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Critical Latin American agroecology as a regionalism from below

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ABSTRACT
Latin America has long been a hot bed for social movement organization and innovation, and for dialogue among different types of knowledge (‘*dialogo de saberes*’). This has included dialog between academic knowledges framed by Western science, popular and ancestral peoples knowledges and wisdoms, and so-called *critical thought* from global and Latin American revolutionary traditions. From these conditions, we postulate that a specifically Latin American agroecology has emerged from these dynamics, as a sort of *regionalism from below*. While dominant academic writing recognizes that agroecology is simultaneously a science (in the Western sense), a movement, and a practice, it is the emergent Latin American version that is the most politically charged and popularly organized. We postulate that the joint forces of Latin American rural movements, intellectuals and scientists have uniquely forged a significant form of regional integration and regionalism *from below*, and that an agroecological variant of *Critical Latin American Thought* underpins this regionalism. This contribution uses a survey of selected Latin American agroecologists to illustrate this regionalism and its conceptual content.

KEYWORDS
Agroecology; regionalism from below; integration; Latin American thought; social movements

Introduction

Contemporary discussions of Latin American regional integration – and regionalisms – tend to focus on one of two major perspectives, which in turn reflect distinct positions on the emerging planetary ecological and social crisis. One paradigm – that of development – emerges from Western epistemologies, focusing on the creation of common markets, cartesian science and the increasingly prominent role of the region for commercial and financial capital, in conjunction with reviving the traditional role as provider of raw materials and consumer of manufactured goods (ex. Malamud, 2018). Meanwhile, another paradigm – the ‘critical’ paradigm – is highly skeptical of Western development discourse, and instead sheds light upon the epistemological diversity of the ‘many worlds’ within Latin America (Escobar, 2019). This second paradigm is part and parcel of long-standing processes of Latin American integration – and the construction of regionalisms – ‘from below’ (Muni, 1985), based on social movements and accompanying intellectuals from both inside and outside of academia who are critical of ‘the system’ and of hegemonic forms of thought (see the

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introduction to this special issue). The glue that holds these regionalisms together is 'Critical Latin American Thought' (Bravo, 2010; Paikin et al., 2016).

We describe and contextualize herein the construction of a specifically Latin American *agroecology* regionalism 'from below' in the context of the dispute in rural areas between the development and critical paradigms of Latin American thought. We challenge the conventional telling of the history of agroecology, which, according to European authors, is simultaneously a 'science, practice, and social movement', heavily weighted toward the first (Western science), with a technological take on the second (farming practice), and only recently some mention of the last (movement) (Wezel et al., 2018). Rather than these non-exhaustive, non-exclusive and contested categories, this article will employ a historical and sociocultural frame to characterize the agroecological phenomenon among the land and peoples of the Americas. This 'peoples' regionalism' has one major pillar in peasant and indigenous social movements and cosmovisions, and the other in the Latin American academic, scientific and technical world, which uniquely interacts on a continual basis with the former, producing what we have chosen to name 'Latin American critical agroecological thought', which we believe is the essence of this unique regionalism (see also Galt, 2016).

Latin American agroecology: decolonization, self-determination, construction of territories

In recent decades, Latin America and the Caribbean and their social movement thought have been increasingly looked to as the region of the world with the potential to offer solutions to the world-ecology debacle of the globalized capitalist system (Berrón et al., 2013). In Latin America in the late 1980s, diverse popular mobilizations shook the foundations of the emerging free-market triumphalism. Many of these mobilizations broadened the conventional class struggle frame, with some of the most encouraging and successful challenges to neoliberal hegemony born out of diverse epistemes, particularly the indigenous and peasant struggles against the destruction of Mother Earth and the privatization of common goods (Barbosa, 2019b). A particular focus of this reaction has been against the numerous negative impacts of the so-called Green Revolution (monoculture, commercial seeds, agrichemicals, heavy farm machinery, etc.) imposed by dominant global institutions on Latin America (and other continents) and against which peasants and indigenous people (first) and scientists (later) reacted, putting forward agroecology as a key alternative, and as a reassertion of the inseparable bond of nature and culture (Holt-Giménez, 2006; Patel, 2013; Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

In this essay, we demonstrate the existence of a specifically Latin American agroecology, as part of the emergence of Latin American regionalism infused with specifically *Latin American Critical Thought*. If *critical thought* is that which questions established wisdom and authority, then in the case of Latin America this takes the form of questioning Eurocentrism and more recently neoliberalism (Lander, 2002). As Bialowsky et al. (2014, p. 70) explain:

> Debates of critical thought have blossomed in Latin America over the past decade. Although they are influenced by the scientific accumulation of Western social sciences, they produce a fusion with them, with a shifting of contents and epistemological bases. Currently they are defined in resistance to the hegemony of neoliberal thought which still defines a major part of the Academy and the institutions of scientific production, their forms of control, [and] the rift between the natural and social sciences and humanities … . In this context we can analyze the continental circulation of critical thought … and its epistemological validity for interpreting social movements and the collective intellect of Latin America.

