

# **Globalizing local struggles – Localizing global struggles. Peasant movements from local to global platforms and back**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the twenty-first century, new peasant movements have entered the global stage. What can we learn from this fundamental shift from local to global platforms? This article presents a historical-comparative analysis about the scale and range of peasant actions in a globalizing world. We focus on former types of peasant movements and on the twenty-first century transnational peasant movement, *La Vía Campesina*. How were and are peasant actions organized? What were and are their demands and expectations? Who did and do they see as their enemies and adversaries? This comparative exercise explores peasant actions between local, transnational and global scales. The new peasant movements have redefined local resistance within a global context.

## **KEYWORDS**

Globalisation, New peasant movements, Local vs. global, La Vía Campesina

**I**n the 21th century, new peasant movements have entered the global stage. What can we learn from this fundamental shift from local to global platforms? This article presents a historical-comparative analysis about the scale and range of peasant actions in the globalizing world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We focus on former types of peasant movements and on the twenty-first century transnational peasant movement *La Vía Campesina*. How were and are peasant actions organized? What were and are their demands and expectations? Who did and do they see as their enemies and adversaries? This comparative exercise questions peasant actions between

the local, transnational and global scales. How have the new peasant movements redefined local resistance within a global context?

## 1. The return of the peasant movement

Understanding old and new peasantries requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries and peasant movements within the long-term transformations of historical capitalism. For more than a century, debates about the “peasant question” have been dominated by two groups of protagonists.<sup>1</sup> 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 has labeled 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 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 redefined contextually, without framing it in capitalist-non-capitalist dualisms.<sup>3</sup> 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: “like every social entity, the peasantry exists in fact only as a process.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> VANHAUTE, E. “Peasants, peasantries and (de)peasantization in the capitalist world-system”. In: CHASE DUNN, C. and BABONES, S. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis*. Oxford: Routledge, 2012, pp. 313-321; ARAGHI, F. “Global depeasantization, 1945-1990”. *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 36, n. 2, 1995, pp. 601-632.

<sup>2</sup> VAN DER PLOEG, J.D. “The peasantries of the twenty-first century: the commoditisation debate revisited”. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 37, n. 1, 2010, pp. 20-23.

<sup>3</sup> OWEN, J.R. “In defense of the ‘peasant’”. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. vol. 35, 2005, p. 382.

<sup>4</sup> SHANIN, T. “Introduction. Peasantry as a concept”. In: SHANIN, T. (ed.), *Peasants and peasant societies. Selected readings*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 6.

In his groundbreaking 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 [...]”<sup>5</sup> The old strategies and institutions have been undermined by the same forces against which the peasants were fighting.<sup>6</sup> In this new, more globalized 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 stated 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.<sup>7</sup> The role of peasants as an independent social actor seemed 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.<sup>8</sup> The new food crisis since 2007-2008 has put the agrarian producer on the international agenda once again.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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*.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies of both the

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<sup>5</sup> WOLF, E. R. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969, p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. “Peasants and politics”. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, n.1, 1973, pp. 3-22.

<sup>8</sup> BORRAS JR., S.M.; EDELMAN, M; KAY, C. “Transnational Agrarian Movements: Origins and Politics, Campaigns and Impact”. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, n.2-3, 2008, pp. 169-204.

<sup>9</sup> For example, consult *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* (<http://wdronline.worldbank.org>), was the first report of the World Bank in 25 years putting agriculture in the centre.

<sup>10</sup> HOLT-GIMÉNEZ, E. and PATEL, R. *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice. The real story behind the world food crisis and what we can do about it*. Oakland: Food First Books, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> According to the statistics of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), see: <http://faostat.fao.org>.

<sup>12</sup> VANHAUTE, E. “The End of Peasantries? Rethinking the Role of Peasantries in a World-Historical View”. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, n.1, 2008, pp. 39-59; VANHAUTE, E. “From famine to food crisis: what history can teach us about local and global subsistence crises”. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, n.1, 2011, pp. 47-65.

United Nations and the World Bank illustrate that small-scale agriculture practiced by the peasantry can provide a good answer to today's challenges.<sup>13</sup>

In this contribution, we review the literature in order to analyze contemporary peasant resistance in a comparative-historical perspective. We focus on former peasant movements, using peasant resistance under Stalinist collectivization in the 1930's as an example, and today's transnational peasant movement La Via Campesina. We question how peasants have been reacting in two very different societal contexts to changes to their land and lives. How do they organize themselves? Which demands do they pose? Whom do they consider to be their adversary, and which methods and actions do they use? The forms and methods of peasant resistance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have changed considerably. Do peasant movements succeed in adapting to new spatial and social contexts: "Globalizing local struggles – Localizing global struggles"?<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Old and new peasant movements: from 'parochial reactions' to 'globalizing the struggle'?

