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## FORUM ON AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM AND THE RURAL WORLD

### Emancipatory rural politics: confronting authoritarian populism

Ian Scoones, Marc Edelman, Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., Ruth Hall, Wendy Wolford and Ben White\*

A new political moment is underway. Although there are significant differences in how this is constituted in different places, one manifestation of the new moment is the rise of distinct forms of authoritarian populism. In this opening paper of the *JPS* Forum series on 'Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World', we explore the relationship between these new forms of politics and rural areas around the world. We ask how rural transformations have contributed to deepening regressive national politics, and how rural areas shape and are shaped by these politics. We propose a global agenda for research, debate and action, which we call the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI, [www.iss.nl/erpi](http://www.iss.nl/erpi)). This centres on understanding the contemporary conjuncture, working to confront authoritarian populism through the analysis of and support for alternatives.

**Keywords:** authoritarian populism; emancipatory politics; rural change

### Introduction

If a new political moment can be said to be underway, what are its features? At a time of increasing inequality between rich and poor, rural and urban, labour and capital, the following seem particularly relevant: the rise of protectionist politics and the embrace of nationalism over regional or global integration, whether in trade blocs or international agreements; highly contested national elections, resonant with broad-brush appeals to 'the people', in which candidates are rewarded for 'strong man' talk that pits insiders against outsiders of different colours, religions and origins; growing concern over the 'mobile poor', including refugees and migrants whose presence seems to threaten a shrinking resource base; appeals for security at the expense of civil liberties; a concerted push to increase extractive capitalism at all costs; and, finally, a radical undermining of the state's ability to support the full range of citizens, while utilising state powers to increase surplus for a minority.

These elements are not evident everywhere, nor are they necessarily evident in their entirety anywhere. At the same time, many are actively working to counter these elements and nowhere is any single political approach absolute. What we see, however, is the rise of politicians, movements and spaces where these political-economic dynamics are playing

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\*The author listing is random, signifying equivalent contributions from all authors.

out, with connections between them; we name these dynamics and these features authoritarian populism.<sup>1</sup>

Our concern in this contribution is not to provide an overarching theorisation of authoritarian populism, but rather to ask: how are these aspects of the contemporary moment playing out in rural areas? How are they shaped by prior transformations in rural society and economy and how do they portend even more dramatic – and usually negative – changes for rural areas?

Authoritarian populism was probably best defined by Hall (1985, 1980), who in the 1980s revived this ‘contradictory term’ to signify ‘a movement towards a dominative and “authoritarian” form of democratic class politics – paradoxically, apparently rooted in the “transformism” (Gramsci’s term) of populist discontents’ (Hall 1985, 118). Mobilising around ‘moral panics’, ‘authoritarian closure’ was given ‘the gloss of populist consent’ (Hall 1985, 116). As Hall (1985, 119) describes, authoritarian populism characterises ‘certain strategic shifts in the political/ideological conjuncture. Essentially, it refers to changes in the “balance of forces”. It refers directly to the modalities of political and ideological relationships between the ruling bloc, the state and the dominated classes’.

Authoritarian populism, as we understand it, is a subset of populism, a capacious and at times problematic category. The political right has often employed ‘populism’ as a synonym for demagoguery, while the left, notably in Latin America, has used it to attack even progressive or anti-imperialist governments with a multi-class base that claimed to defend ‘popular’ or national, rather than solely working-class, interests. Populist projects usually involve personal ties between a leader and the masses, sections of which are incorporated into the state through clientelist mechanisms, rather than via apolitical and durable institutions or bureaucracies, as might occur in a social democracy (Sandbrook et al. 2007). Clientelism or corporatist forms of mobilisation and incorporation typically substitute for genuinely autonomous labour unions or other class- or interest-based organisations.

A crucial element in analysing populism is determining who is incorporated and to what extent, and who is excluded, and under what conditions. It is important to emphasise, following Jacques Rancière, that:

The term ‘populism’ does not serve to characterize a defined political force. On the contrary, it benefits from the amalgams that it allows between political forces that range from the extreme right to the radical left. It does not designate an ideology or even a coherent political style. It serves simply to draw the image of a certain people. (Rancière 2016, 102)

Rancière goes on to state that those ‘figures of the people’ are

constructed by privileging certain modes of assembling, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities; an ethnic people defined by the community of land or blood. ... [R]acism is essential for this construction. (Rancière 2016, 102)

Authoritarian populism – our main concern here – typically depicts politics as a struggle between ‘the people’ and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged ‘Others’, at home or abroad or both. It justifies interventions in the name of ‘taking back control’ in favour of ‘the people’, returning the nation to ‘greatness’ or

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<sup>1</sup>As Gusterson (2017) explains, a range of terms are used for the same broad phenomenon, including nationalist populism, authoritarian populism, right-wing populism, cultural nationalism, nostalgic nationalism and neo-nationalism.

