Peasant movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: from parochial reactions to global struggle?

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In this contribution, we compare two cases of peasant movements and peasant resistance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We see a shift from a local to a global platform. We focus on peasant movements during the Stalinist collectivization in the 1930s and on the twenty-first century transnational peasant movement La Via Campesina. We ask what this comparative exercise can teach us about the scale and range of peasant actions in a globalizing world. How are peasant actions organized? What are their demands and expectations? Whom do they see as their enemies and adversaries? This comparative exercise questions the shift in peasant actions from a local to a transnational and global scale.¹
1/ The return of the peasant

Understanding old and new peasants requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries and peasant movements within long-term transformations of historical capitalism. For more than a century, debates about the ‘peasant question’ have been dominated by two groups of protagonists. On the one hand, the ‘disappearance thesis’ defends the viewpoint that the expansion of capitalism will lead to an extermination of the peasantry. Lenin and Kautsky transformed a previously undifferentiated class of peasants into new, distinct groups: capital owners (capitalist farmers) and wage laborers. On the other hand, advocates of the ‘permanence thesis’ argue in favor of Chayanov’s peasant mode of production in which peasant societies have a distinct development logic that supports the survival of the peasantry within capitalism. Araghi labels the first option as teleological and the second as essentialist; both suffer from a-historical and often functionalistic presumptions. According to Araghi, “depeasantization has been neither a unilinear process, nor has been it taken the historically particular form of differentiation in the countryside within each and every nation-state.”

The biggest problem with the concept of depeasantization is its predominantly inherent and often unexplained link with urbanization, industrialization, development and marginalization. What is often regarded as ‘depeasantization’ is, in essence, part of the peasantry’s diversified labor and income strategy. The marginalization of a growing portion of the world’s population makes these mixed survival strategies more important than ever. The peasantry has to be understood as a set of social relationships. The household is the basic economic unit and gateway to the wider world. It engages in economic transactions in order to secure a level of subsistence within the framework of a broader market economy. That is why the concept of the peasant needs to be contextually redefined contextually. It must be sensitive to local situations and should not turn non-capitalist entities into essentialist or dualistic frameworks such as agency-structure, West-rest, self-other, or capitalist-non-capitalist. Within this framework, the peasantry is an open concept that interacts within multiple forms and scales of action and conflict, thus leaving room for different levels of autonomy. Depeasantization and peasantization are ongoing processes of adaptation and of resistance. Moreover, “like every social entity, peasantry exists in fact only as a process.”

In his novel book *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, anthropologist Eric Wolf analyzed the destructive impact of capitalism on peasant communities. Not only has capitalism generated ecological pressure and overpopulation in the twentieth century, it has also caused a fundamental crisis in the exercise of power relations within rural communities. The traditional methods that peasants use to answer societal tensions no longer suffice: “The peasant rebellions of the twentieth century are no longer simple responses to local problems, if indeed they ever were. They are but the parochial reactions to major social dislocations, set in motion by overwhelming societal change. The spread of the market has torn men up by their roots [...].”

The old strategies and institutions have been undermined by the same forces against which the peasants were fighting. In this new, more globalised world, peasants were no longer able to independently combat the systematic weakening of their bases for survival, nor formulate alternatives. The main causes are thought to be a lack of leadership and organization. Eric Hobsbawm states that peasants could still be a decisive factor in the
twentieth century, but only when united under an external leader. Usually, the changes they could realize did not improve their living circumstances. The role of peasants as an independent social actor seems to be over.

But is this correct? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, after three decennia of fast globalization, peasant resistance is once again on the social agenda. Peasant movements of all kinds are part of alter-globalization movements. The new food crisis since 2007-2008 has put the agrarian producer on the international agenda once again. Several countries are faced with new forms of rural and agrarian resistance. This ranges from European farmers pouring their milk on their fields to land occupations in Central America and Latin America, Africa, India and China. People who need to live from the land express themselves loudly amidst a world of increasing food insecurity. In today’s world, peasants are still the largest social group. Of the seven billion people on our planet, half still live in the countryside and 42 percent of all active women work the land. It is not surprising that international organizations such as the World Bank are reconsidering the importance of the small peasant. Agriculture is no longer perceived as an impediment but as an important road to development. Recent studies of both the United Nations and the World Bank illustrate that small-scale agriculture practiced by the peasantry can provide a good answer to today’s challenges.