*Organization: from "movements without leaders" to "a global grassroots movement"*

Over time, social observers and historians have been unanimous: naturally, the peasantry was not able to organize themselves independently and on a long-term basis.<sup>15</sup> Any cooperation would and could only be temporary and targeted at specific goals.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, historical research illustrates that a lack of formal organization does not mean a lack of direction and association. Secret meetings and gatherings were held, and headquarters were erected.<sup>17</sup> There was internal consultation concerning demands and strategies.<sup>18</sup> In times of external threat, peasants were capable of cooperating and leaving their internal differences behind.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, many authors consider these forms of

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<sup>13</sup> ALTIERI, M. A. "Small farms as a planetary ecological asset. Five key reasons why we should support the revitalization of small farms in the Global South". Website *Food First, Institute for Food & Development Policy*, <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/2115>, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> DESMARAIS, A.A. "United in the Via Campesina". Published 18/11/2006 on [http://www.nfu.ca/sites/www.nfu.ca/files/foodfirst\\_final\\_via\\_campesina\\_backgrounder.pdf](http://www.nfu.ca/sites/www.nfu.ca/files/foodfirst_final_via_campesina_backgrounder.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> SHANIN, T. *Defining Peasants*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 152; HILL, I. "The End of the Russian Peasantry?" *Soviet Studies*, vol. 27, n.1, 1975, p. 111; HOBBSAWM, E. *Bandits*. London: Leidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> WOLF, E. R. *Peasants*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966, p. 108; HOBBSAWM, E. *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> McDONALD, T. "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia: The Pitelinskii Uprising, Riazan 1930". *Journal of Social History*, vol. 35, n.1, 2001, pp. 125-128 (22); VIOLA, L.; DANILOV, P.; IVNITSKLII, N.A.; KOZLOV, D. (eds.) *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930. The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 301.

<sup>19</sup> BERCE, Y.M. "Rural Unrest". In: BLUM, J.(ed.) *Our Forgotten Past. Seven centuries of life on the land*. London: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 142.

informal organization and coordination as weak and temporary.<sup>20</sup> 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 apparently loose forms of protest.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> A lack of formal organization is the norm due to the danger and permanent threat of repression.<sup>23</sup> Peasants usually acted individually or in small groups.<sup>24</sup> This necessitated only small-scale, informal organization and coordination. The traditional pattern of a peasant revolt consisted of a sequence of smaller, more or less isolated eruptions, internally coordinated, but without visible leadership.<sup>25</sup> Small-scale actions did not require clear leadership, diminishing the possibility of repression. Leadership was concealed from contemporaries and remains concealed for historians.<sup>26</sup>

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. 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 Via Campesina*, founded in 1993, is a global peasant movement

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<sup>20</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 5-7; SHANIN, T. *Defining Peasants...* *Op.Cit.* pp. 151-152.

<sup>21</sup> During the peasant uprisings in the 1930s, the Soviet authorities put forward 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'. GRIGORENKO, P. *Mémoires*. Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1980, p. 135. Nevertheless Lynn Viola stresses the strong and structural forms of organization amongst Russian peasants. See also McDONALD, T. "A Peasant Rebellion..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 130-131, 133; VIOLA, L.; DANILOV, P; IVNITSKLII, N.A.; KOZLOV, D. (eds.) *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930...* *Op.Cit.*, p. 257; FITZPATRICK, S. *Stalin's peasants. Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 3-4; CONQUEST, R. *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 4; VIOLA, L. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin. Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 113-114; VIOLA, L. "Bab'I Bunty and Peasant Women's Protest during Collectivization". *Russian Review*, vol. 45, n.1, 1986, pp. 36-40.

<sup>22</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...* *Op.Cit.*, pp. 35, 297-298, xv, 297-299, 301, 273 (25).