'health' after real or imagined degeneration attributed to those Others. Conflating a diverse and democratic people with images of dangerous and threatening crowds – 'a brutal and ignorant mass' (Rancière 2013) – allows for the putting of one ideology and position 'first', while excluding others and generating tensions across society. Authoritarian populism frequently circumvents, eviscerates or captures democratic institutions, even as it uses them to legitimate its dominance, centralise power and crush or severely limit dissent. Charismatic leaders, personality cults and nepotistic, familial or kleptocratic rule combined with impunity are common, though not essential, features of authoritarian populism.

Different authoritarian populisms range from 'competitive' regimes that allow some political space for opponents to 'non-competitive' ones that in extreme cases border on full-blown dictatorships (Levitsky and Way 2010). Dictatorships are often abetted by populist appeals, as Arendt (1951) argued in *The origins of totalitarianism*: tyrannical regimes frequently manipulate populations by creating isolation, separating people from each other, crushing their capacity for critical thinking, and reducing their power to resist, something typically achieved through divisive narratives of 'us against them'.

Appeals to sectarian religious forces further exacerbate tensions, whether these involve evangelical Christians in the US, parts of Europe and Africa; diverse forms of radical Islam in the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey or Indonesia; Hindu nationalists in India or Buddhists in Sri Lanka or Burma. Such political-religious movements – all with strong rural bases – must be seen as symptoms rather than the causes of current crises, both feeding on and feeding into ordinary people's longstanding resentments, sense of isolation and narratives of 'heroic confrontation with the Other' (Hasan 2016, 212). In many regions, rural areas have long been the centre of right-wing electoral support, as well as nationalist political support (Sinha 2016; Edelman 2003; Berlet and Lyons 2000). In exploring rural politics, we therefore must understand, but not judge, the social base, and its class, gender, ethnic and cultural-religious dimensions, which gives rise to regressive and exclusionary, sometimes violent, political movements.

Contemporary populist politics are far from uniform and are often contradictory: for example shoring up exclusionary and even violent political power, while selectively offering progressive policies, whether free tertiary education in the Philippines, land reform in South Africa or Zimbabwe, or targeted investment in rural communities in the US, Europe or India. In South Africa, for example, political discourses embracing equity and land redistribution sit alongside deeply conservative practices favouring elites' claims to land and land uses and the intransigent refusal by officials to subdivide commercial farmland (Hall and Kepe 2017). The consolidation of alliances between patriarchal traditional authorities and state authorities has even led to people being charged rent to remain on their ancestral land (Claassens 2011). In Ethiopia, the reassertion of central state control over land and the allocation of land as commercial concessions have prompted the revival of popular opposition to authoritarian state clamp-downs, even though this does not always take the form of overt and collective resistance (Moreda 2015).

Not all populism is right-wing and authoritarian. As Badiou (2016) explains, arguments in favour of 'the people' can be a positive, mobilising force of solidarity and emancipation. In Latin America, for example, the so-called 'pink tide' swept in several left-leaning neo-populist governments that achieved impressive gains in poverty reduction and expanded political recognition and government support for previously marginalised groups. These advances nonetheless depended on rents from oil and mineral extraction and environmentally destructive export agriculture, and frequently also involved restricting political space, especially for protests against extractivism, concentrating power in executive branches and sometimes in the person of charismatic leaders (Malamud 2017; Svampa 2015, 2017; Gudynas 2009). In

Brazil, the populist appeal of the Workers' Party arguably created a stunning backlash that saw one president impeached and a decade of distributive reforms undone. Meanwhile, in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's populist rhetoric has not brought deeper social reforms, such as land redistribution and restitution, in a country where many poor rural villagers were displaced in land grabs by companies linked to the military (Franco 2016; TNI 2015).