We argue that in the Latin American context there is a greater emphasis on critical political, social and cultural content than is the case in other continents. To address this affirmation, in what follows we first offer an overview of the origins, history and characteristics of Latin American critical thought. We then briefly define agroecology, and offer a brief history of it in Latin America in contrast to Europe and North America, with emphasis on the role of social movements and on the somewhat unique nature – among scientific academies – of the Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology (SOCLA). We then examine the responses of twenty selected Latin American agroecologists[1] – from both the Academy and from grassroots social movements – to a survey we conducted on their opinions concerning the characterization of a specifically Latin American agroecology.

We show that agroecology in Latin America carries historical, social, cultural and political connotations which it does not necessarily carry in other continents, though it may be that these meanings charged with social movement perspectives and deeper counterhegemonic meanings are just now beginning to spread across the globe, for example in La Via Campesina (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014; Val et al., 2019). We also find that agroecology is part of and contributes to Latin American critical thought by being anti-colonial and decolonizing, and more autonomist than much of the debate on the Left (Rosset & Barbosa, 2021). Thus, Latin American agroecological regionalism as represented by critical agroecological thought is contributing to a novel form of Latin American regionalism from below.

From Latin American thought to Latin American agroecological thought

While never questioning the conventional narrative of 'discovering America', classic European critical thought indeed recognized the primary role of the European invasion of the Americas as providing the original wealth that allowed for credit and resources to flow into emerging capitalist economies. Only the mass slaughter, rape and enslavement in mines of the large indigenous population, as well as the commercial hunting, kidnapping and forced agrarian labour of tens of millions of Africans, permitted the 'rosy dawn' of capitalism (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 823). While this conception of primitive accumulation acknowledges the genocidal origins of the dominant world-system (Wallerstein, 1974), it does not, on its own, address the impact of genocide upon the knowledge systems, or epistemes, of the peoples in what would come to be known as the Americas. In the Valladolid debate of 1550, Spain's leading theologists argued about whether the indigenous of America had souls. Leading philosopher Juan Gines de Sepulveda, with support from the emerging landholding colonist class, argued for continued war and maximum exploitation of the indigenous population. Dominican friar Bartolome de las Casas, with support from a Spanish throne concerned with the growing power of colonist landowners, argued that the *encomienda* system of slavery and gruesome torture was unjust, the native peoples should be Christianized, and Africans should instead be brought as slaves to the Americas. Given this remarkably narrow range of thought in the dominant European law, philosophy, geography and history of Conquest, it is no surprise that the post-genocide, post-epistemicide and post-colonial emergence of Latin American thought would require centuries to be heard (Castro-Gómez, 2005; Dussel, 2010).

Before the Conquest, the original peoples who inhabited the continent had different names to designate the different territories that make up what we know today as Latin America: *Tawantinsuyo* (the region that today comprises Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru), *Anauhuac* (today's Mexico and Guatemala), *Pindorama* (the Tupi name for Brazil), etc. The Kuna people[2] called the region we know today as Latin America *Abya Yala*, which in the Kuna language means *flowering land, mature*

land, living land (Albó & Barrios, 1993). These territories were inhabited by a wide range of civilizations with their own epistemes and ontologies originating in cosmogonies, linguistic matrices that provided them with complex conceptual frameworks, and a *modus vivendi* based on an intimate relationship between human life and the plurality of living and non-living beings existing in the cosmos, as attested to by pre-Hispanic historiography (Barrera-Vázques & Rendón, 1963; de la Garza, 2012; Mann, 2005; Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2015).

The *idea* of *America* has existed since the times of the Conquest, as a sort of permanent dialectic between the Old World and the New World, part and parcel of a European ideation that demarcates the emergence of a new part of the world, different from Europe, Asia and Africa (Ardao, 1980). The term *New World* has been used in writings and maps for centuries, for classifying and qualifying purposes, a descriptive or explanatory condition which denotes a world that is discovered and revealed before European eyes. The idea of *Latin America* emerged in the eighteenth century to designate the Americas characterized by the Spanish, French and Portuguese languages, and cannot be explained outside of its dialectical relationship with Anglo-Saxon America, given that 'they are related concepts, although by opposition; they could not appear and develop but together, through their contrasts' (Ardao, 1980, p. 24).

Within the framework of the social and political history of the region, the question of Latin American *identity* has always been present in Latin American critical thought (Sambarino, 1980), as famously articulated by José Martí, whether through his expression of the ethical-political desire for the unity of *Nuestra América* ['Our America'] (Martí, 1974), or as a theoretical-methodological entry point to interpret the process of socio-historical formation and the paths of decolonization of thought (Martí, 2005, 2009). The years that Martí spent in Mexico (1875–1876) and Guatemala (1877–1878) were fundamental to his elaboration of the concept of *Nuestra América*,[3] helping him to develop a consciousness and definition of Latin American autochthony, especially through contact with the indigenous cultures of these countries. In his text *The New Codes* (1877)[4] he developed initial elements of his conception of *Nuestra América*, positing the existence of a new identity, as a fruit of the Conquest:

> With the natural and majestic work of American civilization interrupted by the conquest, a new strange people was created with the arrival of the Europeans. Not a *Spanish* people, because the new sap rejects the old body; and not *indigenous*, because it has suffered the intervention of a devastating civilization; two words that, in their antagonism, constitute a process. A *mestizo* people was created such that, with the reconquest of its freedom, it develops and restores its own soul.

