

**Politics beyond Dominance:  
Subaltern Power and World Making**

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the counter-intuitive relation between the systemic marginalization of subaltern groups and their world-making capacities. Challenging the widespread view of subalterns as only objects of domination and intervention, I argue that they have the capacity to enact alternatives to the dominant order and recompose collective existence from the margins. This capacity, what I call subaltern power, is grounded in enduring ways of being and worlding that continue to be sustained and cultivated despite forces of elimination and assimilation. The dissertation focuses on peasant politics as a significant site of subaltern power in contemporary global politics. I look closely at articulations of peasant power in three interconnected realms. First, I examine how peasant agroecology rejects the capitalist agro-industrial order and enacts social and ecological regeneration in response to the inheritance of ruins. Second, drawing attention to the ontological violence of rural displacement, I argue that peasant power is manifest in the staging of agrarian dissensus wherein peasant villagers make visible and audible a subaltern order of political community and just relations. Third, I suggest that the transformative power of transnational peasant movements exceeds normative and legal changes insofar as they work to construct a different world order through international agrarian restructuring, rural renewal, and epistemic decolonization. By attending to subaltern dwelling, dissensus, and translocal mobilization, I provide an analysis of how subaltern power is expressed in diverse locations, forms, and moments. The dissertation offers a framework to account for what is otherwise obscured in International Relations: the worlds at stake in subaltern struggles against the dominant order.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PEASANT POLITICS AS A POLITICS OF WORLDING

They are mad, they want more than land, they want to change the world.<sup>1</sup>

Here we still live with dignity, we don't just survive.<sup>2</sup>

To think globality is to think the politics of thinking globality.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1. A world seething with peasants<sup>4</sup>

##### 1.1. From peasants to terrorists: between political economy and security

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<sup>1</sup> Vikram Chandra, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> This quote is taken from an interview with a peasant woman who takes part in “The Women Defenders of Pachamama Front” to protest against two mining projects, Rio Blanco and Quimsacocha, in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador. See the documentary film “Mujeres en Defensa de la Pachamama” (Women in Defense of Mother Earth) available at DefensorasPachamama, “Mujeres en Defensa de la Pachamama,” YouTube Video, 20:52, October 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArZ4tIwuSDk>. Henceforth in the dissertation, all the provided internet links are last accessed May 1, 2018, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Culture Talks in the Hot Peace: Revisiting the ‘Global Village,’” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 330.

<sup>4</sup> I take “peasant” to refer to a historically specific articulation of a political and social identity rather than a self-evident empirical category. Although “peasant” and “farmer” may be interchangeable in colloquial language, my use of “peasant” in this project refers to a person who engages or seeks to engage in small-scale agricultural production, who relies significantly on family labor and other non-monetized ways of organizing labor, who tends to have a special relationship with the land and nature, and who typically, though not necessarily, lives in a village or is embedded in a local community. Peasants are distinguished from capitalist farmers insofar as they rely on the land and agricultural work heavily for subsistence, rather than for the accumulation of surplus value. For varying historical, social scientific, and activist definitions of peasants, see Marc Edelman, “What is a peasant? What are peasantries? A Briefing Paper on Issues of Definition,” prepared for the first session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, Geneva, July 15-19, 2013, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/MarcEdelman.pdf>. See also the definitions of peasants in various drafts of the said UN declaration: The initial draft from the 1<sup>st</sup> session during July 15-19, 2013 (A/HRC/WG.15/1/2) is available at [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2\\_En.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2_En.pdf); the revised draft from the 5<sup>th</sup> session during April 9-13, 2018 (A/HRC/WG.15/5/2) is available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/038/14/PDF/G1803814.pdf?OpenElement>.

On December 14, 2015, nearly 1,300 commandos, soldiers, and police officers amassed in the province of Vĩnh Phúc, Việt Nam to rehearse a large-scale anti-terrorist drill. Việt Nam is no stranger to international counter-terrorism campaigns in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US. In 2002, for instance, it signed the “US-ASEAN Joint Declaration for Co-operation to Combat International Terrorism.”<sup>5</sup> We might wonder if the anti-terrorist drill in 2015 was part of the ongoing fight against “international terrorism” in its various forms. Did it, in the disciplinary language of International Relations (IR), indicate the global threat, or securitisation, of terrorism, or did it perhaps point to the global diffusion of counter-terrorism norms and policies?

According to the news report, the drill involved “anti-terrorist combat, hostage rescue and subduing protests and riots.” More specifically, the scenario for the drill entailed residents in nearby localities being “incited to stage protests to complain about land and violations of democracy, human rights and freedom of religion.” In this scenario, the protests, having spread to multiple provinces, turned violent as the “opposition force” took over local administration buildings and held state officials hostage. The State President, the report continues, “was therefore forced to declare a state of national defense emergency in some provinces.”<sup>6</sup>

As the exercise unfolded, the training evidently diverged from international counter-terrorism operations. Just as significantly, the new meanings of terrorism in Việt Nam differ markedly from the nationalist narrative of historical struggles against the

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<sup>5</sup> “U.S.-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism,” U.S. Department of State Archive, August 1, 2002, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/ot/12428.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “1,300 Join Anti-Terrorist Drill in Northern Vietnam,” *Tuổi Trẻ News*, December 15, 2015, <http://tuoitrenews.vn/society/32237/1300-vietnamese-sappers-join-antiterrorist-drill-photos>.

terrorism of colonial and neocolonial occupation.<sup>7</sup> Terrorism is now identified with those who are seen as inciting popular protests. The scenario for the drill does not come out of a vacuum. Cases against the state's violations of democracy, human rights, and freedom of religion have long been made by internal dissidents as well as foreign and diaspora critics. These cases, however, have rarely turned into mass demonstrations. What is noteworthy about the construction of the recent anti-terrorist drill is that widespread protests specifically associated with complaints about land have become a central security concern for the state.

Peasant protests are not a new phenomenon in Việt Nam. Serious and sustained rural unrest occurred in the country as early as the 1990s. In particular, 1997 witnessed major disturbances in Thái Bình and Đồng Nai provinces where thousands of peasants took to the streets to make known their grievances after hundreds of verbal complaints, written petitions, and letters of denunciation had been ignored.<sup>8</sup> In Thái Bình, a revolutionary heartland during the war, peasants from 128 villages marched peacefully before the protests escalated over several months and turned violent. Local government offices were besieged; cadres were detained for questioning, several of whom were beaten while others fled the province. In one incident, local policemen were also taken

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<sup>7</sup> An imprint of this narrative can be found in Hoả Lò prison in Hà Nội, which the French colonial administration built to jail and torture Vietnamese political prisoners. Hoả Lò has been turned into a historic site available to the public. On one of its walls, a few carved paintings depict Vietnamese prisoners in struggle, some being tortured, others fighting back. One of the captions reads, “Đấu tranh chống khủng bố” (“Struggling against terrorism”).

<sup>8</sup> The grievances were manifold, including confiscations of land, requests for “voluntary labor,” the exaction of exorbitant and illegal taxes and fees, the corrupt appropriation of communal lands, the pocketing of funds raised for social welfare and developmental purposes, as well as the abuse of power by local officials more broadly. Benedict J. Kerkvliet, Russell H. K. Heng, and David W. H. Koh, eds., *Getting Organized in Vietnam: Moving in and Around the Socialist State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 12; Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 83-84; Carlyle A. Thayer, “Political Developments in Vietnam: The Rise and Demise of Le Kha Phieu, 1997-2001,” in *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa B. W. Drummond and Mandy Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2005), 23.

hostage and several police cars destroyed. When the central government dispatched 1200 special police to restore order, peasant demonstrators, in several instances, “grabbed riot shields from the police and smashed their megaphones.”<sup>9</sup>

In response to the unrest, the state, on the one hand, tried to suppress and discipline it by, for example, sentencing forty people to heavy jail terms for “abusing democratic rights to incite public disorder.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the leadership also answered to peasant demands by punishing some 1800 officials, passing a reformed land law in 1998 which sought to bolster peasants’ land rights, and launched a “grassroots democracy” program.<sup>11</sup>

In the last decade, peasant protests against land seizures have grown increasingly visible in Việt Nam as rural dispossession has intensified in the service of wide-ranging development projects. According to government reports, about 70% of all complaints submitted to governmental agencies are related to land confiscations.<sup>12</sup> Beyond

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<sup>9</sup> Thayer, “Political Developments in Vietnam,” 23-24; John Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), v-vi.

<sup>10</sup> Garry Rodan and Caroline Hughes, *The Politics of Accountability in Southeast Asia: The Dominance of Moral Ideologies* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Among the 1800 officials punished, 84 party members were expelled and 30 sentenced to prison. The “grassroots democracy” program promoted local consultation, supervision, and to a lesser extent, decision making, regarding budget accountability, contributions for public works, land use management, and social welfare policies. See V. Largo, ed., *Vietnam: Current Issues and Historical Background* (Nova Publishers, 2002), 6; Abuza, *Renovating Politics*, 84; Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and David G Marr, eds., *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), 17; Rodan and Hughes, *The Politics of Accountability*, 98-100.

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen Van Chinh notes, “According to the Government’s Inspector General, between 2008 and 2011 there were about 673,000 petitions and complaints submitted to the central government and 1.57 million participants gathering in front of governmental bodies to express their grievances; among them, 70 percent of petitions and complaints are due to land confiscations. The Minister of Resources and Environment also reported that 98 percent of petitions sent to his ministry are connected with land issues (Tổng Thanh tra Chính phủ 2011).” See Nguyen Van Chinh, “Rural Unrest and Collective Protests in Vietnam,” in *The Promise of Reconciliation? Examining Violent and Nonviolent Effects on Asian Conflicts*, eds. Chaiwat Satha-Anand and Olivier Urbain (Transactions Publishers, 2016), 104-105. Similarly, another source notes, “According to government reports, complaints involving land acquisition and compensation made up 70% of all complains to governmental agencies received from July 1, 2004 to 2011.” See Toan Le and Nguyen

complaints and petitions, peasants have traveled from villages in all three regions, in many cases across the country, to march in the capital city. With mass banners such as “return farmland to the tiller” and “arresting innocent people to steal land is a crime,” large groups of peasant demonstrators are now a regular sight in Hà Nội.<sup>13</sup>

More militant opposition in self-defense against forcible evictions usually occurs at rural sites. This ranges from villagers standing in front of bulldozers, to setting up barricades blocking entry into the village<sup>14</sup>, to improvising land mines<sup>15</sup> and gasoline bombs<sup>16</sup> to fight against eviction police, to name a few more known cases. The most large-scale resistance so far happened in 2012 when about 2,000 villagers established encampment and refused to give up their land in the face of some 3,000 police and security forces equipped with full riot gears.<sup>17</sup> (I will discuss this conflict further in chapter 4.) Although until the anti-terrorist drill in 2015, Vietnamese peasants had not

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Hung Quang, “An Historical Overview of Vietnamese Land Law and Dispute Resolution,” in *Resolving Land Disputes in East Asia: Exploring the Limits of Law*, eds. Hualing Fu and John Gillespie (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 275.

<sup>13</sup> They protest vocally and wait patiently, rain or shine, in front of government buildings such as the Main Office to Receive Citizens of the Central Party and State, the Supreme Court, and the Inspectorate of the Ministry of Public Security, as well as places that would give them needed visibility such as the headquarters of the national television broadcaster and of the Nhân Dân (People’s) Newspaper, the central organ of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

<sup>14</sup> “Dân Lập ‘Chiến Lũy’ – Cảnh Báo Bất An Ở Một Làng Quê” (People Set Up ‘Bulwark’ – Alert of Insecurity In a Village), *VTC News*, July 4, 2013, <http://vtc.vn/dan-lap-chien-luy-can-hao-bat-an-o-mot-lang-que.394.393656.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> John Ruwitch, “Vietnam’s Land Struggle: Tension Between Farmers and State,” *Huffington Post*, January 20, 2012, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/20/vietnam-land-struggle\\_n\\_1218354.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/20/vietnam-land-struggle_n_1218354.html).

<sup>16</sup> Trà Mi, “Thu Hối Đất Ở Long An: Dân Nổi Lửa, Tạt Acid Vào Lực Lượng Cường Chế” (Land Reclamation in Long An: People Blazed Up, Threw Acid at Eviction Forces), *VOA News*, April 16, 2015, <http://m.voatiengviet.com/a/thu-hoi-dat-o-long-an-dan-noi-lua-tat-acid-vao-luc-luong-cuong-che/2722367.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Việt Hà, “Căng Thẳng ở Hưng Yên: Chính Quyền Tuyên Bố Cường Chế, Dân Quyết Chống Lại” (Tension in Hưng Yên: The Government Declares Forced Eviction, the People Are Determined to Resist), *Radio Free Asia*, April 23, 2012, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/hung-yen-leader-to-grasp-land-04232012063931.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/hung-yen-leader-to-grasp-land-04232012063931.html); “Công An và Bộ Đội Cường Chế Đất của Dân Huyện Văn Giang” (Policemen and Soldiers Forcibly Seize Land from People in Văn Giang District), *Radio Free Asia*, April 24, 2012, <https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/vietnamnews/secu-force-seize-land-04242012102947.html>.

recently laid siege to government offices and held state officials hostage<sup>18</sup>, the volatile situations in the past few years, coupled with the lurking memory of Thái Bình, made the anti-terrorist scenario more realistic than the state would have liked.

Given this historical and political context at the level of the nation-state, how do we make sense of the latest military exercise against those “incited to stage protests to complain about land” in Việt Nam? One common reading would attribute it to the type of the state: The mobilization of police and military forces confirms the oppressive nature of the one-party authoritarian rule, which does not tolerate the democratic freedom of citizens to demand rights. These rights include not only political rights to freedom of thought, expression, assembly and association, but also economic rights to land and livelihoods.

Seeing past regime types, others contend that all types of states are capable of employing counter-terrorism discourses and operations to deal with whomever and whatever they deem as a threat to national security. For example, Kim Lane Scheppele points out that when the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1373 in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, which required all 192 members states to change domestic law to fight terrorism without a clear definition, states enacted “a

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<sup>18</sup> In April 2017, however, villagers in Đồng Tâm commune, Mỹ Đức province, detained thirty eight officials and police officers to protest a government attempt to seize 145 acres of disputed land. The villagers then released some while holding hostage 19 officials for nearly a week. They released the remaining 19 officials only after meeting and negotiating with Hà Nội mayor Nguyễn Đức Chung. For further details, see Mike Ives, “Villagers Hold Officials Hostage in Vietnam Land Dispute,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/asia/vietnam-hostages-protest-land-dispute- eviction.html>; Mike Ives, “Vietnamese Villagers Release 19 Officials Held Hostage in Land Dispute,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/22/world/asia/vietnam-hostages-land-dispute.html>; Toan Le, “Lessons Learned From Vietnam’s Dong Tam Standoff,” *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/lessons-learned-from-vietnams-dong-tam-standoff/>; “Nhìn Lại Vụ Đồng Tâm: Bài Học Về Sức Phán Kháng của Người Dân” (Looking Back at the Case of Đồng Tâm: Lessons on the Resistance Power of the People), *Radio Free Asia*, December 28, 2017, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/dong-tam-a-lesson-on-peoples-protestation-12282017115527.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/dong-tam-a-lesson-on-peoples-protestation-12282017115527.html).

proliferation of very different terrorism offenses, ranging from narrowly defined crimes to political crimes so broadly framed that they included all government opponents in their purview.”<sup>19</sup>

Puzzling questions remain, however: Why, of all perceivable dangers, would those complaining about land, who in some cases are identified as land rights activists, pose a threat to national security? Especially in a country where the majority (about 68%) of the population live in rural areas, how have the same peasants who constitute its long-standing social and political base now become potential opponents in the eyes of the state? How do we understand the equivalence of peasants, on the plane of counter-terrorism, with the more internationally known targets such as transnational criminal networks and militant fundamentalist organizations? What is so terrorizing about peasants’ complaints and protests about land?

Beyond the relationship between state and society, I propose that these questions raise theoretical considerations for understanding international relations. First of all, if peasants typically come under the purview of global political economy under various theories and practices of modernization and development, when do they mutate into concerns about terrorism? Under what conditions do bodies marginalized by the dominant political economic system emerge as a prominent threat to national security? What can we glean about the relationship between political economy, human rights, and security, fields of scholarship that are usually separate within IR, to make sense of a subaltern figure that traverses all three: peasant cum land rights activist cum terrorist? What suturing of world order does this traversal disclose and disrupt?

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<sup>19</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, “From a War on Terrorism to Global Security Law,” *The Institute for Advanced Study Letter* (Fall 2013), 8, <https://www.ias.edu/scheppele-terrorism>.



It is important to keep in mind that Việt Nam is not an isolated case of such traversal. To take a related example albeit from a different historical, socio-political context: As indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico resorted to arms to fight for their land and way of living, the Mexican state labeled the Zapatistas terrorists and tried to brutally suppress the movement. Another example can be found in the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, in which landless rural workers and families, without arms, occupied latifundios (large landed estates) to pressure the government for land redistribution and agrarian reform. Brazilian state officials, not just private landowners, referred to their land occupations as “heinous crimes,” terrorism, and a security threat. The Minister of Agricultural Development under the Cardoso government branded the MST a terrorist group<sup>20</sup>, while a state prosecutor under the Lula government called it “a paramilitary organization and a threat to national security.”<sup>21</sup> Referring to the MST’s strategy as land invasions, a congressional inquiry in 2005 called for them to be declared as “acts of terrorism” while urging the prosecution of MST leaders.<sup>22</sup>

We may wonder: What is so threatening about peasant collectivities that endeavor to make themselves heard and seen, even when they do not take up arms, such as in the cases of protests and land occupations? What ordering of the world do they intervene in that generates so much anxiety and requires so much violence to maintain and reproduce itself? And is it only danger and disorder that they represent, or might there be something else embodied in the subaltern peasants that terrifies the established authorities?

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<sup>20</sup> Wilder Robles and Henry Veltmeyer, *The Politics of Agrarian Reform in Brazil 2015: The Landless Rural Workers Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Gibby Zobel, “We Are Millions,” *New Internationalist*, December 2, 2009, <http://newint.org/features/special/2009/12/01/we-are-millions/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Brazil Land Invasion ‘Terrorism’,” *BBC News*, November 30, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4484606.stm>.

The recent anti-terrorist drill in Việt Nam appears puzzling in part because the Socialist Republic targets the very people who formed the backbone of the recent wars and revolution and who were thereby pivotal to national independence and reconstruction. Even if the single-party regime is notorious for suppressing dissent, how could it turn its back on its abiding source of legitimacy? And yet, given the indispensable role peasants have played in the building of the nation, could this act of turning back on peasants be also an anticipation of what they are capable of and thereby an attempt to face up to it?

In response to peasants' unrest in Thái Bình in 1997, then Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải affirmed, "If rural areas remain stable and farmers are happy with their livelihood, our country will be able to ensure stability however serious the difficulties. Therefore, rural stability is the key to national security."<sup>23</sup> The centrality of rural stability is striking in the Vietnamese PM's statement. Surely, experts on international development would tell us that rural transformation vis-à-vis modernization plays some role in an underdeveloped agrarian country. However, PM Phan Văn Khải points to a distinct understanding of development and its relationship to agrarian order: Rural livelihood is no secondary matter, and it is rural stability, not necessarily rural radical transformation, that is "the key to national security." Following the articulation, this key may open the door to a different social imaginary in which a country can surmount any grave difficulties as long as "farmers are happy." What is the place and power of peasants in such an imaginary that their happiness and capacity to flourish ensure national security

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Largo, *Vietnam*, 6.

while, inversely, their discontent and unrest would threaten it? (In chapter 4, I will elaborate further on the constitutive aspects of this subaltern imaginary in Việt Nam.)

If conventional wisdom in IR takes for granted that military capability, and to a lesser extent, economic growth, are essential to state security and power, what alternative conceptions of political order and power can we learn from a social imaginary centered around rural sustainability and peasant vitality, one that is globally diverse and not limited to Việt Nam alone? (Chapter 5, with a focus on transnational peasant movements, will elucidate the globally diverse nature of these alternative conceptions.) My dissertation seeks to examine these conceptions and the implications they yield for our thinking of world order and transformation.

## **1.2. A vibrant past and present**

Beyond contemporary Việt Nam, peasants remain a vibrant social and political identity in many countries across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>24</sup> Neither strangers nor simple converts to campaigns of modernization and industrialization, peasant villagers in these places actively partake in the making and remaking of the social structures they are embedded in, including but not limited to the nation.

Indeed, an outstanding feature of twentieth-century global politics was the centrality of peasants in carrying out rebellions, revolutions, and independence movements against European colonization in many countries. Many thinkers and activists around the world put peasants at the center of theories and praxis of self-determination

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<sup>24</sup> Peasant has been and continues to be a politicized identity in diverse national and transnational movements. See, e.g., Edelman, “What is a peasant?”

and social transformation. The Vietnamese resistance wars against two imperial occupations, by France and by the United States, provided an exemplary articulation and mobilization of peasant power. Another prominent example is the Chinese revolution, along with Mao Tse-tung's influential political theory, which recognized peasants as the protagonists of insurrectionary change foundational to national construction, rather than as a stagnant or reactionary class. The Vietnamese and Chinese examples were part of a global phenomenon, rather than exceptions. Peasant revolts and revolutions in other places such as Mexico, Algeria, and Cuba, enacted visions of political orders with wide-ranging consequences beyond particular national boundaries.<sup>25</sup> As Teodor Shanin observed in 1966, "Day by day, the peasants make the economists sigh, the politicians sweat and the strategists swear, defeating their plans and prophecies all over the world – Moscow and Washington, Peking and Delhi, Cuba and Algeria, the Congo and Vietnam."<sup>26</sup>

These events show us that, far from being linked to backwardness and conservatism only, peasants were also, in theory and in practice, at the forefront of actualizing radical changes, including world-transforming revolutionary movements. It is revealing that the very emergence of "peasant studies as a new field of expertise," remarks Timothy Mitchell, "can be located quite precisely in the widespread rebellions

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Teodor Shanin, "The Peasantry as a Political Factor," *Sociological Review* 14:1 (1966); Joel S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution: Pressures toward Political and Social Change in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); "Special Issue on Peasants and Revolution," *Comparative Politics* 8:3 (1976).

<sup>26</sup> Shanin, "The Peasantry as a Political Factor."

that rural populations were able to organize against occupying European powers during the interwar years.<sup>27</sup>

While peasants might be an economic minority and seen, by and large, as a historical figure in the Western industrial world,<sup>28</sup> peasants in decolonization movements were understood to be contemporaneous political subjects capable of collectively remaking world order by resisting empires and building alternative political futures. Rather than an essential identity, peasant here names a political subjectivity profoundly constituted through processes of articulating and mobilizing for potent visions of self-determination and worlding. It is important to note that peasant subjectivity was central to not just any struggle, but the struggles to decolonize the world for a more just and democratic global order.

Continuing into post-independence era and even under the predominance of neoliberalism, peasants within and across nations persevere in fighting for sustainable conditions of farming and living, as well as for a more democratic order. This is evidenced in many forms of peasant activism. As rural displacement intensifies all over the globe, especially given the phenomenon of increasing large-scale land acquisitions which has come to be called “global land grabbing,”<sup>29</sup> affected peasants have been

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002), 124.

<sup>28</sup> Since the industrialization of agriculture and the acculturation of rural dwellers into modern citizens, the farmer, small and large-scale, has replaced the peasant as the main identity of modern agriculturalists in the West. For an account of this systematic transformation, see Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). For a commentary on the abolition of the peasantry in quest of modernization beyond France, see Theodore Zeldin, “The Destruction of Peasants,” *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 1977. Although peasants appear to progressively disappear in the West, there remain efforts to reclaim this identity. See Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> See Marc Edelman et al., eds., “Special Issue: Global Land Grabbing and Political Reactions ‘From Below,’” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42:3-4 (2015); Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., Ruth Hall, Ian Scoones,

leading local protests and national campaigns to protect their land and livelihoods, to demand agrarian reforms, as well as to reconstruct the rural. More visible than local protests are rural social movements, especially those with militant measures, such as the land occupations in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Malawi, the MST in Brazil, the Landless Peasant Movement (Movimiento Sin Tierra) in Bolivia, and the Zapatista movement in Mexico.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, a significant development of contemporary peasant activism lies in international coalitions that pursue, on a global scale, redistributive agrarian reforms, the promotion of peasant agriculture, ecological diversity and sustainability, and decentralized governance.<sup>31</sup> A notable example is La Vía Campesina, an international peasant movement at the forefront of advocating and instituting the principles and practices of food sovereignty and agro-ecology.<sup>32</sup> (I will discuss this international movement in further detail in chapter 5.)

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Ben White and Wendy Wolford, "Towards a Better Understanding of Global Land Grabbing: An Editorial Introduction," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38:2 (2011): 209-216; Michael Kugelman and Susan L. Levenstein, eds., *Land Grab? The Race for the World's Farmland* (DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2009); "The Global Land Grab: A Primer," *Transnational Institute*, February 2013, <https://www.tni.org/files/download/landgrabbingprimer-feb2013.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> See Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, eds, *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (New York: Zed Books, 2005); Angus Lindsay Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Oakland, CA: Food First Book, 2003); Nicole Fabricant, *Mobilizing Bolivia's Displaced: Indigenous Politics and the Struggle over Land* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Marcos and Vincente, *Ya Basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising* (CA: AK Press, 2004); Lero Vergara-Camus, *Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas, and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism* (Zed Books, 2014); Marc Edelman, *Peasants Against Globalization: Rural Social Movements in Costa Rica* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Saturnino M. Borrás, Marc Edelman and Cristobal Kay, *Transnational Agrarian Movements Confronting Globalization* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Nora McKeon, "One Does Not Sell the Land Upon Which the People Walk": Land Grabbing, Transnational Rural Social Movements, and Global Governance," *Globalizations* 10:1 (2013).

<sup>32</sup> Annette Aurelie Desmarais, *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* (Pluto Press, 2007); Michel P. Pimbert, ed., *Food Sovereignty, Agroecology and Biocultural Diversity: Constructing and Contesting Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2017); V. Ernesto Méndez et al., *Agroecology: A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-Oriented Approach* (CRC Press, 2015); Vandana Shiva, *Who Really Feeds the World?: The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology* (North Atlantic Books, 2015).

It is important to keep in mind that this proliferation of political struggles does not pertain to only rural areas or a particular population that identifies themselves as peasants. If that were the case, the significance of these struggles already could not be underestimated, given that rural population composes nearly half of the world population and despite the aggressive expansion of corporate agriculture, small-scale production still provides about 70 per cent of the world's food supply according to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).<sup>33</sup> Yet, the politics of peasant struggles exceed their own farming and living conditions. Even though land, subsistence farming, and the revitalization of the countryside are essential to the sustenance of peasants' life, my dissertation draws attention to the ways in which peasant struggles seek to challenge and transform larger political, economic, and ecological orders, which implicate all of us.

In spite of the global vibrancy of peasant politics in the past and present alike, peasants are nowhere to be found in the field of IR. There are a few peasant studies in comparative politics<sup>34</sup>, though these are meager compared to the scholarly attention given to them in other disciplines such as geography, sociology, and anthropology. These disciplines host a variety of debates and discussions engendered by “the peasant question,” especially in response to neoliberal globalization, such as peasant wars and

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<sup>33</sup> Karla D. Maass Wolfenson, “Coping with the Food and Agriculture Challenge: Smallholders' Agenda,” Preparations and Outcomes of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), Natural Resources Management and Environment Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, April 2013, revised July 2013, available at [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability\\_pathways/docs/Coping\\_with\\_food\\_and\\_agriculture\\_challenge\\_Smallholders\\_agenda\\_Final.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability_pathways/docs/Coping_with_food_and_agriculture_challenge_Smallholders_agenda_Final.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> E.g: Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1979); James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1977); James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1987); Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979-1989* (Yale University Press, 1992); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gabriel Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (Penn State University Press, 2011).

revolutions, capitalism and agrarian transformation, global land grabbing and land governance, food regimes and food sovereignty, to name a few.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, this burst of intellectual exchanges consistently meets with silence in IR.

Facing the conspicuous absence of peasants in IR, a simple question may arise: “Why aren’t there peasants in International Relations?” Are peasants irrelevant to world politics? Or, do the disciplinary borders of IR effectively bar their entry? If so, are there forms of identification peasants must carry to cross these borders and be recognized as a political subject within IR’s territory? Inversely, without proper IDs, are peasants presumably confined to their local villages and denied admission into the cosmopolitan globe?

Here, I am reminded of the questions writer Toni Morrison raises, in a different context, about certain absences “so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves”:

Looking at the scope of American literature, I can’t help thinking that the question should never have been “Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from it?” It is not a particularly interesting query anyway. The spectacularly interesting question is “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion? Not why. How?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> E.g. A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristobal Kay, *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Utsa Patnaik and Sam Moyo, *The Agrarian Question in the Neoliberal Era: Primitive Accumulation and the Peasantry* (Pambazuka Press, 2011); Van Der Ploeg, *The New Peasantries*; Philip McMichael, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* (Fernwood Books Ltd, 2013); Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg, *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto* (Fernwood Books Ltd, 2013); Zhao Yongjun, *China’s Disappearing Countryside: Towards Sustainable Land Governance for the Poor* (Ashgate, 2013); Farshad Araghi, “Global Depeasantization: 1945-1990,” *Sociological Quarterly* 36:2 (1995), 337-368; Deborah Bryceson, Cristobal Kay and Jos Mooij, eds., *Disappearing Peasantries?: Rural Labour in Latin America, Asia and Africa* (Practical Action, 2000); Dominique Caouette and Sarah Turner, *Agrarian Angst and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Duke University Press, 1994).



If we are to ask of IR what Morrison asks of American literature, we would also need to shift our theoretical focus from “why” to “how”: What intellectual feats had to be performed by scholars of IR to erase peasants from a world seething with their presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work and the field? What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion? And how has this escape and oblivion been enacted over and over, so methodically and imperviously?

As a subaltern figure whose presence and voice are foreclosed from the field of IR, peasant also reveals the limits of intelligibility that conventionally bound the discipline. In the next section, I look at *how* different theoretical approaches in IR either preclude the recognition of peasant as a political actor or frame peasant within existing categories of political agency that prevent us from conceiving of peasant as a distinctive and historically constituted political subjectivity. In both cases, I contend that these theoretical perspectives do not allow us to discern the ways in which peasant politics presents challenges to the dominant world order by articulating other ways of imagining and inhabiting the world.

## **2. An International Relations vacant of peasants**

In this section, I examine how the escape from peasant politics is theoretically sanctioned by two major theories of international relations: realism and liberalism (which includes liberal constructivism). While the scholarship identified with each of these theories is no doubt diverse, I am interested in investigating the shared core assumptions underlying each theoretical perspective and the ways in which these assumptions foreclose inquiries into peasant politics in IR. Despite the literal absence of peasant

studies in the discipline, I will discuss the theoretical conditions of both their absence and possible emergence under the above paradigms. In other words, I look closely at how this existing theoretical terrain either prohibits the entry of peasants into IR or allows it under specifically legible and manageable terms.

## 2.1. Realism in IR

In an entry on “Realism” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, William Wohlforth summarizes four central propositions around which realists tend to converge despite varying details in definitions of realism. The first proposition he lists is “groupism,” wherein “politics takes place within and between groups” and “[t]oday the most important human groups are nation states.” The second proposition is called “egoism”: Political action by both individuals and groups are “driven principally by narrow self-interest”, which is “rooted in human nature.” Third, anarchy, or the absence of central government, defines the nature of international politics and makes states resort to self-help. Fourth, the intersection of the above three propositions turns international relations into “largely a politics of power and security.”<sup>37</sup>

While other realists in IR may enunciate core assumptions of realism differently, the propositions that Wohlforth puts forth are indicative of what counts as politics, and particularly international politics, for realists across various strands. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on realists’ conceptions of political agency, power, and international order in relation to the erasure of peasants from IR.

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<sup>37</sup> William C. Wohlforth, “Realism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford University Press, 2008), 132-34.

For realists, nation-states are the basic units and most important actors in the contemporary international system. Because there is no authority above sovereign states, a condition realists call anarchy, states, as formally equal, “self-regarding” and “like units”, must rely on themselves to protect their own interests and ensure their own survival and security.<sup>38</sup> While states are functionally similar in anarchy, they are differentiated according to relative capability or power. It is this distribution of power among states that, for realists, principally determines the dynamics of international politics.<sup>39</sup> Never certain about other states’ intentions (especially to do harm) in an anarchic system rife with fear, states are compelled to prepare for the worst and engage in a zero-sum competition to “at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination.”<sup>40</sup> As John Herz describes the famous security dilemma, “Since none can feel entirely secure in a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.”<sup>41</sup> In this context of systemic tragedy, only major states, or great powers, which are “determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability,”<sup>42</sup> really matter for realists, because they set the terms that define the structure of international politics.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> As Kenneth Waltz states, “Whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts.” See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 88, 91, 93-97.

<sup>39</sup> While the balance of power is a key concept for all realists, classical realists differ from neorealists in their acknowledgement of the role that normative mechanisms within international society play in upholding world order. See Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (New York: Routledge, 1998), chap. 2, 15-31; also Richard Ned Lebow, “Classical Realism” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford University Press 2007), 58-76.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>41</sup> John H. Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 2:2 (1950), 157.

<sup>42</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 94.

By virtue of realists' state-centric view of the world, peasants, as non-state actors, do not count as significant agents in international politics. As Kenneth Waltz makes it clear, "States are not and never have been the only international actors. But then structures are defined not by all of the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones."<sup>44</sup> For structural realism in particular, states are given units with preexisting interests and motives<sup>45</sup>, while actors such as peasants are at best consigned to domestic political structures and rendered irrelevant to the dynamics of international politics.

Unlike structural realists, neoclassical realists pay more attention to the link between the internal characteristics of states and state behaviors in the international realm. In the words of some proponents, neoclassical realism posits "an imperfect "transmission belt" between systemic incentives and constraints, on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies states select, on the other."<sup>46</sup> The intervening variables responsible for this imperfection include institutional and ideological factors, such as domestic agenda setting, coalition building and ideological propaganda, to name a few.<sup>47</sup> However, neoclassical realists do not offer a coherent

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>45</sup> Waltz states, "The [balance-of-power] theory makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them." See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 122. For critiques of realists' conception of states as actors with pre-given identities, powers, and interests, see Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, "Institutions and International Order" in *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges*, eds. Ernst Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1989): 51–73; John Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together: Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," *International Organization* 52:4 (1998): 855-885; Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization* 38:2 (Spring 1984): 225-286.

<sup>46</sup> Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge UP, 2009), Introduction.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Jack Snyder attributes great powers' policies of "self-encirclement" and "imperial overextension" (which contradict realist prudence about balance of power and rising costs of expansion) to coalition logrolling and ideological propaganda, particularly facilitated by a cartelized system. Taking into account the "cultural legacies" of the US, Cohn Dueck argues that the US's "reluctant crusades" to uphold a liberal international order can be explained by looking at varying intersections of its four distinct strategic subcultures: nationalism, realism, progressivism, and internationalism. Not unlike Snyder, Dueck also places emphasis on mechanisms of domestic "agenda setting" and "coalition building." See Jack Snyder,

relationship between domestic politics and systemic constraints in their explanations of state behaviors, failing to account for why and under what conditions the former would serve as a mere supplement to and not a substitute for the latter.<sup>48</sup> More pertinently to our purpose here, neoclassical scholars adhere to the same notion of power with all other realists, which is evidenced in their exclusive focus on great powers. This brings me to my next point regarding the foreclosure of peasants.

Realists estimate a state's power largely on the basis of the material capabilities it possesses.<sup>49</sup> Regarding material capabilities, states have two kinds of power: actual or military power and potential power; the latter refers to socio-economic resources that can be employed to build military power, mostly a state's wealth and the size of its population.<sup>50</sup> It is important to emphasize that both actual and potential power hinge on modernization which centers on industrialization and technological development. As John Mearsheimer elucidates, "Wealth is important because a state cannot build a powerful military if it does not have the money and technology to equip, train, and continually modernize its fighting forces."<sup>51</sup> Industrial might is key because the more advanced an economy is, the more capable it is of amassing sophisticated weaponry and

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*Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell UP, 1991), chaps. 1-2; Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton UP, 2006), 1-43.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Lobell et al. are fuzzy about the connections between "the long term" wherein international outcomes mirror the distribution of power and "the short term" (how short is short?) wherein policy outcomes cannot be predicted based on a purely systematic analysis. Similarly, Dueck cannot answer why his employment of cultural explanations would render international pressures indeterminate only "to a certain extent" and not completely. See Lobell et al., *Neoclassical Realism*, 4; Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Although material capabilities are central to all realists' notion of power, classical realists have a broader understanding than neorealists' regarding the part that other factors such as diplomacy and ethical norms may play in the wielding of power. E.g: See Lebow's discussion on power and influence in Lebow, "Classical Realism," 64-66.

<sup>50</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 43, 55. Waltz notes similarly, "the political clout of nations correlates closely with their economic power and their military might." Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 153.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

producing surplus wealth to spend on defense.<sup>52</sup> In a telling mention of the peasantry, Mearsheimer notes that “semi-industrialized” states invariably have less surplus wealth available for defense “mainly because much of the physical product of the peasantry is consumed on the spot by the peasants themselves.”<sup>53</sup> Whether or not this is an implicit acknowledgement that peasants belong to a different economy, what matters here is that peasants are relegated to the bottom rung of the development ladder, at the top of which both actual power and potential power are most concentrated. Given the taken-for-granted stages of development – from agrarian to semi-industrialized to highly industrialized societies, or from backward to advanced economies – peasants are not incidentally absent from realists’ scheme of power and politics. They are its constitutive outside.

Closely connected with realists’ conception of political agency and power is their understanding of (world) order and change. First, the system of sovereign nation-states is most central to understanding world order for realists. They are concerned with only changes within this system rather than a change of the system itself. Neorealists in particular treat this system as ahistorical. As John Ruggie notes, “States and the system of states simply *are*: endowed with the ontological status of being, but not of becoming.”<sup>54</sup> Consequently, neorealist theory provides no means by which to account for a transformational logic that would effect systemic change.<sup>55</sup> The “striking sameness in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ruggie, “What Makes,” 863. See also Wendt and Duvall’s critique of neorealists’ ontological assumptions about the state and the international system in Wendt and Duvall, “Institutions and International Order.”

<sup>55</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, “Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis,” *World Politics* 35:2 (January 1983): 261-285.

quality of international life over the millennia”<sup>56</sup> that Waltz observes is, then, “a product of premise even before it is hypothesized as an outcome.”<sup>57</sup> Robert Gilpin acknowledges that this is an assumption and echoes Waltz, “the fundamental nature of international politics has not changed over the millennia. International politics continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.”<sup>58</sup>

Second, in this recurring struggle, major states hold the most decisive influence for realists. Within a state-centric view of world order, realists are primarily preoccupied with the cyclical changes among great powers. As Christopher Layne sums it up, “If history is “just one damn thing after another,” then great power politics is pretty much the same things over and over again: War, security competitions, the formation and dissolution of alliances, bids for hegemony and their defeat by counterbalancing behavior, and the rise and fall of great powers.”<sup>59</sup> Great powers occupy such an essential place in realism mainly because they possess the material capability to determine the dynamics of war and security that shape international order. Mearsheimer thus asserts, “The particular international order that obtains at any time is mainly a by-product of the self-interested behavior of the system’s great powers.”<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, the only change that significantly affects world order is a shift in the distribution of power.

This connects us back to the above discussion on power and the reason why peasants’ irrelevance to international order and change is not accidental but rendered

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<sup>56</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 53.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Layne, “The Influence of Theory on Grand Strategy: The United States and a Rising China,” in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations*, eds. Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 106-07.

<sup>60</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 49.

necessary within realist theory. In order to become great powers on realist terms and gain the capability to wield influence on international order, a state cannot remain agrarian or semi-industrialized; it must seek to achieve the highest level of economic development possible with maximum industrial and technological advancement. Peasants, then, are not simply insignificant in realist theory like any other non-state actors; they constitute the less developmental past that a state must escape in order to become powerful and of consequence in international politics.

## **2.2. Liberalism in IR**

After the discipline of IR was dominated, for a long time, by realism and its preoccupation with the competition for security and power among self-interested states in formal anarchy, the rise of liberal theory helped to open the discipline's door to a multitude of other actors, issues, and aspects of global politics. Michael Barnett and Kathryn Sikkink characterize this disciplinary shift as a movement "away from the study of "international relations" and toward the study of the "global society.""<sup>61</sup> Under the new paradigm, states are still considered important actors, but a multitude of non-state actors burst onto the scene of international politics, including nongovernmental organizations, transnational corporations, international organizations, transnational networks and social movements. Global issues broaden to previously uncharted or under-examined areas, such as human rights, democracy, law, economic interdependence, the environment, and culture. Liberal theories not only allow a proliferation of actors and

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Barnett and Kathryn Sikkink, "From International Relations to Global Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford University Press, 2008), 62.



issues in the study of global politics but also extend the understanding of politics itself beyond realist emphasis on interest and power. They highlight, in particular, normative and ideational dimensions expressed by international norms, institutions, and regimes. Accordingly, as Barnett and Sikkink note, “the overarching narrative of the field” has shifted from one of anarchy to one of global governance.<sup>62</sup>

Given these openings, peasants can theoretically be admitted into IR as non-state actors. Unlike realists, especially structural realists, who treat states largely as “black boxes” or “billiard balls” due to the presumed irrelevance of domestic variables to the international political structure, liberal theories attend to state-society relations and their possible impact on state behavior in the international realm. Furthermore, liberal theories also create the space to study how non-state actors may have influence in international politics not through states, but through global civil society. My concern here, thereby, is not with the literal absence of peasant study in IR research, but with the terms of entry that would permit such a study under liberal theories. To examine these terms, I look closely at liberal conception of political agency and order in IR.

There are two ways in which peasants, as non-state actors, can be propelled into relevance in IR by liberal theories. The first way is through the interrelationship between the domestic and international realms that liberal theorists posit. Andrew Moravcsik’s article, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” serves as an illuminating reference in this regard. For liberals, Moravcsik argues, the configuration of state preferences, rather than the configuration of capabilities as per

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 63.

realist theory, matters most in world politics.<sup>63</sup> To the extent that domestic institutions and relations shape a state's preferences, they acquire causal importance in international politics.

Moravcsik lays out three core assumptions of liberal IR theory that correspond to the three levels of analysis. First, "the fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups," whose "material and ideational interests" are independent of politics.<sup>64</sup> "[O]n the average rational and risk-averse," these actors advance their interests through political exchange and collective action.<sup>65</sup> Second, states, including authoritarian regimes, represent some subset of domestic society whose interests mold state preferences and policies. Third, within the international system, "each state seeks to realize its distinctive preferences under varying constraints imposed by the preferences of other states."<sup>66</sup> Proposing liberal theory as systemic theory, Moravcsik summarizes its essence in the following axiom: "what states want is the primary determinant of what they do,"<sup>67</sup> granted that what states want and do is determined by both domestic interests and the constraints imposed on them by interdependent state preferences.

According to Moravcsik's formulation of liberal IR theory, peasants, as a rational societal group, can attempt to influence state policy by pressing their interests and demands through representative institutions and practices. If peasants successfully capture a state's preferences, their interests may shape its purposive action in world

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51:4 (1997), 513.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 516-17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

politics. Depending on the “intensity of preferences” and the configuration of interdependent state preferences in the international system, a state may be willing to defend its domestic peasants’ material and ideational interests in dealing with other states.

The second way in which peasants can become relevant in IR is through their participation, as members of global civil society, in constructing and changing international norms and institutions. This participation is accentuated by liberal constructivist scholarship and distinct from the agency put forth by Moravcsik in two regards. First, liberal constructivist emphasizes norms, that is “standard[s] of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity,”<sup>68</sup> rather than pre-political interests, in the study of politics. Second, non-state actors can change the international distribution of ideas and norms through transnational networks and movements<sup>69</sup>; states’ representative institutions are not the only channels for action and change.

Following Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s influential article “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” peasants can initiate the process of a global norm shift by promoting new norms through three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization.<sup>70</sup> In the initial stage, their leaders or representatives act as norm entrepreneurs who create issues by challenging existing logics of appropriateness. Using networks of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations as platforms, norm entrepreneurs mobilize information, expertise, resources

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<sup>68</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52:4 (1998), 891.

<sup>69</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” 895.

and leverage to secure the endorsement of state actors and put norm socialization on their agenda. Once norm entrepreneurs have convinced a critical mass of states to adopt new norms through both domestic and international advocacy, the next stage – norm cascade – occurs through various mechanisms of international socialization such as emulation, diplomatic praise or censure, ridicule, material sanctions and incentives. Finally, norms are consolidated through professional training and habit, and reach the stage of (voluntary) internalization when they are widely taken for granted. Alongside states whose adoption and socialization are key to achieving international normative transformation, non-state actors are crucial not only from the inception as norm entrepreneurs but also throughout the whole process as unrelenting advocates.

Although the above theories open up different pathways for peasants to participate in international politics as non-state actors, I am interested in examining their shared assumptions about political agency and order, based on which peasants are rendered intelligible as political actors. First, the basic unit of analysis here is the individual, whose properties are given varying emphasis by different theorists. Moravcsik foregrounds individuals' interests, including material and ideational ones, which, he makes clear, are “analytically prior to politics.”<sup>71</sup> Liberal constructivists such as Finnemore and Sikkink call attention to norms and ideas. However, as Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes perceptively point out, ideas are understood in this literature as objects and individual possessions, rather than as social constitution.<sup>72</sup> This is revealed, for instance, through the relationship posited between norms and rationality or rational choice: the two

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<sup>71</sup> Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously,” 517.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, “Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3:2 (1997), 193-237.

are, symptomatically, held separate and supposed to complement each other in a process called “strategic social construction.”<sup>73</sup> These theories, thereby, share an ontological individualism wherein political agents are fundamentally autonomous individuals who choose to organize exchange and collective action rationally and strategically based on pre-given interests as well as appropriately according to norms.

I wish to highlight two major implications of the liberal conception of individualist agency for thinking peasant politics. First, it tends towards an agent-driven, choice-theoretic understanding of politics and lacks a robust understanding of political structures which determine social positions, circumstances, and capacities. As Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall observe, the “choice-theoretic perspective,” which is prevalent in IR literature on global governance, “frequently masks relations of imposition, domination, structural determination, or cultural hegemony.”<sup>74</sup> Peasants are not just any group of societal actors who seek to promote their interests through representative institutions or to advocate new norms through transnational platforms. Programs of modernization subordinate peasants to the hierarchical valorization of the urban over the rural, of industry over agriculture, and of the city over the countryside. Due to processes of political-economic restructuring, peasants have been made increasingly vulnerable to unlivable conditions, displacement, and disposability. Their political agency cannot be understood in isolation from the structural forces that govern their lives, engender their deprivation, marginalize their voices, and drive many to

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<sup>73</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” 888, 909-12.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

suicide.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, liberal theories do not afford us an analysis of such structures and their attendant violence.

Second, the liberal notion of agency cannot account for how social relations are constitutive of both political agency and political reality itself. As mentioned above, liberal constructivist scholars are more attentive to the role of norms and ideas in determining political behaviors. However, their conception of ideas as objects prevents them from recognizing that not only norms but identities, interests, and rationality are also socially constituted; none is prior to the social or politics. Moreover, ideas and norms are not simply things that political actors choose to entrepreneurially create, strategically frame and altruistically advocate; they shape their very interpretation and construction of reality. If meaning in the liberal conception of the social, as Laffey and Weldes note, is “ultimately reducible to a property of individuals,” then even liberal constructivists in IR fail to heed the constructivist insight that meaning is constitutive of entities and relations.<sup>76</sup> This means that peasants can only appear as liberal actors, whose action is read along the lines of pre-given interest and identifiable norms as standards of appropriate behavior, in an already transparent world. Other than this universalized model, liberal theories cannot help us understand how historically specific social relations constitute not only peasants’ action but also their very interpretation of the world. In

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<sup>75</sup> It has been recognized that farmer suicide is an international crisis not unique to the Global South: “The U.S. farmer suicides rates are just under two times that of the general population. In the U.K. one farmer a week commits suicide. In China, farmers are killing themselves daily to protest the government taking over their prime agricultural lands for urbanization. In France, a farmer dies by suicide every two days. Australia reports one farmer suicides every four days. India yearly reports more than 17,627 farmer suicides.” See Terezia Farkas, “Too Many Farmers Are Committing Suicide,” *The Huffington Post*, September 11, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/terezia-farkas/farmer-suicide\\_b\\_5798656.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/terezia-farkas/farmer-suicide_b_5798656.html); Max Kutner, “Death on the Farm,” *Newsweek*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/04/18/death-farm-248127.html>. For an analysis of the global structures culpable for this crisis and the destitution of subsistence farmers more broadly, see Rahul Rao, “Blenheim & Bangalore,” *New Internationalist*, September 1, 2005, [https://newint.org/columns/essays/2005/09/01/blenheim\\_and\\_bangalore](https://newint.org/columns/essays/2005/09/01/blenheim_and_bangalore).

<sup>76</sup> Laffey and Weldes, “Beyond Belief,” 205.

other words, liberal theories fail to get at what peasants “make” of their circumstances, as John Ruggie puts it, both in the sense of understanding these circumstances and in the sense of “acting on whatever understanding they hold.”<sup>77</sup> This brings me to the next point about the liberal conception of order in IR.

It is widely acknowledged by liberal scholars themselves as well as their critics that liberal theories, implicitly or explicitly, uphold a liberal vision of world order. Certainly, this is manifested in the active involvement in policymaking by prominent scholars. For example, G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter co-directed Princeton Report *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law* (2006), which laid the blueprint for US national security coupled with its leadership in the buttressing of a liberal world order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>78</sup> However, I would argue that the imbrication between IR liberal scholarship and the forging of a liberal world order lies, more fundamentally, in the assumptions about the universality of liberal values and progress. Even Moravcsik’s professedly “nonideological” formulation of liberal IR theory as a social scientific paradigm is itself “deeply ideological,” as Beate Jahn meticulously argues, not only on his own methodological terms but also in the broader sense that it “represents a particular world view justifying and propagating certain policies.”<sup>79</sup>

Many scholars agree that central to a liberal world order and world view is the principle of the natural freedom of the individual and the institutions that seek to best realize it such as free market economy, private property, the rule of law, and

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<sup>77</sup> Ruggie, “What Makes,” 877.

<sup>78</sup> G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2006), <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> Beate Jahn, “Liberal Internationalism: From Ideology to Empirical Theory – and Back Again,” *International Theory* 1:3 (2009), 409-38.

representative government by consent.<sup>80</sup> What I want to emphasize is that the liberal conception of order is bound up with the notion of progress, both of which pivot on liberal ideas and institutions. As Trine Flockhart notes, liberal order “contains an ideological vision for an imagined future” such that liberal agents purposively act “with the clear intention of making progress towards the liberal vision.”<sup>81</sup> This, then, has two important following implications.

First, insofar as liberal theories gauge historical progress with liberal ideas and institutions, they remain oblivious to both the violence undergirding such progress and resistance to what is assumed to be an obvious good. Not accidentally, governance in the liberal view, as Barnett and Duvall observe, “is a matter of resolving conflicts, finding common purpose, and/or overcoming inefficiencies between actors in situations of interdependent choice.”<sup>82</sup> Much of IR literature on global governance focus on liberal peace (promoted through democracy promotion, international trade, and international organizations), consensus, legitimacy, compliance, cooperation, socialization and norm diffusion<sup>83</sup>, rather than questions of power, violence, and contestation, especially as they are intimately connected with, rather than external to, liberal ideas and institutions.

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 1&2,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12:3&4 (1983); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 2; George Sorensen, *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing between Imposition and Restraint* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2-3; Emanuel Adler, “Resilient Liberal International Practices,” in *Liberal World Orders*, eds. Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart (Oxford University Press, 2013), 54; Stefano Guzzini, “Liberal International Order,” in *Liberal World Orders*, 248.

<sup>81</sup> Trine Flockhart, “Liberal Imaginations: Transformative Logics of Liberal Order,” in *Liberal World Orders*, 82.

<sup>82</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> E.g: Bruce Russett, “Liberalism,” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 95-115; Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Beth A. Simmons et al., eds., *The Global Diffusion of Markets and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to*



With regards to peasant politics, the alignment of liberal progress with capitalism and modernization is particularly consequential. Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, for instance, take note of liberal notions about “the virtues of markets and capitalism as the best (and perhaps the only) means to “progress”.”<sup>84</sup> Relatedly, in discussing liberalism as “the spirit in the machine” of global governance, Barnett and Duvall point to the liberal belief in progress “that modernization processes and interdependence (or, now, globalization) are transforming the character of global politics.”<sup>85</sup> Given such commitment to progress, liberal theories fail to recognize how historically entrenched processes of modernization and capital accumulation rests upon a naturalized devaluation of the rural, which is detrimental to the peasantry. These processes are complex and I will discuss them further later, but suffice it to say here that their most visible impact on the peasantry can be seen in the massive conversion of agricultural land for industrial purposes and development projects more broadly, and in the industrialization of agriculture itself. These transformations have increasingly displaced peasant agriculture, which is labor-intensive and at least partially responsible for peasants’ subsistence, with large-scale corporate farming, which is capital-intensive and geared towards profitable

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*Compliance* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics”; Richard Price, “Transnational Civil Society and Advocacy in World Politics,” *World Politics* 55 (2003), 579-606; Margaret P. Karns, Karen A. Mingst, and Kendall W. Stiles, *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015); Brian Frederking and Paul F. Diehl, eds., *The Politics of Global Governance: International Organizations in an Interdependent World* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015); Brian Greenhill, *Transmitting Rights: International Organizations and the Diffusion of Human Rights Practices* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Aseem Prakash and Jeffrey Hart, eds., *Globalization and Governance* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, “The Power of Liberal International Organizations,” in *Power in Global Governance*, 163. Similarly, Hobson and Kurki observe the close link between liberalism and capitalism, “When shaped and structured by liberalism, [democracy] is taken as the best vehicle or provider of core liberal values: it is identified as the best and most logical partner for capitalism, it protects property rights, limits the power of the state, facilitates entrepreneurship of individuals, and is seen to best provide and ensure individual and minority rights.” See Christopher Hobson & Milja Kurki, “Democracy Promotion as a Practice of Liberal World Order,” in *Liberal World Orders*, 195.

<sup>85</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 5.

agro-exports. They have also displaced peasant communities themselves through systemic forcible evictions from their land.

I argue that liberal theories are not simply blind to the structural violence that peasants suffer and resist; their adherence to progress actually *justifies* it. As the works of David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah persuasively demonstrate, integral to the building of a liberal global order is the construction of Third World states, and backward others on the whole, as “objects of progressive modernization.”<sup>86</sup> This construction rests on a moral desire that, as many scholars have seriously interrogated, lies at the heart of liberal world ordering: the moral drive to reform the world by reforming (and eliminating) non-liberal others.<sup>87</sup> As Vinay Gidwani traces “how development becomes the defining *problematic* of liberalism and, by association, colonial government” in *Capital, Interrupted*, he effectively argues that a “moral onus of trusteeship” harnessed to the telos of progress

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<sup>86</sup> David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, “International Relations from Below,” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, 667. See also Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2004), chap. 3, 93-126.

<sup>87</sup> Within IR, classical realists were vocal in exposing the crusading moralism guided by liberal ideals which justified Western conquests and domination. See Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1964); Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions,” *American Political Science Review* 44:4 (1950). In critical theory, the works of David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah investigate how “[I]liberal fundamentals often become fundamentalism” in securing their progressive vision of the world, with regards to global capitalism and liberal modernity more generally. See Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, “Liberal Fundamentals: Invisible, Invasive, Artful and Bloody Hands,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15:2 (2012): 290-315; David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, *Savage Economics: Wealth, Poverty and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2010). By analyzing the parallel between contemporary liberal thought and the classical thought of John Stuart Mill, Beate Jahn illustrates how both advocate intervention as “an appropriate means to speed up the development toward liberalism in the interests both of the target population as well as “of all peoples.” See Beate Jahn, “Kant, Mill, and Illiberal Legacies in International Affairs,” *International Organization* 59 (2005), 197. Beyond IR, Uday Mehta’s study of liberal preoccupation with progress and civilization elucidates that “[w]hat is latent in the liberal conception of the political is a deep impulse to reform the world.” See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999), chap. 3, 77-114.

and a secular conception of space underlies the problematic of development, “what liberalism *can no longer think without*.”<sup>88</sup>

Because peasants are deemed to be “traditional,” “pre-industrial,” and “primitive” on the temporal scale of development, they are to be re-formed, if not sacrificed, in the modernizing pursuit of individual and market freedom, efficiency, productivity, and prosperous accumulation. To the extent that peasants maintain a political, economic, and cultural way of life that is not assimilable to liberal capitalist modernization, they remain the constitutive outside of what constitutes progress in liberal theories. They stand for the so-called pre-modern, pre-industrial, if not also pre-civilizational<sup>89</sup>, which must be overcome to be part of liberal modernity. The taken-for-granted developmental sequence of modernization is where realist and liberal theories intersect in the expungement of peasant from (global) politics.

The second implication of the entwinement between liberal theories and the forging of a liberal world order lies in the equation of political agency with liberal subjectivity and thereby the inability to read political activity and transformation on non-liberal terms. Kimberly Hutchings highlights the re/production of a liberal subject in the

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<sup>88</sup> Vinay Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), chap. 1, 1-32, original emphasis. Tanya Li’s work also demonstrates that the “will to improve” is at the core of the machinery of development while identifying entrenched continuities from the colonial period to the present. See Tanya Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>89</sup> IR scholars have remarked on the equation of liberal political and economic progress with civilizational status. For example, commenting on liberalism becoming the “newly dominant ‘operating system’ in global politics,” Ronnie Lipschutz writes, “the principles of economic and political liberalism thus come to represent something like the *jus civile* of the civilized community.” See Ronnie D. Lipschutz, “Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society,” *Millennium* 21:3 (1992): 407. Caspar Sylvest points to the “liberal trinity of progress, order, and justice” as “definitive markers of civilization.” See Caspar Sylvest, “Theoretical Foundations of Liberal Order,” in *Liberal World Orders*, 176-77.

“liberal quotidian practices of world ordering.”<sup>90</sup> She persuasively argues that much of this re/production “consists in inscribing and reinscribing discrimination between liberal and non-liberal or illiberal practices and subjects.”<sup>91</sup> My contention here is different, albeit related. Apart from the hierarchical line drawing that Hutchings underscores, I argue that the re/production of a liberal subject and order also rests on the quotidian erasure of non-liberal relations, sensibility and rationality from politics.

This erasure is enacted by ascribing political practices that are complexly constituted by multiple logics to purely liberal logics. For example, as I will discuss further in chapter 4, peasants’ struggles against dispossession in defense of their land and way of life would be readily translated into liberal demands. To clarify, one might well detect liberal vocabularies in peasants’ multivocal protests against the injustices that they face. However, I maintain that their struggles are embedded in a web of social relations, historical memories and political imaginaries that cannot be reducible to liberal ideals. This knotty multiplicity is lost on liberal theories, which can only see peasants, if they do at all, as liberal agents striving to make progress towards a liberal vision of the world. Given their assumptions about agency, order, and progressive history, liberal IR theories cannot help us understand lifeworlds and political subjectivity that differ markedly, even incommensurably, from liberal ideas and institutions.

Since peasants’ entry into IR is either barred or permitted under narrowly legible terms by major IR theories, namely realism and liberalism, how shall we open up the theoretical borders to account for their seething presence in the world and their political vibrancy both in the past and in the present? What conceptualization is needed to better

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<sup>90</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, “Liberal Quotidian Practices of World Ordering,” in *Liberal World Orders*, 157-72.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

understand peasants' place in global politics, and more specifically their relationship to the making and remaking of world order? This is the subject of the next section.

### **3. Conceptualizing peasant politics in IR**

In this section, I propose a conceptual approach to studying peasant politics as a necessarily global politics, which is distinct from sociological, anthropological, and comparative approaches. I suggest that to conceptualize peasant politics as a politics of worlding, we need to consider the relationship between world order, dissensus, and subaltern power.

Much scholarship on the peasantry in other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and geography, as well as in the subfield of comparative politics, approaches peasants as a sociological group and situates them solely in a national context. Even studies that place them in a broader context, such as transnational movements and international organizations, and take them to be important social actors, do not always examine peasants' structural position in global politics. Diverging from such approach, this dissertation insists on an analysis of the *global peasant*.

Global in three senses: First, we cannot understand peasant politics without investigating how global structures constitute peasants' place in the world and crucially shape the conditions of their living and their dying. Second, the "global peasant" counters the predominant representation and understanding of the provincial peasant<sup>92</sup>, who is presumed to be spatially, intellectually, culturally and politically constricted, as opposed

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<sup>92</sup> This representation is produced through the prevalent tropes of static tradition, ignorance, and backwardness. E.g: See analyses of this representation in Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, chap. 4, 123-152; Michael Ezekiel Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

to border-crossing, diversely exposed, widely knowledgeable, culturally sophisticated, and politically open-minded cosmopolitans. Contrary to this hierarchical binary, my study highlights peasants' distinct, but not lesser, way of inhabiting and imagining the world. Furthermore, they convey an agile reading of global politics and form connections across borders despite their social embeddedness in a particular place. Last but not least, contemporary peasant struggles not only reveal the crises of the current world order but also fight for alternative political and ecological visions of the world.

Drawing from critical perspectives both in and beyond IR, I propose that we attend to the three following aspects that are essential to thinking the globality of peasant politics. First, it is crucial to inquire into how peasants' "place-in-the-world" is structurally and productively constituted through historical processes of capitalism and colonization in order to comprehend how the contemporary world is made. I borrow the term "place-in-the-world" from James Ferguson's *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* to emphasize the integral part that peasants take in the ordering of the world, with the understanding of place "as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories (as in the expression knowing your place)."<sup>93</sup> I suggest that to grasp peasants' place in the making of the modern world requires us to place modernity in relation to European colonization. That is, we are concerned here with modernity not as a stage of history but as the staging of history itself, as Timothy Mitchell, among others, have insightfully argued. In this colonial staging, the movement of history is the

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<sup>93</sup> Concerned "less with Africa as empirical territory... , culture, region, or historical civilization than with "Africa" as a category through which a "world" is structured," Ferguson raises the question of "Africa" as a place-in-the-world to "think about such large-scale issues as globalization, modernity, worldwide inequality, and social justice." See James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Duke University Press, 2006), Introduction, 1-23.

movement towards the West as the culmination of civilizational progress. In other words, modernity cannot be thought without the colonial production of the modern as the West.<sup>94</sup>

This colonial-modern script continues to reign till today as the imperative of modernization still dictates dominant theories and practices of development and former colonies in the Global South remain objects of development. (It is not accidental that both realist and liberal IR theories take this script for granted.) Within modernization's developmental scheme, the movement of history progresses from agrarian to industrial to postindustrial societies. With each step forward, the peasantry is supposed to be gradually diminished into irrelevance. "Knowing your place" for the peasantry is knowing that it represents a past to be left behind. Opposed to the image of an urban, industrial future, the rural, agrarian peasant occupies the place of the "not yet" in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "an imaginary waiting room of history"<sup>95</sup>: not yet industrialized, not yet modern, not yet developed, not yet civilized. Like "Africa" in Ferguson's analysis, the peasant is an invisible category through which a world is structured, a world driven to transition, at any cost, out of the backwardness that the peasant has come to define. And like "Africa," it is a category that is both socially constructed and real, "that is imposed with force...; a category within which, and according to which, people must live."<sup>96</sup>

Another invisible way in which peasants play a key part in the making of the modern world pertains to the colonial genealogy and global workings of capitalism. This

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<sup>94</sup> Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1-34. Inspired by Anibal Quijano's article "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" (1992), Walter Mignolo has also argued that coloniality is constitutive of modernity. See Walter Mignolo, "The Enduring Enchantment (Or the Epistemic Privilege of Modernity and Where to Go from There)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (2002); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> See Chakrabarty's analysis of the politics of historicism in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>96</sup> Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 5.

is rendered invisible under a Western- and industrial-centric lens.<sup>97</sup> Let us look at the prevalent narrative of European industrialization, which presents an independently advanced Europe that, thanks to the Industrial Revolution and technological innovation, transitioned out of its backward peasantry and subsistence agriculture. A principal implication of this narrative of linear, self-contained development is that this metamorphosis is in store for the rest of the world, which has been behind but will, in time, catch up with Europe in a similar fashion. And in time, the peasantry and subsistence agriculture in other places will shrink into insignificance as they did in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

However, the misconception of Europe's internal success becomes apparent when we shift to a global and agrarian perspective that accounts for European colonization and its entwinement with capitalism. Accordingly, Europe's capitalist development was parasitic on the extraction of primary resources and the production of primary commodities from the colonies through the systemic exploitation of slave-, indentured- and peasant-labor.<sup>98</sup> The implication here is that agrarian production dependent on the peasantry has always been indispensable to the making of the modern world; they cannot be compartmentalized to an enclosed space ("non-West") and time ("pre-industrial").

Furthermore, if we follow Onur Ulas Ince's extension of "primitive accumulation" beyond Marx's formal definition and redefine it as a "(1) political process of forcible transformation whereby (2) noncapitalist relations of social reproduction are

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<sup>97</sup> As Philip McMichael, a historical sociologist whose research examines capitalist modernity through the lens of agrarian questions and food regimes, points out: "Conceptions of the modern world order, anchored in an international state system, focus on industrial development" and "omits the significance of agriculture as the source of food and raw materials upon which industry and its labor force depends, as well as the power associated with control over the supply of agricultural products." See Philip McMichael, "Land Grabbing as Security Mercantilism in International Relations," *Globalizations* 10:1 (2013), 47.

