

Raj Patel / CCS. Southafrica. 2004-12

Democracy is powerful stuff. Its weapons - dissent, voice, inclusion, occupation - are what distinguish it from the feather dusters of 'participation' and 'dialogue'. At the World Forum on Agrarian Reform, rural-based social movements from around the world set up a school for democratic struggle against neoliberal agrarian policy that has something to teach the city.

Winter

It may not come as news that the World Bank is choking the rural poor. But participants at the World Forum on Agrarian Reform in Valencia this December, learned the literal truth of it from Filipino delegates, who brought news of an all too familiar story. Last month, 14 people were killed outside the Hacienda Lusita, a sugarcane plantation in the Philippines. Among those killed were a two-year-old and a five-year-old, who suffocated on the teargas that the police fired into a crowd of protesters. The 5,000 workers at the plantation, farmworkers and sugar-mill workers were fighting the firing of union members during wage negotiations, and demanding an increase in their wages: they want an increase of \$1.78 on top of the daily gross pay of \$3.39, together with medical benefits. The Labour Secretary authorized the use of force to compel the strikers to return to work, and on November 16, a convoy of armoured personnel carriers and other military vehicles rammed the picket line, following up with watercannon, teargas and rifles. Firepower like this doesn't come without friends in high places, and the Hacienda Lusita is well stocked with them: it's owned by Corazon Cojuangco Aquino's family, she of the 1986 populist overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos.

The rural violence in the Philippines isn't an aberration. Activists from the Landless Peasant Movement in Brazil, the Bangladesh Krishok Federation and the Colombian Asociacion Nacional De Usuarios Campesinos were just some of the groups reporting rural activists being killed, routinely and frequently, simply for standing up for their rights to food, dignity and justice. The killers are the police, the military, and private militias. They take their orders from the landed elites, the plantation owners, the buyers. Who in turn constitute the government. Which in turn pari pasu walks with the World Bank.

The armed violence is not the only kind of repression available in rural areas. The chronic structural violence of the landed elites is handily maintained by the tyranny of the market. And all of this is legitimized by a 'post-Washington consensus' that pretends no other destiny for the rural poor than peonage, death, or migration to the cities. This is the agrarian prophesy of neoliberalism, and it has the means to turn vision into reality.

Spring

These were the issues being fought at the World Forum on Agrarian Reform. It's not without irony that the meeting happens in Spain. This is the country, after all, responsible for introducing the hacienda system of feudal landholding to Latin America and parts of South East Asia, a system which remains largely intact to this day. Not all rural inequalities can be attributed to colonialism, of course. India, for instance, had a sophisticated and vicious system of feudal exploitation in place while Europeans were still dragging their knuckles through the Dark Ages. When they arrived, the British shaped and profited from the feudal economy, reorienting it towards market production, while leaving many structures of rural oppression largely intact. The only thing that might make one think that any of this has disappeared is wishful thinking. Or a predisposition for siding with the elites. Which brings us to the World Bank.

Endemic rural violence, of which the Hacienda Lusita massacre is an instance, is fully consonant with existing World Bank rural development policy through its "corporate rural strategy". A look at the Bank's August 2003 report "Reaching the Rural Poor - a Renewed Strategy for Rural Development" tells us what this means. It opens with a 1973 quote from ex-Bank president Robert McNamara, who waxes thus: "Absolute poverty is a condition of life... so limited as to prevent realization of the potential of the genes with which one is born.. the problem is most severe in the countryside." It is a suitable reflection on the Bank that its flagship rural development documents reaches back thirty years for inspiration in a man whose previous strategies for rural advancement involved bombing and defoliating vast tracts parts of South East Asia. But if the Bank looks for an affirming quote to the 1970s, it looks to the eighteenth century for its policy. The trade liberalization regime that it advocates is no newer than that.

What is it, then, about trade liberalization that is so conducive to development? The farmers at the World Forum on Agrarian Reform certainly had their own views. French farmer José Bové - the Asterix of the global peasant movement - put it like this, as he chained himself to the gates of the food export facility in Valencia's port: "Only 10% of agricultural production is for the world market. The rest, 90%, is distributed in local and national markets. How comes the WTO gets to determine the agricultural politics in every country, when their interests are unrepresentative?" He might have gone further. After all, before the WTO there were other agencies, and other corporations, that were doing sterling work in transforming agriculture into a mechanism for fueling urban industrial growth while quelling the restless working class

in the colonial metropole with cheap, calorific but not terribly nutritious, food. Which brings us to the World Bank.

It has its own role to play in keeping a lid on class-tension. Again, looking at its rural development programme, the Bank has committed itself to “forging alliances with all stakeholders”. This means forging alliances with the people like the owners of Hacienda Lusita, the people who hire the heavies. And it means “dialoguing” with the exploited. Little wonder that most independent peasant organizations want to have nothing to do with the Bank’s rural development strategy. After all, it’s a strategy that is designed to squeeze the most out of the status quo, with emollient dabs of dialogue and consultation, to smooth the way. Consultation and participation, the Bank tells us, are key to its renewed vision for the future. So what does the Bank do when movements of the poor refused to be wrung any more, whose ‘dialogue’ with the Bank involves refusing to talk any more? Well, the Bank has rather thoughtfully funded its own popular coalitions, avoiding the need to trouble its stakeholders with the inconveniences of democracy.