Inspired by the liberal ideas of the conformation of nation states, Martí elaborated his conception of Latin American identity based on three essential ideas (Rodríguez, 2007): (1) Latin America is constituted by new peoples; (2) there is a particular Latin American character, with its own spiritual qualities and social psychology; (3), therefore Latin American particularities and specificities require their own analysis and their own solutions.[5]

In the twentieth century, Mariátegui (1928) argued that all theses that ignored the indigenous problematic or abstractly reduced it to an ethnic and moral question were doomed to be but 'sterile theoretical exercises'. In his theoretical-analytical conceptualization of an *Indo-American socialism*, as distinct from a European socialism, the Peruvian thinker identified germinal elements in the historical process of Peru, linked to the survival of peasant and indigenous communal traditions in the face of developing capitalism. This, he argued, created a different specificity in regard to the nature of the contradiction between labour and capital predominant in Europe. In the perspective of an Indo-American socialism, he emphasized that the historical overcoming of the indigenous

problematic should be the task of indigenous people themselves, as a historical-political and revolutionary subject distinct from a European-style working class (Mariátegui, 1982, pp. 185–186).

If at first the concept of a Latin American identity was born in the spirit of liberal republican intellectuals or Latin American revolutionary Marxists, such as Martí and Mariátegui, that same identity has another face, that of the original peoples and peasants, with their historical struggles marked by both legacies of and ruptures with conventional Eurocentric conceptions of the *political project* and the *political subjects* of a revolutionary process, affirming a different epistemic paradigm for their way of being, thinking and living (Barbosa, 2017). According to the Colombian sociologist, Orlando Fals-Borda (2008), this means that the indigenous-influenced Latin American episteme is *Sentipensante* – that is, both thought and felt – adding the heart (*corazón*) to the thought process, in contrast the almost exclusively *rational thought*-based European episteme.[6] Here, the heart constitutes the epistemic and ontological nucleus of a *rationality* proper to the epistemologies of the peoples of Latin America, the *feelings*, *word*, *political action* proper to this rationality, delineated as a different paradigm of thought and construction of knowledge, one that is closely linked to the defense of territories and of nature ('Mother Earth' or *Madre Tierra*), in a communal and agroecological sense (Barbosa, 2019a). As opposed to the endless dualisms that characterize reductionist European thought, epistemes native to the American continent tend to strive for unity, integrating reason, feeling, practice and reciprocity among active subjects, from the soil to the cosmos.

The *sentipensante* perspective establishes a different relationship with nature and the reproduction of life. Here we find the seeds of what we call *Latin American Agroecological Thought*, especially when based on the concrete experiences of peasant and indigenous peoples' movements and organizations, as they recover their collective historical memory of Abya Yala in the reconstruction of their own history, no longer as the soulless primitives in the eyes of the European colonizer, but as peoples endowed with their own, often millenary, wisdoms and knowledges. It is no coincidence that for the organizations of Latin America, the origins of the global peasant movement, La Via Campesina, are found in the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival to Abya Yala. In response to the official celebrations organized by the governments of several Latin American countries, as well as the USA, the European Community, Japan and Israel, a *Continental Campaign of 500 Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance* was formed between 1988 and 1991, which organized simultaneous actions of resistance across the continent and formed the regional structures (North, Central America, Andes, Southern Cone and Caribbean) that would become the basis for the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC – *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo*), the continental expression of La Via Campesina in Latin America.

Today we can observe the theoretical-political claim to Abya Yala made by peasant, indigenous and Afro-Latin movements in the region, employed to express a geographical, socio-cultural and political territorial unity. This phrase was used in its political sense in 2004, within the framework of the *II Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala*, held in Quito, Peru. In the Quito Declaration, they stated:

> We are the original peoples of *Abya Yala*. Our ancestors, our grandparents taught us to love and venerate our bountiful *Pacha Mama*, to live in harmony and freedom with the natural and spiritual beings that co-exist in her. Our own political, economic, social and cultural institutions are an inheritance from our ancestors and are the basis for the construction of our future.[7]

At the *III Continental Summit of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Abya Yala*, held in Iximche, Guatemala, in 2007, they explicitly convened themselves as *Abya Yala* and formed a Continental Coordination of the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of *Abya Yala*, understood as:

> […] a permanent space for liaison and exchange, where experiences and proposals can converge, so that together we can confront the policies of neoliberal globalization and fight for the definitive liberation of our sister peoples, of Mother Earth, of territory, of water and of all our natural heritage in order to live well (*vivir bien*).[8]

We are witness to a processes of political-identity construction and resignification of *Abya Yala,* where discursive practices and political positions play a relevant role in the decolonization of thought, recovering *other* paradigms that are positioned in the critique of the paradigm of modern Western capitalism and its associated thought. These discursive practices have helped fuel the expansion of indigenous and peasant resistance in Latin America, in the defense of their territories as they are confronted with new patterns of the capital accumulation, characterized by the deepening of the extractivist model based on accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), as seen in large-scale mining concessions, the privatization of water, and the energy industry, among others.