<sup>98</sup> See Patnaik and Moyo, *The Agrarian Question*.



restructured through extraeconomic coercion (3) in ways that assimilate or articulate them to the global networks of capital accumulation,”<sup>99</sup> this process is recognizably ongoing rather than a mere “pre-history of capital.” As Ince puts it, it is both “foundational-historical and structural-quotidian.”<sup>100</sup> And it is the structural-quotidian dynamics of displacement that continue to shape peasants’ place-in-the-world today: both physical displacement caused by land expropriation and socioeconomic displacement wherein “while the spatial coordinates of land remain constant, its socioeconomic coordinates and valences in global value chains shift dramatically, from a means of subsistence to a means of accumulation.”<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, I argue that these structural-quotidian dynamics play out as a battle between capital and non-capital relations, logics, and modes of reproduction, rather than as a teleological unfolding. We cannot expect today’s ongoing process of primitive accumulation to transpire in a similar fashion with what occurred in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. To do so would be to ignore consequential differences between the historical and political contexts of then and now. Among other things, the peasantry of the Global South, as Utsa Patnaik (along with others) points out, “has nowhere to go if it

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<sup>99</sup> The process of “primitive accumulation” is described in Marx’s words as one “which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labor; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-laborers. So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as ‘primitive’ because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital.” See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (Penguin Books 1990), 874-75. Although this is a widely used definition in the literature, Ince argues that yoking this concept to the creation of legally free proletarian labor fails to account for the “multiplicity and variance of the colonial processes of expropriation and exploitation effectuated by political violence”, which constitute the global inceptions of capitalism. See Onur Ulas Ince, “Primitive Accumulation, New Enclosures, and Global Land Grabs: A Theoretical Intervention,” *Rural Sociology* 79:1 (2014), 104-131.

<sup>100</sup> Ince, “Primitive Accumulation,” 115.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

is dispossessed, in contrast to the dispossessed peasantry of the North, which migrated in vast numbers to the New World”<sup>102</sup> during the colonization of the Americas. The battle for life and ways of life is, thereby, that much more intense and uncertain. It remains an open question how this persistent contestation shapes the ordering of the world.

Is it not the open-ended nature of such battle that makes contentious peasants a terrorizing threat to the dominant logics of world ordering? What happens when peasants refuse their place-in-the-world as dictated by these logics? What happens when they refuse to have their collectivities dismantled and displaced, even when they are offered compensation and not evicted by force? The voice of Maudilia López Cardona from San Miguel Ixtahuacán, Guatemala is not a unique example. Fighting alongside fellow villagers against the pressure to sell their land to the mining company Montana, Guatemalan subsidiary of Canadian-headquartered Goldcorp Inc., Cardona sees no salvation in the magic word “development”:

They presented themselves like the “village saviors”, like the ones that arrive to save the community from poverty, using that magic word “development”... They give us token money – with no regard to our cultural values, our human values, our dignity as a community – we become slaves.<sup>103</sup>

Let us notice that Cardona is not talking about material dispossession. She is drawing attention to the less visible violence of disregarding the values vital to her community, which, she underscores, is a denial of both their cultural difference and their humanity. She speaks against the trampling of dignity, not as a violated individual, but as

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<sup>102</sup> Patnaik and Moyo, *The Agrarian Question*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> This quote is taken from “Women Crossing the Line,” a three-part mini-documentary series that introduces the work of women activists in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. To clarify, Cardona and her fellow villagers who fight against selling the land represent a vocal but far from unanimous view in their community. In the documentary, the women do speak about this issue of dividedness among community members. See Nobel Women’s Initiative, “Women Crossing the Line: Defending Mother Earth,” YouTube Video, 15:21, December 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFtwmXwl1qw>.

a community treated as disposable. She does not invoke enslavement lightly. Although Cardona cannot speak for others in a similar situation because peasants' perspectives on and responses to "development" and land expropriation are by no means monolithic, what happens to the suturing of the contemporary world order when the emancipatory, savior-like promise of modern development is unraveled by the insistence of villagers like Cardona on its logic of enslavement? (This critique of enslavement is also found in peasant protests against displacement in Việt Nam, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 4.)

These questions lead us to the second important aspect of theorizing the global peasant. This dissertation conceptualizes peasant not simply as an empirical social group whose marginalization, suffering, and everyday as well as organized struggles are worthy of our attention, but as a political articulation of an alternative, albeit subalternized, way of imagining, ordering, and inhabiting the world. To draw from Jacques Rancière's "Ten Theses on Politics" and put it differently, I propose that we think of peasant politics as a locus of dissensus, which "makes visible that which had no reason to be seen" and "lodges one world into another."<sup>104</sup> (Along these lines, I will develop the ideas of agrarian dissensus and global dissensus in chapters 4 and 5 respectively.)

Take, for instance, a simple utterance from peasant women's protest against two mining projects, Rio Blanco and Quimsacocha, in Cuenca, Ecuador: "Here we still live with dignity, we don't just survive."<sup>105</sup> From within the dominant discourses and practices of world ordering that produce peasants' place-in-the-world, this utterance would not emerge because it makes no sense. It has no reason to be seen or heard as long

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<sup>104</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5:3 (2001).

<sup>105</sup> See Defensoras Pachamama, "Mujeres en Defensa de la Pachamama."

as the entire order is premised on making progress by lifting peasants out of their lacking conditions towards a better life, a dignified life on modernity's terms. Yet the peasant women from Cuenca firmly answer that they "don't just survive." One possible reading is that they are not just trying to make ends meet each day, dreaming of a dramatic transformation of their life. Indeed, they do not seem to think that their life is a lack, typically characterized by poverty and deprivation. They are saying that it is an already dignified, already full life. It is important to point out that the peasant women from Cuenca affirm not what is the opposite of the imperative of development, but what is inconceivable within it. In other words, they do not avow that they live comfortably and abundantly from the vantage point of modernization, but rather, indicate that they may live comfortably and abundantly on other terms. The question is, in which world are these terms neither unthinkable nor dubious, but perfectly sensible?

In contradistinction to the transparent world of IR realism and liberalism, conceptualizing peasant politics as a locus of dissensus enables us to heed one of the main insights from postcolonial theories that the world is multiply constituted and lived.<sup>106</sup> As Himadeep Muppidi puts it, "there are multiple realities of the global: multiple ways of imagining, ordering, and inhabiting our world as a global space."<sup>107</sup> I should clarify that, in my analysis, the locus of dissensus bearing the name of "peasant" is not

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<sup>106</sup> In IR, this insight prominently features in the following works, inter alia: Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Siba N. Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories of International Order and Institutions* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Inayatullah and Blaney, *Problem of Difference*; Gurminder K. Bhabra, *Connected Sociologies* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Randolph Persaud and Alina Sajed, eds., *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Robbie Shilliam, ed., *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Global Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed., *Decolonizing International Relations* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

<sup>107</sup> Himadeep Muppidi, "Colonial and Postcolonial Global Governance," in *Power in Global Governance*, 274.

confined to peasants as a social group alone. It may be shared by urban-based citizens, especially in the Global South where rural populations remain considerable and many, if not all, who live in the cities are likely to maintain some connections with village life through various forms of social ties and networks.<sup>108</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a somewhat similar point about the expansiveness of the term when he designates “peasant” as “a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and on their institutions of government. The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity.”<sup>109</sup> This “imprint” that “peasant” leaves on the lives of even elites and institutions of government is certainly not unique to India. “Social imaginary” is the most suitable concept I find to account for this imprint and its workings in the political articulations of different ways of envisioning and ordering the rural in relation to world-making.

Drawing from the works of Cornelius Castoriadis and Himadeep Muppidi, I use the concept of social imaginary to refer to a distinctive field of meanings, powers, subjectivities, and social relations.<sup>110</sup> It provides a socially organized way of making sense of the world, of locating oneself in that world and in relation to others, and of meaningfully claiming identities, powers, needs, desires, and responsibilities. The meaning of “imaginary” here is not separate from the real. Rather, it constitutes what is

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<sup>108</sup> This is most likely the case in Asia and Africa. In Latin America, the historical formation of post-independence elites is inseparable from colonial constructions of racial superiority vis-à-vis other social identities such as Indians, blacks, and mestizos, so the social connections between urban elites and rural peasant populations, which in many places overlap considerably with racialized identities, may be tenuous or simply nonexistent. See Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1:3 (2000), 533-580.

<sup>109</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); Himadeep Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

real, what is desirable, and what is imaginable. A social imaginary is not static, but rather dynamic with diversity and contestations within given terms. It is, however, also not simply in flux, to the extent that it is historically sedimented. To detect the discursive boundaries of a social imaginary is key to understanding what falls within and outside of social reality for those within this imaginary. These boundaries are reached, in Muppidi's account, "when particular representations of the world seem meaningless and specific practices appear strange or irrational within the reality produced by the imaginary."<sup>111</sup>

Lastly, I suggest that an important dimension of theorizing the global peasant is what I call subaltern power. Mainstream discourses and practices of global development regularly treat peasant as a subject of crisis in the same instance that they target peasant as an object of intervention. Associating peasant with alarming problems such as backwardness, poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and suicide, the global machinery of development aims to elevate the peasant, the quintessential figure of underdevelopment, out of crisis into an improved life in its larger mission to improve the world.

From a different angle, even critics of the mainstream, especially those who lean toward the thesis of the "disappearance of the peasantry," often fall into the same trope of crisis. As the name of the thesis indicates, the peasantry is predicted to eventually disappear with the complete subordination of agricultural production to capitalist expansion.<sup>112</sup> Affixed to the inexorable march of capital, the peasantry is constantly facing the distressing threat of dissolution.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global*, 26.

<sup>112</sup> A well-known statement about the "death of the peasantry" is found in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1994). See discussions of the "disappearance thesis" in Araghi, "Global Depeasantization"; Henry Bernstein, "Farewells to the Peasantry," *Transformation* 52 (2003): 1-19; Heather Johnson, "Subsistence and Control: The Persistence of the Peasantry in the Developing World," *Undercurrent* 1:1 (2004): 55-65; Ed Tadem, "The Peasantry as

In contrast to these frames, my dissertation seeks to theorize peasant as a subject of power (and insurgency), as opposed to a subject of crisis, through a careful analysis of historically situated articulations of peasant politics. Such analysis would yield a radically different conception of peasants' place-in-the-world, which is unimaginable within the currently dominant structures of world ordering. In effect, it also shifts the locus of crisis and instability, which lies no longer with peasants but with these largely taken-for-granted structures.

Despite the dominance of certain logics and types of power, I take my cue from Raymond Duvall and Çiğdem Çıdam's claim that "there is no single structuring logic and no particular type of power that is determinative of the world in which we now live, nor of the world orders that are yet to come."<sup>114</sup> Taking seriously the multiplicity of structuring logics and sources of power that constitute world order, I argue that the peasant, as a subject of power, is capable of articulating and effecting a shift in values, ideas, institutions, and material life in the long-term process of the construction of a different world.

I will develop the concept of subaltern power in relation to world ordering in further detail in the next chapter. However, I want to at least emphasize here that such power is necessarily situated in a long and slow temporality. The endurance and power of subaltern dissent from dominant logics and structures lies in its embeddedness in the lifeworlds of those marginalized. Their dissent is thereby not simply a rational critique

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a Class and Its Prophesied Disappearance," *Ang Masa, para sa sosyalismo* 2 (June 2017), <https://angmasa.com/issue-2/14-the-peasantry-as-a-class-and-its-prophesied-disappearance>.

<sup>113</sup> Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij, *Disappearing Peasantries?*.

<sup>114</sup> Raymond Duvall and Çiğdem Çıdam, "Power in the Analysis of World Orders," in *Civilizations and World Order: Geopolitics and Cultural Difference*, eds. Fred Dallmayr, M. Akif Kayapınar, and İsmail Yalacı (Lexington Books, 2014), 39.

but a living subjectivity that has been historically constituted and does not submit to erasure or assimilation. This means that subaltern dissenting subjectivity is resilient even if it seems “quiet,” and that it pulsates subterraneously even when it is not manifest or actualized in a particular outcome.<sup>115</sup> However, despite the appearance of inactivity and even helplessness, subaltern dissenting subjectivity holds the *ever-present* possibility of insurgency. Insurgency here is conceptualized not only as active revolt but also as the very act of, to borrow from José Rabasa’s theorization of indigenous insurgency, “breaking from the structures of power and narratives that have inscribed (and continue to) [subaltern] life under a series of frames.”<sup>116</sup> I would advance Rabasa’s claim further and argue that subaltern power consists in not only the ability to challenge the dominant world ordering logics on their own terms, but also the capacity to reconstruct political relations and order by embodying alternatives and re-articulating collective values, ideas, and institutions. That is, subaltern power resides in both the ability to break the frame and the capacity to (re)compose the fabric of life and world.<sup>117</sup>

It is, of course, important for us to acknowledge the powerful forces of industrialization and urbanization that undergird currently hegemonic regimes of development. However, I find the assumptions that cities alone are the way of the future and that this is an inexorable march of history problematic on many grounds. Perhaps most problematically, they rely on a narrow notion of time as linear and they essentially disregard ongoing political struggles that actively fight for a different future. If we take

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<sup>115</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>116</sup> José Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>117</sup> My formulation of pairing breaking with composing is inspired by Nancy Luxon’s “Breaking The Frame, Composing the Event” in Nancy Luxon, *Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).



the past to be not bygone but inextricably enmeshed in the present, then we can inquire into the ways in which political visions and revolts in the past continue to inform and inspire today's struggles. Furthermore, elements of a previous political imaginary can well be revived to address current concerns. Instead of ruling this out, we would have a better understanding of political processes if we examine how such a re-articulation takes place. This dissertation project is particularly concerned with the entanglement between past and present articulations<sup>118</sup> of peasant power and peasant-centered imaginaries of the global.

#### **4. Outline of chapters**

In the rest of the dissertation, I first develop the concept of subaltern power to help us conceive of subordinated groups such as peasants as subjects of power with world-making capacities, rather than as mere objects of domination and intervention. I then study closely peasant politics as a significant site of subaltern power in contemporary global politics. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 investigate peasant power in three interconnected realms: agroecological farming and regeneration; agrarian dissensus and subaltern orders of just relations; and transnational movements for agrarian justice and other rural-urban futures. In all these realms, the power of peasant subalterns is manifest in their capacity to recompose collective existence from the margins.

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<sup>118</sup> I find Stuart Hall's concept of articulation useful with both meanings of the term: utterance and linkage. Hall writes, "[A] theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects." What is essential in Hall's formulation is the contextual specificity – "under certain conditions," "at specific conjunctures" -- that makes the forging of the discursive unity of two distinct elements and the ideological mobilization of subjects both possible and changeable. See Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 141-142.

More specifically, Chapter 2 examines how existing conceptions of power and world order obscure subaltern politics in international politics. Much of the literature emphasizes the primacy of specific world ordering principles, such as anarchy, liberal internationalism, and global capitalism. Concurrently, power is conceptualized as various forms of control. Such a prevailing focus on dominance (in terms of primacy and control) effaces the role of subaltern groups in shaping world order. Countering this effacement, I advance the concept of subaltern power as the capacity of subordinated groups, to enact alternatives to the dominant order. This capacity is grounded in ways of world making that are repressed in the present but continue to be cultivated at the margins. As long as subaltern groups inhabit them despite forces of assimilation, they can draw on non-hegemonic logics and value systems to mobilize for a different political order.

Chapter 3 looks closely at agroecological knowledge and practices that have been marginalized by the industrialization of agriculture. International institutions such as the FAO now acknowledge agro-ecology as a much-needed balm for a severely damaged environment. However, they see it as a flexible toolkit that can complement the capitalist agro-industrial order. In contrast, I focus on subaltern agroecology which rejects industrial agriculture in favor of collective self-subsistence and ecological restoration. The chapter draws on a wide range of subaltern practices of agroecology in different locations. Examples include an initiative taken by some Vietnamese youth to return to their grandparents' way of farming, a project to revive herbal medicinal traditions in Việt Nam, agroecological farming in Cuba, and natural farming by Japanese farmer-philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka. I argue that these practices enact not only a different way of farming from industrial agriculture but also a different way of worlding. They

remake the world socially by altering the relationship between human and non-human beings. They also regenerate the world ecologically by re-orienting farming towards multispecies collaboration and away from instrumentalist and extractive logics. I suggest that a broader collective re-existence based on subaltern agroecology would require a recognition of our inheritance of ruins and a shift in horizons rather than an expansion of scale.

In Chapter 4, I ask what is at stake in worldwide instances of displacement in which people are willing to risk death to keep alive land, forests, and rivers. Contrary to prevailing scholarly as well as policy discourses, I argue that it is more than the loss of properties, livelihoods, or rights, even though all of these may be important aspects of subaltern struggles against displacement. To grasp the ontological stakes of these struggles, we need to tune into subaltern dissent in specific contexts. Analyzing contemporary peasant protests in Việt Nam, I find that their language of dissent is not reducible to a demand for rights although it often gets translated as such. Rather, Vietnamese villagers speak against the violation of intimate relations, both between peasants and land, and between the governed and those in authorities. I delve into the discursive layers of their contestations to tease out a subaltern grammar of relational justice that treats *dân* (the common people) and *nông dân* (agri-people) to be the root of the collective. I contend that this grammar speaks to one, among many, already existing ethico-political orders that empower peasants to reconstruct governance beyond the legal, contractual relation between the modern state and its citizens. While the contents of these subaltern orders vary across geo-cultural contexts, their existence as alternative grammars of political community and just relations characterizes postcolonial spaces.

Chapter 5 argues that contemporary peasant movements provide us with an important example of subaltern power to build a different world order through international agrarian restructuring, rural renewal, and epistemic decolonization. I first discuss various understandings of rural globality that are often rendered obscure. I then analyze La Vía Campesina's transnational campaigns for agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and agroecology. I suggest that the transformative power of these campaigns exceeds the normative and legal changes in state laws and constitutions as well as at the UN, which they have been playing a major role in bringing about. I also argue that far from advocating a nostalgic return to an idealized past, peasant movements are carrying out rural reconstruction with new and changing articulations of equality and just relations. Last but not least, I look at how these movements challenge the colonial hierarchy of knowledge by revitalizing suppressed knowledges and fostering dialogues among subalterns.

I finally conclude with reflections on my theoretical framework, the process of research and writing, my methodological orientation and commitment, and the need for further explorations of subaltern ways of worlding.

## CHAPTER 2

## SUBALTERN POWER AND THE CONSTITUTION OF WORLD ORDER

[F]or power truly to feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power - or more accurately, an energy - which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control.<sup>119</sup>

Un pueblo con memoria es un pueblo rebelde.<sup>120</sup>

And you, are you so forgetful of your past, is there no echo in your soul of your poets' songs, your dreamers' dreams, your rebels' calls?<sup>121</sup>

This chapter seeks to examine the relationship between subalternity and the (re)making of world order. Drawing from postcolonial and subaltern studies, I employ a conception of the subaltern that carries three meanings. First, used to “signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships”<sup>122</sup> in politics, it refers to subordination whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, race, gender, sexuality, language, culture or in any other way.<sup>123</sup> Subordinated but not dispensable, the subaltern is a necessary presence without which the dominant cannot exist. Second, as a figure of marginality, the subaltern also marks the limit of intelligibility structured by dominant discourses. Hence, Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” This

<sup>119</sup> James Baldwin, “No Name in the Street,” in *Collected Essays* (NY: The Library of America, 1998).

<sup>120</sup> This Zapatista’s injunction is quoted in Rabasa, *Without History*, 46-47.

<sup>121</sup> Emma Goldman, *Living My Life: Vol. 1* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1971), 256.

<sup>122</sup> Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *The American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994), 1475-1490.

<sup>123</sup> See Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian Society and History* (Oxford, 1982), Vol. II.; Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism”; Gyanendra Pandey, “Introduction: The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen,” in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

often misunderstood question is meant to raise the issue of whether or not the subaltern can speak *audibly* in terms other than those defined by dominant discourses. Third, more than a limit concept, the subaltern also serves as a figure of heterogeneity. Contrary to an essentialist notion of identity, the term is, in Spivak's words again, "reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space."<sup>124</sup> In a related formulation that is more pertinent to this dissertation, José Rabasa insists on the subaltern's "capacity to dwell in multiple worlds."<sup>125</sup> It is important for us to keep in mind that this is a relational capacity shaped by historically specific social formations, and not exogenously given.

Considering all these three meanings, can world order be made and made sense of without accounting for subalternity? How do we interpret the remaking of the world when it is not merely the dominant but also the subaltern who play a decisive part in it, be they the enslaved, the colonized, "peasants", "tribals" or "indigenous" peoples?<sup>126</sup> Are there modes of "listening to the subaltern"<sup>127</sup> that may counter rather than confirm their effacement in global political thought and practice? And is "order" an apt metaphor to picture the world from a subaltern perspective?

Far from being answered, these questions are yet to be asked in the field of IR so long as the politics of subalternity is rendered negligible in the theorization of world order. I argue that inquiries into the relationship between subalternity and the constitution

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<sup>124</sup> Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press 1999), 310.

<sup>125</sup> Rabasa, *Without History*, chap. 4, 62-73.

<sup>126</sup> I use quotation marks to indicate that these are constructed and politicized identities not to be taken as natural.

<sup>127</sup> While indebted to Spivak's intervention, I also resonate with Fernando Coronil's approach to subalternity: "I seek to learn to listen to subaltern subjects, and to interpret what I hear. This exchange also involves my learning to speak to a variety of publics, not only to subaltern subjects, but to any who share an interest in overcoming the conditions that make subalternity possible." Fernando Coronil, "Listening to the Subaltern: The Poetics of Neocolonial States," *Poetics Today* 15:4 (1994), 643-658.

of world order are foreclosed due to the existing conceptualizations of world order and power in IR. Much of the literature constructs world order around a dominant structuring logic, and tends towards focusing on dominant agents, norms, rules, institutions, and structures. While it provides important analyses, this tendency risks reducing the heterogeneous, friction-filled, and uncertain processes of order- and world-making to an evident and restricted field of intelligibility. It also imputes more solidity and steadiness to “the dominant” than perhaps warranted. Concurrently, the various concepts of power in the discipline – however divergent they are – also converge around the nexus between power and dominance. As a result, they only reinforce the primacy of dominant world ordering logics.

To move away from this trap of double emphasis on dominance and be attuned to the complex dynamics of global politics, it is crucial to theorize both world order and power in relation to subalternity. I propose that we need to attend to the ways in which subalternized social relations, systems of values, and modes of being play an integral part in the processes that produce and transform world order. Just as importantly, instead of equating subordination with powerlessness, we need to conceive of the possibility that the subaltern, too, is embedded in power.

In what follows, I first examine the ways in which different theoretical paradigms in IR prioritize a certain dominant structuring logic in their implicit or explicit understanding of world order. This transparent model of world order risks reifying it as a sutured whole instead of appreciating the open-ended and always incomplete social processes of order making. Yet, I move beyond acknowledging this “opacity of the

social”<sup>128</sup> to propose a conception of world order as a field of (re)composition and contestation constituted by multiple coeval ways of inhabiting and envisioning global coexistence. Next, I look at how various concepts of power in IR fall under the rubric of dominance, and argue for an alternative conceptualization of power as strength. More specifically, I advance the concept of subaltern power to develop a framework for understanding the relationship between subalternity and the making and remaking of order and world.

### **1. A transparent model of world order: The primacy of the dominant**

In a recent publication, Raymond Duvall and Çiğdem Çıdam observe that IR theorists tend to rest their analysis of world order on putatively singular foundations. These vary from the foundational principle of anarchy of the modern states system for realists, to the logic of global capitalism for globalization theorists, to the emergent structure of liberal cosmopolitanism for some liberals, to a new deterritorializing apparatus of rule that some critical theorists call Empire. Duvall and Çıdam urge us to abandon these endless “arguments over the primacy of one or another structuring principle” and to recognize instead how the contemporary international system is produced by the mutually constitutive “interaction of multiple forms of “world ordering” logics.”<sup>129</sup>

While I agree with Duvall and Çıdam’s problematization of IR theorists’ preoccupation with a single structuring principle, the claim of this chapter is related to

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<sup>128</sup> This term is from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 1985).

<sup>129</sup> Duval and Çıdam, “Power,” 35-36.



but different from their proposal. I argue that the assumption of a single foundational logic renders the agents, institutions and structures that construct world order misleadingly transparent while disavowing their complex constitution. As Duvall and Çıdam alert us, this complex constitution is determined by multiple logics that interact with one another. Building on their argument, I wish to emphasize that some of these logics are subalternized and thereby not discernible within dominant frames of intelligibility. This means that even though these logics are also integral to producing world order, they are disappeared from analyses of world order that fail to think multiplicity *and* subalternity together. The implications of this failure are both conceptual exclusion and conceptual conflation. Not only are subaltern actors excluded from the making of world order, but the very social processes productive of it, which are multiply constituted by both dominant and subaltern logics, are also mistaken for the working of dominant ones only. Let me elaborate on these implications through a close look at different theoretical paradigms in IR.

Realists in IR consider anarchy, or the absence of central government, the defining feature of the international system. According to them, all states under the condition of anarchy engage in a zero-sum competition to “at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination.”<sup>130</sup> Caught in the systemic tragedy of security and power accumulation, only major states, or great powers, which are “determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability,”<sup>131</sup> play a central role in maintaining or altering international order. Subordinated actors, i.e. weaker states, are deemed negligible, never mind non-state actors. Apart from this obvious

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<sup>130</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 118.

<sup>131</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 5.

exclusion, realists' transparent model of world order also attributes a universal logic to state behavior by assuming a priori a state's interests and rationality. Unable to recognize the extent to which international conduct and interaction are shaped by different social constructions of states' identities, goals, interests and dangers, realists only see international order as the product of like units following a uniform structuring logic.

Contrary to realism's professedly non-normative<sup>132</sup> approach to IR and their cyclical<sup>133</sup> view of history, the transparency of liberal scholars' model of world order lies in their assumptions about the universality of liberal values and about progress, measured by the international diffusion of liberal norms and institutions.<sup>134</sup> However, similar to realism's reliance on a single dominant world ordering logic, liberal IR theory also fails to account for either multiplicity or subalternity when it comes to the social processes constitutive of world order. First, despite professing pluralism and cosmopolitanism, liberal ideological and normative commitment hinges on, as Kimberly Hutchings puts it, "inscribing and reinscribing discrimination between liberal and non-liberal or illiberal practices and subjects,"<sup>135</sup> wherein the latter occupy a progressively marginalized place, if any, in the vision for the future. Indeed, insofar as liberal IR theory "represents a particular world view justifying and propagating certain policies,"<sup>136</sup> it is aligned with liberal world ordering practices of intervention on as well as aggression against non-

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<sup>132</sup> This refers to realists' insistence on viewing the world as it is, not as it should be. It doesn't mean that realist theory does not have normative implications.

<sup>133</sup> See a discussion of this in chapter 1.

<sup>134</sup> These assumptions are apparent in liberal scholarship: Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics"; Slaughter, *A New World Order*. Hence, they are readily observed by others: Nicholas Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order: Beyond International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000); Beate Jahn, "Critique in a Time of Liberal World Order," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15:2 (2012), 145-157; Flockhart, "Liberal Imaginations"; Michael Barnett, "Bringing in the New World Order: Liberalism, Legitimacy, and the United Nations," *World Politics* 49:4 (1997).

<sup>135</sup> Hutchings, "Liberal Quotidian Practices," 158.

<sup>136</sup> Jahn, "Liberal Internationalism."

liberal [which is often tellingly labeled as illiberal] subjects.<sup>137</sup> These range from economic restructuring to democracy promotion to humanitarian intervention, to name just a few.<sup>138</sup>

Second, liberal IR theory also effaces the subaltern by reading hybrid expressions of political agency and transformation purely in liberal terms. For example, it is revealing that liberal scholars read those mobilizing broadly for normative change specifically in terms of “norm entrepreneurs.”<sup>139</sup> As I will discuss further in chapter 4, even though peasants’ struggles against disposability are embedded in a complex web of political articulations, historical memories and social values, they are, in liberal terms, simply identified with demands for the protection of human rights, for a transparent representative government, for the rule of law against arbitrary abuses of power, and/or for private ownership of land. Through such an equation, or rather a reduction, subaltern lifeworlds and political subjectivities are made to fit into a liberal vision of world order.

For critical IR theorists of Marxian stripe, the logic of global capitalism is foundational to the production and reproduction of the contemporary world order. Unlike realist and liberal IR theories, they are critical of the status quo and thus attentive to the dynamics of conflict and resistance to this dominant logic. However, their scripting of world order remains transparent to the extent that the forces of domination and resistance revolve mainly around class struggle in their theories. This reinforces subalternization in

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<sup>137</sup> See Hutchings, “Liberal Quotidian Practices”; Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism*; Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, eds., *Democracy, Liberalism, and War: Rethinking the Democratic Peace Debate* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); David Blaney, “Realist Spaces/Liberal Bellicosity: Reading the Democratic Peace as World Democratic Theory,” in *Democracy, Liberalism, and War*; Inayatullah and Blaney, “Liberal Fundamentals.”

<sup>138</sup> Dunne & Flockhart, *Liberal World Orders*; Anne Orford, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Beate Jahn, “Humanitarian Intervention – What’s in a name?”, *International Politics* 49:1 (2012): 36-58.

<sup>139</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics.”

two ways. First, by relying on historicism<sup>140</sup> and taking for granted the dominance of industrial and finance capital, many critical theorists presume a world politics *subsequent to* what Marx calls “so-called primitive accumulation,” that is “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.”<sup>141</sup> Even though it is widely acknowledged that this process, more than a stage in the past, persists in our contemporary world to a significant degree, the assumption remains that it is historically inexorable. As a result, from Robert Cox’s conception of counter-hegemonic social forces centered on industrial workers<sup>142</sup> to Mark Rupert’s study of class-based relations of production<sup>143</sup> to Hardt and Negri’s notion of the “new proletariat,”<sup>144</sup> the worker, a subject who is already dispossessed and proletarianized, is the privileged agent of politics and change. Vanishing from this temporal frame are peasants and indigenous peoples, who continue to struggle over structures of world orders while combating the ongoing process of primitive accumulation.<sup>145</sup>

Second, as crucial as an account of capitalism is to our understanding of world order, many critical theorists tend to presuppose the universalization of capitalist sociality, instead of recognizing a heterogeneous global social formation wherein the logic of relentless accumulation for profit making is always crisscrossed with,

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<sup>140</sup> For a critical discussion on the politics of historicism, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Introduction and chap. 2.

<sup>141</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 874-875.

<sup>142</sup> Robert Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert Koehane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>143</sup> Mark Rupert, *Producing Hegemony: The Politics of Mass Production and American Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>144</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 402.

<sup>145</sup> There have been reformulations of the concept of “primitive accumulation” from the perspectives of indigenous politics. They critique colonial-capitalist accumulation while denaturalizing dispossession, that is, not assuming that it was successful. See Nicholas A. Brown, “The Logic of Settler Accumulation in a Landscape of Perpetual Vanishing,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4:1 (2014), 1-26; Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

reconfigured and potentially interrupted by other logics of social reproduction.<sup>146</sup> Critical IR theorists inscribe a transparent model of world order when they glean only a capital- and class-centered analysis out of complex social processes, institutions, and political subjectivities. Globalization is frequently portrayed as a homogenizing process of capitalist restructuring, what Stephen Gill calls “market civilization”<sup>147</sup> for instance, without paying heed to the disjuncture and difference in social meanings, economic practices, and imaginary landscapes that constitute it.<sup>148</sup> Accordingly, the state is identified mainly as a conduit of capitalist valorization in the globalization of markets, production and finance.<sup>149</sup> In a corresponding manner, resistance to the existing order is legible only in anti-capitalist terms. Even as critical theorists acknowledge the plurality of social forces and movements, resistance boils down to “a vigorous opposition to capitalist globalization”<sup>150</sup> and the multitude, in Hardt and Negri’s well-known contribution, is defined “as all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital.”<sup>151</sup>

Although realist, liberal, and critical theoretical perspectives view global politics very differently, their assumption of one dominant structuring principle – be it anarchy, liberal internationalism, or global capitalism – has the same effect of treating the

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<sup>146</sup> For studies that take this heterogeneity seriously, see Robbie Shilliam, “Hegemony and the Unfashionable Problematic of ‘Primitive Accumulation’,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 32:1 (2004); Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted*; Ince, “Primitive Accumulation.”

<sup>147</sup> Stephen Gill, “Globalisation, Market Civilisation, and Disciplinary Neoliberalism,” *Millennium* 24:3 (1995), 399-423.

<sup>148</sup> For studies of globalization that account for such disjuncture and difference, see Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global*; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>149</sup> See Robert Cox’s discussion of the “internationalization of the state” in Cox, “Social Forces”; also Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 132-134, 236.

<sup>150</sup> Mark Rupert, “Marxism and Critical Theory,” in *International Relations: Discipline and Diversity*, 163.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin Books, 2005), 106.

constitution of world order as self-evident while subalternizing social relations, principles, rationalities, and realities that do not fit into their conceptual models. Our insistence here on taking heed of subaltern politics is as normative as it is realist. Studying the workings of what has become globally dominant (such as the modern system of states, capitalism, and liberal norms and institutions) is certainly crucial. Nonetheless, a sole focus on them obscures the complex realities of global politics, in particular the heterogeneous dynamics of contestation, conflict and change. Containing world order within a script of the dominant risks, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's words, "settling on paper issues that are not settled in reality, where they are the stake of ongoing struggle."<sup>152</sup>

How then do we foreground such ongoing struggle in our conceptualization of world order? I attempt to answer this question in the next section.

## **2. A multiply constituted world: The opacity of the social, subalternity, and ways of worlding**

Taking world order as a central concept in understanding global politics challenges, as Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney observe, "a disciplinary bias towards a unit-level or atomistic understanding of social science."<sup>153</sup> Robert Cox states that the concept is "directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts."<sup>154</sup> According to Cox, problem-solving theory takes existing structures

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<sup>152</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Viva la Crise!: For Heterodoxy in Social Science," *Theory and Society* 17:5 (1988), 776.

<sup>153</sup> Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, "A Problem with Levels: How to Engage a Diverse IPE," *Contexto Internacional* 37:3 (2015), 890.

<sup>154</sup> Cox, "Social Forces," 208.

of world order as the unquestioned parameters within which one aims to fix the problems of seemingly separate parts, whereas critical theory asks how the prevailing order of the world came about and how it might change. Contrary to an ahistorical and atomistic focus on individual parts, theorization of world order seeks to account for the whole and the historical processes that produce and transform it. This is especially essential, as Inayatullah and Blaney remind us, for investigating the “processes that produce relations of global inequality and domination.”<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, a critical theory of world order does not merely zero in on the global as one of the three supposedly discrete levels of analysis. Rather, the global whole and its parts are mutually constituted and therefore conceptually inseparable.<sup>156</sup>

However, a conception of world order as a sutured whole risks imputing a self-evident totality to that which constitutes it. In one sense, the very language of “order” and “whole” possibly reifies global politics, which is in continual, multidirectional motion, and which – in its full diversity – is messy, contradictory and conflictual, if not also fragmented, incommensurable and unknowable. It is in avoidance of such reification that after arguing for the need to move away from ontological individualism towards an investigation of the structuring features of “the whole,” Inayatullah and Blaney draw a conclusion that not all structuralists would be prepared for: “there are no parts, no wholes, and no levels. There are only simultaneous and continuous processes whose seeming mystical flow our descriptions cannot but freeze.”<sup>157</sup>

In another sense, from a post-structuralist perspective, there exists a constitutive

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<sup>155</sup> Inayatullah and Blaney, “A Problem with Levels,” 898.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. 907; also Wendt and Duvall, “Institutions and International Order.”

<sup>157</sup> Inayatullah and Blaney, “A Problem with Levels,” 908.

split between world and order that makes the articulation of the two always already fraught with instability. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's objection to "the conception of 'society' as founding totality of its partial processes"<sup>158</sup> is pertinent here. "We must," they insist, "consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or 'negative essence' of the existing, and the diverse 'social orders' as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences."<sup>159</sup> World order, then, can only be conceived of as an attempted suture that invariably remains contingent and incomplete.

By invoking the "seeming mystical flow" of processes and emphasizing "the openness of the social," the above theorists remind us, with different vocabularies, that world order is always in the making, and that this making stays opaque to the extent that the field of differences cannot be domesticated into an orderly and intelligible whole. While I find this to be a needed caution against rationalist and structuralist certainty, I suggest that an insistence on the opacity of the social *alone* does not adequately address the heterogeneity constitutive of the global. I am referring to a heterogeneity that is not simply the equivalent of making "as many worlds as there are sensible wholes."<sup>160</sup> Nor does it equal to multiculturalism within a liberal cosmopolitanism. Nor does it indicate only differentiated conditions of living within a single globalized world.

Instead, the heterogeneity that I wish to underscore in relation to the making of

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<sup>158</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 95.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>160</sup> This is in reference to Onuf's constructivist conception of "worlds," which is tied to a particular understanding of making sense: "In striving to make sense of the world, we make ourselves whole in a double sense: as self-aware individual beings with multiple, not always reconcilable goals and variously developed skills, and as a number of beings (not necessarily enumerated) who take we-ness for granted. If the world is whatever we, in this double sense, can make sense of as a whole, then there are as many worlds as there are sensible wholes." Nicholas Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), xv.



world order is a politics of difference that produces, to reiterate Himadeep Muppidi's formulation, "multiple realities of the global: multiple ways of imagining, ordering, and inhabiting our world as a global space."<sup>161</sup> Taking cue from Muppidi along with other postcolonial IR theorists, I argue that it is crucial to think difference beyond identity and in conjunction with globality, or more precisely, "multiply imaginable globalities."<sup>162</sup> This is distinct from a conception of the field of differences based on "a surplus of meaning" that overflows and subverts any discursive fixation.<sup>163</sup> Rather, it is historically grounded in "multiple relations, ways of being, and traditions of seeing and doing passed to us across generations."<sup>164</sup> Traditions here signal a sense of difference that is collectively forged with a shared past, but they are not self-contained, unchanging entities. Their boundaries are porous rather than fixed, and shift across time.<sup>165</sup> Owing to this porosity, traditions represent not only different ways of being that may be dissonant and even incommensurable, but also those that are profoundly entangled with one

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<sup>161</sup> Muppidi, "Colonial and Postcolonial Global Governance," 274.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. This resonates with the concept of "heterotopic transversality" that Nevzat Soguk draws from Michel Foucault and Édouard Glissant to describe conditions of contemporary globality: "a heterogeneous and polyvalent spatial-political unity issued out of the interactions of multiple political and economic spaces and identities, where all spaces reflect their own plurality of projects and programs, all coexist and interrelate, but, as Foucault argues, are neither fully reducible to one another nor finally superimposable on one another." See Nevzat Soguk, "Indigenous Peoples and Radical Futures in Global Politics," *New Political Science* 29:1 (2007), 9; also Nevzat Soguk, "Communication/Excommunication: Transversal Indigenous Diplomacies in Global Politics," in *Indigenous Diplomacies*, ed. J. Marshall Beier (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 29-46.

<sup>163</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 93-114.

<sup>164</sup> Anna M. Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

<sup>165</sup> This understanding of tradition is resonant with the concepts of culture and of civilization in, respectively, Inayatullah and Blaney, *Problem of Difference*, Introduction; Duvall and Çıdam, "Power," 39-41. Robert Cox also posits a notion of civilization characterized by openness. However, my concern diverges from his interest in reconciling differences towards a "common ground... as a basis for some practical degree of universality" within a plural world. See Robert W. Cox, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

another.<sup>166</sup>

Furthermore, these ways of being are not only ways of being in a collectivity but also ways of being in the world, or inhabiting the universe. As such, they produce diverse schemes of meaningful and purposeful global existence, what we may call ways of worlding. This means that beyond dominant structures, the opaque constitution of world order does not rest solely on an indeterminate excess of meanings. Opacity also lies in the encounters with historically formed and materially lived – yet subalternized – ways of worlding. If we disavow this opacity, if we are attentive to relations of global inequality and domination without “integrating the Other *analytically* – that is, as a substantive maker of the world”<sup>167</sup> as Anna Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling urge us, might we not reenact the very asymmetries that seek to diminish subaltern others to mere objects of interventions while denying them the possibility of intervening on the world themselves?<sup>168</sup>

If we do acknowledge subaltern ways of imagining and inhabiting the world, we still need to consider how they take part in the shaping of world order and with what (potential) effects. One may very well ask: How do they matter in a starkly unequal world

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<sup>166</sup> Thus, Agathangelou and Ling highlight “the *entwinement* of multiple worlds: their contending structures, histories, memories and political economies in the making of our contemporary world politics. These produce legacies of discord (e.g., Self vs Other) as well as complicity (e.g., selves in others, others in selves).” Agathangelou and Ling, *Transforming World Politics*, 1, original emphasis.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 88, original emphasis.

<sup>168</sup> For a critique of how the discipline of IR, even in its critical variants, predominantly privileges the vantage point of Western perspectives “with non-Western voices present as absences or as always acted upon subjectivities,” see Alina Sajed, *Postcolonial Encounters in International Relations: The Politics of Transgression in the Maghreb* (New York: Routledge, 2013); also Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy*, 50-53. Interrogating the “unintended complicities of *critical* International Relations theory with ongoing processes of advanced colonialism,” J. Marshall Beier looks closely at the universalizing tendencies of Western cosmology in emancipatory social theory and projects and warns against “emancipatory violences.” See J. Marshall Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), chap. 7, 181-212.

where certain ideas, structures, and institutions, backed by power, continue to dominate the ordering of the global? My answer to this question is two-fold. The first aspect has to do with taking seriously the coevalness<sup>169</sup> of subaltern others in the configuration of social relations, processes and institutions that constitute the global order. This view challenges the deep-seated linear conception of time and the staging of history as a civilizing movement of progress towards universal modernity.<sup>170</sup> It counters a prevailing construction of the subaltern perpetuated in different manners, and despite ideological divides, by both mainstream and left regimes of development: the trope of helpless, suffering others who can only be “subjects-in-waiting,” be it waiting for liberal improvement or for revolutionary emancipation.<sup>171</sup>

Contrary to this teleology of agency is the recognition that subaltern others are full political subjects in the now, and that they are not going to recede into irrelevance due to either the force of progress or the progress of force. Acknowledging them as coeval participants in the construction of the global order orients us towards asking not what we, as thinkers and practitioners of international relations, can do for them, but what

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<sup>169</sup> I draw the notion of coevalness from Fabian’s influential critique of the “denial of coevalness,” by which he means “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.” Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 31. Other theorists have showed that the tendency to relegate the Other to a static and less developed time is pervasive beyond anthropological discourse, as it is essential to the colonial production of the modern as the West. See Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21:2-3 (2007), 168-178; Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), chap. 5, 153-176; Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” 1-34; Mignolo, “Enduring Enchantment; Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

<sup>170</sup> See Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity.”

<sup>171</sup> María Saldaña-Portillo offers an instructive analysis of how both postwar developmentalist and revolutionary models of agency and transformation in the Americas share a “meliorist theory of subjectivity” predicated on “the transcendence of a premodern ethnos.” See María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Duke University Press, 2003).

we can learn from them. It urges us to “learn to learn”<sup>172</sup> from their political subjectivities, their readings of the world, both their negotiations with and their struggles against the present order, as well as their designs of the future.

There are many sites and ways in which subaltern groups challenge dominant world ordering logics as coeval – even if structurally discriminated against – producers of the global. This can be illustrated with a variety of examples. To begin with, subaltern globalities make themselves more internationally visible when they manifest in institutional confrontations and organized movements whose principles of governance and co-existence explicitly oppose or disrupt dominant ones. For example, the campaign for the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1960s-1970s was noteworthy for its attempt to redress the structural inequality of the colonial division of labor.<sup>173</sup> Reaffirming the principle of the Non-Aligned Movement in the polarizing climate of the Cold War, the Declaration for the Establishment of the NIEO put forward “[t]he right of every country to adopt the economic and social system that it deems the most appropriate for its own development and not to be subjected to discrimination of any kind as a result.”<sup>174</sup> Furthermore, a vital aspect of the NIEO was the doctrine of Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources (PSNR), which ensured each State’s “right to

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<sup>172</sup> I borrow this expression from Spivak to emphasize that learning from subaltern others necessarily involves and exceeds a painstaking process of unlearning hegemonic knowledge along with the presumption of “our superior theory and enlightened compassion.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “French Feminism in an International Frame” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 134-153; “Gayatri Spivak, Interviewed by Oscar Guardiola-Rivera” (Oxford, June 2006), *Naked Punch*, August 28, 2009, <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21>. See also Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places*.

<sup>173</sup> Heloise Weber, “The Political Significance of Bandung for Development: Challenges, Contradictions and Struggle for Justice” in *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders, Decolonial Visions*, eds. Quỳnh N. Phạm and Robbie Shilliam (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Craig Murphy, *The Emergence of the NIEO Ideology* (Westview Press, 1984).

<sup>174</sup> Point 4d of United Nations, General Assembly, *Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order*, May 1, 1974, A/RES/S-6/3201, <http://www.un-documents.net/s6r3201.htm>.

nationalization or transfer of ownership to its nationals.”<sup>175</sup> This was a crucial effort for formerly colonized countries to substantively bring together political sovereignty and economic sovereignty, instead of attaining formal independence alone.

Not surprisingly, Western capitalist states rejected and undermined Third World states’ campaign for full emancipation from the continuing subjection to and lasting effects of “alien and colonial domination, foreign occupation, racial discrimination, apartheid and neo-colonialism in all its forms.”<sup>176</sup> To appreciate the threat that the PSNR in particular and the NIEO more broadly posed to dominant interests and ideologies, one only needs to recall the 1953 overthrow – orchestrated by the US and UK governments along with their secret agencies – of the democratically elected Iranian PM Mohammad Mossadegh who dared to nationalize the Iranian oil industry; the Anglo-French-Israeli forceful reaction to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1954; and the US-backed coup in 1973 against Chilean President Salvador Allende, another democratically elected government, after his nationalization campaign notably targeted the US-dominated copper industry.<sup>177</sup>

In addition to the above mentioned, a radical albeit often forgotten demand put forth by the Declaration was the “right of all States, territories and peoples under foreign occupation, alien and colonial domination or apartheid to *restitution and full compensation* for the exploitation and depletion of, and damages to” all their

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<sup>175</sup> Point 4e of the Declaration.

<sup>176</sup> Point 1 of the Declaration. For analyses of the Western states’ sabotage of the NIEO, see Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially chap. 4, 196-244; Weber, “Political Significance of Bandung.”

<sup>177</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (Times Books, 2007); Lubna Z. Qureshi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and Allende: U.S. Involvement in the 1973 Coup in Chile* (Lexington Books, 2009); Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Richard Norton-Taylor, “CIA Admits Role in 1953 Iranian Coup,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/19/cia-admits-role-1953-iranian-coup>.

resources.<sup>178</sup> Although the NIEO was negated by Western aggression and coercive measures, its very articulation of what was conceivable and desirable for the global order was consequential and should be situated in the larger anti-colonial context. While some of its demands for structural transformation and restorative justice were apposite to a particular historical conjuncture, others remain pertinent to long-term projects of decolonization.

For another example of institutional battle, the mobilization leading to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 marks a milestone in their enduring struggles for self-determination. If we count the campaign at the UN alone, it was more than thirty arduous years from the inception to the adoption of the Declaration. As Sheryl Lightfoot persuasively argues, even though the Declaration establishes a bare minimum international standard on indigenous rights, it expresses a global indigenous politics that fundamentally challenges the international system, rather than functioning within it as a typical transnational advocacy network.<sup>179</sup> First, by uncoupling self-determination from the state, indigenous nations' demand for plural sovereignty arrangements directly threaten the principle of territorial sovereignty foundational to the modern states system.<sup>180</sup> Second, indigenous peoples' pursuit of land and collective rights push against the individualist foundations of liberal world order and its institutionalization of human rights and property ownership.<sup>181</sup>

Moreover, as Lightfoot's work demonstrates, indigenous worldviews intervene on

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<sup>178</sup> Point 4f of the Declaration, my emphasis.

<sup>179</sup> Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2016), especially chap. 2, 33-71.

<sup>180</sup> Similarly, Audra Simpson examines the political problem of "nested sovereignty" that indigenous self-determination poses to settler governance. See Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>181</sup> See also Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.

not only the governing principles of international relations but also its very conduct. For instance, upon indigenous participants' insistence, the UN bent its rules against public prayers and ceremonies to specifically accommodate their spiritual practices during international meetings.<sup>182</sup> It is important for us to keep in mind that such practices were not simply added procedures at the opening and closing of each session, though they may very well be from the perspective of liberal multiculturalism. Rather, they performed an alternative meaning and dialogue of global relations.<sup>183</sup>

Unlike the above endeavors to forge structural change through international organizations and international institutions, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) is a subaltern insurgency that has primarily waged their struggle on the national stage while at the same time actively appealing to international audiences, supporters and comrades. The Zapatistas first appeared on the international scene when they occupied six large towns and hundreds of ranches in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico during their initial armed uprising, which was timed to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. They described their rebellion as a “product of five hundred years of struggles” of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and took inspiration from Emiliano Zapata, a leading figure of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

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<sup>182</sup> For further analysis, see Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics*, chap. 3, 72-92.

<sup>183</sup> In a similar vein with Lightfoot's work, Nevzat Soguk examines how indigenous agency and cosmologies challenge “modern politics anchoring the hierarchical relations and institutions of local and global orders,” and perform a “different, even alternative, “worlding”.” Such a worlding, he argues, inspires fresh political visions and dialogues. His study focuses on three sites of struggles “exemplary of contemporary indigeneity”: “the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, the native Hawaiian sovereignty movement and the collective activism of indigenous peoples at the United Nations and beyond.” See Soguk, “Indigenous Peoples and Radical Futures”; also Soguk, “Communication/Excommunication.”

While their movement affirms a national imaginary of liberation and finds it necessary to recuperate national sovereignty from the assault of neoliberalism,<sup>184</sup> the Zapatistas defy the authority of the state in consequential ways. They establish their own system of governance and maintain a standing military. Even when they sought to modify the Mexican constitution, their proposal paradoxically called for the noninterference of the state in pursuit of political autonomy for indigenous communities.<sup>185</sup> Within their territories, they set up institutions of self-governance independent of the state and towards radical transformation against a liberal capitalist order. These range from Councils of Good Governance with service rotations as frequent as every eight days or every two months depending on each zone, to autonomous municipalities with community-based judicial, health, education, and production systems, to the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law. In particular, the EZLN's horizontal form of organization coupled with their commitment to communal democratic practices resonate with and inspire other communities and struggles.<sup>186</sup> Beyond institutional arrangements, the Zapatista way of worlding is also cultivated through their distinctive (but not unique)

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<sup>184</sup> For a compelling analysis of the simultaneously nationalist and cosmopolitan politics of the EZLN, see Rahul Rao, *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 150-158.

<sup>185</sup> Rabasa, *Without History*, 8.

<sup>186</sup> For instance, Manuela Picq tells us that the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law inspired Kichwa women from Ecuador, whose struggle for indigenous women's rights sought to both defend the collective rights of their community and change gender norms within it. See Manuela L. Picq, "Indigenous Worlding: Kichwa Women Pluralizing Sovereignty" in *Claiming the International*, eds. Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (New York: Routledge, 2013), 129-132. For another instance, Tatiana Farah observes that the EZLN's horizontal form of organization animates the Free Fare Movement in Brazil. See Tatiana Farah, "Brazilian Movement Takes Inspiration from Zapatistas," *ROAR Magazine*, June 24, 2013, <https://roarmag.org/essays/brazilian-movement-takes-inspiration-from-zapatistas/>.



form of “indigenous communalism,” including especially folklore knowledges and spiritual traditions.<sup>187</sup>

With regards to the EZLN’s international engagement, apart from addressing their communiqués “to the peoples and governments of the world”<sup>188</sup> and adeptly employing wide-ranging media and technologies to communicate and garner support worldwide, they also hosted intercontinental meetings to discuss visions of humanity and globality that are alternatives to that perpetuated by the colonial capitalist system. These meetings include the First International Gathering for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in July 1996, the series of Encounters between the Zapatistas and the People of the World including the First Encounter of Zapatista Women and the Women of the World in December 2007-January 2008, and the First World Festival of Resistance and Rebellion against Capitalism in December 2014 – January 2015, not to mention various organized trips for international visitors to Chiapas.<sup>189</sup>

Much less visible than UN declarations and organized movements are myriads of subaltern practices in the everyday that also interrupt dominant structures of world order. Audra Simpson provides us with an instructive discussion on the refusal of the “gifts” of settler citizenship by members of indigenous nations.<sup>190</sup> This translates into their refusal to vote, to pay taxes, or to carry passports issued by Canada and the United States. When three Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke were on their way back to Canada from the International

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<sup>187</sup> José Rabasa provides an insightful analysis of how the Zapatistas’ cultural and political practices which “combine modern and nonmodern forms” disturb not only dominant normative logics but also certain left conceptions of counterhegemonic opposition. See Rabasa, *Without History*, chap. 3, 37-61.

<sup>188</sup> Rao, *Third World Protest*, 151.

<sup>189</sup> For instance, the Zapatista communities hosted the National and International Caravan for Observation and Solidarity in 2008 and launched sessions of La Escuelita in 2013 and 2014. For further information on La Escuelita, see <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/advances/schools/la-escuelita/>.

<sup>190</sup> Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, chap. 1, 1-36.

Climate Change Conference in Bolivia in 2010, they were detained for almost a month in El Salvador because they held Haudenosaunee passports instead of Canadian travel documents. Eventually they were permitted reentry into Canada. Their insistence on answering only to the authority of Haudenosaunee governance unsettled the logics of settler colonialism and modern state sovereignty. Such a continuing affirmation of indigenous self-determination and national belonging causes both jurisdictional and normative challenges to the exertion of territorial sovereignty and settler disavowal of occupation.

Oftentimes, subaltern ways of worlding not only disturb hegemonic structures but also exceed what are widely promoted as counterhegemonic forms of resistance.<sup>191</sup> This is the case, for instance, with the divergent proposals of water management that emerged during the Cochabamba Water War of 2000 in Bolivia. In the fight against the privatization of the city's water supply, many advocated keeping water in public hands. For them, state control was the needed resistance against corporate greed turning water into a commodity. However, others questioned this binary opposition between public and private, and opted for a third way. According to Marcela Olivera, a water commons organizer based in Cochabamba, this third way had already existed "for so many years – hundreds of years in some cases": Communities manage water themselves instead of

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<sup>191</sup> Siba Grovogui and Lori Leonard have made the case that "noncapitalist and nonliberal systems of value, interest, and ethics" in postcolonial societies exceed counterhegemonic movements that are based on "liberal transnational structures of solidarity." They critique neo-Gramscians' investment in antisystemic resistance that relies on "the emergence of civil society as a significant vehicle toward the emancipation of society from the state in developing countries." See Siba N. Grovogui and Lori Leonard, "Uncivil Society: Interrogations at the Margins of Neo-Gramscian Theory," in *Gramsci, Political Economy and International Relations Theory: Modern Princes and Naked Emperors*, ed. Alison Ayers (Palgrave, 2009), 160-188.

“waiting for the state to manage it on their behalf.”<sup>192</sup> By self-organizing in assemblies and deciding together “on the best way to govern themselves” – “[s]ome [communities] do everything in common, some do not”<sup>193</sup> – they shift control away from both capital and the state. Their diverse arrangements are distinct from the municipalization of water sources. Whereas this form of state intervention “might be celebrated in the North” as a bulwark against privatization, Olivera clarifies, many Bolivians may see municipalization itself “as a sort of privatization” for it “still takes the decision-making out of our hands, which then leads us to believe that this is no longer just about water — it is about something else.”<sup>194</sup>

In sketching the above wide-ranging forms of subaltern struggles with selective highlights, I do not mean to give the impression that they are free of contradictions, ambiguities and limitations. I simply wish to maintain that subaltern groups call into question, interfere with and intervene on dominant world ordering logics in more ways than we know, be it through deliberate interruptions, by means of active mobilizations, or by virtue of their very ways of being in the world.<sup>195</sup> And they continually do so in the face of extreme inequality and discrimination and, under many circumstances, of terrorizing repression in defense of the status quo.

While it may be common to rank the political significance of the above-mentioned struggles according to their scale and effectivity, often measured by normative and institutional transformation, I propose that we look at it from a different angle. Let us

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<sup>192</sup> See an interview with Marcela Olivera in Marina Sitrin, “Fifteen Years of Community-Controlled Water in Bolivia,” *ROAR Magazine*, June 1, 2015, <https://roarmag.org/essays/marcela-olivera-water-bolivia/>.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> This claim resonates, though not entirely, with the theme addressed in a recent issue of *Globalizations*: Nevzat Soguk, “Insurrectional Politics: Theories and Practices of Contemporary Insurrections,” *Globalizations* 12:6 (2015), 829-833; see also other articles in the issue.

take into account that such transformation takes place slowly and contingently within an undecidable temporality that cannot be plainly charted onto a linear vector of progress. Let us also situate it within a larger ecology of political processes of contestation and reconstitution. Then perhaps we can ask questions that connect rather than segregate these struggles, questions such as: What make them possible in the first place? What sustains them? What strengthens them? What politics of worlding do they enact? And what possibilities do they open up for a more just future?

In discussing colonial and postcolonial global governance, Himadeep Muppidi asserts that the materialization of a particular global does not depend alone on its imagination and inhabitation. Instead, it is “when such imaginations are reciprocated and inhabited by the objects of that imagination that a colonial order will be materialized. That is, it is not enough for some to define others as objects. It is also necessary for those who are objectified thus to reproduce, to live up to, their presumed “responsibilities” as objects of a colonial global order.”<sup>196</sup> What is common, then, among what seem to be drastically different political acts – the formerly colonized countries’ campaign for the NIEO, the indigenous peoples’ mobilization at the UN and outside it for their right of self-determination, the EZLN’s rebellion in its armed and unarmed modes, the Mohawks’ use of Haudenosaunee passports to cross the borders of settler states, the communities’ management of their water systems instead of ceding control to either corporations or the Bolivian state – is the subaltern’s refusal to reproduce their objectification, even in the most quotidian practices. At the very least, each of these instances reveals the failure of the dominant construction of world order to materialize. I would argue that they reveal

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<sup>196</sup> Muppidi, “Colonial and Postcolonial Global Governance,” 281-282.

more than that.

It is not just that the subaltern's conduct disrupts or exceeds the world ordering logics that marginalize them. It is also that their very political subjectivity is not conditioned solely by dominant structures. It is produced and sustained, too, by other organized and relatively enduring sets of social relations, values and powers, which we may refer to as alternative social imaginaries, or other lifeworlds, or subalternized structures if you will. The task of translating these imaginaries in relation to what has become globally dominant is key to construing and constructing other globalities, other ways of relating to each other and to the world meaningfully.

Given unequal structures of intelligibility, compounded by the ongoing production of hegemonic knowledge, such a task of translation is no doubt full of difficulties. It gets even trickier when distinct political imaginaries are not always evidenced in unequivocally contrasting norms and institutions, or intense confrontations among radically divergent trajectories, or systems of signification that contain no overlap. More often than not, they are entangled in the shaping of orders, institutions and subjectivities.

Siba Grovogui's study of political contestations among African politicians and French officials during and after the Second World War provides an illuminating case of a conflict between colonial and postcolonial imaginaries expressed in entangled discursive and institutional spaces. Grovogui focuses on the *évolués*, who were colonized intellectuals and elites well versed in French ideas and culture, and who thus emerged as "primary arbiters of metropolitan contestations and deliberations over postwar symbols

and institutions.”<sup>197</sup> On the surface, the évolués’ hybrid education and relatively privileged status (compared to others from a colonized society) may create the impression that they identified culturally and ideologically with the colonial metropole, or at least did not stray far from it. After all, they all spoke the French language, employed French political idioms and concepts, and occupied positions either in the colonial administration or in the French National Assembly or in the French Senate. Yet, as Grovogui demonstrates, despite sharing many things in common with their metropolitan interlocutors, the évolués deployed their knowledge of French traditions to undermine the colonial project. Their sensibilities, agendas and nonimperial visions of community and reciprocity stemmed from postcolonial imaginaries of order and morality that were distinct from those of French officials.

To parse out different imaginaries at work, especially in discursive and institutional spaces where only one seems to prevail, requires us to closely examine the articulations of political claims and contestations, their specific meanings, referents, constituencies, stakes, contents as well as forms. In striving for a nuanced analysis of what is being challenged and what is being reproduced, we need to be careful not to either exaggerate or overlook difference. It is important to bear in mind that subaltern imaginaries are vulnerable to being silenced by dominant ones not only in actual political processes of negotiation and contestation but also in our very reading of those processes.

Heeding Bourdieu’s caution against “settling on paper issues that are not settled in reality,” I have suggested that we shift from a conception of world order as a sutured whole to one as a multiply constituted field coauthored and contested by coeval ways of

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<sup>197</sup> Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy*, 12.

inhabiting and envisioning global coexistence. The stress on coevalness here signals the co-constitution of the world by both dominant and subaltern imaginaries, against attempts to erase the latter. It also bespeaks, in Nevzat Soguk's Glissant-inspired formulation, a "submarine" togetherness that "contains too many roots and trajectories to be fully controlled in history."<sup>198</sup>

Let me now move on to the second aspect of my response to the question raised earlier regarding the relevance of the subaltern in a world dominated by the powerful. I aim to unsettle the terms of this question by arguing, in the next section, that we need to rethink our very conception of power, and by implication, who and what is powerful. I share with Duvall and Çıdam the assumption that "social construction is an ongoing, open-ended process always defined and shaped by relations of power."<sup>199</sup> How we conceive of power, then, is especially important for our understanding of the relationship between subalternity and the ongoing, open-ended process of constructing world order.

### **3. Rethinking power: Power as dominance and power as strength**

E.H. Carr had this to say about the discipline that canonizes him as a classical realist:

What is this thing called International Relations in the "English speaking countries" other than the "study" about how to "run the world from positions of strength"? In other places, at other times, it might be something else, but within those states which had the influence – as opposed to those that did not – it was little more than a rationalization for the exercise of power by the dominant nations over the weak... The subject so-called was an ideology of control masking as a proper academic discipline.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Soguk, "Communication/Excommunication," 44.

<sup>199</sup> Duvall and Çıdam, "Power," 36.

<sup>200</sup> Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, Introduction.

It is hard not to appreciate Carr's blunt unmasking of power. It counters the widespread propagation of universalistic and moralistic ideals in IR as if these were separate from structures of domination and violence. Moreover, it fully realizes the major role that the discipline plays in the imperial enterprise of running the world and dominating the weak. Such a clear-eyed awareness seems lacking, on both counts, in the larger part of the discipline today. In a sense, Carr's statement exhibits the best that a realist perspective has to offer: to see through deceptive appearances and understand the true nature and workings of power in the (re)production of our world. Realism is supposed to expose reality: As far as Carr could see it, IR was *really* about running the world; it was *really* an ideology and exercise of control. Unfortunately, realism in IR, especially the contemporary mainstream version, undercuts itself for relying on a narrow conception of power, measured largely by a state's relative material capabilities. This comes through somewhat in Carr's stress on the "dominant nations."

However, it is not the obvious state-centric focus in Carr's statement to which I want to draw our attention. Rather, it is realism's promise of exposing reality as-it-really-is that is also its blind spot and danger. More specifically, it is the seeming self-evidence of what strength is, what weakness is, and what power the strong has over the weak, that needs questioning here. According to the realist tradition that shapes Carr's view along with many others', it appears a truism that the weak has no power. The border between the have and the have-not, or rather the have-all and the have-none, is clear-cut and uncrossable: "those states which had the influence – as opposed to those that did not."

But what if the very naming of others as weak is part of the ideology of control? What better way to evacuate power from others and monopolize it for oneself than



naturalizing the conviction that they have none? As Alice Walker remarks, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” At least Carr admitted the possible parochialism of the dominant by invoking, fleetingly, other places and other times. Let us entertain the implications of such an admission, which Carr never pursued: Could it be that “in other places, at other times,” power might mean something else and the “weak” might be strong in their own ways? Wouldn’t that alter what realism might be, and what international relations might be practiced?

Since Carr, more sophisticated concepts of power have been developed in the discipline of IR. Nevertheless, I argue that there remains a persistent underlying thread among them that implicitly, if not explicitly, links power with control and dominance. Let us consider the four types of power classified in Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall’s “Power in Global Governance,” as they represent well the various concepts of power commonly found in IR scholarship that also draw from political theories. Two types are conceptualized explicitly in terms of control. One is compulsory power, or the direct control of one actor over another. This concept encompasses widely used definitions of power, ranging from Robert Dahl’s influential formulation, “the ability of A to get B to do what B otherwise would not do,” to Max Weber’s formulation centered on the probability that an actor “will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance.”<sup>201</sup> The second type is institutional power, which entails “actors’ control of others in indirect ways,” through the “rules and procedures that define those institutions,

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<sup>201</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 13.

guides, steers, and constrains the actions (or non-actions) and conditions of existence of others, sometimes even unknowingly.”<sup>202</sup>

The other two types are structural power and productive power. Barnett and Duvall identify two critical ways in which structural power “shapes the fates and conditions of existence of actors”: One, “structures allocate differential capacities, and typically differential advantages, to different positions”; Two, the social structure also shapes actors’ “self-understanding and subjective interests.”<sup>203</sup> Shifting conceptually to post-structural “systems of signification and meaning” and “networks of social forces perpetually shaping one another,” productive power concerns “the constitution of all social subjects with various social powers through systems of knowledge and discursive practices.”<sup>204</sup>

These latter two concepts help us think about power beyond the interactive dimension of social relations and attend to constitutive processes that “set the terms of [the] very self-understandings” of actors.<sup>205</sup> They move away from a measurable notion of power as property and resource,<sup>206</sup> which limits the engagement with power to exercises of acquisition, accumulation, distribution and balancing, to a relational understanding of power as the constitution of social subjects along with their capacities,

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>206</sup> For a compelling critique of this notion of power, especially of the assumption that power can be objectively measurable, see Stefano Guzzini, “On the Measure of Power and the Power of Measure in International Relations,” *DIIS Working Paper* (2009), 28.

identities and interests. As such, they call our attention to the enduring “power to” instead of a sole behavioral focus on “power over.”<sup>207</sup>

While the concepts of structural power and productive power are analytically valuable in the above-mentioned ways, the point that I want to make for the purpose of this chapter is that they are still tied up with a logic, and thus a politics, of dominance. They are oriented towards exposing and denaturalizing relations of domination and subordination. This is, of course, precisely why they are so critical to the study of global politics. Nevertheless, I maintain that “power as dominance,” an umbrella term I use to point to what underlies concepts as wide-ranging as the four types listed in Barnett and Duvall’s work, should not be an exclusive approach to power.

