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# Can the state take agroecology to scale? Public policy experiences in agroecological territorialization from Latin American

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## ABSTRACT

In this article we use a food sovereignty frame to analyze the role of the State in favoring agroecological scaling, particularly in Cuba and in the Latin American countries that elected leftist governments in the first years of the 21st century and currently face an upsurge of right-wing political forces. As with social movement participation in international governance structures, at the national level social movements face risks when they allow themselves to become absorbed in collaborations with the State in order to build public policy for taking agroecology to scale. By participating in the institutionalization of agroecology, movements become part of the established rules of the game, having to move within limits defined by a system that exists to preserve the interests of the dominant class. On the other hand, by boycotting the arena of governance, agroecological movements allow resurgent political and economic elites to grab land, territories and resources needed for agroecological food systems to ever become a global substitute for industrial agriculture. At the heart of the matter is the political character of agroecology: shall we continue betting on reform, in times of (counter) revolution?

## KEYWORDS

Scaling-up agroecology; political agroecology; the state; social movements; the right

## Introduction

The rapid ascent of the right-wing in Brazilian politics is emblematic of a regional phenomenon: none of the institutional reforms of Latin American center-left governments since 1999, nor the social organizations and populations that benefit from these policies, are safe from revisionist, neocon and proto-fascist assault. This particularly disturbing historical situation is unfolding even as some of the most important international efforts to institutionalize agroecology and peasants' rights are yielding fruit. FAO's second international symposium entitled *Scaling Up Agroecology to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* was carried out in April 2018, and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other Working Persons in Rural Areas*, was adopted

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by the General Assembly as international law in the same year (Gliessman 2018; LVC (La via Campesina) 2018). These contradictory tendencies invoke us to discuss which strategies should be used to broaden and accelerate transitions toward agroecological food systems.

This article contributes to the documentation and analysis of how public policy can help take agroecology to scale, while qualifying this debate by recognizing the evolution of thinking about state power in Latin America and the politics of rural people's movements that aspire to build food sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Our story begins with the end of history; that is, the 1990s. From the very zenith of triumphalist neoliberalism, a volcanic series of challenges to transnational capitalism and US hegemony erupted, especially across Latin America. These progressive political projects have often found their core source of strength in peasant and indigenous movements that rejected privatization projects, and instead elaborated visions for a revitalized and democratized State. Popular movements have been the key to mobilizing support for successful electoral campaigns, and governments, that declare decolonization of institutions, national control over key resources, and food sovereignty to be State priorities (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014). Several of these governments have attempted, to varying degrees, to institutionalize agroecology,<sup>2</sup> and in some cases, the rights of nature have become enshrined in law (McCune 2017; Sabourin et al. 2017).

Since 2009, however, the phenomenon of “progressive regimes” in Latin America has shown increasing vulnerability. We argue that this is due to three main factors: (1) the impasse they have shown with respect to transitioning from extractive to regenerative economic models; (2) a related incapacity of leftist forces to permanently mobilize society in a transformational, bottom-up democratization of cultural, economic and social structures; and (3) the successful application in Latin America of US strategies known as unconventional, fourth generation or hybrid warfare, soft coups, or color revolutions in order to control or dispose of undesired governments and restore conventional neoliberal regimes or achieve “outsider” far-right political victories that enthusiastically repress migrants, religious and sexual minorities, as well as land defenders.

These factors, together, comprise the apparent “end of the progressive cycle” and call into question the strategy of institutional reforms for taking agroecology to scale. People's movements almost always enter into negotiations with the State from a position of weakness – particularly to the extent that they represent organized communities engaged in complex reproduction strategies and everyday resistance, rather than a unified class project seeking hegemony (Veltmeyer 2018). These asymmetrical negotiations are often justified in the interests of establishing rights-based frameworks within existing political regimes, in order to gain leverage in resource and territorial disputes (IPC (International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty) 2018). The current context, however, in which regime change against progressive or wavering

governments has become the order of the day (Bello 2017), begs a new question for agroecological movements: what is to be gained from negotiating with governments that are likely to be replaced by aggressive neoliberal or proto-fascist regimes?

This article takes on the question of the State, from the perspective of a search for political and social methods for taking agroecology to scale (Mier Y Terán et al. 2018; Nicholls and Altieri 2018; Parmentier 2014). We situate our discussion in the growing institutional recognition of agroecology as a key tool for solving the problems confronting the planet, as well as the evolving thinking of popular movements with regard to State power. Our purpose is to provide analysis for guiding *how*, *why*, and *under what circumstances*, agroecological movements should engage with the State to design or implement public policy. At the same time, we feel that this article is part of an urgent and global question that, we hope, unites the city and the countryside: how shall we defend social rights – and cool Mother Earth (LVC 2009) – in the face of a rising politics of hate?

In the first section, we describe the cycle of progressive regimes in Latin American political systems. It has been a process with vast dimensions and possibilities, filled with euphoric defenders and disappointed critics, major US destabilization efforts and an extraordinary quantity of elections. The lingering debates about the genuinity of these processes and their place in a global emancipatory project have been sidelined by the crushing advance of right-wing politics in the continent (Scoones et al. 2018), in direct relation to evolving international military and political strategies taken advantage of by transnational corporations and traditional elites.

Next, we delineate three interlocking domains that we use to analyze public policy from the lenses of agroecology: *territory*, *knowledge* and *sovereignty*. Rather than simply looking at single policies or budgetary line items meant to encourage agroecological farming, we focus on these three system-level principles of sociopolitical regimes that can support the scaling of agroecological food systems (Vandermeer et al. 2018). We use these overlapping principles to examine political aspects of agroecological scaling in Latin America. We look at the way that territory, knowledge and sovereignty have been employed by the State and by non-State actors to make possible, encourage or block the scaling of agroecological food production. We find that the fundamental necessity of political change for agroecological transformation is policy that disrupts landlord power and prevents or undoes the consolidation of agribusiness empires. In the absence of these regressive and predatory power structures, agroecology flourishes.