In this contribution, we review literature in order to analyze peasant resistance in a comparative-historical perspective. We focus on two cases: peasant resistance under Stalinist collectivization in the 1930s and today’s transnational peasant movement La Vía Campesina. We assess to what degree former and new peasant movements are comparable. We question how peasants reacted to changes to their land and lives. How did they organize themselves? Which demands did they pose? Whom did they consider to be their adversary, and which methods and actions did they use? Can we follow the pessimistic vision of Eric Wolf, Eric Hobsbawm and others? Is it true that the forms and methods of peasant resistance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are no longer are effective? Or do peasant movements succeed in adapting to the new spatial and social context: from local to transnational?

2/ Peasant movements in 1930s Russia: ‘parochial reactions to major social dislocations’?

Organization: a movement without leaders?

Stalin launched total collectivization on 5 January 1930. Individual farms became large agricultural enterprises called kolkhozes. Farmers were forced to hand over their cattle, materials and labor to those new farms. Peasant resistance against this all-out attack on their lives and work was far-reaching. Several authors have researched this opposition. Their views differ strongly, especially with regard to organization of this resistance. Former Soviet leaders and Marxist authors strongly underestimated the organization capacity and impact of these peasant resistance movements. By considering the peasantry as a class an sich rather than a class für sich with an independent class consciousness, they expressed their doubt in the ability of individual and subordinate peasants to organize themselves as a class in order to defend their common interests. Naturally, the peasantry
was not able to organize themselves independently and on a long-term basis. Any cooperation would and could only be temporary and targeted at specific goals. The Soviet authorities repeated this vision when they were faced with resistance against forced collectivization in the countryside in the 1930s. They described this as a loose set of spontaneous rebellions. However, historical research illustrates that a lack of formal organization does not mean a lack of direction and association with the resistance. Secret meetings and gatherings were held, and headquarters were erected. There was internal consultation concerning demands and strategies. In times of external threat, peasants are capable of cooperating and leaving their internal differences behind. Studies regarding the Russian peasant rebellions illustrate several forms of group solidarity. Nevertheless, many authors consider those forms of informal organization and coordination as weak and temporary. Lynn Viola has researched these rebellions thoroughly and stresses the strong and structural forms of organization amongst Russian peasants. The main problem is that observers, mostly outsiders and historians, have a distinct, often modern or urban, perception of collective rebellions and protests. This obscures a better understanding of the basic structures behind the apparently loose forms of protest. There were no public leaders, membership rolls, manifests or public activities. According to James Scott, these movements can be considered social movements despite this institutional invisibility. A lack of formal organization is the norm due to the danger and permanent threat of repression. Peasants usually acted individually or in small groups. This necessitated only small-scale, informal organization and coordination. The traditional pattern of a peasant revolts consisted of a sequence of smaller, more or less isolated eruptions, internally coordinated but without visible leadership. Nevertheless, many authors consider leadership to be crucial for the success of rural protests. That is why contemporaries, both allies and adversaries, created mythical peasant leaders. According to Eric Wolf, those leaders were often rural dwellers with a certain degree of status and independence. The Soviet authorities also identified two groups as being responsible for the rebellion: outsiders and rich farmers or kulaks. However, neither historical research nor the few remaining testimonies confirm this thesis, ‘et je suis sure que personne ne la dirigeait’. Small-scale actions did not require clear leadership, diminishing the possibility of repression. Leadership was concealed from contemporaries and remains concealed for historians.

