agroecology.<sup>3</sup> My central arguments are (1) agroecology plays an important role in evolving agrarian moral economies; (2) rural proletarian movements advocate agroecology because the overlap between the environment and society is a primary site of conflict between neoliberalism and antineoliberalism; and (3) these movements tactically use agroecology to create autonomous spaces of resistance where they can develop new forms of material production and advance their objective of a socialist transformation. In making these arguments, I draw on a case study of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST), which is one of the most vocal grassroots movements advocating agroecology (Desmarais 2002, 2007; Delgado 2008; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012).



## Neoliberal Values

It might seem strange to speak of neoliberalism's value system. As Giroux writes, neoliberalism places "capital and market relations in a no-man's-land beyond the reach of compassion, ethics, and decency" (2004: 124). Yet neoliberalism is explicitly predicated on values. Neoliberalism is a philosophy that sees market values as trumping all others. Neoliberalism is "a vision of society in which competition for wealth is the only recognized value" (Faux 2006: 5). Neoliberalism's market myopia delegitimizes nonmonetary values, such as those surrounding the environment and sustainability (Henderson and Hursh 2014).

The simultaneous beauty and danger of neoliberalism's value system is that it is both ubiquitous and unquestionable. As Bourdieu writes, "Everywhere we hear it said, all day long—and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength—that *there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neoliberal view*, that it has presented itself as self-evident" (Bourdieu 1998: 29; emphasis added). Ferguson (2010: 166) makes a parallel critique of the left's responses to neoliberalism, which he characterizes as universally centered on critique rather than directed toward productive alternatives. Despite the merit of both of these analyses, they make illegible the normative visions of indigenous, peasant, and rural proletarian groups that are actively showing what "another world is possible" might look like (Fisher and Ponniah 2003; McNally 2006). Agroecology is one of the central arenas in which radical grassroots movements are actively constructing an alternative value system.

## A Historical Overview of Agroecology as Science, Practice, and Movement

The history of agroecology can be divided into two phases: the "old age" of agroecology (1930s to 1960s) and the "expansion age" (1970s to the present) (Wezel et al. 2009). Although elements of agroecology developed simultaneously within agronomy, zoology, and plant physiology, scholars often associate the origination of the concept in the late 1920s with Bensin, a Russian agronomist, who used it to define the application of ecology to agriculture (Loucks 1977; Guzman and Woodgate 2013). During the 1930s and 1940s, various researchers, such as Friederichs (1930), a German zoologist, and Klages (1928, 1940), an American agronomist, published studies that dealt explicitly with what would come to be known as agroecology, though without using the term. Tischler, a German ecologist and zoologist, used the term in various publications in the 1950s to describe the interactions between plants, animals, soil, climate, and human management within an agroecosystem (Tischler 1950, 1953, 1959).

During the expansion period (1970s to the present), agroecology continued to develop as a scientific discipline. Partially in response to the Green Revolution, this emerging science explored the application of ecological principles, such as vertical integration, resilience, and nutrient cycling in sustainable agricultural systems (Conway 1987). Research began focusing on traditional and indigenous subsistence farming systems of tropical and subtropical developing countries (Alcorn 1981; Norgaard 1984; Altieri and Anderson 1986). As part of development work, which involved ecologists, agronomists, and ethnobotanists, in the 1980s the phrase "agroecology" began to be applied to historical cultures' agricultural practices as well as those of their contemporary counterparts (Altieri and Anderson 1986; Erickson 1992; Denevan 1995; Hecht 1995).

In the 1990s, certain groups began to define their engagement with agroecology as a social movement whose objective was to foment a change in the relations between agriculture, nature, and society (Wezel et al. 2009).<sup>4</sup> The MST, which is part of the international peasant movement

La Via Campesina (LVC), is one of the most vocal movements advocating agroecology (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012).

## **Radical Agroecological Grassroots Social Movements**

Globally, radical grassroots social movements have become vocal critics of neoliberal agricultural privatization and advocates of small-scale family farming (Edelman 1999; Borras 2008). Since its origination in 1993, LVC has become one of the most vocal movements advocating for agroecology. LVC is a global conglomeration of more than 200 million family farmers, peasant farmers, indigenous people, landless peasants, farm workers, rural women, and rural youth that seek to defend small-scale family farming from the neoliberal privatization of agriculture (McMichael 2006; Borras et al. 2008; Wittman 2009).

For several reasons, the member organizations of LVC are mobilizing around agroecology. First, it helps maintain members' participation in the movement because it is a "socially activating" form of agriculture that is predicated on horizontal diffusion of new knowledge and techniques (Warner 2008). Second, it is an agricultural approach that is based on traditional agricultural methods and synthesizes peasant and indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge (Leff 2002). Third, it is economically viable for small-scale farmers because it eschews external inputs and promotes the usage of local resources (van der Ploeg 2012). Fourth, agroecology seeks to increase productivity and sustainability by increasing diversity and integration of existing systems (Altieri and Toledo 2011: 599).

