

GLOBAL MOVEMENTS FOR FOOD JUSTICE¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines La Via Campesina (LVC), or The International Peasant Farmers' Movement. The LVC, founded by farm leaders in 1993, is currently made up of 148 peasant organizations in sixty-nine countries. LVC claims to represent the interests of at least 200 million farmers and has been touted as the largest and one of the most important social movements in the world. The article describes the LVC's fight for normatively defensible values—for a food system reflecting ideals of ethics and justice—and its quest to develop defensible lifespaces for small farmers in terms of socioeconomic, ecological, and political autonomy. It also examines how their aims and tactics align with current scholarship on the issues of sustainability and autonomy.

Keywords: *food movements, food system, ethics, justice, defensible lifespaces, La Via Campesina, international peasant farmers' movement, sustainability, autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

The surge in interest in food systems of the past decades, and concurrent rise of food movements, should come as no surprise given recent trends in the global food system. That is, the context of:

- food system consolidation;
- diminishing proportions of the food dollar arriving in farmers' hands;
- neoliberalization of the food system and withdrawal of state support for agriculture;

¹ This chapter benefitted greatly from comments by Maywa Montenegro, Jessica Zemaitis, Jude Wait, Jamie Stepniak, James Moore, and Ron Herring. Any errors likely stem from failing to heed their advice, and are mine alone.

- persistent and widespread hunger;
- 25-50% of produced food ending up as waste;
- homogenization of diets;
- and the continuing plight of the world's hungry and poor—with smallholder farmers ironically making up over half of the hungry in the world²

offers more than sufficient grounds for the rise of food movements contesting the direction and nature of these trends.

These movements are fighting for the reinsertion of “defensible values” into the food system: the reprioritization of human rights, aesthetics, sustainability and equity. They claim that the neoliberal aspirations of minimal state involvement, nominally free markets, and the extension of private property regimes have led to market concentration and excessively large and powerful corporations. Further, this has come at the cost of increasing inequality, and the continued neglect of less-powerful populations and important non-market values (Holt-Giménez et al. 2009, Gold, this volume).

For example, the Slow Food movement emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic and cultural quality of food, affirming the right of all people to have nutritional, enjoyable and sustainable food. Slow Food also emphasizes artisanal food production, although its members and leadership have increasingly recognized the limits of this emphasis with regards to issues of equity and justice (Viertel 2011). IFOAM (the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) is another prominent actor, largely concerned with supporting the evolution of national and international organic food markets (Geier 2007, Larsson, this volume). The Fair Trade movement seeks to provide producers with a greater portion of the “consumer dollar”

² See, e.g., Holt-Giménez et al. (2009), IAASTD (2009), Lang and Heasman (2004) and FAO (2012) for information on these trends.

spent on end products.³ This represents an attempt to build alternatives to current trade regimes by explicitly integrating values of equity and fairness into the market—values that free markets are admittedly ill-equipped to provide (Daly 2007, Gold, this volume).

In contrast to the above moments, which hinge on the direct involvement of local or global economic elites as supposedly ethical consumers, the Farmer-to-Farmer Movement (*Movimiento Campesino-a-Campesino*, or *MCAC*) is organized by and focused on small, mostly poor farmers in Latin America. MCAC has existed over 30 years and claims to have several hundred thousand farmer-promoters: small farmers trained in an empowerment-based pedagogy who travel to other villages and other countries to directly train other small farmers. Using this peer-to-peer knowledge network, MCAC seeks empower promoters and farmers, and to build autonomy and sustainable livelihoods based on agroecological methods and a culture of experimentation (Holt-Giménez 2006).

Beyond these prominent, organized transnational actors, recent years have seen numerous other examples of food movements, including national and sub-national movements for agrarian reform (Herring 2003, Ondetti 2008), and government agri-environment schemes seeking to integrate the cultural, environmental, and economic functions of agriculture (i.e., multifunctional agriculture: Buttel 2007, Otte et al. 2007). There has also been growing public and government interest in CSAs (Community-Supported Agriculture), farmers' markets, and urban agriculture (USDA 2006, Brown and Miller 2008, Mogk et al. 2012); the spread and innovation of food policy councils (Harper et al. 2009, Maluf 2010); and acclaimed documentaries and books challenging the values existing (or lacking) in the current food system (e.g., *The Omnivore's*

³ Jaffee (2007) provides an excellent overview of the Fair Trade movement. See also Johnson and MacKendrick (this volume) for more on consumer-based attempts to integrate ethics and conscience into food systems.

Dilemma, Fast Food Nation, Stuffed and Starved, Food, Inc., Le Monde selon Monsanto, and King Corn).

Analyzing these phenomena brings into question the degree to which any of them may be considered “transnational movements”. Tarrow (1998), for example, developed a typology of four types of transnational collective action: cross-border diffusion; political exchange; transnational issue networks; and true transnational social movements (p. 237).⁴ Under his typology, most of the above examples would fail to meet the criteria for transnational social movements *per se*. True transnational social movements are defined as exhibiting transnational interactions sustained over time, and a continuous, high degree of integration between transnational actors and indigenous social networks. Using these criteria, the only two true transnational social movements discussed thus far would be Fair Trade and MCAC. However, there is one more important movement meeting these criteria that has yet to be mentioned: *Via Campesina* (LVC), or the International Peasant Farmers’ movement.