I find it important to go beyond such an approach for four reasons. First, to return to a point I raised at the beginning of this section in an engagement with E.H. Carr’s realism, part of the work of denaturalizing relations of inequality and domination is also to denaturalize and specify the kind of power in which the dominant are presumably embedded. Again, this move in no way rejects the interdependency between domination and (a certain kind of) power; it simply does not treat that power as the only one at work.

It is not accidental, as indicated by Alice Walker’s remark, that this move is already commonsensical to many in subaltern positions. For their future tomorrow and for their survival today, they *know* that the dominant does not hold a monopoly on power. This knowledge is voiced in feminist traditions by bell hooks for instance: “Women who are exploited and oppressed daily... cannot afford to see themselves solely as “victims” because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they

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<sup>207</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 10. See also Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Realist Critique,” *Polity* 20:1 (1987), 4-31.

possess.”<sup>208</sup> In revolutionary traditions, one of Mao Tse-Tung’s famous quotes is, “All reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality they are not so powerful. From a long-term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are really powerful.”<sup>209</sup> Echoing the power of the people, a proverb popular in both Việt Nam and China has been frequently invoked to express the discontent of the governed, especially of peasants, with the government: “Not only can water carry a boat, it can sink it also.”<sup>210</sup> (“In Vietnamese: “Nâng thuyền cũng là dân, lật thuyền cũng là dân”; In Pinyin: “Shuǐ néng zài zhōu, yì néng fù zhōu.”) Although the proverb speaks to a relation more than that of power (it also appeals to ethics, responsibility, and interdependency), it does convey a firm understanding of power which is distinct from dominance, and which is expressed in specific folk idioms while at the same time resonating translocally with other traditions and struggles.

This leads to the second reason for moving beyond power-as-dominance. Offering a constructivist analysis of the concept of power, Stefano Guzzini insightfully reasons that the development and meaning of the concept of power, like that of any other concept in the social sciences, is dependent on the political context as well as the “theoretical or meta-theoretical context in which they are embedded.”<sup>211</sup> In other words, Guzzini emphasizes both the importance of a “conceptual history or genealogy” and the “reflexive

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<sup>208</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), 45.

<sup>209</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, “Talk with the American Correspondent Anna Louise Strong” (August 1946), *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, 100.

<sup>210</sup> The saying made the title of an award-winning book that emerged out of a three-year survey that two Chinese journalists undertook to learn what had happened to peasants in one of the authors’ home province. See Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?: The Life of China’s Peasants* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2006). In the book’s preface, the authors mention that the book was banned and its copies removed from shelves two months after being published in China in 2003. The authorities’ insecurity ironically attests to rather than censors what is conveyed by the proverb.

<sup>211</sup> Stefano Guzzini, “The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33:3 (2005).

relationship between the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality.” These double emphases coupled with E.H. Carr’s realist observation about IR in “English speaking countries” being nothing “other than the “study” about how to “run the world from positions of strength”” certainly shed some light on why and how existing concepts of power in the discipline, given their conceptual history and political context, lean on the side of dominance. It can also be inferred from Guzzini’s emphases that looking into concepts of power that have been formed in non- or counter-hegemonic theoretical traditions and/or out of subaltern political struggles (“In other places, at other times...”) will likely yield very different meanings of power.

This is connected to both the third and the last reasons. Third, if we take seriously the concept of productive power, we need to consider how these other meanings of power are constituted by and constitutive of ongoing subaltern struggles against domination. If scholars of IR stay confined to only their own concepts without trying to learn what powers energize the subaltern’s tenacious pursuit of a more just world, they would effectively blindfold themselves away from global realities. Learning from others here is not simply a normative exercise. It is vital to our ability to gain a more realist understanding of what social actors, immersed in different political and theoretical contexts, are capable of, what politics they are engaged in and what change they may produce.

Last but not least, I share Guzzini’s view on the politics of defining power: “A conceptual analysis of power in terms of its meaning is part of the social construction of knowledge; moreover, the definition/assignation of power is itself an exercise of power, or ‘political,’ and hence part of the social construction of reality... the very definition of

power is a political intervention.”<sup>212</sup> To conceptualize power beyond dominance is a political intervention against dominance. It is an indispensable intervention in the social construction of both knowledge and reality.

For all these reasons, we need to depart from, without disregarding, what I have identified as a prevailing conception of power as dominance. The departure I propose is to conceive of power as strength. To the extent that this is based on a general understanding of power as capacity or constitution of capacity, there is some affinity between certain existing concepts of power, or certain aspects of them, and power-as-strength. Let us briefly return to two common ones that have been mentioned above. The first one, structural power, concerns the shaping of the capacities of social agents to act in enduring relations.<sup>213</sup> Yet conceptually, these capacities are tethered to differentiated positions within a social structure, and thereby aligned with relations of inequality instead of disturbing them. The second one, productive power, concerns the constitution of not only capacities but also social subjects themselves. This can serve as a basis for beginning to theorize power as strength. However, Michel Foucault (to whom this concept is often traced) and theorists he inspires are chiefly preoccupied with interrogating the link between forms of subjectivity and forms of subjection.<sup>214</sup> Hence, the exercise of power is understood to be “a “conduct of conducts” and a management of possibilities.”<sup>215</sup> Power manages possibilities; it does not open them up.

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>213</sup> In addition to Barnett and Duvall’s discussion of this concept, consider Jeffrey Isaac’s definition of social power as “the capacities to act possessed by social agents in virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate.” Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power,” 22.

<sup>214</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 3* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 331.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 341.

Like structural power and productive power, a conception of power as strength also attends to the constitutive dimension of social relations. However, unlike them, it seeks to think power beyond and against dominance. As such, power-as-strength is distinct in three following important aspects:

One, power-as-strength is conceived specifically in relation to the vitality of the subordinated and the marginalized, those who are typically perceived as weak or powerless. If E.H. Carr invokes strength in reference to imposition and domination (“run the world from positions of strength”), what we are concerned with here is the strength to endure and to refuse relations of domination. While refusal may be expressed in open defiance or revolt, we should bear in mind that it does not negate endurance. Nor does endurance negate refusal. In our understanding, endurance is not the same with acceptance. One may endure relations of domination and at the same time refuse its terms in ways that are not openly stated or easily discernable.<sup>216</sup>

Still, it may seem that putting endurance next to refusal on the same plane with power makes little sense. Following Talal Asad, I would qualify that it makes little modern secular sense.<sup>217</sup> Insofar as modern secular epistemology naturalizes the notion of history making, acts of refusal that aim at transformation can be readily recognized as a desirable form of agency and empowerment. Obversely, endurance is interpreted as the

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<sup>216</sup> Steve Pile and Michael Keith make a similar connection between endurance and refusal in their invitation to rethink resistance: “struggles do not have to be glamorous or heroic, about fighting back and opposition, but may subsist in enduring, in refusing to be wiped off the map of history.” See Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds., *Geographies of Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), preface, xi.

<sup>217</sup> My discussion of endurance and power here owes a great deal to Asad’s discussion of pain and agency in his influential work on modern formations of the secular. In particular, he questions the modern secular assumption that (enduring) pain is not agential and that it must be overcome for self-empowerment. This assumption prevents us from recognizing the moral agency of “the different ways that an agent engages with pain and suffering.” Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Standard University Press, 2003), chap. 2, 67-99.

absence or failure of transformation, and thus equated with passivity and disempowerment. Enduring one's conditions of living, especially when it is filled with pain and suffering, is assumed to mean not doing, or not being able to do, anything about it. Questioning this assumption, Asad asks "whether pain is not simply a *cause* of action, but can also itself be a *kind* of action."<sup>218</sup>

Building on his insight, I ask whether enduring pain is not only a mode of agency but also a mode of strength. I contend that reducing endurance to victimhood and disempowerment fails to recognize that endurance does embody a form of power: the capacity to survive corporeal, material, social, cultural, spiritual and ecological assault in countless ongoing forms; the strength to persist, to take care of one another, to still cultivate traditions and foster communities in the face of all this. I therefore stress that far from being two opposites of a binary, both endurance and refusal perform power as strength. Indeed, they need to be thought together rather than independently of each other, which leads to my next point.

Two, to endure and to refuse the existing order are not two separate capacities but a dual strength that stems from the same source or conditions of possibility. It is thereby important for us to think power both as effective cause and at the same time beyond the manifestation of effects. This brings us to the question of theorizing power in terms of potentiality. Here I draw from two theoretical sources in particular. The first one is Roy Bhaskar's philosophy of critical realism. He posits causal powers as "potentialities and liabilities," which "may or may not be exercised, and when exercised may or may not be manifest in a particular outcome, hence may be exercised unactualized and/or unmanifest

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 69, original emphasis.



to people.”<sup>219</sup> Such a notion of causal power helps us grasp “generative mechanisms and structures independently of any particular sequence or pattern of events.”<sup>220</sup>

The second source is Duvall and Çıdam’s conception of power as “undecidable.”<sup>221</sup> The core meaning of power, they argue, is “undecidable/indeterminate in being simultaneously potentiality (capacity of becoming) and effective cause (productive of effects). To put it differently, power is simultaneously counterfactual and factual, the thing and its opposite.”<sup>222</sup> Unlike Bhaskar’s realist ontology which grounds potentialities in social structures, Duvall and Çıdam’s conception of potentiality draws from Jacques Derrida’s discussion on indeterminacy. Power cannot be assigned to either pole of the binary – sheer potentiality unrealized or sheer effective cause without potentiality; it has to be both because they presuppose one another and “one always involves the trace of the other.”<sup>223</sup> To account for this “malleable unity,” Duvall and Çıdam call for “theorizing power as potentiality actualized – but never fully, always remaining additional capacity for becoming, *and* power as effective cause expressive of potentiality, but never fully so.”<sup>224</sup>

I find the above two approaches to understanding power as potentiality *and* effective cause helpful in thinking about power-as-strength in relation to endurance, refusal, and the underlying capacity of becoming that is constitutive of both. Each approach speaks to an important aspect of potentiality. Bhaskar’s critical realism reminds us that just because expected effects do not manifest or anticipated events do not

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<sup>219</sup> Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, xvii.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Duvall and Çıdam, “Power,” 42-46.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 45.

actualize, it does not mean that generative mechanisms and social structures do not exist or that they are not significant. Duvall and Çıdam invite us to think of power as undecidable and emphasize the *simultaneity* of potentiality and effective cause. Engaging Derrida's discussion on decision and responsibility, they also call our attention to the ethico-political stakes of deploying a particular conception of power over others. For Derrida, responsibility lies in the undecidability that is necessarily constitutive of the moment of decision: "One must know as much as possible, one must deliberate, reflect, let things mature. But, however long this process lasts, however careful one is in the theoretical preparation of the decision, the instance of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to this accumulation of knowledge."<sup>225</sup> Whereas Duvall and Çıdam underline the responsibility of the analyst's theoretical decision in apprehending power, we can connect responsibility with social agents' decision in enacting power as well. In other words, the ethical and political stakes are incalculable in the undecidable moment of decision wherein power as potentiality may or may not be actualized into power as endurance and refusal.

Three, power-as-strength is constituted by heterogeneous social relations and subjectivities. Therein lies the difference between it and the commonly used concept of Resistance (I use capital R to distinguish reference to the concept from reference to the practice). More often than not, Resistance is conceived as immanent to the field of power-as-dominance: Dominance begets resistance, or as Barnett and Duvall state, "there is a human inclination to resist in the face of power."<sup>226</sup> While I do not disagree that acts of resistance can be found wherever domination is exerted, I want to point out two ways

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<sup>225</sup> Derrida cited in *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>226</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 22.

in which power-as-strength differs from Resistance conceptually. First, conceptualizing power as the strength to endure and to refuse relations of inequality and domination allows us to account for the diverse range of subaltern engagement with, through, aside and against those relations. This includes but is not limited to resistance based on direct opposition; it also involves numerous forms of negotiation, dissent, contestation, and challenge.<sup>227</sup>

Second, I mentioned immanence above to refer to the assumption that the field of power-as-dominance creates the very condition of possibility for Resistance. From the perspective of power-as-strength, acts of resistance are only partly conditioned by structures of inequality and domination. They are also made possible by other social imaginaries, or subalternized ways of being. This understanding of resistance markedly differs from concepts of Resistance that presuppose immanence. For instance, it diverges from Hardt and Negri's concept of "constituent power," or "the power of the multitude to make history that continues and is reconfigured today *within* Empire."<sup>228</sup> Linking resistance to "a world that knows no outside," they repeatedly assert that the struggles of the multitude "are immanent to the procedures and developments of imperial power."<sup>229</sup> While a conception of power-as-strength acknowledges that there is no pure outside to dominant structures, it also objects to the pure "within" that Hardt and Negri posit and works with a more complex politics of difference that textures resistance.

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<sup>227</sup> Some recent scholarship has suggested the need to rethink the category of resistance. See the special issue introduced by Uday Chandra, "Rethinking Subaltern Resistance," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45:4 (2015), 563-573; Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Srila Roy, eds., *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>228</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, original emphasis, 47, 59, 393-413.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 413, 47.

For another instance, let us consider the conception of resistance to productive power in Barnett and Duvall's discussion "from power to resistance." In their theorization, "productive power fosters resistance as attempts by actors to destabilize, even to remake, their subjectivities, and, thereby, to transform, or at least to disrupt, the broader social processes and practices through which those subjectivities are produced, normalized, and naturalized."<sup>230</sup> Resistance here takes the form of either destabilizing or remaking existing subjectivities. This implies that existing subjectivities are singly constituted by dominant power, and thus need to be disturbed or made over in the pursuit of transformation. In contrast, a conception of power-as-strength stems from the assumption that existing subjectivities are multiply constituted, by both dominant and subaltern social imaginaries. As a result, transformation does not necessarily equal the creation of new subjectivities; it can also mean the de-subalternization of already existing ones. I believe it is in this sense that Dipesh Chakrabarty speaks of "the "now" that we inhabit as we speak" as "irreducibly not-one," and of "the futures that already "are"."<sup>231</sup>

Taking into consideration these three aspects of conceptualizing power as strength, in the next section I develop the concept of subaltern power and reflect on its relation to the making and remaking of order and world.

#### **4. Subaltern Power: (Re)Composing the World**

"Right, as the world goes, is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." This quotation from the Melian dialogue in Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is often cited to

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<sup>230</sup> Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 23.

<sup>231</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, epilogue, 237-256.

sum up realist IR view of power and of how “the world goes.” This realism, which exhorts us to face the harsh reality of the world we live in, makes it far beyond IR realism into popular discourses as well. Indeed, it is hard not to acknowledge the blatant tyranny of the strong and the mass suffering of the weak in a world rife with invasions, wars, occupation, dispossession, and exploitation of all sorts. It is in this context that Ashis Nandy’s reminder of another reality – or is it another realism? – is refreshing: “[T]here also is a ‘survival of the weak’, and the weak do inherit the world.”<sup>232</sup>

The subaltern do indeed survive. They survive so much systematic violence and abuse that “the weak” appears a sheer misnomer for them. How do they carry on daily, under the devastating weight of structures of discrimination and disability in colonial as well as postcolonial orders? How do they still gather energy and force to fight for a different world? What is the source of their continual strength? Or does Nandy already clue us in: Is it their inheritance of the world that sustains and empowers them?

On many occasions, Nandy also reminds us that even when we know all too well structures of domination, borders of exclusion, and operations of violence, we “refuse to acknowledge that in most cases dominance brutalizes and shrinks the moral universe of the dominant much more successfully than that of the victims.”<sup>233</sup> In other words, it is the dominant who fall victim to their own quest for supremacy: trapped in their closed borders and unable to see or accept any alternative to their supposedly superior way of

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<sup>232</sup> Ashis Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 467.

<sup>233</sup> See Ashis Nandy, “Memory Work,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16:4 (2015), 604-605; also Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Other anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers have also made similar observations. E.g. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Of the Culture of White Folk,” *The Journal of Race Development* 7:4 (1917), 434-447; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2001); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 2005).

life.<sup>234</sup> The other victims of dominance, on the other hand, embrace and embody alternatives that the dominant cannot admit as their possible other selves: “[C]ultures have a right to live not because they can be saved or promoted to a higher state of civilization but because of the alternatives they give us in their distinctive philosophies of life. Because ultimately they *are* willing to live out these alternatives on our behalf.”<sup>235</sup>

Of course Nandy is not the only theorist or writer to avow that alternatives to the dominant are necessarily fostered at the margins. From a different context of lived experiences and struggles, bell hooks, too, identifies “marginality as much more than a site of deprivation... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”<sup>236</sup> It is in marginality that she locates the “space of refusal” and “the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is *not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives*. As such I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.”<sup>237</sup> Lest others mishear her, she goes on to clarify that this is “not a mythic notion of marginality” by sharing her own experience.

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<sup>234</sup> In the words of a well-known practitioner of liberation theology:

“Cursed be  
All your fences  
Which encircle you  
From within...”

Pedro Casaldaliga, *In Pursuit of the Kingdom: Writings 1968-1988* (Orbis Books, 1990), 48.

<sup>235</sup> Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 437, original emphasis.

<sup>236</sup> See the essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” in bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (South End Press, 1999).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, added emphasis.

Indeed, there is hardly anything mythic or romanticizing to saying that there is more to marginality than deprivation. Denying deprivation altogether would be questionable. But resigning oneself to only despair also destroys “the very ground of [one’s] being.”<sup>238</sup> Contrary to both, the above thinkers simply point out that marginalized lives are not reducible to experiences of oppression, and that the marginalized, too, have a way of seeing and living, a worldview, a creativity, a vision for the future, and the capacity to pursue that future. They thus affirm the subaltern power to both endure and refuse relations of inequality and domination.

Furthermore, they are not isolated voices in avowing marginality as a site of radical possibility. There is a consistent thread in political and theoretical voices emerging from various locations of marginality that connects subalternity with the capacity to forge a new morality, a new future, and a new world. This is echoed, for yet another instance, in James Baldwin’s always provocative words:

... the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they can endure everything. They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this – paradoxically – by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be build.<sup>239</sup>

Not surprisingly, we find in Baldwin’s statement also the theme of the subaltern simultaneously “endur[ing] everything” and striving for a more just world.

Building upon the previous section on power-as-strength, I propose to conceptualize subaltern power as the capacity to (re)compose the world grounded in subalternized ways of being and worlding that enact alternatives to dominant ones, alternatives that do not seek to replace the dominant but represent instead a world where

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>239</sup> Baldwin, “No Name.”

many worlds can coexist with dignity. Following the above-mentioned theorists, I take subalternity to be not an accidental but an indispensable locus of world-making precisely due to *historically specific* processes that produce particular ways of world-making in dominance over others, and worse, with annihilating violence towards others. While I take the subaltern seriously as social agents capable of composing the world otherwise, I depart from Baldwin on the process of that composition. I suggest that it does not just begin “almost instinctively”; rather, its imaginative contours are distinctively shaped by subaltern subjectivities that are already constituted by and productive of different lifeworlds in the present. In what follows, I discuss subaltern power in terms of its potentiality, its modes of expression, and its relation to the processes of composing the world otherwise.

#### **4.1. Subaltern power as potentiality: multiple memories, entangled temporalities**

There are many modes of collective memories. History is the officially sanctioned mode, based on a modern secular conception of linear time and aligned with the modern nation-state as the dominant form of political community. However, as Ashis Nandy and other theorists have eloquently argued, there are other vibrant forms of constructing the past: through popular stories, poetry, theater plays, “epics, legends, myths, grandparents’ tales, and through ritualized narratives that never agreed with each other but were always in dialogue.”<sup>240</sup> They are deemed by historians as unreliable records of the past for failing to abide by disciplinary protocols. Yet this failure to conform can also be read as a refusal

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<sup>240</sup> Nandy, “Memory Work,” 601. For other deconstructions of History as the only valid mode of remembering the past, see Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limits of World-History* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002); E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Narendran Kumarakulasingam, “De-islanding,” in *Meanings of Bandung*.



to fit the past into one standard mold, to objectify it from the fictitious position of a detached subject whose view presumably neither affects nor is affected by the world s/he remembers. It is this unruly refusal to contain the past in the official narrative of History that allows people to live the past fully in all its diversity and intensity through unofficial memories.

Subaltern memories are particularly important in countering not only the disciplinary narration of History but also the larger systematic knowledge production that seeks to naturalize relations of domination. This production includes attempts to silence past brutalities as well as ongoing violence that gave rise to and perpetuate the dominant till today.<sup>241</sup> Against this imposed amnesia, subaltern memories act as witnesses to such violence, and more importantly, to the possibility of a different relation between the subaltern and the dominant that has been forsaken and suppressed. In the resounding words of Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali:

“They make a desolation and call it peace  
 ...  
 My memory is again in the way of your history.  
 Army convoys all night like desert caravans...  
 We can't ask them: Are you done with the world?  
 ...  
 At a certain point I lost track of you.  
 You needed me. You needed to perfect me.  
 In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.  
 Your history gets in the way of my memory.  
 I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.  
 I am everything you lost. Your perfect Enemy.  
 Your memory gets in the way of my memory...”<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> For analyses of IR's complicity in the systematic amnesia over European conquest, slavery and colonization, see Sankaran Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations,” *Alternatives* 26 (2001), 401-424; Inayatullah and Blaney, *Problem of Difference*.

<sup>242</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, “Farewell” in *The Country Without a Post Office: Poems* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

In addition to erasing bloodied memories of slaughter and oppression – memories of “arm convoys all night like desert caravans,” of children, women, men, and oxen asphyxiated in caves,<sup>243</sup> of “naked bodies walking in groups, crying with skin hanging down like drags,”<sup>244</sup> of “flarebombs bloom[ing] on the dark sky” and children’s laughter dying,<sup>245</sup> of body parts of unidentifiable tribal elders strewn about after a drone strike,<sup>246</sup> ... – hegemonic knowledge production also purges authoritative narratives of subaltern voices, revolts and revolutions. The sinking of the Haitian Revolution into oblivion as a “non-event” is exemplary in this regard. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work on the Haitian Revolution demonstrates, subaltern power is rendered unthinkable or dismissible by forms of erasure as well as forms of banalization.<sup>247</sup> Hence, it is a ceaseless “struggle of memory against forgetting,” as bell hooks notes, for the subaltern

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<sup>243</sup> Algerian writer Assia Djebar recorded memories of the French colonial army hunting down Berber tribes who refused to surrender and obeying a Field Marshal’s order to “smoke them out mercilessly, like foxes!” See Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

<sup>244</sup> Memories of the US dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima by a survivor in Toge Sankichi, *Poems of the Atomic Bomb* (1952), translated by Karen Thornber, <https://ceas.uchicago.edu/sites/ceas.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Sibley/Genbaku%20shishu.pdf>.

<sup>245</sup> Memories of the US’s war in Việt Nam in Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Witness Remains,” in *Call Me By My True Names* (Parallax Press, 1999).

<sup>246</sup> Testimonies, made by families of victims and survivors, to a US drone attack in the village of Datta Khel in the Pakistani region of North Waziristan. See “Eye of the Drone,” *Harper’s Magazine*, June 2012, <http://harpers.org/archive/2012/06/eye-of-the-drone/>.

<sup>247</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), chap. 3, 70-107. Apart from C.L.R. James’ influential *The Black Jacobins*, recent scholarship has sought to remember the Haitian Revolution as a foundational moment in the emergence of the modern world: Siba N. Grovogui, “To the Orphaned, Dispossessed, and Illegitimate Children: Human Rights Beyond Republican and Liberal Traditions,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 18:1 (2011); Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Undoing the Epistemic Disavowal of the Haitian Revolution: A Contribution to Global Social Thought,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37:1 (2016); Gurminder K. Bhambra, “On the Haitian Revolution and the Society of Equals,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 32:7-8 (2015); Robbie Shilliam, “What the Haitian Revolution Might Tell Us about Development, Security, and the Politics of Race,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50:3 (2008), 778-808; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (The Belknap Press, 2005); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2004).

to “redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality.”<sup>248</sup>

Beyond witnessing entrenched violence and honoring unyielding acts of revolt, there is a third way in which subaltern memories are most significantly related to the concept of subaltern power that I am proposing. They are the passages through which ways of being, sensing and relating are lived on across generations, even if they have to take the form of “besieged yet fugitive knowledges”<sup>249</sup> if need be. They are how “the weak do inherit the world.” A past, in this sense, is not a dead weight, but a continually living past that exists coevally with other pasts remembered in the present. Because time is not experienced linearly, there is a fluidity, instead of a neat partition, between past, present and future. This is illustrated well in an anecdote that EZLN’s Marcos shared about his initial encounter with indigenous people in the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas, Mexico. The way they inhabited time bewildered the vanguardist Marxist, urban-educated mestizo (non-Indian) Zapatistas: “You weren’t always sure about which era they were speaking; when they spoke they could be talking about a story that happened that very week, or that happened five hundred years earlier, or even when the world began.”<sup>250</sup>

This seeming confusion of temporalities is actually a different conception of time wherein past and present are mutually constituted and continually reconfigure each other. The present reflects on and is haunted by the past: What was so inspiring? What was shameful? What was touching? What was unspeakable? What were the dreams? And the

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<sup>248</sup> hooks, “Choosing the Margin.”

<sup>249</sup> Soguk, “Communication/Excommunication,” 43.

<sup>250</sup> Nicholas Higgins, “The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance,” *Alternatives* 25:3 (2000), 364.

nightmares? What could have been? What should have been?... The past is also reshaped, even “transfigured,” “with principled forgetfulness and silences”<sup>251</sup> along with “creative improvisations,” for the present, to quote Nandy in a somewhat different context: “what possibilities that past opens up for the present and for the future; how, in the context of the present, a past is constructed in such a way that some continuity with ancestors is retained but without being burdened by it.”<sup>252</sup>

Subaltern memories inherit multiple pasts, which make the global present “irreducibly not-one.”<sup>253</sup> Achille Mbembe characterizes this multiplicity of temporalities as “the *time of existence and experience*, the *time of entanglement*.” “This time is not a series,” he elaborates, “but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.”<sup>254</sup> Only by conceiving of this time of entanglement can we begin to recognize the coeval existence of social imaginaries and subjectivities that are constituted by other past-present-futures.

Even when certain social imaginaries and subjectivities are besieged and repressed, they can still be sustained by “memory work,” as Nandy argues, and take refuge in unsanctioned and often dismissed memories of the marginalized, “wait[ing] for appropriate moments to return as a form of resistance.”<sup>255</sup> In other words, as long as other pasts are remembered and they continue to constitute social subjectivities in the

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<sup>251</sup> Distinguished from unwitting, adaptive, or unprincipled forgetfulness, “principled forgetfulness,” for Nandy, “involves a refusal to separate the remembered past from its ethical meaning in the present.” Ashis Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” *History and Theory* 34:2 (1995), 47, 66.

<sup>252</sup> Ashis Nandy in conversation with Hilal Ahmed and Priyadarshini Vijaisri, “A Past Without History,” 2012, [http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/639/639\\_conversation\\_nandy.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/639/639_conversation_nandy.htm).

<sup>253</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 249.

<sup>254</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>255</sup> Nandy, “Memory Work,” 598.

present,<sup>256</sup> they may still return, in a form reconfigured by a particular historical conjuncture, as a future once again desirable. For instance, the current global movement for agroecology can be seen as a return to traditional ecologically and agriculturally sustainable practices after modernization campaigns have dismissed them as backward and inefficient. (I will provide a detailed analysis of this “return” in the next chapter.) The “return” should be qualified in two ways though. One, a return of a past is never the same with what it once was due to the historically changed social context. Two, this may be a return on the global scene while what is called agroecology has never ceased to be practiced and favored over industrial farming in the first place in many locales.

I argue that social imaginaries and subjectivities that are constituted by subalternized past-present-futures bear power as potentiality to compose a world more open to “host[ing] the otherness of others.”<sup>257</sup> Whether this potentiality is actualized in a time horizon discernible to us or not, it remains potent. For it is through lived or repressed memories that, as Nandy puts it, the survival of “other worlds and other selves” can and will “challenge our certitudes and threaten to redefine our collective self.”<sup>258</sup>

Subaltern power as potentiality is echoed in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry: “My memory is again in the way of your history... Are you done with the world?... My memory keeps getting in the way of your history...”

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<sup>256</sup> Yan Hairong’s study of postsocialist formation in China provides an insightful example of multiply constituted subjectivities. She analyzes the “unstable process in which the emerging hegemony of capitalism in China must deal with living socialist legacies, claims, and structures of feeling that surround the current relations of production and sociality.” See Yan Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>257</sup> Nandy borrows this formulation from Gustavo Esteva and the Zapatistas. Cited in Nandy, “Memory Work,” 598.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

#### **4.2. Subaltern power as endurance and traversal: the capacity to dwell in multiple worlds**

Drawing in part on José Rabasa's work on Subaltern Studies and the Zapatistas, I suggest that one mode in which subaltern power is expressed is the capacity to dwell in and traverse across multiple worlds. This capacity is born out of both necessity and openness to difference. Historically speaking, as Rabasa puts simply, "to survive in a colonial regime, one must know how to dwell in at least two worlds."<sup>259</sup> Although the colonial situation certainly heightens the need, I suggest that the capacity to traverse across at least two worlds is true for any relation of dominance and subalternity that involves worlding. Since the dominant is complacent about their prevailing status, they expect others to submit or assimilate, counting on a combination of force and the appeal of their supposedly superior way of being. Meanwhile, they cannot take others seriously enough as an equal to learn from others how to dwell in their world; at most, they study others for the purpose of ruling them better. In the encounter with subaltern others, they can only see the latter as lesser beings, who either embody inferior difference or amount to a less developed version of themselves. The subaltern, on the other hand, have to be fluent in the dominant language, in addition to their own, in order to deal with its prevalent logics and categories in relations of governance.

Yet beyond the necessity to survive and function well in an unequal world, the subaltern's ability to immerse themselves in dominant knowledges, concepts, idioms and conduct, and to perform them effectively in various settings also attest to the porous boundaries of their traditions, which allow for the critical integration of elements of other

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<sup>259</sup> Rabasa, *Without History*, 69.

traditions to reconstruct one's own. This relative porosity is highlighted by Ashis Nandy's notion of critical traditionalism and Ángel Rama's discussion on the concept of transculturation. Drawing from Gandhi's political thought and practice, Nandy speaks of the continuation of traditions in ways that both resist modern oppression and are "willing to include elements of modernity as critical vectors" to transform oppressive aspects of traditional frames as well.<sup>260</sup> In a similar vein, Rama employs the concept of transculturation first coined by Fernando Ortiz to refer to the transformative encounter between at least two cultures, which, through a process of give-and-take, rearticulates the cultural structure of each culture with both newly acquired foreign elements and familiar pre-existing elements. Transculturation is meant to be distinguished from acculturation, which implies merely assimilation into another culture, as well as deculturation, which indicates only the uprooting of a previous culture.<sup>261</sup> Both Nandy and Rama challenge the binary produced by colonial modernity between radically innovative, constantly progressing, and liberally cosmopolitan modernity on the one hand, and purely conservative, deplorably stagnant, and oppressively provincial tradition on the other hand.<sup>262</sup>

To take into account the subaltern's capacity to dwell in multiple worlds is to understand subaltern claims to tradition, indigeneity, locality or placed-basedness in a context of hybridity instead of purity. In her reading of Rigoberta Méncu's text, Ileana Rodríguez thus argues, "what makes a text indigenous is not cultural purity but rather the

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<sup>260</sup> Ashis Nandy, "Cultural Frames for Social Intervention: A Personal Credo," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* XI:4 (1984), 411-421.

<sup>261</sup> Ángel Rama, *Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 18-19.

<sup>262</sup> Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity"; Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Mignolo, "Enduring Enchantment."

intensity of its hybridity,”<sup>263</sup> a hybridity that may not be absent but is sorely repressed in a dominant text. The intense hybridity in the text of the K’iche’ political activist is revealed to Rodríguez through simultaneous translations of diverse cultural materials: some “occur between the indigenous and the Ladino worlds, others between Spanish and Quiché, and others between Quiché and other languages – like Latin. Still others transpire between men and women; between *tu* and *vos*; between high, popular, indigenous, and mass-culture registers; and between oral and written experiences.”<sup>264</sup>

What I want to highlight from Rodríguez’s analysis of Méncu’s text for our understanding of subaltern power as endurance is that the subaltern’s dwelling in plural worlds differs from a logic of resistance based on a rejection of or a pure opposition to the dominant. As Rodríguez demonstrates, Méncu deftly deploys liberal vocabularies such as civil society, civil rights, and public sphere either to “expose the aporias of liberal philosophy” or to “push at its borders” in order to transform political culture and demand a democracy marked by equality of cultures instead of abstract individualism.<sup>265</sup> Yet, her performance of liberal discourses does not boil down to either submission or assimilation. Simultaneously, she stays vocal in embracing millenarian *creencias* as a coeval world that her people inhabit, as opposed to a mere “minority culture” within a liberal order.<sup>266</sup>

It is important to note that the subaltern’s fluency in the dominant system of signification does not necessarily imply that they are interpellated by it as its subjects. Nonetheless, the dominant often mistake this fluency for a sheer validation of their

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<sup>263</sup> Ileana Rodríguez, *Liberalism and Its Limits: Crime and Terror in the Latin American Cultural Context* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 2, 42-67.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3, 68-94.



universality, since they are structurally blind to the other world(s) in which the subaltern dwell, where the same words or deeds performed by the subaltern may signify something else entirely. This conflation is what Homi Bhabha playfully calls “signs taken for wonders.”<sup>267</sup> In such cases, I argue that one power is mistaken for another: subaltern power as the capacity to dwell in plural worlds is mistaken for the productive power of dominant discourses.

An illustration of this conflation can be found in Susan Buck-Morss’ reading of the Haitian Revolution as evidence of the universality of the French Revolution and European Enlightenment: “For almost a decade, before the violent elimination of whites signaled their deliberate retreat from universalist principles, the black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications.”<sup>268</sup> Sign – “the black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue” – taken for wonder – the “world-historical” implications of the French Revolution (except for the deplorable violent elimination of whites). Buck-Morss does not ask whether the meaning, significance, or even validity of the banner “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” might have been displaced or appropriated by Haitians under the yoke of French slavery; or whether the Haitian Revolution might have been empowered by other values, aspirations, and temporalities, even if the French revolution was one of the sources of inspiration. Instead, Buck-Morss is able to read it only within the dominant system of signification in the name of “the Enlightenment goal of human liberty.” The

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<sup>267</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), chap. 6, 145-174.

<sup>268</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, And Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 39.

subaltern power of enslaved Haitians is accordingly mistaken for the productive power of Enlightenment values. Such a view would be challenged by subaltern memories narrated in Alejo Carpentier's *El Siglo de las Luces*: "All the French Revolution has achieved in America is to legalize the Great Escape which has been going on since the sixteenth century. The blacks didn't wait for you, they've proclaimed themselves free a countless number of times."<sup>269</sup> The speaker proceeds to recall the subaltern past of one black revolt after another sounding thunders of drums in the continent long before the French Revolution occurred.

Before moving on to the next part, I would like to share a story from the Zapatistas that captures well the conception of subaltern power as endurance and traversal. When the Mexican government representatives exhorted the Zapatistas to reply rapidly to their proposals regarding the demands of the indigenous movement, the Zapatistas responded that they had their own time, their own rhythms. Comandante David recounted the exchange:

We, as Indians, have rhythms, forms of understanding, of deciding, of reaching agreements. And when we told them that, they replied by making fun of us; well then, they said, we don't understand why you say that because we see that you have Japanese watches, so how do you say that you use the indigenous clock, that's from Japan.

On which Comandante Tacho commented: "They haven't learned. They understand us backwards. We use time, not the clock."<sup>270</sup>

Japanese watches: again, sign taken for wonder! The government representatives take for granted the universality of clock time: dialogue must move along efficiently,

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<sup>269</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 231.

<sup>270</sup> John Holloway, "Zapatismo," John Holloway (blog), July 30, 2011, <http://www.johnholloway.com.mx/2011/07/30/zapatismo/>.

decision must be made fast, an hour is an hour for everyone, modern time and speed are measured by standard units. They couldn't fathom that just because the Zapatistas wore watches didn't mean they lived time the same way. While the Zapatistas understood too well the temporality of the state and how it operated, the state representatives remained deaf to the indigenous rhythms of dialogue. (In chapter 4, I will discuss how Vietnamese peasants similarly practice a temporality of dialogue that radically differs from that of the government-staged dialogue.)

#### **4.3. Subaltern power as refusal and redefinition: the capacity to re-articulate the terms of (global) political life**

Quoting Elizabeth Janeway, bell hooks alerts us to the essential link between subaltern power and the capacity for self-definition: "One of the most significant forms of power held by the weak is 'the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful'."<sup>271</sup> Echoing this refusal, James Baldwin points to the threat that it poses to the dominant: "The power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions."<sup>272</sup> The threat is felt, I suspect, due to the recognition that such a refusal leads to not only a redefinition of the subaltern themselves but also a potential redefinition of the entire social relations that produce subalternity in the first place. By questioning the supposedly unquestionable and refusing the supposedly natural, this transgression puts the existing order at risk.

I thereby argue that another mode in which subaltern power is expressed is the capacity to both refuse the existing political order and redefine the terms of political life

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<sup>271</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 90.

<sup>272</sup> James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in *Collected Essays*.

within an imagined community, nationally and globally. Even if the dominant cannot fully grasp the terms of subaltern redefinition, this power is fundamentally threatening to the dominant because it attacks their core assumption and widespread projection of their own indispensability in steering the global order. It dares insist that the dominant structures are prevalent, for now, but they are not, in fact, universal.

Although this mode of subaltern power and the previously discussed mode of endurance and traversal are deeply entangled, rather than mutually exclusive, in the temporality of composing the world otherwise, this mode entails more urgency and mobilized effort in re-articulating the terms of (global) political life so that it is more discursively and institutionally hospitable to subaltern worlds. The urgency is expressed, for instance, by Monica, a woman leader in Brazil's MST from the northeast, a region devastated by stark inequalities and drought: "We have always been told that agrarian reform is a good idea but the *conjuntura*, or present moment, isn't right... Well, we make the *conjuntura* right."<sup>273</sup>

The subaltern insists, militantly, on the materialization of change in the now especially when they can no longer breathe. The EZLN, too, made the *conjuntura* right when they declared "war against oblivion": "We could not sit and wait for the understanding of those who don't even understand that they don't understand."<sup>274</sup> Denied coevalness for so long, the subaltern need to forcefully assert their contemporaneity, even

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<sup>273</sup> Cited in Sue Brandford and Jan Rocha, "Cutting the Wire: The Landless Movement of Brazil," in *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (NY: Verso, 2003), 122-123.

<sup>274</sup> "Words of the EZLN on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of the Beginning of the War Against Oblivion," Enlace Zapatista, January 1, 2016, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2016/01/02/words-of-the-ezln-on-the-22nd-anniversary-of-the-beginning-of-the-war-against-oblivion/>.

if that means going to war. “Here we are, the dead of always, dying once again, but this time to live.”<sup>275</sup>

Due to the subaltern’s precarious positionality and the extremely high stakes of their militant action (violent, if not deadly, repression is virtually guaranteed), their contestation and re-articulation of the political field takes wide-ranging forms and combinations: policy debates and proposals, petitions, parades, songs, dances, poetry, street theater, spiritual acts, marches, demonstrations, campaigns, occupations, social movements, blockades, infrastructural disruptions, hunger strikes, self-immolations, various other types of protests, acts of dissent, and interventions in all media of public discourses. They participate in institutionalized along with non-institutionalized fora and channels, and appeal widely to local, national and international audiences. Their political interventions are usually characterized by a high degree of creativity, adaptability, planning as well as improvisation.

The above multiple forms may share a few important interrelated features of subaltern power as the capacity to redefine political life. First, the subaltern re-imagine who and what constitutes a political community or collectivity. This re-imagination is pronounced, for example, in the global indigenous movement for self-determination. It not only alters narrations of the nation, but also demands plural sovereignty arrangements that unsettle the principle of territorial sovereignty foundational to modern nation-states.

Second, the subaltern redefine the terms of the existing order and the values that underpin it. For instance, the current Rural Reconstruction movement in China, both an

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<sup>275</sup> The Zapatistas cited in Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination*, 231. This is a recurrent theme in their communiqués. This year, their New Year’s message reiterated: “We had to choose then, and we chose life. That is why, both then and now, in order to live, we die.” Ibid.

intellectual current and a social movement for the past decade and a half, is remarkable in directly opposing the logic of industrialization underlying China's ruthless modernization campaign that has been "emaciating the rural."<sup>276</sup> Contrary to the Chinese state's goal of uprooting and relocating 70 percent of its population, roughly 900 million people, from the countryside to the city by 2025,<sup>277</sup> the Rural Reconstruction movement seeks to rebuild a social and economic structure for rural and ecological sustainability. It redefines collective values against hegemonic discourses by reaffirming "village rationality" along with traditional knowledges and "rural cultures of sustainable self-reliance." Moreover, it seeks to re-order the rural within an alternative national imaginary by pursuing "peasants' organizational and institutional renewal" through policy changes, education initiatives, grassroots projects of self-empowerment and self-governance, and practices of rural experimentation.<sup>278</sup>

Third, the subaltern reconstitute shared understandings of the political and the democratic by translating and enacting subaltern ways of worlding. The indigenous peoples' prayers at UN meetings and the Zapatistas' rhythms of dialogue in negotiation with the Mexican government both change the very conduct and meaning of politics and democracy.

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<sup>276</sup> Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants*, part 1.

<sup>277</sup> Ian Johnson, "China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million Into Cities," *New York Times*, June 15, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/world/asia/chinas-great-uprooting-moving-250-million-into-cities.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>278</sup> Wen Tiejun, Lau Kin Chi, Cheng Cunwang, Huili He and Qiu Jiansheng, "Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction in China," *The Monthly Review* 63:9 (2012), <http://monthlyreview.org/2012/02/01/ecological-civilization-indigenous-culture-and-rural-reconstruction-in-china/>.

Fourth, the subaltern push the limits of the established order and hierarchy of knowledges by proliferating forms of protest together with languages of dissent.<sup>279</sup> Thus they confront the boundaries of intelligibility and acceptability in both form and content for the broader collectivity. It is not accidental that subaltern political articulations are often enlivened by, if not saturated with, vernacular idioms, poems, stories, folk references, even jokes.<sup>280</sup> Such expressive vibrancy affects the boundaries of rationality that is supposed to be based on the separation of reason from emotion. Furthermore, it undermines the hierarchies of legitimate and illegitimate knowledges, of high and low cultures, of educated and illiterate speech, of refined and uncouth manners, of enlightened and mass subjects. It also disrupts the order of civility and officialdom.

Fifth, subaltern struggles foster connections and solidarity with other subaltern groups and all those who support their struggles. Mobilizing across borders against suffering in isolated subjugation begins with a fundamental resonance: “We could not wait for the other, different, but with the same pain and rage, to look at us and in looking at us, see.”<sup>281</sup>

Notably, with regards to the state, it is important for us to keep in mind that the subaltern can afford neither to take the state as a pre-given entity with fixed identity and interests, nor to treat it as a mere vehicle of dominant structuring logics. Rather, I maintain that the state is an important site of contestation for the subaltern. As John Beverley points out, there are two theoretical approaches to subaltern agency: One posits

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<sup>279</sup> Ashis Nandy speaks of the “untamed language of political dissent,” especially that expressed by those from margins of society and inaccessible to those well-versed only in hegemonic knowledge systems.

<sup>280</sup> Himadeep Muppidi, *Politics in Emotion: The Song of Telangana* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (University of California Press, 2009); Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>281</sup> “Words of the EZLN on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary.”

it outside the logic of the modern state and constitutively opposed to it; the other argues that it “necessarily passes through the state and in doing so modifies it.”<sup>282</sup> I am inclined to agree with Beverley that the state is a “shifting and complex field of relations,” that the question of who controls the state has crucial impact on people’s lives, and that subaltern-popular movements may need to garner both “political support and concrete policy consequences within the nation-state.”<sup>283</sup>

For these reasons, I do not rule out the possibility that the state and its institutions can be made part of a broader process of political re-articulation and transformed by “bringing into it demands, values, experiences from the popular-subaltern sectors.”<sup>284</sup> In this regard, Florencia Mallon makes a similar observation in her study of peasant politics and postcolonial state formation that “[w]hen subalterns engaged in conflict over power and meaning, they helped define the contours of what was possible in the making of nation-states.”<sup>285</sup> Accordingly, “subaltern struggles,” she notes, “are woven throughout the fabric of state institutions.”<sup>286</sup> In particular, the importance of the state cannot be underestimated with regards to subaltern struggles that seek to redefine the terms of citizenship, those that engage in constitutional and legal reforms for consequential impact on discriminated and marginalized bodies, those that pursue redistributive policies such

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<sup>282</sup> John Beverley, *Latinamericanism after 9/11* (Duke University Press, 2011), chap. 7, 110.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>285</sup> Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



as agrarian reforms, as well as those that aim to reconstruct the state against neoliberal restructuring.<sup>287</sup>

Yet, just as importantly, let us not take for granted that subaltern struggles are necessarily conjoined with political projects that seek to occupy the state. This has two implications for understanding subaltern power. First, it would be a mistake to evaluate the effectiveness of subaltern struggles according to their ability to transform the state and its institutions, when their power may lie elsewhere, in other realms of meaningful engagement and change. For example, the import of Anupama Rao's work on questions of caste equality, caste radicalism, and Dalit emancipation would be missed if subaltern protest is measured by the success or failure to capture state power. Rather, by tracing an alternative genealogy of the political subject, her work reveals "how caste subalterns creatively transformed key political categories such as rights, equality, and citizenship" and reconfigured Indian democracy.<sup>288</sup>

Second, it is important to remember that many subaltern struggles explore *re-existence*, to borrow Adolfo Albán Achinte's term, more than resistance.<sup>289</sup> They may seek to change a society's structures and infrastructures; they may seek better and more egalitarian conditions of living; they may seek respectful and continual dialogue with state representatives; they may seek just relations of governance; they may seek to rebuild communities; they may seek to establish global alliances. But the one thing that they may not seek is to seize power as dominance. This does not betray their "weakness"

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<sup>287</sup> On the last point, even the EZLN, which is supposed to seek autonomy from the Mexican state, thinks that "the recuperation and defence of national sovereignty" is necessary in view of neoliberal globalization. See Rao, *Third World Protest*, 157.

<sup>288</sup> Rao, *The Caste Question*, xii.

<sup>289</sup> Achinte's term is cited in Caroline Levander and Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order," *The Global South* 5:1 (2011), 1-11.

or “futility”. Instead, I would suggest, it signifies that something much larger is politically and ethically at stake, and in a way, that something mediates everything else: our very ways of being in the world and relating to each other.

Subaltern power as the capacity to redefine the terms of global political life is necessarily actualized in a slow, long, and nonlinear temporality. Drawing in part from theories of articulation put forth by Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I argue that the course of its unfolding depends on an enduring, complex, and challenging process of discursive re-articulation that may gradually lead to relational, institutional, and structural changes. The details of this re-articulation vary according to specific historical and social contexts, but in general, it draws discursive elements from existing subalternized social imaginaries and repressed memories of other past-present-futures to reconstruct what is imaginable, what is just, what is desirable, what is sensible, and what is doable for a given political collectivity.

Whether or not this discursive re-articulation yields widespread effects and gets institutionalized into more lasting change is contingent upon a number of factors. One, how visible and audible is the subaltern’s public staging of political interventions and democratic practices. Two, how well they translate themselves to their interlocutors and audiences in terms of delegitimizing hegemonic discourses, proposing collective changes, and preventing taming appropriations of their discourses. Three, how they maintain communication, dialogue, negotiation, and contestation persistently. Four, crucially, whether or not their re-articulation generates popular interpellation, resonances, sympathies, and support. Five, what responses it engenders from the dominant and how much the subaltern can bear their likely repressive, possibly terrorizing, measures to

sustain the process of re-articulation. These factors are entangled and may be mutually determining. Of course, all of these factors are beyond subaltern control, just as subaltern power is beyond dominant control. The subaltern are always conscious of the extremely dangerous and treacherous conditions in which they have to operate. And yet, they must ultimately make the undecidable decision to make the *conjuntura* right or not, and how.

Lastly, I suggest that we think of subaltern power, expressed as the capacity to refuse the existing unjust order and to redefine the terms of global political life, as independent of whether or not the process of discursive re-articulation ends up in the definite outcome of institutional transformation. Rather, this power is actualized in the very act of refusal and in the very moment of enunciation when another way of worlding is imaginatively opened up and resonates with those others “different, but with the same pain and rage, [who] look... and in looking..., see.”

#### **4.4. Subaltern power and the temporality of renewal and insurgency**

In 2016, Berta Cáceres, a Lenca woman activist in Honduras, was assassinated in her home after years of death threats. She is one among many indigenous and environmental activists who have been killed in Honduras, as well as across the world.<sup>290</sup> She once said in an interview, “here in this country... they want to prohibit us from

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<sup>290</sup> According to investigation by Global Witness, between 2002 and 2013, at least 908 activists protecting land rights and the environment were killed in 35 countries. Many were ordinary people defending their land, their livelihoods and the environment from corporate and state abuse. See Nina Lakhani, “Surge in Deaths of Environmental Activists Over Past Decade, Report Finds,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/apr/15/surge-deaths-environmental-activists-global-witness-report>.

dreaming.”<sup>291</sup> She was a dedicated fighter against the prohibition of dreams, and among the many things she did, she “waged a grassroots campaign that successfully pressured the world’s largest world dam builder [in collaboration with the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation and a Honduran company] to pull out of the Agua Zarca Dam” at the Río Gualcarque, which “would cut off the supply of water, food, and medicine for hundreds of Lenca people and violate their right to sustainably manage and live off their land.”<sup>292</sup> Cáceres received at least 33 death threats before her murder, but her daughter, Laura Zuñiga, said that her mother’s last words to her were that she was never afraid. Zuñiga added, “My mother isn’t dead. She is multiplied.”<sup>293</sup>

Many mourned Cáceres’ death. And many also remember her and continue to be inspired by her. For me, Zuñiga’s statement does not just contain nice words that honor her mother. It also does not simply bespeak a romantic, wishful thinking about resistance when everything seems hopeless and futile: One assassination after another, not to mention the intimidation, detention, and torture. It is evident that Cáceres won’t be the last person murdered for defending her people’s dreams. But isn’t that the point? Not that she won’t be the last to be killed, but that despite her murder, and the murder of countless indigenous and environmental activists before her, people will not cease to fight to death for their dreams and hers.

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<sup>291</sup> See a 2014 interview presented at Berta Cáceres and Chris Lewis, “They Want to Prohibit Us from Dreaming,” *Jacobin*, March 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/berta-caceres-murder-honduras-agua-zarca-dam/>.

<sup>292</sup> The description is taken from the website of the Goldman Environmental Prize which was awarded to Berta Cáceres in 2015 for her role in the campaign. <http://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/berta-caceres/>.

<sup>293</sup> “Berta Cáceres’ Daughter: My Mother Isn’t Dead, She Multiplied,” *Telesur*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Berta-Caceres-Daughter-My-Mother-Isnt-Dead-She-Multiplied-20160323-0034.html>.

Zuñiga's statement speaks to the long temporality of subaltern power that is akin to an undercurrent intimately felt by those swimming in it but invisible to those who mistake the surface current for the whole ocean and remain certain that the direction of flow they see on top is the only one existing. When subaltern power is expressed as a forceful redefinition of political order and political life, it becomes more visible because it directly threatens dominant power. But this surface moment is indeed expressive of a much more immense, profound, and lasting formation of power that exists resiliently alongside the dominant, albeit under the radar. Understanding this undercurrent of power as the constitutive basis of not just their own uprising in the now but also social ferment to come, the Zapatistas consciously identified themselves as "nothing but a symptom of something more":

Don't give too much weight to the EZLN; it's nothing but a symptom of something more. Years from now, whether or not the EZLN is still around, there is going to be protest and social ferment in many places. I know this because when we rose up against the government, we began to receive displays of solidarity and sympathy not only from Mexicans, but from people in Chile, Argentina, Canada, the United States, and Central America. They told us that the uprising represents something that they wanted to say, and now they have found the words to say it, each in his or her respective country.<sup>294</sup>

It is not accidental that there are many popular sayings that echo the spirit of Zuñiga's remembrance of her mother. The verse of Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos, "What didn't you do to bury me? / but you forgot that I was a seed," finds reverberation in the Mexican proverb, "Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semillas." Rumi says, "Don't let them think that we've broken down, that we've cracked up. We merely dropped leaves, for a further spring." Consistently, all these sayings point to the continuation of life after attempted burial and seeming death. They point to the

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<sup>294</sup> "Emergence: An Irresistible Global Uprising," in *We Are Everywhere*, 24.

entanglement of the time of renewal and the time of insurgency: for a further spring. As long as subaltern subjectivities continue to be regenerated by the memories and dwelling of multiple worlds, by the dreams that the dominant try to prohibit, the possibility of their insurgency against the dominant towards another world is *ever-present*.<sup>295</sup> Cuban independentista José Martí thus intimates the temporality of subaltern power in the context of anti-colonial insurgency: “Ahora son nuestros amos; pero mañana ¿quién sabe!” (Today they are our masters; but tomorrow, who knows?)<sup>296</sup>

Situating the surface current in relation to the undercurrent prevents us from jumping to misleading conclusions about subaltern failure, defeat, weakness, and hopelessness. As I mention above, even if a subaltern re-articulation of the terms of global political life is suppressed by the dominant and does not lead to a global re-ordering in the short run, it is not reducible to a defeat. Not only does it actualize subaltern power in the moment itself, it may also inspire subsequent re-articulations through living memories. Just as the memories of many thunders of drums sounded by the enslaved across the Americas contributed to making the Haitian Revolution possible. Although the past articulation inevitably has its own limitations, it can be remembered with “principled forgetfulness” and creative improvisations “in such a way that some continuity with [predecessors] is retained but without being burdened by it.” In that sense, the NIEO didn’t fail. The Arab Spring didn’t fail.<sup>297</sup> Mossadegh and Allende aren’t

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<sup>295</sup> José Rabasa theorizes (indigenous) insurgency as “the ever-present possibility of breaking from the structures of power and the narratives that have inscribed (and continue to) indigenous life under a series of frames.” Rabasa, *Without History*, 1.

<sup>296</sup> José Martí, “Un Paseo por la Tierra de Los Anamitas,” in José Martí, *Obras Completas* (vol. 18) (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1991), 462.

<sup>297</sup> For readings of the Arab Spring as an expression of what I conceptualize as subaltern power, as opposed to a failure, see the Special Issue introduced by Anna M. Agathangelou & Nevzat Soguk, “Rocking the

dead. They tried to bury them, but they didn't realize that they were seeds. These predecessors enunciated powerful subaltern articulations in their times, and they remain alive as memories of other possible past-present-futures that can be reconstructed for our times.

From the perspective of subaltern power, there is no failed subaltern insurgency. There can only be failed memory of what could have been, and what can return, for a further spring.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REGENERATIVE POWER OF SUBALTERN (AGRO)ECOLOGY

#### 1. The science and politics of agroecology

In recent years, agroecology has emerged as an important part of the scientific solution to global problems of hunger, poverty, climate change, food security and nutrition. This recent emergence can be detected in key speeches and policy documents of various international agencies and organizations. Defining agroecology as the “science of applying ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems,”<sup>298</sup> a 2009 report by the International Assessment of Agriculture Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)<sup>299</sup> stated that agroecology could help address major development and sustainability challenges. Agroecology figured more prominently in a 2013 Trade and Environment Review produced by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) as an urgent call to “wake up before it is too late” and “make agriculture truly sustainable.”<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> This definition is in keeping with the one offered in Miguel A. Altieri, *Agroecology: The Science of Sustainable Agriculture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

<sup>299</sup> Initiated in 2002 by the World Bank and the FAO, the IAASTD aims to “provide decision makers with the information they need to reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable, environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development through the generation of, access to and use of agricultural knowledge, science and technology.” See International Assessment of Agriculture Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), *Agriculture at a Crossroads: Global Report* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009), available at [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/est/Investment/Agriculture\\_at\\_a\\_Crossroads\\_Global\\_Report\\_IAASTD.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/est/Investment/Agriculture_at_a_Crossroads_Global_Report_IAASTD.pdf).

<sup>300</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Wake Up Before It Is Too Late: Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now for Food Security in a Changing Climate* (United Nations Publication, 2013), available at <http://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=666>.



In a report presented before the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2011, Olivier De Schutter, then Special Rapporteur on the right to food, highlighted the contribution of agroecology, as “a science and a set of practices,” to the realization of the right to adequate food and advocated for its “scaling up” through public policies.<sup>301</sup> His successor, Hilal Elver, reaffirmed the need for global agricultural policy to adjust towards “agricultural democracy” and the empowerment of rural small farmers in her debut speech in 2014 titled “Agro-Ecology: A Solution to the Food Crisis.”<sup>302</sup> Her speech coincided with the landmark International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition, which was hosted at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, Italy.<sup>303</sup> The FAO has subsequently organized three regional meetings on agroecology in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

While the above reports and events varied in tone, content, and approach when it came to the significance of agroecology for the global governance of food and agriculture, all of them seemed driven by a conspicuous sense of crisis. The reports characterize the crisis as a multifaceted one, which pertains to human, climate, energy, biodiversity, and natural resources. Among the pressing global problems listed are hunger

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<sup>301</sup> Olivier De Schutter, “Agroecology and the Right to Food,” Report presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 1/HRC/16/49, March 8, 2011, <http://www.srfood.org/en/report-agroecology-and-the-right-to-food>.

<sup>302</sup> Cited in Nafeez Ahmed, “UN: Only Small Farmers and Agroecology Can Feed the World,” *The Ecologist*, September 23, 2014, [http://www.theecologist.org/News/news\\_analysis/2566719/un\\_only\\_small\\_farmers\\_and\\_agroecology\\_can\\_feed\\_the\\_world.html](http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/2566719/un_only_small_farmers_and_agroecology_can_feed_the_world.html). See also interviews with Hilal Elver available at Rose Hayden-Smith, “UN Special Rapporteur Hilal Elver Discusses Global Food and Human Rights Issues,” *KCETLink*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.kcet.org/food/un-special-rapporteur-hilal-elver-discusses-global-food-and-human-rights-issues>; Kathryn Bryant, “Interview with Hilal Elver: U.N Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food,” *Food Tank*, June 2016, <https://foodtank.com/news/2016/06/interview-hilal-elver-special-rapporteur-right-to-food/>; “The Right to Food: An Interview with Hilal Elver,” *The Moon Magazine*, November 2, 2011, <http://moonmagazine.org/right-to-food-interview-hilal-elver-2014-11-02/>.

<sup>303</sup> The proceedings and the final report of the symposium are available at *Final Report for the International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition* (FAO, 2014), <http://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/4e651e91-f75d-4599-9dde-f70e3f26e1de/>.

and malnutrition, the unprecedented and steady loss of (agro)biological diversity, the degradation of resources, deforestation, soil depletion, water shortage, loss of water and air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and intensifying consumption of and dependence on fossil energies.

Although such devastation has been long in the making, the recent food crises in 2007-2008 and again in 2011-2012 seemed to have revealed more than before the widespread vulnerability, suffering, and unrest linked to drought conditions (whose frequency and severity are anticipated to be worsened by climate change), the volatile prices of food and fossil energies, the financialization of food markets, and social inequalities. Consequently, there has been a renewed sense of urgency regarding the “sustainability challenges” of what is considered “conventional agriculture,” i.e. industrial agriculture. A shift is seen as needed, one that must take agroecology seriously. In the space of global governance marked by institutions such as the World Bank and the FAO, this late and reluctant realization is novel. Its novelty was noted by José Graziano da Silva, Director General of the FAO, in his closing remarks at the International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition: “Today a window was opened in what for more than half a century has been considered the Cathedral of the Green Revolution.”

Mr. da Silva’s statement was telling on a couple of counts. By referring to the FAO as the Cathedral of the Green Revolution, he pinpointed the type of agriculture it had been promoting exclusively. His frankness is appreciable in contrast to the pervasive and misleading discourses of food security, which attribute the above-mentioned problems (of hunger, malnutrition, loss of (agro)biological diversity, degradation of

resources, deforestation, soil depletion, water shortage, loss of water and air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and intensifying consumption of and dependence on fossil energies) to agriculture in general, rather than a particular model, i.e. industrial agriculture. Furthermore, if a window is opened only today, it has stayed shut for more than 50 years. In other words, since the Green Revolution, the FAO along with other international organizations has advanced industrial agriculture as the sole path of development while rejecting other forms of agriculture in the name of productivity and progress. It is only in the face of inescapable crises that there is now an opening, in the Cathedral, to other ways of knowing and doing. But just what kind of shift is this new recognition of agroecology? And what does agroecology mean for those who are its newest champions?

We may glean some clues from an issue paper on agroecology published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in 2014. The paper called for “mainstreaming agroecology,” which, it asserted, “will require a fundamental cultural and philosophical shift in how we as a society define ‘productive’ and ‘efficient’ agriculture.”<sup>304</sup> It is worth noting that productivity and efficiency need to be redefined, but they remain binding criteria for agricultural production. They are not dispensable. The shift must be fundamental, and yet some fundamentals appear not shiftable.

In answer to the question “What is agroecology?”, the paper names three facets:

1. A scientific discipline involving the holistic study of agro-ecosystems, including human and environmental elements;
2. A set of principles and practices to enhance the resilience and ecological, socio-economic and cultural sustainability of farming systems;

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<sup>304</sup> Laura Silici, *Agroecology: What It Is and What It Has to Offer* (London: IIED, 2014), 3.

3. A movement seeking a new way of considering agriculture and its relationships with society.<sup>305</sup>

It is not uncommon to define agroecology as a science, a practice, and a movement.<sup>306</sup> This three-pronged breakdown allows for flexible compartmentalization: One can integrate or segregate these facets for different purposes. We can see the segregation at work in IAASTD's use of agroecology as a science and Olivier De Schutter's reference to it as "a science and a set of practices." Let us note that both dispense with the social movement "facet."

Treating the social movement as a "facet" that is dispensable means ruling out the explicitly political and contestatory nature of agroecology. Agroecology is acceptable as science and as practice but is unrecognizable as politics, as contestation of the existing way of doing things. Indeed, all the policy recommendations of agroecology within major international organizations emphasize its virtue as a harmonious addition to the status quo. In his promotion of agroecology to the UN Human Rights Council as Special Rapporteur on the right to food, De Schutter stressed that it "delivers advantages that are *complementary* to better known conventional approaches such as breeding high-yielding varieties."<sup>307</sup> In a similar search for "common ground," Laura Silici from the IIED went further to suggest that "the differences [between agroecology and conventional farming]

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>306</sup> A. Wezel, S. Bellon, T. Doré, C. Francis, D. Vallod, and C. David, "Agroecology as a Science, a Movement and a Practice: A Review," *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 29 (2009): 503–515; Mette Vaarst, P. Panneerselvam, and Niels Halberg, "The Role of Agro-Ecological and Organic Food Production in Making the World Feed Itself in the Twenty-First Century," in *Routledge Handbook of Food and Nutrition Security*, eds. Bill Pritchard, Rodomiro Ortiz, and Meera Shekar (New York: Routledge, 2016); Maywa Montenegro de Wit and Alastair Iles, "Toward Thick Legitimacy: Creating a Web of Legitimacy for Agroecology," *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene* (July 2016).

<sup>307</sup> De Schutter, "Agroecology and the Right to Food," my emphasis.

are often blurred” and that they are best approached as “a flexible toolkit.”<sup>308</sup> Adding agroecology to the mix, according to these proposals, we would get the best of both worlds: an optimal solution that is both “highly productive” and “highly sustainable.”<sup>309</sup> Or as the FAO summed it up, we would be able to take advantage of “win-win opportunities which can close both yield and environmental gaps.”<sup>310</sup>

The problem with this “highly productive, highly sustainable” appropriation of agroecology is that it sees no contradiction between productivity and sustainability. This makes sense only if what it seeks to sustain is not the environment as much as the existing agro-industrial order. Within this order, as Eric Holt-Giménez and Miguel Altieri point out, agroecology could only be treated as “a set of additional tools to improve everyone’s toolbox. Big, small, organic, conventional,... will all get along better with a little more agroecology.”<sup>311</sup> The co-optation of agroecology as a quick-fix for the problems of the agro-industrial order shows an inability to read the crisis politically. Reading that politically would allow for an understanding that would not only apprehend the catastrophic nature of the current order but also reveal how it may require a fundamental shift.<sup>312</sup> Commenting on the persistent prioritization of industrial productivity, even the UNCTAD recognizes that the “required transformation is much more profound than simply tweaking the existing industrial agricultural system.”<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Silici, *Agroecology*, 5, 14.