You might think, for example, that a group called “the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty” would involve things like a commitment to the eradication of hunger and poverty, and involve a good number of people. But the coalition decided to rename itself to “The International Land Coalition” because, frankly, it was a little embarrassing to have the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the increasingly co-opted Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN, the World Food Programme, the European Commission and the World Bank, together with agricultural landowners and NGOs peddling policies that were deeply unpopular with large swathes of the world’s rural poor. (Also, the Bank doesn’t seem willing to commit itself to poverty eradication - only “poverty alleviation”.)

So, ersatz democracy is the stock in trade at the International Land Coalition, the idea being that when there’s a more visible, more bankrolled, glitzy artificial space for ‘dialogue’, people will forget what proper democracy looks like, or why they fought for it in the first place. At the World Forum on Agrarian Reform, social movements from across the world weren’t ‘dialoguing’ - they were arguing about what ‘rural development’ has come to mean, and what it should actually be. The tension was between a model of industrial export-oriented agriculture that privatizes land, water and seed, and a model of rural transformation that will, finally, address centuries of feudal and capitalist exploitation in the countryside.

One of the ways that the Bank is able to push its agrarian agenda is its control over knowledge. Marcelo Resende, who used to be President of the Agrarian Reform Institute in Brazil, tells of his experience: “the World Bank presented us with a program that wanted to marketise land, and it served to divide organizations in Brazil. The Bank also tried to privatize the Amazon, one of the most important ‘patrimonies’ of Brazil. When we talk of multilateral organizations, it’s not just that the Bank is an ideological centre, which it is, but it’s also a mechanism for action through other multilateral institutions. That is why we condemn the multilateral institutions that are ideologically affiliated to the World Bank. When workers go to Washington, the Bank tells them that in Brazil things are going fantastically well. They tell similar stories about Brazil elsewhere in the world. But they’re not.” Brazil, instead, seems to be involved in something of a counter-agrarian reform, a process of stalling over genuine social transformation that, this week, has resulted in Lula’s Worker’s Party being abandoned in its coalition by the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, on grounds that it has failed to deliver its promised social agenda.

The disillusionment with neoliberal politics isn’t confined to Brazil. Víctor Julio Imás Ruiz from the Frente Nacional Campesino in Paraguay put it like this “Multilateral organisations have set up the game so that land is in the hand of the multinationals that earn terrific profits that we never see. The outcome for us is poverty and violence. So, there’s nothing to negotiate - it’s a question of rejecting. We know what model of agriculture we want - and it’s not an agricultural revolution, but a national and social revolution. The assistance we get just traps us, but it doesn’t help.” In fact, it’s help that hurts. Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya of the Land Research Action Network argues that both the Global South and the Global North have been experiencing “agricultural counter-reform”, with a systemic shift in rural development policy towards sophisticated neocolonial relations of dependency, authority, knowledge and patronage. Which brings us to the World Bank.

Amade Sucá, from the União Nacional de Camponeses, told how the World Bank pushed cashew export in Mozambique. “The idea was that we should export everything without processing, and the government incorporated this in their policies. Thousands of farmers and farmworkers, and processing industrial workers, lost their jobs. We worked very hard to collect all the information that we could to prove this - we have to make it clear ... that this is happening, that the model is not working. ... When we join forces, that’s when we can fight.”

And fight there was, though the weapons were unusual. Some at the Forum were keen to maintain it as a neutral space - an uncharitable explanation for this being that such a space is far more open to funding, more Bankable shall we say, than one that has taken a principled stand against neoliberalism. Some sophisticated organizing on the part of the Via Campesina international peasant movement prevented the Forum from maintaining the status quo. The

weapons were weapons of democracy. Panels were deluged with tough and unflinching questions about agrarian reform from the peasant movements who have suffered at the hands of such programmes. The conference itself was preceded by a “mistica”, an internationalist sacrament to the value of rural life (though not, it must be said, necessarily a hymn to the value of tradition - the participants at the conference were more critical than that). Progressive organizers insisted, despite much resistance, that questions from the floor alternate between men and women, and that there need not be a declaration at the end of the conference - after all, democracy takes time. You can’t just bring peoples’ movements together and expect after four days a unanimity of vision and purpose that can be authorized without discussion with the people. So. No declaration. Plenty of different voices. Structural respect for gender, with a separate women’s statement emerging from the process. A subversion of the pretensions, equivocations, and guff of which the ageing white men who convene these sorts of conferences seem overly fond. Instead, now, a space for action.

Summer

You might be wondering what this agrarian revolution looks like. Well, it’s going to take time to work it out. And democracy. The one-size-fits-all school of agrarian reform isn’t one that Via Campesina are keen to replicate. There are, however, principles and mechanisms for distinguishing progressive from reactionary agrarian transformation, which can be applied in specific circumstances, the principles of Food Sovereignty as developed by Via Campesina involve “Food sovereignty is the peoples’, Countries’ or State Unions’ right to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries... including prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit... the right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced... the populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices and ...the recognition of women farmers’ rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food.”