Demands: violation of local conventions

Rebellious peasants often put forward their demands only implicitly, so historians have to derive these demands from their concrete actions. Although peasants could be quite extremist in their world view (for example by imagining a reversal in the distribution of riches and status), generally these were not in their demands and actions. Peasants did not ask for radical societal changes; on the contrary, their demands derived from daily experiences. Scott summarizes their claims as a cry for bread, land and fewer or no taxes. Russian and Ukrainian peasants repeatedly demanded the restitution of their recently confiscated grain, cattle and machinery. Furthermore, they asked for fair wages for their work on the kolkhozes, rebelled against the partition of land, and were concerned about the shortages of food resulting from the collectivization.
On the whole, their demands covered fundamental material and physical needs. The Soviet authorities liked to describe the resistance as irrational and hysterical, especially when it was led by women. Yet women were responsible for the survival of their families. The confiscation of cows deteriorated peasant families’ economic base and threatened the future of their children and households. This causes most authors to conclude that peasants normally fight for rather modest demands. Their aim was not the abolishment of the existing social order, but a fight against specific changes in their way of life. Their goal was not to topple the dominant system, but to facilitate their survive within that system: ‘the usual goal of peasants […] is “working the system to their minimum disadvantage”.’ As such, the Russian peasantry in the 1930s did not try to topple the Soviet authorities; they tried to get the most unfavorable measures abolished. This was translated in slogans across the Russian countryside: ‘We welcome Soviet power without collective farms, grain collections, and local communists’; ‘Soviet Power, but without Collective Farms’, ‘We Are for Soviet Power, but against the communists’. After all, Russian peasants were already used to communist power, which was established in 1917. Collectivization, however, was new. The primary goal of their resistance was to protect as much of their independence as they could. The demands of the Russian peasantry were by no means extreme. Furthermore, the demands of peasant movements were often based on their sense of justice. Their perception of a fairer social order frequently formed the base for protest movements. Confiscating the property of the kulaks and forcing the peasants to hand everything over to the kolkhoz did not comply with that sense of justice. Consequently, peasants often demanded an investigation into the excesses of the collectivization campaigns. The - imagined - past constituted another important breeding ground for resistance. This was often translated into a desire to return to the former way of life, to old customs and traditions. Actions of resistance were regularly aimed at symbols of renewal such as schools. They demanded their abolition and a banishment of the teachers. This past was often reconstructed in function of the present; old conventions, disadvantageous for the peasantry, were left out. Resistance was also a consequence of their loss of status and their role in cultural life.

**Opponents: the local logic of accusation**

When Russian peasants switched to direct action in the form of destroying properties, breaking windows and attacking people physically, their actions were almost always directed against local representatives of Soviet power and members of the local Soviet, their family and property. The Russian uprisings of the 1930s confirmed the tradition of peasant rebellions, focusing almost exclusively on local targets. Peasants were aware of the bigger processes, but they experienced and combated those in personal, specific and local forms. Their adversaries became real people, actors responsible for their deeds. This kind of personification canalized anger and provoked actions that would have been less likely if the causes were considered to be impersonal and inevitable. James Scott calls this redirection of anger the local logic of accusation. Members of the local community bore obligations towards each other and could be advised about their responsibility. Strangers, on the other hand, could not be held responsible since local moral conventions could not be applied to them.
This also explains why the distant symbol of suppressive power, the sovereign, was typically not a victim of peasant rebellions. Myths about the sincere king express the belief that, if only he knew about the injustices, he would set things right. Some explain this via religion: the king was sent by God to enforce justice and thus was the one who could restore harmony. The same pattern can be seen in the USSR of the 1930s. Peasants directed their grievances to central authorities in the vain hope that Stalin or the Central Committee of the communist party would defend them against the local Soviet powers. Stalin became a hero of the Russian peasantry after publication of the article Dizzy with success in March 1930, in which he accused local staff members of committing excesses during collectivization. They felt supported by Stalin in their struggle against local Soviet members. Stalin was considered the good tsar residing in far-away Moscow. Instead of being a victim of the peasantry’s anger, Stalin succeeded in becoming the ‘good leader’. Attacks against members of the local Soviet fits into this picture. Moreover, many communists did collectivize in an aggressive manner so as to report the best numbers to Moscow. Despite the warning not to start a game of collectivization, local officials tried to expropriate and/or deport as many kulaks and to establish as many kolkhozes as possible. The central authorities’ strategy of accusing the local Soviets of being the cause of unrest was successful. Shifting responsibility onto those locals became one of Stalin’s typical policies. To what degree this strategy was able to convince all peasants remains unclear. Some slogans illustrate a more fundamental dissatisfaction with the regime: ‘down with Stalin’s dictatorship, long live a real worker’s and peasants’ dictatorship’, or ‘down with Stalin, give us Trotsky, the leader of the Red Army, and Comrade Mykov’. According to Fitzpatrick, the Stalin-cult of the peasantry was only a façade; they held him responsible for collectivization and the subsequent famine.