<sup>309</sup> De Schutter, “Agroecology and the Right to Food.”

<sup>310</sup> See the final report of the International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition.

<sup>311</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez and Miguel Altieri, “Agroecology “Lite”: Cooptation and Resistance in the Global North,” *Food First*, October 18, 2016, <https://foodfirst.org/agroecology-lite-cooptation-and-resistance-in-the-global-north/>.

<sup>312</sup> For a discussion of two senses of catastrophe - as abrupt, visible events and as long durée, dreary conditions - see Antonio Y. Vazquez-Arroyo, “The Antinomies of Violence and Catastrophe: Orders, Structures and Agents,” *New Political Science* 34 (June 2012): 211-221.

<sup>313</sup> UNCTAD, *Wake Up*.

In contrast to approaches that instrumentalize agroecology as a tool, I suggest that it is important to understand agroecology as a *subaltern* political movement that not only challenges the fundamentals structuring the current world order but also embodies a different order of existence. To begin with, it is crucial to not forget that the subalternization of agroecology has a political history. That history of dominance and subordination is concealed in the frictionless depiction of agroecology as a merely advantageous complement to industrial agriculture.

When I was doing research in Việt Nam in 2016, I saw how that concealment was performed – only to be called out – in a forum called “What is the Future of Organic Agriculture in Việt Nam?”<sup>314</sup>. Co-organized by the University of Science and Technology of Hà Nội and the French Cultural Center L’Espace, the forum was a public event with free entry. Two guest speakers were invited: Dr. Đào Thế Anh, Director of the Center for Agrarian Systems Research and Development (CASRAD)<sup>315</sup>, and Ms. Từ Tuyết Nhung, Head of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) Vietnam Coordinating Committee.<sup>316</sup> Dr. Thế Anh’s presentation on “Agroecology and Sustainable Agricultural Development in Việt Nam” was divided into two main parts. The first part discussed the challenges of the country’s agricultural development despite its relatively high productivity. After the first slide showed a steady rise in rice productivity since the 1990s thanks to the Green Revolution, the subsequent slides included charts and figures that disclosed its hefty

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<sup>314</sup> Henceforth in the dissertation, all translations of quotes from Vietnamese into English are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>315</sup> CASRAD is a public scientific establishment under Việt Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Further information is available at <http://casrad.org.vn/index.php?page=en>.

<sup>316</sup> PGS are locally focused quality assurance systems based on the active participation of those directly involved in the organic supply chain. They are supported by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). PGS Vietnam was developed under ADDA (Agricultural Development Denmark Asia) and Việt Nam Farmer’s Union. Further information is available at the following web sites: <http://www.ifoam.bio/en/pgs-vietnam>; <http://vietnamorganic.vn/?lang=eng>.

costs, including the massive use of chemical fertilizers, the heavy dependence on imported pesticides, the alarming pollution of water, and dangerous food hazards (indicated, for example, by the agricultural exports rejected by the EU). The second part of the presentation introduced agroecology. Using the FAO's definition of sustainable agriculture and listing agroecology next to precision agriculture and high-tech farming as "forms of sustainable agriculture in the world," Dr. Thế Anh touched on several agroecological methods currently in use in Việt Nam. Ms. Nhung then discussed the problem of young villagers leaving agriculture and the countryside, and the need to organize networks and supports for those who are now returning to farming, in increasing numbers, via organic approaches. Since the two invited presentations took up most of the forum's time, what was left for Q&A seemed regrettably inadequate given the large number of concerned attendees that filled the auditorium. The need for more dialogue was acutely felt when the forum facilitator was wrapping up the event after only two exchanges from the audience. The ending was so abrupt that it prompted a third audience member to cut in briefly so as to raise some key questions that he found had been skirted.

As Director of CASRAD, Dr. Thế Anh was an authority figure whose speech reflected the official state discourse on agricultural development. Notably, the framework of his presentation resembled the ways in which international institutions admitted the adverse effects of industrial agriculture to a certain extent and turned to other ways of farming as useful add-ons under the banner of sustainability. Only as a tool can agroecology be made equivalent to high-tech farming and congruent with the agro-industrial order. Indeed, following the international discourse of "the new Green

Revolution,”<sup>317</sup> Dr. Th  Anh stated that agroecology could be called “the second green revolution” that, once again, would “transform peasants’ awareness and habits.”

“The second green revolution” signals a smooth and natural transition, from first to second. It (re)deems the Green Revolution of the 1960s a success worth celebrating, despite all its known fatal harms to humans and the environment. Furthermore, by presenting agroecology as yet another stage of scientific innovation, this dubbing incorporates it into the straight, ever-forward vector of Progress. In this frictionless - and bloodless - narration, agroecology becomes a novel sequel to the Green Revolution rather than a tradition that long preceded it and was moreover pushed to the margins by it, if not destroyed in many places.

It has been well-documented that the Green Revolution has radically and violently transformed not only agricultural production but whole ecosystems through appropriation of land and its highly unequal concentration, agricultural mechanization and its accompanying dependence on fossil fuels, intensive irrigation and its resulting desertification along with exacerbation of water insecurity, the massive and toxic use of chemicals, the exhausting exploitation and contamination of resources, and the elimination of biodiversity by monoculture, not to mention the patenting of life forms and

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<sup>317</sup> Please note that the discourse of the “new Green Revolution” associated with agroecology differs from that of the “second Green Revolution” associated with genetic engineering. For examples of the former, see Olivier De Schutter and Ga tan Vanloqueren, “The New Green Revolution: How Twenty-First-Century Science Can Feed the World,” *Solutions* 2:4 (July 2011), 33-44, <https://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/article/the-new-green-revolution-how-twenty-first-century-science-can-feed-the-world/>; FAO, “Towards a New Green Revolution,” *World Food Summit*, November 13-17, 1996, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0262e/x0262e06.htm>. For examples of the latter, see “The Second Green Revolution Has Begun: Rice, Food Security, and Climate Change,” *International Rice Research Institute*, <http://irri.org/the-second-green-revolution-has-begun>; “The New Green Revolution: A Bigger Rice Bowl,” *The Economist*, May 10, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21601815-another-green-revolution-stirring-worlds-paddy-fields-bigger-rice-bowl>; Alexandra Sims, “New Types of Rice Could Herald a Second ‘Green Revolution’,” *The Independent*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/new-types-of-rice-could-herald-a-second-green-revolution-a6877341.html>.



the monopolization of seeds that ensued in the same pursuit of profitable productivity.<sup>318</sup>

Under these conditions, agroecology - rooted in the interconnectedness of all living beings – is made unable to survive.

Based on the responses in the forum, the conflict-free, past-subsuming, politically neutral, win-win presentation of agroecology as “the second green revolution” was hardly persuasive. A forum attendee exposed the pretense of friction-free harmony and spoke frankly about the violent history of the present:

... From the presentation of Mr. Thế Anh, I am startled. (...) [O]ur country has not completed industrialization but the industrialization of our agriculture has already slaughtered traditional agricultural production, if I may say so. How? All the indexes that Mr. Thế Anh brought up – the pollution caused by pesticide, the use of nitrogen fertilizers – clearly all of these originated from what? From our course of industrialization. (...) [P]erhaps in order to resolve the issue of agroecology, one needs to re-cognize [*nhìn nhận lại*] the course of industrialization in the past period. (...) I have one question I would like to ask the speakers: While our soil environment is extremely dangerous, extremely bad, in terms of chemicals, while our water sources are extremely polluted after a number of years of carrying out industrialization, (...) what do people who practice agroecology have to come up against in an agricultural environment today wherein many don't care a whit about the ecological? (...) In such an environment, how will one do agroecology?...<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> See, inter alia, Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (Zed Books, 1991); Lakshman Yapa, “What are Improved Seeds? An Epistemology of the Green Revolution,” *Economic Geography* 69:3 (1993), 254-273; Walden Bello, *The Food Wars* (NY: Verso, 2009); Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Belknap Press, 2006); Wendy Wolford, *This Land is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* (Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>319</sup> Original quote: “... Từ bài trình bày của anh Thế Anh tôi giật mình... nước ta chưa hoàn thành công nghiệp hoá nhưng chuyện công nghiệp hoá nông nghiệp của chúng ta đã giết cái nền sản xuất nông nghiệp truyền thống, tôi xin mạo muội nói như vậy. Vì sao? Nếu tất cả các chỉ số anh Thế Anh có nêu ra – ô nhiễm về thuốc trừ sâu như thế nào, phân đạm chúng ta sử dụng ra làm sao – rõ ràng tất cả những cái đó nó xuất phát từ cái gì, từ cái đường lối công nghiệp hoá của chúng ta... Có lẽ để mà giải quyết được vấn đề nông nghiệp sinh thái, cần nhìn nhận lại đường lối công nghiệp hoá thời kỳ vừa rồi... Tôi có một vấn đề chỉ muốn xin hỏi các diễn giả như thế này: Trong khi môi trường đất của chúng ta cực kỳ nguy hiểm, cực kỳ xấu xa, hiện nay về vấn đề hoá chất, trong khi nguồn nước của chúng ta cực kỳ ô nhiễm sau một số năm chúng ta tiến hành công nghiệp hoá... những người làm nông nghiệp sinh thái phải chống đỡ những gì trong bề nông nghiệp hiện nay người ta không coi cái sinh thái nó là gì cả.... Trong môi trường như thế thì sẽ làm nông nghiệp sinh thái như thế nào?...”

The forthright remark received a round of applause in the auditorium. Laying bare the contradictions of adopting agroecology merely as part of a flexible toolkit, the speaker traced the current conditions of degradation to the industrialization of agriculture and called for a rethinking of industrialization itself. He pointed out that industrial agriculture had not only killed the basis of agroecology in traditional agriculture but also created structural conditions that continued to be both toxic and hostile for a serious engagement with agroecology.<sup>320</sup> Furthermore, instead of assuming, like both presenters, that peasants were the ones whose awareness and habits needed to be improved, the speaker emphasized instead the dire need for a “change in the thinking of [the nation’s] leaders” (*thay đổi tư duy lãnh đạo*). It was the authorities, not marginalized peasants, who must relearn the politics of the past (“one needs to re-cognize the course of industrialization in the past period”) and realize the need for structural change.

This demand for political change was reinforced by another audience member, let us call him Mr. Quý, who felt compelled to cut in at the end. He addressed one of the two speakers as a “mandarin” – who “can be considered a dignitary, albeit an academic rather

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<sup>320</sup> People from different places around the world have attested to this destruction and similarly pointed out the incompatibility between industrial agriculture and the agroecological basis in what is often referred to as traditional agriculture. For instance, Sheelu Francis, President of the Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective in India, states, “The Green Revolution has impacted human health, children’s health, environmental health, and it has erased the traditional systems. That is why we are against it.” Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, President of the Peasant Movement of Papaye in Haiti, warns, “Corporations have to destroy peasant agriculture and combat agroecology to continue their destructive practices. It is important to be wary of discourses of governments of industrialized countries. Be careful of the scientists in the service of capital that talk about combining agroecology with industrial agriculture. It is clear that these two models cannot be combined. This is a ploy to kill agroecological peasant agriculture.” Cited in *Agroecology: Putting Food Sovereignty into Action* (Why Hunger Publication, 2015).

than political-administrative dignitary” – and the other as someone “belonging to the category of NGO”<sup>321</sup>:

... Today you have expressed your views in this forum and provided us with much knowledge, but actually it is not new. It is not new because it is *yet to touch the Heavenly Palace* (...) The question at present with regard to agriculture, rural areas, and peasants is not merely agroecological technique or market and such, but it is a matter of *political will and determination* of high-ranking leaders in order to change agriculture, and not only to change agriculture, but to be oriented towards rural areas and peasants, which are the *cultural foundation* of the Vietnamese society, which are tradition, not to mention to pay debts of gratitude for some thousand years of keeping and building the country all on the back of peasants (...), as they say, missing not a single kilo of rice, nor a single enlisted person.<sup>322</sup>

This impassioned commentary also received a big round of applause. Mr. Quý’s very way of addressing the distinguished guests (one as a mandarin and the other as a representative of the NGO world) draws our attention to the imbrication between the hierarchy of governance and the hierarchy of knowledge. Perhaps his invocation of “mandarin” is also suggestive of an imbrication between the feudal past and the modern present. With this layered understanding of power and knowledge, by placing *political will and determination* at the forefront, he rejects what James Ferguson famously calls “the anti-politics machine” (in his landmark study of the discourse and practice of

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<sup>321</sup> Original quote: “... ở đây có 2 vị, 1 vị là quan, có thể coi như là quan chức, mặc dầu đây cũng là quan chức về mặt học thuật thôi, chứ không phải về mặt chính trị quản lý, và 1 vị thuộc về cái loại là phi chính phủ...”

<sup>322</sup> Original quote: “... Hôm nay các vị phát biểu ý kiến diễn đàn ở đây cung cấp thêm cho chúng tôi rất nhiều những kiến thức, nhưng mà thực ra xin nói là nó không mới. Nó không mới ở chỗ này: *Chưa động chạm tới cái thiên đình* (...) Vấn đề hiện nay đối với nông nghiệp nông thôn nông dân không phải chỉ là kỹ thuật nông nghiệp sinh thái, thị trường này khác vân vân, mà cái chính là vấn đề *quyết tâm ý chí chính trị* của các nhà lãnh đạo cấp cao để thay đổi cái nông nghiệp, và không phải chỉ là thay đổi cái nông nghiệp, mà để hướng đến với nông thôn với nông dân, là cái *nền tảng văn hoá* của cái xã hội Việt Nam, là cái truyền thống, chưa nói đến để đền ơn đáp nghĩa mấy nghìn năm giữ nước và dựng nước dựa vào nông dân hết (...) bảo là thóc không thiếu 1 cân quân không thiếu 1 người.” I italicize the emphases in the speech. The saying “missing not a single kilo of rice, nor a single enlisted person” refers to the national mobilization for the war of resistance against the US aggression.

“development”),<sup>323</sup> as well as what Tania Li later calls the practice of “rendering technical” which is central to implementing “the will to improve.”<sup>324</sup>

By putting politics front and center, Mr. Quý altered the terms of the discourse of agroecology in that forum. He reminds us that the question regarding agriculture, rural areas, and peasants is not technical, but political. Like the previous speaker, he maintained that the burden to transform one’s awareness and habits was not to be placed on peasants, but on “the Heavenly Palace.” Indeed, he called for a political re-orientation towards those who have been rendered subaltern, as he pointed to the vital part that peasants had been playing in the social and cultural constitution of society as well as their sacrifices in the construction and sustenance of the nation. (I will return to this theme in the next chapter.)

The above interventions, which center on politics as well as subalternity, resonate with the intercontinental social movement for agroecology. This movement explicitly objects to the mainstreaming of agroecology by international institutions.

## **2. Social movements: “People’s agroecology for people’s power”**

When diverse social movements from all over the world came together at the International Forum for Agroecology in Nyéléni village in Sélingué, Mali in 2015 (hosted by Mali’s National Coordination of Peasant Organizations), their declaration clearly identified and opposed the dominant economic system. Seeking to repair “a food system and rural world that has been devastated by industrial food production and its so-called

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<sup>323</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>324</sup> Li, *The Will to Improve*.

Green and Blue Revolutions,” the Forum was vigilant against the “co-optation of Agroecology to finetune the industrial food system, while paying lip service to the environmental discourse, [which] has various names, including “climate-smart agriculture”, “sustainable-” or “ecological-intensification”, industrial monoculture production of “organic” food, etc. For us, these are not Agroecology: we reject them, and we will fight to expose and block this insidious appropriation of Agroecology.”<sup>325</sup>

Denouncing the reduction of agroecology to “a tool to prolong the dominant model,” the Forum was explicit about its political commitment: “Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society. We need to put the control of seeds, biodiversity, land and territories, waters, knowledge, culture and the commons in the hands of the peoples who feed the world.”<sup>326</sup> Proposing “people’s agroecology for people’s power,” the Forum revolved around those who had been marginalized and displaced by the industrial food production system. It represented “the first joint vision of Agroecology” that “endeavored to interpret, understand and share what Agroecology means from the diverse viewpoints of peasants, small-scale farmers, the landless, rural workers, indigenous peoples, hunters-gatherers, artisanal fisherfolk, pastoralists and nomadic peoples, urban communities, consumers and others.”<sup>327</sup> In this joint vision, these groups are subjects of politics and knowledge, instead of being targeted as objects of improvement schemes.

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<sup>325</sup> “The International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni Center, Sélingué, Mali, 24-27 February 2015,” <http://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/NYELENI-2015-ENGLISH-FINAL-WEB.pdf>, 4, 9.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 5, 22.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 2.

If mainstreaming agroecology is based on, implicitly or explicitly, ranking the scientific and technical knowledge of experts higher than the practical and experiential knowledge of subaltern groups, the diverse social movements at the Forum subverted this dichotomy and hierarchy. For instance, against this hierarchical binary, Andrea Ferrante, a representative of La Vía Campesina (The Peasant Way) from Italy, stated, “We want the world to recognize we are the first researchers, producers and breeders.”<sup>328</sup> Rather than looking to experts for counsel and direction, various movements had been practicing horizontal learning and popular education by organizing training schools “where peasants teach peasants, fisherfolk teach fisherfolk, pastoralists teach pastoralists.”<sup>329</sup> Instead of privileging science as objective knowledge, the movements foster *diálogo de saberes*, or dialogue among ways of knowing.<sup>330</sup>

Furthermore, the Forum distinctly challenged the appropriation of subaltern knowledges by modern science. Against the tendency to date agroecology back to the 1930s when the term emerged in the domain of scientific study,<sup>331</sup> the Forum participants emphatically attributed it to ancestral knowledge and highlighted the importance of intergenerational learning. Contrary to the rhetoric of scientific innovation, they avowed

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 22. A notable example is the Campesino-a-Campesino movement which began in Guatemala in the 1970s and spread throughout Central America and the Caribbean. See Eric Holt-Giménez, *Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America's Farmer to Farmer Movement for Sustainable Agriculture* (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2006); Nils McCune, Juan Reardon, and Peter Rosset, “Agroecological *Formación* in Rural Social Movements,” *Radical Teacher* 98 (Winter 2014): 31-37.

<sup>330</sup> “The International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni Center,” 5. I will discuss *diálogo de saberes* in chapter 5 as well.

<sup>331</sup> A. Wezel and V. Soldat, “A Quantitative and Qualitative Historical Analysis of the Scientific Discipline of Agroecology,” *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 7:1 (2009): 3–18; Silici, *Agroecology*, 7.

agroecology as an age-old inheritance: “we did not invent it, but rather have inherited it from our parents and ancestors.”<sup>332</sup>

Connected to ancestors and traditions, agroecology signifies an enduring past-present-future, that is, a live and continuous order. It animates horizontal dialogues as well as movements of re-turn. Its globality is often overlooked due to its marginalization, yet it has not only been sustained by self-subsistent communities around the world, but it has also nourished populations beyond these communities. As Chantal Jacovetti from the National Coordination of Peasant Organizations (CNPO) in Mali affirms:

Agroecology is part of the traditional knowledge, held by any peasant, whether men or women, worldwide. It is through this peasant ecology, ‘peasant’ not because it is used only by farmers or growers, ‘peasant’ because it is rooted in a region, a *terroir* or territory. And it is this agroecology that fed humanity till now. If we hadn’t had an agroecological practice for let’s say 80% (of our agriculture) that respects the territories, the ecosystems, the appropriate times for fishing, hunting, sowing, and selecting seeds, so they would adapt through time to different territories, maybe we would not even be here to do the interview... And today the industrial world, the capitalist world is in a deadlock, but it is a system that always manages to co-opt everything and so it brought us conventional farming, modern agriculture, low-input farming, and now we are told, ah, how about agroecology, which is so fashionable nowadays. So these are the same people who now speak of agroecology. For me, agroecology is peasant agroecology, or agroecology of the people, of communities.<sup>333</sup>

When proponents of agroecological agriculture articulate it as an alternative to industrial agriculture as opposed to a mere appendage, they emphasize that it rejects the latter and refuses to be appropriated. Going further, Ibrahima Coulibaly, President of CNPO, points out that it may actually be misleading to call peasant agroecology an “alternative,” since it begs the questions: “Alternative for whom? Alternative from which

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<sup>332</sup> “The International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni Center,” 19, 5-6.

<sup>333</sup> Cawr Coventry University, “Agroecology: Voices from Social Movements (Long Version),” YouTube Video, 22:29, September 24, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Km9Kv5UylU&index=23&list=PLpv3YQVeJqKmaEnoo\\_GbRTMPTUw5ChUI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Km9Kv5UylU&index=23&list=PLpv3YQVeJqKmaEnoo_GbRTMPTUw5ChUI).

vantage point?” Seen from the perspective of peasant producers, Coulibaly states, “Agroecological peasant production is not an alternative! This is the model of production that has allowed us to feed the world for thousands of years, and it is still the dominant model for food production. (...) [T]he majority of the world’s population depends on peasant agriculture for food.”<sup>334</sup>

Coulibaly’s statement prompts us to re-view what is dominant and what is global. According to the ETC Group (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration) headquartered in Canada, the industrial food chain uses 70% of the world’s agricultural resources and feeds only about 30% of the world’s population, while peasants (including peasant farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, and forest and savannah dwellers) “make up almost half of the world’s peoples” and “feed at least 70% of the world’s population.”<sup>335</sup> In a similar vein, another document produced by the FAO states that smallholders and family farmers are “providers of nearly 70 percent of the world’s food supply.”<sup>336</sup>

It is crucial to note that as inheritance, agroecology is more than a movement of resistance to the capitalist order. It is constitutive of how people live in communities and in ecosystems. When Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, a Haitian peasant leader and member of the International Coordination Committee of La Vía Campesina, commented on the dispute over the definition of agroecology at the International Symposium in Rome, he raised the need to specify the sustenance of “agroecological peasant agriculture” because

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<sup>334</sup> *Agroecology: Putting Food Sovereignty into Action*, 9.

<sup>335</sup> ETC Group, “Who Will Feed Us? Questions for the Food and Climate Crises,” *Communiqué* No. 102 (November 2009), available at <http://www.etcgroup.org/content/who-will-feed-us>.

<sup>336</sup> Wolfenson, “Coping with the Food and Agriculture Challenge.”



“agroecology is a way of life for us, not just a mode of production.”<sup>337</sup> In Nyéléni, the International Forum as a whole reinforced Jean-Baptiste’s view: “Agroecology is not just an alternative – it is our way of life.”<sup>338</sup> The Forum also spoke the language of cosmovisions: “We recognize that as humans we are but a part of nature and the cosmos. We share a spiritual connection with our lands and with the web of life.”<sup>339</sup> It is in this sense that I read agroecology as signifying a different order of existence, one that is embedded in enduring and entangled worlds.

I am not unfamiliar with this cosmovision as someone who grew up in Việt Nam, in an imagined community whose fabric of history and culture remains significantly connected to the village (as Mr. Quý indicated above). Despite how modernization and economic liberalization relegates rural areas to backwardness, another social imaginary of the village continues to sustain its co-evalness through dense and intimate urban-rural connections, through shared notions of belonging and rootedness, through familial rituals and common spiritual orientation, through art, music, literature, through everyday language and popular culture. My mother’s immediate and extended families, like many others’, maintain close ties with their home village near the city where we live, and everyone regularly returns on various occasions. While I was born and raised in the city, the sacredness of ancestral lands, the understanding that humans are but a part of nature and the cosmos, and the gentleness with which people live with other beings all compose a world that has shaped me. Although I have not lived the agro-ecological life in the

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<sup>337</sup> See “International Symposium on Agroecology at the FAO in Rome,” *La Via Campesina*, September 25, 2014, <https://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/food-sovereignty-and-trade-mainmenu-38/1671-international-symposium-on-agroecology-at-the-fao-in-rome>.

<sup>338</sup> “The International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni Center,” 16.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

countryside itself, it is a way of living that is meaningful and tangible to me, a familiar unfamiliarity you can say. It is neither invisible nor merely a space characterized by multiple “lacks.”

About a year ago, I was intrigued by the story of a young peasant farmer in southern Việt Nam who started practicing agriculture in ways that were significantly different from those around him. Agroecology was not handed down to him from his parents, but he found his way back to it through a long and continuing journey filled with hurdles as well as rewards. This journey can be understood, from the perspective of the questions I am dealing with here, as one of learning to re-exist. My retelling of this youth’s journey draws mainly from his public posts on social media, in combination with newspaper accounts, documentary videos, a panel talk, and personal conversations.

### **3. Farming as worlding: A story of re-existence**

Võ Văn Tiếng’s journey to agroecological farming began not exactly with a tradition that was passed down for generations, at least not one in his own village in Hồng Ngự, Đồng Tháp. It began with his travels, to places far away from home.

The youngest in a farming family of eleven children, Tiếng was not inspired to follow his parents’ footsteps. Seeing the hardship that they had to endure, and like many other youths facing harsh circumstances in the countryside, he wished to do something other than farming in pursuit of a better life. As the twenty-five-year-old Tiếng admitted publicly, “Actually before, [I] did not like being a farmer; [I] saw farmers were very wretched. [I] saw my parents, my grandparents, being farmers and being in the field day and night, rain or shine, very wretched. So [I] thought when I grew up [I] must do

something to be happy, to earn money, so [I] can take care of dad and mom; [I] did not think of farming in their place.”<sup>340</sup>

Tiếng loves traveling to different places to learn and experience new things. Three years ago, he journeyed on foot throughout the northern region of the country. He did this without spending any money on the trip; the paltry 8000 VND, equal to 35 US cents, that he brought with him stayed intact in his pocket. He visited different indigenous communities in mountainous areas and appreciated the breathtaking surroundings that enfolded their daily life. He especially admired the beauty of the terraced fields on the mountains of Hà Giang and Cao Bằng. Once, when he spotted people working in the field near Pác Bó Cave, he asked if he could help them with harvesting rice and joined in. They invited him home for dinner afterwards, and he again asked if he could continue helping them with the harvest the day after. As he stayed with them, he inquired into their way of farming and their answer took him by surprise. In his own words:

At first I compared the productivity in my head and wondered why theirs was so bad. Each *sào* in the north is a third of one *công* in the south; how come it yielded only between 150 and 200 kilograms, while the land back home yielded between 900 kilograms and a ton each *công*.<sup>341</sup> I asked and found out that Uncle used very little chemical fertilizer, only cow dung, and no pesticide.

I went on to visit ethnic communities in other areas and same thing: they didn't use pesticide; they farmed almost semi-naturally.

In the process of walking and reasoning at the same time, I went East, West, North and found no one mentioning cancer, diabetes, stroke, etc. I walked till near 3am and saw no funeral. Thinking of the south, you see a funeral whenever you go out into the streets, this man died of stroke, that woman died of cancer.

Then I went home and reexamined the way rice was cultivated at home, and oh goodness, I understood why people died so early. Each year, 20 tons of chemical fertilizers are used, plus almost a ton of pesticide. One has to ask: Do people now make rice into food or make chemicals into food? *After days of thinking, [I]*

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<sup>340</sup> Panel talk at the “Fair of High Quality Vietnamese Goods: Clean Food and Agricultural Products” in Hà Nội on October 8, 2016.

<sup>341</sup> *Sào* is a unit of measurement equal to 360 square meters. 1 kg is equal to 2.2 pounds. Vietnamese address one another relationally, so “uncle” here does not refer to one's own relative.

*decided to put aside my ambitious hope and dream of traveling around the world and return to being farmer.*<sup>342</sup>

Staying with indigenous communities in the northwest helped Tiếng realize that they lived very happily “not because they had a lot of material wealth but because of good health and clean food.”<sup>343</sup> He did not know till then that it was possible to live self-sufficiently on food crops grown without chemicals. Or rather, he did not realize that it was only possible for farmers to eat well and live well if they did away with toxic chemicals. Following the examples of indigenous peoples, Tiếng was inspired and determined to farm differently in his village in the south. He came back home and boldly told his father, “Your rice is not food, dad.”<sup>344</sup>

He pleaded with his parents to let him try growing rice without using chemicals, but his father would not hear a word of it. Not only because it was abnormal since nobody else did that, but also because Tiếng had had little farming experience. His occasionally helping out with the family’s work seemed grossly insufficient to prepare

<sup>342</sup> Original quote with added italics: “Ban đầu mình so sánh năng suất trong đầu nói sau tề vậy, một sào miền bắc bằng 1/3 công miền nam sau có 150/200kg thôi so với đất nhà mình một công làm 900/1tấn. Hỏi ra thì chú làm rất ít xạ phân chỉ dùng phân bò thôi còn xịt thuốc sâu thì không có. Mình đi tiếp qua bà con dân tộc mấy vùng khác cũng vậy, họ không dùng thuốc sâu họ trồng gần như bán tự nhiên.

Trong quá trình vừa đi vừa suy luận mình đi hết Đông, Tây, Bắc mà không thấy bà con nào nhắc đến bệnh ung thư, tiểu đường, tai biến, . . .v. mình đi hết gần 3 sáng không thấy đám ma chay nào cả, rồi suy luận lại miền Nam, cứ đi ra đường là thấy đám ma, hỏi ra thì ông đó chết do tai biến, bà kia chết do ung thư. Rồi mình về nhà xem lại cách trồng lúa của nhà mình, mình thốt lên oi trao oi đã hiểu tại sao người dân mình mau chết sớm là vậy. Một năm nhà mình dùng trên 20 tấn phân, thuốc hoá học gần cả tấn thì hỏi thử người dân bây giờ làm lúa ra lương thực hay lấy hoá chất tạo ra lương thực. *Sau bao ngày suy nghĩ và quyết định gác lại bao hoài bão và ước mơ đi khắp thời giờ của mình về làm nông dân.*” This excerpt is from Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, October 14, 2016,

<https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1146498675439776>. All of Tiếng’s posts cited in this chapter are publicly available.

<sup>343</sup> Kim Yến, “Võ Văn Tiếng – Chú Ngựa Ô Can Trường,” *Tiếp Thị Thế Giới*, August 24, 2016, <http://tiepthithegioi.vn/abcd-mekong/dong-thap/vo-van-tieng-chu-ngua-o-can-truong/>; Thanh Tuyền, “Người Làm Ra Gạo Sạch Bán Cháy Hàng Tại TP. HCM,” *Pháp Luật Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*, October 3, 2016, <http://plo.vn/xa-hoi/nguoi-lam-ra-gao-sach-ban-chay-hang-tai-tphcm-656114.html>.

<sup>344</sup> Original quote: “Lúa của ba không phải là lương thực.” Cited in Thanh Tuyền, “Người Làm Ra Gạo Sạch”; Phong Huyền, “Chàng Nông Dân Loay Hoay Làm ‘Nông Nghiệp Sạch,’” *Tiền Phong*, November 6, 2015, <http://www.tienphong.vn/kinh-te/chang-nong-dan-loay-hoay-lam-nong-nghiep-sach-929376.tpo>.

him for laboring through a whole season, let alone reaping a good yield. Rice cultivation was no child's play, and his parents could not afford to let the spontaneous audacity of youth wreck a harvest. Moreover, the very idea of producing less was absurd, given the pervasive logic of market competition. As far as his father was concerned: "Whatever others make, we have to make more; [we] can't lose in quantity."<sup>345</sup> It took a lot of persuasion for his mother to finally agree to let him try on 2 hectares for one year. Both of his parents, however, thought it would be a good lesson for him to know what failure is like.<sup>346</sup>

In that one year, Tiếng spent all his energies exploring how to nurture rice plants by relying on the ecosystem rather than aggressive chemical interventions. On his own, he had to do a lot of research and experiments to learn everything from scratch, from how to rehabilitate the soil to how to deal with pests without using pesticide. He stayed out in the field day and night to observe closely the growth of rice plants in complex interactions with others in the habitat. The times when the plants became vulnerable to various insects were crucial. As Tiếng detected the beginnings of these phases, he figured out, bit by bit, how to fight each kind with its natural enemies (*thiên địch*). For instance, he observed that at a certain point in time the brown planthoppers would come to lay eggs on the rice stems and leave near dawn. He would then pump water into the field to soak these eggs and prevent them from hatching. As for the brown planthoppers themselves, he just needed to raise the appropriate fish in that water to catch them. Similarly, he also

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<sup>345</sup> Original quote: "Người ta làm thế nào mình phải làm hơn chứ không thua về sản lượng được". Cited in Kim Yên, "Võ Văn Tiếng."

<sup>346</sup> Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, November 21, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1183561108400199>.

raised ducks and other fishes to take care of stem borers, yellow snails and so on.<sup>347</sup>

Gradually, he was able to foster an environment rich with ecological inter-relationships.



Figure 3.1: Fish raised to take care of stem borers



Figure 3.2: Re-learning ecological inter-relationships

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<sup>347</sup> Kim Yên, “Võ Văn Tiếng.” Figures 3.1 & 3.2 are from Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, June 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1046310868791891>

To learn about the intricacies of these inter-relationships, Tiếng had to search for guidance online and stumbled through trial and error. For instance, he knew in principle that fish eat brown planthoppers, but he did not realize that he needed to carefully select which fish to introduce into the mix since those two were not the only ones cohabiting. Initially, he went for silver carp, which grew fast and sold well, except that they ended up eating the rice plants themselves. Eventually, he found better matches: tilapia, climbing perch, snakeskin gourami, for example.<sup>348</sup> From rice to planthoppers, from planthoppers to fish, from fish back to rice, all these co-inhabitants Tiếng got to know intimately and always in relation to one another, not through disembodied classification or isolated specialization.

Meanwhile, the pressure on him to produce “results” was enormous. “I was completely alone, doing things silently on my own, not supported by family, hindered by the government, friends also said I was crazy,” he later shared.<sup>349</sup> His parents were losing sleep. His failure would cost them two to three harvests to repay debts.<sup>350</sup> Too anxious, his father kept pressing him to spray pesticide, but Tiếng resolutely refused. Losing his temper once, his father almost took back the field, but his mother restored peace between them. The sarcasm, derision, and disparaging remarks from their neighbors did not help. Utterly baffled, they could not understand what had gotten into Tiếng. His strange ideas

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Original quote: “Tôi cực kỳ đơn độc, chỉ một mình âm thầm làm, không được gia đình ủng hộ, chính quyền thì ngăn cản, bạn bè cũng bảo mình điên.” Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> See documentary *Ước Mơ Xanh của Tiếng* (Tiếng’s Green Dream), co-produced by Tùng Thiện, Thanh Truyền, and Công Hiệp (Đồng Tháp, Việt Nam: Đồng Tháp Radio and Television Station, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWTzfII2K-U&feature=share>.

and doings earned him nicknames like “Tiếng liều” (foolhardy Tiếng) and “Tiếng khùng” (crazy Tiếng).

Through all this, “foolhardy” Tiếng kept his faith. He said his foolhardiness had its grounds (“*liều có cơ sở*”). Defying the ubiquitous trope of the risk-averse peasant/small farmer who only acts according to short-term interests, Tiếng stayed firm, “I take risks but I think in terms of what is long lasting and sustainable, not jettisoning my *tâm* [heart] for the benefits in front of my eyes.”<sup>351</sup>

His first harvest yielded four tons per ha, one ton less than he had hoped for and only 60 percent of the former productivity. Tiếng felt the pressure mounting even higher. But he also knew that was not the only result. When his parents tasted the rice, they tasted the difference: its sweetness and fragrance was distinct; it was indeed finer than the rice they grew. What grew from his ardor and persistence diverged far from the neighbors’ prediction that “[g]rowing rice without pesticide would not bring even rice husk to eat, never mind rice.”<sup>352</sup> Not concerned about “the benefits in front of the eyes,” Tiếng continued to walk steadily on the path of the heart: If in the first season he had only halved the amount of chemical fertilizer, he dispensed with it altogether in the second season, utilizing rice straw to make organic fertilizer instead. And to everyone else’s surprise, his yield increased. People were now more curious about his way of farming. His foolhardiness did not appear so foolish after all.

Indeed, what way of farming is this? It is an important question to raise and dwell on. The question is not: what way of farming is this that yields good harvests without

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<sup>351</sup> Original quote: “Út liều nhưng út nghĩ về lâu về dài và sự bền vững, chứ không cần thấy lợi ích trước mắt mà bỏ đi cái tâm của mình.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 21, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1021031607986484>.

<sup>352</sup> Panel talk at the “Fair of High Quality Vietnamese Goods.”



pesticide and chemical fertilizers? Or what way of farming is this that can be both productive and sustainable? Or what way of farming is this that is healthy for both producers and consumers, both humans and the environment? But simply, what way of farming is this?

One may approach this question from various angles of calculation, be they related to methods, techniques, effectivity, impact, expansibility, or modeling. However, rendering the question technical misses the politics of how this way of farming was made possible or impossible as a way of being in the first place. If we move away from the calculable to the incalculable, from farming as an activity or a livelihood to farming as a way of existence, then I would suggest that we cannot make sense of this way of farming without asking what way of worlding this is. What ordering of the world does this way of farming have to come up against and what being in the world does it open up and revive?

Tiếng's journey tells us less about a lone pioneer who thinks outside the box and innovates ahead of his time, and more about how the structuring principles and values underlying a dominant order get challenged and undone by subaltern ones. Industrial productivity and accumulation have become so dominant that producing more has turned into an unquestionable priority, for many peasants too, even if it is against their better judgment. Anything that deviates from it appears strange, if not absurd and unacceptable. Even a simple desire to farm without chemicals gets dismissed as foolhardy and insane.

Tiếng might have been completely alone in his efforts to farm differently in his home village, but he is neither alone nor pioneering in this way of farming. When I was reading extensively about his endeavor to begin growing "clean" rice in Hồng Ngự, one question was constantly on my mind: If nobody around him was doing this, if he learned

it neither from his neighbors nor from his family and on the contrary they all thought he was crazy, how did this way of farming become conceivable to him? What was the fountain of inspiration that not only stirred him to defiance but also guided him towards a lucid alternative? Usually, it is people of older generations who remember and carry on traditions that have been exiled from ascendant common sense. Yet Tiếng was young and green: 24 years old, with little prior experience in rice cultivation.

So when he shared that he first learned about this way of farming during his stay with indigenous communities in the northwest, I was not surprised. It could hardly have been an individual invention. Saying this is of course not to underplay Tiếng's initiative, hard work, and perseverance. But it is important to recognize that his way of farming is not simply "his," but a collective knowledge and practice that has been maintained and innovated for generations in specific locales. It is also not accidental that this way of farming is being sustained by subaltern indigenous groups while national policies have abandoned it for a few decades now. It speaks to the heterogeneous social imaginaries and orders that constitute subaltern lives but are rendered invisible or nonsensical and thereby seemingly nonexistent. Although repressed and on the margins, they remain enduring and make up our "irreducibly not-one"<sup>353</sup> world.

As Tiếng later learned, the indigenous knowledge and practice of farming in the northwest that he encountered actually relates back to how his grandparents and great grandparents used to farm, right in the southern land where it is now considered

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<sup>353</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty uses this phrase to speak of the multiple temporalities of our present: "To critique historicism in all its varieties is to unlearn to think of history as a developmental process in which that which is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular. Or, to put it differently, it is to learn to think the present – the "now" that we inhabit as we speak – as irreducibly not-one." Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 249.

senseless. He told me that agriculture in his area before the 1980s was chemical-free.

That decade in Việt Nam was marked by Đổi Mới, the economic reforms officially initiated in 1986, which, similar to policies in China, aimed to create a “socialist-oriented market economy.” Thus began the campaign for “economic restructuring,” which systemically transformed agriculture and life in rural areas.

When I was looking at records of post-Đổi Mới development planning and policies in Việt Nam’s National Archives, I found one key heading that pervasively marked the documents produced by the Ministry of Planning and Investment. It was “*chuyển đổi cơ cấu kinh tế nông nghiệp nông thôn*” (economic restructuring of agriculture and the countryside), with the objective to shift from a self-sufficient economy (*nền kinh tế tự cấp tự túc*) based on subsistence agriculture to an export-oriented commodity production (*sản xuất hàng hoá hướng vào xuất khẩu*).

Official state discourses as well as liberal proponents of reforms often assess this turning point as a positive climb in the ladder of development, measured in terms of economic growth and agricultural productivity. A frequently mentioned achievement, for instance, was Việt Nam’s rise to the status of the second largest rice exporter in the world market. The rhetoric of evolutionary transition leaves little space for the kind of critique made by one of the audience members at the forum on organic agriculture, that “the industrialization of agriculture has already slaughtered traditional agricultural production.” When Tiếng reminded me of how recently agriculture was restructured in Việt Nam, I shuddered thinking about how much had been aggressively de-formed and re-formed – in a span of only thirty years – through not only the reordering of production but also the reordering of subjectivities. So much so that “grandparents’ way of farming”

was not merely replaced, but expelled into oblivion in certain places as if it had never existed. Or almost, in this case.

Whenever Tiếng talks about his way of farming, he speaks of two (re)orientations: to re-orient farming and ourselves towards “nature” (*tự nhiên*) and to return to “our grandparents’ [*ông bà ta*] way of farming.” When he invites others to join him, he describes his endeavor as:

oriented towards nature, recovering our grandparents’ natural way of growing rice; everything I do is chemical-free and in accordance with nature. I grow rice without using chemical fertilizers and pesticide, willing to bear risks rather than using things toxic to nature. I grow rice in combination with raising fish and ducks as well as planting beans, winter melon, and lemongrass on the surrounding paddy dike. I shall alternate crops between two seasons of rice and a season of vegetables, or two seasons of rice and a season of fish and shrimp.<sup>354</sup>

Once, in answer to people asking him what natural means, he says simply, “What belongs to nature, let it be natural, don’t greedily take nature to be yours. What in nature has been abused and exhausted should be restored to nature.”<sup>355</sup> It is important to note that this understanding of nature differs from the construction of nature as pristine wilderness and scenery in dominant conservationist discourses and practices. The latter is hinged on the binary between nature and culture, driven by a desire for preservation based on enclosure and specialized expertise, and linked to histories of colonial

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<sup>354</sup> Original quote: “...hướng về tự nhiên khôi phục lại cách làm lúa tự nhiên của ông bà xưa, mọi thứ út làm trên mô hình là phi hoá học thuận tự nhiên hết. Út trồng lúa sẽ không dùng phân thuốc hoá học, sẵn sàng chịu rủi ro chứ không dùng những thứ độc hại đến tự nhiên. Út trồng lúa kết hợp với nuôi cá và vịt, trên bờ đê xung quanh út trồng đậu và bí với sả. Út sẽ xen canh hai vụ lúa một vụ màu, hoặc hai vụ lúa một vụ cá tôm.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1014127308676914>.

<sup>355</sup> Original quote: “Cái gì thuộc về tự nhiên thì hãy để tự nhiên, đừng tham lam nói tự nhiên là của mình. Những gì tự nhiên bị lạm dụng cạn kiệt thì hãy nên trả lại cho tự nhiên.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, October 12, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1144671892289121>.

dispossession.<sup>356</sup> Such conservation is only the reverse of exploitation, both of which presuppose human superiority and mastery over nature. In contrast, Tiếng's orientation is based on neither possessing nor controlling nature: "don't greedily take nature to be yours." Humans and nature are not segregated into the dichotomies of civilization-wilderness and subject-object, be it exploiter-exploited or protector-protected. Rather, they nurture one another and are part of a whole.

What does "what-belongs-to-nature-let-it-be-natural" look like in farming? There are surely many examples, but one stands out in particular based on what Tiếng has shared. When thunderflies came feed on the rice plants about ten days after the planting stage, his whole field turned yellow, a color that should turn up only when the rice is ripe for harvest. Next to everyone else's green fields, the yellowness that encompassed Tiếng's hectares stuck out alarmingly. While others wanted to "cry on his behalf," he was not distressed in the slightest. Worried and afraid for him, his neighbors urged him to spray pesticide or he would lose everything. Yet his reply was as calm as it was humorous: "These thunderflies are tiny like needle tips; they can only eat a little, then they will get full and rest; if they eat too greedily, they will break their belly and die."<sup>357</sup> So he did not do anything, just waiting for the thunderflies to eat, "get full and rest."

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<sup>356</sup> For critical analyses of the politics of conservation and its casting of nature, see, inter alia, Narendran Kumarakulasingam and Mvuselelo Ngcoya, "Plant Provocations: Botanical Indigeneity and (De)colonial Imaginations," *Contexto Internacional* 38:3 (2016), 843-864; Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (University of California Press, 1998); William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, eds., *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Dawn Chatty and Marcus Colchester, eds., *Conservation and Mobile Indigenous Peoples: Displacement, Forced Settlement and Sustainable Development* (Berghahn Books, 2002); Stephen Corry, "The Colonial Origins of Conservation: The Disturbing History Behind US National Parks," *Truthout*, August 25, 2015, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/32487-the-colonial-origins-of-conservation-the-disturbing-history-behind-us-national-parks>.

<sup>357</sup> Original quote: "... con rầy lửa nhỏ bằng đầu kim nó ăn được tí thôi nó rồi nó nghỉ, nếu nó ham ăn quá nó sẽ bị bể bụng mà chết." Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, June 6, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1048619028561075>. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 are from the same post.

What belongs to nature, let it be natural. Soon enough, just as he anticipated, the rice plants turned green again all on their own, to everyone's amazement. After that, his neighbors became friendlier and more appreciative of what he was doing. They started coming to him with learning inquiries.



Figure 3.3: “These thunderflies are tiny like needle tips; they can only eat a little...”



Figure 3.4: “...then they will get full and rest; if they eat too greedily, they will break their belly and die.”

From the yellow field in the first picture to the green field in the second picture are days of just letting nature be. Elsewhere Tiếng explains this course of nature in more detail: “Thunderflies from day 8 to 15 will come to the rice plants. They are tiny like needle tips; it takes five of them to eat one leaf. When the rice plant grows its sixth leaf, there will be no more plague; it ends on its own. The plant having a lot of nutrients will grow stronger from day 15 on, capable itself of resisting thunderflies without any need for pesticide.”<sup>358</sup> It is worth noting here that plants of traditional varieties are known to be stronger than genetically modified varieties in resisting pests and diseases.<sup>359</sup>

<sup>358</sup> Original quote: “Rầy lửa, tức con bù lạch, từ 8 – 15 ngày sẽ bay đến lúa của mình. Nó tí xíu bằng đầu kim, năm con mới ăn được một lá lúa. Khi cây lúa lên đến lá thứ sáu rồi thì không bị dịch hại nữa, sẽ tự hết. Cây lúa còn nhỏ chứa nhiều dinh dưỡng, đến ngày 15 sẽ mạnh hơn, tự dè kháng lại con rầy lửa đó mà không cần phun thuốc gì hết.” Cited in Kim Yên, “Võ Văn Tiếng.”

<sup>359</sup> For instance, documenting the Green Revolution’s “destruction of the conditions of production,” Lakshman Yapa notes, “In the early 1980s, there were reports from South and Southeast Asia that rice paddies were being damaged by the brown leafhopper, previously a pest of only minor importance, because

Additionally, the widespread use of pesticides not only eliminates the pests' natural enemies but also helps to create forms of pests that grow ever more resistant to pesticide, which in turn demands the deployment of yet more destructive chemicals. This vicious cycle can only be stopped by efforts like Tiếng's to revive an ecological web of interdependent relations.

Contrary to the common presumption that peasants and farmers lack the sophisticated expertise that scientists possess, Tiếng moves fluidly between vernacular play and scientific explanation, between jesting about overeating belly-breaking thunderlies and spelling out the minutely observed process of rice growth. Moreover, he emphasizes that it all comes back to grandparents' knowledge if only we seek it and remember it: "Friends and I get to hang out and play when people around anxiously carry pesticide containers and spray [their fields] continuously, because they are dependent on chemicals for everything, forgetting the experience of our grandparents."<sup>360</sup>

Countering the modern ideology of progress that relegates tradition to backwardness and stagnancy, Tiếng insists on returning to ancestral past as a cure for the toxic present. Grandparents' way of farming is an inheritance rich with decades, if not centuries, of experience, research, experiment, improvisation, inventiveness, and cultivation of relations with other beings. Furthermore, it is not just a way of doing but also a way of dwelling and relating that constitute the world one lives in.

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of the greater resistance of the traditional varieties (Bull 1982, 13). Crop diseases caused by intensive monocropping of genetically uniform varieties have been aggravated by pesticide use (Conway and Barbier 1990, 21; Shiva 1991, 99)." See Yapa, "What are Improved Seeds?," 261.

<sup>360</sup> Original quote: "Út và anh em ngồi chơi xơi nước, còn những người xung quanh thì họ lo vắc bình đi xịt liên tục, vì họ đang bị lệ thuộc tất cả vào thuốc hoá học bỏ quên những kinh nghiệm của Ông Bà ta." Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, June 6, 2016.



If, beyond observing what Tiếng does, we also listen to his language and open up to the possibility of connecting with the way he connects with others around him, we may get a sense of the subaltern world he has come to inhabit. Others here can be animals, insects, plants, or soil. If farmers are used to three major cropping seasons in the Mekong Delta due to export-driven production, Tiếng is set on having two seasons only. The soil should not only work; he wants the soil to rest also. When others express dismay at such wastage of productivity, he smiles, “People who work hard must feel tired and need time to rest. So does soil. Soil has worked so much that it is exhausted now; [we] must let soil rest. If we force soil to work till the day soil has no strength left to work, soil will die.”<sup>361</sup> Even after his rice sells well and he does not produce enough to provide for all of those who wish to eat clean rice from his farm, Tiếng refuses to make the soil work harder. He sticks to two seasons; the third one he spends planting beans and mixing rice straw into the soil in order to nourish it with nutrients.<sup>362</sup> He looks forward to the day the soil can be rejuvenated to its earlier richness: “It can be considered giving justice back to the soil.”<sup>363</sup>

He treats rice plants with the same love and care. Pained to see his neighbors’ rice plants being drenched in pesticide, spray after spray, he writes, “This farmer looks after rice plants just like looking after myself, treating them as friends, not as a crop to earn

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<sup>361</sup> Original quote: “Út cười nói người ta làm nhiều cũng phải mệt, cần có thời gian nghỉ ngơi. Đất cũng vậy đất đã làm quá nhiều đã kiệt sức rồi, phải cho đất nghỉ ngơi mới được, chứ bắt đất làm việc đến một ngày đất không còn sức để làm thì đất sẽ chết.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 21, 2016.

<sup>362</sup> Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, March 18, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/996761403746838>.

<sup>363</sup> Original quote: “Cũng coi là trả lại lễ công bằng cho đất.” Cited in Hà Hương and Hoàng Thanh, “Robinson của Đồng Tháp Mười,” *Zing News*, November 27, 2016, <http://news.zing.vn/robinson-cua-dong-thap-muoi-post700934.html>.

money.”<sup>364</sup> If rice plants are not a means to make food or money, but living beings themselves, then we would want them to grow healthy and strong just as we would want the same thing for our bodies. Taking good care of soil and nurturing rice plants are not simply principles to abide by in order to produce organic food; these are friendships to foster in Tiếng’s world. And there are other friends Tiếng also talks about endearingly: “The fish are frolicking about in the water, waiting for any insect or planthopper fellas to jump in and take a swim; then our fish friends will enjoy an additional late night snack. And spiders are spinning webs, awaiting gatecrashers for an enjoyable meal.”<sup>365</sup>

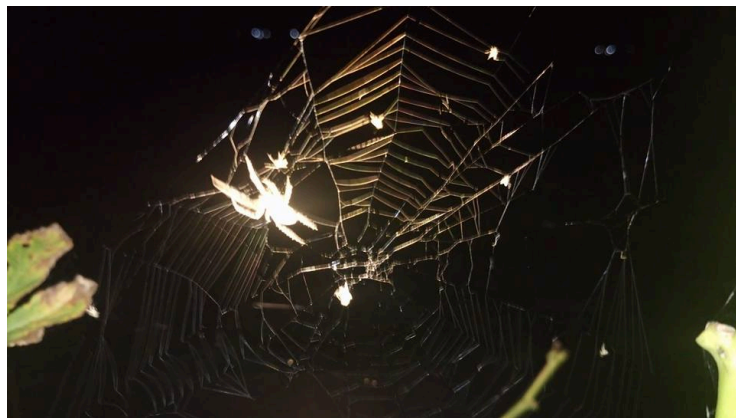


Figure 3.5: “... spiders are spinning webs, awaiting gatecrashers for an enjoyable meal.”

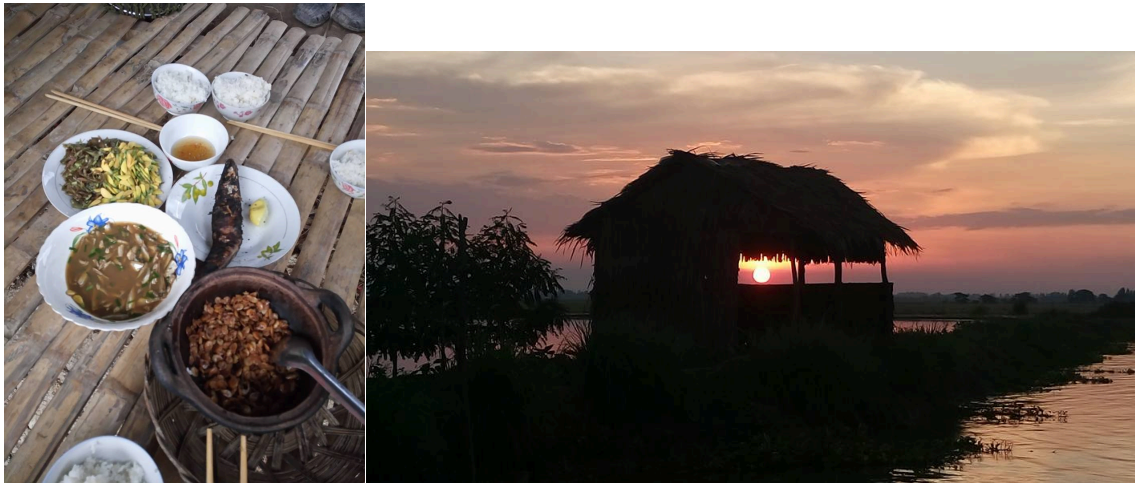
In this social-ecological order, every being is bound together in a web of inter-related existence, as opposed to everything being instrumentalized and refashioned to serve humans first and foremost. Take thunderflies for example: a pest that seems to serve no good and only threatens to harm rice fields. They, too, get to live and even feast.

<sup>364</sup> Original quote: “Anh nông dân chăm lúa y như chăm bản thân mình, côi lúa là bạn chứ không côi đó là một cây trồng để lấy tiền.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, August 25, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/880583958697917>.

<sup>365</sup> Original quote: “Đàn cá tung tăng phía dưới nước chờ xem có anh sâu, rầy nào xuống nước tắm thì anh bạn cá thưởng thức thêm buổi ăn dặm đêm khuya. Còn đàn nhện thì zdẫn tờ chờ các anh bạn không mời mà đến để thưởng thức buổi ăn của mình.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, June 2, 2016 (including figure 3.5).

They are not reduced to a disease that must be eradicated. Likewise, the planthoppers feed the fish; other insects feed the spiders; the snails feed the ducks; they are not all obliterated with chemical weapons.

To be presently immersed in this subalternized order of existence, Tiếng has journeyed far from his earlier conception and mode of living. From a youth who thought he would do anything but farming, he has become a full-time dedicated and proud farmer. From someone who could only see the wretchedness of rural agricultural life and wanted to earn money to be happy, he has come to realize, both imaginatively and materially, a farming life in which it is possible to eat well and live happily. From someone who only looks forward to being on the road, he still loves traveling but he is also fully committed to revitalizing an ecosystem filled with all sorts of plants, fruits, birds, fishes, and animals in his village land. The journey still goes on for him of course.



Figures 3.6 & 3.7: Realizing, both imaginatively and materially, another mode of living well.<sup>366</sup>

<sup>366</sup> Figure 3.6 is from Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, September 8, 2016. Figure 3.7 is from Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, November 19, 2016.

Tiếng is also very mindful of cultivating re-existence not only for himself but also for the broader collectivity. He is conscious that beyond reaction and resistance to the status quo, people need to actively nurture the alternative that they wish for the shared future. At the Fair for “Clean Food and Agricultural Products” in Hà Nội in October 2016, he told me something quite simple yet not widely recognized: Many people feel fearful about food safety and declare that they will boycott contaminated food, but really, how can they possibly boycott it? At the end of the day, they still have to eat, and as long as that is the only thing available, they still have to buy it. All this boycott talk is empty if there is no production of clean food to actually replace contaminated food. I discern a similar message, put more subtly, when Tiếng wrote:

Currently I hear many young people calling for environmental protection, what is environmental protection then? I don't know anything about the environment, but I saw my village doing agriculture, and after harvests, farmers would burn straw and the smoke would cover the whole sky. Seeing that I felt pained for *ông* [a term of relation] sky, so when I came back to be a farmer, I resolved not to burn straw after harvesting rice. Because [I was] afraid if *ông* sky inhale too much smoke, he would choke up and be unable to breathe; then he would fall sick and make the climate erratic.<sup>367</sup>

In both instances, Tiếng points us to more than the discrepancy between words and deeds. I take him to suggest that meaningful change cannot be materialized without practices of re-existence. What he is doing can be called by various names: natural farming, peasant agroecology, or organic farming. Tiếng would simply call it a return to grandparents' way. As Mr. Nguyễn Lâm Viên, an established businessman who

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<sup>367</sup> Original quote: “Hiện nay cũng thế út nghe rất nhiều các bạn trẻ cũng kêu bảo vệ môi trường, mà bảo vệ môi trường là gì vậy ta? Út không biết gì về môi trường, nhưng út thấy quê út làm nông, sau thu hoạch người nông dân họ đốt rơm rạ cháy khói kính cả bầu trời. Út thấy vậy nên thương cho ông trời, nên út về làm nông dân thu hoạch lúa xong ai đốt gì thì đốt chứ út quyết không đốt rơm. Vì sợ ông trời hít khói nhiều nghẹt thở, thở không nổi thì ông trời bị bệnh sẽ làm thời tiết thất thường.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 22, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/caut.gatre/posts/1021567064599605>.

advocates for organic agriculture in Việt Nam, observed, “Tiếng’s model ought to be called organic, but he does not say this. This is wonderful, Tiếng only says that [he] wants people to have rice as delicious as the ones made once upon a time by our grandparents.”<sup>368</sup>

Mr. Viên’s phrase “once upon a time” strikes a jarring note for me. A few decades ago is not that far back to invoke “once upon a time,” is it? What’s more, that “once upon a time” is very much the present time for many, such as the indigenous peoples who inspired and taught Tiếng, as well as those who came together in Nyéléni village in Mali, and countless others whom we do not hear about due to their conditions of subalternity. Their co-eval ways of living, nonetheless, are constantly missed. It is amazing how vibrant subaltern worlds are and at the same time how nonexistent they appear if we are not searching beyond dominant horizons. This nonexistence is of course not accidental, but “actively produced” as Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes. Santos discusses how a presence is turned into an absence when framed as “a noncredible alternative to what exists.”<sup>369</sup> It is impossible, then, to discern “absences,” or rather, to be attuned to co-eval presences, without altering the frame of conceivable existence.

#### **4. Movements of horizons rather than expansions of scale**

In a recent book on her journey of following the matsutake mushroom and the open-ended understandings of economy and ecology that it enables, Anna Tsing

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<sup>368</sup> Original quote: “Lẽ ra mô hình của Tiếng phải gọi là hữu cơ, nhưng bạn ấy không nói điều này. Đây là điều tuyệt vời, Tiếng chỉ nói rằng muốn cho bà con có những gạo ngon như ngày xưa ông bà ta làm.” Cited in Trần Quỳnh, “Út Lúa Đồng Tháp Giành Giải Nhất Dự Án Khởi Nghiệp 2016,” *Người Nhà Quê*, October 2, 2016, <http://www.nguoinhaque.com/vi/news/Dong-chay-hang-Viet/Ut-lua-Dong-Thap-gianh-giai-nhat-Du-an-Khoi-nghiep-2016-11662/>.

<sup>369</sup> See Santos’ discussion of the sociology of absences in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 171-172.

discusses the arts of noticing.<sup>370</sup> She observes that we are surrounded by many time-making and “world-making projects, human and not human.” Nevertheless, they “drop out” of our view as long as we stay within the categories and assumptions of human-made progressive history and evaluate the world in terms of either success or failure of advancement. Tsing explicitly implicates academic knowledge production in the entrenchment of these categories and assumptions: “Twentieth-century scholarship, advancing the modern human conceit, conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds. Entranced by the expansion of certain ways of life over others, scholars ignored questions of what else was going on.”<sup>371</sup>

To notice multiple world-making rhythms and trajectories, the challenge is to “look around rather than ahead.”<sup>372</sup> However, the modern chase of advancement is compounded by the fixation with expansion. The latter turns arts of noticing obsolete, Tsing argues, because they are unable to “scale up.” She traces the problems with scale to two key vantage points. One is modern science, which “demands the possibility for infinite expansion without changing the research framework.”<sup>373</sup> The other is the European colonial plantation, which served as a model for factories during industrialization and launched the “expansion through scalability” that “shaped capitalist modernization.”<sup>374</sup> Accordingly, scalability is based on the interchangeability of presumably self-contained and uniform units. This interchangeability is made

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<sup>370</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), Part I, 11-43.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-40.

commensurate with a project frame that remains unchanged regardless of ever more expansion. Thus, scalability “banishes meaningful diversity” in a number of interconnected ways. First, it cannot admit of data that do not already fit the project frame. Second, smooth expansion cannot allow for the indeterminacies of dynamic multispecies encounters. Third, the “contaminating relationity” resulting from these encounters spoils the basic rationale of interchangeability.<sup>375</sup>

To acknowledge multispecies diversity requires a departure from the assumptions of scalability. It invites, Tsing suggests, a “theory of nonscalability,” one that may be regarded as “anti-plantations.”<sup>376</sup> The concept of assemblage that she draws from ecologists and puts forth may be useful to signify not only the heterogeneity of ecological lifeways but also their open-ended gatherings and “happenings.” In particular, Tsing emphasizes the indeterminate, polyphonic, and multidirectional ways in which they collaborate through contamination and transform one another.<sup>377</sup>

An understanding of nonscalability helps us look critically at the references to scale in the literature on agroecology. They include two types: scaling up and scaling out.<sup>378</sup> Scaling up agroecology refers to increasing government commitment and institutionalizing research, training, and supportive policies. Scaling out refers to spreading agroecology to other farmers and communities through initiatives such as

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 37-43.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 22-34.

<sup>378</sup> Peter M. Rosset and Maria Elena Martínez-Torres, “Rural Social Movements and Agroecology: Context, Theory, and Process,” *Ecology and Society* 17:3 (2012); McCune et al., “Agroecological Formación”; *Agroecology: Putting Food Sovereignty into Action*; “The Scaling Up of Agroecology: Spreading the Hope for Food Sovereignty and Resiliency,” SOCLA’s Rio+20 position paper prepared by Miguel A. Altieri, with contributions by Clara Nicholls, Fernando Funes, and other members of SOCLA, May 2012; Stéphane Parmentier, *Scaling-Up Agroecological Approaches: What, Why and How?* (Belgium: Oxfam-Solidarity, January 2014).

peasant-to-peasant exchanges. To be sure, these efforts to strive for institutional support and wider dissemination are undoubtedly important for agroecology to thrive, or even more basically, just to have some space to breathe. However, I contend that framing these efforts exclusively in terms of scale is misleading, because what is at stake is less a matter of scale than a shift in horizons.

The question is less how to take agroecology to scale than how can agroecology make sense again to policy makers and practitioners alike. Institutional support for agroecology can hardly materialize if policy priority continues to lie in industrial productivity. Consequently, it is difficult for farmers to dispense with chemical fertilizers and pesticide when they feel the constant pressure to compete to make ends meet. Moreover, no farmers want their children to struggle like them, just as no young villagers want to stay in a withered countryside, when rural life continues to be structurally made wretched and the city is projected to be the only desirable future. In such a context of systemic “emaciation of the rural”<sup>379</sup> as Yan Hairong puts it, the challenge, whether “up” or “out,” is for agroecology to become conceivable at all. This requires a shift in horizons.

Shifting horizons is crucial for those in the positions of policy-making. If we recall the two speakers at the forum on organic agriculture in Hà Nội, both of them express the magnitude of the challenge in terms more fundamental than scale. One exhorts the nation’s leaders to re-cognize and rethink the very path of industrialization, while the other demands a re-orientation towards subaltern peasants and rural areas. Both indicate that deliberations about agriculture and the rural more broadly cannot be

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<sup>379</sup> For an insightful and historically informed analysis of the emaciation of the rural in China, see Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants*, chap. 1, 25-52.



separated from deliberations about how the nation imagines itself, where it comes from, and where it is heading.

For farmers to practice agroecology is also not simply a matter of knowledge exchanges and training. At the forum on organic agriculture, I met someone who came from a farming family in Nghệ An Province (in north-central Việt Nam) and who was then a student at Hà Nội University of Science and Technology. In response to the question raised by one of the forum's presenters about why the countryside is bereft of youth, he pointed to a predicament beyond the immediate problems of economic hardship. He spoke of how industrialization and modernization has shaped people's thinking – in a distorting way he added – that life in the city is easier and more comfortable with a stable income and that people should escape the countryside by all means. Based on lived experience, he drew attention to how industrialization and modernization had re-ordered rural life as much as they had re-ordered rural subjectivity, an analysis glaringly missing from the forum's presentations. Impressed by his earnest and thoughtful response at the forum, I talked to him afterwards and we ended up staying back to chat for an hour or so. I listened to his observations, which I found very perceptive, on an array of issues, from the setup of the forum to the problems with GMO, from the impact of agricultural policies on farmers to Israel's promotion of agricultural technology in Việt Nam. He noted that various promoted tendencies to do agriculture in a seemingly progressive manner such as high-tech farming and organic farming are still in service of the market; they are yet to connect closely with farmers (*“bám sát nông dân,” “gắn với nông dân”*).