It is important to note that increasingly these organizations and movements articulate a political discourse based on matrices that structure *other* intersubjective rationalities with their territories. In essence, this constitutes a critique of the reproduction of life under the hegemony of capital, which can be understood as what Barbosa (2016) has called the *Epistemic Paradigm of the Countryside*. Some concepts are central to these rationalities and to this epistemic paradigm of the countryside, such as *Sumak Kawsai* (from equatorial *quéchua*) or *Sumak Qamaña* (from the Bolivian *aymara*) or *Buen Vivir* (*living well*), understood as an essential principle of the rights of humans and of Nature, in contrast to the perspective of 'living better' defended by modern capitalism (Giraldo, 2014; Lalander & Lembke, 2018; Royero-Benavides et al., 2019).

Within this framework, we can imagine a critical *Latin American agroecological thought* that is structured on three perspectives. The first is articulated to an epistemic understanding of territory (Barbosa, 2018), in which it is a locus of resistance and conformation of an *identitary ethos*, incorporated into the political narrative of Latin American indigenous and peasant movements, in the defense of land, nature, common goods and the recognition of territory as a space for the reproduction of life, as well a place of creation and resignification of socio-cultural and power relations. This appropriation of territory directly challenges that which prevailed at the time of the Conquest, under the eyes of the conqueror, that is to say, of an 'empty' land, a no man's land, an uninhabited territory, therefore open to colonization, exploitation, and unlimited appropriation (Barbosa, 2018, 2019a). These movements and currents of thought see territories as inhabited, or even as spaces of co-habitation among peoples and between human beings and nature (Giraldo, 2018).

The second has to do with the biocultural memory of traditional knowledges and wisdoms (Toledo & Barrera-Bassols, 2008), which often underlie efforts to preserve native seeds, to conserve soils, to make sustainable use of water, to recover ancestral agroecological practices, among other ancestral knowledges, and which underpins this conception of Agroecology (Guzmán Luna et al., 2019). The third is directly linked to the rural social movement use of agroecology as a banner of collective struggle and (re)construction and as a political project in the defense of its territories and food sovereignty (Barbosa & Rosset, 2017).

These three axes of a possible Latin American Agroecological Thought can be seen in different peasant and indigenous peoples' organizations and movements throughout the continent. For example, the organizations of the CLOC, the Latin American part of La Via Campesina (LVC), articulate an agroecological peasant pedagogy (Barbosa & Rosset, 2017) based on epistemes that dialogue inside CLOC/LVC (Rosset, 2015). Elsewhere we have described the origins and

functioning of CLOC/LVC (Barbosa & Rosset, 2017; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010, 2014; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012), and we recently examined the continental network of peasant agroecology schools and peasant-indigenous universities that they have constructed, which serve to consolidate this Latin American vision of peasant agroecology as a dispositive for the collective transformation of reality (Rosset et al., 2019; Val et al., 2019). Remarkably, and fairly unique to Latin America, agroecological scientists share many of the elements of the critical social movement vision of agroecology, as exemplified by the discourses commonly expressed in the Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology (SOCLA)[9] (Altieri, 2008; Altieri & Nichols, 2017). Since its first academic congress held in Medellín, Colombia in 2007, and biannually around the continent since, SOCLA congresses have consistently featured hundreds and sometimes thousands (the two times they were held in Brazil) of academics, researchers and technicians, along with dozens and sometimes hundreds of peasant farmers and rural social movement representatives and organic intellectuals,[10] generating a rich debate and 'dialogue of knowledges' (Artacker, 2019; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014) between the two sectors, who can be thought of as the two 'parents' of contemporary Latin American critical agroecology as a distinct regionalism from below.[11]

What is agroecology?

Agroecology stems from the accumulation of knowledge about nature through indigenous and traditional farming and food production systems over millennia [see the lifelong work of leading Latin American agroecologist Miguel Altieri, from Altieri (1987) to Rosset and Altieri (2017), with many works in between]. Using their intricate local knowledge, traditional peasant farmers have maintained high levels of biodiversity associated with their farming systems, developing agroecosystems that cycle nutrients through closed systems, maintain soil fertility and requiring very few external inputs (Gliessman, 2014). In its contemporary usage, agroecology is variously known as the *science* that studies and attempts to explain the functioning of agroecosystems, primarily concerned with biological, biophysical, ecological, social, cultural, economic and political mechanisms, functions, relationships and design; as a set of *practices* that permit farming in a more sustainable way, without using dangerous chemicals; and as a *movement* that seeks to make farming more ecologically sustainable and more socially just (Rosset & Altieri, 2017; Wezel et al. 2009).

Agroecology as a science and a movement has been built upon the rejection of the main tenets of the Green Revolution, namely that crop genetics and the application of purchased synthetic chemicals to monoculture plantations is the most efficient way to produce food (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). The basic assumptions of high-input, industrial agriculture have led to enormous negative externalities, in terms of resource depletion, air, land and water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions, at the same time as they have concentrated power over food systems in the hands of a few large corporations, and contributed to the deterioration of the health of farm workers and consumers. Perhaps most conclusive, even on its own terms of ending hunger, the Green Revolution has failed – around 900 million people continue to suffer from malnutrition, even as half a billion now suffer from diet-induced obesity (Patel, 2012).