Actions: weapons of the weak

Just like their demands and targets, the peasantry’s actions were usually modest, careful and realistic. These low-profile forms of resistance are called everyday forms of resistance, infrapolitics or passive resistance. They appeared to be an effective strategy, especially in rural settings. The simple act of not understanding an order gave peasants enormous power. They could use the system to their maximal advantage and minimum disadvantage. Rebellious peasants used to do their work ‘carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance and incompetence’, which made their resistance ‘nearly unbeatable’. This disorder and inertia was also a widespread phenomenon in the USSR. The peasants only worked a minimum number of days on the kolkhoz, tools and machinery were scattered around and abandoned. The cattle was neglected and sold or slaughtered. Socialist properties were damaged and destroyed, nobody bothered to repair it. Absenteeism was endemic in the 1930s. Peasants simply refused to do a certain task, or they needed to be bribed. Robbery was omnipresent. Language and cultural patterns are part of these ‘infrapolitics’. Since exploitation and domination was legitimated by ideology, the resistance needed a counter-ideology. It made use of contradictions and openings within the dominant culture. For example, peasants constructed barricades and asked every passer-by to show his or her documents, a practice widespread under communists. The farms of communists were dekulakized. Symbolic inversions were typical for peasant resistance, although normally only
expressed in drawings and stories. While there was no cooperation in the traditional sense, this cultural atmosphere made a minimal form of coordination possible. It created a *climate of opinion*, a silent support of each other’s actions. An additional advantage was the oral character of popular culture, which made it impossible for the authorities to trace who was saying what. This enabled peasants to express dangerous opinions in relative security. Another way of securing the anonymity of a speaker was by spreading false rumors. In the Russian countryside, rumors spread that women’s hair served as a means of payment to the Chinese for the trans-Siberian railway, and that all men and women should be forced to sleep in one bed. Rumors were partly based on reality. In some cases, women were indeed forced to cut their hair and in the Northern Caucasus, local activists collectivized all blankets. At the same time, by pretending to believe the rumors, one could participate in easy accessible, non-political protest. False rumors also reflected the wishes, hopes and fears of the peasants, as is illustrated by the rumors related to an international intervention, a papal interference, and the collectivization of women and children. When it was not possible to guarantee the anonymity of a speaker, they concealed the message, for example by making use of euphemisms, metaphors and other linguistic tricks. Those silent actions were hidden behind a public façade of obedience and respect.

More sporadically, resistance turned violent and open. During the first months of the 1930s, the fight was fierce. Communists were beaten up, chased away, and killed. Peasants took back their grain, destroyed portraits, windows, and buildings. In rural society, violence remained just beneath the surface. What was necessary to cause it to erupt? According to Scott, the moment of eruption was difficult to predict since it cannot always be seen as an act of rebellion; it is often somebody’s failure to control themselves. Nevertheless, some structural features can be identified, making the transition from passive to active rebellion more likely. When changes were carried out gradually, they did not affect everyone equally. On the contrary, when changes were a sudden attack against all daily routines, active rebellion became more probable. Viola describes collectivization as an ‘all-out attack against the peasantry, its culture, and way of life’. Even though the Russian peasantry was not a homogeneous group, collectivization hit it more or less to the same degree, enabling them to transcend their internal differences and work together against a common enemy. Dekulakization made the peasantry even more homogeneous, thereby reinforcing their solidarity. Open rebellion became more likely when peasants had the feeling that changes violated their basic rights, when they interpreted something as an act of aggression or provocation, and when they felt humiliated or exploited. This was also the case in Stalin’s Russia; the peasantry considered collectivization as a return to slavery and as theft: ‘socialism, they sneered, “Robbery is a better name for it”’. Repression was another factor that influenced the probability of outright rebellion. When the government made all other forms of resistance impossible, open resistance was the only option left. Active rebellion mostly occurred during huge crises, when there was nothing left to lose. It was a sign of despair; it illustrated the failure of hidden forms of resistance. Those ‘infra-politics’ were not a substitute for open resistance or an outlet for their anger; they formed the basis for rebellions or revolutions that only erupted after a long yet hidden struggle. In the Soviet Union, violence had a prehistory. 1927 is traditionally considered the start of troubles between the government and the peasantry.
peasantry no longer wanted to sell their grain to the state, the so-called grain procurement crisis, since, next to bad weather conditions and crop failures, prices were too low and few goods were offered in exchange. Stalin was convinced of the need for collectivization after 1927. He succeeded in silencing the opposition and carried through his plan in 1929. After three years of struggle, the Russian peasantry probably felt that their traditional forms of resistance had failed.