I was especially struck by his remarks on Industrialization-Modernization, a keyword that has guided policies of national development since Đổi Mới. He saw it as a form of losing direction (“*mất phương hướng*”) and losing oneself (“*đánh mất chính mình*”); one no longer thinks one can farm, so one becomes a worker in the city. His articulation is suggestive: It is not simply the giving up of the activity of farming, but the abandonment of the very notion of farming, of its thinkability, that constitutes the loss of the national self as well as the rural self. I brought up Tiếng and asked if anyone in his home village did agriculture similar to Tiếng. He shook his head. He said his parents’ generation, those more than forty years old, all know how to do agriculture differently from the way it is now, but they are afraid... “They know but they cannot conceive that it is possible to do so.” I asked him what they are afraid of, and his answer boiled down to survivability: They are afraid that there would be no market, that nobody else would do like them, then they would die.

Even when people know how to farm differently, it may still lie outside their horizons of doability and thinkability, especially if they believe it is a deadly path with no possibility of survival. For peasant farmers to hold on to extremely toxic pesticides as if they were holding on to dear life, they must think there is no other way. Take Tiếng’s region for example. He talks about hired laborers who have to carry pesticide containers of 25 liters on their back and spray the amount of 40 to 50 containers each day. Exhausted and poisoned by inevitably inhaling what they spray, some die in the field.<sup>380</sup> According to the official statistics on the Mekong Delta, rice farmers spray pesticide 8 to 10 times on average per season. On average per ha, they spray around 3 to 3.5 liters of

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<sup>380</sup> Panel talk at the “Fair of High Quality Vietnamese Goods.”

chemicals of various sorts, including weed killers, snail killers, insecticide, crop protection, and seed treatment, in addition to several rounds of chemical fertilizers applied to the ground. If we multiply the numbers by three seasons per year and keep in mind that of all these chemicals, 20 percent are absorbed by the rice people eat, 15 percent evaporate into the air people breathe, and the vast remaining 65 percent saturate the soil and water with lasting contamination, can we begin to fathom the poisonous effects on humans as well as on the entire environment?<sup>381</sup>

And yet, when Tiếng started to try farming without pesticide and chemical fertilizers, his neighbors were not welcoming or at the very least curious about how he was going to do that. Their reactions were more of outright disbelief and ridicule. Based on what some of them said when interviewed, it was not that they meant ill, but rather, they genuinely could not imagine what Tiếng proposed was possible. When asked “What do you think about growing rice without using chemical fertilizers and pesticide?” one answered, “I find it quite bizarre (lạ kỳ)”; another predicted grimly: “Tiếng won’t succeed.” When asked next “Why is growing rice without chemical fertilizers and pesticide bizarre?” one replied earnestly, “I spread fertilizer and spray pesticide and I still find it unsatisfactory”; another laughed, “We spread fertilizer and even then there is nothing to eat; without spreading fertilizer, what is there to eat.”<sup>382</sup> It is not clear whether by “unsatisfactory” the farmer means that the results do not satisfy her standards or that they do not satisfy market demand, but in order to earn a livelihood, the two seem to have

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<sup>381</sup> The statistics are cited in the documentary *Ước Mơ Xanh của Tiếng*.

<sup>382</sup> See reportage program provided by VTC16 (Việt Nam’s Agricultural and Rural TV Channel): 3NTV, “Cuộc Sống Nhà Nông Số 02 – Trồng Lúa Không Bón Phân, Không Thuốc Trừ Sâu” (Agricultural Life No. 2 – Rice Cultivation without Chemical Fertilizer, without Pesticide), YouTube Video, 30:54, July 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1i7Vvrm8DM>.

to be equated. Market value rules out other judgments of value. The assumption is that one can only try to do more of what one is already doing, of what everybody is doing, or else, there is nothing to eat.

Although Tiếng's way of growing rice is often summed up as a no to using chemicals in agriculture, what he brings back to his village is not merely a change in the technique or procedure of farming. It is a change in the horizons of what is possible for farming and for farmer's life. The rice that Tiếng produces is not outside of the market, but he reconstructs a value regime that determines independently of the market what matters for cultivation, what counts as food, and what can make for a healthy and happy farming life.

From the perspectives of both investors and consumers who are interested in Tiếng's clean rice, he should scale up production to meet the increasing demand. Based on his insistence on letting the soil rest and recover its nutrients, we learn that Tiếng is not driven by accumulation. He plans to broaden the farming area for ecological rehabilitation, but scaling up to serve the market is not his priority. Whereas Tiếng's supporters believe that the solution to both food security and food safety lies in expanding Tiếng's model through scalability, he has a different thought. Since 1995, he told me, government policies constantly reference food security ("*an ninh lương thực*"); it is like "a program set automatic in the head." Meanwhile, if only each province in Việt Nam committed two wards to growing rice, there would surely be sufficient food.

Tiếng questions the dominant discourse of food security by challenging its underlying assumption of a lack of productive capacity. While he addresses a national context, a similar critique has been made with regards to the international discourse of

food in/security that pivots on agricultural productivity. According to a 2013 Review by the UNCTAD, the world “already produces sufficient calories per head to feed a global population of 12-14 billion.”<sup>383</sup> The problem clearly does not stem from the need to produce more, but resides in structures of inequality as well as the political vision and determination to address them. Tiếng voices not only a critique of national policies but also a collective vision of self-sufficiency based on local production and provision. His hope for decentered undertakings in different locales contrasts with an entrepreneurial ambition for self-expansion and individual accumulation.

Incidentally, only a couple of days before listening to Tiếng, I heard a similar vision articulated by another Vietnamese farmer, whom we will call Kiên. After many ups and downs in their farming life, Kiên’s family is currently raising ducks organically with homemade feed. Their flock of several thousands became the subject of a post-dinner group conversation when a friend eagerly asked Kiên if he was going to expand the flock by doubling its current size, adding thousands more. The friend was keen to see Kiên scale up and reap more success. Before Kiên answered, a collaborator of his at the table smiled and remarked gently, “[One] cannot be greedy, [it is important to] look after the environment, keeping it natural.” The friend was not convinced and replied, “But in order to raise ducks, he has had to intervene on the environment, hasn’t he?” To which Kiên shook his head, “Intervention must be balanced and harmonious; all living beings are interdependent. If you multiply and expand too much, you will give rise to epidemics, then you will lose everything, the whole flock will die.” He concluded with a simple

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<sup>383</sup> UNCTAD, *Wake Up*.

statement that has stuck with me since, “The important thing is everyone doing it together, many families raising them; nobody can take it on alone.”

Tiếng and Kiên want others to join them and farm in a wholesome way: “nobody can take it on alone.” Contrary to a model of individual concentration of resources and self-expansion through scalability, the important thing for them is “everyone doing it together.” It is important to note that doing it together does not necessarily translate into doing it communally, that is building and participating in a collective farm. Both Kiên and Tiếng envision togetherness as a decentered undertaking wherein peasant farmers in different villages and different regions take to agroecological farming. When Tiếng began to introduce his rice with the name *Tâm Việt* (literally translated as Vietnamese Heart), others warned him to watch out for counterfeits. He expressed thanks and said, “I also really need wholehearted forgers (*người giả mạo thật tâm*) so that there are many safe products, which would be better for many people.”<sup>384</sup> Playing on what appear to be two poles of a binary – genuineness and forgery – Tiếng is not preoccupied with competition or violation of intellectual property. If others can forge wholesome rice from the heart, he considers it all the better for the larger community. His encouragement of “wholehearted forgery” is an invitation for joint efforts to construct a healthy economy.

Tiếng’s determination to return to his grandparents’ way of farming has affected the horizons of others. The first people to shift their outlook were his nearest and dearest. After the first couple of harvests, his parents turned around. They were no longer afraid and began to cultivate rice on all their land the way Tiếng did: with fish and ducks and thunderflies and spiders. After four seasons, some of his neighbors started being swayed.

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<sup>384</sup> Original quote: “...em cũng rất cần người giả mạo thật tâm để có nhiều sản phẩm an toàn tốt hơn cho nhiều người.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook comment, August 17, 2016.

One shared that at the beginning, he did not believe it was possible to grow rice without pesticide, but after watching Tiếng for a year, he was happy to follow suit. Several others began to use only half of the amount of pesticide they used to spray.<sup>385</sup> Although this was not the same commitment as Tiếng's, it was a major change compared to the initial incredulity and dismissal.

Even more significantly, from early on, Tiếng invited other youths to walk his path (*đồng hành*). After a year of exploration on his own, he reached out to peers from all over the country to welcome them to farm with him if they love natural agriculture. His call likely stemmed from the same recognition and collective vision as Kiên's: "The important thing is everyone doing it together; nobody can take it on alone." Tiếng's proposal was simple: "Your duty when you join me does not consist in doing much, [we are] simply doing what farmers used to do in the old days."<sup>386</sup> His call on social media reached widely, and the immediate, numerous responses exceeded his expectation. While he was looking for only three to five to join him, he received more than 20 emails and 50 messages of interest merely a few days after his post. Below is an excerpt of his initial invitation:

My wish is to bond together youths who love natural agriculture and become a group that will stand elbow to elbow and jointly endeavor to create safe products that are the best for our family and society. (...)

I cordially invite friends who love agriculture, without discriminating between male and female, without discriminating your specialty, and only asking that you dare to think, dare to make happen, and are ready to become a farmer. Join me growing rice, raising fish, tending ducks, cutting grass to feed cows... and I readily welcome you into the project.

The terms are: you get to be a farmer, to encounter practicalities, to know how a rice plant grows, to witness ducks eating rice, growing, and laying eggs without

<sup>385</sup> See documentary *Ước Mơ Xanh của Tiếng*.

<sup>386</sup> Original quote: "Nhiệm vụ của các bạn có vẻ với út bạn sẽ không làm gì nhiều, chỉ làm những gì nông dân xưa kia làm thôi." Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 9, 2016.

having to eat industrial feed. You get to feed fish yourself, you can make friends with baby goats, and everything is natural and safely clean. You can integrate your life with nature; you will be proud of creating clean, chemical-free products for your family and for society. You can do it with me, and although the profit is not enough to nurse a moneyed and blissful life, I firmly believe that it will be enough to nurse your dream into reality.<sup>387</sup>

Although Tiếng's call can be seen as an attempt to "scale out" agroecology, I would argue that its politics of subalternity and re-existence cannot be captured in the notion of scale. First of all, while scaling out indicates the diffusion of a method or a model already validated, Tiếng and others like him are treading on a much more perilous path of going against dominant common sense and facing ubiquitous distrust and incredulity. The challenge is to open up the horizons of what is conceivable: for peasant farmers accustomed to depending on chemicals for productivity to realize that it is possible to farm differently and still survive; for youths from farming families who are fixed on a hopeful future of settling in the city to imagine, again, that a future is also possible in agriculture and in the village; and for urbanites to treat the rural countryside not merely as a place of chronic poverty and backwardness or a bucolic destination for fleeting vacation, but as a site of knowledge and meaningful dwelling.

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<sup>387</sup> Original quote: "Với mong muốn của út là gắn kết các bạn thanh niên yêu nông nghiệp tự nhiên, trở thành một nhóm sẽ chung tay sát cánh với nhau để tạo ra sản phẩm an toàn tốt nhất cho gia đình và xã hội mình. (...)

Út thân mời kêu gọi các bạn nào yêu thích nông nghiệp, không phân biệt Nam hay Nữ, không phân biệt chuyên ngành các bạn học, chỉ yêu cầu các bạn giám nghĩ giám thực hiện và sẵn sàng trở thành nông dân. Cùng út trồng lúa, nuôi cá, chăn vịt, cắt cỏ cho bò ăn .... thì út sẽ sẵn sàng đón bạn về cùng dự án của út. Điều kiện các bạn được làm nông dân, được va chạm thực tiễn, được biết cây lúa sinh trưởng ra sau, được chứng kiến con vịt nó ăn lúa rồi nó lớn lên, để trứng khỏi cần ăn cám công nghiệp. Bạn được tự tay cho cá ăn, bạn có thể làm bạn với những chú dê con, và mọi thứ đều là tự nhiên và an toàn sạch. Bạn sẽ được hoà nhập vào cuộc sống của mình với tự nhiên, bạn sẽ được tự hào là người tạo ra sản phẩm sạch không hoá chất cho gia đình bạn và cho xã hội.

Bạn có thể làm cùng với út, tuy lợi nhuận không đủ để nuôi cuộc sống của bạn giàu có sung sướng, nhưng út tin chất nó đủ để nuôi được ước mơ của bạn trở thành hiện thực." Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 5, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauut.gatre/posts/1011851342237844>.



When the modern pursuit of progress is to leave the underdeveloped past behind for a more civilized future, Tiếng invites others to walk with him towards the future via a bold and creative return to the past. When the devaluation of the rural drives exodus from the village to the city, his project of rebuilding agricultural life attracts youths from the city to the village. So far, 15 peers have come to farm with Tiếng from diverse cities and provinces from all regions of the country, including Hà Nội, Huế, Đà Nẵng, Hồ Chí Minh City, Lào Cai, Thái Nguyên, Bình Định, Đồng Nai, Đồng Tháp, Bạc Liêu, Sóc Trăng, Long An, An Giang, and Cà Mau.<sup>388</sup> His fellow travelers on the path of return to “grandparents’ way of farming” are mainly college graduates, including some with master’s degree, some from agriculture-related studies, and others specialized in accounting and finance. They are inspired to walk with Tiếng despite tremendous family and social pressures to seek success measured by financial earnings and urban comforts.

One fellow traveler, Đỗ Thanh Vân, who comes from a farming family and has a bachelor’s degree in accounting, shares that since she was small, her parents hoped that her study could take her far from their farming life filled with hardship. So when she quit her job, they were completely baffled: “We looked after your studies with a great deal of money and now you are returning to doing the same work with us?” Their rebukes eventually ceased and they became sympathetic when she explained her decision with regard to her dreams and aspirations. In conversation with Vân at Tâm Việt farm, a TV reporter inquired, “Can I ask you honestly? Before sleeping at night, do you ever think about returning to the old job? Do you ever feel too tired?” Vân smiled with a firm no,

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<sup>388</sup> See documentary *Ước Mơ Xanh của Tiếng*.

“When I make up my mind, I won’t regret it. I will follow through till the end.”<sup>389</sup> Given the structural challenge of reviving meaningful agrarian life in the countryside, Vân’s account is not solely one of individual determination.

Her story leads us to the second point regarding the limitations of the notion of scale. Scaling out speaks to a will to propagate a pre-given project with the goal of getting more and more people to follow it. However, I am reminded of what Fernando Funes-Monzote, a Cuban farmer and researcher, emphasized in a round table on agroecology with local organic coops and organizations in the Twin Cities, Minnesota: “You cannot change people’s mindset. People change themselves. It’s the only way forward.”<sup>390</sup> Tiếng does not aim to propagate his ideas or insist that others follow his model. Rather, he invites co-dreamers: those who love agriculture, who want to farm from the heart, and who aspire to walk the path he is walking. The desire for re-existence has to come from others themselves, just as it emerged within Tiếng when he visited indigenous communities in the northwest. Tiếng, too, is only a fellow traveler: “If you are searching for a new path for yourselves and do not yet dare walk it, walk with me,”<sup>391</sup> he appeals to other youths. After all, it would have been impossible for someone like Vân to join if she herself did not yearn for it so strongly that she was willing to quit her job and risk all the sacrifices her parents had made for her to walk a more conventional path.

This is linked to the third difference between scaling and an invitation to walk with. Whereas scaling out is a question of technique and procedure, Tiếng’s invitation

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<sup>389</sup> See interview with Đỗ Thanh Vân in VCT 16’s reportage program “Cuộc Sống Nhà Nông Số 02.”

<sup>390</sup> Roundtable with Dr. Funes-Monzote and local organic coops and organizations in the Twin Cities, Minnesota at the Wedge Table on January 11, 2017.

<sup>391</sup> Original quote: “Các bạn đang tìm cho mình một con đường đi mới mà không giám đi thì các bạn hãy đi cùng với út nhé.” Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 5, 2016.

raises questions of politics, ethics as well as life. It opens up the possibilities not only to farm ecologically but also to live meaningfully. Vân feels that her “life is turning a new page” and that she is going on a beautiful journey instead of “stepping on a well-worn path.”<sup>392</sup> With friends, she wants to “realize the green dream, the dream of clean agriculture” and do well “based on value” and “with conscience.”<sup>393</sup> In response to Tiếng’s call, another peer shares at length where he is coming from and what the project means to him:

... Having graduated from the University of An Giang with an honors degree in biotechnology, an academic field specialized in research, and afterwards worked for several chemical fertilizers and pesticides companies, I have come to grasp the misery of farmers who all year around sell their face to the earth and their back to the sky<sup>394</sup> like my own parents while those who profit are chemical companies and agricultural supply agencies (...) Fed up with working for chemical companies and having seen its many hidden corners, I did not want to work there any longer, so I was going to study in the field of economics in accordance with my family’s wishes; however, after considering everything, the only thing I know is that whether later on I become successful Mr. this Mr. that, I will still be a child of farmers, wishing to change my family’s habit of agricultural production, wishing to change the polluted agriculture in our country, where I was born and raised with it and will die in a day not distant because of this agricultural cradle if we are not able to change it. (...) I work first and foremost not because I want to earn money no matter what, [but because] I want work that brings me true peace, true meaningfulness in the things that I do...<sup>395</sup>

This letter echoes the commitment and faith of other fellow travelers at Tâm Việt farm.

Leaving well-worn trajectories that they find alienating, they resolve to walk together a path that promises to remake both the self and the collective: finding peace, joy, and

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<sup>392</sup> See reportage program provided by VTC16: 3NTV, “Cuộc Sống Nhà Nông Số 10 – Mùa Vàng Tâm Việt” (Agricultural Life No. 10 – Golden Season at Tâm Việt), YouTube Video, 30:07, September 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2W8P5yfWOU>.

<sup>393</sup> See documentary *Ước Mơ Xanh của Tiếng*.

<sup>394</sup> “Selling one’s face to the earth and one’s back to the sky” is a Vietnamese idiom that conveys the hardship of peasant farmers who have to work strenuously in the fields all the time.

<sup>395</sup> Võ Văn Tiếng, Facebook post, April 18, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/cauat.gatre/posts/1019307181492260>.

purpose in what they do every day while laboring to transform the agricultural cradle of the nation.

Fourth, apart from being a limited concept, scalability has potentially dangerous implications since, as Anna Tsing points out, it “banishes meaningful diversity.” If it is done at the cost of banishing meaningful diversity, it would be incompatible with agroecology whose very basis is eco- and bio-diversity. Each place has its own climate, land configurations, water conditions, soil texture, suitable seeds, creatures that thrive there and those that do not, the types of natural enemies that are available, and so on. These heterogeneous elements and interactions make up distinctive assemblages of gatherings and happenings. As a result, farmers from different places can learn from one another certain practices but they have to figure out on their own, through experience and experiments, the assemblage that nature endows them with. For instance, Tiêng told me that each region he visited during his travels has a very different habitat, so he must learn selectively what is fit for him to adopt and adapt. When he stayed with communities in mountainous areas who mainly grew potatoes and cassavas, he obviously could not learn rice cultivation from them, so he would learn how they nurtured the soil. Such diverse collections of knowledge from elsewhere and creative adjustments to a home habitat are not admissible in a model of scalability based on self-contained and interchangeable units.

What Anna Tsing calls “contaminating relationality” within an ecological assemblage stimulates open-ended explorations as opposed to the predictable replication that underlies scalability. As Cuban agroecologist Fernando Funes-Monzote observes, agroecology “is a way of having a great contact with nature, interacting with all these

balances and all these unknown periods and things” in contrast to “industrial agriculture that wants to control nature, to [dominate] nature, and in many ways to simplify what nature is about.” Talking about his family’s farming practices in Cuba, he also tells an illustrative anecdote, “We have not many things to tell the others what to do. We are telling what we are doing and we are telling our stories. There was a man working at the United Nations [who] came to the farm, and he was asking me how to replicate what we were doing. And I told him, ‘this is not replicable.’ And he told me, ‘I am going to build a network of nonreplicable farming systems,’ because they are all the time thinking in networks.”<sup>396</sup>

Fernando highlights not only the divergence between agroecology and industrial agriculture but also the disjuncture between place-based agroecology and institutional attempts to mainstream agroecology through networks of scaling out. In addition to a common understanding that agroecological farming is not replicable, Tiéng shares with Fernando a similar orientation of not telling others what to do. Whoever wants to come farm with him comes of their own desire and learns through their own practices along with their own mistakes. Only then would they be able to figure out how to practice agroecology elsewhere, for example, if and when they decide to do it in their home villages. Thus, agroecology, by its nature, is a decentralized undertaking that thrives on dynamic gatherings and happenings in a particular ecological assemblage.

Last but not least, to understand agroecology as a movement of horizons rather than a movement of scale is to recognize that there already exist numerous individual and collective practitioners on the margins from diverse backgrounds. The challenge then is

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<sup>396</sup> Roundtable in the Twin Cities, Minnesota at the Wedge Table on January 11, 2017.

not so much to educate others into a new way of doing. It is rather to facilitate connections and mutual learning among people who inhabit subaltern worlds that may resonate or entangle with one another. Threads of resonance and entanglement across multiple locales and world-making projects are actually ever-present and boundless if we learn to notice them, if we look, as Tsing suggests, around rather than ahead.

Threads of resonance with Tiếng's project can be found in co-eval ways of living grounded in agroecology and ancestral knowledge. Where these ways have been pushed to the margins, resonance can also be found in diverse initiatives of "walking together" on a path of returning to them. During my research trip in 2016, I had the chance to converse with a very energetic person named Vy, who is around Tiếng's age and who travels across Việt Nam to learn "green" ways of living. In addition to sharing many stories of farmers whom she met and stayed with, she pointed me to two projects of walking together which I find clearly resonate with Tiếng's green dream. One is an enterprise to bolster farmers' production of clean vegetables started by Mai Hằng, who left a ten-year corporate job to be close to farmers instead. Cognizant of monoculture as a "slow suicide" for everyone, not solely for farmers, she promotes polyculture while working to make chemical-free agriculture viable.<sup>397</sup> Advocating an eco-centered, as opposed to ego-centered, approach to agriculture, Hằng speaks of the agroecological interdependence among plants, insects, and humans: "Clean vegetables must have pests. But pests can never eat all the vegetables humans grow. (...) Nature creates us, but nature

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<sup>397</sup> Benthanh Tedx, "Thương lái - toàn kẻ xấu? | Mai Thị Thúy Hằng | TEDxBenthanh," YouTube Video, 12:08, November 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlepQZQIrdQ>.

also creates insects, so living in a balanced way with one another is the best.”<sup>398</sup> Her recommendation to only “chase pests away” instead of annihilating them with pesticide is reminiscent of Tiếng letting thunderflies fill their bellies until rice plants outgrow them.

The second project that resonates with Tiếng’s path is VietHerb, which seeks to strengthen herbal medicinal traditions in Việt Nam by nurturing both the diversity of plants and intergenerational indigenous knowledges. Vy’s friend at VietHerb sums up the current painful reality of food production and consumption in a succinct observation, “Before vegetables were medicines; now vegetables are not even vegetables.” This radical degeneration echoes what Tiếng once said to his father about pesticide-ridden rice, “Your rice is not food.” Both of these realizations point to two layers of loss. The more conspicuous layer lies in the pervasive insecurity about one of the most basic elements of life: what people eat every day. This acute insecurity stems from not simply the loss of options of healthy foods, but as the comments indicate, the loss of food itself, when vegetables are not even vegetables and rice is more chemical than food. Furthermore, this is the consequence of a deeper loss: the erosion of a different ecology of farming and living wherein the distinction between food and medicine is not made because they are part of the same complex of biodiversity and nutrition. As the saying goes, “*com không rau như đau không thuốc*” (Rice without vegetables is like pain without medicine). When vegetables are no longer medicines, it evidences deterioration in their quality, but more importantly, it betrays the forgetting of invaluable knowledge built by generations with regards to the healing powers of specific plants or specific parts of a plant.

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<sup>398</sup> See interview with Mai Hằng in Phương Thủy, “Mai Hằng – Khởi Nghiệp Với Rau Sạch,” *Elle Magazine*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.elle.vn/elle-voice/mai-hang-khoi-nghiep-voi-rau-sach>.

VietHerb, therefore, has worked to revitalize subaltern knowledges and practices of agroecology and healing. For the past several years, the team has been journeying across diverse regions in Việt Nam to learn from existing healers and growers about indigenous plants and assemblages. According to Đỗ Hoàng, founder of VietHerb, “90% of plants in the forests are medicinal plants. For example, based on our investigation, in a region we visited, within a small community of about only 20-30 households, the healer there together with villagers know how to use about 300 medicinal plants in the forest, plus about 20 vegetables that are also medicinal.”<sup>399</sup> The team receives intimate knowledge about herbal remedies in all sorts of forms, including verses, proverbs, and legends. In addition to linking up healers and remedies from different places, VietHerb has also been actively involved in the long-term ecological cultivation of medicinal plants. It is worth noting that the team is concerned about helping to make existing medicinal traditions economically viable for practitioners. This concern, however, is not to be confused with the commodification of medicinal plants geared towards the international market, which can be found in growth-based models of sustainable development. For instance, as Ana Isla points out in her analysis of one such model, “In the process of commodification, medicinal plants lose their social, ethical, cultural, and even their biological power.”<sup>400</sup> This process both appropriates and devalues the knowledges and practices of place-based indigenous and peasant communities.

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<sup>399</sup> See interview with Đỗ Hoàng on VNOTV (Việt Nam Online Television): VietHerb\_Thuốc nam của người Việt, “Trò chuyện với người cứu cây dược liệu Việt VNOTV,” YouTube Video, 30:00, June 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRLWAZwtvUc>.

<sup>400</sup> Ana Isla, “Conservation as Enclosure: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Sustainable Development and Biopiracy in Costa Rica,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16:3 (2005), 59.



Concurrently, the domestication of medicinal plants as monoculture crops deprives them of species association and changes their chemical properties as well as genetic strength.

In contrast to this model of appropriation and accumulation through scalability, VietHerb initiates a significant practice of re-existence in a number of ways. First, it fosters biodiversity in the face of industrial destruction of habitats as well as commercial exploitation of particular plants, which have led to the disappearance of many precious species and threatened the vanishing of others. Second, the VietHerb team helps to reconstruct gardens of medicinal plants in the very places it encounters them so that they can thrive in the most favorable environment and local healers can better maintain and develop their traditions.

Third, in addition to decreasing the prevalent dependency on industrial products and pharmaceutical chemicals, VietHerb's promotion of herbal products for medicinal treatment as well as everyday care reorients people, in both urban and rural areas, towards sustaining indigenous agroecological knowledges and learning from minoritized communities in mountainous and forest areas. Fourth, VietHerb revives formerly common sensical practices from "the tradition of our grandmothers and mothers,"<sup>401</sup> which prove similar to the current practices of those considered cultural others often under the category of "ethnic minorities." If five years ago, Hoàng felt like "walking on an almost lone path," he has gradually connected with more and more people walking with him.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> See interview with Đỗ Hoàng at "Gìn Giữ thuốc Nam của người Việt," *VTC10-NetViet*, August 12, 2015, <http://netvietvc10.com/chuong-trinh/3613/do-hoang-va-vietherb> (accessed Jan 5, 2017).

<sup>402</sup> VietHerb\_Thuốc nam của người Việt, "Trò chuyện."

It was in the subaltern worlds they encountered that Tiếng, Hằng, and Hoàng found a vision for collective re-existence. With different projects and purposes, they embody and enable translocal movements of horizons. Whether it is cultivating rice or growing vegetables or planting herbs, their paths of agroecology converge around a return to past futures, futures that can now become alive because they once were. They bear testimony to how enduring as well as entangled subaltern worlds are.

Following the threads of entanglement, I stumbled across a translocal movement of horizons that extends beyond national borders. It is not the sort of visible motion that one may spot at international policy conferences or academic symposia or transnational advocacy networks. Rather, it is a quieter, more quotidian, and more open-ended current of reverberant ideas and endeavors. As I talked and listened to people who were directly involved with or supportive of peasant agroecology in Việt Nam, one reference came up time and again. It is a book written by Japanese farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka (1913-2008) called *Cuộc Cách Mạng Một Cọng Rơm* (*The One-Straw Revolution*). Tiếng has read the book; Hằng often talks about it; Vy highly recommended it to me. Another person told me about a facebook group of nearly twelve thousand members nationwide who regularly discuss Fukuoka's farming philosophy and their own experiences of putting it into practice in different ecological assemblages. As recommended, I immediately got hold of the book. It was not difficult since pdfs in both English and Vietnamese are readily available online for those interested in "natural farming." I found myself engrossed from beginning to end. As Wendell Berry, a farmer, poet, and novelist from the US, puts it in the preface, "It is an inspiring, necessary book

about agriculture because it is not *just* about agriculture.”<sup>403</sup> *The One-Straw Revolution* indeed opens a window into a whole other world. It was during perusing this “*at once* practical and philosophical”<sup>404</sup> text that a key aspect of the world-making politics of subaltern agroecology became clear to me: no movement of return to past futures is possible without the work of regeneration.

### **5. Self and world regeneration: Recognizing inheritance of ruins**

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the institutional attempt to mainstream agroecology stemmed from a newly felt sense of crisis among certain groups. The crisis consists of old and new problems of sustainability with regard to human life, natural resources, climate, and the environment at large. Among those who only recently began to feel alarmed by these problems, there appears to be an increasing acknowledgement of globally shared, albeit differential, vulnerability to human-made calamities. As a result, mainstreaming agroecology is one of the green fixes that aim to mitigate this vulnerability.

However, a recognition of vulnerability propelled by the urgency of crisis diverges and deflects from a recognition of ruins long in the making. When it comes to sustainable development, an awareness of vulnerability is regularly addressed with promises of better security. Hence, we see the proliferation of security discourses bolstered by international institutions: food security, water security, climate security, and so on. They are hinged on the quest for ever better technologies of improvement.

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<sup>403</sup> Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*, edited by Larry Korn (Rodale Press, 1978), Preface, ix.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*

Agroecology is thus mainstreamed as one such technology, one that would flexibly complement industrial agriculture. Questioning this kind of eco-managerial interventions, Timothy Luke observes that the fusion of developmentalism and sustainability science in “green modernization programs” works “to preserve the historically inequitable distribution of wealth, technology, and power for those social forces that have caused the most ecological destruction around the world over the past 250 years.”<sup>405</sup> In this sense, sustainability implies “some sense of being a “bearable,” or even “defensible,” condition, experience or situation.”<sup>406</sup> Sustaining high-tech modernity means “accepting disasters like Bhopal, Chernobyl, Deepwater Horizon or Fukushima Daiichi.”<sup>407</sup> The management of sustainability, therefore, forecloses the ability to recognize, let alone to wrestle with, unbearable, indefensible ruins.

In contrast, understanding ruins is a crucial point of departure for Masanobu Fukuoka’s “one-straw revolution.” For Fukuoka, a plant biologist turned farmer, technologies of improvement are not only inadequate to redress the ruins we are facing today, but they are the very source that continually creates and aggravates ruins: “The reason that man’s improved techniques seem to be necessary is that the natural balance has been so badly upset beforehand by those same techniques that the land has become dependent on them.”<sup>408</sup> What is significant about Fukuoka’s meditation on the ecological conditions of our present is multifold: his realization of an unbearable, indefensible situation, as opposed to a sustainable one; his clarity about the trajectory of development

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<sup>405</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “On Sustainabilization: Global Inequalities, Digital Habitats, and Material Governance – A Critical Ecology,” *Spectra* 4:1 (2015).

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*, 15.

that has led to this situation; his philosophy on how to rehabilitate what has been ruined without walking further down the path that has created ruins in the first place; and his steadfast practice of this philosophy in his day-to-day farming and living.

If Timothy Luke's political ecocritique links the catastrophic present with "the idea of modernization itself, which has never really gone away," and places it within a *longue duree* of "the phalanx of powerful economic, political and social forces that constitute the march of progress,"<sup>409</sup> Masanobu Fukuoka also questions the modern imaginary of human-centered conquest and advancement. For Fukuoka, what is destructive about modern agriculture does not lie in the industrialization of farming *per se*. Rather, he traces it to the more fundamental presumption of human mastery and control. This presumption is foundational to modern science, which views the world as an object, one that can be progressively mastered and infinitely improved for humans' benefits. Modern agriculture is the evolving outcome of applying scientific achievements to farming, relentlessly.

But what if the accumulation of progress, contemplated from a different way of inhabiting the world, is an accumulation of damage? Fukuoka unsettles the lens through which we take for granted what modern science accomplishes:

Human beings with their tampering do something wrong, leave the damage unrepaired, and when the adverse results accumulate, work with all their might to correct them. When the corrective actions appear to be successful, they come to view these measures as splendid accomplishments. People do this over and over again. It is as if a fool were to stomp on and break the tiles of his roof. Then when it starts to rain and the ceiling begins to rot away, he hastily climbs up to mend the damage, rejoicing in the end that he has accomplished a miraculous solution.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Luke, "On Sustainabilization."

<sup>410</sup> Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*, 18.

For this analogy to make sense, Fukuoka must inhabit a world that is already a wholesome house without science's "tampering." He refers to this house as "nature," which hosts humans along with other beings. Notably, his understanding of nature starkly differs from the modern grasp of nature as wilderness to be conquered and civilized. Such a grasp already enacts destruction, as Fukuoka notes: "Nature as grasped by scientific knowledge is a nature which has been destroyed; it is a ghost possessing a skeleton, but no soul."<sup>411</sup> Against science's certainty of knowledge and reduction of life to what is known, the farmer who once worked as a scientist affirms, "Scientists think they can understand nature... Because they are convinced that they can understand nature, they are committed to investigating nature and putting it to use. But I think an understanding of nature lies beyond the reach of human intelligence."<sup>412</sup>

Fukuoka's objection to the modern drive for mastery and improvement is not only an intellectual critique, but it also serves as the basis for a way of farming radically different from modern agriculture. If the advancement of modern agriculture is predicated upon the ceaseless development of new techniques of doing this or doing that, Fukuoka proposes, "How about *not* doing this? How about *not* doing that?"<sup>413</sup> After years of experimenting with farming naturally by not doing this and not doing that, he came to the realization of a method translated into English as "do-nothing farming": "I ultimately reached the conclusion that there was no need to plow, no need to apply fertilizer, no

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 15.

need to make compost, no need to use insecticide. When you get right down to it, there are few agricultural practices that are really necessary.”<sup>414</sup>

Practically speaking, Fukuoka’s method seems incredulous, for it dispenses with practices conventionally thought to be indispensable in agriculture. Farming without insecticide is not a foreign idea to organic farmers, but farming without any fertilizer (either chemical or organic), without prepared compost, and without even plowing is generally unheard of. These practices are hard to imagine because Fukuoka’s farming philosophy and modern agriculture are unmistakably incommensurable. If the latter’s motor of betterment is based on an ethics of hard work and industrious busyness, Fukuoka “aim[s] at a pleasant, natural way of farming which results in making the work easier instead of harder.”<sup>415</sup> Whereas modern agriculture is geared towards productivity, Fukuoka has a different “ultimate” in mind: “How to make plenty of time for a nice long nap, that’s the ultimate. It is not about how to Do This and That. It is how to Not Do that counts.”<sup>416</sup>

More fundamentally, he dislodges the construction of human superiority based on intelligence and civilization, which is central to the modern imaginary. He returns to a subaltern past and future in which humans live as part of nature rather than as master of nature: “Modern agriculture is built with human intelligence. In the Yayoi era, and the Jomon Stone age era before that, it wasn’t through our cleverness. Humans lived as just one of nature’s many members, and that was reflected in how they farmed. When you

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> See documentary footage available at Cecilia Macaulay, “Masanobu Fukuoka Talks About the One Straw Revolution,” YouTube Video, 9:30, February 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HveaqQy9hUc>.

reject human knowledge, reject science, reject civilization, the only thing that remains is natural farming.<sup>417</sup>

It is important to note that Fukuoka's rejection of modern agriculture and embrace of natural farming stems not from a fanciful idealization of nature but from a realist understanding of the ecological ruins wrought by industrial interventions. His neighbor's field, for instance, is a fairly typical example of the rapid transformation of a previously plural and bounteous ecosystem:

The weeds have all been wiped out by herbicides and cultivation. The soil animals and insects have been exterminated by poison. The soil has been burned clean of organic matter and microorganisms by chemical fertilizers. In the summer you see farmers at work in the fields, wearing gas masks and long rubber gloves. These rice fields, which have been farmed continuously for over 1,500 years, have now been laid waste by the exploitative farming practices of a single generation.<sup>418</sup>

In the face of such sweeping and profound change, Fukuoka's do-nothing method is purposefully oriented towards undoing that which has brought about degeneration. Let us take for example his reasoning behind no plowing. Contrary to the common assumption that plowing is a necessary practice of cultivation, Fukuoka views plowing as an unnecessary intervention on nature that actually creates serious problems for farmers such as tough weeds:

... when a natural area is brought under the plow very strong weeds such as crabgrass and docks sometimes come to dominate the vegetation. When these weeds take hold, the farmer is faced with a nearly impossible task of weeding each year. Very often, the land is abandoned. In coping with problems such as these, the only sensible approach is to discontinue the unnatural practices which have brought about the situation in the first place.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*, 33.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.



To not plow, then, is to undo the troubles that plowing has caused. Similarly, to not apply chemical fertilizer or prepared compost is to undo the depletion of the soil and to restore its fertility. To not use insecticide is to undo the “war of annihilation” and to rehabilitate “insect and plant communities” that foster a balanced ecosystem.

Fukuoka’s processes of undoing are simultaneously processes of regeneration. After having dedicated most of his life to ecological regeneration and having been invited to many places in Asia and Africa to green barren land, he says, “Now I am old and I have practised natural farming for 40 to 50 years, I could say my work has been researching ways to turn around desertification.”<sup>420</sup> Far from idleness or abandonment, his do-nothing farming is a deference to nature’s creation and doing: “Humans don’t produce. It’s nature who is creating. Not one blade of grass can humans make. Nature makes it.”<sup>421</sup> He dispenses with human cultivation and fertilization because he discerns that nature is the best cultivator and fertilizer. He does not need to prepare or buy compost to get high yields because nature already gives straw, poultry manure, and green manure such as clover, vetch, and alfalfa.<sup>422</sup> Neither does he have any need for insecticide when, like Tiêng, he can rely on natural predators and appreciate “the intricacy of insect inter-relationships”: For instance, spiders feed on leaf-hoppers and prevent them from eating rice plants; lady bugs devour aphids and stop them from eating acacia buds.<sup>423</sup>

According to Larry Korn, who stayed with Fukuoka at his farm near a small village in southern Japan and eventually translated Fukuoka’s farming philosophy into

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<sup>420</sup> Cecilia Macaulay, “Masanobu Fukuoka Talks About the One Straw Revolution.”

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*, 36-38.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 26-27, 59-60.

English, the idea of natural farming first occurred to Fukuoka when he passed an old field. Even though it had been left unplowed and uncultivated for many years, the field was full of “healthy rice seedlings sprouting through a tangle of grasses and weeds.”<sup>424</sup> From that basic realization about nature’s power, Fukuoka spent years exploring and practicing what has come to be known as natural farming. He seeks to attune to nature’s workings to the extent that they can be comprehended and minimize human interference. Take a core matter in farming for instance: how to deal with weeds. In addition to discontinuing plowing, a human interference that produce effects contrary to what is intended, Fukuoka would rely on a natural balancing system to keep weeds in check by intercropping, planting ground crops, and staying in tune with nature’s timing:

If seeds are sown while the preceding crop is still ripening in the field, those seeds will germinate ahead of the weeds. Winter weeds sprout only after the rice has been harvested, but by that time the winter grain already has a head start. Summer weeds sprout right after the harvest of barley and rye, but the rice is already growing strongly. Timing the seeding in such a way that there is no interval between succeed crops gives the grain a great advantage over the weeds. Directly after the harvest, if the whole field is covered with straw, the germination of weeds is stopped short. White clover sowed with the grain as a ground cover also helps to keep weeds under control. The usual way to deal with weeds is to cultivate the soil. But when you cultivate, seeds lying deep in the soil, which would never have germinated otherwise, are stirred up and given a chance to sprout. Furthermore, the quick-sprouting, fast-growing varieties are given the advantage under these conditions. So you might say that the farmer who tries to control weeds by cultivating the soil is, quite literally, sowing the seeds of his own misfortune.<sup>425</sup>

Fukuoka’s advice reveals not simply different practices of taking care of weeds but, more profoundly, two different ways of conceiving of humans’ place in the world and their relationship to others, which produce those quotidian practices. If humans are regarded as subjects of the world and weeds as objects in the wild that are of no use to

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., Introduction.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

humans and furthermore impedes their activities, i.e. food production, then humans need to exert force, i.e. plow or deploy herbicide, to eliminate these useless, unwanted objects. However, if both humans and weeds are understood to be part of nature, then the dilemma is no longer how to remove the latter (“weed out” as they say), but how to best arrange co-existence among all living beings. Figuring out this arrangement is more a matter of being than a matter of doing for Fukuoka (hence, “do-nothing farming”). So it is, if we recall, for Tiếng, who waits for the thunderflies to eat a bit of rice plants, “get full and rest”; and so it is for Hăng, who maintains, “pests can never eat all the vegetables humans grow. (...) Nature creates us, but nature also creates insects, so living in a balanced way with one another is the best.”

Fukuoka’s reverence towards the amazing “dramas of nature”<sup>426</sup> and his humility about human’s part in them guides his commitment as well as his very approach to regenerate thriving conditions of farming and living. Although I do not fully grasp his whole meditation on the one-straw revolution, I suggest that his philosophy and practice of farming offers us at least three important insights into world making. First, he helps us recognize our inheritance of ecological ruins. Through his discussion of the deterioration of ecosystems due to unnecessary as well as violent interventions, it becomes clear that the material conditions for farming and living in the countryside are poor today because they have been made poor, systematically. He attributes this impoverishment to world-ordering logics that center on human conquest and advancement. As Larry Korn, a student of Fukuoka, puts it, the assumption of humans’ separation from nature and

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 28.

superiority to other species means, in effect, that all things non-human (what are non-human must be things) are mere collateral damage:

Somewhere along the line people got the idea that human beings are different than other species. We are better. We have more value. And that the world was given to us to do whatever we wanted. And that through our intellect and through science, we could actually improve things for human beings, and, well, [it is] not so important what happens to other species. Er... it's just collateral damage.<sup>427</sup>

Second, the implication of this realization is that the rural impoverishment, along with the life of hardship tethered to it that we find ubiquitous today, is not a natural lack but a produced lack. This produced lack has been inherited both imaginatively and materially. The response-ability for such impoverishment, therefore, can hardly be sustainability or development. It is modernizing development which presupposes originary backwardness while causing deprivation in the first place. Development is a prescribed response to a pre-given state of deficiency. Understanding ruins, on the other hand, calls for a different response because it begs the questions of what has been damaged, severely, and of what can be rehabilitated, slowly. Fukuoka's do-nothing farming serves as an example of undoing modernization at the same time as resuscitating the richness that once was and can once again be albeit in a different form.

Third, Fukuoka's lifework bears testimony to a subaltern existence imbued with not only enduring but also regenerative powers. It shows that a way of farming and dwelling in the world that refuses the dictates of "the phalanx of powerful economic, political and social forces that constitute the march of progress" is not just possible to imagine; it is already lived. It is not pre-modern; it is in the here and now. Furthermore, such subaltern existence can empower others to re-exist and enable broader collective

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<sup>427</sup> Cited in the documentary "Final Straw: Food, Earth, Happiness," directed by Suhee Kang and Patrick M. Lydon (SocieCity Films, 2015).

transformation, as many people in different parts of Asia and beyond have found resonance in Fukuoka's orientation towards life and been inspired to practice natural farming.

Last but not least, the work of ecological regeneration that Fukuoka together with fellow natural farmers perform does not serve only themselves, but it revitalizes the living commons in ways that cannot but concern a larger community: from the species we get to coinhabit with, to the soil that produces the food we eat, to the water that we drink and the air that we breathe.

## CHAPTER 4

## AGRARIAN DISPLACEMENT AND DISSENSUS:

## CAN THE BOAT SINK THE WATER?

*Dĩ nông vi bản.*

I will only leave this land if the graves of my ancestors,  
the sacred hills and the valleys are transferred  
to the place where they want me to go  
... They will have to move the land with us.<sup>428</sup>

*Phúc chu thủy tín dân do thủy.*

### 1. What is at stake in subaltern struggles against agrarian displacement?

On the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup> through the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2012, some two thousand villagers from three communes in Văn Giang district, Hưng Yên province, Việt Nam, are keeping vigil all night in the middle of their rice field. In 2004, the Deputy Prime Minister signed a Decision that allowed the Việt Hưng Urban Development and Investment Joint Stock Company to acquire 499.07 hectares (1233 acres) of agricultural land in these three communes to develop a satellite city called Ecopark. During the next eight years, Văn Giang peasants who objected to their displacement have filed dozens of petitions and staged several large protests in the capital city. On the morning of April 24,

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<sup>428</sup> These words are from Chief Rekayi Tangwena, who is known in Zimbabwe for fierce resistance to the eviction of his people from their ancestral lands to make way for white settlers. The words are cited in Donald S. Moore, "Remapping Resistance: 'Ground for Struggle' and the Politics of Place," in *Geographies of Resistance*, 87-106.

2012, the local government is going to forcibly expropriate land from farming families who still refuse to be displaced despite the offered compensation.

The land seizure is anticipated to occur around 4am. Contrary to the hope that the stealthy timing would help to evade obstruction from opposing peasants, the latter are ready for a battle. The villagers are fully aware of the daunting combination of humans and machines that have been mobilized to enforce the expropriation and to crack down on their dissenting bodies. According to a peasant villager interviewed in the tense hours before the seizure: “They are preparing (...) three types of machines [trucks, excavators, bulldozers], about eighty of these, and the police together with the military and gangsters amount to about three thousand people.”<sup>429</sup> In spite of these formidable forces, she tells the interviewer, “No, we are not afraid at all! We are indignant, and angry, and now we don’t have any other road.” Indeed, she expresses a firm refusal to part with the land and echoes a form of collective self-determination:

No, how could we give the land up! (...) Today we numerous people, a multitude as one, three communes in this project area, all gather together, with the sky as our cover and the earth our mat, determined to die with them! (...) They have government, army, money, they have weapons, we the people only have two bare hands. But we are determined to fight to the end. We are ready with a bottle of gasoline each. (...) We know it’s eggs fighting against stones [*trúng chọi với đá*], but we are ready. If [we must] sacrifice for our land it is worth it.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> The full interview, including audio and text, is available at Thuy My, “Việt Nam: Đêm Trắng của Nông Dân Văn Giang Chống Cường Chế Đất” (Việt Nam: White Night of Văn Giang Peasants Resisting Forced Land Seizure), *Radio France Internationale*, April 24, 2012, <http://vi.rfi.fr/viet-nam/20120424-dem-trang-cua-nhung-nguoi-nong-dan-van-giang-dau-tranh-chong-cuong-che-dat>.

<sup>430</sup> Original quote: “Không, làm sao giao đất được! (...) Hôm nay là chúng tôi hàng bao nhiêu người dân muôn người như một, ba xã của cái vùng dự án này, tất cả tập trung, màn trời chiếu đất để quyết tử với chúng nó! (...) Họ có chính quyền, quân đội, tiền tài này, họ có vũ khí này, dân chúng tôi chỉ có hai bàn tay trắng. Nhưng chúng tôi sẽ kiên quyết chiến đấu đến cùng. Chúng tôi sẵn sàng mỗi người một chai xăng ngay. (...) Cũng biết rằng là trúng chọi với đá đấy, nhưng mà chúng tôi sẵn sàng. Nếu mà hy sinh cho mảnh đất của mình thì cũng đáng làm chứ.” Ibid. The Vietnamese idiom “the sky as the cover, the earth as the mat” (màn trời chiếu đất) expresses a situation of vagrancy and hardship.

I begin with this scene of acute conflict to raise the question of what is at stake in a struggle like this, a struggle both singular in its specific happening and resonant with a myriad others around the world, especially those that have come to be named “land struggles.”

What is at stake in the violent confrontation between on the one hand, those armed with money and weapons, backed by government and army, and on the other hand, those left with the sky, the earth, and bare hands? What may the villagers’ determination to “fight to the end,” in the face of a gross asymmetry of forces, signal to us? Can it point us to not only what they battle against but also what they battle for? What empowers eggs to go against stones? Are the peasant villagers and the developers clashing over the same thing? Is it land only that the villagers refuse to give up? And what does “land” mean to them such that they are ready to sacrifice themselves for it?

Let us consider a telling moment in the above-mentioned interview, when the reporter from *Radio France Internationale* asks, “People seem to have made a living here for a long time, what can you grow on this land?” The villager’s answer, excerpted below, is perhaps longer than expected:

This land of ours is a rich field of sticky rice and honey [*bờ xôi ao mật*], which has been passed on from generation to generation for so many years. Great great grandparents bequeath it to grandparents, and parents bequeath it to children always, for years. This land is the land of a thousand years of cultural cultivation. There is the history of the Trung Sisters, and festivals every year... The festival is coming up, and yet on this very occasion they are about to rob our land. (...) As history records it, when the Trung Sisters fought against invaders and came to our commune, the people warmly welcomed them. People hosted the resistance fighters and also offered food to them and their horses when the Trung Sisters departed. The Trung Sisters honored our commune with the name *Phượng Công*,



meaning the people are very hospitable, caring affectionately for other people and loving the land...<sup>431</sup>

The question was simple and straightforward: “What can you grow on this land?” Yet nowhere in the peasant’s long response could relevant information be found about crops grown in the field. On the surface, it appears that she simply failed to answer what the interviewer asked and went off on a tangent about some local tale. Or perhaps she was picking upon the temporality of life in this place alluded to in the interviewer’s question: Crops aside, people have indeed been living here for a long time. Based on the reference to the Trung sisters alone, the life of this land, for the villagers, stretches back at least two thousand years.<sup>432</sup> I suggest that this moment of discursive disjuncture between the peasant and the interviewer may reveal two different ecologies of meanings in which the speakers were embedded.

To the interviewer, land in this context is equated with agricultural land; it signifies a means of livelihood. Thus she inquires into the value of this land, i.e. its material capacity to produce crops for people to eat and to sell to earn a living. This presumably would get at the principal loss incurred by the imminent seizure.

Of course this meaning of land is not alien to peasants in Văn Giang. Nonetheless, the above answer, strolling in a different direction, also gives us clues about what else

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<sup>431</sup> Original quote: “Đất này của chúng tôi là đất bờ xôi ao mật, ngày xưa cha truyền con nối hàng bao nhiêu năm nay. Cứ đời cụ kỵ để lại cho cha ông, cha ông lại để cho các con các cháu mãi hàng bao nhiêu năm nay. Đất này là đất lịch sử ngàn năm văn hiến. Có lịch sử của Hai Bà Trưng này, hội hè hàng năm... Bây giờ sắp đến ngày hội, mà chính dịp này chúng nó đang chuẩn bị cướp đất của chúng tôi. (...) Trong lịch sử có ghi lại là Hai Bà Trưng đi chống giặc ngoại xâm, về đến xã chúng tôi thì nhân dân nghênh tiếp hai vị. Nhân dân đón nghia quân đến, và khi Hai Bà đi thì nhân dân còn giúp đỡ lương thảo. Hai Bà trước khi đi đã đặt tên cho xã chúng tôi là xã Phương Công, có nghĩa là nhân dân rất là quý khách, mến người, yêu đất...” Ibid. The Vietnamese idiom “bank of sticky rice, pond of honey” (*bờ xôi ao mật*) is a way of conveying the richness of one’s village fields with pride, as sticky rice and honey stand for the most delectable food.

<sup>432</sup> The Trung sisters are popularly remembered as Vietnamese heroines who assembled a large army composed mostly of women, led a revolt against Chinese domination, and successfully reclaimed 65 citadels in AD 40.

land may mean to its inhabitants. The villager tells us that land in this commune, among many things, is a gift to be nurtured, “a rich field of sticky rice and honey.” It is a family inheritance that has been passed down for generations. It is a collective inheritance that grows out of “a thousand years of cultural cultivation.”

I do not think we should treat these features as facts that are supposed to authenticate a century-long communal existence. Rather, the villager’s statement allows us a window into the stories, the memories, and the festive practices that bind the making of the place with the making of the self and the making of the social world. The remembrance of the Trung Sisters, enacted in festivals every year, narrates not only the name of the commune but also the sociality of the villagers as people who “are very hospitable, caring affectionately for other people and loving the land.” As Keith Basso observes while dwelling among the Western Apache, place-making is inseparable from world-building and “[w]e *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.”<sup>433</sup> Thus, I would argue that when villagers refuse to give up land, they refuse to give up much more than land. They stand up for not just a place in the world, but also the world in a place. And this is not unique to Văn Giang, Việt Nam.

Across lands and waters, we can find speeches and acts of sacrificing the human self in defense of the larger place-world. Statements such as “we are ready to give our life, but not our land”<sup>434</sup> echo widely. Anticipation of disappearance and death – such as

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<sup>433</sup> Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

<sup>434</sup> This slogan is from communities in India that also struggle against development-induced displacement. See “India’s Massive Land Scam: An Interview with Dr. Walter Fernandes,” *Ecojesuit*, July 18, 2011, <http://www.ecojesuit.com/india%E2%80%99s-massive-land-scam-an-interview-with-dr-walter-fernandes/1225/>. A similar expression was voiced against a forced land seizure in Kiên Giang Province, Việt Nam in 2010: *bỏ mạng chứ không bỏ đất* (lose life but not lose land). Tổng Văn Công, “‘Chủ Lực Quân Cách Mạng’ Đang Yếu Thế Nhất” (‘The Main Revolutionary Force’ Is the Most Vulnerable), *Bauxite*

“I am not going to stop; they will disappear me. But I will die with the land”<sup>435</sup> – is not merely rhetorical, but as palpable as the relentless intimidation and attacks orchestrated against people who refuse to sell, who refuse to give up or give in. According to a report by *Global Witness*, at least 185 people in 16 countries were murdered in 2015 for defending their land, forests, and rivers.<sup>436</sup> The organization has documented 1176 killings going back to 2002. The actual death toll was likely to be far higher, not to mention all the countries that remained uncounted. The report identifies “key drivers of violence” to be mining and extractive industries, agribusiness, hydroelectric dams, and logging. It notes a prevalent tendency of dominant political and business interests to collude in the ongoing violence against land and environmental defenders, “branding their action as ‘anti-development’.”<sup>437</sup>

The report by *Global Witness* indicates the systemic nature of the violence. What’s more, it highlights the tenacity of people in numerous places, across continents, who risk death to keep alive land, forests, and rivers. The report reminds us that for every life lost, many more are faced with unceasing discrimination, intimidation, and death threats. Still, despite the pervasive criminalization of dissent and impunity of perpetrators, despite knowing it’s eggs fighting against stones, many subaltern groups

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*Việt Nam* (blog), September 16, 2011, <https://boxitvn.blogspot.com/2011/09/chu-luc-quan-cach-mang-ang-yeu-nhat.html>.

<sup>435</sup> The cited statement is from a peasant woman in Peru’s highlands, one of the “guardians of the lagoons,” who refused to sell her land to Newmont Mining Corporation (one of the world’s largest gold producers) and Buenaventura and endured countless police attacks on herself as well as her family, animals, and crops. See Marisol de la Cadena, “Uncommoning Nature,” *e-flux journal* (May-August 2015): 1-8.

<sup>436</sup> “On Dangerous Ground,” *Global Witness* (June 2016), <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/dangerous-ground/>.

<sup>437</sup> “On Dangerous Ground,” 7.

continue to stand their ground, even if it means engaging in war when there is no other road to take.<sup>438</sup>

Speaking a language prevailing in global civil society, *Global Witness* frames these conflicts as the defense of human rights: “The rights they defend are recognized as human rights, such as the right to a healthy environment and the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands. They also might campaign on freedom of speech and the right to protest.”<sup>439</sup> Refuting the denigration that these defenders of human rights are anti-development, the international NGO also ties their struggles to “broader goals” recognized by international institutions such as “combating climate change and ensuring sustainable development.”<sup>440</sup>

Caught between the charge of anti-development and the assimilation into development goals, subaltern articulations other than a yearning for development, and other than a clamor for rights, often remain inaudible. However, they abound. For instance, facing the Socfin Agricultural Company’s large-scale land acquisition and displacement of subsistence-farming villages for the development of a palm oil plantation in Sierra Leone, Sima Mattia asserted, “It is necessary to defend the land, for us the poor people. (...) If we lose it we have lost the world.”<sup>441</sup> The linguistic cue is important here.

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<sup>438</sup> For instance, the Chief Governor of Cañamomo Lomapieta Indigenous Reserve of the Embera Chamí people talked about the conflict over mining in their land in terms of war, “We have serious conflicts with the State about their mining vision. They say that the subsoil is theirs; we say that the land is one with the subsoil; you cannot separate it from a spiritual point of view. This is the war we are waging... to have the air, the land, the subsoil, together.” *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.* For further readings on this contested land acquisition, see Rachel Ibreck, “A Right to Land? Activism against Land Grabbing in Africa,” in *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical Perspectives on Transnational Activism*, ed. Alex de Waal (London: Zed Books, 2015), 240-270; Marion Aberle, “Land Governance: Those in Darkness Drop from Sight,” *Rural 21: The International Journal for Rural Development*, September 21, 2016, [http://www.rural21.com/nc/english/current-issue/detail/c/a\\_closer\\_look\\_at-1/article/those-in-darkness-drop-from-sight-00002053/](http://www.rural21.com/nc/english/current-issue/detail/c/a_closer_look_at-1/article/those-in-darkness-drop-from-sight-00002053/); “Socfin

The invoked loss of the world appears to far exceed the deprivation of rights or of development. In another land, José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and Maria do Espírito Santo were fighting against a similar kind of loss when they were murdered in Amazonia. In a talk given six months before they were killed, Mr. da Silva affirmed what they were standing up for:

I live from the forest, I'll protect her by any means. For this... I live with a bullet in my head at any time. Because I stand up, I denounce the loggers, I denounce the charcoal makers, and for this they think that I cannot exist. (...) I can be here today talking with you, and a month from now you know what could happen to me – disappeared. (...) these trees that we have in Amazonia are my sisters. I am a son of the forest. I live from them. I depend on them. I am part of them. When I see one of these trees on a truck going to the sawmill it gives me a pain. It is as if you were watching the funeral procession carrying the most cherished friend you have.<sup>442</sup>

Whether the language of “world” is explicitly uttered or indirectly intimated through a relational order of being, I argue that subaltern defense of land, forests, and rivers in these cases entail more than a demand for rights, and more than an attachment to cultural particularity. Rather, it is a struggle over worlds, wherein, as Bruno Latour puts it, nothing less than “the makeup of the cosmos [is] at stake.”<sup>443</sup>

When academics and policy makers discuss global dispossession and displacement, the word “global” usually signifies an international scale or a certain universal logic at work. Subalternity is easily equated with subordination when subaltern groups are regarded solely as victims and identified mainly as the dispossessed or the

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Agricultural Company Sierra Leone Ltd Oil Palm Plantation in Malen Chiefdom, Pujeun District, Sierra Leone,” *Environmental Justice Atlas*, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/socfin-agricultural-company-sierra-leone-ltd-oil-palm-plantation-in-malen-chiefdom-pujeun-district-sierra-leone>.

<sup>442</sup> The talk with English subtitle is available at DavidLeeWilsonYT, “Zé Cláudio Ribeiro Nov 2010,” YouTube Video, 9:32, May 24, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSS2ALiU1ss>.

<sup>443</sup> Bruno Latour, “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck,” *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004), 450-462.

displaced. However, to understand systemic displacement in relation to subaltern power and not marginalization alone is to be attentive to another meaning of the global, that is, the multiply imagined and lived ways of world-making at the heart of innumerable peasant and indigenous struggles.

In this chapter, I first examine two important frameworks that are often employed to understand agrarian displacement. One offers an analysis of structural dispossession, while the other focuses on the agency of the dispossessed in terms of rights claims. I argue that as important as these frameworks are, neither helps us think about the ontological stakes of subaltern struggles against agrarian displacement. The nature of the violence is not only structural but also ontological in that it involves the potential or actual loss of worlds. And what drives subaltern struggles is the sustenance of these worlds, which is not reducible to the defense of rights, even though the latter may serve as a helpful recourse. To appreciate the stakes, the layers, and the force of contestation, I propose to extend our conceptual lens from dispossession to displacement and from rights-claiming to dissensus. I turn to contemporary peasant protests in Việt Nam as a site to study agrarian dissensus, wherein subalternized forms of relationality, to borrow Jacques Rancière's peculiar formulation, "lodge one world into another."<sup>444</sup>

## **2. Primitive accumulation and dispossession**

Scholars across a wide range of fields have relied on the analytic of primitive accumulation of capital to interrogate dispossession as a key feature of capitalism. Marx theorizes that capital relation presupposes, maintains, and reproduces "on a constantly

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<sup>444</sup> I elaborate later in the chapter how I draw from Jacques Rancière's conception of politics as dissensus. See Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics."

extending scale” a separation between “immediate producers” and the “social means of subsistence and production.”<sup>445</sup> For him, the historical process of this separation, which Marx terms “so-called primitive accumulation,” creates the fundamental conditions for capitalist production and “forms the pre-history of capital.”<sup>446</sup> Many theorists, especially in the recent decade, have moved away from a linear reading of primitive accumulation as a completed historical stage and treated it instead as an ongoing and constitutive feature of capitalist development.<sup>447</sup>

In my view, the critical engagement with primitive accumulation provides us with an expansive understanding of the violence of dispossession, especially when theorists account for capitalist and colonial development together. It points to the restructuring force and potentially intense conflict resulting from capital’s tendency to displace, subordinate, or assimilate nonaccumulative logics of social reproduction. Nevertheless, the analytic of primitive accumulation cannot address when and how this process might fail to take place, or even be reversed after dispossession has occurred. At its most generative capacity, this analytic considers the destruction inflicted upon noncapitalist forms of life; yet it does not consider the strength with which these forms of life could refuse displacement or subsumption.

First and foremost, understanding contemporary agrarian dispossession through the lens of primitive accumulation gives us a *longue durée* perspective. Dispossession is

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<sup>445</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 874.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 875.

<sup>447</sup> For an excellent overview of significant re-readings of primitive accumulation in this vein, see Robert Nichols, “Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation,” *Radical Philosophy* 194 (Nov/Dec 2015). See also Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Postcolonial Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Sandro Mezzadra, “The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx’s Analysis of ‘So-called Primitive Accumulation,’” *Rethinking Marxism* 23:3 (2011).

not an event, but a structure grounded in colonial and capital relations. Postcolonial critics have problematized Eurocentric accounts of capitalism which place its emergence within a self-contained Western Europe and advance a diffusionist “first in Europe, then elsewhere” notion of capitalist expansion.<sup>448</sup> In contrast to these accounts, recent interventions highlight the colonial formation of capitalism from its inception until today. For instance, Onur Ulas Ince situates primitive accumulation in a global genealogy of capitalism “in which colonialism occupies an originary and formative role” and heterogeneous social forms are forcibly restructured and articulated into networks of capital accumulation.<sup>449</sup> Bikrum Gill historicizes the contemporary global land grab by analyzing the colonial co-production of race and nature in forging new frontiers of “unused nature” for capitalist development.<sup>450</sup> These various interventions locate today’s dispossession in centuries-long colonial-capitalist processes while taking heed of the political specificities of the present conjuncture.

Second, theorists have broadened the conception of dispossession beyond the juridical meaning centered on the self-possessive individual and her/his properties. Dispossession comes to connote more than, or other than, the ostensible privative form of dis-possession. Rather, it refers to the forcible transformation of both social order and subjectivity. As Robert Nichols underscores, dispossession entails far more than the simple theft of objects. He argues that it names a constitutive logic of capitalist development “grounded in the appropriation and monopolization of the productive powers of the natural world in a manner that orders (but does not directly determine)

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<sup>448</sup> E.g: Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Patnaik and Moyo, *The Agrarian Question*.

<sup>449</sup> Ince, “Primitive Accumulation.”

<sup>450</sup> Bikrum Gill, “Race, Nature, and Accumulation: A Decolonial World-Ecological Analysis of Indian Land Grabbing in the Gambella Province of Ethiopia” (PhD diss., York University, 2016).



social pathologies related to dislocation, class stratification and/or exploitation, while simultaneously converting the planet into a homogenous and universal means of production.”<sup>451</sup> Onur Ulas Ince also highlights the restructuring violence of dispossession, which “comprises not only radical and traumatic overhaul of the relations of social reproduction (for example, the reconstruction of property systems or labor organization) but also the articulation of existing social forms (such as the market, commodity, and money) to the logic of capital by destroying them as independent social forms.”<sup>452</sup> Brenna Bhandar and Davina Bhandar are similarly attentive to the radical and traumatic effects of dispossession. They remind us that far from being confined to material and juridical fields, the dispossession of “one’s home, land, territory, means of subsistence, history, language, and sense of self” takes “cultural, psychic, affective” forms as well.<sup>453</sup>

This critical engagement with primitive accumulation draws our attention to the violence of dispossession in significant ways. If normative discourses of development disavow this violence by either ignoring it or rationalizing it in pursuit of modern progress, the analytic of primitive accumulation marks the force and destruction at the heart of ongoing rural dispossession.<sup>454</sup> It sheds light on a ruination that far exceeds the violation of individual properties. Just as importantly, it offers us a view of violence that is not solely instrumental, as in the case of the deployment of extraeconomic and

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<sup>451</sup> By disaggregating the component elements of primitive accumulation, Nichols distinguishes dispossession from proletarianization, market formation, and urbanization. See Nichols, “Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation,” 27.