Resisting the homogenizing ethos of industrial agriculture, agroecology aspires to mimic nature by organizing food systems around the principles of diversity, energy efficiency, and mineral recycling. This means, in practice, the use of local resources, including knowledge, and the development of complex feedback relationships among agroecosystem components (Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

Agroecology in Latin America

In Latin America and the Caribbean, agroecology has long-existed on the margins of the *latifundio*, or landlord estate, a feudal system established by colonial powers (Hecht, 1999). Much of the New World endured slave agriculture for centuries, during which indigenous and African peoples were forced to work in monoculture plantation *latifundios*. The peasant farming in resistance, as well as the small areas that enslaved workers dedicated to food production, relied on local resources, seed saving, and complex intercropping. These historical experiences of a hegemonic 'their agriculture' in contrast to an 'our agriculture' of everyday resistance deeply inform the relationship that peasants, indigenous peoples, rural proletarians, and Afro-descendent populations in Latin America maintain with agricultures (La Via Campesina, 2013).

It is precisely this history that has led agroecology to insert itself as 'the scientific, methodological, and technological basis for a new 'agrarian revolution'' in Latin America (Altieri & Toledo, 2011, p. 587). As twentieth century struggles against *latifundio* have led to renewed land access via land occupations and the conquest of limited land reforms, tillers have reclaimed their knowledge systems as well. Agroecology in Latin America tends to explicitly address the socioeconomic structure within which agriculture exists by acknowledging the need to transcend *latifundio* property relations. At the same time, it can be argued that Latin American agroecology challenges the '*latifundio* of the mind' that remains tied to Eurocentric categories of analysis and Cartesian reductionism (McCune et al., 2017). As such, the biocultural relationship between people and territory transcends both exclusion and exploitation: popular sectors that gain or defend land access enact a productive model that contrasts with that of agrarian capitalism.

Agroecology is understood in popular movements as the recovery of ancestral knowledge associated with food production, as well as access to the productive means needed for this knowledge to contribute to the collective right to build and defend food systems, a right also known as food sovereignty. In Latin America, agroecology is largely seen as being part of a relationship that involves knowledge, land, and political power (Borsatto & Carmo, 2012; Leff, 2002). In this sense, SOCLA has played a unique role in galvanizing alliances that not only including popular actors, but in many cases are inspired by and even led by the methodological proposals of these actors (Ferguson & Morales, 2010). As such, academic approaches toward agroecology in Latin America tend to respond to demands to democratize knowledge and learning institutions themselves. The co-evolution of the agroecology movement in Latin America and the anti-neoliberal agenda has produced rich experiences in agroecology as a form of resistance to capitalist relationships.

The pioneering work of Mexican agronomist and ethnoecologist Efraím Hernández Xolocotzi, who sent Chapingo University students to learn from indigenous peasant farming techniques, was complemented in the 1970s by Stephen Gliessman and his team, who systematized the ecological basis of traditional agricultural systems of Tabasco (Altieri & Nichols, 2017). By the 1980s, agroecology existed as a scientific discipline with transdisciplinary, participatory and action-oriented tendencies (Méndez et al., 2013). The peasant-to-peasant agroecological movement gained traction as a horizontal method for taking agroecological practices to scale in Guatamala, México, Nicaragua and other Mesoamerican countries during the same time period (Holt-Giménez, 2006). By the mid-1990s, many reported on the agroecological transformation of Cuban agriculture as a creative response to the Special Period that began when the Soviet Union fell and the US blockade was tightened (summarized in Funes et al., 2002). The capacity of Cuba to show that a national-level transition to agroecology was possible, further consolidated the Latin American understanding of

agroecology as a form of resistance to neoliberal globalization.[12] The consolidation during the 1990s and early 2000s of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) and La Via Campesina International (LVC), with their demands for food sovereignty, and against free trade agreements, provided further momentum to a conception of agroecology as a class project of the global peasantry in opposition to capitalist relations in the countryside (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; McCune & Sánchez, 2019). As opposed to apolitical Northern notions of agroecology as the productive techniques (and scientific basis) of market-friendly 'organic' or local agriculture, agroecology in Latin America carries historical, social and political weight (Ferguson & Morales, 2010). Remarkably, academic configurations such as SOCLA, rather than repressing these broader connotations of agroecology in Latin America, have synthesized and translated them, deepening the global discussion of agroecology (Altieri, 2008).

Responses to our survey: what is Latin American agroecology?

We posed this question in a survey of twenty Latin American agroecologists, both from academia and from rural social movements in the region. The majority, more than 75%, argued in favour of the existence of a Latin American agroecology (LAa) and described its characteristics. Although not an exhaustive sample, this percentage, as well as the coincidences in the characteristics highlighted by the interviewees, are highly significant. It also seems that even those who do not adhere to the idea of a particularly Latin American agroecology recognize the same set of distinctive characteristics of agroecological thought in the region.