Focusing on Latin America, Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2014) argue that the umbrella LVC movement is composed of indigenous, peasant, and rural proletarian movements. Peasant movements are defined by their mode of production and subsistence. Peasant movements can be largely comprised of indigenous members, but they frame their struggle in terms of land access, credit, subsidies, and crop and livestock prices (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2014: 10). Indigenous organizations within LVC, by contrast, frame their struggles in terms of language, territory, autonomy, and culture. Rural proletarian organizations are the most ideological of the three, organizing the landless to squat on land and rural laborers into trade unions.

Each of these three groups mobilizes around and understands agroecology in different ways.<sup>5</sup> These differences center around the individual movement's unit of organization and mode of knowledge transmission (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2014). Indigenous movements are based around the community as the unit of organization, and see agroecology as synonymous with traditional diversified farming systems whose management is governed by traditional calendars derived from the cosmos (Toledo 2000). Knowledge of these practices, like planting dates, are embedded in cultural traditions and passed down over millennia (Toledo 2000: 10–11). Peasant organizations, by contrast, see the family as the basic organizational unit, and mobilize around agroecology due to lower production costs and a more resilient source of subsistence (Toledo 2010). Agroecological knowledge in peasant movements is experiential and transmitted through farmer-farmer methodologies, exemplified by the Cuban Campesino a Campesino movement (Rosset 2011). Last, rural proletarian movements are organized around the collective, and see agroecology as part of socialist ideology that is opposed to the expansion of capital. These movements see the transmission of agroecological knowledge as taking place in schools, which will result in trained technician members who are capable of helping collectives move toward ecological farming at semilarge scales.

Brazil provides a particularly interesting context to explore the conflict between neoliberalism and antineoliberalism and the rural proletarian movement's engagement with agroecology

(Almeida et al. 2000; Stahler-Sholk et al. 2007; Vanden 2007). Brazil has one of the highest concentrations of property ownership in the world, with a Gini coefficient of land distribution at 0.872 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2006). While this level of inequity stems from colonial land grants and nineteenth-century land laws (Hall 1990), neoliberal agroindustrial policies and development projects have perpetuated it (Hecht 1993; Wolford 2005). Landless peasants, or *sem terra*, are characteristic of Brazil's history of rapid modernization and development, and in many ways a product of neoliberal restructuring (Almeida et al. 2000).

The MST is comprised of marginalized peasants who became politically mobilized out of a desire for agricultural land. MST members seek to attain land by first identifying unused agricultural land and then pressuring the government to expropriate it by squatting and forming encampments (Wolford 2010). If these MST members are successful, the government will create an agrarian reform settlement. This tactic of squatting has historically worked fairly well for the MST's members, as the Brazilian constitution states that land must have a social value.<sup>6</sup>

Although the MST originated in the early 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that it began to "green" itself by beginning to debate agroecology as a political and practical set of strategies.<sup>7</sup> The reason for debate was that the MST had originally adopted a large-scale agricultural approach that was heavily influenced by Soviet and Cuban models and theoretically based in orthodox Marxism-Leninism (Toledo 2002; Barcellos 2009). The internal debate within the MST about agroecology continued until the MST's 2005 national congress, during which the assembled 11,000 members formally ratified agroecology as the movement's foundation for small-scale farming (Altieri and Toledo 2011).<sup>8</sup>

## The MST's Agrarian Moral Economy and Agroecological Values

The MST in many ways operates from the epistemological antithesis of neoliberalism. Despite being a movement that seeks to transform the state, one central pillar of its value system is the responsibility it places on the state, from legalizing its occupations (*acampamentos*) and creation of formalized settlements (*assentamentos*) to providing credit, health, education, and other services. Additionally, the movement pressures the state to have an increasingly regulatory role in managing the economy, advocating the creation of public policies such as the National Program for the Acquisition of Food (Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos, or PAA), which purchases food from smallholders in agrarian reform settlements for use in schools, hospitals, and other public institutions. Another example of the MST's diametric opposition to neoliberalism is the emphasis the movement ideologically places on the collective as opposed to the individual.