Having outlined our understanding of authoritarian populism, in the remainder of the paper, we explore three themes: (1) understanding current contexts, the emergence of authoritarian populism and its rural roots and consequences; (2) conceptualising an emancipatory rural politics, posing questions and raising debates; and (3) exploring forms of resistance and mobilisation, and the generation of emancipatory alternatives. The paper concludes by outlining a set of challenges for critical, engaged scholar-activists, including the methodological approaches required.

### **Understanding current contexts**

Rural transformations of course have occurred over centuries; many contemporary processes of deagrarianisation, migration and rural disenfranchisement are not new. We cannot understand them without understanding rural areas historically, both in recent years and over the *longue durée*. Central is the political economy of resource extraction (human, financial, natural) in and from 'the rural' and the persistent, grinding poverty of many rural people, sometimes in the midst of growing general abundance. Through processes of financialisation particular to contemporary neoliberal capitalism, commodification, appropriation and extraction of rural resources are intensifying through increasingly aggressive enclosures (Clapp 2014; Fairbairn 2014; Haiven 2014; White et al. 2012). Land, energy, mineral, green or water 'grabs' aim at capturing resources in the hope that future scarcities will generate super-profits (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2015; Edelman, Oya, and Borrás 2013; Wolford et al. 2013; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Mehta, Veldwisch, and Franco 2012; Borrás et al. 2011). Massive exclusions and dispossessions have swelled the 'relative surplus population' scattered throughout rural, peri-urban and urban areas (Li 2010). State-led programmes, often supported by international 'aid' flows, are reconfiguring rural areas, using discourses of food security in support of agribusiness, as epitomised by the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa (Crankshaw 2016). In South Africa, the African National Congress's recent proposals to ban foreign purchases of agricultural land won popular support, but were profoundly undermined by provisions to exempt 'institutional funds' (i.e. hedge and pension funds), exposing the contradictions between populist nationalist appeals and efforts to appease national and global capital. In Brazil, high-profile efforts to limit foreign ownership of land did little to stop increasing investment and concentration in land ownership and agricultural production (ActionAid et al. 2017; Rede Social et al. 2015; Sauer and Leite 2012). In these instances, supposedly popular and left-wing appeals to the interests of the poor actually advanced narrow interests of foreign and domestic capital.

Dominant models of economic growth have failed to provide for the majority, instead facilitating accumulation by the 'one percent' (Oxfam 2017). Inequality, social mobility and future prospects for the majority are worsening (ISSC et al. 2016). Forms of 'progressive neoliberalism' – peddled inaccurately as social democracy – have failed to stem disillusionment, disenfranchisement and marginalisation (Fraser 2017). Aiming for the poor to capture an equal share of future growth is not enough; reversing inequality requires a redistribution of wealth and income (ISSC et al. 2016). Austerity economics, imposed on the heels of capitalism's latest convulsions, has squeezed both the middle class and the working poor (Picketty 2014; Pollin 2013). As with earlier waves of austerity, some of

the worst impacts of the withdrawal of public services and support have been felt in rural areas (Murphy and Scott 2014; Deere and Royce 2009). In the United States, for example, rural and urban ‘sacrifice zones’ have suffered interrelated waves of home foreclosures from the 2008 bursting of the mortgage derivatives bubble and rising drug addiction related to the physical and emotional pain resulting from lack of work, housing and adequate medical care (Lopez and Frostenson 2017; Economist 2017; Hedges 2014). These assaults, and the deep alienation that they bring, have wrought havoc and destroyed the social fabric in many rural communities.

For rural areas, the flow of people and finance to the cities, and the generation of poor, disenfranchised ‘left-behind’ populations who are elderly or children, is well documented, for example in China (Ye et al. 2016; Ye and Lu 2011), Mexico (Durand and Massey 2006) and the Philippines (Cortes 2015). Changing rural demographics and labour relations, including the aging of the farm population and the role of youth and migrants, have been affected by and in turn have affected the politics of the countryside. Young people in particular need a special place in our understanding of both current regressive political trends, and the possibilities for progressive change (Ansell 2016). Youth have been historically at the forefront of movements of progressive renewal, and of new ways of doing politics, challenging authority as the ‘vanguard of change’ (Herrera 2006, 1433). The new regimes that they have helped to install also then see them as a political vehicle that should no longer challenge, but legitimise and defend, the new order, and whose criticism is no longer welcome (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Ryter 2002). In many countries, state-sponsored youth organisations aim to ‘tame’ and channel youth aspirations in ways that suppress autonomous political mobilisation.