In general, the main features identified by the agroecologists consulted that would characterize Latin American agroecology can be summarized into 3 mutually related axes: (1) *Agri*-culture and ancestralism: deep roots in traditional *agri*-cultures and co-evolution between human beings and their environment; (2) Organization and common horizons of struggle: The articulation in a social movement of resistance and construction of alternatives in the search for independence, autonomy and socially, economically and environmentally sustainable modes of production and reproduction; and (3) Formation and dialogue of knowledge: the emphasis of the organizations in the formation of technicians/cadre in agroecology and the dialogue of knowledge between the ancestral/vernacular/local knowledge and that of technicians/scientists/academics (Toná & Guhur, 2009). We develop each of these as follows:

Agri-*culture and ancestrality*

One question that appears in almost all the answers is the ancestral relationship between human beings and their environment. The sustainable management of agroecosystems through an agricultural practice that conserves biodiversity and the natural commons is a consequence of a long *agri*-cultural tradition (i.e. the South American *chacra*, the Mesoamerican *milpa*) of co-evolution and co-creation of landscapes. In the words of the Argentine agroecologist Walter Pengue (*Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento*): '*Agroecology in Latin America involves not only agricultural issues, but is framed by humanity and in its environment, its landscapes and the configuration that has been historically given to the same (…)*'. In the same vein, Marta Chiappe, an agroecologist at the University of the Republic (Uruguay), affirms that in Latin America '*there is a greater identification of agroecology with ancestral agrarian practices that form part of its cultural identity than in countries or regions where agroecology appears as an alternative to conventional production*'.[13]

From the production point of view, it is pointed out that the origin of Latin American agroecology is linked to the need for farmers to reduce their dependence on external inputs (mainly energy, fertilizers and pesticides – called *agrotoxics*) and to reduce their costs of production in the face of endemically unstable and generally unfavourable marketing conditions for peasants and family farmers in the region. For some, this is the very origin of a Latin American agroecology: '*I believe that Agroecology is of Latin American origin (…) and was born as an approach or paradigm by which to reduce the dependence of Latin American farmers on inputs, and as a consequence allow them to produce quality food*,' says Santiago Sarandón of the National University of La Plata (Argentina) and new president of SOCLA.

Likewise, many people highlighted the endogenous peasant-indigenous character of the development of Latin American agroecology; arguing that its power lies in the fact that it emerges from the territories and communities, and not as a proposal external to them. In the words of Boli-Vian agroecologist Georgina Catacora-Vargas, vice president of SOCLA: '*Latin American agroecology is characterized by being peasant based, based on traditional knowledge, biodiverse and integrated into proposals for food sovereignty.*'

In short, and as Lorena Soto Pinto of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (Mexico) very clearly puts it, agroecology in Latin America is '*an agroecology based on culture, on what people have been doing for thousands of years*'. As will be seen throughout this text, these arguments are repeated in almost every intervention, even among those who do not believe in the existence of a Latin American agroecology.

Organization and common horizons of struggle

The vast majority of agroecologists interviewed referred to the high degree of politicization and organization of Latin American rural populations. Moreover, they affirm that this is a fundamental and characteristic aspect of Latin American agroecology. In Latin America, agroecology has been constructed in a context of struggles for land and territory, gradually becoming a tool of resistance to the attacks of territories promoted by neoliberal globalization, as well as a device for the territorialization of alternative projects *for life* (i.e. *Sumak Kausay, Buen Vivir*).

As Marlen Sánchez, a young woman agroecologist from the Association of Rural Workers of Nicaragua (ATC) and the *IALA Mesoamerica* (CLOC-VC) clearly states, '*Latin American agroecology brings to the debate the structural violence suffered by peasants and indigenous peoples; the militarization of their lands, territories and the dispossession of natural goods …* '. In the same sense, the Mexican academic Jaime Morales characterizes the agroecology of *Nuestra América* based on its articulation with social movements: '*(…) with a strong content of local knowledge, rooted in grassroots experiences and as part of broader struggles. It has a very clear political dimension. It transcends technical aspects, serves marginalized and vulnerable sectors, and is aimed at family and peasant agriculture*'.

Agroecology in this context is central to the (re)emergence of a socio-historical project that, from the recovery of ancestral knowledge and worldviews and dialogue with other ontologies and epistemes, articulates a new horizon of meanings outside the frameworks of modern-capitalist globalization (Rosset et al., 2019; Val et al., 2019). In this framework, agroecology, agrarian reform and food sovereignty are part of the same horizon of struggle (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014; Rosset, 2013; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). In the words of Walter Pengue '*Agroecology in Latin America (…) implies a revolutionary social process, which has fully understood that the*

human being is nothing without the land he treads on, and therefore, agroecology and agrarian reform clearly go hand in hand.'

Another question that emerges from the opinions of Latin American agroecologists revolves around the public policies for agroecology deployed in the region. Professor Irene Cardoso of the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (ABA) provides an account of this demand of the Latin American agroecological movement when she affirms that '*it expresses itself in the struggle, even for public policies, for the transformation of agro-food systems*'. Some of the interviewees also suggest that in Latin America '*agroecology has greater recognition in national regulatory frameworks, compared to other regions*' (Georgina Catacora-Vargas).

On the other hand, there are those who believe that it is precisely the lack of public policies and, in general, the non-presence of the State, that has promoted more autonomous and self-governing processes in Latin American agroecology. Professor Tomás León-Sicard of Colombia inscribed himself in this tendency when he affirmed that '*the very existence of the peasantry, of the "roots" and Afro communities, and of the indigenous nations that still fight for their territories, becomes a characteristic of our agroecology, not inscribed in other latitudes (…). Add to this the fact that we practice it in very varied soils, in different climates (…), with precariousness in property rights, subsistence economies and deficiencies in public policies*'.

Finally, there seems to be a tacit consensus that an important characteristic of the Latin American agroecological movement is its capacity to develop multi-level organizational processes (from local communities to continental processes), in dialogue and articulation with broad sectors (academia, environmental movements, NGOs, consumer organizations, urban social movements, neo-rural movements, etc.) (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014; Val et al., 2019).