<sup>24</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts...* *Op.Cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, p. 9; BERCE, Y.-M. "Rural unrest..." *Op.Cit.* p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> SHANIN, T. *Defining Peasants...* *Op.Cit.*, pp. 151-153; SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts...* *Op.Cit.*, p. 139.

uniting millions of peasants from America, Africa, Europe and Asia.<sup>27</sup> This movement is built on the mutual recognition of and solidarity between peasants from all parts of the world.<sup>28</sup> Until recently, the huge diversity between the peasants was seen as a significant weakness.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> From its start, *La Via 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.<sup>31</sup> That is why *La Via 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: from “confirmation of local conventions” to ‘another modernity’*

Rebellious peasants have often put forward their demands only implicitly, so historians can only derive them from their concrete actions.<sup>32</sup> Although peasants could be quite extremist in their world views (for example, by imagining a reversal in the distribution of riches and status), generally these views were not directly translated in their concrete demands and actions. Peasants did not ask for radical societal changes; on the contrary, their demands derived from daily experiences.<sup>33</sup> Scott summarizes their claims as a cry for bread, land and fewer or no taxes.<sup>34</sup> For example, Russian and Ukrainian peasants repeatedly demanded the restitution of their recently confiscated

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<sup>27</sup> See: <http://viacampesina.org>, where the movement presents itself as “the international peasant’s voice: globalizing hope, globalizing the struggle!”.

<sup>28</sup> EDELMAN, M. “Bringing the Moral Economy back in ... to the Study of 21st-Century Transnational Peasant Movements”. *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, n.3, 2005, p. 338; PATEL, R. “International Agrarian Restructuring and the Practical Ethics of Peasant Movement Solidarity”. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 39, n.1, 2008, pp. 85, 87.

<sup>29</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. “Peasants and Politics...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> PATEL, R. “International Agrarian Restructuring...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 85,87; DESMARAIS, A. A. “The power of peasants: reflections on the meanings of La Via Campesina”. *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 24, n.2, 2008, pp. 141-142.

<sup>32</sup> MEGILL, A. “Some Aspects of the Ethics of History-Writing: Reflections on Edith Wyschogrod’s An Ethics of Remembering”. In: CARR, D.; FLYNN, T.R.; MAKRELL, R. A. (eds.), *The ethics of history*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004, p. 67; BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>33</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...* *Op.Cit.*, pp. 326, 331,348-350.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295.

grain, cattle and machinery.<sup>35</sup> 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 collectivization.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, their demands covered fundamental material and physical needs. 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. This causes most authors to conclude that peasants normally fought 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 survival within that system: ‘the usual goal of peasants [...] is “working the system to their minimum disadvantage”’.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the demands of peasant movements were often based on their sense of justice.<sup>38</sup> Their perception of a fairer social order frequently formed the base for protest movements.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> This past was often reconstructed in function of the present; old conventions, disadvantageous for the peasantry, were left out.<sup>41</sup> Resistance was also a consequence of their loss of status and their role in cultural life.<sup>42</sup>

*La Via 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.<sup>43</sup> The movement does not aim to return to a romanticized past. On the contrary, it strives

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<sup>35</sup> McDONALD, T. “A Peasant Rebellion...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 127-128; GRAZIOSI, A. “Collectivisation, révoltes paysannes et politiques gouvernementales à travers les rapports du GPU d’Ukraine de février-mars 1930”. *Cahiers du monde Russe*, vol. 35, 1994, p. 456.

<sup>36</sup> McDONALD, T. “A Peasant Rebellion...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 129; VIOLA, L.; DANILOV, P; IVNITSKLII, N.A.; KOZLOV, D. (eds.) *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930...Op.Cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.*, pp. 301, 341-343. 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. See BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, p. 129; VIOLA, L.; DANILOV, P; IVNITSKLII, N.A.; KOZLOV, D. (eds.) *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930...Op.Cit.*, p. 258

<sup>38</sup> BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> WOLF, E. R. *Peasant Wars...Op.Cit.*, p. 295; WOLF, E. R. *Peasants...Op.Cit.*, p. 106 .

<sup>40</sup> McDONALD, T. “A Peasant Rebellion...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 127, 134.

<sup>41</sup> BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 136, 148, 139; SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.* pp. 318, 179, 345-347.

<sup>42</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.*, pp. 236, 239; McDONALD, T. “A Peasant Rebellion...” *Op.Cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> DESMARAIS, A. A. “The power of peasants...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 139-141.

for a new and different modernity.<sup>44</sup> Today's world economy creates the social space in which this movement operates. The main ambitions of *La Via Campesina* include the 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.<sup>45</sup> The program of *La Via 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: from "a local logic of accusation" to "agents of neo-liberal globalization"*

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, including their family and property.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> This also explains why the distant symbol of suppressive power, the sovereign, was typically not a victim of peasant rebellions.<sup>48</sup> Myths about the sincere king express the belief that, if only he knew about the injustices, he would set things right.<sup>49</sup> The same pattern can be seen in

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<sup>44</sup> DESMARAIS, A. A. "Peasants Speak – The Via Campesina: Consolidating an International Peasant and Farm Movement". *Journal of Rural Studies*. vol. 29, n.2, 2002, p. 101.

