

Reruralizing the World

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I began to pose to myself the issue of the land as a crucial question at the end of the eighties, on the heels of a trajectory which, during the end of the sixties and the seventies, had as its crux the factory as the space of waged labour and then the home as the space of unwaged labour within which the former finds its roots. The labour, therefore, involved in the production of commodities and that of the reproduction of labour power, the labour of the factory worker and the labour of the housewife within the Fordist organization of society. At that time we said that the employer with one paycheck in reality bought two people, the worker and the woman behind him. Agricultural labour, or the labour of the land, which reproduced life for everybody, remained in shadows however.

The question that was always subtended to that path of mine, as to that of so many others, was of where the Achilles heel of capitalism, that profoundly unequal system we wanted to transform, could be found. Workers, students and women were in movement, but at that time, within the marxist culture that permeated rebellious society within developed countries, the agricultural labour of the farmer was seen as anachronistic.

The eighties, in which state politics formulated themselves as a response to the cycle of struggles of the sixties and seventies, are the years in which neoliberalism takes off, in which there are applied in a

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systematic and increasingly drastic manner in many countries the politics of structural adjustment, which cause in the world an unprecedented poverty. During those years in fact, there multiply struggles for bread, against the increase of the cost of living, from Latin America to Africa to Asia.

Yet strongly influencing the direction of domestic governments was the recommendation on the part of the International Monetary Fund that where land was free or subject to forms of local community-based usage that a price be fixed for it, in other words that it be subjected to a regime of private property. A result of this is that whomever wants to work it must first of all have enough money to buy it. It is no coincidence that those years become ones in which there multiply struggles surrounding the expropriation of land and the water that runs through its veins.

It is in this context that the issue of the land became central for me, considering the levels of poverty and the impossibility of subsistence that its expropriation (together with neoliberal policies and other measures typical of structural adjustment) determined. Naturally the expropriation of the land had already been since the sixties a particularly widespread practice characterizing the Green Revolution, which demanded that the bigger and better allotments of land be destined for export crops at the expense of public financing for subsistence farming.

The expropriation of the land was accompanied by the expulsion of populations that derived from it the possibility for nutrition and settlement. Eradicated from their land, they added themselves to urban slums or they took the route of migration. Yet the expropriation of the land and the eradication/expulsion of its populations also characterized many of the World Bank's development projects, beginning with the construction of large dams or roads or particularly with the transferring of populations, projects that complemented the policies of structural adjustment inasmuch as if the latter had increasingly lowered the quality of life, the former had maximized profit thanks to the large-scale demolition of factors at the base of social reproduction in those settings. Therefore I found as crucial constants of the development phase that took off in those years those macro-operations upon the land and its populations that had allowed the launch of the capitalist system five centuries ago: the expropriation from, and the accumulation of, land on the one hand, and the accumulation of immiserated individuals who could no longer reproduce themselves because they had been deprived of the fundamental means of production and reproduction, above all the land itself, on the other. These operations were now functional to a further

expansion of capitalist relations and to the re-stratification of labour on a global level.

Yet if the expropriation of the land remains a crucial element of that process of primitive accumulation that is reproduced again and again, generating ever-higher levels of poverty and famine, this makes the urgency of the question relevant not only to those who risk expulsion from the land, but to humanity in its entirety. The conditions of labour and of life of men and women across the world, regardless of where they live, are implicated, because it is upon the expulsion from the land that the condition for class is re-founded and labour within the global economy is re-stratified. As far as those expelled from the land are concerned, it is unthinkable that jobs will multiply in accordance with their number. Instead we are witnessing the decimation of such positions by various means. Nor is it possible to fool oneself into hoping for a global guaranteed income of such vast proportions. Yet even if it arrived one day, replacing the bombs perhaps, could we really delimit the matter to one of money, money sufficient for the purchase of a farming product which, in its industrial and neoliberal formulation, increasingly pollutes our bodies, destroys small economies and their jobs, and devastates the environment? And, beyond this, how much freedom would we have when all of the earth's inhabitants depended only and exclusively on money for their survival?