In the last part, we discuss our understanding of the State and people's movements in this historical moment of global capitalism, led by speculative, financial capitalism, in a global resource scramble. We argue that the State is nothing if not contradictory: its popular and democratic control is a condition,

*sine quo non*, for organized people to use legal means to stop capitalist ecocide; at the same time, the negotiations around State power tend to create permanent routes for the continuity and return of economic power to be exercised as political power. Nothing can replace committed, territorial, grassroots agroecological movements as a means to autonomous self-determination. As such, we commit the audacity of calling upon readers to engage in the historical task of “painstaking organizing” to defend land, nature and the future.

## **Section 1: the doing and undoing of “friendly” governments in Latin America**

To the question of what political and institutional context favors agroecological scaling, the agricultural and food transformations taking place in Cuba since 1991 are instructive (Machín et al. 2010). With the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Cuba lost its major trading partner just as the United States (US) government tightened a decades-old commercial blockade on the island. In the year between invading Panama and invading Iraq, the US president, George H.W. Bush, announced a “new world order” based on the idea that Western liberal democracy would be the final form of human government. In reality, the new world order or “full spectrum dominance” (Chomsky 2003) would mean the complete and irreversible institutionalization of the kind of experimental neoliberal shock therapy (Klein 2007) and structural adjustment programs that were already contributing to Latin America’s “lost decade,” as foreign debt payments, privatizations and market shocks vastly expanded the levels of extreme poverty across the continent. As has been widely documented, Cuba’s government reacted entirely differently to the new circumstances and agroecological farming became both a form of resistance and a national policy during the 1990s. Food self-sufficiency policy, based on local peasant knowledge combined with reoriented technological programs to produce biological inputs, decentralized urban gardens and a peasant-to-peasant agroecological movement, became the order of the day (Fernandez et al. 2018).

The Washington Consensus’ free market orthodoxy, rejected early on by the *Caracazo* riots of 1989, Cuba’s survival and the *Zapatista* uprising of 1994, was upended permanently by the electoral triumphs of Venezuelan Hugo Chavez in 1998, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2012 (Wilpert 2007). Chavez argued that Latin America and the Caribbean had only achieved a partial, formal independence, and that a “second independence”, based in part on wealth redistribution, was needed to decolonize the continent economically and culturally (Escobar 2010). Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro formed the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) alliance in 2004, in response to George W. Bush’s proposal for a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, known in Spanish as ALCA. Rather than ALCA, which open all the economies of the

region to “free” competition, ALBA proposed a regional integration based upon the principles of solidarity and complementary relations.

As progressive and semi-progressive candidates were elected in Argentina (2003), Brazil (2003), Bolivia (2005), Honduras (2005), Nicaragua (2006), Ecuador (2006), Paraguay (2008), Uruguay (2009), El Salvador (2009), and other countries, the ALBA alliance swelled and the decades-long isolation of Cuba was finally broken (Riggirozzi and Tussi 2012). The opposition of voters to neoliberalism opened a broad conversation about socialism, post-liberalism, post-capitalism, autonomy and decolonization. There emerged a multi-tiered resistance to *laissez-faire* capitalism in Latin America: the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay became examples of a “responsible” left that sought to reduce poverty through a neodevelopmentalist approach that expanded both capitalist and social investments, people’s revolutions in Ecuador and Bolivia used new constitutions to defend the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir* as an antipode to capitalist development, and *Chavista* Venezuela embarked on constructing “21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism”, calling on urban and rural people’s movements, Afro-descendent communities and indigenous peoples to organize a new kind of State (Katz 2008). In addition to ALBA, progressive institutions for regional integration created during the Chavez era included the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), Petrocaribe, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). This was a period in which agroecological principles were enshrined into law in many Latin American countries, particularly Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina and Nicaragua.

The progressive governments of Latin America are generally credited with dramatically reducing extreme poverty, restoring literacy, education and health care as rights rather than privileges, and broadening the conception of citizen and State to guarantee historically-denied rights of women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, peasants and workers (Escobar 2010). These governments vastly expanded social services and public investment in infrastructure, while reducing or ending dependence on predatory loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, none of these progressive projects found a way to definitively break away from the extractive economic structures that have dominated since colonial times, sparking deep debates within leftist communities and popular movements (Andermann 2018; Stédile 2017; Veltmeyer 2018). Despite a transformed institutional landscape, the role of agroecology has not been consistent in Latin America’s “left turn.” The role of the private sector in food processing, distribution and retail has not been aggressively challenged by ALBA governments, except Cuba, which represents a qualitatively distinct level of commitment to agroecological food systems (Rosset and Benjamin 1994; Machín et al. 2010). Other countries of Latin America’s ‘pink tide’ since 1999 have, in general, pursued a two-track policy of supporting sustainable smallholder farming, at least in discourse, while also

being complicit to transnational agribusiness and mining interests' incursions into peasant territories.