After six months, in the summer of 1930, active resistance was revived in the USSR. Authors concluded that a long-term mobilization of the peasantry was a nearly impossible task. Field work was solitary or family-based, and competition for the scarce resources of the land was the rule. Furthermore, all peasants were not affected equally by the reforms. This created other divisions in rural society. Finally, repression was harsh, depriving the peasantry of any realistic perspective. One of the few alternatives was to flee, which Scott calls ‘avoidance protest’, a phenomenon also widespread in the Soviet Union. The most realistic forms of resistance in rural societies were the weapons of the weak. Those often hidden forms of resistance were most sustainable and best suited for a long-term struggle. When active rebellion failed or was suppressed, one could revert to those ‘infrapolitics’. Since collectivization was not halted, it can be assumed that everyday forms of resistance continued in the USSR beyond the 1930s. According to Viola, it was this silent and inconspicuous resistance that undermined the fundamentals of Soviet politics in the long run. McDermott postulates that ‘collectivised agriculture continued to be the Achilles heel of the Soviet economy right to the Gorbachev era’.

Failed rebellions?

How can one decide whether the rebellions were successful or not? This is a difficult question to answer since it involves the consideration of objective targets and a subjective assessment. Some specific demands were realized. A women’s rebellion in Viknyna in February 1930 was able to temporarily abolish the kolkhoz. The degree of unrest in the countryside was so overwhelming that the communists were forced to make temporary concessions. The decree of 1 March 1930 gave the peasantry the right to own some cattle and poultry and their own piece of the land. Continuing unrest forced Stalin to publish his article Dizzy with Success, which effectively resulted in a temporary stop of collectivization. On March 10, another decree was published that confirmed a prohibition of the collectivization of poultry and cattle, required the reopening of markets and churches, and revised the list of households that should be dekulakized. Stalin promised a cow to every household on the kolkhoz in 1933. Those concessions did not end collectivization, but they did soften the most detested practices such as direct attacks against the church, an attempt to collectivize all cattle, and the impunity of local Soviet members. Despite those initial achievements, most authors conclude that peasants could not realize their goals in the long run, and the fight almost always ended in defeat. Even with an external leader, regarded as essential by some, success was not guaranteed. Very often the peasantry found themselves helping leaders rise to power who subsequently neglected their interests. This also happened to the Russian peasantry after they helped the communists gain power in 1917.
Since the Soviet authorities succeeded in carrying out collectivization, it is not surprising that they described the peasants’ resistance as a failure. Graziosi states that Stalin’s victory over the rebellious peasantry was complete in 1933. However, all historians are not in agreement. According to McDermott, agriculture remained the Achilles heel of the Soviet state. Viola thinks the state’s victory was a Pyrrhic victory. Due to collectivization, peasants became bitter and turned to long-term, passive resistance. Fitzpatrick argues that the state could not subject the Russian peasantry completely; peasants succeeded in limiting their contribution to the Soviet state to a minimum.