Thus, in Latin America, agroecology is emerging as a broad and inclusive regionalism towards the transformation of agrifood systems, as well as of social and environmental relations. This profoundly revolutionary aspect is clearly expressed in the characterization of José Maria Tardin, agroecologist and militant of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil, for whom Latin American agroecology is based on '*the multiplicity of cultural ethnic foundations expressed in the cosmovisions and praxis of the continent's ancestral peoples (…) and enslaved Afro-descendants. A second aspect is that within the peoples' social movements of the countryside, articulated in the CLOC/VC, agroecology is constitutive of the struggles and projects of human emancipation, is radically anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal, and is of socialist orientation*'.

Training/formation *and diálogo de saberes*

Closely related to the previous block are the processes of training and formation[14] – especially among youth – of professionals/technicians/cadre in agroecology. Proof of this is the enormous variety of proposals, approaches, methodologies and practices in agroecological training that have emerged in recent years. Among them, the Latin American Institutes of Agroecology (IALAs), which CLOC-VC peasant universities in several countries of the region (Rosset et al., 2019), stand out. The training processes in this type of schools reinforce the holistic sense of agroecology (as a system of production, of struggle and of life), while at the same time contributing – from this holistic perspective – to the symbolic and material construction of Latin American agroecology (Rosset et al., 2019; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Val et al., 2019).

This has also been a recurrent theme in the interviews and is clearly summarized in the argument '*Latin American agroecology is distinctive because it is simultaneously a social process, a science and a practice to promote healthy food systems, for which it relies on solidarity and spiritual relations*

with Mother Earth, through peasant to peasant processes, dialogical education based on processes of research-action-participation-systematization as a strategy for the collective construction of knowledge, in which scientific knowledge interacts with the current and ancestral knowledge of farmers'.

As can be seen in many of the responses, there is a strong link between the local, vernacular and ancestral knowledge of indigenous and peasant communities and technical, scientific and academic knowledge, and their mutual feedback from the exchange of experiences and the *diálogo de saberes* (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

We conclude this section with a phrase from the response of the political agroecologist Omar Felipe Giraldo of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (Mexico), which articulates clearly and relates the proposed blocks in a clear and elegant way: '*Latin American agroecology has been forged in the context of struggles to resist the deterritorialization of neoliberal globalization and at the same time plant the seeds of re-existence and* Buen Vivir, *in which the popular sectors of the countryside and the cities (…) are recovering ancestral knowledge, constructing new knowledge situated in their own worldviews, in dialogue with Science, while reaffirming their cultural identities. In short, it is the defense of territory, which includes autonomy and self-determination, decolonization and depatriarchalization, all for* Buen Vivir.'

Agroecolog(ies) from south to north

When asked about the differences between a Latin American agroecology and other agroecologies, the answers were remarkably similar. Here again, the connection between Latin American agroecology, traditional agriculture and peasant-indigenous worldviews, as well as the strong link with social and political movements, was highlighted. In relation to the ancestral cultural traditions, the words of Dana Avila of the IALA María Cano of Colombia (CLOC/LVC) make this clear, when she affirms that agroecology in Latin America '*is based on two principles: indigenous cosmovision, and communal or collective work. It is deeply nourished by cultural and spiritual elements that are interwoven with the practices of everyday life, while in other latitudes of the planet it is more linked to productive processes without the ancestral and spiritual aspect*'.[15]

Similarly, her compatriot Tomas Enrique León-Sicard of the National University of Colombia affirms: '*I am absolutely sure that there is a profoundly Latin American agroecology, not only in the field of science, in social movements or in farming practice, but ultimately in a series of attitudes and values that can be called the "symbolic framework of agroecology"*.' The political dimension as a characteristic feature of agroecology in Latin America contrasts sharply with the perceptions the respondents hold concerning other agroecologies. The agroecologies practiced in the industrial north (mainly in Europe and the United States) are perceived as a set of agronomic practices and technical developments detached from the political, social and cultural dimensions of agroecology (Wezel et al., 2018). These northern agroecologies are seen more as a market-driven transition of family farmers to organic production to meet the demands of the healthy food market.[16]

Professor Manuel Parra of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* in Mexico and Walter Pengue of the *Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento* in Argentina express themselves along similar lines of thought, though from the northern and southern extremes of the Latin American academy. The Mexican agroecologist explains the differences of contexts: '*Latin American Agroecology is commonly associated with peasant agriculture. But in the US or Europe the contexts are very different, in terms of the scale of production, forms of organization, markets, and culture*.' For his part, the Argentine researcher warns about the risks of a depoliticized agroecology: '*(…) the European view of agroecology, which is much more limited to the production processes of organic production (…),*

and to some newer perspectives that seek to impose so-called smart agriculture *and* ecological intensification *(which use essentially agroecology as a battering ram), seek only to achieve "efficiencies" in the agricultural system. This empties agroecology of content, of the farmers, of their land, and of the food they produce*'.