The concept of the moral economy provides a fertile arena to explore the evolving place of agroecological values in the MST. Historian Edward P. Thompson (1971) first promulgated the concept of the moral economy to describe popular protests in the face of expanding capitalism in England in the eighteenth century. These protests were not driven by hunger and fear, but the poor's perceptions that their moral right to feed themselves was being disregarded by millers who adulterated grains and merchants who hoarded them (Wolford 2005). Thompson's original conception of the moral economy was "in general ... confined to confrontations in the marketplace over access (or entitlement) to 'necessities'—essential food," particularly profiteering and the beliefs, usages, forms, and deep emotions that surround "the marketing of food in time of dearth" (Thompson 1991: 337–338; see also Edelman 2005: 331).<sup>9</sup>

Since Thompson, various scholars have engaged with the moral economy concept in diverse ways. Scott's *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), for example, explores how new forms of fixed cash land rent that accompanied the transition to French and Dutch colonialism replaced tradi-

tional tenancy relations that were based on labor rent and sharecropping. Similar to Thompson's analysis of eighteenth-century English peasants, Scott found that peasants felt a moral right to "subsistence security" (1976: 35) that was sacrosanct and warranted rebellion when violated.

Marc Edelman (1999, 2005) explores how peasants in La Via Campesina project a "moral right" to culturally persist as agriculturalists. Edelman argues that many of LVC's arguments, such as those about "just prices", are "invoked as a transnational or even universal norm, rather than a local or national one. Some of the actors have changed and the relevant social field has widened to encompass global markets, but 'just' behavior by the more powerful is an aspiration that still forms part of contemporary peasant activists' implicit moral economy" (2005: 339). As a result, Edelman sees that "the old moral economic discourses about just prices, access to land, unfair markets, and the greed of the powerful have echoes in today's struggles against global trade liberalization, the World Bank's market-based agrarian reform programs, and corporate efforts to gain greater control of the food supply and plant germplasm" (2005: 341).

Wolford employs the moral economy lens to explore the MST. She uses the term "moral economy" in a different manner than Thompson or Scott, referring to "the moral arguments (ideal models or ideology) used by a particular group of people to define the optimal organization of society, including most importantly an outline of how society's productive resources (in this case, land) ought to be divided" (2005: 243).

Wolford employs the moral economy lens because it clarifies both the socially constructed nature of the MST's "objective claim to resources" and their basis in a perceived moral heritage. The moral economy concept illuminates that in rejecting neoliberalism, MST members "are objecting to a worldview that labels their own poverty an indication of slothfulness and interprets their request for assistance as a sign of weakness" (2005: 245). The MST engages in moral economic arguments in order to legitimize their occupation of land. As Wolford describes it, "the presentation of a position as morally superior is, in fact, a necessary means of sanctioning or supporting the institutionalization of policies regarding the distribution of resources—particularly when the resource in question is considered (rightly or not) to be scarce" (2005: 257). I build upon Wolford's analysis to argue that the MST's moral economy is evolving and has expanded to make normative claims about forms of land management.

Rural proletarian movements employ agroecology as a moral economic argument because reframing their ideological arguments around sustainable land management makes political sense. The MST initially justified its land occupations on the basis that the lands were "unused". However, increasing transnational investment in Brazilian agriculture in the 1990s resulted in a large percentage of Brazil's idle land being converted to agrofuel monocrop plantations (Novo et al. 2010; McMichael 2010). The MST, in turn, reframed their argument "by contrasting the ecological and social wasteland of agribusiness plantations ('green deserts') with a pastoral vision of agroecologically-farmed peasant lands, conserving biodiversity, keeping families in the countryside, and producing healthy food for local markets ('food sovereignty')" (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012: 390). The agroecological values of this evolving agrarian moral economy are at odds with the neoliberal model. These values are the primacy of the community, through cooperation and collective organizing, and the importance of land, territory, autonomy, and food sovereignty.

## **Agroecology as Political Ideology**

Rural proletarian movements, such as the MST, use agroecology to express the moral economic basis of their political ideology. The moral economy of these movements, including what they

value, what they frame as injustice, and what they see as ideal, supports their political ideology, substantially and strategically. Rural proletarian movements espouse agroecology as part of their larger political ideology because it can be used as part their moral economic critique of the systemic inequality of the global food system and their advocacy for counterhegemonic forms of small-scale agriculture. As the MST's national leadership notes,

This [capitalist] model of agriculture is the same that produces social exclusion and the expulsion of millions of peasant families to the slums, which led to hunger and poverty in rural and urban areas, and promotes the destruction of nature. We need to resist this destruction, exploitation of human beings, and the nature of capitalism. That's why for a number of years the MST has been developing agroecology in their settlements. ... Above all, we understand that *agroecology is a way of organizing farmers* in search of social change, which proposes a new model of society where man and nature can relate without exploitation. (MST 2007: 7, my translation, emphasis added)

Agroecology is a socially activating form of agriculture (Warner 2008) and is part of the MST's political strategy to maintain its members' political participation. Levels of MST members' participation vary widely, especially after the primary social grievance of obtaining land is addressed and a settlement is created (Wolford 2010). Agroecology is a form of agriculture that tends to be collectively organized, involving work parties and the horizontal sharing of knowledge and innovations (Wolford 2005). Agroecology is part of the MST's political ideology and moral economy because it places value on continued collective organization. The MST sees mobilization as not ending with the attainment of land, but as continual and necessary to pressure the government for public services and institutions such as schools, hospitals, roads, and agricultural credit. By emphasizing agroecology, the MST reinforces the value of the collective as a foundation upon which a new model of environmental-society relations can develop.