Throughout the early 2000s, traditional elites found themselves displaced from political power and faced with uncomfortable choices – taking exile in the US, organizing active opposition to progressive governments, retiring to strictly private sector activities, or simply waiting for an opportunity. The coup attempt against Hugo Chavez in 2002 and oil industry lockout the same year, the armed rebellion that ousted Haitian president Jean-Bernard Aristide in 2004, the “Media Luna” rebellion by landlord elites of Croatian descent against the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia during 2008, the military coup against Honduran president Manuel Zelaya in 2009, and the coup attempt against Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa in 2010 are landmarks in the evolution of opposition to progressive governments in Latin America and the Caribbean (Borón 2014). The early success of left-leaning governments in repelling plots and elite-led rebellion was linked to the committed support for these regimes by organized sectors of society, particularly urban *barrio* organizations and peasant movements (Wilpert 2007). Guided by Chavez’s example, these government’s common reaction to coup attempts was to deepen national processes of transformation and maintain the permanent mobilization of supportive social sectors. Such deepening translated into measures such as the nationalization of hydrocarbons in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as the commitment by Hugo Chavez to replace the “bourgeois state” with a communal, ascendant democracy of people’s power, including an explicit commitment to agroecological production (Ciccariello-Maher 2014).

All of these governments, however, were bogged down by their inability to stamp out corruption in State bureaucracies, and many observers decried a widening gap between aspirations of experimental democracies and entrenched cultural and social practices that reproduce inequality (Katz 2008). The glaring contradiction between political constitutions and laws that formally recognized the rights of nature, and policies that encouraged extractivism, pushed leftist governments toward quagmire. Many academics and progressive non-governmental organizations (NGOs) criticize the “redistributive neo-developmentalism” of the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, which are seen as being too friendly toward capitalist interests and in particular, for fomenting extractive industries (Gudynas 2011). However, most of the organizations and social movements that make up the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (*Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo* – CLOC), continental expression of La Via Campesina in Latin America and the Caribbean, have been slightly more qualified in their critiques of left-leaning governments, and in general have closed ranks with urban movements and progressive candidates during election cycles (CLOC 2015).



Soon after Hugo Chavez died of cancer in 2013, the Venezuelan economy sank into crisis as oil prices dropped from \$110 per barrel in June 2014 to \$22 per barrel in January 2016, a period of less than two years. As Venezuelan financial support for the regional economy disappeared, leftist governments faced the prospect of cutting social programs or taking on deficits. In this context, protest movements of the newly created middle class blossomed in Latin America, generally over issues of corruption. By that point, conditions had ripened for more brazen regime change efforts (Mora 2018), and the success of US-managed “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring became a blueprint for similar applications in Latin America.

The elite rebellions that have emerged recently receive critical logistical and financial assistance from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which in its own publications has boasted of building the capacity of opposition groups to take sudden control of communications media and control a dominant narrative (Waddell 2018). The novel collaboration of traditional oligarchical media companies and social media campaigning virtually transforms the political landscape overnight, using messaging previously developed through extensive political, social, anthropological and psychological research of the type that has gained notoriety since the scandal of Cambridge Analytics. US-owned transnational social media platforms Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter play a fundamental role in stoking “spontaneous” and leaderless uprisings against progressive governments in the region, aided by “post-truth” contemporary political tools such as fake news stories, bots and trolls to construct a state of public opinion that can force out progressive governments. The extremely violent *guarimba* protests in Venezuela in 2014 and 2017, the media blitz run-up to the impeachment of Dilma Rouseff in 2016, Lula’s imprisonment and the 2018 elections, and Nicaragua’s political crisis since April 2018, were all essentially media operations, guided by Gene Sharp’s (1994) theories of asymmetrical conflict, in which non-State actors bring down political regimes (Korybko 2015).

The dismantling of progressive governments signals a chilling return toward authoritarian and neoliberal regimes in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Incoming traditional landlord elite castes in some cases, and neoright populist extremists in other cases, use State power to intensify diverse forms of violence against indigenous and peasant communities, internal and global migrants, sexual minorities, Afro-descendant peoples, women and in general, the poor (Andermann 2018; Bähre and Gomes 2018). The “end of the progressive cycle” in the continent appears to be the beginning of a period of heightened repression, criminalization and hate. Not only have agroecology-friendly policies been overturned in these countries, but they have arguably been converted into tools for repression and information-gathering against movements.<sup>4</sup>

## Section 2: why, how and when of agroecological public policy

What is to be learned from this harsh experience? Do social movements waste precious energy designing and demanding agroecological policy? Before venturing responses to these troubling questions, we examine some of the agroecological policies created in Latin America through the social movement/progressive government dynamics in the last two decades.

To begin with, it must be said that the struggles to take agroecology to scale are really recent, with Nicaragua's peasant-to-peasant movement of the late 1980s and Cuba's transition in the 1990s as milestones (Holt-Giménez 2006; Wright 2005). Although agroecology has been defended – under that and other names – by social movements over the last forty years, it was only very recently that the growing agroecological movement managed to include the issue in public debates (Wezel et al. 2009). For a long time, agroecology was excluded from political discussions in institutions. The political platform that gave rise to scaling up agroecology was built with the struggles of peasant movements throughout the 20th century (Rosset 2006). Although historically the struggles were mainly defensive – against land grabbing, the flooding of exported food into national markets, water privatization, mining concessions, seed patents – it was in the context of progressive or socialist governments that agroecological policies were achieved, thanks to pressure from a wide network of actors such as organized peasants, indigenous peoples, rural workers' unions, NGOs, academics, as well as sectors of governments and international cooperation (Altieri and Toledo 2011).

This brief review of agroecological policies also proposes three guiding principles for changing the power relations in favor of agroecology: *knowledge*, *territory* and *sovereignty*.

*Knowledge* means the recovery of indigenous knowledge and technology, the exchange and dialogue between ways of knowing, including scientific/rational, complex/relational, constructionist and others. Agroecology challenges conventional, productivist logic in food systems. It does so through the revalorization of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, which are inevitably linked to places and territory-based social relations.