This last point is the litmus test of the vision for rural transformation. The agrarian reform Via Campesina advocates isn’t about reconstructing some past idealized rural existence - in these rural idylls, women were uniformly exploited and no amount of nostalgia through the soft focus of ‘heritage’ can alter that fact. Since the exploitation of women is at the very heart of agrarian capitalism, there’s going to have to be some fairly heavy changes in agrarian relations. As Shalmali Guttal, from Focus on the Global South put it, “perhaps with all these changes, we don’t really mean agrarian reform. What we’re really saying is that we need agrarian revolution.”

In South Africa, there is occasion to test these principles. Apartheid has shaped an exceptional agrarian landscape, and if there is such a thing as a classical agrarian society, South Africa isn’t it. The histories of dislocation, urbanization, eviction, colonization, cultural rearticulation and conquest have left South Africa looking very different from the rest of the continent, let alone the rest of the world. Although the idiom of land for all South Africans had played a central mobilizing role in the struggle against apartheid, the government has made pitiful progress in its commitments to justice for South Africa’s rural and disenfranchised poor. This is in no small part because, in the ten years since the democratic dispensation, the capture of the state by neoliberalism has been swift and almost total. From the heady days of the Freedom Charter, in which the ANC proclaimed in 1955 “All shall have the right to occupy land wherever they choose”, the ANC let it be known in 1994 that 30% of agricultural land would be transferred within five years. The target has been pushed back a little since then: the government’s current aim is to redistribute 30% of agricultural land by 2015. To do that, it’d need to transfer 2.1 million hectares a year, between now and then. The prospects aren’t good - it has only managed to transfer this much in the eight years since the programme started. Part of the reason for this sloth is the government’s commitment to neoliberal conceptions of agrarian justice: no expropriation from those who have for generations profited from the sweat of Africans. Instead, the “willing buyer-willing seller” approach to land redistribution - in which property rights trump all other rights - is the principle of justice that guides the state. It is an almost global and certainly Pythonesque phenomenon that, when confronted with the idea of willing-seller/willing-buyer, poor people observe that they’d probably be willing to buy had they any money, but if they had money, they wouldn’t be poor and landless.

In South Africa in particular, one might think that the inequities of apartheid might enter the calculus of justice in land reform. Instead, the law is being used to frustrate the process of land reform. For example when dealing with restitution claims of families evicted in 1913 with the introduction of the Native Land Act the government requires communities to submit their land claims to the state. For this the claimants need a lawyer. But since the government’s legal aid system is acutely underfunded, the only public lawyers available are buried in criminal cases. Gary Howard, of the Campus Law Clinic at the University of KwaZulu-Natal - one of the few places where a handful of land claims can be processed - is clear: there are precious few places with the resources and knowledge capable of addressing the land question through legal means in South Africa. In other words, the ANC’s land reform programme seems to be intentionally designed to fail.

Autumn

Agrarian reform extends beyond the question of land. In South Africa, the success of the neoliberal capture of the imagination is such that the government's dismal land reform program will now only entertain criticism about its pace, not its substance. In other words, there's little if any discussion about quite what can or should be done with land that is acquired by the survivors of apartheid, only that the distribution ought to happen a little more speedily than it is. Yet there is little merit in fighting for a patch of land if there are not the mechanisms in place to nurture the jobs on the land for which South Africa's rural poor are so desperate, and for which the Landless Peoples' Movement - the South African members of Via Campesina - have been fighting.

It would seem, however, that the LPM has a new ally. The South African Communist Party have recently thrown their weight behind a comprehensive agrarian reform, in their "Red October Campaign". Although they initially seem only to be targeting white agricultural capital, this is surely an oversight on their part. The ANC's vision of agrarian reform, enshrined in the AgriBEE (Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment for Agriculture) initiative seems to be to change the skin colour of the exploiters, but leave everything else pretty much as is. So, it seems, apartheid's economic structures will remain intact, under new management, and with a small cash settlement as a token of goodwill to those who suffered under the previous administration.

Having held aloft the Brazilian MST's example of coordinated land occupations and categorical rejection of willing-buyer/willing seller, it'll be interesting to see whether the SACP, who have remained largely silent in public about the neoliberal take-over of South Africa, will offer support for a widespread campaign of civil disobedience in the best tradition of MST activism, over the coming year. After all, the MST exists only because it has actively occupied land, not anarchically, but strategically, in defence of rights that the state has neglected for far too long. The lesson for other landless movements is clear: the poor can only negotiate from a position of strength, and that means occupation. Without it, without genuine post-colonial agrarian transformation, as the Tanzanian scholar Issa Shivji has argued, it's not yet democracy.

To find out more about the Hacienda Lusita massacre, visit
<http://www.geocities.com/arkibo10/04-asyenda/asyenda.htm>

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