Although Fair Trade, MCAC and LVC are all worthy of scholarly consideration, LVC is unique in the breadth of its goals and reach. Neither MCAC, which extends through Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, nor Fair Trade, with member farmers in an estimated 60 countries, can match the 69 countries with LVC member organizations. Further, MCAC has focused on farmer-to-farmer education and has no infrastructure for lobbying or mobilization, and the values addressed by Fair Trade are limited by its focus on consumer sovereignty (Fridell 2007, Johnson and MacKendrick, this volume). LVC’s combination of sustained transnational interactions and mobilization, an ambitious agenda, and global reach make it unique even among true transnational food movements. For this reason, this piece focuses on LVC—and to a large

⁴ Tarrow’s work in this area is foundational; interested readers might additionally seek out Tarrow (2005) and (2011).

extent, LVC may be seen as an axis around which other contemporary movements for defensible values in food systems turn. It has shaped debate and conceptual terrains at the international level— e.g., within the FAO, World Bank, and WTO—with varying levels of success (Desmarais 2007, Borras 2008). “Its member organisations have even helped topple national governments... or defended them,” (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010: 151).

In this chapter, I will examine La Vía Campesina as a social movement and its advocacy of “defensible values”. Specifically, I will describe its fight for *normatively defensible values*—for a food system reflecting ideals of ethics and justice—and its quest to build and maintain *defensible lifespaces* for small farmers in terms of socioeconomic, ecological, and political autonomy. Lastly, I will examine how their aims and tactics align with current scholarship on the issues of sustainability and autonomy.

Defining La Vía Campesina and Defensible Values

La Vía Campesina and the Global Peasantry

Around 40 percent of the world population directly depends on agriculture for livelihood (IAASTD 2009: 8). Further, nearly 90% of these people work on small farms (i.e., under two hectares in size), occupying around 60% of the world’s arable land (*ibid.*). Thus “smallholder farming... remains the most common form of organization in agriculture, even in industrial countries” (The World Bank 2007: 91).

In the nearly 20 years since its inception, LVC has worked consciously to adopt and promote an umbrella “peasant identity” that includes most of these estimated 404 million small farms, intentionally conflating family farmers, subsistence farmers, sharecroppers, agricultural wage laborers, and the landless (Naranjo 2012: 232). They have sought to “[Build] Unity within Diversity” (Desmarais 2007: 27) through direct, open discussion and deliberation on “issues of

gender, race, class, culture, and North/South relations”. Founded in 1993 by farm leaders from every continent but Australia, LVC is currently composed of 148 peasant organizations in 69 countries (Desmarais 2007, La Via Campesina 2008). Through its member organizations, LVC claims to represent the interests of at least 200 million farmers and has been argued to be the largest, and one of the most important, social movements in the world (Chomsky 2003, Hardt and Negri 2004, Perfecto et al. 2009). However, as Rosset and Martínez-Torres (2005) argue, social movements’ constituents “often cannot be precisely identified... Movement participants may never recognize themselves as such,” (p. 4). Peasants, in their own day-to-day struggles within their own communities or countries, may not recognize these struggles as part of a transnational social movement—“yet that does not mean that they are not part of it” (*ibid.*).

A key to understanding LVC, “the international peasants’ movement,” is understanding how it defines “peasant”. In English, “peasant” tends to connote not just low social status but often backwardness and a lack of sophistication. However, in Spanish, the roughly equivalent word *campesino* does not necessarily carry the same negative overtones. For LVC and their allies, campesinos, or peasants, are characterized most by what they *do*, and the context they do it in:

“A peasant is a man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, rely above all on family labour and other small-scale forms of organizing labour. Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities and they take care of local landscapes and of agro-ecological systems. The term peasant can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts-related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. This includes

Indigenous people working on the land. The term peasant also applies to landless,” (La Vía Campesina 2009: 6-7).

Van der Ploeg (2008) further qualifies that for peasants, “[p]roduction is oriented towards the market as well as towards the reproduction of the farm unit and the family,” (p. 1). These definitions bridge the artificially rigid separation some scholars have placed between peasants, who farm for their own subsistence, and entrepreneurial farmers, who farm for profit: small-scale producers around the world have long engaged in varying degrees of cash cropping and long-distance trade alongside local provisioning (Edelman 2005, van der Ploeg 2008).⁵ This is not to say that notable wealth and class disparities do not exist within the class of peasant farmers (Naranjo 2012: 232-235). But condensing all of these groups into the term peasant allows LVC to include millions of farmers in the “Minority World” (the industrialized countries/Global North: see Alam 2008), who may be “far more peasant than most of us know or want to admit” (van der Ploeg 2008: xiv), and many of whom are members of LVC.⁶

How can LVC include *all* of these people, in their economic, cultural, and political variation, under the rubric of “peasant”? Clearly, as a movement, LVC cannot genuinely claim to have sustained integration between its international networks and the social networks of every family farmer, subsistence farmer, sharecropper, agricultural laborer, and landless person in the world (i.e., meet both of Tarrow’s requirements for a true transnational movement). An inclusive view of membership, such as Rosset and Martínez-Torres’s statement that peasants may be part of the international peasants’ movement without even recognizing it, rather refers to LVC’s development of what Hardt and Negri (2004) call “new subjectivities” (p. 66): “Who we are,

⁵ The number of peasants making significant portions of their income from non-farm employment or remittances from family members is, however, large and growing.