External inequality is another foil of the agrarian moral economy and rural proletarian movements' political ideology. External inequality is related to the global decrease in the profitability of farming as a function of unequal exchange relationships between the agrarian, industrial, and service sectors. By reducing the profitability of farming, this inequality pushes small farmers to farm more intensively with higher technological inputs, making them more beholden to the industrial sector. Agroecology redresses this lack of profitability through diversification and reducing the usage of external inputs (Altieri 1993, 1999). At the planning level, farmers choose to develop agricultural products and services with the intention of appealing to diverse markets, thereby dispersing the risks of market fluctuation or saturation. At the farm scale, intercropping is integrated both spatially and materially with animal husbandry and the production of arable crops. According to van der Ploeg (2012), agroecological diversification is also about increasing the value per unit of product. Farmers who diversify engage with other elements of the production process, including on-farm processing (e.g., cheese production) and direct marketing through cooperatives such as the MST's Terra Viva, Sabor do Campo, and Paladar (Diniz and Gilbert 2013). Agroecological diversification redresses the moral-economic concerns related to external inequality by making viable small-scale production using traditional methods.

Agroecology addresses the social and environmental injustice concerns associated with the MST's moral economy and remains intimately linked with collective organizing and the larger political project of transforming the social relations of production. According to the MST,

We already know that *agroecological production is able to reduce production costs, reducing risk for the small farmer and the environment*. The main challenge we face is not technological. We already know that it is possible to produce in quantity and without the use of pesticides, GMOs and without further deforestation. But for that *we must unite and organize ourselves*

in confronting the model represented by agribusiness. There is no way to transform Brazilian agriculture based on agroecology and social justice without defeating landlordism, agribusiness, and capitalism. (MST 2007: 7, my translation, emphasis added)

The MST's engagement with agroecology, while mentioning principles of social and environmental equity, is intrinsically defined on the one hand by its moral critique of the capitalist agricultural system, and on the other hand by its political approach to transforming the industrial agricultural system through collective mobilization.

Agroecology cannot be reduced to the technical redesign of agricultural systems around ecological principles, but given the political nature of the food system, it can only be advanced through systemic changes in political institutions. Proletarian movements' engagement with agroecology is political because they seek to advance it by using collective action to reframe governmental policies. As João Pedro Stedile, a leader within the MST's national coordinating council, told Brazilian president Dilma Rouseff,

We urgently need a national program to stimulate agroecology. A program of public policies that can recover a healthy agriculture, which plants foods without poisons. The more agrotoxins we put in our food, the greater the incidence of cancer. *It's a requirement to produce healthy food and to do this the techniques of agroecology are the most recommended.* But the government is missing in action and *we need to have public policies that compensate and encourage these practices.* (Stedile 2012, emphasis added)

In the moral economy of the MST, the "requirement" to have foods that are pesticide-free necessitates active governmental regulatory intervention. Less than a year after Stedile's mandate, Rouseff announced the Brazilian government was launching the Plano Nacional de Agroecologia e Produção Orgânica (National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Agriculture). This national plan is unquestionably the result of massive mobilization involving numerous organizations that, in addition to the MST, make up the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (Associação Brasileira de Agroecologia, or ABA) (Gliessman 2014). Its development highlights the larger project of a political agroecology that sees a tight connection between the politics and practice of agroecology (de Molina 2013).

Rural proletarian movements see this political ideology of agroecology as being intimately linked to the transformation of the agrarian landscape. Understanding the linkages between agroecology as political ideology and agroecology as practice requires disentangling the relationships between territory, hegemony, and counterhegemony. Territory can be conceptualized as the combination of material and immaterial aspects (Fernandes 2009). Material territories consist of natural elements, such land and landforms, and human-derived infrastructure. Immaterial territories, by contrast, are the ideologies connected with landscapes, including ideas about what constitutes appropriate land use. Material and immaterial territories are intrinsically linked, in that the dominant ideas of a society dictate norms concerning proper forms of environmental management. Agroecology is exemplary of an idea that is at odds with the hegemonic common sense of neoliberalism.