It is through posing questions such as these that, already in the eighties, beginning from the Global South, and more importantly, gaining greater visibility and formalization in the nineties, that there was formed a series of networks, many of which became connected through the best-known one, the Via Campesina, which make of the issues of farming and nutrition their clarion call. New networks and subjects, ones that are fundamental components of the movement of movements. It can therefore be said that, in the decade that just ended, yet with its roots in the struggles for bread, land and water of the eighties, a planetary movement for the defense of the access to land, for the preservation of its reproductive powers, for access to fresh and genuine food, has been formed. I encountered the Via Campesina in 1996 in Rome when, with Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Farida Akter and people of other circuits we put together the first alternative convention to that of the Food and Agriculture Organization, a convention in which that same network had a vital role in its ability to mobilize, to organize, and to fine-tune the themes that were brought to everyone's attention. It was also a crucial moment of the Zapatista insurrection, which had at its heart as with all indigenous struggles the issue of the land/Earth as a common good. In my view, given the resonance with which it came to the fore and the response

and support that it enjoyed on the part of the most diverse sectors within developed countries, that rebellion had built an ideal bridge, which for the first time had joined the struggle over the question of land expropriation with that of the post-Fordist expropriation of labour. Emblematic of this was the fact that at one pole there were the rebelling indigenous of Chiapas and on the other the workers/unemployed of developed Europe protesting in the streets carrying the banner of Zapata. In 1996 however agricultural issues were still paid scarce attention by rebel forms of activism in Italy. I still remember sensing a certain surprise surrounding the subject within a movement meeting I raised it at in March of that year. The attention paid to such themes today offers us a measure of the progress made since.

The networks that have been constructing themselves from the various global Souths and the Zapatista insurrection, as I was saying, returned to the developed world the concept of the land/Earth as a common good, and a many-sided concept at that. Let us consider the primary facets:

- a) The land/Earth above all as a source of life, of nourishment and therefore of plenty if preserved as a system capable of reproducing itself. Therefore the right of access to the land and to the resources it contains, above all water and seeds, against their continual privatization. The right of access to and the economic possibility of farming the land according to organic techniques, using all of the biodiversity that place can offer. Therefore a right to the variety of food as a universal right, not only for elites, and as a guarantee of better nutrition and greater health. The right to food freedom as the other face of food democracy. Food democracy as the basis for a different project of life, where farming, production and commercialization practices are sustainable from an economic, social, and environmental point of view. This against farming choices that condemn us to nutritional homogeneity (that is also the bearer of low nutrition and poor health), to the solely industrial production of food (possibly for import or export, but for many impossible to purchase), and to the specialization of crop cultivation imposed geographical areas within the neoliberal internationalization of markets;

- b) The land/Earth as the source of natural evolution. Therefore the right to protect the diversity and integrity of the different varieties against their destruction and genetic manipulation and the resulting immiseration and risks for the population. Networks that oppose themselves not only to the expropriation of the land but to its violation and to the commodification of its reproductive powers which constitute the crucial terrain of the current capitalist strategy of hunger, itself functional to stratifying labour and holding it ransom. On the other hand this terrain is crucial for the possibility, quality, and freedom of human reproduction. Therefore on such issues the political positions that are the bearers of the project of a different life, the most revolutionary ones, appear to be the most conservative.
- c) The land/Earth as territory on which to live against the continual eradication brought about by the industrial concept of agriculture and by war operations. Both of these take away land, polluting it in the former case with chemical products, and in the latter with explosives. War increasingly provokes via such pollution with lethal new explosives and toxic substances an infinite damage and an expulsion without a possibility of return.
- d) The land/Earth as a public space against its continual fencing off and privatization. From the increasingly numerous refugee camps to the increasingly numerous golf courses that alter the environment, taking away fields for farming or rice fields or public parkland. Already there have been bloody struggles around such elite projects from Vietnam to Mexico.

Yet even the construction of community that these networks represent, beginning from the land as a primary common good - in that they understand this to be the foundation of a different social construction - is articulated within a multifaceted approach. Above all women occupy an emerging role that corresponds to the crucial nature of their position within agricultural labour and the reproduction of the family. These networks, because they brought to the fore the fundamental role women have in the labour of agricultural subsistence, remind us of the fact that upon women and children fall the most dire consequences of the Green Revolution and the neoliberal project, and therefore ask that there be equal participation for women where planning for the farmers' movement is carried out. And, in bringing to the fore the issue of the

woman's condition, they above all raise the problem of the violence she is the victim of within the family, within the society, and particularly during the operations of land expropriations, such as women and children's right to education and health, to mention only some of the most important cases. Also symptomatic of an evolution in the relationship between the sexes, to give just one example, is that within the Karnataka Farmers Union (founded in 1980, counting around ten million members, and today a part of the Via Campesina) it was decided to abolish particularly expensive wedding rituals that, given their poverty, were impeding marriage for men and women. In other words what have been promoted are civil marriages of "reciprocal respect" without the intervention of the Brahmin in the place of the conventional marriages that often generated huge debts for families. The same union promotes programs and meetings for women, and a fixed percentage of seats on its committees are reserved for them.