For example, the paramilitary National Rural Youth Service Corps in South Africa provides modest stipends to young people in rural areas, including those evicted or facing eviction (RSA 2017). The absence of strong, independent youth movements promoting young people’s priorities and agendas has led frustrated and marginalised youth into apathy and demobilisation or into reactionary populist organisations, sometimes with a religious frame, such as Indonesia’s *Pemuda Pancasila* and the Muslim Defenders’ Front (Hasan 2016). In short, the contradictions between young people’s expanding, digitalised global horizons and their shrinking material possibilities may propel them in different directions, including towards disengagement, reactionary and violent populism or towards movements of progressive renewal. As a political generation, youth are both ‘makers and breakers’ (Honwana and De Boeck 2005). The mobility and improved access to education of young rural men and women everywhere – again, not new, but now extending to all classes and sexes, and including mass migration to cities and also (and much less studied) return migration to rural places of origin – give them a key role in forging links between rural and urban political movements.

Unlike in the recent past, in many countries industrial economies do not provide the employment opportunities they once did. This has resulted in the ‘fracturing’ of classes of labour, who resort to diversified livelihood and survival strategies (Bernstein 2010). Such changes present particular challenges for women (Razavi 2002). Downward mobility, deepening poverty and insecurity, inequality and despair in rural areas are the result, as the agrarian and industrial transformation takes new forms, dominated by low-employment and mechanised business models (Monnat 2016). We need to explore the consequences of such rural transformations in diverse settings, asking, for example, how patterns of migration – including both an exodus of young people from rural areas and an in-migration of both short-term agricultural workers or herders and formerly urban elites – are affecting rural politics, across generations and classes.

The consequences for rural livelihoods, identity, self-esteem and recognition are profound. Forms of dislocation, prolonged and widespread neglect, challenges to identity and the undermining of rural communities and livelihoods have been documented widely, from the US (Duncan and Blackwell 2014; Hedges 2014; Berry 1977) to Thailand (Nishizaki 2014), Russia (Mamonova 2016) and Europe (Silverstone, Chrisafis, and Tait 2017). As Gaventa (1982) described for rural Appalachia, powerlessness emerges through the exertion of elite power, resulting often in ‘quiescence’ in the face of extreme inequality and injustice. Longstanding rural ‘moral economies’ (Scott 1977; Thompson 1971) erode, and older patterns of social cohesion weaken, influenced by wider shifts in political economy (Sayer 2000).

In the US, for example, deindustrialisation, a product of both automation and robotics and of companies moving abroad, famously hit rural areas hard, leading to the near disappearance of jobs that paid adequate wages. Moreover, small town Main Streets, historically populated with family-owned businesses that provided both off-farm income and employment for farm households and sites of human contact and thick social networks, withered as malls and big chain stores were located in nearby areas. More recently, the minimum-wage retail and service jobs that the malls provided began to vanish too with the rapid expansion of e-commerce (Lutz 2016). US households are frequently heavily indebted from college tuition, mortgages, medical expenses, credit card purchases and the automobiles that are essential transportation in most of the country (Kirk 2016). In this situation of precariousness and diminished income, even small unanticipated expenses – a medical emergency or an expensive repair to a car – can produce a desperate downward spiral into poverty and homelessness (Lutz 2014). Indeed, in recent years the rural US has seen a dramatic rise in midlife mortality among non-college educated non-Hispanic whites, with cancer and heart disease overtaken by the ‘deaths of despair’: drug overdoses, suicides and alcohol-related liver mortality (Case and Deaton 2017; Quiñones 2015).

At the same time, a global economy based on a voracious, unsustainable use of natural resources has devastated many rural areas. Almost half of the world’s population makes a living from the land, and yet this resource base is being depleted through various forms of extractivism (Conde and Le Billon 2017; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). Are there new discourses and practices of sustainability and environmental care emerging that are generative of a new politics and economy? Perspectives from political ecology, feminist political ecology or green Marxism, for example, can help us to think about the exercise of power and labour in the appropriation of resources, about the rise and discursive influence of metaphors of resilience, adaptation, transformation, sustainable development, ecosystem services and about the intimate co-construction of politics and ecology, where power always shapes access and control, as well as underlying sources of vulnerability (e.g. Scoones 2016; Perreault, Bridge, and McCarthy 2015; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Watts and Peluso 2013). Through perspectives on critical governance and power, both in and beyond the state, we can ask how micro-politics of control and the ‘power to exclude’ influence access to and use of natural resources, such as land, forests, water and minerals (Beban, So, and Un 2017; Ribot 2014; Peluso and Lund 2011; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Swyngedouw 2009).