⁶ Approximately one-fifth of LVC’s member organizations hail from Europe, USA, Canada, or Japan.

how we view the world, [and] how we interact with each other.”⁷ LVC defines peasant identity as resisting and opposing Empire, in the sense of van der Ploeg (2008) and Hardt and Negri (2004):

“The state and the market... flow together and converge within Empire. In this respect, Empire emerges as the mutual co-penetration, interchange and symbiosis of state and markets... the rationale and justification of any activity no longer rest with that activity... but are, instead, linked to, and therefore dependent on, their (assumed) contribution to the profitability and expansion of Empire... tight cycles of planning and control are enforced.” (van der Ploeg 2008, p. 252).

LVC’s vision of who peasants *are* and what they want, in contrast, is rooted

“...in the complex and diverse realities of peasant agriculture... using our local knowledge, ingenuity, and ability to innovate. We are talking about relatively small farms managed by peasant families and communities... with diversified production and the integration of crops, trees and livestock. In this type of agriculture, there is less or no need for external inputs, as everything can be produced on the farm itself.” (La Vía Campesina 2010: 2-3).

This “somewhat stylized dichotomy” appears to define out entrepreneurial medium-scale farmers who maintain both peasant and agribusiness identities (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012: 5). However, it may be viewed tactically as a way of creating a clear alternative pole to maintain activist identity and mobilization (cf. Ondetti’s outline of “activist strategy” theory, Ondetti 2008: 31).

⁷ Although only acknowledged in passing here, it is clearly in the interest and “nature” of any movement to “claim to represent more than they represent” (R. Herring, *pers. comm.*). An excellent overview of the tensions between identity, representation, and reality in transnational agrarian movements is given in Borrás et al. (2008).

Encapsulating LVC's overall perspective and approach is the term *food sovereignty*, or “the rights of local peoples to determine their own agricultural and food policy, organize production and consumption to meet local needs, and secure access to land, water, and seed,” (Wittman 2010). Originated by LVC at the World Food Summit in 1996, food sovereignty was conceived of as a distinct alternative to the too-apolitical term of food security. Since its formulation, food sovereignty has served as both an aspiration and a rallying cry. Its rapid growth as a concept in international and academic discussions is an indication of LVC's reach and the strength of its approach (Patel 2009, Wittman et al. 2010, De Schutter 2012).

After decades of protests and participation in international forums, LVC has recently secured a further victory for its vision of peasant identity and food sovereignty. In September of 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to prepare a draft declaration “on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas” (UNHRC 2012). The language used by the Council parallels LVC's *Declaration of Peasant Rights – Men and Women* (La Via Campesina 2009). The definitions and compromises created in the years to come over the UN's possible declaration will shed further light on the effectiveness of LVC's strategy, and the merits of their particular definition of *peasant identity*.

Defensible Values

As previously established, defensible values may be thought of as normative (i.e., moral and ethical) defensible values, and as the practical value of *defensible lifespaces/defensibility* (i.e., being able to define and defend normative values through socioeconomic autonomy and well-functioning communal and political spaces). Both types of defensible values can be seen emerging from LVC's internal and external discourse throughout its evolution (e.g., Desmarais 2007: 67-69; 72-73). And while the term food sovereignty directly signals a relationship to the

“autonomy” elements of defensibility, it is clear from their rhetoric that LVC also intends for the term to encompass discrete set of moral and ethical values.

The *Declaration of the Rights of Peasants—Women and Men*, for example, directly reveals the centrality of both types of defensible values. Its preamble includes statements of how “The policies of neoliberalism worsen the violations of Peasants’ Rights” and “The struggle of the Peasants to uphold and protect their Rights”. The Declaration proper begins with the statement “*Women peasants and men peasants have equal rights*”, giving gender equality primacy of place after only their definition of the peasant identity itself. (This is also evident in that the declaration is “*of the Rights of Peasants—Women and Men*”.) It goes on to recapitulate basic human rights outlined under international convention and law, rights related to conservation and biodiversity, and rights that can be classified as allowing the maintenance of defensible agricultural lifespaces (e.g., rights to seeds and traditional knowledge, the means of agricultural production, and to actively participate in food system policy design and implementation). For our purposes, these groups of rights might be restated as the *right to self-determination* of a peasant lifestyle and identity; the *right of peasants to have rights*; and the *fundamental importance of gender equality*. LVC sees these as key to the *defensibility* of sustainable, secure and autonomous lifespaces. Taken together, these values represent LVC’s demand for food sovereignty.