With the category of *Territory* we want to argue that only by stopping land and resource grabbing, defending indigenous territories, and constructing peasant, peasant-indigenous, and peasant-worker territories through popular, integrated agrarian reform, can agroecology be taken to scale. As such, agroecological solutions imply transforming land-based social relations, which in practice means breaking landlord power structures, which may take agrarian, laboral, legal, economic, political, or cultural forms. This is why agrarian reform remains the policy *par excellence* of this category, without which agroecology and food sovereignty cannot be scaled out. In territorial policies we also include access to certain means as a guarantee for public credit systems; biological means for the

early stages of agroecological reconfiguration; and rural infrastructure. Disrupting landlord power is only a first step. Agroecological policy is also that which prevents food empires from taking hold, and reduces their ability to maintain control where they currently exercise it, such as in supermarkets, gate prices and trade negotiations.

Finally we chose *Sovereignty*. Agroecology builds food sovereignty at every level, as the Declaration of Nyéléni makes clear (International Forum for Agroecology 2015). It puts food production, distribution and consumption in the hands of the people. At the same time, national, local and popular sovereignty are necessary to protect agroecological processes from the offensive of transnational capital (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014). Sovereignty means that agroecology is understood as part of sovereign food systems, wherein social actors are free to define, construct and defend their food culture, and they are protected from outside predatory actors (such as banks, mining companies, and agribusiness circuits) that would undermine these food cultures.

Each of these three principles is used to analyze the progressive policy for agroecology that has emerged since 1999 in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Knowledge**

This category includes policies that have promoted or supported processes of agroecological training, exchange of experiences and knowledge, research-action, and technical support to families and producer communities. The Brazilian National Rural Extension Policy (PNATER) created in 2004 stands out, which in the period 2010–2104 reached a budget of US\$ 600 million and benefited approximately 550 thousand families (Borsatto 2018). Also noteworthy in Brazil is the creation, since 2003, of more than 167 technical courses and a bachelor's degree in Agroecology, as well as doctorate programs in Agroecology (Schmitt et al. 2017). In Venezuela, there is the *Programa de Formación de Grado en Agroecología* de la Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela, with more than 2,000 graduates who are part of the country's dynamic agroecological movement (Domené et al. in this issue).

In this group of policies, we include the policies of transition towards agroecology that support with training and co-production of agroecological knowledge, especially for food autonomy. Among the emblematic cases are the ProHuerta program in Argentina with 464,527 gardens in operation (Patrouilleau et al. 2017), the *Manos a la Siembra* program in Venezuela, and the National Program of Urban, Suburban and Family Agriculture of the Institute of Fundamental Research in Tropical Agriculture (INIFAT) in Cuba. This latter program has more than one million linked people; it generates more than 300 thousand jobs; it has 23 subprograms in organoponics, intensive

orchards and semi-protected crops, patios and family plots, municipal projects, and suburban farms; it is articulated with 8 ministries and 16 institutions; it has a network of more than 7,000 organic fertilizer centers; and a network of 147 municipal seed producing farms.<sup>5</sup>

Cuba was the pioneer country in the region in implementing public policies favorable to agroecology as a response to the crisis caused by the fall of the socialist bloc (Machín Sosa et al. 2013), when the country opted to implement many minority ideas of Cuban scientists who recommended decoupling agricultural production from imported technologies. Throughout the 1990s, Cuba massified urban agriculture with few external resources, while the country's food production fell to the associated peasant sector, which had never lost certain ancestral practices, such as crop rotation, ploughing with oxen, and the use of manure and compost to maintain soil fertility. The existence of more than 15 agroecological research institutes that existed before the crisis of the nineties was crucial for the expansion of agroecology in Cuba. Particularly noteworthy are the State Council's Science and Technology Forum (Machín Sosa et al. 2013), and the universities currently conducting research located in all the provinces of the island.

### **Territory**

In taking stock of the redistribution of land, achievements have been very limited. Despite distributing more than 51.2 million hectares to 721,442 families (Sauer and Mészáros 2017), the Workers' Party (PT) governments of Brazil mostly allocated public and marginal lands, attempting the least possible impact on landlords. The strategy of the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia was similar, where by 2014, 28.2 million hectares had been distributed to 369,507 beneficiaries (Webber 2017). These were legalization and land titling programs that did not affect the interests of the landowners. In Venezuela, the case is different, because although thanks to the Law of Lands and Agrarian Development, the important amount of 6.34 million hectares was recovered and 117,224 agrarian letters were distributed, this result did not translate into an increase in the cultivated area because it coincided with an economic policy focused on obtaining oil revenues (Purcell 2017). In Cuba, on the contrary, the agrarian reforms of 2008 and 2012 did favor the massification of the agroecology of the Peasant to Peasant Agroecological Movement of the National Association of Small Peasant (ANAP). It was a policy that handed over 1.9 million hectares of idle land from state-owned enterprises to peasants through the figure of "usufructuaries" (Vázquez, Marzin, and González 2017).

In this group of countries there were special low-interest lines of credit, including the National Program to Strengthen Family Farming (PRONAF) in Brazil (Schmitt et al. 2017), loans to beneficiaries of the agrarian reform

of the Credit and Commerce Bank in Cuba (Vázquez, Marzin, and González 2017), the soft credit for producers of the new Ministry of Family, Community, Cooperative and Associative Economy of Nicaragua, the loans for small and medium cocoa farmers of the new Institute of Popular and Solidarity Economy in Ecuador (Clark 2017), and the credits of the Enterprise to Support Food Production (EMAPA) in Bolivia (Webber 2017). These credits, although in some cases they have displaced the usurious lenders that prevailed, have also received criticism that, except in Cuba, they are aimed at farmers with greater capacity to pay, and do not promote agroecology, but rather monocultures of agribusiness.