### **What is an emancipatory rural politics?**

While the current conjuncture has given rise to forms of authoritarian populism, what alternative politics might emerge? An emancipatory politics requires an understanding of the current regressive trends – the things to be ‘resisted’ – and a vision of a better



society and ways to move towards it. What then do we mean by emancipatory politics, and the struggles that these entail? We can potentially draw on many inspirations and traditions. In the following paragraphs we highlight some possibilities, with different conceptual starting points. There are inevitable tensions between these, and a singular, precise, *a priori* definition is impossible; instead, a range of approaches, each contextualised, each drawing on different perspectives, is necessary.

For those in the Marxist tradition, questions arise around the emergence of revolutionary moments, and the constellation of class-based alliances resisting particular forms of feudalism or capitalism. An ‘epoch of social revolution’ – or emancipation – thus emerges when social relations become unstable, as relations of production become less compatible with productive forces (Marx 1968 [1859], 161–62). Marxist scholars of agrarian change have identified diverse agrarian ‘paths’ (Bernstein 2010; Bernstein and Byres 2001), emerging from different contexts, including the role of and place for the rural in the midst of revolutionary upheavals. More narrowly, Marxists often view ‘peasants’ as an inherently vacillating political category, with potential for both revolutionary and reactionary politics. Much research on peasant politics during the past century drew from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* and Engels’ mid-1890s formulation of the peasant question, focused on how to win the votes of the peasantry (Hobsbawm 1973; Marx 1978 [1852]; Engels 1950). The question ‘How do peasants become revolutionary?’ was not just a question posed by Mao, but also a central debate in agrarian studies (Huizer 1975). Classic texts highlighted debates among radical scholars of agrarian politics,<sup>2</sup> as well as scholars with a neoclassical conception of peasant politics (e.g. Popkin 1979). Much orthodox Marxist scholarship has focused on class politics, informing debates about which peasants are most likely to be reactionary, as in Lenin’s (1964) observation of late nineteenth-century Russia, and which have the greatest revolutionary promise, as in the contrasting ‘rural proletarian’ and ‘middle peasant’ perspectives of Paige (1978) and Wolf (1969), respectively.

Early agrarian Marxist scholarship examined the ways in which identity politics (linked to kinship, for example) intersected with class politics in peasant societies (Alavi 1973). Subsequent work has explored the range of peasant politics, from quiescence to everyday politics and all-out revolution, enquiring, for example, into how peasants struggle against neoliberal globalisation (Edelman 1999) or land grabbing (Hall et al. 2015). The links of contemporary agrarian politics to broader politics have been addressed in Brazil (Wolford 2016, 2010) and many other settings (e.g. Moyo, Jha, and Yeros 2013; Moyo and Yeros 2005). Then and now, relationships between peasants and the agrarian sector, revolutionary parties and the state are often critical to emancipatory political transformations (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017; White 2016; Putzel 1995).

For those coming more from a libertarian socialist-anarchist tradition, such as Murray Bookchin, the fostering of autonomous, local, decentralised, participatory democracies, based on inspirations from ‘social ecology’, are the best route to emancipation (Biehl and Bookchin 1998; Bookchin 1982). Inspired by Bookchin, the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan has encouraged experiments in democratic confederalism in war-torn Rojava in northern Syria, based on libertarian municipalism and face-to-face assembly democracy (Biehl 2012). These innovative experiments offer insights into how emancipatory politics and economies can be organised, even under wartime conditions (Cemgil and Hoffmann 2016). They also raise questions about the role of violence in the struggle for

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<sup>2</sup>For example: Brass (1991), Paige (1978), Scott (1977) and Wolf (1969).

emancipation, and the very real difficulties of organising a decentralised economy for more than survival (Üstündağ 2016).