In casting its demands as food sovereignty, LVC seeks changes in social institutions, at all levels: food sovereignty implies participatory citizenship seeking to overcome differences in class, culture, and roles within the peasant movement and within the societies they are part of.

Normatively Defensible Values

The values endorsed by LVC draw on international human rights treaties, and specifically, the rights enumerated around food—in other words, rights nearly universally agreed upon, at least in name. One-hundred and sixty countries are party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which begins with:

“All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development; [...] The States Parties to the present Covenant... shall promote the realization of the right of self-determination, and shall respect that right.”

This Covenant commits signatories to the recognition of self-determination, one of the fundamental normative values supported by LVC. Yet dominant contemporary food systems *do not* provide for the type of self-determination envisioned by LVC. LVC and many of the groups mentioned in the introduction—Slow Food, MCAC, Fair Trade—largely agree that current international market structures fail to allow or promote self-determination, and have often pushed reforms directly inimical to it. Neoliberal approaches like Structural Adjustment Policies and preferences for international trade subordinate national sovereignty and regional self-determination to international market forces (Rosset 2006, Desmarais 2007: 45-73, IAASTD 2009: 45-46; 85).

In line with the idea of self-determination, LVC and its allies have asserted that food sovereignty cannot be simply approached as a concept or academic definition, but must arise “from a collective, participatory process that is popular and progressive... constantly enriched through various agrarian debates and political discussions,” (Stédile and de Carvalho 2011: 25). They advocate participatory political processes as a way to negotiate differing and conflicting values, both within the movement itself, and within society more broadly. Representation is

achieved through a horizontal process of consultation and discussion; LVC leaders are meant to be strictly accountable to and to represent the interests of their members through well-defined constituencies within regional and local peasant organizations (Desmarais 2007: 28).⁸ Through this approach, LVC aims to reflect the self-determination it calls for in broader society.

In demanding self-determination and other rights for peasants, LVC fundamentally demands the “right to have rights over food,” (Patel 2009: 663)—a demand to political systems at all levels to recognize *and actively support* defensible values. “For rights to mean anything at all, they need a guarantor, responsible for implementing a concomitant system of duties and obligations,” (*ibid.* at 668). Yet, Patel’s analysis also asserts that food sovereignty’s radical and inherently contestable character undermines the very notion of rights’ guarantor, as its formulators reject the idea that states have paramount authority. If the states that have signed documents like the ICESCR do not have paramount authority, who then may serve as a guarantor?

LVC and their conception of food sovereignty are perhaps most clear on who or what will *not* serve as guarantor. Food sovereignty is founded in a rejection of the sovereignty of supposed *free markets*, and the concomitant collusion of states (i.e., Empire).⁹ This collusion within Empire represents a form of top-down control that LVC sees as taking autonomy away from peasants and civil society more generally. Yet the rights-based ideas underlying food sovereignty, like all rights, depend crucially on a social agent (e.g., the state) to protect them. This tension is resolved, in part, by realizing that food sovereignty opposes governance decisions

⁸ Further explanations of LVC’s internal processes and structures can be found in Desmarais (2007: 27-33; 135-189).

⁹ Panitch (1994) has observed that free markets in fact represent the transformation of the state to protect the interests of capital, not (as is commonly perceived) the retreat of states from regulation. See also Pinder (2011).

made without a participatory democratic process and not necessarily to all centralized action by the state.¹⁰ But beyond a call for participatory governance, LVC uses rights-based rhetoric as a “platform for strategic action”—a conceptual base for mobilization and identity-building (Patel 2007: 89). In specifying who the guarantors of rights should *not* be rather than who they are, LVC argues for a “sustainable and widespread process of democracy that can provide political direction to the appropriate level of government required to see implementation [of food rights] through to completion,” (Patel 2007: 91).¹¹

The third normatively defensible value central to LVC is gender equality. Women still experience significant repression and discrimination around the world, including (perhaps especially) in agricultural systems (Dwyer and Bruce 1988, Patel 2007, Agarwal, this volume). While gender equality has not always enjoyed its fundamental status in LVC’s agenda—and the degree to which LVC is currently living up to its nominally foundational importance is debated—the rights of women has been repeatedly affirmed as an ongoing core issue (Desmarais 2007, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). The process that brought it to the fore has in fact been key in cementing deliberative processes as a healthy practice within the movement: gender equality became one of their central identifying platforms only as a result of work by women and allies within the participatory structures of LVC. Nevertheless, some constituent groups and allies have consistently voiced concern that gender issues are not high enough on the agenda, and that representation (especially at the national, rather than international level) continues to be a

¹⁰ Many of the measures called for by LVC in fact imply and necessitate state involvement. Thanks to M. Montenegro for pointing this out. Elaboration on the conceptual tensions here can be found in Patel (2009).