James Scott recognizes that in the course of history, occasional and isolated peasant resistance did not have much impact. The situation changed when resistance adopted a consistent pattern, even if that pattern was not coordinated or organized. Through their everyday forms of resistance, peasants were definitely able to disturb the ambitions and plans of a state, as is shown in the case of the Soviet Union. Throughout history, peasants have frequently made unpopular measures impossible through the use of passive resistance. The efficiency of those forms of resistance increased as the peasantry succeeded in cooperating. Several authors state that the Russian peasantry was able to temporarily transcend their traditional cleavages and unite in their fight against a common adversary. At the same time, James Scott acknowledges that the results of rural resistance must not be overestimated. The actions did not bring fundamental changes. Most of the time it was the landlord or the government that won the fight, even though they occasionally had to make some concessions. In general, peasantry victories (resulting from both active and passive resistance) were only marginal and temporary. In the Soviet Union, the abolishment of kolkhozes did not last. The government continued to confiscate grain on a large scale. Peasants seldom received a fair share of the harvest or just wages for their work. Collectivized properties were not returned to their initial owners and commerce was only possible under very strict conditions. Therefore, resistance only resulted in small and temporary concessions.

Despite their enormous de facto power, why were peasants not able to obtain more than some modest successes? Explanations refer to the weak or inferior position of the social group, their lack of resources, the nature of their work on the land, their desolation and disintegration. It would be too easy to see this as the ultimate cause for a failure of peasant movements. Due to a local focal point of resistance, successes on the local scale were often significant. Researchers can seldom detect whether the peasants considered their actions successful or not.

3/ La Vía Campesina: ‘Globalizing the struggle’

Organization: a global grassroots movement

Current changes in the global food chain and the position of food producers have thoroughly redefined the areas of action and resistance of peasant movements. Peasant movements have adopted a clear identity and agenda. The social group of rural producers seems to have transformed into a class für sich. Today’s peasants are represented by several formal, permanent organizations, with a board of directors, membership rolls, public activities and an identifiable structure. They are defined as small and medium-scale agricultural producers.
They cultivate the land and act as global citizens. They protest against globalization in its current form, in mutual consultation and solidarity. Agreements are no longer only made on a local and regional level, but also within national and global networks. *La Vía Campesina*, founded in 1993, is a global peasant movement uniting billions of peasants from America, Africa, Europe and Asia. This movement is built on the mutual recognition of and solidarity between peasants from all parts of the world. Until recently, the huge diversity between the peasants was seen as a significant weakness. Now it is believed that, despite the big differences in living and working conditions, new transnational movements can create new forms of cohesion. All workers of the land are presumed to fight for the same goals and to share the same values. This results from a growing consciousness that the problems they face are similar and transcend local and regional boundaries. From its start, *La Vía Campesina* has expressed itself as a transnational movement, an international alliance of peasant and family farmer organizations. It aims to be a conglomerate of local, regional or national organizations. This makes it fragile and vulnerable, and confronts it with internal tensions and contradictions.

That is why *La Vía Campesina* is working on a common identity, strengthened by the conviction that all peasants have the same problems and adversaries despite their social and spatial differences. The need for global unity relates to an exchange of experiences, the need to educate people, and the strengthening of local peasant organizations, as expressed in their central slogan ‘Globalizing Hope – Globalizing the Struggle’.

**Demands: another modernity**

*La Vía Campesina* fiercely reclaims the identity of the campesino, the peasant. The movement shows the important contribution that small peasants make to twenty-first century global society, especially regarding food production and food security. It points out the social and ecological stability and sustainability of local, small-scale agriculture. The movement does not aim to return to a romanticized past. On the contrary, it strives for a new and different modernity. Today’s world economy creates the social space in which this movement operates. The main ambitions of *La Vía Campesina* are an end of the neoliberal world system, the withdrawal of agriculture as one of the policy domains of the World Trade Organization, the idea of food sovereignty, and the protection of regional food systems. In order to realize this, a reversal in the current world order is necessary. The goals are definitely radical and peasants no longer put forward their demands within the existing social order, as their ancestors did. Justice is currently more than simply a moral right; it is the goal of a global social struggle.