Final reflections: Latin American critical agroecological thought as a regionalism from below

If agroecology is reduced to a scientific approach uniting ecology with agronomy (and even with sociology and anthropology), then everywhere it will be just another 'improved seed' bringing exogenous concepts to new lands – ultimately conforming to the dominant food regime (Levidow et al., 2014). However, in Latin America, agroecology is understood more broadly, as ways of resistance and survival of food and farming cultures, in which agroecosystems are biocultural repositories of traditional knowledge systems and agroecologists are agitators for structural change. Many in Latin America see agroecology as a way of *being*, *living* and *producing* (da Silva, 2014), a way of *being* and of *being in* territories (Giraldo, 2018; Royero-Benavides et al., 2019).

When these elements come into present-day dialogue with academic research, NGO networks and anti-capitalist movements, the possibilities shift, as agroecology becomes a critical contribution of Latin American indigenous, peasant and African diaspora peoples, particularly women, to the construction of alternatives to the dominant capitalist system of social reproduction (Giraldo, 2018; Val et al., 2019).

Critical agroecological thought has accompanied the last four decades of capitalist restructuring and counterhegemonic initiatives in Latin America. In Cuba, for example, agroecology passed from being a minority scientific tendency in the Cuba of the 1980s to the offensive during the Special Period beginning in 1990s, and has proven itself capable, in the hands of a peasantry with access to land, education, health care and markets, of feeding the Cuban people in a sovereign fashion, in line with the revolutionary and socialist 'sense of struggle' (Rosset et al., 2011; Machín Sosa et al. 2013). Across the continent, agroecology is present in the anti-capitalist organizing struggles of Latin America, but it also is a radicalizing element within these struggles; a 'revolution within the revolution', as former Cuban ANAP president Orlando Lugo Fonte put it (Machín Sosa et al. 2013). In Puerto Rico, agroecological peasant economies are a form of decolonization and resistance to capitalism's climate crisis (McCune et al., 2019). Latin American agroecologists and social movements emphasize the linked struggles for self-determination, self-sufficiency, autonomy, and change from below (Giraldo, 2018). This perspective has provided vitality to – and deepened debate within – regional integration processes in Latin America. With its ability to generate dialogue (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014), and having survived conventional scientific institutions and the realpolitik of 'friendly' governments, anti-peasant centralized planning, neoliberal reforms, repression, and incipient neofascism, we believe that Latin American critical agroecological thought is the underpinning of an increasingly important regionalism. We close with reference to Giraldo and Rosset (2018), Nicholls (2014, 2015) and Val et al. (2019), who describe how CLOC, LVC and SOCLA were the foundations of a powerful global civil society dispositive in pushing the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to finally take agroecology seriously, and were able to influence the global agroecological process conducted by FAO to take seriously the politicized Latin American vision of agroecology, in what is a growing dispute with other actors (institutions, the private sector, etc.) over the definition of agroecology as more political or as more technical (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018). This ongoing struggle is a clear demonstration that

Latin American critical agroecology and its underlying thought are representative of a real and powerful regionalism from below.

Notes

1. Following Rosset and Altieri (2017, p. 1) we use the word 'agroecologists' to refer to a mixed bag of agroecological researchers, academics, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) the promote agroecology, ecological farmers, agroecological peasants and agroecology activists, who together conform the agroecology movement.
2. Currently located on the Caribbean coast of Panama, the Kuna people originated in the Sierra Nevada of northern Colombia and inhabited the region of the Gulf of Urabá and the Darien mountains.
3. His classic essay *Nuestra América* was first published on 30 January 1891, in the Mexican newspaper *El Partido Liberal.*
4. First published in Guatemala in 1877.
5. According to Rodríguez (2007), these three ideas appear in different writings of José Martí and not as a specific reflection on the question of identity.
6. Fals-Borda (2008) identified the concept of *sentipensante* when he heard it in fishing villages of the Colombian Atlantic Coast: 'we believe, in reality, that we act with the heart, but we also use the head. And when we combine the two, we are sentimental.' See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo.
7. Available at http://www.cumbreindigenabyayala.org/.
8. Available at https://www.ocmal.org/3740/.
9. hsoclaglobal.com/.
10. Personal observation by the authors.
11. NGOs and their networks like CLADES and MAELA have also played a central role (Altieri & Nichols, 2017; Altieri & Toledo, 2011), but for the sake of simplicity we lump them (with the their largely professional, technical staffs) here with the scientists and technicians ('*técnicos*') represented in SOCLA.
12. It should be pointed out that while the Cuban government has admirable public policies in favour of agroecology, these were mostly the result of pressure from below (Rosset et al., 2011; Rosset, 2016).
13. Direct quotes that are from the survey responses (translated by the authors) are presented in italics.
14. Latin American social movements use the word 'formation' to refer to those types of training that include a transversal political and organizing component.
15. It should be noted that there are also attempts by peasant organizations in other continents to link agroecology with ancestrality (see for example the case of Zimbabwe, discussed by Rosset, 2013), though the argument is more fully developed in Latin American organizations. Another feature more common in Latin America than in other regions is the linking of agroecology with more radical and socialist traditions (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).
16. Although this is a relatively small sample of the Latin American agroecological universe, the little recognition of and connection with the agroecological movements of other regions of the global South, mainly Asia and Africa, is notable. The few references that were provided to other regions came from people linked to rural social movements (CLOC, LVC), who in general showed a broader and more integral view of agroecology as a social movement and alternative mode of production and way of life.

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