With respect to access to water, it is worth mentioning Bolivia's new Political Constitution, which establishes water as a common good, and Brazil's One Million Rural Cisterns program for rainwater harvesting and storage, which has energized gardens in arid zones (Schmitt et al. 2017). For access to seeds it is important to mention the National Program of Genetic Resources in Cuba which established a seed supply system for the urban agriculture program, and in Venezuela the Seed Law of 2016, which prohibits patents, transgenics and establishes the seed as patrimony of the peoples at the service of humanity. In Cuba, two flagship programs for the agroecological transition are the National Program for the Production of Biological Means – created in 1988 – and the National Program for Organic Fertilizers – in 1991 –, through which decentralized production of biological pest controllers – entomophagous and entomopathogenics – is made through a network of more than 200 laboratories at the service of the peasantry, which in turn converged with a series of State policies that favoured the rapid evolution of the Peasant to Peasant Agroecological Movement.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to mention the rural infrastructure programs, such as the Program to Support Infrastructure in Rural Territories (PROINF) in Brazil, and the investment in rural roads that has existed in most of these governments which has reduced transportation costs, reduced the power of intermediaries and brought farming families closer to the consuming population.

### **Sovereignty**

Brazil, Nicaragua and Uruguay have enacted specific laws for agroecology, while several other countries created laws to support organics, environmental laws and legislation on the right to food (Freguin-Gresh 2017). Local ordinances against GMOs or glyphosate have also been important, and among local experiences, none shine so brightly as that of Rio Grande do Sul and Belo Horizonte, where the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) was implemented in 2003 and, later, the National School Feeding Program (PNAE). The latter two

policies aimed to purchase organic/agro-ecological food at prices up to 30% higher than conventional agronomic products, for local public schools, food programmes, food banks, community kitchens, charitable associations and community centres (Schmitt et al. 2017). In Cuba, on the other hand, there is a marketing facility through fixed prices established by the Ministry of Finance and Prices, and there is a state insurance that covers 50% of the premium – for food and grains. The cooperatives,<sup>7</sup> to which the Cuban peasants are integrated, sell to the state agrocenter – which distributes to other places in Cuba –, although they also have direct sales points (Chan and Freyre 2010).

Nicaragua has become 80–90% food self-sufficient over the last decade, with rice production recovering from 30% of consumption in 2006 to over 70% in 2017 (Núñez-Soto 2018). However, landlord power has remained potent, and when Venezuela (due to its own crisis) stopped purchasing Nicaraguan beef in March 2018, the landholding oligarchy led a prolonged and violent effort to oust the government which had, until that moment, provided it with a lucrative business opportunity in the form of beef exports (Dada 2018). Nicaragua was in 2017 the only Central American country with a positive trade balance with the United States (Office of the US Trade Representative 2018), undoubtedly one of the factors fueling regime change efforts from outside the country.

There is no doubt that the achievements and advances in these exemplary policies are evident. However, it is important to highlight some of their greatest difficulties and obstacles:

- (1) Only in Cuba can it be argued that there is an effort to articulate policies at the national level to transform the food system using agroecology (Chan and Freyre 2010). Even in Cuba, there are voices within the state sector that perceive agroecology as a provisional alternative until commercial relations can be re-established (Altieri and Funes-Monzote 2012).
- (2) In other cases, agroecological policies have created niches, without challenging the dominance of agribusiness. Brazil, despite many agroecological policies under PT governments, became globally the largest consumer of agrochemicals and the second-largest in area cultivated with genetically modified crops (Schmitt et al. 2017).
- (3) Achievements are vulnerable to changes in the political regime. For example, with the coup d'état of the neconservative Temer government in 2016 “the Ministry of Agrarian Development dedicated to agrarian reform and family agriculture was closed, and resources for public purchases and agroecology were cut off” (Schmitt et al. 2017, 387). Bolsonaro, for his part, promised to close the MST schools and declare the movement as “terrorist organization”, while in Argentina



Macri's government dismantled the newly created Secretariat of Family Agriculture in 2018.

- (4) The policies that promote short circuits were bureaucratized to such an extent that they ended up establishing lists of requirements, documents, control mechanisms and quality standards totally out of line with agroecological philosophy and alien to the peasant economy (Freguin-Gresh 2017; Schmitt et al. 2017).
- (5) The legislation has conjugated agroecology with organic agriculture, and is therefore based on the substitution of inputs (Rosset and Altieri 1997) and not on the redesign of plots and rural landscapes, and a mercantile approach to agro-export.

### **Section 3: agroecology and the state of the state**

After taking stock of public policies for agroecology in Latin America and the Caribbean, we consider it necessary to make a reflection of the contemporary State and the real possibilities of what can be done from its institutions in our days. We do so, however, not as an exercise in seeing like a State, but rather as a step toward orienting the efforts of agroecological movements toward judging if, when, and to what degree they should put effort into gaining institutional reforms for agroecological scaling.

For two decades after the Cold War ended, there was a tacit agreement between the forces of the left and the right in Latin American politics, outside of Cuba. According to this arrangement, leftist movements would honor the rules of bourgeois democracy – by seeking political power through electoral means and protecting private property relations – while the right would not use military means to exterminate the left and would allow it to present its platform to voters (Núñez-Soto 2018). According to Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017), once left-wing movements win elections, they may incorporate social movement activists into the institutional bureaucracy and adopt some of their ideas, but cannot radically transform the relations that structure the entire system. Progressive governments do not really emerge as the ruling class, are forced to make agreements and programmatic coalitions with historically oppositional forces to win elections, and they domesticate radical agendas by institutionalizing them in the state bureaucracy (Rosset 2018).