¹¹ Similarly, Johnson and MacKendrick (this volume) “identify greater promise for reform” from a citizen-based, democratic approach than one based in so-called “consumer sovereignty”. Their conception of *ecological citizenship* echoes Wittman’s *agrarian citizenship*, a model seeking to “reconnect agriculture, society, and environment through systems of mutual obligation” (Wittman 2010: 91).

problem. Although there has not been a systematic study of women's power within LVC as compared to other movements or organizations, one possible resolution to this seeming contradiction (the prominence of gender on LVC's agenda, yet its persistent appearance as a leading concern by internal and external actors) may be that LVC has accomplished significant, and possibly unique, progress on the issue, but that the distance from gender parity is far enough that a level of dissatisfaction is also reasonable. Lacking further evidence, however, this remains conjecture.

This notwithstanding, the process that saw a group within LVC raising gender to be a central issue represents perhaps a key element of LVC, and sets it apart from many predecessor movements. LVC is able to reformulate and address issues and internal contradictions more readily than a group of its size and diversity might be expected to. This perhaps reflects a novel, dynamic structure that embraces adaptive management alongside deep democracy. The decisions at the international level, in its secretariat, nominally come from the wishes agreed upon democratically by each national and regional representative. Although they admit continuing difficulties in accomplishing this (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005: 13-16; A1.33, Desmarais 2007: 136-144), they appear to be pursuing the challenge of Hardt and Negri's (2004) *Multitude*: "The challenge of the multitude is the challenge of democracy... that is, the rule of everyone by everyone," (Hardt and Negri 2004: 68). The multitude seeks to balance the necessity of unity as a voice for political change with the imperative to avoid homogenization and capitulation of differences in the cause of such unity. The tensions and actions around gender within LVC both result from and reflect their values of self-determination and the right to have rights. Determining what exactly these mean in the area of gender calls on the very processes of participatory democracy that food sovereignty seeks to propagate.

Autonomy, Democracy and A Defensible Lifespace

LVC is a proponent of *defensible lifespaces* (after Friedmann 1992, in Desmarais 2007: 67-68). Concisely stated, a defensible lifespace is a physical and social space enabling a family to make a living and to exert a degree of autonomy over their own conditions. Autonomy here is not meant in the narrow sense of being completely self-provisioning (a common misapprehension of the demands of the Localization and Peasant movements), but rather is related to the ability to influence and change material conditions and social structures. In practical terms, this implies the ability to make a dignified and sustainable living as a peasant—as opposed to, for instance, escaping poverty by leaving one’s community to make a go of it in the city. Defensibility would mean that, rather than the ability to *leave* poor rural circumstances, peasants and peasant communities have the ability to *change* the sociocultural and physical infrastructures creating and maintaining endemic hardships.¹²

Unconstrained international trade places the control necessary for this physically and socioculturally outside the reach of individual communities—the loci of control of local prices and supply are moved from within a community, region, or country into the hands of the supposed “invisible hand”. Or beyond—the formulation of Empire elaborates on how cycles of planning and control, the ability to enter and exit the market, what a farmer produces and how, all become constrained within Empire, forming a “visible hand” (van der Ploeg 2008: 252; cf. Araghi 2008's "visible foot"). The “hands” of the market, visible or invisible, move sites of control from individual communities and into the stock exchanges and boardrooms of the Minority World. Any given community must now push to enact change in a marketplace

¹² Gender is a particularly important element here, as rural women’s labor often goes uncompensated, undercounted, or gets overlooked, while their political rights are underemphasized (Bruce and Dwyer 1988, Agarwal, this volume).

influenced by millions of their compatriots around the world, besides the (from the point of view of the Majority World¹³ farmer) completely unaccountable decisions of executives and foreign governments¹⁴—though this is a continuing, not new, trend (Davis 2002, McMichael 2009). The results are food products tailored for their suitability for mass and elite markets, rather than to the desires or needs of individual communities; food systems and agriculture influenced not by the civic conversation Patel referred to, but rather characterized by food products’ durability and consistency. Under the continuous influence of “imperial” socioeconomic powers, food markets are increasingly supplied by a very small range of crops and animals, forming raw materials for a wide array of “fabricated flavors” (Weis 2007: 16). This corresponds to huge amounts of food waste due to pesky crops or animals that do not come out perfectly each time, no matter how much we narrow their genetic stock, and perfectly edible food that is thrown away because it does not meet cosmetic standards (van der Ploeg 2008, Stuart 2009). Thus, a system is created where non-productive energy must be spent disposing of usable but “off-spec” food, while energy is simultaneously spent to increase control and return to industrial specifications. This additionally decreases the sustainability of the food system, as control and uniformity of a heterogeneous world requires significant and continuously growing inputs of energy (Tainter 1988), and is in opposition to the idiosyncrasy, variety, and thus *adaptability* and *stability* of peasant farming systems (Di Falco and Perrings 2003, Edelman 2005, Jarvis et al. 2011). Social traditions, diversity, and culture are also lost: “subsistence customs and traditional social

¹³ As before, this reflects Alam’s (2008) nomenclature of the Minority (Global North) and Majority (Global South) Worlds.