<sup>452</sup> Ince, “Primitive Accumulation,” 123.

<sup>453</sup> See Brenna Bhandar and Davina Bhandar’s introduction and articles in the Special Issue, “Reflections on Dispossession: Critical Feminisms,” *darkmatter* 14 (2016). This broader meaning resonates with Athena Athanasiou’s discussion of “becoming dispossessed” as a condition of “enforced deprivation of land, rights, livelihood, desire, or modes of belonging” in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity, 2013), 5.

<sup>454</sup> For a critical analysis that historicizes development, see Onur Ulas Ince, “Development,” in *Fundamental Concepts for International Law: Constructing Intelligibility in International Legal Studies*, eds. Jean d’Aspremont and Sahib Singh (Edward Elgar, 2014).

extralegal force in the process of dispossession. Rather, we are confronted with violence in structural and psycho-affective terms, which may be less conspicuous and yet much more profound and lasting.

As expansive as this conception of violence is, it does not tell us about the encounter between different ontologies and thereby misses the attendant political implications. The analytic of primitive accumulation is, after all, premised upon an ever-extending process of dispossession and appropriation with an overwhelming power to re-order social relations. Left in its wake, as the above-mentioned theorists emphasize, are radically overhauled relations of social reproduction and traumatically dispossessed subjects. Yet, even as we acknowledge the devastating effects of dispossession, it is also important for us to consider carefully the political subjectivity of those facing dispossession. If they are not merely recipients of restructuring violence but also inhabitants of a different ontological order, how does this change our understanding of the political process in question?

Although various reconstructions of primitive accumulation pay attention to the relation between capital and otherness, the latter tends to remain overshadowed by the former. For example, Onur Ulas Ince locates primitive accumulation “at the interface of accumulative and nonaccumulative logics of social reproduction” while conceptualizing it as “the assimilation or subordinate articulation of the latter to the former” through extraeconomic coercion.<sup>455</sup> There are exceptions in Indigenous Studies in North America, which place theoretical emphasis on noncapitalist relations and practices that have

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<sup>455</sup> Ince, “Primitive Accumulation.”

survived the “acquisitive and genocidal process” of settler dispossession.<sup>456</sup> Scholars who insist on such survival want us to grapple with a complicated reality wherein the settler colonial project of elimination and assimilation has both caused untold destruction *and* failed.

Calling attention to this failure, Nicholas Brown asks, “Moving beyond Marx, what happens to primitive accumulation when we stop assuming that dispossession was successful and instead start from the conviction that settler colonialism is, in part, a failed project?”<sup>457</sup> Audra Simpson’s work provides one answer to Brown’s question by continually highlighting that “Indigenous peoples are reminders, sometimes indecipherable *announcements* of other orders, other authorities, and an earlier time that has not fully passed.”<sup>458</sup> Glen Coulthard provides another answer by affirming “resurgent practices of cultural self-recognition and empowerment.”<sup>459</sup> Like Simpson, he exercises “the contextual shift in analysis from the capital-relation to the colonial-relation” to better interrogate settler dispossession.<sup>460</sup> Yet diverging from Audra Simpson, and building on the works of Taiaiake Alfred and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Coulthard anchors a project of collective self-determination in “modalities of Indigenous land-connected

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<sup>456</sup> The emphasis on this survival is a common theme in Indigenous Studies. Audra Simpson, for example, observes, “Settler colonialism is predicated on a territorial possession by some, and, thus, a dispossession of others. In this model of colonialism, “the settler never leaves,” so the possession of territory requires the disappearance of “the native” (Wolf 1999, 2006). The condition of Indigeneity in North America is to have survived this acquisitive and genocidal process and thus to have called up the failure of the project itself.” See Audra Simpson, “Settlement’s Secret,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26:2 (2011), 205.

<sup>457</sup> Brown, “The Logic of Settler Accumulation,” 6.

<sup>458</sup> Audra Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of “Refusal”: Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia,” *Postcolonial Studies* 20:1 (2017), 5, original emphasis.

<sup>459</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 24.

<sup>460</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 11.

practices and longstanding experiential knowledge” which he calls “grounded normativity.”<sup>461</sup>

My research on agrarian place-worlds finds closer resonance in Glen Coulthard’s “grounded normativity” than in Audra Simpson’s work. However, it is important to note here that both scholars put forth conceptions of enduring difference which both persists and can be strengthened despite the ongoing assault of settler colonialism. I would argue that this robust sense of difference and perseverance in the face of crushing violence is not limited to Indigenous politics but can be theorized in agrarian contexts as well. To begin with, the concept of displacement may serve us better in understanding the ontological encounters and violence involved in what is often called dispossession.

### 3. Ontological encounters and the violence of displacement

The main limitation of the concept of dispossession is that, as Robert Nichols points out, it presupposes prior possession and thereby connotes “the very proprietary and commoditized models of social relations” that many critics want to call into question.<sup>462</sup> Addressing this limitation, Nichols links theft and property to a recursive, rather than linear, logic of dispossession in the context of colonization. He argues that colonial land seizure “*recodes* the object of exchange in question such that it appears *retrospectively* to be a form of theft in the ordinary sense.”<sup>463</sup> This means that what looks like the “*transfer of property*” may actually be the “*transformation into property*” as colonization

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<sup>461</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.

<sup>462</sup> Robert Nichols, “Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession,” *Political Theory* 46:1 (2018): 3-28.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, original emphasis.

engenders new proprietary relations.<sup>464</sup> We can deduce from Nichols' argument that to mistake colonial dispossession for theft of property is to efface existing social relations that are not governed by the same possessive logic.

Preventing such effacement, the concept of displacement can help us foreground the question of what is already in place before the violent encounter. Whereas accounts of capitalist expansion often center on the prevailing logic of capital, the language of displacement, first and foremost, re-narrates this expansion of one logic as an encounter between two or more ordering logics and modes of sociality. Like dispossession, displacement also signals violence. However, it is the nature of the violence in question that is worth our close examination.

If Onur Ulas Ince draws our attention to the forcible restructuring and subordinate articulation of heterogeneous social forms to the logic of capital, displacement reminds us of the exterminatory force when capital meets with forms of otherness that are too irreconcilable to be articulated together. With this understanding, the threat or actualization of displacement concerns not only the dislocation of people from the place that they have been inhabiting, but also the termination of ways of being that have constituted the people and the place through specific ecological, social, and material relationships.

To return to the notion of place-worlds discussed earlier, if place-making is inseparable from world-building, then displacement can amount to the destruction of a world. Audra Mitchell recently put forth a "worldly approach to security" to theorize this kind of destruction. She observes that catastrophes such as war, ecological collapse, or nuclear devastation to name a few, harm not humans in isolation but "heterogeneous

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., original emphasis.

collectives that humans co-constitute with diverse nonhuman beings.”<sup>465</sup> However, both statist and critical accounts of security in international relations focus on the human as the ultimate subject of security and fail to conceive of harm in the ontological register. Consequently, Mitchell advances the concept of mundicide to make thinkable “the destruction of worlds and the conditions of worldliness.”<sup>466</sup>

I think mundicide gets at the loss of world that Sima Mattia, the villager in Sierra Leone, spoke of. It reflects the ontological violence of displacement, which is largely overlooked in the literature on primitive accumulation and not captured by the concept of dispossession. At the same time, as a concept, mundicide can only convey the dissolution of worlds. It cannot give us a sense of the relations, meanings, and practices constitutive of those worlds. It is only the latter that can account for the political subjectivity and contestation of the displaced. Insofar as this contestation is frequently located in the realm of rights claiming, I will next examine critically the politics of framing subaltern struggles against agrarian displacement in the language of rights.

#### **4. The politics of rights and wrongs**

In the context of worldwide displacement to make way for large-scale development and business enterprises, it has become standard to claim human rights in defense of the displaced. As the United Nations framework on land and human rights delineates, land is “central to economic rights” when it is a source of livelihood and “tied

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<sup>465</sup> Audra Mitchell, “Only Human? A Worldly Approach to Security,” *Security Dialogue* 45:1 (2014), 5.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 16.

to social and cultural rights” when it is “linked to people’s identities.”<sup>467</sup> Human rights advocates also demand the protection of civil and political rights as they condemn government suppression of citizens’ dissent and protest.

Rights claiming certainly serves as an important strategy to hold onto one’s land, especially in the immediate battle against forcible eviction. It is a strategy to which those facing displacement cannot not resort as they strive to make their plight known and gain support widely. As an internationally recognized idiom, rights can be incorporated into any mobilization to put pressure on the authorities, whether the demand is for the government to cancel the expropriation, or to offer, however inadequate, compensation, or to return land after expropriation.

At the same time, it is important for us to recognize the significant limitations of rights discourses with regard to systemic and ontological displacement. First, when land is treated as a resource and linked to economic rights within liberal discourses, an assertion of these rights is premised upon the presumed universality of the fundamental right to property. Here, we are back to a critique of dispossession in the privative form, that is, a violation of the self-possessive individual and her/his properties.<sup>468</sup>

Dispossession is perceived as an event rather than as a structure. This understanding of violation and, in turn, claiming of rights also does not admit of a relationship with land that is not reducible to either property or resource.

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<sup>467</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Land and Human Rights,” available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/LandAndHR/Pages/LandandHumanRightsIndex.aspx>.

<sup>468</sup> For a critique of the misrepresentation of the problem of *displacement* as *dispossession* in the rights discourse, see Radha D’Souza, “The ‘Rights’ Conundrum: Poverty of Philosophy amidst Poverty,” in *Rights in Context: Law and Justice in Late Modern Society*, ed. Reza Banakar (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), 55-69.

Second, an exclusive focus on human rights, rather than a strategic deployment of them, as a site of agency and change disavows entrenched political, economic conditions that have long made displacement systemic and justifiable.<sup>469</sup> As urgently needed as it may be in specific situations, an appeal to human rights alone leaves unquestioned trajectories of development that sacrifice rural-agrarian well-being. As Jiwei Ci observes more broadly, “the human rights discourse is concerned for the most part not with the major reform of basic institutions, domestic or international, but with the promotion of certain feasible rights in the context of existing social institutions.”<sup>470</sup> As such, Ci reminds us, it ideologically produces “an imaginary feeling of agency through the equation of agency with the absence of direct coercion” and “serves to shape the political imagination without doing nearly as much to change political reality.”<sup>471</sup>

Third, with exceptions usually conceded to tribal and indigenous peoples only, liberal human rights discourse, as many scholars point out, presupposes a sovereign individual subject whose freedom ought not to be impinged by the state.<sup>472</sup> This subject,

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<sup>469</sup> Radha D’Souza discusses how displacement is “integral to processes of modernity” and is an “ongoing phenomenon that parallels colonial history” as well as the emergence and growth of capitalism. See D’Souza, “The ‘Rights’ Conundrum.” Relatedly, by engaging with contemporary discussions of social death, abandonment, and disposability, Louiza Odysseos questions the assumption that human rights can ameliorate rightlessness. See Louiza Odysseos, “The Question Concerning Human Rights and Human Rightlessness: Disposability and Struggle in the Bhopal Gas Disaster,” *Third World Quarterly* 36:6 (2015): 1041-1059.

<sup>470</sup> Jiwei Ci, “Taking the Reasons for Human Rights Seriously,” *Political Theory* 33:2 (2005), 261. Ci’s observation accords with the critique that the “provision of rights can be seen as a minimal legal response, leaving the material conditions of the new rights holders largely unchanged.” See Louiza Odysseos, “Human Rights, Liberal Ontogenesis and Freedom: Producing a Subject for Neoliberalism?,” *Millennium* 38:3 (2010), 764.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 262. Stuart Scheingold provides a related ideology critique in his landmark work on the politics of rights in the US context. Scheingold writes, “The *myth of rights* is, in other words, premised on a direct linking of litigation, rights, and remedies with social change. (...) The simplicities and exaggerations of the myth of rights have led in the past to overrating the progressive capacities of the law.” See Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Politics of Rights: Lawyers, Public Policy, and Political Change* (Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>472</sup> See Odysseos, “Human Rights, Liberal Ontogenesis and Freedom”; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Toward a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights,” in *Moral Imperialism: A Critical Anthology*, ed.



however, is not necessarily in place when human rights are claimed in struggles against displacement. Thus, it is important to not project liberal ideals onto villagers' invocation of rights in these struggles, for doing so would flatten complex political subjectivities and relations of governance.

This connects with my last point about the danger of confining displacement-related conflicts to the moral and legal framework of human rights. Louiza Odysseos argues that the latter regulates freedoms and manages social discontent as it “displaces earlier linguistic and action horizons” for transformation.<sup>473</sup> By earlier horizons, she has in mind “‘revolutionary ends’ such as redistribution of land and wealth, agrarian justice and radical political reform.”<sup>474</sup> I both sympathize with and differ from Odysseos's point. Instead of imputing a temporally prior status to other “linguistic and action horizons” and thereby implying, if not lamenting, their supersession by the human rights paradigm, I would emphasize their subaltern contemporaneity instead. The problem with privileging rights as the channel for discontent is not only the effacement of previous radical aspirations but also the deafness to coeval worlds that host alternative languages and desires for just relations.<sup>475</sup>

In the following sections, I draw on the concepts of dissensus and ontological difference to consider the politics of worlding at stake in agrarian conflicts when people

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Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol (NYU Press, 2002); Roland Marden, “‘That All Men Are Created Equal’: ‘Rights Talk’ and Exclusion in North America,” in *Silencing Human Rights: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project*, eds. Gurminder K. Bhambra and Robbie Shilliam (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 85-101.

<sup>473</sup> Odysseos, “Human Rights, Liberal Ontogenesis and Freedom,” 763.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Relatedly, Siba Grovogui maintains, “the human aspiration to justice, equality, and decency has been expressed in multiple languages, idioms, and institutions reflecting the complexity of the human condition.” Yet, he points out, “neglect of alternative moral universes continues to plague human rights discourse.” See Siba N. Grovogui, “No More, No Less: What Slaves Thought about Their Humanity,” in *Silencing Human Rights*: 43-60.

refuse to be displaced. I then attend specifically to peasant villagers' ethico-political articulations in contemporary protests against rural displacement in Việt Nam. I suggest that they express a sense of being wronged that cannot be adequately addressed by the moral and legal framework of rights. Furthermore, these articulations give us a glimpse into a subaltern ontological order that complicates governance beyond the rule of the modern state.

### **5. *Dân oan* and agrarian dissensus: “lodging one world into another”**

*Dân* refers to “the people” or “the commoners” or “the governed,” and *oan* means “wronged” in Vietnamese. Both words date back to precolonial rule and have been part of the Vietnamese vocabulary for centuries. The meanings of the words of course have shifted along with major political changes. Today, *dân oan* – roughly translated as “wronged people” – is commonly used to refer to displaced peasants, although the term is certainly not limited to this group and their circumstances of being wronged.

Relatedly, *nông dân*, which literally means “agri-people,” is the word for peasant. The closeness between peasants and people is etymologically intimated as well as politically enunciated. The centrality of agri-people to the imagination of the community can be traced to varying ideological articulations from more than one remembered past. The more widely known one stemmed from the 20th-century revolution. Hồ Chí Minh's writings were exemplary in underscoring the vital role of peasants in the making of the nation and of a democratic revolution: “The basis of the national question is the peasant question, because peasants are the absolute majority in the nation. The basis of a democratic revolution is also the peasant question, because peasants are the largest

revolutionary force against feudalism and against imperialism.”<sup>476</sup> Other articulations of the indispensability of agri-people in the imagined community are less internationally known but no less relevant in the Vietnamese context. To take a popular example, Lê Quý Đôn, a famous intellectual from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, stated the following four key principles that would make a nation prosper or decline: “*Phi nông bất ổn; Phi công bất phú; Phi thương bất hoạt; Phi trí bất hưng*” (Without agriculture no stability; Without craft no wealth; Without trade no busyness; Without intellect no flourishing). In this formulation, all four realms are highly valued, but agriculture comes first and foremost, laying the foundation for everything else. Statements by Hồ and Lê are only two among many examples of influential articulations of the political centrality of agriculture and agri-people. Although two centuries apart, both are still cited in today’s public discussions in Việt Nam to argue against the manifold marginalization of peasants. In other words, “*phi nông bất ổn*” (without agriculture no stability) is not an idea deemed relevant to the 18<sup>th</sup> century only. Although far from the mainstream modernization agenda, it continues to be reiterated and taken seriously in and for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Việt Nam.

Given these discursive layers, what may (*nông*) *dân oan* – or wronged (agri-)people – have to do with dissensus?

I find Jacques Rancière’s conception of dissensus provocative in thinking about the political stakes of peasant-villagers’ protests against displacement. If framing these protests in the lexicon of rights risks effacing other idioms of dissent and taming the force of contestation, the concept of dissensus foregrounds multiple discursive registers and the

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<sup>476</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập* [Completed Works] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2000), vol. 7, 15.

“litigiousness constitutive of the political.”<sup>477</sup> Instead of presupposing a single register of discourse or universe of reference, dissensus begins with “the discordant understanding of both the objects of reference and the speaking subjects.”<sup>478</sup> Litigiousness, then, refers not to a mere clash over interests or opinions, but to a “reconfiguration of that which is given in the sensible.”<sup>479</sup> For Rancière, insofar as “a shared ‘common’” and the “qualifications for part-taking in the community” are determined through a “partition of the sensible,” political litigiousness is “first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable.”<sup>480</sup>

Dissensus gives us a language to approach agrarian discontent care-fully and open-endedly, without grasping either the objects of reference or the speaking subjects with ready categories. Given multiple discursive registers, terms such as “land,” “peasant,” and “the people” do not hold a single, let alone obvious, meaning. The very status of the speakers is also part of the litigiousness rather than fixed in advance. If we read *nông dân oan* (wronged peasants) as instigators of agrarian dissensus, they cannot be easily dismissed as helpless victims whose grievances are perpetually ignored. Neither can they be transparently identified as marginalized citizens demanding rightful recognition solely. Instead, we would inquire into the political intervention they make on the visible and the sayable through their “enunciative and demonstrative” responses to

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<sup>477</sup> Jacques Rancière and David Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Diacritics* 30:2 (Summer 2000): 119. See also Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics.”

<sup>478</sup> Rancière and Panagia, “Dissenting Words,” 116.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 115. In thesis 8 on politics, he writes, “The essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself.” See Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics.”

<sup>480</sup> Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics.”

displacement.<sup>481</sup> What disagreement do peasant-villagers articulate over a shared “common,” over rule and boundaries, over modes of relating that are possible? What universe of reference do they draw from? And what scene of interlocution do they invent to communicate this disagreement and reconfigure the common?<sup>482</sup>

Intriguingly, Rancière invokes nothing less than worlds in his conceptualization of dissensus: “The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one.”<sup>483</sup> In another iteration, he writes, “Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another.”<sup>484</sup> The invocation of worlds here is significant for at least two reasons, especially with regard to agrarian dissensus. First, disagreement is not a mere reaction to structures of domination. Protesting peasants are not protesters only. In the Vietnamese context, despite their identification as *dân oan*, peasants are not reducible to recipients of violence and injustice. Their disagreement manifests not only a critique of wrongs but also “the presence of two worlds in one.” Second, “lodg[ing] one world into another” is not an intervention on behalf of a particular group. Neither is it in the name of an abstract universality. As peasants disrupt what is given in the sensible and rearticulate the broader “common,” they are not simply local actors with parochial concerns as they are treated all too often. At the same time, they may be called land rights activists, but that designation does not get at the depth of their political intervention. The question that Rancière provokes us to ask, even though he

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<sup>481</sup> For Rancière, political subjectivity “refers to an enunciative and demonstrative capacity to reconfigure the relation between the visible and the sayable, the relation between words and bodies: namely, what I refer to as ‘the partition of the sensible.’” Rancière and Panagia, “Dissenting Words,” 115.

<sup>482</sup> Rancière writes, “In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized. It is in this respect that we may speak of a *poetics of politics*.” Rancière and Panagia, “Dissenting Words,” 116, original italics.

<sup>483</sup> See thesis 8 in Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics.”

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

cannot help us answer it, is: If peasant-villagers make visible and audible that which had no reason to be seen and heard, what world is being lodged?

Despite pointing to the presence of more than one world, Rancière does not quite elaborate on what that entails. Whereas the constitution of multiple worlds remains rather vague in his theory, there has been much discussion and debate on it in the scholarship on ontological difference. The importance of conceptualizing difference in terms of ontology lies in the claim that there are multiple realities. Two dimensions of this claim are particularly pertinent to our discussion of agrarian dissensus. First, the question of world-making is at the heart of the politics of ontology. The multiplicity of realities is inextricably bound to that of worlds. As John Law puts it, to take ontological differences seriously is to grasp that “the differences are *not* simply matters of belief. They are also a *matter of reals*. What the world *is*, is also at stake. Our orderings (...) do not carry to other places.”<sup>485</sup> In a similar vein, Mario Blaser contrasts cosmopolitics with reasonable politics. While the latter defines the common world in advance and rules out entities and concerns deemed lacking in reality, cosmopolitics acknowledges that “[s]ometimes different worldings may coexist – enabling each other or without noticing each other – but at other times they interrupt each other.”<sup>486</sup> It is in this domain of cosmopolitics that, for Blaser, ontological conflicts take place. He characterizes it as “the terrain where

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<sup>485</sup> John Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 16:1 (2015), 127, original emphasis.

<sup>486</sup> Mario Blaser, “Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible?,” *Cultural Anthropology* 31:4 (2016), 563. Blaser critically engages with the theorization of cosmopolitics by Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. He notes that even though they keep open “the question of who and what might compose the common world,” cosmopolitics for both remains “oriented to the composition of the common world.” Because this orientation fails to adequately address ontological conflicts, Blaser proposes another conception of cosmopolitics that allows for “the uncommon” between different worldings.

multiple and diverging worlds encounter each other and the possibility (without guarantees) of composing mutually enlivening rather than destructive relations.”<sup>487</sup>

Second, different realities are not only anchored in “different sets of presuppositions about how the world works”<sup>488</sup> but also enacted in different practices.

This is demonstrated in many studies of indigeneity in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>489</sup> Scholars have investigated treaties, negotiations, and conflicts between settlers and indigenous peoples to bring out divergent ways of knowing and living. Their ontological investigations point to “heterogeneous material-symbolic assemblages” that challenge the prevalent assumption of a single object or reality under contention.<sup>490</sup> Helen Verran identifies the terrain of contention as “a politics being waged over ontic and epistemic commitments; a politics over what there is and who/what can know it.”<sup>491</sup>

Looking closely at the negotiations over land title in Australia, Verran analyzes how meanings and practices related to land are constituted by and constitutive of different imaginaries for pastoralists and Yolngu people. On the one hand, pastoralists know and own land through practices of quantification within the modern frame of empty space and

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<sup>487</sup> Mario Blaser, “Notes Towards a Political Ontology of ‘Environmental’ Conflicts,” in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green (Human Sciences Research Council, 2013), 21.

<sup>488</sup> Anne Salmond, “Ontological Quarrels: Indigeneity, Exclusion, and Citizenship In a Relational World,” *Anthropological Theory* 12:2 (2012): 115-141.

<sup>489</sup> E.g. Ibid.; Helen Verran, “Re-imagining Land Ownership in Australia,” *Postcolonial Studies* 1:2 (1998): 237-254; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits,” *Inner Asia* 9:2 (2007): 153-172; Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics,’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25:2 (2010): 334-370; Mario Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology,” *Current Anthropology* 54:5 (2013); Sarah Hunt, “Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept,” *Cultural Geographies* 21:1 (2014): 27-32; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 33:3 (2014): 1-25.

<sup>490</sup> Verran, “Re-imagining Land Ownership,” 239, 250, 252. See also Mario Blaser, “Ontology and Indigeneity: On the Political Ontology of Heterogeneous Assemblages,” *Cultural Geographies* 21:1 (2012): 1-10.

<sup>491</sup> Verran, “Re-imagining Land Ownership,” 238.

secular time. On the other hand, land is known to Aboriginal communities as a set of interconnected places, imbued with meaning through a large corpus of stories, songs, dances, and graphic designs, embedded in the “material pattern of kinship relations – *gurrutu* for Yolngu people,” and enlivened by *Wangarr* (“something like eternal time”).<sup>492</sup> In short, rather than a single object, land is multiple as it exists differently through each set of collective practices of picturing and storytelling, and thus knowing and owning the land.<sup>493</sup>

Although the multiplicity of land features prominently in indigenous studies, the emphasis is not on land as an object per se. Rather, as part of complex material-symbolic assemblages, land provides a point of entry into different ontologies. Land frequently enters into analysis due to the pervasive conflicts related to it, but its entanglement in more than one world is in no way exceptional. For instance, Mario Blaser’s study of conservation concerns about the hunting of caribou by Innu communities in Labrador and Quebec reveals that “caribou has never been just caribou, a single entity.”<sup>494</sup> Caribou is *atiku* for Innu people, whose hunting and meat sharing can be understood as “a set of connected caring practices that ensure the ongoing realization of generosity and respect within this collective of human and nonhumans.”<sup>495</sup> Yet *atiku* is caribou for non-Aboriginals, who found hunting detrimental to the sustainability of the herd according to standard assumptions in wildlife biology and management and thus mounted pressure on

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 247-248.

<sup>493</sup> Verran argues that although “picturing and stories embedding metaphors” are disavowed in modern orientation toward land, they are as much a part of the imaginary as rules and regularities. She points out, “To be able to get on with their negotiations, the Cape York pastoralists need to recognise that collective picturing and storytelling about the land with its possibilities for emotional ladenness and material embeddedness is an inherent part of knowing it and owning it; and that Western picturing is no more and no less rational than Aboriginal ways of picturing and thus knowing and owning the land.” Ibid., 249.

<sup>494</sup> Blaser, “Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible?,” 562-563.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 555.



the government to put a ban on it. In this instance, *atiku*/caribou, like land, emerges from different material-semiotic assemblages that “partially co-occur” but remain distinct.<sup>496</sup>

And similar to the case of land, the distinctness of the assemblages becomes more conspicuous, or rather harder to ignore, in times of intense conflict.

Notably, it is not solely in Indigenous Studies that we find accounts of different realities being made in different practices. These accounts also populate Science, Technology and Society Studies (STS).<sup>497</sup> A fascinating example is Annemarie Mol’s oft-cited study of day-to-day diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis, which shows the multiplicity of reality-in-practice in the field of medicine. In a site where the single verifiable truth of science is supposed to reign, “atherosclerosis enacted” turns out to be “more than one – but less than many.”<sup>498</sup> What appears to be one body or one disease, upon close inspection, are different objects formed in practice as part of different assemblages or sets of relations. Mol describes a “complex present”<sup>499</sup> in which “objects do not so much cohere as assemble.”<sup>500</sup> Their multiplicity – being more than one and less than many – manifests entangled realities such that what-there-is can no longer be certain: “Somewhere along the way the meaning of the word “is” has changed. Dramatically. (...) for nothing ever “is” alone. *To be is to be related.*”<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 558.

<sup>497</sup> E.g: Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Duke University Press, 2002); John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Wen-yuan Lin, “Displacement of Agency: The Enactment of Patients’ Agency In and Beyond Haemodialysis Practices,” *Science, Technology & Human Values* (2012): 1-23.

<sup>498</sup> Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 55.

<sup>499</sup> As Mol explains, her book “does not simply grant objects a contested and accidental history (that they acquired a while ago, with the notion of, and the stories about their *construction*) but gives them a complex present, too, a present in which their identities are fragile and may differ between sites. (...) If an object is real this is because it is part of a practice. It is a reality *enacted*.” Ibid., 43-44, original emphasis.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 54, original emphasis.

In the cases of both Indigenous Studies and STS, the focus on ontological encounters is to emphasize that distinct practices, in certain contexts, produce distinct realities rather than distinct perspectives on a single reality. Furthermore, the same entity enacted differently is actually more-than-one insofar as it plays a part in more than one assemblage. The multiplicity is hard to discern precisely because it is not evidenced in discrete things or beings. What is there is a lot more intricate, as John Law notes: “different realities *overlap and interfere with one another*. Their relations, partially co-ordinated, are complex and messy.”<sup>502</sup>

It is this messy multiplicity of partially co-ordinated realities that, I would argue, characterize agrarian dissensus in the postcolony. The realities are messily enmeshed because peasant subalterns do not occupy autonomous spaces that are detached from the dominant logics of the modern state and capital. At the same time, the multiplicity comes from the complex life-worlds that continue to animate postcolonial rurality. Granted, studies of indigeneity provide conceptual resources that are more relevant to research on agrarian dissensus than those available in STS. The conceptual affinity lies in the connection between ontological difference and cosmopolitics, the sense that “[s]ometimes different worldings may coexist – enabling each other or without noticing each other – but at other times they interrupt each other.”<sup>503</sup> In the contexts of both indigenous and postcolonial rural-agrarian politics, the subaltern dwells in more than one world and takes part in partially co-ordinated realities through varying practices. This chapter builds on the idea of ontological multiplicity yet focuses on dissensus rather than dwelling because I want to highlight the subaltern power to redefine collective existence.

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<sup>502</sup> Law, *After Method*, 61, original emphasis.

<sup>503</sup> Blaser, “Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible?,” 563.

This power is expressed not only in peasants' enunciative and demonstrative responses to displacement but also in their insistence on another existing grammar of political community and just relations.

Drawing on peasant protests against displacement along with dissent from the margins, I argue that this alternative grammar in Việt Nam is anchored in the political vitality attributed to both *nông dân* (agri-people) and *dân* (the common people) more broadly. I suggest that this vitality has two key dimensions: affect and power. The figures of *nông dân* and *dân* are constitutive of the affective fabric of the imagined community. Furthermore, there is a shared understanding that *nông dân* and *dân* do not refer simply to powerless commoners but to powerful co-authors of the common. This imaginary in the complex present is composed by richly sedimented and creatively recalled pasts of political articulations and mobilizations. It exists as a potent undercurrent that can bolster as well as disrupt the formal relationship between the modern state and its citizens. In what follows, I will elaborate on this subaltern imaginary with concrete speeches and actions that shape agrarian dissensus in Việt Nam.

## **6. A *nông dân*-grounded politics**

The vital place of *nông dân* in the Vietnamese national imagination is a very complex topic. Within the limited space of this section, I can only discuss modestly a few important aspects that are underscored by peasants themselves with strong resonance across the country. The following four are, in many ways, connected with one another.

### **6.1. Đất/land**

The first aspect is related to the way in which *đất*/land is multiple for peasants as well as for Vietnamese people in general. To begin with, its indispensability to peasants' subsistence is most easily recognized. The rhetorical question, "Without land how would peasants live?," is ubiquitously voiced by the displaced and their supporters. Ms. Đỗ Thị Dơi from Phụng Công commune, Văn Giang district, laments, "Since we lost land, our life, our future is so doomed that we have to cry out in the sheer hope that some government level would care to answer us: Without land what would peasants live by? Without the means of production we are definitely being shoved into the path of pauperization."<sup>504</sup> Contrary to the common trope of peasants' short-sightedness and preoccupation with short-term gains, many can foresee their doom beyond the immediate financial loss of properties and earnings, and beyond the meager compensation that is always grossly disproportionate to the market value of the expropriated land. They anticipate market dependency and destitution in the long term after the compensation money runs out. A peasant from Vụ Bản district, Nam Định province, grieves about life after displacement, "Before [we] had land to produce rice, now everything has to be bought from A to Z, [we are] returning to a landscape of hunger and thirst."<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Original quote: "Chỉ từ khi bị mất đất, cảm thấy cuộc sống, tương lai u ám quá nên phải đi kêu, cũng chỉ mong có cấp nào quan tâm, trả lời cho chúng tôi câu hỏi: Mất đất nông dân lấy gì để sống? Không có tư liệu sản xuất chắc chắn bị đẩy vào con đường bán cùng hóa thôi." Ms. Dơi's daughter was refused marriage license by the local government because her family was among the ones that refused to take compensation in exchange for giving up their land. Ms. Dơi is quoted in Hoàng Anh and Lê Dương, "Ruộng đất, nhìn từ chuyện cưỡng chế ở Văn Giang" ("Farmlands, Viewed from the Forced Land Seizure in Văn Giang"), *Báo Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam* (Agriculture Newspaper), April 26, 2012, <https://nongnghiep.vn/ruong-dat-nhin-tu-chuyen-cuong-che-o-van-giang-post93949.html>.

<sup>505</sup> Original quote: "Trước kia có đất thì sản xuất lấy thóc, bây giờ tất cả mọi thứ phải đi mua từ A tới Z, thì trở về cái cảnh đói khát thôi." The full interview, including audio and text, is available at Thuỵ My, "Cưỡng chế đất đai tại Vụ Bản, Nam Định: 5 người dân bị bắt" ("Forced Land Seizure in Vụ Bản, Nam Định: 5 People were Arrested"), *Radio France Internationale*, May 9, 2012, <http://vi.rfi.fr/vietnam/20120509-cuong-che-dat-dai-tai-vu-ban-nam-dinh-5-nguoi-dan-bi-bat>.

Such plight of peasants generates widespread public sympathy. As Ms. Doi's choice of words indicates, the ownership of the means of production (*tu liệu sản xuất*) as a structural safeguard against pauperization (*bản cùng hoá*) is part of the national discourse since the gains of the socialist revolution were inscribed into everyday vocabulary. Many commentators also point out that land is expropriated not to benefit the public, but only to further redistribution from the poor to the rich. In addition to egalitarian concerns, people in Việt Nam feel sympathetic for villagers who have lost not only their livelihoods but also a whole way of life which has been passed on from grandparents, great grandparents, and possibly further back. Hence, the magnitude of the loss is bemoaned through the frequent invocation of families who have farmed "for generations" (*bao đời*). It is also conveyed through the common equation of losing land (*mất đất*) with losing everything (*mất hết*). This equation is pregnant with meanings, for losing everything implies losing much more than the means of production. And herein lies an intricate connection between the countryside and the city, between villagers and urbanites, between agri-people and people at large, one that is denser than sympathy for distant strangers.

That connection has to do with another material-symbolic assemblage of which *đất*/land is a part. Most Vietnamese are considered to have roots in their paternal and maternal home villages (*quê*), where family ancestors and deceased members are buried and extensive kin networks are maintained. This extends beyond people who currently reside in rural areas as well as migrant workers who either commute back and forth or try to come back to the village whenever they can afford the time and money, especially on special occasions such as Tết (the Vietnamese new year). Even families who migrated to

urban areas a few generations ago retain social, emotional, and spiritual ties with their home villages through kin relations and practices of remembering and caring for ancestors. *Đất*/land in the countryside, then, is not just for cultivation and residence; it is also the resting place of family members who have passed away and a home-land for those who have long migrated. Such ontological significance of *đất*/land is somewhat captured by the proverb, “Sống vì mồ vì mả / Không ai sống vì cả bát cơm” (One lives for (ancestral) graves / Nobody lives for a full bowl of rice). Within this assemblage, when ancestral graves were destroyed in the process of rural displacement as in the cases of Văn Giang and Dương Nội, its unspeakable violence horrified and outraged peasant-villagers and urbanites alike. Dr. Nguyễn Xuân Diện, a researcher based in Hà Nội city who visited Văn Giang a few days after the forced land seizure and held human bones in his hands for the first time, asked in anguish, “Do you hear in each fiber of *đất* the stirring and terrifying groaning, alongside the Bắc Hưng Hải canal, of the aggrieved ghosts who are demanding the return of the bones of ancient times and of the sweat, tears, and even blood of today?”<sup>506</sup>

Dr. Diện’s question gives us a sense that *đất*/land is a being rather than a thing. As such, it is ontologically different from the understanding of land as a thing embedded in varied relations and orders. The latter claim can be found in the scholarship that situates land disputes within the framework of property relations and legal pluralism. For instance, Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann observe that “[m]any traditional legal

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<sup>506</sup> Original quote: “Có nghe thấy trong từng thớ đất đang cựa quậy và rên lên rùng rợn bên dòng kênh Bắc Hưng Hải của những hồn ma đang oán hận đòi trả lại xương xưa và mồ hôi, nước mắt và cả máu của nay?” Dr. Diện’s blog is one of several popular and reliable sites that post regularly updated reports of forced land seizure in Việt Nam, including pictures and videos. See Nguyễn Xuân Diện, “Chiều 30.4: Đau Đớn Lòng Ta Chiều Văn Giang!” (April 30 Afternoon: What a Sorrowful Afternoon in Văn Giang!), *Xuân Diện Hán Nôm* (blog), April 30, 2012, <https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/04/chieu-304-tan-nat-long-ta-chieu-van.html>.

orders... treat property relations as only one aspect or strand of more encompassing categorial relationships, in which kinship relations, property relations and relations of political authority are largely fused in a many-stranded or multiplex relationship.”<sup>507</sup> John Gillespie and Hualing Fu take similar note of “traditional communities” in rural China and Việt Nam, “property relations remain embedded in relational and/or spiritual practices and have not yet re-embedded in legal relationships.”<sup>508</sup> These scholars acknowledge that land conflicts are not simply a legal matter since they are also mediated by established structures of kinship relations and spiritual practices. Although they admit the complexity of these social relations (while relegating them to a “traditional” status), they ontologically fix land *a priori* as property or natural resource. I wish to undo such fixity by emphasizing instead that *đất*/land itself is multiple, instead of being a single entity that is multiply embedded.

The ontological multiplicity of land and the associated affective bonds are enacted in both quotidian practices and acts of protest against displacement. When peasants in Vụ Bản faced an impending forced eviction, they performed an act that spoke volumes even though it involved no speech. About two dozen villagers wore white headbands and stood by their land. White headbands are worn in Việt Nam only on occasions of mourning. Vụ Bản peasants transformed an imminent forced seizure of land into a funeral for their *đất*. This funeral, we can say with Rancière, made visible that which had no reason to be seen, and lodged one world into another. It is a haunting scene. What kind of life is being exterminated when *đất* is not allowed to live? We are so used to funerals being held for

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<sup>507</sup> Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, “Multiple Embeddedness and Systemic Implications: Struggles over Natural Resources in Minangkabau Since the *Reformasi*,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010), 175.

<sup>508</sup> Fu and Gillespie, eds., *Resolving Land Disputes in East Asia*, 24.

human beings that a funeral for land-being cannot but jolt us out of our common sense.

Vụ Bản peasants constructed, or rather reminded their countrymen of, another common and common sense, one that should not be foreign to either the authorities who approved the expropriation or the policemen who carried it out. Yes, peasants are demanding “Let us live!,” but their collective appeal is also “Let *đất* live!”



Figure 4.1: Villagers wore mourning headbands in Liên Minh commune, Vụ Bản district, Nam Định province, 2012.<sup>509</sup>

## 6.2. Debt to *nông dân*

<sup>509</sup> The picture is from a series posted in Nguyễn Xuân Diệm, “Bà Con Vụ Bản Đồng Loạt Chít Khăn Tang Quyết Giữ Đất” (“Villagers in Vụ Bản Together Wear Mourning Headbands Determined to Keep Land”), *Xuân Diệm Hán Nôm* (blog), May 8, 2012, <https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/05/ba-con-vu-ban-ong-loat-chit-khan-tang.html>.



The second aspect of *nông dân*-grounded politics concerns the enormity of peasants' sacrifices and support in the decades-long resistance wars against France and the US. This certainly involves the powerful make-or-break role that peasants played in these wars, a point I will come to later. Here, I want to emphasize instead another vital affective tie that binds the Vietnamese nation to its peasants, namely the immeasurable debt that the nation owes to families who not only risked their lives feeding, sheltering, and protecting the resistance forces, but also gave their children and everything they had to the cause of peace and independence. This is a foundational narrative that speaks to millions of Vietnamese whose families, counting only a few generations back, all had intimate connections to the countryside and suffered untold tribulations and loss during the wars. The injustice in the present runs as deep as the sacrifice in the past: To displace peasants today is to displace the very people without whom there would not be a today. In response to such a fundamental wrong, peasants both express indignation at its inconceivability and remind the government of an ethics it once knew.

The elder in figure 4.2 is *mẹ liệt sĩ* Thái Thị Tiển, who was 86 years old at the time she protested against forced land seizure with fellow villagers in Phước Long ward, Khánh Hoà province.<sup>510</sup> Three of her family members fought and died during the war. After the war ended in 1975, her family donated much of their inherited land to the government, keeping only a modest amount for the children. Yet even that was taken away in 2010, throwing thirty people in her extended family into deprivation and hardship. In objection to the expropriation, Mrs. Tiển was holding in her hands what was supposed to be a testimony to the nation's gratitude to her family. She had hoped that

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<sup>510</sup> In Việt Nam, the mothers of those who fought and died during war are called *mẹ liệt sĩ* (roughly translated as "mother of fallen soldier").

facing what her family had done and sacrificed for the country, the government would at least feel “a little sense of shame” (*một chút liêm sĩ*) for its wrong:

... During the war of resistance I dug underground shelter to hide cadres, so the State recognized my family as one that contributed to the Revolution. In 1978, I was awarded *Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công* [Homeland Certificate of Appreciation for Contribution] signed by then PM Phạm Văn Đồng and Certificate of Family of *Liệt sĩ* [Fallen Soldier] with regard to *Liệt sĩ* Bùi Văn Cẩn. When my family’s land of more than 5000 square meters was forcibly seized, I had to hold *Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công* in the hope of receiving a little sense of shame from the government. But I could not have expected that even my *Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công* was also stolen and until today not yet returned...<sup>511</sup>



Figure 4.2: Villagers protested against forced land seizure in Phước Long ward, Khánh Hoà province, 2010.

<sup>511</sup> Original quote: “...Trong kháng chiến tôi đã từng đào hầm để che giấu cán bộ, nên tôi được Nhà nước công nhận là gia đình có công với Cách mạng. Năm 1978, tôi được nguyên Thủ tướng Chính phủ Phạm Văn Đồng ký cấp Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công; Giấy chứng nhận là gia đình Liệt sĩ đối với Liệt sĩ Bùi Văn Cẩn. Khi gia đình tôi bị Cường chế hơn 5.000 m2 đất, tôi đã phải ôm Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công để mong nhận được một chút liêm sĩ của chính quyền. Nhưng không ngờ đến tằm Bằng Tổ quốc ghi công của tôi cũng bị cướp đến nay chưa trả...” See “Nha Trang: Mẹ dân oan ôm bằng Tổ quốc Ghi công để thấy “chút liêm sĩ của chính quyền”!” (Nha Trang: *Dân Oan* Mother Held *Bằng Tổ quốc Ghi Công* to See “a Little Sense of Shame of the Government”!), *Vườn Rau Lộc Hưng* (blog), August 9, 2010, <http://vuonraulochung.wordpress.com/2010/08/09/nha-trang-me-dan-oan-om-bang-to-quoc-ghi-cong-de-thay-“chut-liem-si-cua-chinh-quyen”/>.

Castigating the government for being shameless and ungrateful is not quite the same as denouncing it for being authoritarian and oppressive. If the latter is a common enough description of the one-party regime in popular and academic discourses, the former emerges from an intimate relation between the governed and those who govern. A relation built on long years of living with death together and for one another:

... when [my brother] came back from the mountain, they shot him. I buried him there [in the family's land]. My mother contributed to the revolution. That land grew cassava and onions that nourished the revolution in the mountain, whatever we had we sold, whatever we had we fed [the revolutionaries]. It was for eating as well as for buying fish and rice to feed them. Now my mother is lying there, how could they dig it up and eat it [*đào lên lấy ăn*]? How could they take everything, even graves to eat? *Đất* is my ancestors', not theirs. [They] came and dug it up to eat. How come?...<sup>512</sup>

Mrs. Tiễn's speech counts on the multiple meanings of "eat" in Vietnamese to indicate a rapacious acquisition and consumption, an aggressive snatching and devouring ("*lấy ăn*"). The connotation of avarice, accentuated by her question "How could they take everything," is overwhelming. Yet Mrs. Tiễn pointed to wrongs committed by those in authorities that were far graver than the crime of greed. They violated what the revolution stood for by cannibalizing the very people who nursed it. Worse yet, they trampled on the basic ethics of respecting the resting place of others' deceased family members and ancestors. Mrs. Tiễn's questions, "How could they / How come?," repeated over and over, both incredulous and interrogating, betrays the unthinkability of such violations within another ethico-political imaginary.

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<sup>512</sup> Original quote: "Tôi đem cái hình của em tôi, nó ở trong núi nó mới về là người ta bắn nó chết. Giờ tôi cũng chôn đó. Mẹ tôi có công với cách mạng. Đất đó là trồng tía sắn kiệu là nuôi hết cách mạng ở trong núi về có bao nhiêu cũng bán có bao nhiêu cũng nuôi hết. Ăn rồi mua cá, mua gạo nuôi trong đó. Bây giờ mẹ tôi nằm đó cũng tới đào lên lấy ăn là sao vậy? Giờ tại sao muốn lấy hết, mà mò cũng lấy ăn. Đất của ông bà tôi chớ đâu phải đất của mấy người đó ha. Tới đó đào lên lấy ăn. Tại sao vậy?" Audio interviews with Mrs. Thái Thị Tiễn, her son, and her daughter-in-law are available at Phong Thu, "Tấm Bằng Liệt Sĩ" ("The Certificate of Liệt Sĩ"), *Radio Free Asia*, February 12, 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/programs/WomenMagazine/death-certificat-02122013062447.html>.

### 6.3. Agri-culture and agri-people as the root

The third aspect of the *nông dân*-grounded imaginary revolves around the centrality of agriculture and agri-people to the stability and prosperity of the nation. At the most basic level, this is expressed through the general gratitude to *nông dân* for feeding the entire country, from villages to cities, from wartime to peacetime. As the Vietnamese proverb goes, *ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây* (when eating the fruit, remember the one who grows the tree). This is what Ms. Lê Hiền Đức, a dedicated activist against corruption and rural displacement now in her 80s, reminds the police who evicted peasants. She shares in an interview:

They [the authorities] didn't want me to be present at the scene [of forced land seizure] but still people took me there so I could have a few words encouraging our fellow people [*bà con nhân dân*], strengthening their spirit, and at the same time a few words advising the police force, "Point your gun at those corrupt, don't turn your gun at the people. Children, the toiling peasants here are the people who make grains of rice to feed us." [Hearing me] one was crying. A policeman was crying.<sup>513</sup>

At the national level, Hồ Chí Minh is often cited on the key role that agriculture plays in national development and prosperity. In his book on the development of agriculture and the countryside in Việt Nam from the turn of the last century until 20 years after the *Đổi Mới* reforms, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Bích, who formerly served as Vice Chairman of the Office of the President cum Assistant to the President (1998-2006), refers to Hồ's guiding principle, "In order to develop industry and develop the economy

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<sup>513</sup> Original quote: "Tức là họ không muốn cho mình có mặt ở hiện trường nhưng mà dẫu sao dân cũng đưa tôi đến và cũng được một vài lời động viên với bà con nhân dân củng cố tinh thần cho dân, đồng thời một vài lời nhắc nhở với lực lượng công an, "Cầm súng và chĩa vào bọn tham nhũng, đừng cầm súng quay vào phía nhân dân. Các con ơi, những người lam lũ lao động nông dân đây chính là những người làm ra hạt lúa nuôi chúng ta đây." Thế thì có cháu khóc. Có cháu công an khóc đấy..." The audio interview is available at Quỳnh Chi, "Đừng chĩa súng vào dân!" (Don't Point Gun at the People!), *Radio Free Asia*, April 24, 2012, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/w-should-gun-point-at-qc-04242012134732.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/w-should-gun-point-at-qc-04242012134732.html).

in general, we must treat agricultural development as that which is at the root and primary [*làm gốc, làm chính*].”<sup>514</sup> In Hồ’s political thought, the prioritization of agriculture would satisfy people’s basic need and bring wealth to the nation: “for humans, “*dĩ thực vi tiên*” (meaning first one needs to eat); for our country, “*dĩ nông vi bản*” (meaning agriculture is the root). For the people to be full, [we] must plant and grow a lot. For the country to be wealthy and strong, [we] must develop agriculture.”<sup>515</sup>

Given that the goal of industrialization and modernization (*công nghiệp hoá, hiện đại hoá*) has dominated the national agenda since the 1990s, Hồ’s principle of putting agriculture first is more cited than followed in policy-making. In 1991, the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of Việt Nam announced the economic restructuring required for industrialization and modernization: “Economic growth is closely associated with the process of the building of infrastructure, *restructuring economy in the direction of gradual industrialization* and escaping from a state of agricultural backwardness.”<sup>516</sup> In 1996, the 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress called for “stepping up industrialization and modernization” with the resolution that “[f]rom now to the year 2020, we will strive strenuously to turn ours basically into an industrialized country.”<sup>517</sup> The success of this goal is measured numerically by the progressive diminution of the agricultural sector and the rural population. Dr. Đặng Kim Sơn, former Director General of the Institute of

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<sup>514</sup> Original quote: “Muốn phát triển công nghiệp, phát triển kinh tế nói chung phải lấy việc phát triển nông nghiệp làm gốc, làm chính.” Cited in Nguyễn Văn Bích, *Nông Nghiệp Nông Thôn Việt Nam Sau Hai Mươi Năm Đổi Mới: Quá Khứ Và Hiện Tại* [Agriculture and the Countryside in Việt Nam Twenty Years After Đổi Mới: Past and Present] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2007), 19.

<sup>515</sup> Original quote: “Loài người ai cũng “*dĩ thực vi tiên*” (nghĩa là trước cần phải ăn); nước ta thì “*dĩ nông vi bản*” (nghĩa là nghề nông làm gốc). Dân muốn ăn no thì phải giồng giọt cho nhiều. Nước muốn giàu mạnh thì phải phát triển nông nghiệp.” Ibid., 260. See also Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập*, vol. 4, 121.

<sup>516</sup> *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam (1930-2005): A Selection of Documents from Nine Party Congresses* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2005), 789-790, original italics.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 961-2.

Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (under the Ministry of

Agriculture and Rural Development), provides the following numbers:

If in the phase of underdevelopment, agricultural production contributes to around 60-80% of GDP, average income per capita is only around 100-300 USD, rural population makes up 70-80% of total population, after the processes of industrialization and urbanization are completed, the agricultural share of total GDP will be merely 2-8%, income per capita will increase to above 10,000 USD, rural population will make up only 5-10% of total population, and the ratio of agricultural labor will reduce to 1-5% of total labor force.<sup>518</sup>

As far as government policies are concerned, agriculture is no longer the root; it represents a state of backwardness to escape from. *Nông dân* have been pushed to the margins, yet a *nông dân*-grounded imaginary, now subalternized, can still be detected from many dissenting voices, including those of eminent political and intellectual figures. An exemplar is the late General Võ Nguyên Giáp, belovedly known as “the general of the people.” He was a political leader who systematically studied peasant politics, fought war based on peasant power, and dedicated his whole life to the cause of peace and happiness of the common people. Giáp was acutely worried about rural displacement: “In reality, numerous complaints involving multitudes happen today because land is taken away from *nông dân* without solving the fundamental issue of people’s living in the long term. The matter of *nông dân* and agriculture is a very crucial revolutionary strategy that requires our Party and State to truly care adequately.”<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Đặng Kim Sơn, “Phát Triển Nông Nghiệp, Nông Thôn trong Quá Trình Công Nghiệp Hoá” [Developing Agriculture and Rural Areas in the Process of Industrialization] in *Nông Dân, Nông Thôn & Nông Nghiệp: Những Vấn Đề Đang Đặt Ra* [Peasants, the Countryside, and Agriculture: Emerging Issues] (Hà Nội: Tri Thức Publisher, 2008), 185.

<sup>519</sup> Cited in “Đại Tướng Võ Nguyên Giáp: Không Để Nông Dân Thiệt Thòi...” [General Võ Nguyên Giáp: Don’t Let *Nông Dân* Be Disadvantaged], *AGROINFO* (Information Center for Agricultural and Rural Development), July 15, 2007, [http://agro.gov.vn/vn/tID2457\\_Dai-tuong-Vo-Nguyen-Giap-Khong-de-nong-dan-thiet-thoi.html](http://agro.gov.vn/vn/tID2457_Dai-tuong-Vo-Nguyen-Giap-Khong-de-nong-dan-thiet-thoi.html).

It is important to remember that Giáp was one of the two co-authors of the seminal book on the “Peasant Question,” *Vấn Đề Dân Cày*, published in 1937.<sup>520</sup> The book documented peasants’ wretchedness under French colonialism as well as analyzed their revolutionary power. Perhaps more than anyone else, he could fathom the magnitude of the problem of massively pushing peasants off their land. *Nông dân* and agriculture for him remain at the core of revolutionary praxis in war and in peace alike. They are not diminished to a stage of history to be overcome, a historical force that was essential at one point in the nation’s past but disposable in the 21st century. Giáp further stated:

This is a very huge issue, this is the dark side of the process of industrialization, urbanization, and development in general of all nations, but I think we are not yet cognizant of the momentousness of the issue, so [we] do not yet care adequately in order to have policies and measures to solve the problem for *nông dân*. And it can be said that *we have thus wronged our fellow people* [*chúng ta có lỗi với bà con*].<sup>521</sup>

Giáp soberly pointed out that which is disavowed by modernization enthusiasts: the constitutive violence of development centered on industrial and urban growth. He thereby urged the government to think through the systemic implications for *nông dân* rather than treating them as an afterthought. His sheer warning about the momentousness of the issue should be deeply unsettling. He did not criticize policy makers only for neglect, or a recognizable and fixable mistake. He was concerned that no one had even begun to grasp the radical ramifications of restructuring. Such a grasp requires more than

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<sup>520</sup> For the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in Vietnamese, see Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Vấn Đề Dân Cày* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1959). For an English translation, see Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1974), translation and introduction by Christine Pelzer White.

<sup>521</sup> Original quote: “Đây là vấn đề lớn lắm, đây là mặt trái của quá trình CNH, đô thị hoá và phát triển nói chung của mọi quốc gia, nhưng tôi cho rằng chúng ta chưa nhận thức đúng tầm quan trọng của vấn đề, nên chưa quan tâm đúng mức để có chính sách, biện pháp giải quyết vấn đề cho nông dân. Và có thể nói như vậy là chúng ta có lỗi với bà con.” See “Đại Tướng Võ Nguyên Giáp,” my emphasis.

clear-eyed vision and analysis; it pivots on a fundamental care for fellow people (*bà con*). Speaking a shared, albeit subalternized, language of intimacy, Giáp could see not only the structural violence of rural displacement but also the *relational* violence committed against *nông dân*. He uttered, “we have thus wronged (*có lỗi*) our fellow people.” This wrong is admitted only when realized. And it is realized only when one answers, ethically and politically, to *nông dân*.

Dr. Đào Thế Tuấn (1931-2011), a pioneering researcher and practitioner in the field of agriculture in Việt Nam, provided another dissenting perspective that stood out against the hegemonic devaluation of the rural. He received many national and international honors and awards for his contributions and formerly served as Director of Việt Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences and Technology.<sup>522</sup> Tuấn voiced a scathing critique of the structural exploitation of agriculture and agri-people:

All the statements such as “*nông dân* are the revolutionary force,” “*nông dân* are the initiators of *Đổi Mới*,” “we must be grateful to *nông dân*,” “we must prioritize rational agricultural development,” I think, are to stupefy people [*mị dân*]. In reality, agriculture is being squashed, *nông dân* suffer loss in all aspects. That is the consequence of exploiting agriculture to accumulate force for industrialization. To put it another way, the poor development of the countryside and agriculture in Việt Nam now is entirely due to the mechanism, the line, and the decision of leaders.<sup>523</sup>

<sup>522</sup> Dr. Đặng Kim Sơn, former Director General of the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development, eulogized Dr. Đào Thế Tuấn as “one of the very few great oaks (*một trong những cây đại thụ ít ỏi*) in the field of agricultural sciences” in Việt Nam. For further details on the latter’s biography, see Đặng Kim Sơn, “Giáo Sư Đào Thế Tuấn - Con Người Tuyệt Đẹp” (Professor Đào Thế Tuấn – A Truly Beautiful Human Being), *Dân Trí*, January 24, 2011, <http://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-khuyen-hoc/giao-su-dao-the-tuan-con-nguoi-tuyet-dep-1296128934.htm>.

<sup>523</sup> Original quote: “Tất cả những câu “nông dân là lực lượng cách mạng”, “nông dân là những người khởi xướng *Đổi mới*”, “phải biết ơn nông dân”, “phải ưu tiên phát triển hợp lý nông nghiệp”, tôi cho đều là mị dân cả. Trên thực tế, nông nghiệp đang bị lép vế, nông dân thua thiệt đủ bề. Đó là hậu quả của việc bóc lột nông nghiệp để dồn lực cho công nghiệp hóa. Tôi nói cách khác, việc nông thôn, nông nghiệp Việt Nam bây giờ kém phát triển hoàn toàn là do cơ chế, do đường lối, quyết định của lãnh đạo mà thôi.” See “GS.VS. Đào Thế Tuấn nói về nỗi khổ của nông dân” (Professor Đào Thế Tuấn Speaks about Peasants’ Misery), *Vietnamnet*, July 2, 2009, <https://baomoi.com/gs-vs-dao-the-tuan-noi-ve-noi-kho-cua-nong-dan/c/5595556.epi>.



Like Giáp, albeit more bluntly, Tuấn pointed out the restructuring violence of industrial modernization. This program has sunk peasants into misery despite a national rhetoric that elevates them. Beyond conspicuous events of land dispossession, it has, over time, rendered life in the countryside increasingly unliveable by devaluing agriculture and inflicting on *nông dân* “loss in all aspects.” What Tuấn described as “wringing every last drop”<sup>524</sup> out of the rural (*vắt kiệt*) somewhat echoes what Gayatri Spivak, in her theorization of globalization, calls “the spectralization of the rural”<sup>525</sup> and what Yan Hairong, in her investigation of post-Mao modernity in China, calls “the emaciation of the rural.”<sup>526</sup>

If peasants are understood to play a key part in the stability of the country, their displacement, it is anticipated, would unleash unknowable instability. Tuấn warned, “*Nông dân* are being pauperized, and that poses the danger of social unrest. Like in China today, riots in the countryside take place numerously, that’s the consequence of the pauperization of *nông dân*.”<sup>527</sup> More foundationally, peasants are inseparable from the alternative paradigm of agricultural development, and of development in general, that Tuấn articulated. His view is similar to Hồ’s: agriculture is the root because survival is not possible without it. “*Không là chết*” (without it one would die) - it is that basic:

I do not agree with the way it is said that “[we] develop agriculture because we have advantage in agriculture,” “because we have the conditions to develop agriculture.”

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of A Discipline* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 92.

<sup>526</sup> By analyzing how the rural-urban relationship comparatively figured in Mao-era and post-Mao modernization projects and how this shift has shaped the “troubled process of subject formation for rural youth,” Hairong demonstrates that “[e]mbedded in the post-Mao culture of modernity is an epistemic violence against the countryside that devalorizes the rural in both material and symbolic practices.” See Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants*, chapter 1.

<sup>527</sup> See “GS.VS. Đào Thế Tuấn nói về nỗi khổ của nông dân.”

Agriculture is a field we must maintain and develop, not because of any competitive advantage, but because agricultural development is what one must do, or one would die, that's all.<sup>528</sup>

As simple or obvious as this reasoning may sound, it opposes the hegemonic devaluation of the rural that undergirds modernization. Whereas “*khinh nông trọng công*”<sup>529</sup> (depreciate agriculture, value industry) has come to be economic common sense, Tuấn put agriculture first and valued it independently of market imperative.<sup>530</sup> Because agriculture is vital in itself, not because of any competitive advantage, agri-culture, agri-people, and agri-countryside (*nông nghiệp, nông dân, nông thôn*) must be thought together in a way that strengthens all three. Just as a nation cannot be without agriculture, it is taken for granted that agriculture is not without peasants. Tuấn made clear, “the right path is not to eliminate peasant household economy and develop large farms, but rather, to organize new-style cooperatives.”<sup>531</sup>

In demanding that state and Party leaders be accountable to *nông dân* and value rather than depreciate agriculture, he advocated another path of development in which sustainability means the equal – as opposed to hierarchical – sustenance of the rural and the urban. This path requires a drastic change in “the mechanism, the line, and the

<sup>528</sup> Ibid. Original quote: “Tôi không đồng ý với cách nói “phát triển nông nghiệp vì chúng ta có lợi thế về nông nghiệp”, “vì chúng ta có điều kiện phát triển nông nghiệp”. Nông nghiệp là ngành mà chúng ta phải duy trì và phát triển, không phải vì lợi thế cạnh tranh nào cả, mà vì phát triển nông nghiệp là chuyện bắt buộc phải làm, không là chết, vậy thôi.”

<sup>529</sup> *Khinh nông* (depreciate agriculture) carries the connotations of both disparagement and contempt. The phrase is used by Mr. Lê Quang Bình, Director of The Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment, in his discussion of the impact of industrialization on peasants in Việt Nam. See Lê Quang Bình, “Bánh Xe Công Nghiệp “Đè Nặng” Nông Dân?” (Industrial Wheels Crushing *Nông Dân*?), *Vietnamnet*, August 30, 2013, <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/banh-xe-cong-nghiep-de-nang-nong-dan-137553.html>.

<sup>530</sup> This understanding of the foundational importance of agriculture, as opposed to a market-oriented approach to agriculture, echoes widely. When former Brazilian President Cardoso said that agriculture had to submit to the law of the market, a food co-op member replied: “Very well, Mr. President. When Brazil no longer needs food, then you can let agriculture go bankrupt.” See Katharine Ainger, “The New Peasants’ Revolt,” *New Internationalist*, January 2, 2003, <https://newint.org/features/2003/01/01/keynote/>.

<sup>531</sup> See “GS.VS. Đào Thế Tuấn nói về nỗi khổ của nông dân.”

decision of leaders” since it counters the process of restructuring that has emaciated the rural to fatten the urban. Tuấn maintained, “In our country, agricultural development is intimately linked to the sustainability of development. If the gap between the urban and the rural ever increases, with excessive social disparity, then even high growth cannot be regarded as development.”<sup>532</sup>

Of course, peasants themselves who directly bear the brunt of the national project of industrialization and modernization are most vocal about their displacement. In the international media, reports about land dispossession in Việt Nam tend to focus on the problems of the absence of private ownership of land, government corruption, police brutality, and human rights violations. All these problems are often attributed to the one-party regime and revolve around the occurrence of dispossession. However, peasants’ critiques point to larger processes that are not limited to a regime type or particular incidents of land seizure. They question the state’s trajectory of development that has privileged industrial and urban growth at the deadly expense of agriculture and the countryside. “*Nông dân* suffer so much they cry ‘*Công phá Nông*’ (Industry destroys Agriculture).”<sup>533</sup> In a letter of commiseration with fellow displaced peasants, one asks: “What are the state’s guiding principles and policies based on? What is the measurement for a ‘fair, democratic, and civilized society’ [a longtime state slogan]? When [they]

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<sup>532</sup> Đào Thế Tuấn, “Nông nghiệp, nông dân, nông thôn - những vấn đề không thể thiếu trong phát triển bền vững” (Agriculture, *Nông Dân*, the Countryside – Questions Indispensable to Sustainable Development), *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản* (Communist Review) (September 2008), <http://dangcongsan.vn/tu-lieu-van-kien/tu-lieu-ve-dang/gioi-thieu-van-kien-dang/books-2928201510064846/index-09282015959574658.html>.

<sup>533</sup> Original quote: “Người nông dân khổ quá kêu lên là “*Công phá Nông*”.” See Mai Xuân Dũng, “Vấn đề dân cày – Chưa bao giờ nóng bỏng như hiện nay” (The Peasant Question Has Never Been Burning like Now), *Bauxit Việt Nam*, August 18, 2010, <https://boxitvn.wordpress.com/2010/08/18/v%E1%BA%A5n-%D%E1%BB%81-dn-cy-ch%C6%B0a-bao-gi%E1%BB%9D-nng-b%E1%BB%8Fng-nh%C6%B0-hi%E1%BB%87n-nay/>.

callously shove us *Nông Dân* down the sewer of the urbanization project? Fair?

Democratic? Civilized? Alas, how bitter we *Nông Dân* feel.”<sup>534</sup>

Peasants are cognizant of the slow violence of displacement as they suffer its manifold forms. While this process crystallizes in the event of forcible land seizure, peasants more than anybody else know that political programs and policies have paved the way for such eventuality long before the actual event. Displacement and disposability do not happen overnight. They are also not happening for the first time. What is going on in the present is reminiscent of a collective past still fresh in memory. The following comment from a peasant villager in Dương Nội is telling:

The elders in the commune who have lived through several regimes and underwent the historic famine of 1945 know that the reason for the famine of 1945 was the fascist policy that militarist Japan applied to exterminate our people’s way of living. Rice paddies were luxuriant green in the fields when they forced [us] to uproot them to grow jute and castor oil plants. As a result, *they did not have to waste a bullet to directly shoot our people but they indirectly killed more than two million Vietnamese people*. Now the people fear that the policies that roll out the red carpet for businesses to urbanize Hà Tây province will push the people into the condition of pauperization and unemployment. Because after losing land, the people would not know what to do to sustain their lives. (...) Now we go to the market of humans [*chợ người*] and see that there are multitudes of *nông dân*, multitudes of people sitting there – ask them and they would surely say we have lost land and are unemployed – multitudes...<sup>535</sup>

<sup>534</sup> Original quote: “Chủ trương, chính sách của nhà nước dựa vào đâu? Lấy thước đo gì trong bối cảnh xã hội công bằng dân chủ văn minh? khi mà nhấn tâm gạt Nông Dân chúng tôi xuống cống rãnh của công cuộc đô thị hóa? Công bằng ư? Dân chủ ư? Văn minh ư? Sao Nông Dân chúng tôi thấy chua cay quá ông trời ơi.” See “Những Lá Thư Đắm Nước Mắt” (Letters Drenched in Tears), *Que Choa* (blog), April 25, 2012, <http://quechoablog.wordpress.com/2012/04/25/những-la-thur-dắm-nước-mắt/>.