The experience of progressive governments in Latin America shows that, aside from Cuba and Venezuela, none broke the structures of landlord power; on the contrary, under their management, large landowners regrouped by forming alliances with transnational capital. Leftist and center-left coalitions argued that they controlled the government but not the State (García-Linera 2012), and as such, the bourgeois, rentier and oligarchical classes' opposition to redistributive policies would need to be “softened”, by

guaranteeing them public infrastructure investments, greater levels of social stability and some areas of liberalized capital expansion. In this sense, progressive regimes delivered exactly what capitalism needed – more palatable politics, economic stability, and new infrastructure for future privatization. It's becoming evident that, once deposed from power, a decade or two of progressive governance has favored the overall stability of the capitalist system.

We believe that Latin American popular movements are interpreting this situation in divergent ways. While not necessarily antagonistic to one another, two emerging positions do indeed suggest distinct long-term strategies. Both begin with a recognition that center-left governments generally failed to deliver structural change, and even “to a certain extent laid the groundwork for a return of the Right, by failing to resolve the structural and political contradictions of the country, and by facilitating extraordinary access by agribusiness and financial capital to rural areas and government programs” (Pinheiro-Barbosa 2018, 1). However, from this point forward, interpretations diverge. Is the State intrinsically regressive and repressive, no matter who wields its power? Or did the State once hold the potential to transform economic structures (as in Cuba), but has lost it in the last 30 years as a result of globalized capitalism? Or does the State still have the potential to redistribute wealth, defend the commons and ancestral territory, and even decolonize Latin American society by transforming public budgets and redefining national priorities?

These theoretical doubts immediately translate into political correlaries: Should leftist governments have broken relations with the local oligarchy, transnational investors and the United States immediately after being elected and instead decreed food sovereignty? Should they have taken advantage of the moment they had to nationalize the media corporations and reform the corrupt political systems that ultimately orchestrated the coups against them? Should the rural social movements have avoided forging alliances with the urban working classes to support leftist candidates, instead rejecting “post-neoliberal” politics as a farce? Does the current situation call for more autonomy, or does it call for a stronger popular front against fascism? In short, the current situation in Latin America calls for deep reflection about the strategy and tactics of food sovereignty, pragmatism, alliances, reform, and revolution.

We will briefly overview what we consider to be two of the most serious tendencies in rural social movements: one which we call “autonomist” and another which we call “sovereignist”. The autonomous perspective may be epitomized by the Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico, and the traditional left position by the Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil, although even these are not precise labels.

The autonomist position reflects a conception that rejects putting State power in the center of social movement strategies for changing reality. Instead, it



focuses on self-determination and democratization as bottom-up processes. This position is highly critical of the attempts to engage the State as a partner in agroecological scaling. The concern is that participating in the institutionalization of agroecology could serve the technologies of governments to maintain a dual agriculture – agribusiness in peaceful coexistence with peasant agriculture now renamed as agroecological – while agroecological movements are subsumed by the logic of regulations, programs and projects of an institutional bureaucracy coupled with market forces.

Autonomists see an immense risk of being incorporated into the established rules of the game; included in the framework of instituted power, having to move in a system whose purpose is the preservation of the interests of the dominant class (Negri 1999; Rancière 1999). This position considers that there is a risk that agroecology, instead of being a destituent power – capable of rendering inoperative the system before which it is revealed – becomes a constituent power – maintaining operative forms of power of the constituted political economic system – (Agamben 2014). Autonomists warn that the scaling up of agroecology, and the underlying public policies, could become servile to the logic of capital accumulation, making agroecology be swallowed up by the enemy that movements wanted to fight. This position sees an inward-looking process of agroecological education and horizontal scaling as the best strategy for replacing agribusiness with agroecology.

The sovereignist position, in contrast, sees transnational corporations as the main enemy and demands that people learn how to govern themselves, but also govern territories and exercise full sovereignty, in order to check corporate power. From this perspective, the character of the State depends on which social class is dominating the others; only active State intervention, in response to permanent and massive popular mobilization, is capable of stopping the business deals and resource grabs of transnational capital. When movements physically stop the installation of mining equipment or occupy farms, they resort to legal frameworks and mechanisms to avoid direct violent confrontation and deaths. The basis for these legal strategies is the expectation that the State will not permit capitalist powers to commit mass violation of human rights.

In this discussion there are good reasons from both sides. From the autonomist position, several risks can be anticipated with the institutionalization of agroecology. Indeed, with the return to orthodox regimes that transfer State functions to the private sector, there is an enormous risk that the institutionalization of agroecology ends up being an ally of investments. The case of extractive industries is alarming: payment schemes for compensation for damage caused by the actions of large companies – mining, hydrocarbons, dams, wind farms – or payment for REDD+<sup>8</sup> type environmental services may end up being directed towards financing agroecological projects in public-private partnerships. Public policies and funding for agroecology may be an

opportunity for the expansion of extractivist projects, not only to have legal viability – compensation for mitigation for land use change is an obligation in many countries – but legitimacy in adopting an environmentalist disguise and a socially responsible face.

Agroecology, re-worked as climate-smart agriculture, is being welcomed by the world's largest corporations. The recent interest in including agroecology in public policy can be partially explained by the need for agrocapitalism to create, or expand, new sources of business, such as the industry of organic inputs, organic monocultures for export niches, profit from the sale of carbon credits, agroecotourism, and biotrade, while re-establishing production conditions (O'Connor 1998) degraded by the technologies of the green revolution (Giraldo 2019; Giraldo and Rosset 2018).