As Rosset and Martinez-Torres (2012) highlight, the discursive practice of advocating agroecology is one way in which social movements link immaterial and material territories, and in so doing draw upon their moral economy to advocate for counterhegemonic models. The MST's João Pedro Stedile underscores the relation between the movement's conception of territory and agroecology as political ideology:

[I]n the past we looked at a settlement mostly as a piece of land to work upon. Now we are taking into account that a settlement is more than that: it is a territory where we can have

autonomy not only to produce, but *also to reproduce our culture, our family, and as such, to construct our own values*. And more recently we have also incorporated this debate together with the fight against agribusiness and the transnationals for the control of seeds, for the control of water, and for the control of biodiversity. (Garmany et al. 2008: 189, emphasis added)

Within the MST's moral economy, land plays a pivotal role in social reproduction (Wolford 2005) and the creation of new values based around human-environment interrelations. As Wolford found within her analysis of MST members' moral economy, "land was believed to be key both to production and to social reproduction, where farmers who produced for their families were the proper stewards of the material environment" (2005: 254). This "greening" of the MST exemplifies Fernandes's (2009) tightly linked immaterial and material territories, showing the importance of agroecology in not only structuring land management, but also the MST's moral economy and political ideology. This highlights how agroecological ideas and practices, which are grounded in normative social and environmental justice concerns, are tactically advanced as an emerging counterhegemony. Seeing agroecology as a counterhegemonic set of grassroots ideas and practices that are being used to construct an interconnected vision of environment and society speaks directly to the absence noted by Ferguson (2010), and informs understanding of the conflict between neoliberalism and antineoliberal alternatives.

### **Agroecology and the Agrarian Question**

The century-old agrarian question, and its twin processes of *global depeasantization* and *repeasantization*, provides another set of rationales for why rural proletarian social movements advocate agroecology within their moral economy (Martinez-Torres 2012). The agrarian question, known alternatively as the peasant question, concerns the impact of the expansion of capitalism on the rural peasantry. It arose toward the end of the nineteenth century in the work of Marx and Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin, and has raged among scholars ever since (Bernstein 1996, 2004; McMichael 2006, 2012; Araghi 2012). Karl Kautsky, one of the first scholars to pose the question, asked in 1899: "Is capital, and in what ways is capital, taking hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, smashing the old forms of production and of poverty, and establishing the new forms which must succeed?" (Banaji 1976: 46). Chayanov, a Russian agronomist, held an opposing view: that the peasant economy was governed by its own logic that was apart from capitalism, and so the expansion of capitalism did not necessarily warrant the end of the peasantry. Contrary to the Bolsheviks, he saw individual peasant farms, and their collective institutions, as a springboard for a socialist society.<sup>10</sup> In the following century, there have globally been massive shifts in where and how the peasantry live, causing a debate about whether peasants continue to exist or if they have been displaced by the neoliberal restructuring of industrial agriculture (Araghi 1995; Byres 1996; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2012).

While many before have challenged the death of the peasantry, the emergence of new agrarian social movements with agroecological systems of production is yet one more refutation of the thesis of modernization and the death of the peasantry implied in the work of Kautsky and others. These social movements are thus posing what has been referred to as a "new agrarian question", consisting of a reframed development paradigm in which peasant knowledge, forms of land management, and group solidarity are valorized and permanence on the land is made possible through agroecological practices (McMichael 2006: 471). McMichael describes this as a reformulation of the agrarian question as a question of food, which shifts the epistemological and ontological focus from production to social reproduction. These debates about the agrarian



question and the new agrarian question are fundamentally geographic in nature. The two processes of depeasantization and repeasantization are key to understanding the geographic nature of these questions.

In the twentieth century, a global-scale demographic shift, known as depeasantization, began as the rural agricultural population moved to urban areas (Araghi 1995). Depeasantization became pronounced in the post-World War II period, which “saw the most spectacular, rapid, far-reaching, profound, and worldwide social change in global history. ... [This] is the first period in which the peasantry became a minority, not merely in industrialized developed countries, in several of which it had remained very strong, but even in the Third World countries” (Hobsbawm 1992: 56). Whereas 29 percent of the global population, and 16 percent of the “Third World”, lived in urban areas in 1945, by 2012 that number had raised to 51 and 47 percent, respectively (World Bank 2013). This hypothesis that the expansion of capitalism will slowly result in rural socioeconomic change by transforming peasants into wagedworkers or large-scale capitalist farmers is known as the *disappearance thesis* (Araghi 1995).