The program of *La Vía Campesina* combines a global analysis of the basic problems with locally oriented solutions. ‘What are we fighting against?’: imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and eco-systems, and agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments that are antagonistic to their peoples. ‘What do we defend?’: Peasant, family farm-based production and people’s food sovereignty, organized according to the needs of local communities and via decentralized food production and supply chains.
Opponents: agents of neo-liberal globalization

*La Vía Campesina* no longer focuses exclusively on local, regional or even national governments. Justice needs to be realized on a global level, primarily by correcting the skewed global food regime.\(^1\) First, *La Vía Campesina* directs its actions against the institutional supports of the global system, as stated in The Maputo Declaration: ‘Our reflections have made it clear to us that multinational corporations and international finance capital are our most important common enemies, and that as such, we have to bring our struggle to them more directly. They are the ones behind the other enemies of peasants, like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the FTAs and EPAs, neoliberal governments, as well as aggressive economic expansionism, imperialism and militarism. Now is the time to redouble our struggle against FTAs and EPAs, and against the WTO, but this time more clearly indicating the central role played by the TNCs.’ At the same time, *La Vía Campesina* also fights the big transnational corporation dominating the global food system, especially Monsanto, Syngenta, Du Pont, Bayer, Cargill, BASF en Dow.

Actions: act local, aim global

The actions of today’s peasant movements are still in line with peasant traditions. Many of their actions are still locally oriented, such as the occupation of a McDonald’s in France or the attack of offices of the multinational Cargill by East Indian peasants.\(^2\) The objectives, however, supersede this regional focus. Peasant movements claim a transcending peasant identity and make demands concerning world trade.\(^3\) Today’s peasants look for forms of organization that collaborate on a supra-regional scale and make full use of all recent communication techniques. Their opponents are global enterprises and organizations. Local and regional strategies no longer suffice. Meetings, forums, tribunals, and demonstrations need to have an international appeal and draw global attention.\(^4\) The struggle is open, rather than hidden and disguised as it used to be, in a repressive local environment. *La Vía Campesina* is active on two fronts. On the one hand, they focus on the international agents of neo-liberal globalization. Protest and negotiations are combined: ‘Negotiations with other agencies would be weak without the real threat that *Vía Campesina* can actually resort to militant forms of actions against them; conversely, purely ‘expose and oppose’ actions without intermittent negotiations would project the movement as unreasonable.’ On the other hand, the movement consists of several organizations that are active on local and regional scales. *La Vía Campesina* promotes local struggles for access to and control of productive resources such as land, credit, seeds, knowledge and water. It also helps marginalized people have a greater say in defining community and national agricultural policies. Media coverage is very important for the actions of *La Vía Campesina*. The Internet is a crucial aid that the movement employs and can control.

4/ Old and new peasant movement: from local to global

Peasant movements, both historical and contemporary, do not easily fit into simple templates. The differences across time and space are considerable. Nevertheless,
comparison is possible using well-defined analysis models. This contribution attempts to make a comparison. An analysis of historical research related to peasant uprisings during the collectivization campaign in the Soviet Union in the 1930s confirms both the power and the weakness of traditional peasant resistance. Peasants were organized in informal networks in which actions and resistance were mainly coordinated locally and formal leadership remained invisible. Authorities often described the resistance as instinctive, uncoordinated and irrational, partly as a consequence of their inability to think out of the box, and partly to avoid the obligation of giving in to their demands. Demands and goals were often specific and local; they aimed at safeguarding the survival of the family and relations within the local community. They were always linked to the material and physical needs of the peasantry. The fight also had a symbolic character; it was about the definition of justice and an interpretation of the past. Peasants struggled for the survival of both their physical existence and their cultural status.

Their targets also were almost exclusively local. The Russian peasants did not aim at Stalin, Moscow and the communist party. Their fight was not part of a big project of change, but was a consequence of their fear of losing the world they knew. The techniques they employed were usually small-scale and hidden, so-called everyday forms of resistance. Workers of the land switched to active and open resistance only in times of great crisis. The beginning of collectivization can be seen as such a crisis. During the first months of 1930, the Soviet Union encountered a real wave of violent resistance. After a few months, the peasants fell back on more hidden forms of protest, their weapons of the weak. As James Scott emphasizes, historians have difficulty grasping the spirit of these forms of resistance. What was hidden behind their silence? What were the intentions of the peasants? How successful could such resistance be? Critical minds such as Eric Wolf and Eric Hobsbawm often repeated that peasant resistance was unsuccessful in the tumultuous twentieth century. They were caught up in the social changes that they tried to fight, both in the forms of capitalism and communism. That was one of the harsh lessons that Russian peasants learned.