<sup>535</sup> Original quote: “Thì các bậc cao niên trong xã sống qua mấy chế độ đã trải qua trận đói lịch sử năm 45 biết được rằng nguyên nhân dẫn đến nạn đói năm 45 là do các chính sách phát xít của quân phiệt Nhật áp dụng nhằm triệt đường sống của nhân dân ta. Lúa đang xanh tốt ở ngoài đồng chúng bắt nhô đi để trồng đay trồng thầu dầu. Kết quả chúng không phải tốn một viên đạn nào để trực tiếp bắn giết nhân dân ta nhưng chúng cũng đã gián tiếp giết chết được hơn 2 triệu nhân dân Việt Nam. Đến nay nhân dân lo sợ vì các chính sách trải thảm đón các doanh nghiệp vào đô thị hóa của tỉnh Hà Tây sẽ đẩy nhân dân vào cảnh bần cùng hóa, thất nghiệp hóa. Vì sau khi mất hết đất đai, nhân dân không biết làm gì để duy trì cuộc sống... Giờ chúng ta cứ ra các chợ người mà xem, rất nhiều nông dân, rất nhiều người ngồi cứ hỏi thế nào cũng bảo là chúng tôi bị mất đất thất nghiệp, nhiều lắm...” See Mua Xuan, “P1-2 Cường chế thôn La Dương - Dương Nội HN2 ngày 9-3-2010,” YouTube Video, 22:33, January 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu9cick1p6k&t=280s>, my emphasis.

Again, we hear the familiar vocabulary of pauperization and a lucid understanding of the violent impact of restructuring on peasants. The previous remark speaks of how peasants are rendered superfluous and disposable through the analogy of being shoved down “the sewer of the urbanization project.” In this speech, the word *chợ người* conjures the image of a market where humans are bought and sold. For villagers, rural displacement results in servitude as multitudes of self-sustaining cultivators are turned into a market of humans for sale.<sup>536</sup> More strikingly, the peasant recalls how the Japanese policy caused famine in pre-independence 1945. This is not to equate the current government with the fascist occupation in a facile manner. On the contrary, the connection the peasant draws is startling precisely because the two are supposed to stand in contrast. That connection lies in the necropolitics of indirectly killing millions without directly shooting them.<sup>537</sup> Some 70 years after formal independence was declared and 40 years after the war ended, rural displacement is that indirect killing. Just as the Japanese policy forced peasants to uproot rice in order to industrially grow jute and castor oil plants, the contemporary uprooting of peasant cultivation for industrialization and modernization is, for *nông dân*, nothing short of exterminating a way of living.

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<sup>536</sup> The anticipation of servitude is expressed by another peasant in Văn Giang: “We villagers are determined to keep land to the bitter end, or we would be beggars!” (*Bà con quyết giữ đất đến cùng, chứ không còn thì phải đi ăn mày!*). Cited in Gia Minh, “Thành quả bước đầu của dân oan Dương Nội” (Initial Accomplishment of *Dân Oan* in Dương Nội), *Radio Free Asia*, June 19, 2013, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/encour-preli-vic-lan-kep-06192013073726.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/encour-preli-vic-lan-kep-06192013073726.html).

<sup>537</sup> In his influential essay, Achille Mbembe uses the concept of necropolitics to discuss sovereignty and “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death.” He raises a series of questions, including the following: “under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right?” The focus of his essay, unlike my brief reference to necropolitics here, is on experiences of human destruction and the “creation of death-worlds” such as colonial occupation and contemporary wars. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003); 11-40.

Peasants' analytical and affective critiques of displacement, I suggest, emerge from a *nông dân*-grounded imaginary that has been grossly violated. We can detect enunciative and demonstrative clues of this subaltern imaginary in expressions of agrarian dissensus. They are sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit. Here is an instance recounted by a peasant villager in Dương Nội:

When the land seizure happened in Section 8, Ms. Khả kept clasping her hands praying to Uncle Hồ, she kept saying, “Oh Uncle Hồ, from your resting place in the golden stream, please protect us, since you passed away we are miserable, this way we are going to lose the country Uncle Hồ... this gang came to rob all our land, [we've] lost all the land Uncle Hồ.”<sup>538</sup>

The peasant's prayer to Uncle Hồ, on the surface, appears to have the same meaning with the framed pictures of the founding father that frequently accompany rural protests. And yet it is more intriguing. While the use of the pictures could be read as a tactic of “rightful resistance”<sup>539</sup> which relies on a powerful symbol of authority to apply pressure on the state, the prayer is intimate. What collective politics did Hồ embody such that Ms. Khả prayed to him for protection from displacement? If she attributed peasant misery today to the absence of his leadership, what alternative agrarian life was envisioned and materialized during his lifetime? And why was she saying, “we are going to lose the country Uncle Hồ”?

Lamenting an imminent loss of the country in the context of rural land expropriation may seem overly dramatic or simply bewildering. It would have made more apparent sense if the expropriated land was given to a foreign corporation. Yet, a

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<sup>538</sup> Mua Xuan, “P1-2 Cũng ché thôn La Dương - Dương Nội.”

<sup>539</sup> In their study of contentious politics in rural China, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li define rightful resistance as “a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public.” See O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 2.

Vietnamese company benefited in this case, so how did Ms. Khả link the loss of peasants' land to the loss of the country? This linkage is intelligible only within an imaginary in which agriculture and agri-people are taken to be "the root" of the nation. It is the same imaginary in which former Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải underscored the importance of rural stability and *nông dân*'s happiness in response to peasants' unrest in Thái Bình province in 1997: "If rural areas remain stable and farmers are happy with their livelihood, our country will be able to ensure stability however serious the difficulties. Therefore, rural stability is the key to national security."<sup>540</sup>

#### 6.4. Peasant power and happiness

The fourth aspect of *nông dân*-grounded politics can be traced back to the Vietnamese revolution and its ideological articulation of peasant power and peasant happiness. In 1946, Trường Chinh, then Vice-Premier of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV), wrote *The August Revolution* on the first anniversary of national independence. In it, he made clear that the agrarian revolution was essential to the Vietnamese democratic revolution and that "the question of the people's happiness is basically one of giving land to the peasants."<sup>541</sup> Recommending that the Vietnamese revolution "must progress further to realize land reform and wipe out all vestiges of

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<sup>540</sup> Largo, *Vietnam*, 6. We can find in China a similar articulation that links peasants' land to peace and security for the countryside and for the entire nation. For instance, such articulation shaped the reclamation of land by 40,000 peasants in Changchunling village, Heilongjiang province. In their letter to the nation, they announced their plan to take back 150 mu (24,705 acres) of collective land which had been seized by local officials and to distribute it equally among the peasants in 72 villages. The letter, entitled "40,000 Peasants from 72 Villages in Funjin City, Heilongjiang, Declare Their Ownership of Land to the Entire Nation," stated, "Land is the lifeline of the peasantry, it is the peasants' greatest human right. Only when we have obtained true ownership of the land can we live in peace and security, can the Chinese countryside live in peace and security, can the entire country live in peace and security." See Eva Pils, "Contending Conceptions of Ownership in Urbanizing China," in *Resolving Land Disputes in East Asia*, 163.

<sup>541</sup> Trường Chinh, *The August Revolution* (Hà Nội: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1958), 56.

feudalism,” he stressed that it “must fulfil both the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal tasks to realize independence, freedom, and happiness for the people.”<sup>542</sup> A decade earlier, Trường Chinh had already co-authored with Võ Nguyên Giáp the seminal *Vấn Đề Dân Cày* (The Peasant Question) in which they concluded, “The key to the Indochinese peasant problem is to give the peasant land to till.”<sup>543</sup> These documents were among the key texts written by prominent political leaders and theoreticians, which put forth the ideological basis for the DRV’s socio-economic policies and agrarian reforms in particular in the decade after formal independence.

In as early as 1940, the Communist Party included in its revolutionary program priorities such as the confiscation of lands and properties belonging to French colonialists and Vietnamese “traitors” to redistribute to landless peasants and the poor, the abolition of colonial taxation and forced labor, the reduction of land rent and interest rates, the establishment of a national fund for disaster and flood prevention, etc.<sup>544</sup> From 1945 to 1956, the DRV carried out agrarian reforms which were gradually more and more radical in terms of abolishing the colonial land system and feudal arrangements, redistributing land and wealth, redividing communal land, reducing rent and interest rates, cancelling debts and obligations imposed on peasants before 1945, and developing cooperative agriculture.<sup>545</sup> Under the leadership of Việt Minh (the united front for national

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938*, 12.

<sup>544</sup> Nguyễn Văn Bích, *Nông Nghiệp Nông Thôn Việt Nam*, 42-43.

<sup>545</sup> For a study of the DRV’s agrarian policies in different stages in the period from 1945 to 1953, see Alex-Thái Đình Võ, “Agrarian Policies in North Vietnam during the Resistance War, 1945-1953” (Master thesis, Cornell University, 2010). Much scholarship in English tends to focus on the significance of the land reform campaign carried out by the DRV from 1953 to 1956. However, this narrow focus fails to situate the campaign in the longer-term process of agrarian reforms which began much earlier. Regarding land redistribution alone, Edwin Moise notes that out of an estimated 518,000 hectares redistributed by the DRV between 1945 and 1956, 73 per cent were redistributed before the beginning of land reform. See Edwin



independence founded by Hồ Chí Minh), “approximately one-quarter of cultivated land in Cochinchina and northern Việt Nam had been redistributed to peasants” by the end of the French colonial rule in 1954.<sup>546</sup> This achievement is significant in itself. Yet it stands out more starkly when we consider the severe land concentration under the French occupation: “By the 1920s and 1930s over half of the peasants in Tonkin and Annam [northern and central Việt Nam] were completely landless, and 90 percent of those who owned any land owned next to nothing”; landlessness was worse in Cochinchina (southern Việt Nam), with the numbers being about 75% and 80% respectively.<sup>547</sup> After the country was reunified in 1975, the communist government outlawed tenancy in the south as it had done in the north and continued to equalize land distribution through the 1980s.<sup>548</sup>

It was in this ideological and institutional context that peasants occupied the center of national and democratic politics. Although the state’s ideology and policies have shifted with economic restructuring, the political subjectivity molded during the revolution continues to enliven agrarian dissensus today. Contemporary peasants’ protests in the villages and demonstrations in the cities are filled with banners such as “*trả lại đất cho dân*” (return land to the people) and “*nông dân phải có ruộng cấy*”

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Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 162-3. For a study that situates land reform within broader agrarian transformation in Việt Nam, see Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Mark Selden, “Agrarian Transformation in China and Vietnam,” *The China Journal* 40 (July 1998): 37-58. Instead of laying sole stress on the role of the political leadership, Kerkvliet and Selden note that in the later phases of land reform, “Vietnamese and Chinese village activists pressed ahead with land seizures and redistribution, often in advance of Party directives.”

<sup>546</sup> Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, “Agricultural Land in Vietnam: Markets Tempered by Family, Community and Socialist Practices,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 6:3 (2006), 285-286.

<sup>547</sup> Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution* (Volume 1: The French Colonial Period) (Vietnam Resource Center, 1974), 26. For a detailed study of the conditions of Vietnamese peasants under French colonialism, see Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>548</sup> Kerkvliet, “Agricultural Land in Vietnam,” 286.

(peasants must have farmland to till). Having participated in Việt Minh at the age of 13, Ms. Lê Hiền Đức, now 86 years old, has vocally criticized the systemic displacement of peasants as *phản cách mạng* (counter-revolutionary):

If before, [the process in which] the Communist Party used slogans such as “Land to the Tiller” to appeal to and draw numerous *nông dân* into the struggle to overthrow colonialism and feudalism was considered revolutionary, then today, the forced seizure and plunder of the fertile fields dear to *nông dân* [*bờ xôi ruộng mật*] to give them to fat cats [*đại gia*] cannot be called by any name other than “counter-revolutionary.” In other words, the revolution in which our generation took part 60-70 years ago has been betrayed flagrantly and totally. State ownership, people’s ownership is merely a trick to denationalize, to privatize ownership, to turn that which is common into that which is privately owned.<sup>549</sup>

It is indeed not uncommon for Vietnamese, especially those belonging to the generations that participated in the revolution and resistance wars, to agonize over injustices under the current regime and regard them as an egregious betrayal of what they fought for. What is noteworthy here is that it is specifically violence against *nông dân* that constitutes an indefensible wrong. Rural dispossession is not easily justified as a necessary step of development when there is an existing imaginary that ties the being-well of the nation to the living-well of peasants. Ms. Đức reminds the government of this tie:

Until now almost my entire life I have fought for the living-well [*ám no*] of the people, for *nông dân* to have farmland. (...) The fields are like the bone and blood of *nông dân*. With all their land grabbed are they supposed to grow rice under the

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<sup>549</sup> Original quote: “Nếu như trước kia, việc Đảng cộng sản dùng những câu “Ruộng đất về tay dân cày”, “Người cày có ruộng” để phát cờ hiệu triệu, lôi kéo đông đảo nông dân tham gia cuộc đấu tranh đánh đổ thực dân, phong kiến được coi là cách mạng thì ngày nay, việc cưỡng chế, ăn cướp bờ xôi ruộng mật của nông dân để trao vào tay các đại gia không thể gọi bằng cái tên nào khác ngoài “phản cách mạng”. Nói cách khác, cuộc cách mạng mà lớp người chúng tôi đã tham gia 60-70 năm trước nay đã bị phản bội một cách trắng trợn, triệt để. Công hữu, sở hữu toàn dân chỉ là chiêu bài để tư hữu hoá, tư nhân hoá, biến của chung thành của riêng.” See Lê Hiền Đức, “Phản Cách Mạng Đã Rõ Ràng!” (The Betrayal of the Revolution is Clear!), *Lê Hiền Đức* (blog), May 3, 2012, available at <https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/05/le-hien-uc-phan-cach-mang-ro-rang.html>.

bed? (...) I am in great anguish. I love them and place all my trust in their power. They will seek justice.<sup>550</sup>

Her rhetorical question about peasants growing rice under the bed expresses the inconceivability of the idea of severing peasants from their land. Hers is an incredulousness steeped in anguish. Yet anguish is not paralysis. It would be a mistake to read popular disillusionment with the current government as simply cynicism or defeatism. Ms. Đức herself has tirelessly fought against corruption since her retirement in 1984. Even into her late 80s, she is often found either side by side with wronged peasants supporting their struggles or knocking on government offices demanding answerability. Despite the intimidation, injury, and death threats she has received, her energy has not waned. Ms. Đức is only one among numerous Vietnamese who do not give up on the political ideals they fought for even if the state leadership has abandoned them.

Far from being outdated, a *nông dân*-grounded politics continues to be a breathing conviction for many. Let us note from Ms. Đức's speech that it is anchored in not only the well-being of *nông dân* but also their power. It is difficult to underestimate peasant power when a revolution has been carried out on its basis. Hồ Chí Minh's political thought and activism played a significant part in placing peasant power at the center of the Vietnamese revolution, although one should be careful not to overstate the agency of any single individual in such a mass mobilization. With a global outlook, Hồ was concerned with peasant politics and its crucial role in decolonization from the early years of his political engagement in exile. His commitment to the liberation of peasant-majority

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<sup>550</sup> Original quote: “Cho đến bây giờ gần như cả cuộc đời tôi chiến đấu đem lại ấm no cho người dân, cho nông dân có ruộng cày. (...) Đồng ruộng như xương máu của người nông dân. Lấy hết đất của họ thì họ trồng lúa vào gầm giường à? (...) Tôi đau xót lắm. Tôi thương họ và đặt tất cả niềm tin vào sức mạnh của họ. Họ sẽ đi tìm công lý.” The audio interview is available at Quỳnh Chi, “Đừng chĩa súng vào dân!” (Don't Point Gun at the People!).

colonies marked a clear departure from metropolitan communists.<sup>551</sup> If the latter were passionate about the world-transforming power of the proletariat with mainly the European working class in mind, Hồ had to think about the world-transforming power of peasants in the colonies. Even at the first congress of the Peasant International organized by the Comintern in 1923, he again confronted a limited conception of the international and had to foreground the importance of colonized peasants in world politics:

“Comrades, to conclude, I must remind you again that your International only becomes a true International when not only peasants in the West but also peasants in the East, especially peasants in the colonies who are exploited and oppressed a lot worse than you comrades are, join your International.”<sup>552</sup>

From international theory to place-based practice, Hồ insisted that peasants were “the largest revolutionary force against feudalism and against imperialism.”<sup>553</sup> In Việt Nam, this conception of peasant power was actualized through egalitarian socio-economic re-organization and radical mobilization for the resistance war in the countryside. Since the early 1940s, Việt Minh built grassroots bases and broad alliances in rural areas through mass associations for the cause of national salvation (*hội cứu quốc*). As peasants, women, and youth actively joined in political activities and major long-term reforms were instituted, traditional village relations and institutions were

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<sup>551</sup> As a colonized person politically active in the 1920s, Hồ frequently criticized metropolitan contempt for and ignorance of colonized peoples, which was prevalent among progressives also. In an article on “Some Considerations on the Colonial Questions” printed in *l’Humanité* on May 25, 1922, he included a section on “The Indifference of the Proletariat of the Mother Country toward the Colonies” and wrote: “Unfortunately, there are many militants who still think that a colony is nothing but a country with plenty of sand underfoot and of sun overhead, a few green coconut palms and colored folk, that is all. And they take not the slightest interest in the matter.” See Bernard B. Fall, ed., *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66* (Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1968), 26. At the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924, Hồ maintained: “I come here to continually draw the Comintern’s attention to a truth: Colonies are still existing.” See Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập*, vol. 1, 273.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 212.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 7, 15.

changed.<sup>554</sup>

As discussed above, agrarian reforms were critical in providing peasants with a sustainable basis for their revolutionary strength. More than beneficiaries of these reforms, peasants were protagonists in a different script of restructuring society. As the resolution of the 4<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the Party Central Committee announced in 1953, “Ideologically and organizationally, we must destroy the political prestige of the feudal landlords and secure political supremacy for the working peasantry in the countryside.”<sup>555</sup> During the mass mobilization for the land reform program, Party cadres were embedded in village-communes following the strategy of “*ba cùng*” (three together): *cùng ăn* (eat together), *cùng ở* (live together), and *cùng làm* (work together) with the poorest peasant families.<sup>556</sup> Poor and landless peasants were also organized as *cốt cán* (backbone elements) of the Party who took on leadership roles in the villages. When the Party shifted its policy from a rhetoric of national unity to one of class struggle in the early 1950s, class background became a decisive criterion in recruitment. Village-level government was “reformed to include a majority of poor and landless peasants” while landlords were expelled.<sup>557</sup> According to Tuong Vu’s study of the revolutionary path to state formation in Việt Nam, this effectively “destroyed much of what remained of the

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<sup>554</sup> See Hy V. Luong, *Tradition, Revolution, and Market Economy in a North Vietnamese Village, 1925-2006* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), chap. 4.

<sup>555</sup> The translated quote is from Christine White, “Peasant Mobilization and Anti-Colonial Struggle in Vietnam: The Rent Reduction Campaign of 1953,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 10:4 (1983), 191-192. The original source is Tran Phuong, ed., *Cách Mạng Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [The Agrarian Revolution in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1968), 96.

<sup>556</sup> See Christine White, “Peasant Mobilization and Anti-Colonial Struggle in Vietnam.” See also Alex-Thái Đình Võ, “Agrarian Policies,” chap. 4.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 202. See also Luong, *Tradition, Revolution, and Market*, chap. 4.

colonial state” with new government units usually led by poor peasants.<sup>558</sup> Vu further notes the ascendancy of peasants in the military when the People’s Army of Việt Nam, on the recommendation of Chinese advisors in the 1950s, bolstered its revolutionary character by “removing commanders of upper-class backgrounds (...) and promoting men of poor peasant roots.”<sup>559</sup>

As crucial as the roles of political leaders and the Party were, the materialization of peasant power during the revolution was not simply a top-down process rigidly imposed on Vietnamese villages. Rather, it resulted from a complex process of ideological articulation and political mobilization that interpellated different sectors of the society. Given that peasant power was integral to the revolution, transformative in the lives of the majority, and institutionalized in state structures, it undoubtedly constitutes a profound dimension of the *nông dân*-grounded politics that shapes contemporary agrarian dissensus. It is also intimately connected to what I call a *dân*-grounded politics, the subject of the next section.

### **7. A *dân*-grounded politics:**

I argue that there exists a subaltern order of political community and just relations in Việt Nam which is based on taking both *nông dân* (agri-people) and *dân* (common people) to be the root (*làm gốc*) of the collective. Here I tentatively identify two modes in which *dân* affirm themselves as necessary co-authors of the common. One is the insistence on dialogical governance wherein dialogue with *dân* is continual, relationally

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<sup>558</sup> Tuong Vu, “The Revolutionary Path to State Formation in Vietnam: Opportunities, Conundrums, and Legacies,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11:3-4 (2016), 282.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

textured, and patiently open-ended. The other is the exercise of just revolt as a last resort in the face of unjust governance. Both modes of engagement are pronounced in the staging of agrarian dissensus. These two modes are not mutually exclusive but co-present. In other words, there is an ever-present possibility of just revolt if the government fails to listen to *dân* over and over again. And even as militant resistance begins, *dân* continues to invite the government to the long overdue dialogue before the conflict intensifies further.

### 7.1. Dialogical governance

In the context of rural displacement, one of the wrongs which peasants and their supporters repeatedly charge the government with is the failure to listen to *dân*. What appears to be a gentle reproach is a rebuke of a grave violation. Not listening to *dân* equals disregarding *dân*. It negates the very condition for dialogue and what governance is about. Thus, commenting on the violent land seizures in Văn Giang and Tiên Lãng, a blogger asks the government not to “dialogue” with *dân* while turning its back on them (*đừng đối thoại theo kiểu quay lưng với nhân dân*): “Meeting with *dân* to resolve their complaints and accusations has not been effective because state cadres often dialogue with their back on *dân*. The government always claims that it is right while considering *dân* obstinate, extremist, ignorant, viewing *dân* with cold-hearted eyes, even considering *dân* enemies.”<sup>560</sup> A government that considers its people obstinate, extremist, and ignorant enemies can be called by other names. It can be called authoritarian, repressive,

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<sup>560</sup> Bùi Công Tự, “Đừng Đối Thoại Theo Kiểu Quay Lưng Với Nhân Dân” (Do Not Dialogue with Your Back on the People), *Xuân Điện Hán Nôm* (blog), May 4, 2012, <http://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/05/bui-cong-tu-ung-oi-toai-theo-kieu-quay.html>.

or tyrannical. In what discursive context, then, is the ironic, seemingly mild description of “dialoguing with its back on *dân*” a potent indictment? What alternative form of governance do *dân* ask the government to live up to when they call for genuine dialogue?

As the government performs a unilateral kind of “dialogue” to legitimize the violent seizure of land, peasants are quick to expose pretend dialogue and, more generally, the structural conditions that make dialogue impossible. For them, there can be no dialogue when the government already fixes the participants and agenda in advance. Ms. Kiệt from Xuân Quang commune, Văn Giang district, refutes the government’s claim of dialogue when an official meeting is set up with a predetermined program and restricted participants, “The project involves 3 communes but they invited only 166 households here for coercion. Coming in they announced the agenda; we *dân* objected because the constituents were not right.”<sup>561</sup> Peasants who face forced eviction see through the state’s exercise of coercion and strategy of divide and rule. Ms. Thịnh from the neighboring commune Phụng Công adds, “The project involves 3 communes and they concentrate on one commune, they want to split [us]. They split a bundle of chopsticks in order to bend them more easily; *dân* do not agree. The dialogue today is not dialogue-able.”<sup>562</sup>

Rather than invitees to government-held meetings, peasants, as *dân*, demand to be equal part-takers in establishing the terms of the dialogue. This entails more than

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<sup>561</sup> Original quote: “Dự án là của 3 xã mà họ chỉ mời có 166 hộ tới đây cưỡng chế. Khi bước vào thì họ tuyên bố chương trình làm việc, dân chúng tôi phản đối vì thành phần không đúng.” See Việt Hà, “Đối Thoại Giữa Chính Phủ và Người Dân Văn Giang Bất Thành” (Dialogue Between Government and Văn Giang People Fails), *Radio Free Asia*, April 12, 2012, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/dialo-btw-gov-n-vangia-farm-fail-04122012060053.html?fb\\_action\\_ids=361683907294562&fb\\_action\\_types=og.recommends](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/dialo-btw-gov-n-vangia-farm-fail-04122012060053.html?fb_action_ids=361683907294562&fb_action_types=og.recommends).

<sup>562</sup> Original quote: “Dự án này là của 3 xã nó tập trung vào một xã, nó muốn bóc tách ra. Một bó đũa nó tách ra để nắm cho nó dễ, dân không đồng ý. Cuộc đàm thoại hôm nay coi như là không thể đàm thoại được.” Ibid.



determining who and what would be part of the discussion for a particular meeting. *Dân* also raise fundamental questions about the common, and dispute matters that state policies have made indisputable. One such matter, especially for *nông dân*, is displacement for development. Many peasants make clear to state officials that no dialogue can take place between a state bent on seizing land for development projects that benefit a few and *dân* intent on defending *đất* inherited and inhabited for generations. In a meeting about a land dispute in Từ Liêm district, when a state official tells a villager that he has spoken too much without focusing on the contents of the day, the latter replies plainly, “I am not complying with your meeting. Your goal is to rob [us of our] land and our goal is to not let you rob [us].”<sup>563</sup> It is not so much the coercive conduct of state agents as the structural violence of displacement that villagers contest. In this case, the villager delegitimizes rural displacement by calling it, in another comment, “systematic robbery” (*cướp có hệ thống*). Another villager finds the meeting not dialogue-able when the point of departure for the state is compensation instead of listening to *dân*’s viewpoints and concerns:

My wish is this: I have lived on this land for a very long time. (...) I want to keep this land my parents gave me. (...) Even if billionaires come here, I won’t move. Unless [someone] shoots me. For the equality of all I would move. That’s all, such is my view. Don’t talk compensation with me now. That’s all, excuse me I am leaving. In this meeting here today I would like to express this view: I do not agree to be relocated.<sup>564</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Original quote: “Tôi không nghe theo họp các anh. Mục đích của các anh là cướp đất. Còn mục đích của chúng tôi là không để cho các anh cướp.” Hoàng Dũng, “Các anh nghỉ đi. Tôi là dân. Tôi đuổi các anh đó!”, YouTube Video, 10:01, June 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBJw24FZ2y8&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>564</sup> Original quote: “Nguyện vọng của tôi này: Tôi đã sống ở mảnh đất này rất lâu. (...) Tôi muốn là mảnh đất này cha mẹ đã trao cho tôi tôi giữ lại (...) Còn kể cả người tiền tỷ mà xuống đây tôi cũng không đi. Chỉ trừ khi bắn tôi. Vì sự bình đẳng cho tất cả tôi sẽ đi. Thế thôi, tôi chỉ có ý kiến thế thôi. Đừng nói chuyện đền bù đất đai với tôi bây giờ. Thế thôi, xin phép coi như là tôi xin phép về. Cuộc họp này ở đây hôm nay tôi xin được diễn đạt ý kiến này: Tôi không đồng ý di dời.” Long huynhxuan, “Dân “gian” phải dạy, quan

Confronting the façade of the government-staged dialogue, these villagers refuse to obey the script of development set for them, that is, to be displaced with compensation at best. More than being disobedient, they also express other understandings of and commitments to the common. For instance, as adamant as the above villager is about holding onto the land his parents gave him, there is actually one collective condition under which he would consider letting it go: “For the equality of all I would move” (*Vì sự bình đẳng cho tất cả tôi sẽ đi*). He would be willing to make sacrifices for an egalitarian common, not for a project of national development that privileges billionaires over commoners.

Apart from the principle of the equality of all, *dân* also insist on the principle of continuous dialogical engagement in constructing the common. How shall a dialogue take place when there are incommensurable desires such as land expropriation for development on the one hand and villagers’ determination to keep their inherited land on the other hand? A peasant from Dương Nội expresses it best when he rejects the restrictions that the government wants to impose on dialogue: “Only if 20 of us can come in [the meeting room] would we come in. And to dialogue, there must be no deadline, no time limit.”<sup>565</sup> It is not dialogue as an event, but dialogue as a sustained relation that *dân* want. For everyone involved to really listen to one another, to be open to being led elsewhere, and to be able to collectively question and deliberate over anything and everything, there must be no deadline for the unfolding conversation. Dispensing with

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“tham” phải trị,” YouTube Video, 10:53, December 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGHQoxoDwTY>.

<sup>565</sup> Original quote: “Mà chúng tôi vào là phải được 20 người vào thì chúng tôi mới vào. Mà đã đối thoại là phải không thời hạn, giới hạn thời gian.” Mua Xuan, “Dương Nội đối thoại với chính quyền trong đấu tranh giữ đất P1,” YouTube Video, 45:48, September 30, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rypKsDu9pSk>,

clock time here is less a utopian ideal than a hospitable orientation, one that conjoins temporal and dialogical openness. Dialogue with *dân*, as the peasant proposes, must be continual and open-ended, without temporal limit and without guarantees.

Villagers enact democratic dialogues that not only stretch the temporality of engagement between governor and governed but also admit of heterogeneous relations, rationalities, and emotions. They may disrupt formal rules and procedures and challenge state authorities while invoking a *dân*-rooted conception of just governance. When state agents ask people in Từ Liêm to submit yet another round of documentation which they have already provided with regard to the ongoing land dispute, Mr. Long refuses to comply, “All those papers, it’s not that the [People’s] Committee does not have them. I also have the original copies. But why am I not giving them? I am challenging the Committee [*thách thức Ủy Ban*]. If the Committee cannot keep papers, then throw the Committee the \*\*\*\* out. I am *dân* living in a garbage dump and I am able to keep those papers.”<sup>566</sup> Like many others, Mr. Long must be fed up with unnecessary bureaucratic requirements that only impose additional burdens on *dân* without addressing their concerns. Yet his defiance does not stem from mere annoyance at red tape. He also curses the uselessness and disposability of the People’s Committee, the executive arm of the government at various administrative levels. Meanwhile, the state agents just sit there and listen to him. He keeps reminding them that *dân* comes first, before the government, the Committee, and the law. It is the latter that is disposable, not *dân*. When the state’s land

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<sup>566</sup> Original quote: “Tất cả những giấy tờ đó, Ủy Ban không phải là không có, mà tôi cũng còn bản chính cơ. Nhưng mà tại sao tôi không đưa? Tôi đang thách thức Ủy Ban đấy. Ủy Ban mà không giữ được giấy tờ thì vứt mẹ Ủy Ban đi. Tôi là dân ở bãi rác mà tôi còn giữ được những giấy tờ đấy.” Long huynhxuan, “Chính quyền UBND mẽ tri dồn người dân vào đường cùng,” YouTube Video, 24:25, December 29, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-vnN\\_W\\_DLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-vnN_W_DLE).

clearing team starts reading criteria for compensation from the Land Law, he tells them:

Only when I agree would you be able to proceed. Even if you are brandishing the law now, I will not agree. Because the law is based on the life-sustaining needs of *dân*. *Dân* give birth to law. It is not the case that law is imposed on *dân*. (...) I affirm with you that the Land Law of 2013 was born to serve *dân*, to serve the rights and interests of *dân*, [for their life to be] more beautiful, more dignified, more comfortable, and happier. The law was not born so that *dân* tomorrow are pushed to the streets.<sup>567</sup>

The state agents speak one law; Mr. Long speaks another. From where emerges the confidence with which he tells them what the law is and is not about (it is to serve *dân* and not to push them to the streets) and what it can and cannot do (it cannot displace *dân* if they don't agree to leave their land)? His confidence is not as simple as individual irreverence. Rather, recognizable through his repeated invocations of *dân*, the social basis of his disobedience is a popular conception of *dân*-rooted governance. This conception is commonly invoked through references to pre-colonial history as well as revolutionary mobilization.

In particular, Hồ Chí Minh's political thought is known for its democratic emphasis on "*lấy dân làm gốc*" (treating *dân* as the root). He famously writes, "*Dân* have the right to supervise and criticize the government. If the government harms *dân*, *dân* have the power to dismiss the government. From the president to the transportation staff, if one cannot be of service to *dân*, *dân* won't need them."<sup>568</sup> Hồ was acutely conscious of distinguishing postcolonial governance from colonial (and fascist) rule. In his letter to the

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<sup>567</sup> Original quote: "Tôi có đồng ý hay không thì các bạn mới được. Chứ đây mà các bạn lại giờ luật ra lúc này ý thì tôi cũng không đồng ý đâu. Vì Luật căn cứ theo nhu cầu đời sống của nhân dân. Nhân dân sinh ra luật, chứ không phải luật áp đặt vào người dân. (...) tôi khẳng định với bạn rằng Luật Đất Đai năm 2013 nó sinh ra cũng để nhằm phục vụ nhân dân, phục vụ đem lại quyền lợi, lợi ích của nhân dân, to đẹp hơn, đáng hoàng hơn, ấm no hơn, hạnh phúc hơn, chứ luật sinh ra không phải để cho người dân ngày mai đi ra đường." Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> Original quote: "Nhân dân có quyền đôn đốc và phê bình Chính phủ. Nếu Chính phủ làm hại dân thì dân có quyền đuổi Chính phủ. Từ Chủ tịch nước đến giao thông viên cũng vậy, nếu không làm được việc cho dân, thì dân không cần đến nữa." Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập (Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1984)*, vol. 4, 283.

People's Committees at the regional, provincial, district, and village levels soon after independence was declared in 1945, he advised:

Our country was oppressed by the West for more than 80 years and by Japan for 4-5 years. (...) But if the country is independent yet *dân* do not enjoy happiness and freedom, then independence would mean nothing. (...) We must understand that government institutions from the nation to the villages are all servants of *dân*, that is, [they should] shoulder the common work for *dân*, not oppress *dân* like the periods of French and Japanese domination. What benefits *dân*, we must do our best. What harms *dân*, we must avoid our best. We must love *dân*, respect *dân*, only then will *dân* love us, respect us.<sup>569</sup>

Mr. Long's comment about throwing out a People's Committee that is of no service to *dân*, then, is not spontaneously out of exasperation but based on an existing discourse of *dân* having "the power to dismiss the government" (*có quyền đuổi chính phủ*). Furthermore, he turns what government officials have planned to be a strictly procedural meeting into a charged dialogue in which the speaking statuses of state agents and villagers are far from being predetermined. When it comes to land disputes, government officials usually have a set agenda to get on with, and they hope to do it efficiently with *dân* with the least time spent and obstruction encountered. In the case of the meeting in Từ Liêm, the agenda is to explain the relevant policy and law regarding land clearance and compensation. *Dân* is supposed to mainly listen. The officials take brief and selective inputs from *dân* to legitimize the process, while showing little interest in lengthy comments and fiery questions that complicate or contest land expropriation. When villagers speak, the officials often ask them to keep it succinct and to the point -

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<sup>569</sup> Original quote: "Nước ta bị Tây áp bức hơn 80 năm và bốn, năm năm bị Nhật áp bức. (...) Nhưng nếu nước độc lập mà dân không hưởng hạnh phúc tự do, thì độc lập cũng chẳng có nghĩa lý gì. (...) Chúng ta phải hiểu rằng, các cơ quan của Chính phủ từ toàn quốc cho đến các làng, đều là công bộc của dân, nghĩa là để gánh vác việc chung cho dân chứ không phải để đè đầu dân như trong thời kỳ dưới quyền thống trị của Pháp, Nhật. Việc gì lợi cho dân, ta phải hết sức làm. Việc gì hại đến dân ta phải hết sức tránh. Chúng ta phải yêu dân, kính dân thì dân mới yêu ta, kính ta." See Hồ Chí Minh, "Thư Gửi Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Các Kỳ, Tỉnh, Huyện và Làng" (Letter to Regional, Provincial, District, and Village People's Committees), *Báo Cứu Quốc* 69 (National Salvation Newspaper), October 17, 1945 in Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập*, vol. 4, 64-66.

the point being, of course, the officials' agenda.

Whereas officials conduct procedures, *dân* enact litigiousness. Villagers do not resign themselves to being a side note to the operation. When the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee in his ward interrupts Mr. Long instead of letting him explain his viewpoint, Mr. Long castigates him for his failure to listen to *dân*. "As a Vice Chairman," Mr. Long glares at him, "you must listen [*lắng nghe*]." Before pressing on with his point, he reminds the Vice Chairman of who and what made possible this government and his seat of authority:

When you were small, I was a soldier taking part in seizing power [for independence], not robbing *dân* of land like you now. You must change your thinking. For you to occupy the position of Vice Chairman today is owing to three generations of my family seizing this government, let me state clearly, seizing this government to have the [People's] Committee today. The Committee must protect all these people, protect all these *dân* (pointing to his fellow villagers in the meeting room).<sup>570</sup>

I argue that there are different layers to the relationship between *dân* and the government of which Mr. Long speaks. Most clearly, the relationship is tied to the indispensability of *dân*'s endurance and strength in the resistance wars. Affectively, it is often expressed as a relation of incalculable debt to *dân* for the long years of collective struggle and sacrifice to have peace and independence in the present. Politically, *dân* who fought against unjust rule before can gather force to fight again today. It is not wise, to put it mildly, to underestimate the power of *dân*. This understanding of *dân*'s power has a much longer political tradition than the mobilization of the recent wars alone (significant

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<sup>570</sup> Original quote: "Cái lúc anh còn bé ý tôi đã đi bộ đội tôi còn đi cướp chính quyền cơ, không phải bây giờ tôi đi cướp đất của dân như anh bây giờ đâu. Anh phải thay đổi tư duy đi. Có ngày hôm nay ở vị trí phó chủ tịch phường nhớ là công của gia đình nhà tôi 3 đời đi cướp cái chính quyền này, tôi nói rõ, cướp cái chính quyền này để được cái Ủy Ban ngày hôm nay, Ủy Ban ngày hôm nay phải bảo vệ ngân này con người, bảo vệ ngân này dân."

as this is), a point I will return to below. For now, suffice it to say that Mr. Long's speech evokes both the affective and political dimensions of the relationship between *dân* and the government when he tells the Vice Chairman that the very existence of the People's Committee is "owing to three generations of [his] family seizing this government." In one regard, he reminds the government representative to listen respectfully to *dân* and to fulfill his job of protecting *dân*. Simultaneously, his emphasis on the latest seizure of power by *dân* also conveys that *this* government cannot afford to forget what *dân* are capable of.

Insofar as *dân*-rooted governance is a shared imaginary, the necessity of taking dialogue with *dân* seriously is not a mere plea of the governed but also well within the grasp of political leaders. We can see this reflected in certain government's responses to peasant unrest. For example, former Deputy Prime Minister Nguyễn Công Tấn recalls intervening in a heated conflict in Song Phương commune, Hoài Đức district, in the 1980s when peasants were ready to take up arms against the local government with a sizeable stock of weapons at their disposal from civil defense. In such a volatile situation, Mr. Tấn maintained that the only way forward was to dialogue with *dân* directly and candidly. A military response from the government, he anticipated, would only aggravate the conflict. He recounts how he persuaded his high-ranking colleague:

The military from the capital city back then was going to bring armored cars to besiege the village, I said that's like pouring fuel on the fire. I along with Mr. Phạm Chuyên, then Deputy Director of Hà Nội Police, went in to dialogue with *dân*. Chuyên asked, "Is it dangerous for me to go like this?" I told him, "No, let's go and see." Chuyên again asked, "Are you bringing guns?" I told him, "Leave the guns, we are with bare hands coming to *dân*." "What if it is dangerous?" Chuyên was still anxious. I comforted him, "*Dân* seeing that we are going in with

bare hands for their sake, they would not have the heart [to do harm]. Suppose they fight back, we would have to bear it for social stability.<sup>571</sup>

Unlike Mr. Chuyên who saw armed peasants as a security risk and was fearful for his own safety, Mr. Tạn understood *dân* otherwise. He wanted to, first and foremost, listen to and dialogue with *dân*. More strikingly, as a top-level state leader, with the military and police under his command, he was willing to “bear it” if *dân* fought back. His yielding to *dân* is exemplary of the principle of treating *dân* as the root. One can attribute Mr. Tạn’s practice of dialogical governance to his concern for social stability. Especially in a country that had just emerged from brutal decades of war, it is understandable that he would want to avoid yet more violence. Indeed, he states so explicitly as he recollects another instance in which he talked the local government out of an armed response. This time, it was the peasant rebellion in Thái Bình province in 1997: “When I came, they [the local government] were prepared to use violence. The government side said, ‘We have prepared guns all set, let’s combat.’ I said, ‘We have shed blood in a few wars already, do you want more bloodshed comrades?’”<sup>572</sup>

Although social stability is evidently a serious consideration, it does not quite exhaust what underlies the former Deputy PM’s action and his steadfast commitment to dialogue with *dân* with bare hands. After all, another person in his position could opt for

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<sup>571</sup> Original quote: “Quân khu Thủ đô hồi ấy định đưa xe bọc thép bao vây làng, tôi bảo như thế chẳng khác đổ dầu vào lửa. Tôi cùng anh Phạm Chuyên, lúc đó là Phó giám đốc Công an Hà Nội, vào đối thoại với dân. Anh Chuyên hỏi: “Anh đi thế này có nguy hiểm không?”. Tôi bảo: “Không, cứ vào đấy xem sao”. Anh Chuyên lại hỏi: “Em có mang súng theo không?”. Tôi bảo: “Bỏ súng, chúng ta tay không vào với dân”. “Nguy hiểm thì sao?”. Anh Chuyên vẫn băn khoăn. Tôi mới an ủi: “Dân thấy chúng ta vào tay không vì lợi ích của họ sẽ không nở lòng nào. Giả thiết họ đánh lại chúng ta đành chịu vậy vì ổn định xã hội”.” See Đinh Tường, “Nguyên Phó Thủ Tướng Nguyễn Công Tạn: Về Với Dân, Đừng Mang Súng” (Former Deputy PM Nguyễn Công Tạn: Coming to *Dân*, Do Not Bring Guns), *Báo Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam* (Viet Nam Agriculture Newspaper), February 13, 2012, <http://nongnghiep.vn/nguyen-pho-thu-tuong-nguyen-cong-tan-ve-voi-dan-dung-mang-sung-post90198.html>.

<sup>572</sup> Original quote: “Lúc tôi về họ chuẩn bị dùng bạo lực. Cảnh bên chính quyền bảo: “Chúng em chuẩn bị súng sẵn sàng rồi, chiến đấu thôi”. Tôi nói chúng ta mấy cuộc chiến tranh đổ máu rồi, các đồng chí có muốn đổ máu nữa không?” Ibid.



a strong show of force instead, also with the goal of social stability in mind. There is something noteworthy about Mr. Tạn’s complete lack of hesitation to face armed peasants with bare hands, his being at ease about entering a heated conflict zone to dialogue with *dân* in contrast to his colleague’s uneasiness, his desire to find out from *dân* what was going on instead of taking the words of the local government officials, and his trust that *dân* would welcome his goodwill and mean no harm. I would suggest that there is a faith in *dân* here as co-authors of the common that is not reducible to instrumental security concerns. Could there also be an appreciation of *dân*’s power that goes beyond a particular event of rebellion, such that “bearing it” for the moment is better than “pouring fuel on the fire”?

## 7.2. Just revolt

When dialogue and revolt are mapped onto the binaries of reasonableness versus irrationality, peace versus violence, and order versus disorder, they tend to be regarded as opposites. However, I argue that they are intimately linked within a *dân*-grounded imaginary. *Dân* have the power to construct and revitalize the political community through dialogue and through revolt alike. This is best articulated in a guiding principle popularly cited from Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), which has acquired a proverb-like status in Việt Nam: “*Chở thuyền cũng là dân, lật thuyền cũng là dân*” (*Dân* carry the boat; *dân* also overturn the boat).<sup>573</sup> I find the metaphors of water and boat particularly apt in thinking about subaltern politics. It offers a different view of reality by shifting away

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<sup>573</sup> Nguyễn Trãi is a renowned Vietnamese scholar, poet, and political leader. He is known for advising the rebel leader Lê Lợi in fighting against Chinese domination and freeing the country from the Ming Dynasty’s occupation. The declaration of independence from the Ming rule written by him in 1428 is included in school curriculum.

from a focus on domination. Like that of water, the power of *dân* is tremendous, permanent, and quiet. It is immense as *dân* envelops those who govern rather than simply being ruled by them. This power is enduring while governments come and go. And it at times appears still as if nothing is happening but it is perpetually in motion and can create storms that topple insufferable regimes.

Of course, Nguyễn Trãi was not the only political thinker who articulated a conception of *dân*'s power. Other figures with similar conceptions, including pre-colonial as well as contemporary ones, are frequently cited as reminders of ethical governance, especially in relation to ongoing peasant protests. For instance, commenting on the violent land seizure in Văn Giang, Professor Trương Lai, a known dissenting voice in Việt Nam, invokes Mencius's dictum "*dân vi quý, quân vi khinh*"<sup>574</sup> (*dân* are the most estimable, the king is to be treated lightly) to affirm, "It is an elementary lesson: A government that wants to exist must be supported by *dân*. Therefore, relying on *dân*, trusting *dân*, and listening to *dân*'s viewpoints and wishes are the least that the authorities must realize."<sup>575</sup> Upon visiting Văn Giang after the land seizure, writer Phạm Xuân Nguyên criticizes the state's brutal use of force and reminds today's leaders of the advice that Trần Hưng Đạo (1228-1300)<sup>576</sup> gave to Emperor Trần Anh Tông: "*Dân* must be well

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<sup>574</sup> The full version of this saying is "*dân vi quý, xã tắc thứ chi, quân vi khinh*" (*dân* are the most estimable, the country comes second, the king is to be taken lightly). Hồ Chí Minh repeated this saying often.

<sup>575</sup> Original quote: "Phong kiến hay là cổ xưa như Mạnh Tử mà còn nói đến "*dân vi quý, quân vi khinh*". Cái bài học sơ đẳng: Một cái chính quyền muốn tồn tại thì phải được dân ủng hộ. Vì vậy, dựa vào dân, tin dân, và lắng nghe ý kiến, nguyện vọng của dân là cái việc tối thiểu mà người cầm quyền phải biết." Full interview with Professor Trương Lai, including audio and text, is available at Thanh Phương, "Sẽ Còn Nhiều Vụ Văn Giang Khác ở Việt Nam" (There Will Be Many Other Văn Giang Cases in Việt Nam), *Radio France Internationale*, April 30, 2012, <http://vi.rfi.fr/viet-nam/20120430-se-con-nhieu-vu-tien-lang-van-giang-khac-o-viet-nam>.

<sup>576</sup> Trần Hưng Đạo is a noted statesman and military commander during the Trần Dynasty. He is most remembered in Việt Nam for having successfully defended the country against Mongol invasions three times.

cared for so that the root planted deep will be tenacious, that is the best policy to keep the country.”<sup>577</sup>

Examples from centuries ago continue to be brought back to the present to reinforce a conception of *dân* and governance that is more than the relationship between the modern state and citizens. More than one, less than many. The unwavering emphasis in dissenting public discourses – be it voiced by peasants, writers, scholars, journalists, activists, or politicians – is on *dân*'s power rather than sovereign power. So goes another popular saying passed on from the decolonization struggle, “Dễ trăm lần không dân cũng chịu / Khó vạn lần dân liệu cũng xong” (Even if it is 100 times easy, without *dân* nothing can get done / Even if it is 10,000 times difficult, *dân* will take care of it).<sup>578</sup>

What makes an articulation of *dân*-grounded politics unmanageable dissent when the official discourse, too, ostensibly elevates *dân*? The Vietnamese state does identify itself as one of the people, by the people, and for the people. The unmanageability, I submit, comes from the justness of revolt in response to unjust governance. The first part of Mencius's aphorism, *dân vi quý* (*dân* are the most estimable), is a lot easier for state and Party officials to mouth than the last part, *quân vi khinh* (the king is to be treated lightly). The government legitimizes itself in the name of *dân*, but under no circumstances would it allow the idea of rebellion.

To the extent that dialogical governance is foregrounded, the *dân*-grounded imaginary may partially co-occur with the imaginary of the modern state. Even then,

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<sup>577</sup> Original quote: “Khoan thư sức dân để làm kế sâu rễ bền gốc, đó là thượng sách giữ nước.” See Phạm Xuân Nguyên, “Tạ Lỗi Với Văn Giang” (Apologies to Văn Giang), *Báo Pháp Luật* (Law Newspaper), May 13, 2012, <http://plo.vn/kinh-te/ta-loi-voi-van-giang-61133.html>.

<sup>578</sup> This saying is sometimes attributed to Hồ Chí Minh since he repeated it often. It is actually part of the poem “Dân No Thì Lĩnh Cũng No” written by Thanh Tịnh in 1948.

friction occurs between the kind of open-ended dialogue that *dân* enact and the kind of circumscribed dialogue that state agents conduct. Still, certain mutual accommodations can and do get made. The distinctness of the two ontological orders comes into view more sharply when *dân* revolt after those who govern have repeatedly failed to listen and dialogue with them. Acts of revolt are intolerable for the state. Yet within the *dân*-grounded imaginary, they are just, if not inevitable when the authorities keep turning their back on *dân*. Agrarian dissensus thus reverberates with popular sayings such as “*Quan nhất thời, dân vạn đại*” (Mandarins are transient, *dân* are perennial) and “*Phúc chu thủy tín dân do thủy*” (Only when the boat is overturned would one realize that the power of *dân* is like that of water).

When peasant villagers from three communes in Văn Giang kept vigil all night in the middle of their rice field in April 2012, they were prepared for battle. With basic defense such as wooden sticks, knives, and bottles of gasoline, they were, in the words of one peasant, “ready to combat the local and central government.”<sup>579</sup> Unlike instances of rural resistance that demonstrate discontent with the local government while appealing to the central government for redress, Văn Giang peasants were prepared to fight both. There was no confidence left in the central government itself. It is important to remember that this final resort to militant defiance was reached after 8 years of having filed dozens of petitions and staged several protests in the capital city to get the government to listen. It was only after this repeated failure to listen on the part of the government at all levels that peasants in Văn Giang concluded that there was no other road to take:

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<sup>579</sup> Original quote: “Những người ở nhà vẫn tiếp tế cho chúng tôi đồ ăn, đồ uống để sẵn sàng chiến đấu với chính quyền địa phương và trung ương.” See My, “Việt Nam: Đêm Trắng.”

We are the people who directly inhabit this land, from this land [we] raise generations, so we must keep it. If necessary, we are prepared to have our children join the struggle with their fathers and mothers. Now between *dân* and the government is life-and-death, there is no other path than the path of struggle.<sup>580</sup>

If we assume that nobody wants to put their children in harm's way, what do we make of the villagers' preparedness to involve their children in a life-and-death struggle if necessary? One may consider this an extremely desperate act. However, based on their enunciative emphasis, I would suggest that the villagers' total commitment to "the path of struggle" (*con đường đấu tranh*) did not arise simply out of desperation but, more importantly, out of the conviction that their struggle was just. It was, first and foremost, a just defense of their *đất*/land, which "raises generations." So the peasant affirmed: "If [we must] sacrifice for our land it is worth it."<sup>581</sup> Furthermore, it was a just response to a government that has turned its back on *dân*. It was with the confidence in the rightness of their struggle that Văn Giang peasants took on the eviction forces armed to the teeth:

Of course if they have modern weapons, we have rudimentary weapons. Hoes, shovels, spears, pikes, as uncle Hồ said in the old days: "Those who have guns use guns, those who have swords use swords." Without guns and swords, then sticks and pikes. We are united so one way or another we will win; even if we have to shed blood in this battle, we will.<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Original quote: "Chúng tôi là những người trực tiếp sinh sống trên mảnh đất này, từ mảnh đất này mà nuôi các thế hệ, nên chúng tôi phải giữ. Nếu cần thiết, chúng tôi sẵn sàng cho các cháu ra đấu tranh cùng với các bố các mẹ. Bây giờ giữa dân và chính quyền một mất một còn luôn, chứ làm gì còn con đường nào khác ngoài con đường đấu tranh đâu." Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> Original quote: "Nếu mà hy sinh cho mảnh đất của mình thì cũng đáng làm chứ." Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> Original quote: "Tất nhiên là thôi thì người ta có vũ khí hiện đại thì mình sẽ có những cái vũ khí thô sơ. Thôi thì cuốc xẻng giáo mác, cũng như là lời cụ Hồ ngày xưa ấy: 'Ai có súng thì dùng súng, ai có gươm thì dùng gươm.' Không có súng gươm thì gậy gộc, giáo mác. Chúng tôi cứ đoàn kết thì kiêu gì chúng tôi cũng phải đánh thắng, kể cả trận này đổ máu chúng tôi cũng chơi." Ibid.



Figure 4.3: “Nếu mà hy sinh cho mảnh đất của mình thì cũng đáng làm chứ,”  
Văn Giang district, 2012.<sup>583</sup>

Not only did the peasant convey the villagers’ resolve to fight with whatever rudimentary weapons they could gather. She was also convinced that despite the stark asymmetry of force, they would win one way or another. Both the determination and the conviction carried memories of the struggle for collective self-determination before. The words from HỒ that the peasant recalled come from his appeal to the nation to rise up against French colonialism in 1946. The appeal was made to everyone, “men and women, old and young”: “All the Vietnamese must rise up to fight colonial France and save the

<sup>583</sup> The picture is from My, “Việt Nam: Đêm Trắng.” For more pictures of the night before the land seizure, see “Trực Tiếp: Trắng Đêm Cùng Văn Giang – Hưng Yên” (Live: White Night with Văn Giang – Hưng Yên), *Xuân Diệm Hán Nôm* (blog), April 23, 2012, [https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/04/truc-tiep-tu-van-giang-toan-bo-xa-xuan\\_23.html](https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/04/truc-tiep-tu-van-giang-toan-bo-xa-xuan_23.html).

nation. Those who have guns use guns. Those who have swords use swords. Without swords, use hoes, spades, and sticks. (...) Although we will have to endure hardship to resist, with the determination to sacrifice, victory will certainly belong to our people!”<sup>584</sup> It is revealing that both Văn Giang peasants and those who visited them during the night before the land seizure likened the atmosphere and the intensity of struggle to the times of *kháng chiến* (the resistance wars). Such an analogy intimates the power of *dân* to re-establish a more just order.

Similarly, when peasant villagers in Dương Nội encamped to protest against displacement in 2013, their rice fields were filled with banners that reiterated messages from both anti-colonial and pre-colonial struggles for self-determination.<sup>585</sup> “*Giặc đến nhà đàn bà cũng đánh*” (When invaders arrive, women also fight) refers to the army composed mostly of women that the Trưng sisters legendarily led against Chinese domination in AD 40. “*Quyết tử giữ đất cho con cháu sau này*” (Determined to die to keep the land for later generations) recalls the familiar slogan from the independence movement, “Determined to die for the homeland to live.” “*Nhân dân Dương Nội thà hy sinh tất cả chứ không chịu mất đất*” (Dương Nội people would rather sacrifice everything than lose the land), again, echoes Hồ’s appeal for national uprising against colonial France. This echo is imbued with the refusal to yield and be enslaved: “Out of love for peace, we have made concessions. But the more concessions we made, the more colonial

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<sup>584</sup> See Hồ’s “Lời kêu gọi toàn quốc kháng chiến” (Appeal for National Resistance) in Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập*, vol. 4, 1018.

<sup>585</sup> See Mai Xuân Dũng, “Ồ Đồn Mang Cá Thích Hơn Ở Nhà,” *Mai Xuân Dũng* (blog), January 29, 2013, <http://dzungm86.blogspot.com/2013/01/o-on-mang-ca-thich-hon-o-nha.html>; “Dương Nội: Người Âm, Người Dương Cùng Quyết Giữ Đất,” *Xuân Điện Hán Nôm* (blog), January 29, 2013, <https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2013/01/duong-noi-nguoi-am-nguoi-duong-cung.html>.

France encroached, because they resolve to steal our country once more! No! We would rather sacrifice everything than lose the country, than be enslaved.”<sup>586</sup>

Often peasants have already spent years filing petitions and organizing protests before forced land seizure occurs in their village. In many cases, their struggle persists even after displacement. They carry on their endeavor to reclaim their land and agrarian life. It has been more than four years since their farmland was expropriated, but peasants from Dương Nội are still intent on taking it back. In support of their “indomitable spirit” (*tinh thần quật cường*), a photographer from Hà Nội, Nguyễn Thịnh, took a series of pictures of villagers on the land that they used to inhabit, and titled the collection, “*Chúng tôi vẫn ở đây*” (We are still here).<sup>587</sup> The photographed villagers are among about 200 families who, for almost a decade, have refused compensation and continued to hold onto the land despite the urbanization process.

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<sup>586</sup> Hồ, “Lời kêu gọi toàn quốc kháng chiến.”

<sup>587</sup> The collection is available at Thịnh Nguyễn, “Bộ Ảnh ‘Chúng Tôi Vẫn ở Đây’ Về Làng Dương Nội” (Photograph Collection ‘We Are Still Here’ about Dương Nội Village), *Hanoi Grapevine*, March 11, 2018, <https://hanoigrapevine.com/vi/2018/03/photo-series-we-are-still-here-duong-noi-village/>; see also “Chuyện của Thịnh,” *Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/chuyencuathinh/posts/1319096261525210>.





Figure 4.4: “Chúng Tôi Vẫn ở Đây” (We Are Still Here),  
 Dương Nội village, 2017.

In conversation with the villagers, Thịnh asks about their life before and after displacement as well as their future plans. Mr. Đỗ Văn Hà and Ms. Triệu Thị Hạnh used to grow rice in rotation with other crops on more than 1 *sào* of farmland (each *sào* equals 360 square meters). Now they commute to the city every day to buy and resell recyclables. When asked about their future, they say they are determined to the end to get back their land (*quyết tâm đòi đất đến cùng*).<sup>588</sup> Contrary to the claim that peasants just want fair compensation for their loss, Mr. Hà and Ms. Hạnh maintain that they need land, not money, even if the offered compensation is equivalent to the market price.

<sup>588</sup> Mr. Hà and Ms. Hạnh’s story is narrated at “Chuyện của Thịnh,” *Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/chuyencuathinh/posts/1064656200302552:0>.

Their fellow villager, Mr. Nguyễn Văn Sự, is currently growing vegetables on the land that is abandoned after being expropriated for urban planning. Although worried about the prospect of land confiscation, he is glad that he is able to go on farming. For him, “farming is living healthily, living happily” (*làm nông sống khỏe sống vui*); he keeps saying “happy” a few times as he talks about farm work. This is someone who gets up at 1am everyday to pick vegetables, goes to sell them until 3.30am, comes home to nap, gets up again in the morning to pick grass, then carries twenty buckets of water from 200 meters afar to water the plants.

In addition to the difficulties of the ongoing struggle to reclaim land, Mr. Sự shares with Thịnh some heartening aspects: “Our Dương Nội village serves as an exemplar for other villages in the whole country concerning the task to demand justice. Other wronged people [*dân oan*] nation-wide come and interact [with us]. With solidarity and a just cause, there is nothing to be afraid of.”<sup>589</sup> When asked if he is afraid of being put in prison, he cracks a big smile, “I used to be very afraid, but now I am no longer afraid. We are on the side of justice [*chính nghĩa*].”<sup>590</sup> Despite all the troubles and perils, Mr. Sự is persevering like Mr. Hà and Ms. Hạnh and proud of their village’s collective endeavor: “I am proud of *dân* in my village, because they dare to resist the dominant authorities [*cường quyền*]. *Dân* in Dương Nội will [strive to] reclaim the land to the

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<sup>589</sup> Original quote: “... làng Dương Nội chúng tôi là làng tiêu biểu cho các làng khác trong cả nước về công cuộc đi đòi công lý. Các dân oan khác trên toàn quốc đến giao lưu. Đoàn kết và có chính nghĩa thì không sợ gì hết.” Mr. Nguyễn Văn Sự’s story and the conversation with him is narrated at “Chuyện của Thịnh,” Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/chuyencuathinh/posts/1072430256191813:0>.

<sup>590</sup> Original quote: “Ngày xưa thì sợ lắm, nhưng giờ hết sợ rồi. Mình là bên chính nghĩa mà.” Ibid.

end.”<sup>591</sup> He is speaking not only as an individual but also as a Dương Nội villager and as one of *dân*.



Figure 4.5: Mr. Đỗ Văn Hà and Ms. Triệu Thị Hạnh: “Cần đất không cần tiền” (Need land, not money), Dương Nội village, 2017.

Among the seven Dương Nội villagers who have been put in jail so far, Ms. Cần Thị Thêu has been the most vocal about their unceasing struggle. She has been imprisoned twice: from August 2014 to July 2015 and from September 2016 to this past February. Each time she was released, she immediately continued to mobilize for the return of land to Dương Nội villagers. Ms. Thêu does not shy away from confronting the authorities: “Today you arrest one person, there will be 100 people standing up.

<sup>591</sup> Original quote: “Tôi rất tự hào về dân làng tôi, vì dám chống lại cường quyền. Dân Dương Nội sẽ đòi đất đến cùng.” Ibid.

Tomorrow you kill one person, there will be a million people standing up.”<sup>592</sup> This may seem like a grandiose statement. Yet from the perspective of just revolt, it is a realist logic based on the power of *dân* and borne out by previous struggles. Ms. Thêu’s statement resonates with Hồ’s warning to French colonialists in 1946, at the beginning of what would be an eight-year war, “You will kill ten of us and we will kill one of you, but you will be the ones who grow tired.”<sup>593</sup> Of course, the battle against colonial occupation has its own distinctness. Yet the resonance between the struggles then and now lies in an alternative conception of power grounded in commoners fighting for justice. Without such a conception of *dân*’s power, a victory over a force overwhelmingly more destructive and deadly – as articulated by Hồ as well as the villagers from Dương Nội and Văn Giang – would be unthinkable. Again, this power has a lineage far older than the anticolonial movement. That lineage, too, is evidenced in Ms. Thêu’s warning: “We will rise up so you understand how *dân*’s power is like water. It is *dân* who carry the boat, it is *dân* who overturn the boat. If you do not return to *dân*, you will be drowned by *dân*... I ask you to return to *dân* to receive their compassionate forgiveness.”<sup>594</sup>

Between Văn Giang and Dương Nội, I narrate in this short section a range of moments of subaltern politics within a *dân*-grounded imaginary: from the violent confrontation with eviction forces to the quieter everyday living, from preparing to fight

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<sup>592</sup> Original quote: “Ngày hôm nay các ông bắt một người, thì sẽ có 100 người đứng lên. Ngày mai các ông giết 1 người, thì sẽ có 1 triệu người đứng lên.” Trương Duy Nhất, “Mồi Lửa Cán Thi Thêu” (The Igniter Cán Thi Thêu), *Trương Duy Nhất* (blog), November 13, 2016, available at <http://www.rfvietnam.com/node/3541>; Báo Tiếng Dân, “Cán Thi Thêu,” YouTube Video, 0:44, February 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdv69WKHMxQ>.

<sup>593</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 120.

<sup>594</sup> Original quote: “Chúng tôi sẽ vùng lên để các ông hiểu được thế nào là sức dân như nước, chớ thuyền là dân lật thuyền là dân, không quay đầu mà về với nhân dân thì các ông sẽ bị nhân dân nhấn chìm hết... Tôi yêu cầu các ông quay lại với nhân dân để được hưởng cái khoan hồng của nhân dân.” Báo Tiếng Dân, “Cán Thi Thêu.”

with hoes, sticks, and bottles of gasoline to lying on a piece of mat with only the sky above and the earth under, from waiting wearily to petition government offices to coming together with *dân oan* from other villages all over the country, from imprisonment to ongoing mobilization, from the fierce fight to defend the land to the dogged struggle to take it back. This range of moments speaks to the long temporality of agrarian revolt and its multiple manifestations. The revolt is not confined to acts of militant resistance alone. It also lives on in the peasant villagers' determination to reclaim their land and agrarian life even after physical displacement, as well as their unrelenting agitation for just relations with *dân*.

Revolt is alive as long as there persists a shared subjectivity that exists because of and for a subaltern place-world, a “we” who are, against all odds and “to the end” as the villagers say, holding onto and cultivating a “here.” “We are still here” is an utterance that reverberates with many an echo, each word carrying its own inflection. *We*, as *dân* and as *nông dân*, are still here. *Here*, in the village and on the land, we still are. With bare hands, *still*, we are here. We, like water, *are* still here.

As Ms. Thêu's speech indicates, even amidst acute conflict, *dân* continually remind the government to “return” to them, to realize its wrongs and listen to *dân*. This was lost neither on General Giáp who admitted that the government has “wronged our fellow people,” nor on Mr. Tạn who was keen to dialogue with *dân* with bare hands. Obversely, if the government keeps turning its back on *dân*, *dân* would remake the common through revolt. This is a subaltern political grammar that former Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng understood when he acknowledged the just revolt of Thái Bình peasants in 1997. At the time, he took issue with the assessment that the rebellion was not a clash

with an enemy but an internal clash among *dân*. Although such an assessment avoided either treating *dân* as enemies or attributing the problem to an external one, it still deflected attention away from the government's accountability by locating the violence in *dân* rather than in the authorities. Rejecting this habitual deflection, Đồng faced up to how the government had wronged *dân*:

There is no internal clash among *dân* here. This is a clash between on one side, the governing authorities that are so corrupt, retrogressive, degenerate, and oppressive that *dân* could not bear it, and on the other side, *dân* who could not bear it so they had to revolt and fight [*nổi dậy đấu tranh*]. [One] must analyze right to find the right solution.<sup>595</sup>

I end here with a brief note on one of the known recent cases of peasants' militant defense of their land in Việt Nam. In 2013, the government in Tiên Lãng district, Hải Phòng city, ordered local forces numbering more than a hundred, including police and army personnel, to forcibly expropriate the land of Mr. Đoàn Văn Vươn's family. In turn, the family used improvised landmines and shotguns to resist. Four family members were arrested after having injured six officers and sentenced to jail. The incident stirred a storm of public outrage and heated discussions. The outrage, in part, had to do with the illegal action of the local government. It was also linked to the larger context of agrarian displacement in which many legal yet violent land seizures had been taking place.