By contrast, those advocating the *permanence thesis* hold that peasants follow a different logic than industrial capital and are able to maintain their reproduction in rural areas through their adaptability. Van der Ploeg has used the term *repeasantization* to describe “in essence, a modern expression of the fight for autonomy and survival in a context of deprivation and dependency” (2008: 7). This “modern expression” is the contemporary phenomenon of nonpeasants and former peasants engaging in “autonomous” subsistence practices and production relations. Repeasantization is a backlash against depeasantization, and is a process whereby rural areas, which frequently are environmentally degraded, are once again being utilized for small-scale agriculture (Edelman 1999; Leonard and Kaneff 2002; van der Ploeg 2012). Depeasantization and repeasantization are two elements of rural proletarian movements' moral economy, because they are both about the value of land for social reproduction. Radical proletarian movements deplore depeasantization because land is part of cultural heritage. These movements value repeasantization from an ethical perspective because it enables social reproduction on the land. Agroecological practices are key tools for strengthening and reforming cultural ties with the land.

There are a variety of agroecological practices that grassroots movements use in repeasantization (van der Ploeg 2012).<sup>11</sup> The first agroecological practice that enables repeasantization is the *reduced usage of external inputs*, which goes along with the increased incorporation of local resources. The practice of seed saving is a clear example of this, whereby a family reduces its reliance upon agroindustry, saves financial resources, selects for seeds that are more adapted to local environmental conditions, and conserves agrobiodiversity (Nabhan 1985; Rhoades and Nazarea 1999).

The second practice is *regrounding farming upon nature* (Vandermeer 1995; Ewel 1999). This constellation of methods consists of everything from means of increasing soil fertility to biological pest control, all of which seek to improve the interconnected flow of resources (Ewel 1986; Altieri 1993). These practices also reduce the usage of external inputs (van der Ploeg 2012: 49).

*Pluriactivity* is the third practice, and involves the generation of income from non-farm-related activities.<sup>12</sup> Pluriactivity is an important element of smallholder economies in both the global North and South (Amekawa et al. 2010). It exists along a continuum from temporary forms, such as seasonal migration, to more permanent forms. Pluriactivity can be considered an agroecological practice because it generates alternative sources of income that improve the possibility of a family remaining on the farm by not relying solely on income from agricultural production (Ricardio 2011).

The fourth mechanism involves *local cooperation*. Examples of local cooperation include seed-sharing networks and the collective attainment and usage of expensive machinery. The

fifth mechanism is *increases in technical efficiency in production*, which seeks to maximize production given a static quantity of resources (Pandey et al. 2001; Parrott and Marsden 2002; Altieri 2004; Uphoff 2007).

These five agroecological principles are elements of a moral economic response to the agrarian question; grassroots social movements utilize them in order to resist the expansion of capital, remain on the land, and advance alternative forms of production. The question remains as to how these movements are able to reach their objectives by utilizing agroecological practices.

In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre provides a geographic lens that is useful for understanding how movements attain their objectives through creating agroecological spaces. One of Lefebvre's central theses is that space is socially produced through material relations. "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial" (1991: 404). Repeasantization is necessary for agrarian social reproduction. To remain on the land, and to resist the expansion of capitalism, requires the re-production of space. The agroecological principles that constitute the process of repeasantization are the means through which space is actively re-produced. In addition to material relations, the role of ideology is equally important in the production of space.

As Lefebvre asks, "[W]hat is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and kinds it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?" (1991: 44). If agroecology is at once part of a dual moral economy and political ideology, then drawing upon Lefebvre, agroecology necessitates a space through which its practices can be engaged. The agroecological space is the one that is continually reproduced through the agroecological relations of production. Agroecology, therefore, refers to a space of repeasantization that has been won through an ideological, moral-economic, and often physical struggle with the state and the engines of capital. The production of space lens illustrates how movements use agroecology as an ideology, moral economy, and set of practices to socially produce a space through which they productively resist the expansion of capital and remain on the land.

### **Agroecology as a Means to Sovereignty**

Rural proletarian social movements advocate agroecology as a means to attaining sovereignty. Sovereignty is a key element of MST members' moral economy (Wolford 2005: 255). There are three forms of sovereignty that grassroots social movements mobilize around: food, energy, and technological sovereignty (Altieri and Toledo 2011).

Of the three forms of sovereignty, grassroots social movements have been the most vocal about the need for food sovereignty. Food sovereignty can be defined as "the right of local peoples to control their own food systems, including markets, ecological resources, food cultures, and production modes" (Wittman 2011: 87).<sup>13</sup> As McMichael recently put it, food sovereignty "is ultimately about an ontological contest between distinct visions regarding agriculture: as an economic sector with producing units employing a short-term market calculus, or a landscape inhabited by farmers/pastoralists/fisherfolk geared to sustainable ecological relations" (2014: 20).