¹⁴ “Corporate power is now so great within and between national borders that it is redefining what is meant by a ‘market’... corporate policy is becoming more fully engaged in public policy to further its own interests, thus raising questions about accountability,” (Lang and Heasman 2004: 127).

relations [are replaced] with contracts, the market, and uniform laws,” (Scott 1976: 189, in Edelman 2005).

LVC and the ideals of food sovereignty seek to ground decisions about food and agriculture in institutions at lower socioeconomic and biophysical scales (e.g., national, regional, and local). In this, they attempt to restore communities’ ability to guarantee values and rights, to preserve cultural diversity, to acknowledge and support the vital role of small farmers in preserving genetic and cultural diversity and in producing much of the world’s food (Jarvis et al. 2008, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

The commonly raised counterpoint to these positions is that the peasant lifestyle is losing its defensibility because of its inefficiency. One might in fact argue that defensibility is an indulgence—surely not every sector or way of life can demand the ability to keep existing. The lifespace defensibility of, say, criminals or quacks is of little moment and actively undesirable to society. In fact, one might reasonably hope that ways of life taking more from society than they give back will lack the power to demand defensibility and subsidization.

The demand of LVC and related movements is quite distinct from such a case against inefficiency or undesirability for several reasons:

- 1) Despite decades, if not centuries, of assuming peasant agriculture is backwards and inefficient, numerous researchers have found peasant agriculture to be more efficient in terms of its use of energy, land, and other resources as compared to industrial, “high modern” agriculture, and to generally better support long-term sustainability of the environment and its components (e.g., Altieri and Toledo 2011, Chappell and LaValle 2011, Lin et al. 2011).

- 2) Peasant agriculture generates a significant amount of value, including cultural, aesthetic and spiritual aspects that are not reflected in industrial agriculture (Duncan 1996, Pretty 2002, Gold, this volume). Peasants also produce a disproportionately large amount of the food produced in many societies (e.g., Rosset et al. 2011: 181).

Further, inherent in the concept of food sovereignty is a call for open, democratic discussions of values. True food sovereignty would generate processes involving the citizens and communities of any given area capable of determining the priorities and shape of the food system:

“[Food sovereignty takes direct aim at] a one-size-fits-all approach to agriculture, as opposed to the context specific results generated by democratic deliberation. By leaving the venues of subnational engagement open... La Via Campesina calls for new political spaces to be filled with argument... a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities, bearing in mind the community’s needs, climate, geography, food preferences, social mix, and history... *We will know if the promise of food sovereignty has been realized when we see explicit discussions of gender politics and food production,*” (Patel 2007: 91; emphasis added).

There is no reason that such discussions could not also involve debate over the value of peasant identity and peasants’ rights to a given society; negotiating between peasants’ rights and priorities and those of other citizens will be a delicate and interesting process. Another difficult element—the right venues and scales for these democratic discussions—may find its solution in a useful tautology implied by food sovereignty: decisions and food systems should be localized

as far as is possible and effective, but no further.¹⁵ LVC's multi-scale and polycentric democratic traditions will also help them in navigating this difficulty, if the democratic processes they seek do become as commonplace as they hope.

LVC's priorities around participatory democracy also align with several converging bodies of academic literature. Researchers of collective action and common property management have pointed out that local communities and civil society—not formally of “the market” or “the state”—can create and maintain socially and ecologically sustainable resource use regimes (Ostrom 1990, Poteete et al. 2010). Localization and autonomy is also supported by current research on the potential of participatory and deliberative democratic forms (Prugh et al. 2000, Herbick and Isham 2010), and the possible social and environmental benefits of localized systems (Feenstra 1997, Pretty 2001, and De Young and Princen 2012, though localization is not without critique: Tregear 2011). All of these literatures point to the possibility of new sovereignties and subjectivities. In this, Hardt and Negri's (2004) conceptualization of multitude is useful, as its crucial distinction from previous democratic forms is that it does not require the sacrifice of *singularities*. That is, diverse peoples are able to work together, negotiate, and lobby for societal changes and restructuring, without giving up their distinctiveness (cf. Note 18). Rather, they work together pragmatically on the areas of agreement. This tension between unity and uniqueness, compromise without complete capitulation of differing values, is seen throughout LVC, and was recently witnessed in the form of the “Occupy” Movement (Razsa and Kurnik 2012). The full potential of the multitude, as a concept and a mode of action, remains to be seen, but there are empirical and theoretical reasons to be optimistic based in the literatures

¹⁵ This intentionally echoes Einstein's oft-paraphrased comment: “The supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience,” (Einstein 1934: 165).

above. From the MCAC, the LVC member organization MST (The Landless Rural Workers' Movement), and the Mexican *Zapatista* resistance, to *panchayat* reforms in India, habitat conservation planning and neighbourhood governance councils in the USA, and participatory budgeting in Brazil, alternative democratic forms exist and are being recognized both within scholarly and civic circles (Fung and Wright 2003).