One more warning from the autonomist side is about the risks inherent in the flow of resources that will come to fund agroecology programmes, projects and loans that have been announced with FAO's global *Scaling Up Agroecology Initiative* (FAO 2018). As has been seen in the most autonomous cases, austerity as a working principle is a virtue, and on the contrary, as usually happens in the classic development projects, excess money corrupts the processes. Austerity impedes clientelism, corporatism and attachment to power, and instead fosters political imagination, stimulates the flowering of reciprocity, mutual support, and solidarity to build paths outside the world of money and economics. Simplicity avoids the creation of relations stimulated by project salaries, the emergence of inequalities in the way of life between those who earn resources from the projects and the rest of the peasants. The funding cycles of projects and programs tend to be true schools of consumption that create dependence on money (Baschet 2015) and unweave community relations based on other types of values – such as gratuity and the pleasure of service – which do not go through the logic of monetary interest (Timmermann and Félix 2015).

Also, even in the best cases of agroecological policies, there exist risks associated with creating a “beneficiary” population. Good public policy in general has a demobilizing impact, but particularly when the governments creating the policy are seeking to demobilize, accommodate, or coopt movements. The State itself creates the image that the movement has become redundant to the extent that its institutions are already meeting the demands of the base (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014). As such, movements need to show extreme prudence in deciding when to “cash in” on their mobilization strength and consolidate it as institutional reforms. If good policies completely demobilize the movement, it becomes much more difficult to react to changing political winds.

However, it is also necessary to pay attention to the sovereignist position. Not participate in the institutionalization of agroecology could prevent the modification, even partially, of the State's reason for agrifood policy, indirectly supporting the creation of even more obstacles to the territorialization of agroecology.

Achieving certain spaces is possible to facilitate some aspects as shown in the policies that have been achieved so far, or others that could be achieved through an adequate correlation of forces of the agroecological movement and the economic elites that tend to dominate political power. The State is a permanent contradiction that allows for breaches, ruptures, and interstices within the global system of power. When there is sufficient correlation of forces derived from social organization, these spaces can be opened up and some policies antagonistic to the project of the dominant elites can be carried out (Boneti 2006). However, it is still necessary to ask ourselves how to open these cracks without the movements losing sight of the objectives; without the state agenda eating away at the movement.

### **Conclusions: reformism or agroecological revolution?**

In the last years of the 19th century Eduard Bernstein (1993) opened a sharp debate on the role of social democracy in the construction of socialism. His famous thesis asserted that it was possible to achieve the objectives of the labour movement without having to resort to revolution, by appealing to gradual reforms within the framework of state institutions. The strategy, according to Bernstein, was to make gradual reforms and qualitative changes in the capitalist relations of production through the political institutions of the capitalist regime in order to slowly get on the socialism objectives (Steger 2006). Rosa Luxemburg (2006), controversially his ideas in her famous work entitled *Reform or Revolution* (2006), questioning him for having abandoned class analysis and offering solutions that would only serve the perpetuation of the bourgeois order. This old debate becomes valid in the discussions of Latin American progressivism at the beginning of the 21st century, because history has shown that radical changes – such as those required by the transformation of the globalized agrifood system – cannot be made while respecting the current institutionality and status quo.

The question for the agroecological movement is to ask if we aspire to a reformism of the agroalimentary model, or if, on the contrary, our struggle is for a peasant revolution with an agroecological base that radically transforms the instituted system (Levidow, Pimbert, and Vanloqueren 2014). What we have learned from progressive regimes, such as those that have occupied the government in Latin America since the beginning of the new millennium, is that, in essence, they have had blocked the possibility of impeding the reproduction of capital, which is particularly evident in agrarian issues, since what has happened in the region has been an unprecedented expansion of agribusiness,<sup>9</sup> accompanied by some minor changes in the agrifood structure. Up against the “capitalist hydra”, we cannot continue aiming the machete at one of its heads.

What should be the perspective of agroecological movements, in this historical moment of counter-revolution and the rise of the far right?

Perhaps, the choice of whether to engage or not in institutions is a false dictotomy. We believe it is necessary to open a struggle on several fronts, although it may sound contradictory. As long as the State exists, it is necessary to dispute it in order to open certain cracks. In some aspects, such as access to the means of production, the State constitutes an entity that we cannot renounce in the process of building hegemony. That is why when there are similar regimes it is necessary to co-opt them, to permeate them, to conspire from within, to create common sense, to gain space for the proposals of social transformation thanks to the allies within the structures of power. But also to know themselves distanced, as critical entities of the state bureaucracy.

This, in other words, means rethinking strategies by decentralizing the State: taking it out of the center, marginalizing it, which means that we cannot concentrate on the State, but neither can we ignore it. Across Latin America, peasant communities displaced by tractors and armed guards have no other recourse but to appeal to institutions. Without legal protection or rights upon which to base their claims, frontline agroecological communities have very little options for activating media campaigns and solidarity networks to their plight.

Ignoring public policy also means handing it over to corporations that are trying to impose their version of agroecology as a tool of green capitalism. Rather, agroecological movements can and should develop the capacity to create and defend their knowledge, their territories and their sovereignty, constructing their own institutions and making use of the State when and only when such use concretely strengthens grassroots processes of emancipation, autonomy and self-determination.