A "forgotten genealogy" of food sovereignty is currently emerging (Edelman 2014) that departs from canonical accounts of the concept's origination in the 1990s (e.g., Wittman et al. 2010). According to this new genealogy, Central American governments were already using the concept of food sovereignty (*soberania alimentaria*) in the 1960s to refer to national self-sufficiency of food production. In the early 1980s, both the Nicaraguan and Mexican governments created national plans centered on the objective of food sovereignty (Edelman 2014). By

the late 1980s, Edelman reminds us, Costa Rican peasant activists were using the concept to critique the United States' dumping of surplus corn, which lowered domestic prices. Several of these Costa Rican activists would become founders of La Via Campesina in the 1990s. La Via Campesina, most scholars agree, is responsible for globalizing the concept of food sovereignty (Patel 2009; Wittman 2011).

LVC adopted food sovereignty at its 1996 conference in Tlaxcala, Mexico, as both a challenge to the industrial agriculture system and reigning discourse of food security as well as a set of practical alternatives.<sup>14</sup> Since the Tlaxcala conference, there has been an explosion of activist and academic attention on food sovereignty (Patel 2009; Perfecto et al 2009; Wittman et al. 2010; Rosset 2011; Fairbairn 2012).<sup>15</sup> Grassroots social movements' increasing demands for food sovereignty are in part a reaction to neoliberal agricultural restructuring that has replaced food crops with biofuels and led to the global food crisis of 2008 (Borras et al. 2008; Dauvergne and Neville 2010; Wilkinson and Herrera 2010; McMichael 2010).

Sovereignty is a rights-based argument that has historically been linked to space, and thus forces a reconsideration of the relations between society and the environment (Wittman et al. 2010).<sup>16</sup> As LVC states in regard to food sovereignty: "We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory" (Patel 2009). The lens of autonomous geographies is useful for understanding how agroecology is employed in a rights-based claim to geography. As Pickerill and Chatterton define them, autonomous geographies are "those spaces where people desire to constitute noncapitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation" (2006: 730). The MST's João Pedro Stedile describes the conception of autonomous geographies from the perspective of a rural worker:

In the political struggle for the land we're always disputing ... space ... but in the head of a *camponês* there doesn't exist this idea of "space". He thinks, "I want to have a place to live, a place that gives me security, where I can raise my family and where no one will bother me." Then the *camponês* begins to have a small feeling of individual *sovereignty*: "Here I have *autonomy*, here I can develop my production, here I can have my culture, and here I can be a person." This is what's in his head. (Garmany et al. 2008: 188, emphasis added)

What Stedile underscores is that security is attached to sovereignty within the *camponês's* moral economy. Through land occupation, MST members create autonomous spaces for individual sovereignty and agroecological production. Stedile continues: "[W]e're realizing that to have control over nature and biodiversity is a very important thing, that to have control of the water is a very important thing, and that to have control of the seeds is a very important thing. It's important for *autonomy*, for the future of the movement, and for the future of *camponês* agriculture" (Garmany et al. 2008: 188, emphasis added).

Autonomous geographies are relational places that enable the coexistence of resistance, creativity, and solidarity across multiple scales. While the concept of autonomous geographies was built around anarchist theory and movements, it does provide purchase for analyses of rural proletarian social movements (Featherstone 2003). Whereas these movements are frequently not autonomous in every sense implied by Pickerill and Chatterton (2006), they do track these authors' concept of autonomous geographies in several senses. First, sovereignty is about autonomy because it emphasizes the necessity to provision sustenance within spaces that are free from neoliberal control. Returning again to Stedile,

This [agroecological] model of agriculture is the only one that can ... develop a policy of food sovereignty, where each people—all peoples—can and must produce their own food. And

as José Martí warns us, “a people that cannot produce its own food is a people enslaved.” He was correct, because the people that do not produce food will always depend on others for survival. (2013: 15)

Second, peasant movements are actively creating a network of autonomous geographies by mobilizing these sovereign spaces together as part of a transnational movement. Third, these movements constitute autonomous geographies because their agroecological practices are a creative form of resistance to neoliberal privatization of agriculture. Autonomous geographies are a direct response to Ferguson’s (2010) critique of antineoliberalism, because they focus on the creation of agroecological “futures in the present” (Clever 1993).

## Conclusion

At the center of traditional accounts of the moral economy is the concept of the marketplace as a site of contestation (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). In the era of neoliberalism, the market remains a locus of struggle, although not as a material territory, but rather as an immaterial territory of ideas. Within neoliberalism, the free market is the center of all value. Rural proletarian movements, which frame themselves as opposed to neoliberalism, contest the primacy of the market as the arbiter of value. The moral economy of these movements remains centered on the market as a site of protest, although they are “confrontations in the marketplace” of ideas. The role of agroecology in rural proletarian movements’ evolving agrarian moral economies speaks to the absence noted by Ferguson (2010) and exemplifies a constructive vision of the interrelations between environment and society in a postneoliberal world. This alternative vision consists of conserving agrobiodiversity, practicing ethical land management, and advocating a rights-based approach to food production.