<sup>45</sup> WOLF, E. R. *Peasant Wars...Op.Cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> McDONALD, T. "A Peasant Rebellion..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 126, 136; VIOLA, L. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin...Op.Cit.*, pp. 111-113.

<sup>47</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.*, pp. 168-169, 181-183, 347-348.

<sup>48</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. *Primitive Rebels...Op.Cit.*, p. 22, 26.

<sup>49</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 12, 14.



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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> Instead of being a victim of the peasantry's anger, Stalin succeeded in becoming the "good leader".<sup>52</sup>

*La Via 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.<sup>53</sup> First, *La Via 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 Via Campesina* also fights the big transnational corporations dominating the global food system, such as Monsanto, Syngenta, Du Pont, Bayer, Cargill, BASF and Dow.

*Actions: from "weapons of the weak" to "act local, aim global"*

Just like their demands and targets, the peasantry's actions were usually modest, careful and realistic. These low-profile forms of resistance have been coined *everyday forms of resistance*<sup>54</sup>, *infrapolitics*<sup>55</sup> or passive resistance. They appeared to have been 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.<sup>56</sup> Rebellious peasants could work "carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance and incompetence", which made their resistance "nearly unbeatable".<sup>57</sup> Language and

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<sup>50</sup> VIOLA, L. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin... Op.Cit.* p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> VIOLA, L.; DANILOV, P; IVNITSKLII, N.A.; KOZLOV, D. (eds.) *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930... Op.Cit.*, p. 267; VIOLA, L. "Bab'I Bunty..." *Op.Cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> McDERMOTT, K. *Stalin. Revolutionary in an Era of War.* Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, pp. 65, 71.

<sup>53</sup> McMICHAEL, P. "Peasant Prospects in the Neoliberal Age". *New Political Economy.* vol. 11, n.3, 2006, p. 409.

<sup>54</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. XVI, 348.

<sup>55</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 13, 20.

<sup>57</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. 273, 282, xvii, 22, 227-230, 248-251, 265, 33. This disorder and inertia was also a widespread phenomenon in the USSR. The peasants only

cultural patterns are part of these “infrapolitics”. Since exploitation and domination was legitimated by ideology, the resistance needed a counter-ideology.<sup>58</sup> It made use of contradictions and openings within the dominant culture.<sup>59</sup> Such 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 almost 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> Those silent actions were hidden behind a public façade of obedience and respect.<sup>62</sup> More sporadically, resistance turned violent and open. In rural society, violence remained just beneath the surface. What was necessary to cause it to erupt?<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> During the

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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. See SHIMOTOMAI, N. “A Note on the Kuban Affair (1932-1933)”. *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, n.1, 1983, p. 47; KRAVCHENKO, V. *I Chose Freedom. The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official*. New York: Garden City, 1946, p. 99; LOZOVY, S. “What happened in Hadyach County”. In: SANDUL, I.I.; STEPOVY, S.O.; PIDHAINY, S.O. (eds.), *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin. A White Book, vol. i. Book of Testimonies*. Toronto: The Basilian Press, 1953, p. 247; VIOLA, L. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin... Op.Cit.*, p. 218; WERTH, N. *La vie quotidienne des paysans Russes de la révolution à la collectivisation (1917-1939)*. Paris: Hachette Litt., 1984, pp. 360, 369.

<sup>58</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, pp. 118, 136-137, 139, 152.

<sup>59</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. 336-339.

<sup>60</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, pp. 140, 144-145, 160, 162, 166-167, 171; SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>61</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, pp. 136-137, 139, 152, 166-167, 171.

<sup>62</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. xvii, 26, 304.

<sup>63</sup> BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>64</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, pp. 210, 217-219.

<sup>65</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>66</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, p. 219; BERCE, Y.-M. “Rural unrest...” *Op.Cit.*, pp. 139, 148, 142-143, 150, 135.

first months of the 1930s, peasant uprisings in the USSR radicalized. Communists were beaten up, chased away, and killed. Peasants took back their grain, destroyed portraits, windows, and buildings.<sup>67</sup> Repression was another factor that influenced the probability of outright rebellion.<sup>68</sup> When the government made all other forms of resistance impossible, open resistance was the only option left.<sup>69</sup> Active rebellion mostly occurred during huge crises,<sup>70</sup> when there was nothing left to lose.<sup>71</sup> It was a sign of despair; it illustrated the failure of hidden forms of resistance.<sup>72</sup> These *infrapolitics* 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.<sup>73</sup>

The actions of today's peasant movements are 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.<sup>74</sup> The objectives, however, supersede this regional focus. Peasant movements claim a transcending peasant identity and make demands concerning world trade.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> The struggle is open, rather than hidden and disguised as it used to be, in a repressive local environment. *La Via 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 *Via 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 Via 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 Via Campesina*. The Internet is a crucial aid that the movement employs and can control.