Beyond LVC's commitment to local and national constituent autonomy, they have innovated or revived useful democratic "technologies", including collective and rotating leadership (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010), and the creation and maintenance of cultural, spiritual and collegial ties, especially their ceremony of the *mística* (Issa 2007, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Further, in order to address concerns that the group had too "Latin American" a focus, the international secretariat was moved to Indonesia, with Indonesian Henry Saraigh elected as General Coordinator.¹⁶ Personal conversations with LVC members during the COP15 summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 indicated that the Secretariat would next be moving to Africa in order to strengthen LVC's roots and presence there, but this does not appear to have been confirmed in public documentation.

Defending Defensible Lifespaces

Autonomy, sovereignty, and a participatory democracy have been explored as important components of defending a defensible lifespace—LVC maintains that extending sovereignty and autonomy to consumers and small-scale food producers would go far towards providing such a lifespace to the global peasantry. But aside from the broad political structures, there are several

¹⁶ "It is remarkable in today's world that a movement can be coordinated by a Muslim, and incorporate Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and members of many other religions, together with radical Marxist and social democratic atheists, all scarcely without raising an eyebrow internally. The *mística* plays a key role in making this possible..." (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

further, specific ways that LVC advocates for defensibility—in this case, in the form of livelihood security. Some of these are briefly outlined here.

Agroecology and agroecological methods are key components of LVC’s ideals and conceptual platform, and closely tied to normative values as well as defensibility. In particular, agroecology’s focus on regenerative, self-maintaining ecological processes decreases peasants’ reliance on outside inputs and increases their autonomy. Research has also found that small-scale farming and agroecology can increase a community’s internal social connections and farming’s contribution to the local economy (Goldschmidt 1978, Lockeretz 1989, Lyson et al. 2001). Normatively, many agroecologists value and support the preservation of the cultural and spiritual values of agriculture (Pretty 2002), and seek to improve the percentage of the “food dollar” captured by farmers rather than intermediaries, food system monopolies and monopsonies (Jaffee 2007, Holt-Giménez et al. 2009). The biodiversity underlying agroecological methods may also serve to buffer against climatic shocks like drought and hurricanes, which are likely to increase in frequency with continuing global climate change (Holt-Giménez 2002, Philpott et al. 2008), and buffer farm families from price and production fluctuations, and other unplanned exigencies (Di Falco and Perrings 2003, Méndez et al. 2010). Further discussion of agroecology’s range of biodiversity- and knowledge-based practices, social and ecological goals, and ability to support peasants’ income, yields and livelihoods can be found in Uphoff, and in Nelson and Coe (both in this volume), and in several other recent works (Kloppenborg 2010, Jarvis et al. 2011, Pautasso et al. 2012, Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012).¹⁷ Pertinent to LVC’s values, agroecology can also improve socioeconomic conditions for women, though it is likely that these gains are tied to a

¹⁷ Although seeds have not been extensively discussed here, LVC has declared that “sustainability is completely impossible if the right of the peoples to recover, defend, reproduce, exchange, improve and grow their own seed is not recognized” (La Vía Campesina 2001).

tendency within agroecology to acknowledge the importance of gender, and thus specific efforts to address gender within agroecological improvement programs (Bezner-Kerr 2008, De Schutter 2011, Rosset et al. 2011).

Alongside LVC's support of agroecology, its opposition to genetically engineered (GE) crops has been a defining issue. Its committed rejection of GE crops reflects both the experiences and perceptions of many (though not all) of its members regarding the dangers of modern industrial agricultural developments (Holt-Giménez 2006, Desmarais 2007: 40-45). It also emerges from the experience many farmers have had with centuries of enclosure and appropriation of physical and intellectual goods (Kloppenborg 2004, Weis 2007, Kloppenborg 2010), and the long-term, ongoing patterns of international imperial/hegemonic consolidation of control over agriculture and food systems.¹⁸

In its opposition to GE crops, as well as their staunch criticisms of international trade institutions like the WTO and World Bank, LVC has maintained what Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010) characterize as “collective defiance” (*sensu* Piven and Cloward 1977), giving grist to Piven and Cloward's finding that “in general, that poor peoples' organizations are most effective at achieving their demands when they are most confrontational, and least effective when they take more conciliatory positions and invest their energies in dialogue.” Although LVC's stance of non-engagement with actors such as the WTO and World Bank has been criticized by some who believe the organization could accomplish more with a more cooperative stance, Doimo's classic (1995) work on Brazilian post-1970 social movements reinforces Piven and Cloward's claim. Doimo found what she called a “double-ethos” in Brazilian social

¹⁸ Relatedly, Rangnekar (2002) found evidence of increasingly rapid planned obsolescence in commercial wheat varieties in the UK, creating pressure to buy new, patented seeds on a more and more frequent basis.