Indeed, the policies implemented by Cuba and by progressive governments in the region teach that the institutional actions to be sought are those that facilitate certain conditions for agroecology to be practiced and expanded, but without these actions generating dependencies or eclipsing processes in the face of changes in administrations. In other words, it is acceptable that there should be some degree of heterotomy that complements ongoing social processes and opens the possibility for new ones, without institutional actions appealing to the dynamism of the most autonomous collective actions. The objective of desirable policies that can be developed under pressure from civil society is to open up spaces and free up certain resources for organized actors to use according to their collective agreements and cultural horizons. The idea is that the accompaniment of external agents fosters spontaneous relationships among people, and thus distributes power, encourages access to knowledge and common goods, and there is a gradual transition to autonomy for individuals and communities.

We believe that public funding for the pursuit of some of these objectives should not be rejected and that, as some emblematic cases such as those

described teach, specific policies for the scaling up of agroecology can be welcomed (Rosset and Altieri 2017). We refer to state support for: (1) Agroecological training schools led by rural movements and organizations – See Rosset et al. article in this issue; (2) Horizontal Peasant to Peasant type exchange processes – See Val et al. article; and Khadse and Rosset in this issue; (3) Peasant markets located, and territorial; (4) Public procurement programmes of food produced in an agroecological manner (5) Agrarian reform; (6) Support for the recovery and strengthening of local seed systems – See article by García et al. in this issue; (7) Release of funds for research in agroecology; (8) Public basic education programs for agroecology – See article by Morales and Ferguson in this issue – and university careers associated with changes in the agronomy curriculum and other agricultural careers – See article by Domené et al. in this issue.

All this is acceptable and undoubtedly helps agroecological transitions. However, the “politics from below” should concentrate most of the efforts of agroecological movements, bearing in mind that the fissures that can open up in the State, the government and the institutions are only a complement to the collective construction for self-determination and autonomy of peasant and popular organizations. We cannot underestimate the structuring capacity of politics that is made from below through self-organization, self-management, and the revitalization of wealth relational and the regeneration of commons. In terms of Spinoza (2001) it is the *potentia* (inner ability) and not so much the *potestas* (outer power) that must be strengthened in anti-systemic struggles.

Giving too much power to the State through the search for public policies for the massification of agroecology can be counterproductive if it is a means of capturing the collective *potentia* built by the heterarchic trials of power that have been made from below. That is why we believe that the discussions on agroecology scaling out should leave the state-centric tone that they have taken in their beginnings. The horizontal social processes of agroecology, and in particular *Campesino a Campesino*, have shown with great eloquence that it is possible to revive relational wealth, regenerate the network of human relations, and revitalize traditional knowledge, mobilizing the capacity of rural and suburban communities to use available resources, such as seeds, techniques, tools and knowledge. This experience is proof of the potential of rehabilitating community environments, and the advantages of relational structures based on massive participation and collective creativity (Giraldo 2019).

The foregoing is just a way of saying that the massification of agroecology is radically different from the logic of state projects, because it changes the sense of process construction because it is done slowly,<sup>10</sup> little by little, its growth is rhizomatic and in the long term, very different from the logic of government periods and project funding cycles. Agroecological transitions are long-lasting processes and demand continuity. This process logic, slow,

continuous and qualitative, has a different rhythm to the agendas of governments, which must be governed by quantitative indicators and results, strict legal frameworks, hiring of professional personnel for specific tasks, and short financing cycles.

The only road left is the long road. As military strategist Liddell Hart (1991[1954]) put it, “In strategy the longest way round is apt to be the shortest way home.” Only the active practice, time and time and time again, of grassroots community organizing methods, based on agroecological practices, dialogue, local struggles, and leadership building, can create the kind of solid grassroots movements that can change the balance of forces. Although slower than we would like, it is the only way we now see possible not to appeal to reformism but to revolution.

## Notes

1. Other works have made recommendations for the design of public policies (Parmentier 2014), or have evaluated the scope of political instruments for the scaling up of agroecology in the region (Sabourin et al. 2017). This article contributes a critical analysis of the contemporary State from the point of view of agroecological social movements.
2. We understand institutionalization as the process by which State institutions formally recognize agroecology through legal frameworks, public policies and other actions.
3. The process began with Macri in Argentina in 2015, followed by Temer (2016) in Brazil, Kuczynski-Vizcarra in Peru (2016), Morales in Guatemala (2016), Danilo Medina in the Dominican Republic (re-election 2016), Lenín Moreno in Ecuador (2017), Piñera in Chile (2017), Hernández in Honduras (2017), Abdo Benítez in Paraguay (2018), Duque in Colombia (2018), Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018) and Bukele in El Salvador (2019).
4. The best-known example of this is from the public procurement programs in Brazil, in which the Brazilian government purchased food from family farmers of the Small Farmers Movement (MPA) for school lunch programs. In the hands of the Temer government, data on cooperatives is now a tool for judicial harassment against the MPA.
5. Data obtained by INIFAT of the Ministry of Agriculture of Cuba.
6. National Animal Traction Program, National Organic Matter Production Program, Popular Rice Cultivation Program, National Soil Improvement and Conservation Program, National Program to Combat Desertification and Drought, National Forestry Program, Participatory Plant Improvement Program, Integral Forest Farms Program (Machín Sosa et al. 2013).
7. The figures: Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPA) and Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCS), created by the State, were fundamental to configure a national structure articulated to ANAP around agroecology (Machín Sosa et al. 2013).
8. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation.
9. The most dramatic case is the “soy republic” in South America. This is an area that in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia grew from 17 million to 46 million hectares between 1990 and 2010, and in which 20 million hectares were deforested from 2000 to 2010 (World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) 2014).



10. We remember the principles from peasant to peasant: start slowly and in small, limit the introduction of technologies, experiment on a small scale.

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