Another equally significant fact is that networks for the recuperation of a different relationship with the earth, for the spread of organic agriculture, for access to fresh and genuine food, are being organized in the more developed capitalist countries. In the United States as far back as 1986 farmers resisting the dominant agricultural model founded the National Family Farm Coalition. Other examples, and significant ones, were created in the nineties in that country as well as in Canada, and of course in France there emerged the experience of "peasant-based farming" with José Bové. The Community Food Security Coalition formed in the United States in the past decade, involving producers, consumers and various other subjects, joined under the slogan of "food security for the community", a notion that gathered steam simultaneously from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. The latter not only put in place an organic agriculture, but it assured the distribution of its products at a local level allowing for access, through various types of arrangements, to low-income citizens, building distribution points at low cost and providing the necessary transportation to reach them. Declaring their intent to install a "more democratic nutritional system," it gathers 125 groups that connect food banks, networks of family farms, anti-poverty organizations which rarely collaborated on such network's programs in the past, and obviously operates on the basis of the push tying people together, putting in contact small urban or rural farmers, food banks, and soup kitchens for the poor and low-income communities. Similarly, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, which self-organized around the same problem, then became key organizers in the struggle for more decent conditions for reproduction, from housing to public parks, by making available for the community capacities, work skills and

knowledges generated at a local level. The first thing to note here is that a different will regarding the relationship to the earth, one that plays itself out through farming, is in these examples the first step towards a different will regarding modalities of life in their entirety, a different food project for a different social project. This is particularly evident if we look at that broad movement of initiatives that goes by the name of “social ecology” or “bio-regionalism” or “community economic development” which tend to re-localize development in the sense of developing, alongside a different form of managing the land (for nutrition, for housing, for public space), a different management of work skills, professional abilities and knowledges geared towards the strengthening and defence of the roots of a social context against its destitution and the eradication of its citizen inhabitants decreed by the global economy.

In the same way, the fact that the earth can represent housing stability, beyond being a source of nutrition, has led to the development in the United States of Public Land Trusts, which are conceived also as a means by which to safeguard the environment. With such initiatives people put together funds to purchase land. The goal is to preserve it as a piece of untouched nature or to build housing upon it: the latter can be sold but not the land upon which they are built. In this way the price of the home is kept low and therefore accessible for low-income segments of the population.

Even in the French case of peasant-based agriculture the plan for a different social project, beginning from its declared principles, is abundantly obvious. Above all that of international farmer solidarity against the harshest and most destructive competition which neoliberal globalization wants to impose, and beyond this are the principles of the social and economic significance of labour and human activity; of the refusal of productivism that is clearly expressed by Bové when he says: our goal and our work are not those of production: we occupy a space, we manage it and participate in the social bond with the countryside”; of a management of the countryside that is respectful of people, of the environment and of animals that translates itself in not wanting to increase excessively one’s farm because the countryside must represent jobs for many people, in not wanting to have more animals than those which the earth can sustain, in assuming responsibility of the maintenance of vegetable and livestock varieties that characterize that area, and much more. Similarly, the fundamental theme of nutrition and of not wanting to run risks with respect to this has been key in allowing the political position and commitment to grow and envelop the commodification of health, education, and culture.

In sum we can say today that the land, farming and nutrition constitute the emerging theme of the self-organized networks that developed in particular in the nineties and which, with the global movement of farmers, has vigorously come to the fore as the missing subject, upon whose labour we all depend every day in the reproduction of our lives. If re-localizing development is particularly significant with respect to the agricultural question this only fuels the re-localization of other aspects of development and life. Global is the movement, global are the rights, and global are the struggles, above all for the universal right to a healthy diet, a varied one and not a standardized and not an estranged one with respect to one's own cultural traditions and the specificities that the land, worked by men and women rather than raped by humans, can generate. And if it is true that, as Columbian farmers that have self-organized around the cultivation of varieties at risk of extinction say, the spirit is within the nature surrounding us, in the trees and in the rivers, then reruralizing the world is necessary to recuperate the spirit as well as life.

Translated by Enda Brophy

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