movements. The first was an “expressive-disruptive” ethos, “through which movements manifest their moral values or ethico-political appeals, and which simultaneously tend to delegitimize public authority and establish intergroup frontiers.”¹⁹ This ethos aligns with LVC’s use of food rights as both a mobilization tool and a critical platform. Doimo, like Piven and Cloward, found this ethos to be an important element in successful movements, though she noted that at some point movements tended to switch to an alternative “cooperative-integrative” ethos, to “seek to acquire higher levels of social integration in terms of access to goods and services.” Thus far, LVC seems both comfortable and effective in their “disruptive” stance. They remain concerned with the possibilities and threat of cooptation from cooperation and integration, and sensitive to how cooperation and integration may neutralize the most pointed criticisms of activist groups and movements. Instead, with delegitimization of imperial structures and sociocultural disruption and reorganization still on its agenda, it seems likely that LVC will maintain its tactics of non-engagement. LVC seeks to maintain the autonomy and defensibility of the movement itself, and sees their oppositional stances as still useful and philosophically important—while at the same time recognizing that member organizations may need to act differently within their own national and regional contexts (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005: A1.31, Desmarais 2007: 135-160).

Lastly, LVC’s emphasis on *gender equality* itself plays into the building of a defensible lifespace. Although it is clear that LVC does not approach gender from an instrumentalist standpoint—that is, it does not appear to support gender equality *because* it is connected with lower household malnutrition (e.g., Smith and Haddad 2000)—it is nevertheless the case that interventions increasing the status of women are connected to a number of positive developments,

¹⁹ Translated from Portuguese by the author (MJC).

including increased agricultural productivity. Gender equality clearly advances the goals of autonomy, defensible and sustainable livelihoods, and democracy alongside the inherent normative value of such equality itself (Agarwal, this volume).

CONCLUSION

Essentially, movements like La Vía Campesina at base may be seen as movements for fulfilling the promises of democracy. Not just democracy in the form of nominal representation, electoral, or procedural rights, but the fulfillment of human dignities and rights. Further, defensible values as articulated by these movements rest on an implicit understanding that there is no democracy without *capabilities* (*sensu* Sen 1992), and that such capabilities must be guaranteed by a strong civil society in ongoing discourse, and perhaps tension, with the State.

The parallel tensions within the movement and outside of it—conflicting identities, issues of representation, countries or regions without member groups, and heterogeneity within members at subnational levels—have not been extensively dealt with here. Borras et al. (2008) note several important and surprising “silences in the literature” of transnational agrarian movements, including a lack analyses of their internal dynamics, and of the true dynamics of interconnectivity between international, national and local levels of existing movements (pp. 10-12). They also note that the contentious question of representation is under-analyzed by movement leaders, activists and academics. Instead, to make the complexities manageable, “a great many important details tend to be taken for granted or missed in the analysis and discourse that [transnational agrarian movements] produce,” (p. 17). Class, race, and restrictive or prescriptive notions of identity make it difficult to truly represent a large and diverse class such as “peasants”, much less the rural poor more broadly. While it is of course in any movement’s interest to claim as broad a representation as possible, most transnational agrarian movements

lack any large presence in many areas of the world, “notably Russia, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa region, and most especially China” (p. 14)—areas that host much of the world’s rural poor. Further, the constituency that LVC seeks and claims to represent, by its very nature, means that many of LVC’s member organizations will be something of ciphers to the academic world: a movement seeking to represent the world’s rural poor is simultaneously a movement of people and places lacking easy access to the rest of the world, lack a large endemic academic class, and lack significant outside attention and resources. The ability to check LVC’s claims of representation, or to examine the extent to which their peasant identity speaks to the world’s 1 billion-plus peasants is simply not (yet) there.

Nevertheless, an important distinction for LVC as a movement is its acknowledgement and endorsement of the principle that people must have power to set their own agendas, and this power must be reflected through all different strata of society – peasant to consumer, retailer to producer, man to woman. Their construction of a peasant identity should be taken as much aspirational and tactical as representative—they seek to build an inclusive identity that invites a multitude of singularities. Their rejection of organizations like the World Bank and WTO, of imperial structures and transnational corporations, is a rejection of these organizations’ *democratic unrepresentativeness and unresponsiveness*. LVC and likeminded movements observe that free market structures and ideology have not provided democratic leveling and horizontal participation; those with little or no money have little or no vote in the marketplace. In demanding recognition of the small farmers’ fundamental support of the human race, LVC advocates for deep democracy. Better connections between differing people and identities and a true discussion of priorities and vision may not, in the end, lead to a universal embrace of LVC’s specific goals and vision. Yet, LVC’s desire for a truly sovereign, autonomous world where

participatory democratic discussion and deliberation takes place is possibly its most valuable and defensible contribution—one that implies it will continue to be a touchstone within transnational food movements. In this support for an active and engaged citizenship, LVC may also help create the sociopolitical spaces necessary to realize the goals of other movements like Fair Trade, and advance the promises of *ecological* and *agrarian citizenship* (Johnson and MacKendrick, this volume, Wittman, 2010). The extent to which LVC (and other transnational movements) may be willing and able to compromise on their values within the kind of democratic processes they seek remains to be fully tested.

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