The peasants of the twenty-first century do not seem to care about history. Their fight is no longer directed against the local lord or the repressive state, but against an unfair world order. The patterns of peasants in resistance, based on historical cases of rebellion, need to be revised. Contrary to many expectations predicting the end of the peasantry, a further marginalization of rural areas and of the peasant population does not mark the final collapse of peasant resistance, but the start of a new type of autonomous peasant organizations. Based on a proud and universal peasant identity and supported by the most recent forms of media, communication and action, this movement combines a connection to the land with self-conscious world citizenship. There is no need for external leadership, but alliances with other alter-globalization movements are necessary. The capitalist world-system has historically expanded and transformed in coexistence with frontier-zones or zones of contact. The processes of interaction that emanate from these contacts are challenged by pressures for incorporation into the modern world-system. These pressures contribute to the homogenization of the world by reducing its frontiers, and they simultaneously lead to heterogenization because they are answered by the formulation of old and new frontiers. Throughout history, peasant societies and rural zones have represented geographically diverse frontier-zones. Rural communities have never been able
to escape the pressures of incorporation once they come into contact with the modern world-system. In response, they have been developing strategies for survival and resistance, articulated towards expanding state power, expanding market relations, class struggle, and ethno-cultural identity. Over time, the scales upon which these social power relations are expressed have been widening and multiplying, and they have become increasingly interdependent. On a global scale, processes of deagrarianization in the core zones often created new peasannies in the periphery. Recent forces of deagrarianization are triggered by the enforcement of neo-liberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. Vulnerability, the link between risk and the precariousness of people’s livelihood, has always been part of the peasant’s existence. A diversification of income and coping strategies (individual, in the household and in the village) has always been the primary answer. However, a continuing erosion of the family basis of livelihoods has created new and more massive forms of vulnerability. This has eroded former household and village security mechanisms and it affects their ability to overcome short-term economic stress. Three decades of economic liberalization and institutional restructuring, resulting in multiple and intensified involvement in markets - for commodities, credit, technology, land, and all kinds of services - have created growing and interconnected vulnerabilities and new risks. New forms of organized peasant reactions such as La Via Campesina try to formulate an answer to the predominantly neoliberal mode of food production. Food sovereignty, control over one’s own food production and food markets, is put forward as an alternative for food security, a concept agnostic about food production systems. A call for localizing food power implies support for domestic food production and the promotion of a return to smallholder farming. At the same time, peasant’s rights are now defined as a set of ‘transgressive rights’, challenging the primacy of the nation-state and calling for international and universal (human rights) spaces. This clarifies how the present material and ideological struggles for ‘peasant spaces’ put the peasantry in the center of the twenty-first century’s systemic crisis. The peasants of the twenty-first century have taught us an important lesson: they are not a redundant relict, but a force of change directed at the future.
1 This article is based on: C. Van Den Abeele, *De Russische peasant en de collectivisatie in de jaren 1930. Het traditionele verzet tegen oppressie en exploitatie, of een unieke casus?*, Master Thesis Ghent University 2009;


2 In this contribution, we distinguish between peasants (small producers primarily aimed at the survival of their household) and farmers (running larger enterprises and primarily producing for the market). In the USSR of the 1920s, the two types were present. Next to the mass of peasants, there was a smaller group of rich farmers, the kulaks.


13 According to the statistics of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), see: http://faostat.fao.org, last consulted on 27/04/2012.


17 This article is mainly based on the research of Sheila Fitzpatrick, Andrea Graziosi, Kevin McDermott, Tracy McDonald and Lynn Viola.


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31 E. HOBSBAWM, Peasants and Politics [..], p. 9 (10); Y.-M. BERCE, Rural unrest [..], p. 143 (26).

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