In this instance, the *dân*-grounded imaginary was manifest not only in the combative response of Mr. Vươn's family but also in the nation-wide outpourings of support and affection, if not admiration, for their courageous resistance. Mr. Vươn

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<sup>595</sup> Original quote: “Không có mâu thuẫn nội bộ nhân dân nào ở đây cả. Đây là mâu thuẫn giữa một bên là những nhà cầm quyền hư hỏng, thoái hóa, biến chất, đè nén áp bức khiến dân không chịu được; và bên kia là dân không chịu được nên đã nổi dậy đấu tranh. Phải phân tích đúng mới tìm được giải pháp đúng.” See “Đằng Sau Vụ Nổ Súng ở Thái Bình” (Behind the Shooting in Thái Bình), *BBC*, September 12, 2013, [https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2013/09/130912\\_thaibinh\\_shooting\\_analysis.shtml](https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2013/09/130912_thaibinh_shooting_analysis.shtml).

became a folk hero and an example of *dân* standing up to unjust governance.<sup>596</sup> The violation of law by his family did not appear to be a concern for the general public as much as what had caused it. As Nguyễn Quang Vinh, a well-known Vietnamese writer, puts it, if the government does not listen and answer to *dân*, if it “plays drums without drumsticks,” only pretending to redress problems or dealing with them in such a way that allows them to remain only to resurface later, it would only “ignite many other Đoàn Văn Vươn bombs.”<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Luke Hunt, “Vietnam’s Land Hero,” *The Diplomat*, February 21, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/02/vietnams-land-hero/>; Reuters Staff, “Vietnam Farmer Jailed for Military-Style Defense of Land,” *Reuters*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam- eviction/vietnam-farmer-jailed-for-military-style-defense-of-land-idUSBRE9340BK20130405>; Trung Nguyen, “Vietnamese Farmer, Released from Prison, Gets Hero’s Welcome,” *VOA News*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/vietnamese-farmer-released-prison-hero-welcome/2941260.html>.

<sup>597</sup> Nguyễn Quang Vinh, “8 hành động sau kết luận của Thủ tướng” (“8 Actions after the Prime Minister’s Conclusion”), *Bauxit Việt Nam* (blog), February 12, 2012, <http://boxitvn.blogspot.com/2012/02/8-hanh-ong-sau-ket-luan-cua-thu-tuong.html>.

## CHAPTER 5

“¡OTRO CAMPO ES POSIBLE!”<sup>598</sup>:

## TOWARDS OTHER RURAL-URBAN FUTURES

Land reform is a struggle not only between peasants and landlords, but a struggle for all of society. What kind of society do we want to live in? Do we want inequality, global warming, poverty, misery and urban slums? Agrarian reform and food sovereignty are the keys to changing this society.<sup>599</sup>

Dead land reforms are not dead; they become nodes around which future peasant mobilisations emerge because promises unkept keep movements alive.<sup>600</sup>

Land, sea, and territory for life. Land, sea, and territory for dreams. Land, sea, and territory to affirm our dignity. Now!<sup>601</sup>

We need more than solidarity. We must put our anchors deep.<sup>602</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> “Another Countryside Is Possible!” is a slogan taken from the 2018 Proclamation of Plan de Ayala Siglo XXI 2.0, which identifies itself as a nation-wide peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Mexican movement in Mexico. Plan de Ayala (1911) was a document drafted by Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican Revolution. It included the revolution’s vision of land reform. The name of the contemporary movement, Plan de Ayala Siglo XXI 2.0, signifies the subaltern regeneration of revolutionary ideals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to “demand justice for all” (*demandamos justicia para todos*). To read further about the proclamation and the movement, see <http://www.movimientocampesinoplanteadeyalasiSigloXXI.org.mx/>.

<sup>599</sup> This was expressed by the participants at the Bukit Tinggi international workshop held in West Sumatra, Indonesia in 2012. The meeting, “Agrarian reform and the defense of land and territory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the challenge and future,” was organized by the Global Campaign on Agrarian Reform and hosted by the Indonesian Peasant Union and La Vía Campesina from July 10 to 13. It gathered “about 150 representatives from peasant, fisher-folk, indigenous peoples, women, youth, human rights and activist research organizations from Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe.” See Shalmali Guttal, “Porto Alegre, Nyéléni and Bukit Tinggi: Evolving Views of Agrarian Reform,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40:4 (2013): 739.

<sup>600</sup> This quote by Ronald Herring is cited in A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Saturnino M. Borras Jr., and Cristóbal Kay, eds., *Land, Poverty and Livelihoods in an Era of Globalization: Perspectives from Developing and Transition Countries* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

<sup>601</sup> “Final Declaration: ‘Land, Territory, and Dignity’ Forum,” Porto Alegre, Brazil, March 6-9, 2006, [https://sarpn.org/documents/d0001933/Land\\_Declaration\\_March2006.pdf](https://sarpn.org/documents/d0001933/Land_Declaration_March2006.pdf). The motto of the forum was “For a new agrarian reform based on food sovereignty!”. The forum was facilitated by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty and held in parallel with the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development which was hosted by the FAO and attended by its member states. The forum participants included representatives of organizations of peasants, family farmers, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, artisanal fisherfolk, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest dwellers, rural women, rural youth, and others.



## 1. The global rural

Discussing global transformation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm famously stated, “The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry.”<sup>603</sup> He attributed the death of the peasantry to what he called the “revolution of global society” driven by industrial capitalism. He noted the “extraordinary speed” and the “universality” of this novel transformation.<sup>604</sup> What is striking about Hobsbawm’s statement in 1994 is that he declared peasants dead at a time when he himself admitted that they still composed more than half of the human population. He was so sure of the universality of the transformation brought about by industrial capitalism that, for him, it was just a matter of time before all peasants would abandon their village and farming life. Since peasants belong to “the world of the past,” they have no place in the global future. Indeed, at the moment of Hobsbawm’s writing, peasants were already being displaced from the enunciated present.

Hobsbawm’s prediction could not stand in starker contradistinction to another vision of peasants and the countryside also articulated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mao Tse-tung theorized a very different kind of revolution based on peasant power and the encirclement of the cities by the countryside. In 1965, Lin Biao, then Vice Premier of the People’s Republic of China, affirmed Mao’s ideas that peasants “constitute the main force of the

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<sup>602</sup> The quote is from a fisherwoman. See Marienna Pope-Weidemann, “Food Sovereignty Offers Possible Path Toward Climate Justice,” *Truthout*, December 20, 2015, <https://truthout.org/articles/food-sovereignty-offers-possible-path-toward-climate-justice/>.

<sup>603</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 289.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

national-democratic revolution” against imperialism and that “the countryside, and the countryside alone, can provide the revolutionary bases from which the revolutionaries can go forward to final victory.”<sup>605</sup> Notably, far more than a Chinese revolution, this was understood to be a world revolution. Lin thus highlighted the international significance of Mao’s theory:

Taking the entire globe, if North America and Western Europe can be called “the cities of the world,” then Asia, Africa, and Latin America constitute “the rural areas of the world.” (...) In a sense, the contemporary world revolution also presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas. In the final analysis, the whole cause of world revolution hinges on the revolutionary struggles of the Asian, African, and Latin American peoples who make up the overwhelming majority of the world’s population.<sup>606</sup>

Locating revolutionary power in the agrarian countryside, Lin mapped the world and its future in radical contrast to Hobsbawm. According to this vision, rural areas are not backward corners of the world waiting to be taken over by industrial capitalism; they are insurgent bases that encircle the cities. Peasants are not the face of an obsolete past; they are indispensable builders of a common future.

Let us fast forward to the present. In September 2017, the United Nations adopted the resolution on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas by a recorded vote of 34 to 2, with 11 abstentions.<sup>607</sup> It foresees the adoption of the Declaration on these rights by the member states in 2018. Until now, the most updated

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<sup>605</sup> These quotes are from an article originally published in the CCP central journal *People’s Daily* in September 1965, when Lin Biao served as Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP, Vice Premier of the PRC, and Minister of National Defense. See Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of People’s War!: In Commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japan* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1966).

<sup>606</sup> Ibid. A slightly different translation of the quote is cited in Qian Liqun, “The Way Our Generation Imagined the World,” trans. Zhang Jingyuan, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6:4 (2005), 530.

<sup>607</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 29 September 2017: Promotion and Protection of the Human Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*, September 11-29, 2017, A/HRC/RES/36/22, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/294/05/PDF/G1729405.pdf?OpenElement>.

draft of the Declaration includes, among others, the right to adequate food and food sovereignty; the rights of peasant women and other women working in rural areas; the “right to land, individually and collectively, including the right to have access to, use and manage land and the water bodies, coastal seas, fisheries, pastures and forests therein, to achieve an adequate standard of living, to have a place to live in security, peace and dignity and to develop their cultures”; the right to seeds; the right to biological diversity, including “the right, individually or collectively, in association with others or as a community, to conserve, maintain and sustainably use and develop biological diversity and associated knowledge, including in agriculture, forestry, fishing and livestock”; and the right to “maintain, express, control, protect and develop their traditional and local knowledge, such as ways of life, methods of production or technology, or customs and tradition.”<sup>608</sup>

What explains this eruption of visibility and audibility of the rural in international fora if peasants are supposed to be disappearing and the countryside is supposed to be vanishing, slowly but surely, due to processes of industrialization and urbanization?<sup>609</sup> Even at a superficial level of appearance, an international coalition of peasants and other people working in rural areas who demand and achieve individual and collective rights at the UN does not quite fit the image of peasants being mere residues of earlier historical

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<sup>608</sup> For further details, see United Nations, General Assembly, *Revised draft: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*, April 9-13, 2018, A/HRC/WG.15/5/2, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/038/14/PDF/G1803814.pdf?OpenElement>. See also “A New Step Forward in the Process for a UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants,” *La Via Campesina*, October 6, 2017, <https://viacampesina.org/en/new-step-forward-process-un-declaration-rights-peasants/>.

<sup>609</sup> E.g. Matthias Messmer and Hsin-Mei Chuang, *China's Vanishing Worlds: Countryside, Traditions, and Cultural Spaces* (The MIT Press, 2013); Bernstein, “Farewells to the Peasantry.” In this article, Bernstein discusses different versions of the disappearance of the peasantry deemed necessary to progress, while he himself does not argue for “the general or definitive demise of agricultural petty commodity production.”

epochs. I suggest that this coalition differs from both Hobsbawm's and Lin's conceptions of the peasantry, although there remains certain resonance with the latter.

The contemporary peasant movements challenge two traditional views: one, peasants represent an archaic way of life that belongs to a pre-capitalist history; two, peasants represent a less productive mode of production that persists only in subordinated articulation with the capitalist mode. Affirming that peasants are neither anachronistic nor backward, the movements fight for global agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and agroecology to build a viable and more sustainable alternative to industrial capitalism. They work to challenge the dominant model of production rather than being resigned to simply complement it. Furthermore, even as the movements emphasize land redistribution and small-scale production, they move away from a primarily economic perspective on peasants. Instead, as partially reflected in the UN Declaration, they situate the political economy of peasant subsistence within more encompassing "ways of life." Because the movements embody diverse social relations and cosmologies, socialism is not the sole political ideal and peasants are not necessarily revolutionary agents in the way Lin and Mao posited them. Yet, I maintain that there is an important connection between contemporary agrarian movements and former socialist revolutions. Apart from ideological overlap in certain locales, the connection lies in the appreciation that rural areas, still encircling the cities, hold the potential for radical social renewal, and that peasants, revolutionaries or not, constitute a vital force of democratic politics in the world.

Suffice it to say that the “Declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas”<sup>610</sup> results from long years of mobilization and negotiation, including 17 years at the UN alone, based on issues stemming from grassroots movements. Instrumental in bringing this about is La Vía Campesina, which identifies itself as “an international movement bringing together millions of peasants, small and medium size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world.”<sup>611</sup> La Vía Campesina, whose name is translated as “The Peasant Way,” was founded in 1993, at a time when Hobsbawm declared the death of the peasantry. Since then, La Vía Campesina has grown considerably, and it now comprises 182 local and national organizations in 81 countries from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

I argue that the work of La Vía Campesina together with other social movements and people’s organizations to renew peasant politics and “globalize the struggle”<sup>612</sup> serves as an important example of subaltern power. Before elaborating on its power in this chapter, let me draw out a few aspects of the subalternity of this ongoing struggle. First, as symbolically and discursively significant as the UN Declaration is, it should be seen as one articulation, rather than the culmination, of the struggle. Even by comparing the different drafts of the Declaration alone, we can already gain a sense of the politics of dispute and negotiation with regard to how the rights are framed and how the specific articles are worded.<sup>613</sup> More broadly speaking, as I have discussed in chapter 4, rights is

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<sup>610</sup> In this chapter, I henceforth refer to this in the short form as the Declaration.

<sup>611</sup> <https://viacampesina.org/en/international-peasants-voice/>.

<sup>612</sup> One of La Vía Campesina’s slogans is “Globalizing hope, globalizing the struggle!”.

<sup>613</sup> For a close reading of the politics of revisions involved in drafting the Declaration, see Robin Dunford, “Peasant Activism and the Rise of Food Sovereignty: Decolonising and Democratising Norm Diffusion?,” *European Journal of International Relations* 23:1 (2017): 145-167.

an important arena, but only one among many in which subaltern struggles are staged. Rights claiming does not exhaust the subaltern languages to define a different world order.

Second, the materialization of the Declaration acquires international visibility after long years of arduous and tenacious, albeit inconspicuous, work. It speaks to the slow and quiet motion of subaltern power. Its noticeable manifestations may only be the tip of an iceberg. Nettie Wiebe, the president of the National Farmers Union of Canada from 1995-1998, uses the analogy of buried and sprouted seeds to speak of the long temporality of struggle in relation to its visible results. She spoke to the delegates at the Second International Conference of La Vía Campesina in Tlaxcala, Mexico in 1996: “I come from a place where the winter is long and cold, and I feel that we have planted some seeds and this is our spring. Some of our seeds are still buried deeply, but I am seeing that many have sprouted. And we, the people of the land who know the seasons, are seeing growth and feeling hope.”<sup>614</sup> To go with Wiebe’s metaphor, for every seed that has sprouted, there remain others that are still buried deeply. The latter may be undetectable to many, but intimately known to the cultivators themselves. Invisibility is distinguished from absence.

Third, from a perspective that privileges scale, peasant activism would not be on the map of world politics unless it coalesces into an international movement like La Vía Campesina. Granted, the significance of transnational organization cannot be underestimated. Certain interactions and transformations are only possible in the bringing together of diverse peoples and ideas from the world over. Moreover, mobilizations

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<sup>614</sup> Quoted in Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*, 32.

across nations and regions are crucial in reshaping institutional dialogues and policies at international organizations. However, an exclusive focus on transnational dynamics in explaining change is inadequate. From the perspective of subaltern politics, it is also important to remember that transnational movements like La Vía Campesina would not exist but for a myriad of place-based struggles being fought day in, day out across the earth. The latter compose the former. That's why when Ms. Elizabeth Mpfu, who is an organic peasant farmer in Zimbabwe and the General Coordinator of La Vía Campesina (2012-present), was asked about how La Vía Campesina was assisting local struggles in her country, she clarified, "There is no Vía Campesina if it is not me. I am the Vía Campesina because campesina means farmer. So what the movement is all about, Vía Campesina is about [bringing] the farmers, the peasants together to share the knowledge."<sup>615</sup> Ms. Mpfu made clear that it is not transnational networks that effect change for peasants; rather, it is peasants who constitute the movements and bring about change for the world.

Fourth, it is not the case that the rural only becomes global with the emergence of La Vía Campesina. Yes, transnational coordination is involved as diverse place-based struggles link up with one another through La Vía Campesina. This is one sense of being global. Yet in another sense, the rural has long been global insofar as it has been profoundly reconfigured and exploited through processes of colonization and capital accumulation. With cities being represented as cosmopolitan, globality is often associated with urban areas only. Nevertheless, the devaluation of rural areas in both material and

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<sup>615</sup> Elizabeth Mpfu, Lecture, the African Studies Initiative Public Symposium entitled "Exploring African Agricultural Futures," cosponsored by the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, November 9-10, 2017.

symbolic terms has always undergirded urban- and industrial-centric development.

Commenting on “the conversion of the rural into data through the patenting of indigenous knowledge and through pharmaceutical interests in seeds and population control,”

Gayatri Spivak productively re-positions the rural in how we conceptualize it in relation to globalization, “the rural front is a real front of globalization. The urban phenomenon, which is much more spectacular, is what is visible and instrumental.”<sup>616</sup> Only by understanding the rural as a real front of globalization instead of mistakenly treating it as a left behind backwater, can we realize the extent to which the violent production of the contemporary rural makes possible and sustains the dominant model of global development.

It is in this context of rural and peasant subalternity that I wish to highlight the power of an international peasant movement such as La Vía Campesina. I argue that the significance of this movement cannot be captured within analyses of norm diffusion because it does not merely add new standards of appropriate behavior to a liberal, capitalist world order. Rather, the movement aims to build a different world by challenging the political economic structures that valorize urban-industrial civilization and make rural-agrarian life increasingly uninhabitable for peasants, family farmers, indigenous peoples, the landless, and other people residing and working in rural areas. Grounded in already existing, albeit subalternized, ways of living and producing from the land and sea, the movement fosters urban-rural equality, ecologically restorative agricultural systems, and democratic governance.

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<sup>616</sup> Jenny Sharpe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the Imagination,” *Signs* 28:2 (2003), 610-612.



A world order in which rural well-being and prosperity is, again, desirable and attainable would have a direct and momentous impact on a significant part of humanity. With regard to the population subsisting on small-scale farming in the Global South alone, it would affect about “two-thirds of the developing world’s 3 billion rural people [who] live in about 475 million small farm households, working on land plots smaller than 2 hectares.”<sup>617</sup> At the same time, it is worth stressing that La Vía Campesina is working towards a global transformation that re-organizes the common, socially and ecologically, instead of benefiting only a particular group. In that sense, the movement plays a crucial role in staging something akin to a global dissensus. It reconfigures that which is given in the sensible regarding food, farming, ecological sustenance, rural-urban relations, and living well. In what follows, I focus on three noteworthy dimensions of the alternative vision of world order that La Vía Campesina seeks to materialize: international agrarian restructuring, rural reconstruction with new articulations, and epistemic decolonization.

## **2. International agrarian restructuring: Food sovereignty, agroecology, and global agrarian reform**

To counter the systemic devaluation of the rural, La Vía Campesina advocates nothing short of international agrarian restructuring.<sup>618</sup> Key to this restructuring are three closely connected campaigns for food sovereignty, agroecology, and global agrarian reform.

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<sup>617</sup> George Rapsomanikis, *The Economic Lives of Smallholder Farmers* (Rome: FAO, 2015), <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5251e.pdf>.

<sup>618</sup> Rajeev Patel, “International Agrarian Restructuring and the Practical Ethics of Peasant Movement Solidarity,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 41:1/2 (2006): 71-93.

La Vía Campesina first launched the concept of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit in 1996. In the Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali in 2007, food sovereignty is defined as following:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.<sup>619</sup>

The political vision of food sovereignty challenges the promotion of food security by institutions of global governance. The UN's Committee on World Food Security defines the latter, also in 1996, as the condition in which "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."<sup>620</sup> While the definition of food security mentions food access, safety, and nutrition, it does not at all touch on the questions of how food is produced and where it comes from. Food security, then, lends itself easily to reproducing the dominant international economic order. Food sovereignty,

<sup>619</sup> "Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty," Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali, February 27, 2007, final edited version March 27, 2007, <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>.

<sup>620</sup> Raj Patel notes the changing definitions of food security at the UN from 1974 to 1996 according to varying political economic contexts. Specifically, he points out the shift from state redistribution of resources to individual ability to access food made available through the market and trade. See Raj Patel, "What Does Food Sovereignty Look Like?", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36:3 (2009): 663-673.

on the contrary, problematizes three major issues within this order: the industrial model of agricultural production, liberalized agricultural trade dominated by developed countries, and massive rural displacement through global land grabbing.

International discourses on food security often presume that food insecurity results from a lack of food supply. Consequently, increasing agricultural productivity is prioritized as a solution. As mentioned in chapter 3, this diagnosis and prescription ignore the fact that “the world currently already produces sufficient calories per head to feed a global population of 12-14 billion.”<sup>621</sup> Meanwhile, the focus on food supply and agricultural productivity aligns with practices of dumping food on to poorer nations. Food dumping is enabled by unequal terms of trade wherein wealthy farmers in developed countries receive large subsidies while subsistence farmers in developing countries are deprived of agricultural subsidies and supports.<sup>622</sup> As a result, massive imports of cheap, subsidized food from the US and the European Union are recommended as an aid to achieving food security in developing countries. In reality, they undermine local producers while consolidating market share and control of the world’s food system in the hands of multinational corporations.

Furthermore, the emphasis on productivity for the sake of food security provides the rationale for large-scale land acquisitions in pursuit of capitalized forms of agriculture. Thus, the World Bank’s 2011 report titled *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?* identifies relative land

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<sup>621</sup> UNCTD, *Wake Up*, iii.

<sup>622</sup> Rahul Rao, “Blenheim & Bangalore”; Bello, *The Food Wars*; Patel, “International Agrarian Restructuring.”

availability and “yield gaps” in each continent.<sup>623</sup> A yield gap is the assessed divergence between actual yields and potential productivity, or as the Bank puts it, “the amount by which output could be increased under best practice management and production technologies.”<sup>624</sup> These gaps can be overcome to address the challenge of global food security, according to the Bank, through voluntary large-scale land transfers to responsible investors. Hence, the Bank, the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the UNCTAD devised the “Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment.” However, Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food (2008-2014), censured these principles for reinforcing industrial agriculture while “responsibly destroying the world’s peasantry.”<sup>625</sup> Critiquing the “‘yield gap’ epistemic premise of the global land grab,” Bikrum Gill alerts us to how the racialized construction of “unused nature” erases the agency of both indigenous peoples and extra-human natures in purposefully maintaining rather than incompetently wasting the so-called gap.<sup>626</sup>

At issue here is a clash not simply between two concepts – food sovereignty and food security – but between two political economic orders that allow for different models of agricultural production and development itself. La Vía Campesina rejects industrial agriculture and the corporate trade and food regime because they advance, in the words

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<sup>623</sup> Klaus Deininger and Derek Byerlee et al., *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2011).

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>625</sup> Olivier de Schutter, “Responsibly Destroying the World’s Peasantry,” *Project Syndicate*, June 4, 2010, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/responsibly-destroying-the-world-s-peasantry?barrier=accesspaylog>. To read further on a long history of the World Bank’s complicity in the structural violence against peasants, see Eric Holt-Giménez and Tanya M. Kerssen, “The World Bank’s Long War on Peasants,” *Food First*, April 20, 2015, <https://foodfirst.org/the-world-banks-long-war-on-peasants/>.

<sup>626</sup> Gill, “Race, Nature, and Accumulation.”

of Alberto Gomez Flores, “a global offensive against the countryside,” “a global offensive against small producers and family farmers that are not in the logic of an “efficient” countryside, an industrialized countryside.”<sup>627</sup> More than rejecting the dominant system, La Vía Campesina articulates a concrete alternative based on the principle of food sovereignty. This alternative centers on peasant farmers and local producers, promotes subsistence agriculture, and draws on existing place-based knowledges and practices of sustainable food production. Subsistence here is not confined to an economic perspective indicating either privation or self-provision. Rather, it comes closer to what Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies describes as a life-centered political economy: “freedom, happiness, self-determination within the limits of necessity – not in some other world but here; furthermore persistence, stamina, willingness to resist, the view from below, a world of plenty.”<sup>628</sup>

Notably, La Vía Campesina affirms peoples’ self-determination in defining their own food and agriculture systems. This collective orientation diverges from both a notion of food security based on individual ability to access food and a liberal conception of individual rights. Peoples can refer to nation-states as well as non-state political communities such as indigenous nations.<sup>629</sup> Food sovereignty is gradually being institutionalized at the national level as half a dozen of countries have adopted policies

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<sup>627</sup> Alberto Gomez Flores was executive co-ordinator of UNORCA (Union Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autonomas, or National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations) in 2000. UNORCA identifies itself as a non-profit and non-partisan network of 1,400 Mexican campesino and Indigenous farming organizations representing 200,000 producers in 27 Mexican states. Flores’ quote is cited in Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*, 40.

<sup>628</sup> Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2000), 19. See also Leigh Brownhill, *Land, Food, Freedom: Struggles for the Gendered Commons in Kenya, 1870-2007* (Africa World Press, 2009).

<sup>629</sup> For a discussion of possible co-articulations of food sovereignty and indigeneity, see Sam Grey and Raj Patel, “Food Sovereignty as Decolonization: Some Contributions from Indigenous Movements to Food System and Development Politics,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 32:3 (2015): 431-444.

for food sovereignty to support domestic production and consumption.<sup>630</sup> Seven countries have integrated food sovereignty into their national constitutions or laws: Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Nepal, Mali, Senegal, and Egypt.<sup>631</sup> Ecuador was the first country to enshrine food sovereignty in its 2008 constitution, which specifies state responsibilities, among others, to promote organic and ecological principles in agricultural production, to adopt redistributive policies to support small farmers, and to protect the national economy from food import dependency.<sup>632</sup> The following year, the National Assembly of Ecuador passed the Organic Law on Food Sovereignty Regime.<sup>633</sup> For another important example of the institutionalization of the principle of food sovereignty, the National Assembly of Venezuela enacted a new seed law in 2015, which was lauded as “one of the most progressive seed laws in the world.”<sup>634</sup> Quite remarkably, it promotes the transition to “communal and eco-socialist agriculture, in order to protect agro-biodiversity”; valorizes the Indigenous, Afro-descendent, peasant, and local seeds;

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<sup>630</sup> Raj Patel, “‘Food Sovereignty’ is Next Big Idea: Concept Spawnd by Farmers Moving Beyond the Fields into Global Policy,” *Food First*, December 17, 2013, <https://foodfirst.org/food-sovereignty-is-next-big-idea/>. This article was originally published in *Financial Times* on November 19, 2013 .

<sup>631</sup> Annette Desmarais, Hannah Wittman, and Nettie Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community* (Food First, 2010); Ben McKay, Ryan Nehring & Marygold Walsh-Dilley, “The ‘state’ of food sovereignty in Latin America: political projects and alternative pathways in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41:6 (2014): 1175-1200; Wendy Godek, “Challenges for food sovereignty policy making: the case of Nicaragua’s Law 693,” *Third World Quarterly* 36:3 (2015): 526-543.

<sup>632</sup> Article 281 of Ecuador’s constitution states, “Food sovereignty constitutes an objective and strategic obligation of the State to guarantee that people, communities, pueblos, and nationalities achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis.” For further details, see Desmarais, Wittman, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty*; Nathan Bellinger and Michael Fakhri, “The Intersection Between Food Sovereignty and Law,” *Natural Resources & Environment* 28:2 (Fall 2013); Karla Peña, “Opening the Door to Food Sovereignty in Ecuador,” *Food First*, December 1, 2008.

<sup>633</sup> Some sections of this bill, however, were later vetoed by President Correa. Both government officials and social movements in Ecuador have questioned the influence of agri-business on the President’s partial veto. *Ibid.*

<sup>634</sup> See William Camacaro, Frederick B. Mills, and Christina M. Schiavoni, “Venezuela Passes Law Banning GMOs, by Popular Demand,” *Counter Punch*, January 1, 2016, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/01/venezuela-passes-law-banning-gmos-by-popular-demand-2/>. See also “Statement of International Solidarity with Venezuela’s Seed Law,” *GRAIN*, May 30, 2016, [https://www.grain.org/bulletin\\_board/entries/5497-statement-of-international-solidarity-with-venezuela-s-seed-law](https://www.grain.org/bulletin_board/entries/5497-statement-of-international-solidarity-with-venezuela-s-seed-law).

“opposes the conversion of seed into intellectual or patented property or any other form of privatization”; and prohibits transgenic seeds.<sup>635</sup>

Going hand in hand with food sovereignty is La Vía Campesina’s campaign for agroecology. Since I have discussed peasant agroecology, as distinct from the attempt to mainstream agroecology, in chapter 3, here I wish to only highlight that the movement has been particularly fervent about the defense of local seeds against the privatization of seeds and corporate control. This is reflected in the articulation of the right to seeds in the UN Declaration. Let us note that the initial draft of the Declaration in 2013 included “the right to reject,” which was removed from the revised draft in 2018. The following two clauses under the Article on the right to seeds were deleted: “Peasants have the right to reject varieties of plants which they consider to be dangerous economically, ecologically and culturally”; “Peasants have the right to reject the industrial model of agriculture.”<sup>636</sup> Still, the institutionalization of the collective right to food sovereignty and of such a thing as the right to seeds remains threatening to a dominant state like the US. It thus expressed its reasoning for opposing the adoption of the draft Declaration:

The draft also purports to enumerate new rights for this group, including collective rights. This effort to create human rights for groups instead of for individuals is inconsistent with international human rights law. Further, many of the proposed new rights have no precedent. For instance, there is no internationally accepted definition of the “right to seeds.”<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*, July 15-19, 2013, A/HRC/WG.15/1/2, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2\\_En.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2_En.pdf).

<sup>637</sup> “United States Opening Statement at the Working Group on the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas,” May 16, 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPleasants/Session3/statementsbystates/UnitedStates.pdf>.



Figure 5.1: Peasant saved seeds at Shashe Agroecology School, Zimbabwe, 2017.<sup>638</sup>

Last but not least, La Vía Campesina launched the “Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform” (GCAR) in 1999, with the FoodFirst Information and Action Network and later the Land Research Action Network (LRAN). It directly opposed the neoliberal model of market-led agrarian reform based on securing formal private property rights,

<sup>638</sup> The picture is from “La Vía Campesina,” *Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/viacampesinaOFFICIAL/photos/pcb.1618198108250754/1618192194918012/?type=3&theater>. The post on October 24, 2017 reads, “La Vía Campesina International Coordinating Committee (ICC) members at Shashe Agroecology School during the field visit on Monday 23. A seed fair was organised to showcase the local peasant seed diversity to the ICC members. Over 50 peasants mostly women showcased a wide diversity of peasant saved seeds.”



which was on the official agendas of international institutions then.<sup>639</sup> Instead, the GCAR supports both state-led agrarian reforms and land occupations, or what may be called “land reform from below.”<sup>640</sup> Members of La Vía Campesina come from countries with significant political traditions of land occupations and peasant movements in pursuit of agrarian justice and democratic citizenship, such as Brazil, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia.<sup>641</sup> Whereas opponents of land occupations delegitimize them by labeling them “invasions,” Indra Lubis, a leader of the West Sumatra Peasants’ Union and the Indonesian Peasants’ Union, explains the importance of land occupations for La Vía Campesina in terms of enacting grassroots transformation and pressuring policy change from below:

At the same time, LVC needs to stick with land occupations. Occupying land isn’t outmoded or based on old theory or old practice. With land occupations we achieve small victories and that’s how we grow. We can talk about the UN or about international policy, but our members at the local level can’t wait for such and such a negotiation, for a certain policy to be agreed upon and implemented. It will take years to obtain results from the system at the policy level. Yet the land issue continues at the grassroots level, so we must keep occupying land at the grassroots level, and implement agroecology and the cooperative model. (...) this is also a very effective pressure tactic to bring about implementation at the policy level. This is the importance of global campaigns – to justify the land occupations on the local level in order to influence those international policies toward which we are working.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Saturnino M. Borras Jr., “La Vía Campesina and Its Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8:2-3 (2008): 258-289.

<sup>640</sup> Peter Rosset, “Re-thinking Agrarian Reform, Land and Territory in La Vía Campesina,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40:4 (2013): 721-775.

<sup>641</sup> Hannah Wittman, “Reframing Agrarian Citizenship: Land, Life and Power in Brazil,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 25 (2009): 120-130; Wolford, *This Land Is Ours Now*; Carmen Diana Deere and Leonilde Servolo de Medeiros, “Agrarian Reform and Poverty Reduction: Lessons from Brazil,” in *Land, Poverty and Livelihoods*, 80-118; Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, “Land Occupations and Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Towards the National Democratic Revolution,” in *Reclaiming the Land*; Christian Lund and Noer Fauzi Rachman, “Occupied! Property, Citizenship and Peasant Movements in Rural Java,” *Development and Change* 47:6 (2016): 1316-1337; Suraya Afiff, Noer Fauzi, Gillian Hart, Lungisile Ntsebeza, and Nancy Peluso, *Redefining Agrarian Power: Resurgent Agrarian Movements in West Java, Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, University of California Berkeley, 2005); Noer Fauzi Rachman, *Land Reform dan Gerakan Agraria Indonesia* [The Resurgence of Land Reform Policy and Agrarian Movements in Indonesia] (Yogyakarta: Insist Press, 2016).

<sup>642</sup> In 2013, Indra Lubis was also part of the International Operative Secretariat of La Vía Campesina and team member of the GCAR. He is cited in Rosset, “Re-thinking Agrarian Reform,” 761.

The GCAR is a vital political response to the conditions of landlessness and high concentration of land ownership in the world, which have been exacerbated with the most recent wave of global land grabbing.<sup>643</sup> At the same time, the GCAR is not a mere reaction to these conditions of inequality; it offers an alternate vision of farming, of agrarian life, and of the broader common. It is common knowledge that the object of land reform is never land as a means of production alone because one would not be able to stay on the land without policies and programs that facilitate agrarian life in the long term. So it is not surprising that from very early on, La Vía Campesina called for “integral or genuine agrarian reform” that would couple access to land with policies supportive of peasant agriculture. In its III International Conference in Bangalore in 2000, the movement also linked agrarian reform to food sovereignty, placing emphasis on the redistribution of land to “produce food for people, rather than exports for the global economy.”<sup>644</sup> Furthermore, La Vía Campesina encourages agro-ecological practices on land newly obtained through occupations or state-led reforms, which are especially helpful to recover soil fertility and general biodiversity on degraded land.<sup>645</sup>

As the movement carries on dialogues, debates, and reflections – both internally among its diverse organizations and externally with its allies and critics – it keeps revising concepts and visions in pursuit of a more just world. An important revision occurred when La Vía Campesina learned from indigenous peoples and rethought its agrarian struggle from the perspective of territory rather than just land. As the agrarian

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<sup>643</sup> “The Global Land Grab: A Primer,” *Transnational Institute*, February 2013, <https://www.tni.org/files/download/landgrabbingprimer-feb2013.pdf>.

<sup>644</sup> Rosset, “Re-thinking Agrarian Reform,” 724.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*, 727.

leader Faustino Torrez from Nicaragua explains, “Territory expresses the identity of a people, it is where the ancestors lived and where they still reside, it means knowledge and ways of knowing (*saberes*), historical memory, and the right of usufruct of the communal resources which properly speaking belong to the Mother Earth.”<sup>646</sup> This territorial perspective resounded in the “Land, Territory, and Dignity” Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006. The Forum’s Declaration puts forth the following concept of territory:

No agrarian reform is acceptable that is based only on land distribution. We believe that the new agrarian reform must include a cosmic vision of the territories of communities of peasants, the landless, indigenous peoples, rural workers, fisherfolk, nomadic pastoralists, tribes, afrodescendents, ethnic minorities, and displaced peoples, who base their work on the production of food and who maintain a relationship of respect and harmony with Mother Earth and with the oceans.<sup>647</sup>

In noticeable contrast, in the process of drafting the UN Declaration, the Article on the “right to land and territory” in the initial draft is edited into the “right to land and other natural resources” in the latest version. The term “territory” is nowhere mentioned in the 2018 document. It is noteworthy that according to the revised draft, states “shall carry out redistributive agrarian reforms,” which “must guarantee equal access of men and women to land, fisheries and forests, and shall limit excessive concentration and control of land taking into account its social function.”<sup>648</sup> Nonetheless, it also dropped a more specific and assertive clause from the initial draft, which read: “Peasants have the right to benefit from land reform. Latifundia must not be allowed. Land has to fulfill its social function. Land ceilings to landownership should be introduced whenever necessary

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<sup>646</sup> Ibid., 726.

<sup>647</sup> “Final Declaration: ‘Land, Territory, and Dignity’ Forum.”

<sup>648</sup> United Nations, *Revised draft*, A/HRC/WG.15/5/2.

in order to ensure equitable access to land.”<sup>649</sup>

Ultimately, the GCAR is about more than land and agriculture. As stated in one of the opening quotes of this chapter, it is about what kind of society and world we want to live in. It is about the social relations that we want to build, and rebuild, in continual dialogue with one another. This leads to the subject of the next section.

### **3. Rural reconstruction with new articulations**

Whether it is the affirmation by Plan de Ayala Siglo XXI 2.0 that “*¡Otro Campo es Posible!*” or La Vía Campesina’s call for a global revival of peasant agroecology, contemporary peasant movements are not advocating an unreconstructed return to some rustic idyll. As they inherit their place-worlds and carry memories of past struggles, they are also reconstructing the rural anew, with articulations befitting the current conjuncture. We can discern this reflective and ongoing reconstruction from the dynamic articulations of who constitute the movements, what issues are foregrounded, and what futures they aspire toward.

First, important issues related to gender inequality in rural-agrarian settings are brought to the fore. La Vía Campesina has been making conscious efforts to address gender inequality in the society and inside the movement itself. It did not start out that way though. Issues were gradually brought up through in-depth discussions and heated debates. As Peter Rosset notes, questions of women leadership and women’s land rights featured in the movement’s earliest declarations. Nevertheless, it was not until the International Seminar on “Agrarian reform and gender” in Cochambama, Bolivia, in

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<sup>649</sup> United Nations, *Declaration*, A/HRC/WG.15/1/2.

2003 that there was intense collective engagement on how these questions bore on the movement's visions and processes. La Via Campesina made an explicit statement about tackling intersectional forms of violence in its own organizations at the V International Conference in Maputo, Mozambique, in 2008:

All the forms of violence that women face in our societies – among them physical, economic, social, cultural and macho violence, and violence based on differences of power – are also present in rural communities, and as a result, in our organizations. This, in addition to being a principal source of injustice, also limits the success of our struggles. We recognize the intimate relationships between capitalism, patriarchy, machismo and neo-liberalism, in detriment to the women peasants and farmers of the world. All of us together, women and men of La Via Campesina, make a responsible commitment to build new and better human relationships among us, as a necessary part of the construction of the new societies to which we aspire... We commit ourselves anew, with greater strength, to the goal of achieving that complex but necessary true gender parity in all spaces and organs of debate, discussion, analysis and decision-making in La Via Campesina, and to strengthen the exchange, coordination and solidarity among the women of our regions.<sup>650</sup>

It is out of processes of debates and confrontations such as the above that the rights of peasant women and other women working in rural areas are written into the UN Declaration. The current draft affirms, among others, their rights “to participate equally and effectively in the formulation and implementation of development planning at all levels”; to have equal access to a range of productive resources, financial services, and social protection benefits; and to have “equal access to, use of and control over land and natural resources, including inheritance thereof, independently of their civil and marital status and of particular tenure systems, and equal or priority treatment in land and agrarian reform and in land resettlement schemes.”<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Cited in Rosset, “Re-thinking Agrarian Reform,” 729-30.

<sup>651</sup> United Nations, *Revised draft*, A/HRC/WG.15/5/2.

Second, at its VII International Conference in Derio, Basque Country, in 2017, La Via Campesina formally opened a debate about gender and sexual diversity for the first time since the founding of the movement. One of the participants urged, “This is a reality and we, as La Via Campesina, should not close our eyes to it. Many people in the countryside are killed for being of a different sexual orientation [than the ones represented in the heteronormativemodel]. We need to include this in our debates and take a political position in support of LGBTI\* comrades.”<sup>652</sup> This international discussion presumably followed the lead of one of its member organizations, the MST in Brazil, whose training booklet now states that “the issue of sexual diversity and the process of self-organizing of our LGBT militancy is a fundamental part of our project of emancipation.”<sup>653</sup> Only two years earlier, the MST organized a country-wide seminar in Guararema on “MST and sexual diversity” to devote formal attention to the situation of the LGBT landless also for the first time. It inspired the European Coordination Via Campesina to follow suit.<sup>654</sup>

Third, La Via Campesina includes many members that are conventionally not expected to comprise a peasant movement. Because it promotes the GCAR and fights for rural-agrarian well-being both for those who currently live on the land and for those who have left or been displaced and now wish to return, landless people constitute an

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<sup>652</sup> “La Via Campesina Peasants Initiate Debate on Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity in the Movement,” *La Via Campesina*, August 17, 2017, <https://viacampesina.org/en/la-via-campesina-peasants-initiate-debate-gender-sexual-orientation-diversity-movement/>.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

<sup>654</sup> Paula Gioia, “Gender Diversity in the Peasant Movement,” *La Via Campesina*, October 3, 2016, <https://viacampesina.org/en/gender-diversity-in-the-peasant-movement/>.

important part of the movement. Insofar as landlessness is a subjectivity<sup>655</sup> (as distinct from, say, homelessness or joblessness), one can also say that La Vía Campesina helps to create this subjectivity in that it contributes to making a return to or a reclaiming of land desirable. Therefore, if a typical definition of peasants tends to begin with some access to or relationship with land, the definition in the UN Declaration more open-endedly states that a peasant is any person “who engages or who seeks to engage” in small-scale agricultural production.<sup>656</sup> The phrase “or who seeks to engage” may seem like a minor addition, but I suggest that it evidences a consequential re-articulation of peasant as a political identity, in the global arena, to include the landless.

In addition, La Vía Campesina, as an international peasant movement, consists of and/or works closely with indigenous peoples, tribes, Afro-descendants, forest dwellers, riverine and coastal peoples, and nomadic pastoralists. Differences and friction in such a heterogeneous gathering may not be easy to navigate. At the same time, this coming together also allows for the possibility of learning from one another as well as co-articulating differing concerns. As mentioned in the previous section, indigenous leaders urged La Vía Campesina to re-envision agrarian reform from a territorial perspective. This rethinking also helped to accommodate different communities, as Rosset notes, “such that the distribution of land to peasants would no longer mean a truncation of the rights of pastoralists to seasonal grazing areas, of fisher folk to fishing sites, and of forest

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<sup>655</sup> E.g: See the discussion of the formation of a “landless subjectivity” in South Africa in Amanda Alexander, “Rights Beyond the Urban-Rural Divide: South Africa’s Landless People’s Movement and the creation of a Landless Subjectivity,” in *Silencing Human Rights*, 223-241.

<sup>656</sup> For the full definition, see United Nations, *Revised draft*, A/HRC/WG.15/5/2.

dwellers to forests.”<sup>657</sup> This was how Indra Lubis, a peasant leader in Asia, learned from his comrades from another continent:

I remember in the old days when people talked about the struggle for agrarian reform they were only thinking of farmers, or only of landless peasants, and sometimes our comrades in Africa said that agrarian reform was a problem there, because it gave the land to one actor, the peasant, but excluded others like the nomadic pastoralists for whom land reform was a form of enclosure. Now in LVC we must take into account other rural people such as pastoralists and fisher folk.<sup>658</sup>

Last but not least, from the moment La Vía Campesina launched the concept of food sovereignty, it has been attentive to building urban-rural linkages to support a food system that is healthier and more ecologically sustainable than the one driven by the demands of markets and corporations. Though generated by an international peasant movement, the concept has worked for both urban consumers of rural produce and local food producers residing in urban areas.

More recently, at the Bukit Tinggi international workshop held in West Sumatra, Indonesia, in 2012 on “Agrarian reform and the defense of land and territory in the 21st century,” participants raised the question of building alliances between rural peoples and the urban poor based on “land sovereignty.” Such alliances would go beyond the existing connections based on food production and consumption. The question arose due to the massive evictions of the urban poor caused by real estate speculation:

Despite the necessary focus on rural areas, our vision must also address the challenges in urban areas with respect to land, water, housing, food and essential services. The same forces of speculative capital that drive land grabbing and displace rural peoples also drive real estate speculation that lead to mass evictions

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<sup>657</sup> Rosset, “Re-thinking Agrarian Reform,” 724.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*, 759-60.



of the urban poor. We must build rural-urban ‘land sovereignty’ alliances to fight common enemies.<sup>659</sup>

According to Saturnino Borrás Jr. and Jennifer Franco’s elaboration on this concept of land sovereignty, land is not only resource but also territory and landscape. As such, a land sovereignty perspective, they propose, “embraces struggles by indigenous movements, rural labourers, urban activists and social movements North and South who have sometimes been excluded by traditional land reform campaigns.”<sup>660</sup>

Above are some of the novel articulations of the contemporary peasant movements to reconstruct the rural and build a more just world. Newer ones will emerge as the movements continue to learn, in struggle and in dialogue. In the last section, I will end with a few brief notes about the dialogue among different knowledges and ways of knowing that peasant movements practice, *diálogo de saberes* as they call it.<sup>661</sup>

#### 4. Epistemic decolonization

“There is no Vía Campesina if it is not me. I am the Vía Campesina because campesina means farmer. So what the movement is all about, Vía Campesina is about [bringing] the farmers, the peasants together to share the knowledge.” I return to Elizabeth Mporfu’s statement here because I find it simple and yet powerful. Her unequivocal affirmation makes audible the subaltern peasant-farmer as a subject of knowledge, of movement, and of globality.

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<sup>659</sup> Shalmali Guttal is a researcher and analyst at Focus on the Global South in Thailand, a co-coordinator of LRAN, and a member of the GCAR team for many years. See Guttal, “Porto Alegre, Nyéléni and Bukit Tinggi,” 746.

<sup>660</sup> Saturnino M. Borrás Jr. and Jennifer C. Franco, “A ‘Land Sovereignty’ Alternative? Towards a Peoples’ Counter-Enclosure,” *Transnational Institute*, July 2012, [https://www.tni.org/files/a\\_land\\_sovereignty\\_alternative.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/a_land_sovereignty_alternative.pdf).

<sup>661</sup> María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset, “Diálogo de Saberes in La Vía Campesina: Food Sovereignty and Agroecology,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2014): 1-19.

Rather than separating the global from the local or relying on changes resulting from policies, peasants take initiatives in their own locales in constructing alternatives to the dominant order. That's why Indra Lubis from the Indonesian Peasants' Union makes clear that peasants are not waiting for negotiations to be finalized at the UN. Rather, he maintains, "we must keep occupying land at the grassroots level, and implement agroecology and the cooperative model." Beyond land occupations, he points to the collective initiation and cultivation of concrete alternatives such as agroecological and cooperative farming. Similarly, Pedro Magaña Guerrero, a peasant leader from UNORCA in Mexico, tells us that it is first and foremost the place-based materialization of alternatives that makes a global process viable:

But what about the process of construction? How much have we advanced on that front? Yes, we are gaining experience, yes, there are confrontations, and yes, there are possibilities of building a global movement. But this doesn't depend on a global process. The consolidation of alternatives rests completely on what is happening at the local level, it depends on the development of organizations in their regions, in their countries. This gives viability to a global process.<sup>662</sup>

It is already significant that La Vía Campesina grounds the construction of a different world in peasants' knowledge and action. What is further inspiring about the movement is that peasants are actively seeking each other out in order to exchange knowledges and ways of knowing from different places: *campesino a campesino* (peasant to peasant).<sup>663</sup> Turning to each other, they are both challenging the hierarchy of knowledge based on "the rule of experts"<sup>664</sup> and fostering mutual learning among diverse horizons. João Pedro Stédile from MST Brazil shares his experience of shifting to a new

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<sup>662</sup> Cited in Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*, 135.

<sup>663</sup> E.g: See Holt-Giménez, *Campesino a Campesino*.

<sup>664</sup> Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*.

perspective on land and farming in dialogue with fellow farmers from Việt Nam and

India:

One plank on which we agree, at the international level, is that there must be the sort of agrarian reform that would democratize the land – both as a basis for political democracy, and for building an agriculture of another kind. This has major implications. From the time of Zapata in Mexico, or of Julio in Brazil, the inspiration for agrarian reform was the idea that the land belonged to those who worked it. Today we need to go beyond this. It's not enough to argue that if you work the land, you have proprietary rights over it. The Vietnamese and Indian farmers have contributed a lot to our debates on this. They have a different view of agriculture, and of nature – one that we've tried to synthesize in *Vía Campesina*. We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming, that ensures an ecological equilibrium and also guarantees that land is not seen as private property.<sup>665</sup>

As Stédile explains La *Vía Campesina*'s concept of food sovereignty, he invokes Cuban independence leader José Martí's warning: "a people that cannot produce its own food are slaves; they don't have the slightest freedom. If a society doesn't produce what it eats, it will always be dependent on someone else."<sup>666</sup> When I read this, I thought: This is *dĩ nông vi bản*.<sup>667</sup> It immediately reminded me of Hồ Chí Minh's advice to treat agriculture and agri-people as the root of a society. Apparently, this is a common sense that has been marginalized in Việt Nam as well as in Brazil, but it continues to inform struggles in both places for a different society.

The *diálogo de saberes* that La *Vía Campesina* practices is a call *to* and *among* subaltern knowledges. What marks this dialogue apart from others is a revisiting and revitalization of ways of knowing that have been besieged and suppressed. As Enrique Leff eloquently puts it, "the dialog becomes an investigation, an exegesis, a hermeneutics

<sup>665</sup> João Pedro Stedile, "Landless Battalions: The Sem Terra Movement of Brazil," *New Left Review* 15 (2002), 99-100.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>667</sup> This is a reference back to chapter 4 where I talk about various articulations of the centrality of agriculture and agri-people to the imagination of the community in Việt Nam. What José Martí said resonates with both *phi nông bất ổn* (without agriculture no stability) and *dĩ nông vi bản* (agriculture is the root).

of erased texts; it is a therapeutic politics to return the words and the meaning of languages whose flow has been blocked.”<sup>668</sup>

In discussing a “worlding of many worlds,” Marisol de la Cadena foregrounds the “constitutive divergence” among these worlds even as alliances are made to “house hope for a commons.”<sup>669</sup> This commons, she argues, “emerge[s] from the uncommons as grounds for political negotiation of what the interest in common - and thus the commons – would be.”<sup>670</sup> This strikes me as particularly pertinent to a movement like La Vía Campesina, as it strives towards other rural-urban futures. To keep the dialogue among its heterogeneous members open-ended, La Vía Campesina would need to attend to their “uncommonalities”<sup>671</sup> as much as their commonalities. Rafael Alegría, Operational Secretariat (1996-2004), was cognizant of this need when he spoke of the movement’s dynamics. He made clear that the movement did not aspire towards oneness. In terms of discussions and debates, he underscored mutual listening and respect more than agreement. It would be apt to close this chapter with his caution that the movement would not embody an alternative if it attempts to force differences into vertical convergence:

We cannot have, nor aspire to have, only one way of thinking because we are so many, we are too big. What is important is to discuss, engage in debate and agree on some ways forward, not to detain ourselves. If there are contradictions or differences this is normal. What we need to do in the Vía Campesina is to ensure that we always have the capacity to listen to each other and always act with deep respect for the way of thinking of each of the organizations and to always discuss in an open and transparent way and then move forward. The day that the Vía Campesina attempts to impose ways of thinking or vertical lines, then we will have ceased to be a distinct social movement truly committed to building an

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<sup>668</sup> Cited in Martínez-Torres and Rosset, “Diálogo de Saberes,” 3.

<sup>669</sup> de la Cadena, “Uncommoning Nature,” 7.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid.

alternative model.<sup>672</sup>

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<sup>672</sup> Rafael Alegría was a peasant leader from COCOCH (Consejo Coordinador de Organizaciones Campesinas de Honduras), the Honduran Coordinating Council of Peasant Organizations. Cited in Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*, 38.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Please allow me to begin with a brief anecdote not of mine. I came across it in the preface to Ngô Vĩnh Long's book, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French*. Ngô recollected his experience as a student at Harvard amidst the US war in Việt Nam. One of his professors at the time served as a consultant to the State Department and the Defense Department, and later became National Security Adviser and Secretary of State. Coming back from a fact finding tour of Việt Nam in 1967, this professor, Ngô recalled, cheerfully lectured about the US winning the war thanks to its massive military presence. The peasants, the professor found, were simple-minded and indifferent to both sides as long as they were left alone. He also joked that every time he asked them a simple question, they gave him epic poems as answers. Ngô then wrote this professor a 12-page letter to explain that the western concept of "might makes right" would not apply to Việt Nam where a different set of cultural values and principles determined political legitimacy and shaped political struggle. It would be impossible, the letter concluded, for the US to win in Việt Nam. Ngô wrote, "Victory in Việt Nam requires more than force alone... If those people are defeated today, they... will fight again when they can recuperate their strength." In response to Ngô's view, another Harvard professor, also of political science, told him, "Long, you are really naive. Every country, like every human being, has a breaking point, Việt Nam included." Ngô's

insistence on the “deep-seated support for and the resiliency of the Vietnamese revolution” would fall on unlistening ears.<sup>673</sup>

I retell this story here because it is, for me, emblematic of the disjuncture between two radically different conceptions of power. In oversimplified terms, it is a disjuncture between power as might and power as strength. The former is hypervisible (in this case, it is manifest in massive military presence). It thereby acquires the appearance of being ultra-real. By ultra-real, I mean it appears as if no other reality can be possible. The US was winning, for how could it be otherwise given the superpower’s overwhelming force. Ngô’s view could only be deemed “really naive.”

Power as strength is more subtle, as it is expressed in registers not easily recognized or accesible. It takes an intimate understanding of its social, cultural, and historical basis to appreciate its resiliency and read the terms of its politics. Those in dominant positions, trapped in the ultra-reality of their might, are clueless about this form of power.

I was quite struck by the certainty with which Ngô announced, in 1967, that it would be impossible for the US to win in Việt Nam. Furthermore, he was assessing reality within a temporality unintelligible to his Harvard professors, the temporality of subaltern insurgency: “If those people are defeated today, they... will fight again when they can recuperate their strength.” Articulations such as these would be found more abundantly in Việt Nam at the time.

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<sup>673</sup> Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution*; Ngo Vinh Long, ““If They’re Making Maps, They’re Preparing For War,”” in Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (Penguin Books, 2004), 54-59.

In the initial stage of doing research for this project, I encountered expressions of power as strength in quite a different context. In the past few years, as one after another violent incident of rural land seizure occurred in Việt Nam, I followed closely, first and foremost, how peasants responded to their displacement in speech and in action. I also read extensively public discussions and debates, media reports, government officials' statements, and scholarly analyses surrounding these events. Navigating this complex and intense field of discourses, I detected intricate layers of contestations and was seized by powerful ethico-political articulations in protest against rural displacement.

One of the things that struck me the most was the affirmative mode in which peasant villagers fought back. Affirmative in two senses: They invoke alternative values that constitute the political community, and they assert their own power in the face of crushing violence. Commonly invoked is the saying, "*Nâng thuyền cũng là dân, lật thuyền cũng là dân*" (The people carry the boat, the people overturn the boat also.) Imagine peasants with nothing but hoes, shovels, sticks, and each other in the middle of their rice fields, anticipating forcible eviction by military and police forces armed with bludgeons, electric rods, stun grenades, and tear gas. Yet the peasants are saying *they* have the power to overturn the boat. How do we make sense of this articulation of power? What reality is it embedded in? What politics does it enact?

I could not find any theory of power in the discipline of political science that can account for the power explicitly expressed by Vietnamese peasants and implicitly conveyed in Ngô Vĩnh Long's story. The fields of postcolonial and subaltern studies provide me with important theoretical insights to think through various facets of my



research topic. However, even in these fields, I have not come across works that specifically conceptualize subalternity and power together.

In this dissertation, I develop the concept of subaltern power to help us understand the world-making capacities of subordinated groups. I find that existing conceptions of power, divergent as they are, tend to be tied up with a politics of dominance. This is evident in the case of coercive power (power over). Though in a less apparent manner, it is also pertinent to concepts of power related to the constitution of social subjects (power to) such as structural power and productive power (as I have argued in chapter 2). All of these conceptions allow subordinated groups only the status of passive sufferers or, at best, the status of reactive resisters.

Yet there is much more going on in what often gets named as resistance. The concept of resistance draws our attention to what resistance is against. But what do marginalized people fight for, or in defense of? What empowers and sustains their fight, especially in spite of a lethal asymmetry of force? As I asked in chapter 4, what empowers eggs to go against stones?

I offer the concept of subaltern power to think what is otherwise obscured in IR: the world that is at stake in subaltern struggles against the dominant order. I rework power, rather than another concept, in order for us to comprehend both the stakes of contestation and the forces at play. I also purposefully make an articulation that may appear oxymoronic to encourage us to conceive of subalternity and power together, rather than as opposites. My conceptualization of power as strength renders subaltern groups visible as powerful cultivators of already existing alternatives to dominant ways of being. These alternatives are enduring, albeit marginalized, orders of existence that animate and

sustain subaltern capacities to reconstruct the world. To borrow a term from the Colombian artist and activist, Adolfo Albán Achinte, subaltern power is about *re-existence* rather than resistance.

Concretely, this dissertation examines peasant politics as a site of subaltern power. Although they number in the hundreds of millions and have historically played a key role in anti-colonial revolts and socialist revolutions, peasants are markedly absent as global actors in the discipline of political science. Scholarship on international politics also neglects the critical implications of worldwide struggles against systemic rural devaluation and land dispossession. This absence and neglect, in part, has to do with how prevailing theoretical approaches in IR conceptually preclude the recognition of peasant as a distinctive political subjectivity, as I discussed in the first chapter.

Still, more broadly, the inability to conceive of peasant as a political subject, let alone as a world maker, is due to entrenched colonial representations of peasants and of the countryside at large as a blur of material wretchedness and backward stagnancy. As Timothy Mitchell's study shows us, the peasant, under colonial gaze, is one who "preserves and repeats, but does not originate anything." Her life is "like a series of wonderfully composed paragraphs." The village is "where all is dust and disorder."<sup>674</sup> And as David Ludden points out, "Agrarian folk appear as a negative mirror image of all that is urban, industrial, and modern; not as makers of history, but rather as inhabitants of

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<sup>674</sup> These references are from Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, chap. 4. Similar representations have been interrogated in other studies of colonialism.

history, endowed with mentalities and memories which can be recovered, but not with creative powers to transform their world.”<sup>675</sup>

Working against colonial knowledge, I focus on peasant politics because it is a significant site of both subalternity and power in global politics, with important implications for how we think about world order and transformation. Initially, I was drawn to do research on peasant politics to investigate the violence involved in the production of peasants’ subaltern place-in-the-world. This violence, I came to fathom more than before, is enormous, systemic, and ongoing. Nonetheless, as it undergirds processes of modernization and capital accumulation, the violence is made largely invisible either through disavowal or through rationalization in pursuit of progress. Amitav Ghosh recently wrote a book on climate change and titled it, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.<sup>676</sup> I find “the great derangement” an apt metaphor for the *longue durée* devastation inflicted upon peasant-farmers and rural-agrarian life. Like climate change, and closely linked to it as well, this devastation’s impact on different populations varies vastly due to inequalities and differential vulnerabilities. But it, too, has been and is affecting everyone. The difficulty with addressing the great derangement, in both cases, is that it has come to be constitutive of the (re)production of our societies and of our own subjectivities and desires.

At the same time, in the process of research, I have also become inspired by what I have learned about peasants’ power to recompose collective existence from the margins. The dissertation studies peasant power in three realms. In chapter 3, I look at how

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<sup>675</sup> David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia (The New Cambridge History of India)* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>676</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Penguin Books, 2016)

subaltern practices of agroecological farming regenerate the world ecologically in places where they have been maintained or recently adopted. They do so by stopping the damage that practices of industrial agriculture have inflicted on agroecosystems and by gradually restoring biodiversity. Peasant agroecology also remakes humans' relationship with non-human nature. It provides a model of subsistence and food production that is more sustainable, socially and ecologically, than industrial extractive models.

In chapter 4, I argue that peasant power is manifest in the staging of agrarian dissensus wherein peasant villagers make visible and audible a subaltern order of political community and just relations. In the case of Việt Nam, I offer a reading of this subaltern order in terms of a politics grounded in *dân* (the common people) and *nông dân* (agri-people).

In chapter 5, I focus on the power of global peasant movements to construct a different world order through transnational mobilization for agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and agroecology. These movements also work to resuscitate the countryside, build urban-rural equality, and democratize knowledge through *diálogo de saberes*.

With differing focuses in these three chapters, I provided an analysis of how subaltern power is enacted in diverse locations, forms, and moments. If we characterize these chapters in terms of subaltern dwelling, dissensus, and translocal mobilization (the separation is artificial to the extent that all these elements are mixed and in more than one chapter), I insist that subaltern power is exercised, both as potentiality and as effective cause, in each and every of these realms. Since I conceptualize subaltern power as the capacity to (re)compose the world that is grounded in already existing alternatives to dominant ways of being, the dissertation, deliberately, does not concentrate on only

visible instances of political contestation such as militant struggles or mass movements. Throughout the chapters, I often emphasize that subaltern power is also actualized in quiet practices and long temporality.

Việt Nam is an important political, cultural, and linguistic site for me in this work for a couple of reasons. First, because subaltern power is intimately connected with collective memories, linguistic universes of references, place-based practices, and vernacular idioms, my familiarity with the latter enabled me to read the politics of domination and subalternity as I navigated the Vietnamese field of social relations, meanings, and claims. I was also committed to the complex and challenging task of translation as I offered interpretations and analyses of subaltern articulations and practices from Việt Nam.

The task of translation was tricky and delicate owing to the multiple discursive layers at work, and at play. Possibilities for translation were, therefore, often temptingly plural. In addition, translation carries greater risks – and thus requires more consideration and caution than usual – when it comes to subaltern politics, because, as Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson states frankly, “Let us not pretend that there is an even playing field for interpretation.”<sup>677</sup> Most of the time, when I translated from Vietnamese into English, I tried to stick as closely as possible to a literal translation in order to mark enunciative differences. I did not prioritize flow and smoothness in my translations. In fact, I wanted to avoid them to hinder, to the extent possible, quick and easy equations in English.

Second, Việt Nam is a rich site to study peasant politics, and peasant power in particular. Partly because its peasant-based revolution was vital to its founding as an

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<sup>677</sup> Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent,” 6.

independent nation-state, one would expect its revolutionary past to shape peasant struggles' against marginalization in the present. Given that only a few countries have recorded peasant revolutions in their histories, a concern may be raised about the limited relevance of having Việt Nam as a case study. I would like to respond to this concern by first acknowledging that although Việt Nam's project of industrialization and modernization has displaced peasants from the center of national politics to the margins, its subaltern peasant-grounded imaginary is indeed more easily detected and traced thanks to the revolution.

Nevertheless, the revolution alone does not determine the *existence* of a subaltern imaginary that enunciates the centrality of peasant-farmer and rural-agrarian politics. As I argued in chapter 4, even in the case of Việt Nam, certain discursive elements of the subaltern imaginary grounded in agriculture and agri-people can be traced to pre-colonial, i.e. pre-revolutionary, articulations, which remain alive in collective memory and continue to inform political action in the present. Similarly, in other linguistic, cultural, and historical sites, a subaltern imaginary that expresses the importance of peasant-farmer and rural-agrarian politics may very well be traced to non-revolutionary discourses. An international peasant movement like La Vía Campesina would not have existed and grown otherwise. Let us not forget that nearly half the world population are still living in rural areas, that peasant and small farmer families currently compose more than two billion people, and that decolonization movements carried out by agrarian societies in the last century continue to mold our global present.

In each chapter, I combined critiques of the dominant order with subaltern articulations and practices of alternative ways of being and knowing, with greater

concentration on the latter. Whenever I could, I tried to foreground peasant-farmers' voices and actions. I am conscious that I am inevitably a mediator who offers interpretations of what they are saying and doing. My commitment to foreground their speeches and practices is *not* to demonstrate access to unmediated authenticity, but to acknowledge my debts to them for helping – and inspiring – me to think through this project. I wanted to affirm, in whatever small way I could, peasant subalterns as knowledge makers. Although this work is conducted in the discipline of political science, I tried to follow what Spivak says about Comparative Literature: “approaching the language of the other not only as a “field” language.”<sup>678</sup>

The danger, of course, is apparent. By attempting to give descriptive and conceptual substance to an alternative imaginary with a necessarily limited and limiting set of terms, I risked essentializing it and fixing the subaltern. This is a risk I had to take as I put forth the concept of subaltern power. The terms I offer are meant to be provisional rather than definitive. The argumentative nature of a dissertation in social science might make them appear more authoritative than I intended for them to be.

Listening to, interpreting, and translating the idioms of subaltern dissent, I endeavored to give some conceivable texture to what I have variously referred to as alternative imaginaries, multiple realities, or other ethico-political grammars. It is these living alterities that sustain ongoing struggles for more just relations and hospitable worlds. They are what empower eggs to go against stones. And whether or not we are eggs, we are all affected, individually and collectively, by these struggles. Because, as it

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<sup>678</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 9.

has been expressed in various ways, “the self-determination of the other is the other-determination of the self.”<sup>679</sup>

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<sup>679</sup> Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions,” *Cultural Anthropology* website, January 13, 2014, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions>; see also Nandy, “Memory Work.”



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