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<sup>67</sup> McDONALD, T. "A Peasant Rebellion..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 126, 128, 134-135.

<sup>68</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>69</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, p. 15; SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts...Op.Cit.*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>70</sup> WOLF, E. R. "On Peasant Rebellions". In: SHANIN, T. (ed.), *Peasants and peasant societies, selected readings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 265-267.

<sup>71</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts...Op.Cit.*, pp. 156, 190.

<sup>72</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...Op.Cit.*, pp. xvi, 29, 37, 273, 297.

<sup>73</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts...Op.Cit.*, pp. 184, 186-187, 227.

<sup>74</sup> EDELMAN, M. "Bringing the Moral Economy back in..." *Op.Cit.*, p. 339.

<sup>75</sup> DESMARAIS, A. A. "The power of peasants..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>76</sup> EDELMAN, M. "Bringing the Moral Economy back in..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 338-340.

### 3. Failure and success of peasant movements

Historical research shows time and again 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. 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. 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? Since the Soviet authorities succeeded in carrying out collectivization, it is not surprising that they described the peasants' resistance as a failure.<sup>77</sup> However, 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.

Through their *everyday forms of resistance*, peasants were definitely able to disturb the ambitions and plans of supra-local powers. 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.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the results of rural resistance must not be overestimated; they did not bring fundamental changes.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> Despite their enormous *de facto* power, why were peasants not able to obtain more than some modest successes? Explanations

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<sup>77</sup> For example, Graziosi states that Stalin's victory over the rebellious peasantry was complete in 1933. GRAZIOSI, A. *The Great Soviet Peasant War, Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917-1933*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52, 56-57, 68-69.

<sup>78</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. 296, 30-31, 303, xvii, 36, 38, 294, 298, 31.

<sup>79</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Domination and the Arts... Op.Cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>80</sup> BERCE, Y.-M. "Rural unrest..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 140-142, 152; SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak... Op.Cit.*, pp. 212, 229, 183, 248, 250-255, 29-30.

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.<sup>81</sup> If we return to the local level, the main scale of action of former peasant movements, successes were often significant. However, researchers can seldom detect whether the peasants considered their actions successful or not.<sup>82</sup> Critical minds such as Eric Wolf and Eric Hobsbawm often repeated that peasant resistance was unsuccessful and ultimately dying out 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.

The peasants of the twenty-first century have broken with this past. The symbolic fight is not anymore about the interpretation of the past, but of the future. 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 new frontier-zones or zones of contact.<sup>83</sup> The processes of interaction that emanate from these contacts have been challenged by pressures for incorporation into the modern world-system. 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 came into contact with the new 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. 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 has affected their ability to overcome short-term economic stress. Three decades of economic liberalization and institutional restructuring, resulting in multiple and intensified involvement in markets -

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<sup>81</sup> HOBBSAWM, E. "Peasants and Politics..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 26-28; HILL, I. "The End of the Russian Peasantry ..." *Op.Cit.*, p. 111; BERCE, Y.-M. "Rural unrest..." *Op.Cit.*, p.141; WOLF, E. R. *Peasants...* *Op.Cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>82</sup> SCOTT, J. C. *Weapons of the Weak...* *Op.Cit.*, p. 258.

<sup>83</sup> VANHAUTE, E. "Peasants, peasantries and (de)peasantization in the capitalist world-system" *Op.Cit.*

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.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> The local has been reinvented and redefined as part of global struggles. 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.

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<sup>84</sup> PATEL, R. "International agrarian restructuring and the practical ethics of peasant movement solidarity". *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. vol.41, n.1-2, 2006, pp. 84-85.

<sup>85</sup> HOLT-GIMÉNEZ, E. "The World food crisis. What's behind it and what can we do about it?" *Food First. Institute for Food and Development Policy (Policy Brief nr 16)*, 2008, pp.13-14.

<sup>86</sup> PATEL, R. "Transgressing rights. La Via Campesina's call for food sovereignty". *Feminist Economics*. vol. 13, n.1, 2007, pp. 87-93; EDELMAN, M. "Bringing the Moral Economy back in..." *Op.Cit.*, pp. 331-345; McMICHAEL, P. "Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please...". *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 8, n.2-3, 2008, pp. 205-228.