Agroecology plays a multifaceted role in rural proletarian movements’ rapidly evolving agrarian moral economies. These movements value agroecology because of its relevance to political ideology through emphasizing collective mobilization, decentralized land tenure, and the ethical right to sovereign food production. Agroecology’s role within the agrarian moral economy demonstrates how value, ideology, and practice are intertwined with the production of landscapes. Antineoliberalism and neoliberalism are similar in this way: both consist of value systems, ideologies, and practices that affect the access to and usage of the environment. However, the geographic nature of this similarity quickly dissipates as neoliberalism strives to simplify through privatization, whereas rural proletarian movements embrace the complexity of diversity, which they advance through cooperation, integration, and self-sufficient adaptation.

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## NOTES

1. As an example of this trend in scholarship, the *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* was renamed in 2013 the *Journal of Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*.
2. Martinez-Torres and Rosset's (2014) tripartite delineation partially redresses Bernstein's (2009, 2014) critique that academics that are sympathetic to agrarian movements unwittingly homogenize them by describing them as "peasant" movements (e.g., Desmarais 2002: 93). While Bernstein's critique is valid, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that these movements (perhaps tactically?) homogenize themselves. For example, leaders of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement frequently use the terms *campesino* and "rural landless worker" synonymously (see Garmany et al. 2007: n1). I feel that such slippage is exemplary of what Wolford (2004) and Delgado and Rommetveit (2012) refer to as the MST's efforts to create an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983).
3. I focus on rural proletarian movements in general, and Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) in particular, because I have the most knowledge of these movements, having conducted four periods of fieldwork between 2009 and 2014 on agroecology in the MST.
4. The existence of agroecology as a social movement does not mean that all agroecologists are social movement activists, in the same way that not all agroecologists are botanists or ecologists. These groups frequently hold opposing understandings of what constitutes agroecological practices and their utility. These differences are discussed in Wezel and colleagues (2009).
5. Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2014: 10) note that these categories are fluid, and the identity of both movements in general, and their members in particular, will be along a continuum.
6. Frequently the MST's land occupations are not successful, or drag on for more than a decade as the MST activists continue pressuring the state to expropriate land. One reason behind the slow pace of the MST's direct action land reform approach is that a neoliberal model known as market-based land reform is increasingly dominant in Brazil (Borras 2008).
7. Costa Neto and Canavesi (2002) expand this timeline by arguing that at the MST's first national congress environmental concerns were debated.
8. The MST's involvement in the nascent LVC movement in the early 1990s was another factor driving this agroecological debate. The MST's involvement in LVC is exemplary of "internationalization", which is a process of increasing vertical integration between subnational, national, and international levels facilitated by formal internal movement structures and informal intermovement associations (Borras 2008: 259).
9. For an excellent, yet now dated, overview of both the origins and evolutions of the moral economy concept, see Thompson's 1991 essay "The Moral Economy Reviewed." Edelman's (2005) review article is one of the most relevant reviews of academic engagement with the moral economy lens because it builds a data-driven argument for the concept's application to transnational agrarian social movements such as La Via Campesina.
10. Chayanov undoubtedly plays an important role in the tradition of agrarian thought that led to agroecology (Guzman and Woodgate 2013). While certain of Chayanov's concepts, such as social agronomy, are quite relevant, Chayanov's modernization commitment and related emphasis on machinery and chemicals as the path to agricultural productivity makes him perhaps ultimately less relevant to these movements' agroecological framing (Bernstein 2009: 61).
11. Diversification, which was addressed earlier in the article, is the first principle that van der Ploeg (2012) mentions.
12. Pluriactivity is related to the discussion surrounding sustainable livelihoods (Scoones 2009; Amekawa et al. 2010; Amekawa 2011).

13. The concept of food sovereignty is certainly not exclusive to social movements, having become taken up by nongovernmental organizations and policy circles, as exemplified by the 2002 World Food Summit and countersummit, the Forum on Food Sovereignty, in Rome.
14. Edelman critiques the frequent argument that “food security” and “food sovereignty” are diametrically opposed, showing that there is indeed significant overlap, as certain key definitions revolve around “‘autonomy and self-determination,’ ‘sustainability’ and protection of ‘the ecological system,’ and ‘equity’” (2014: 9).
15. As an example of this academic engagement, see the various papers that came out of the recent agrarian studies conference on food sovereignty at Yale University (<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/>).
16. See both Edelman (2014) and Agarwal (2014) for critical discussions of changing conceptions of to what scale “sovereign” refers.

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