For Ernesto Laclau, a broad notion of populism can unite diverse groups beyond conventional class formations by deploying shared meanings and symbols among otherwise fragmented sectors. Reclaiming populism, and its performative dimensions and ‘dangerous logics’, can thus be central to the creation of ‘radical democracy’ and the struggle against the normalisation of authoritarianism (Laclau 2005). This approach, adopted by political movements such as Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece, provides the basis for a new style of politics, which is necessarily antagonistic, unruly and dissenting. Such politics must, it is argued, challenge power in ways that are not limited by cosmopolitan idealism or simplistic appeals to community participation and deliberative democracy (Mouffe 2005, 1999; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000).

Another radical position is offered by Jacques Rancière (1998), for whom true politics emerges through ‘disagreement’, through popular uprising, which disrupts the *status quo*, declaring an unruly ‘radical equality’. This requires the reclaiming of the unheard voices and histories of the people, and accepting the radical, progressive role of the oppressed. Similarly, Alain Badiou (2016, 2005) explores the many ways ‘the people’ can be symbolically and practically deployed, and emphasises the radical, activist interruption of ‘the event’, where political subjects and emancipatory potentials emerge. Yet such subject-centred, activist perspectives on politics, with a narrow conception of ‘democracy’, offer little insight into how such change is sustained, and how it becomes embedded (Hewlett 2010).

Others, by contrast, emphasise the structural, institutional and political conditions for emancipatory transformations, and whether dictatorship or liberal forms of democracy result, as Moore (1966) argued half a century ago. Beginning in the 1980s there was a surge of studies on transitions from authoritarian-military regimes to ‘democracy’ (O’Donnell and Schmitter 2013), although many have questioned the assumption that authoritarian regimes always are moving in one direction (Levitsky and Way 2010). Fox, for example, analysed ‘rural democratization’, looking at Latin American and Philippine cases, arguing that ‘the distribution of rural power in developing countries both shapes and is shaped by national politics’ (Fox 1990: 1; see also Franco 2001 for the Philippines and Ntsebeza 2006 for South Africa). Emancipation may emerge through what Fox (2007) terms ‘accountability politics’, whereby, even in authoritarian settings, accountabilities are enhanced through the deepening of civil society engagements, acting to transform state structures and embedding accountabilities. While always uneven, partial and contested, and involving on-going cycles of action, such processes can build the possibilities of emancipation, but in relation to the institutional infrastructure of states and through a politics of representation (Ribot 2013).

For Polanyi (1944), the ‘great transformation’ of the twentieth century resulted from a mobilisation by diverse sectors of society, then supported by the state, to defend ‘social protections’ against ‘disembedded’ market capitalism. This ‘double movement’ was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the commodification of land and life broke with traditional norms of land use and labour sharing (Li 2014; McMichael 2006). Today, faced with new kinds of authoritarian populism, rural–urban divides are increasingly framed in racial or ethnic terms. Thus, critical race studies – including studies of white, elite privilege (Pulido 2000) – as well as intersectional perspectives from cultural studies and critical feminism (Crenshaw 1991; Hall 1986), are all necessary to understand the present context, as well as the radical politics of emerging alternatives (Cairns 2013). At the same time, as state protections weaken and financialised, neoliberal capital assumes

new forms, other movements – around, for example, women’s rights, race or environmental justice – may combine, according to Fraser (2013), to generate a ‘triple movement’, centred on new forms of emancipatory politics (see also Ribot 2014).

In this view, a new emancipatory politics must therefore address many challenges together, rather than in piecemeal fashion. Deep inequalities, marginalisation and exclusion, persistent poverty, fractured identities and loss of esteem are all features of rural areas today, giving rise to a regressive politics. Following Fraser and Honneth (2003), a new politics therefore must combine concerns with redistribution (and so concerns with class, social difference and inequality), recognition (and so identity and identification) and representation (and so democracy, community, belonging and citizenship). Emancipation thus must encompass representation, linked to a strong state and active public sphere, as well as material distribution and recognition of diverse identities. Such a politics, Fraser argues, potentially offers new routes for and forms of mobilisation in the face of systematic marginalisation of those left behind by globalised capitalism. This must go substantially beyond the ‘progressive neoliberalisms’ that have unmistakably failed (Fraser 2017). Critiques of contemporary capitalism that promote a ‘third way’, ‘inclusive growth’ (Giddens 2001), and even measures of ‘social protection’, whether *Bolsa Família* in Brazil, social grants in South Africa, or employment-guarantee schemes in India, are insufficient (De Haan 2014). In Latin America, left-leaning governments failed to confront the power of agribusiness and dominant rural classes, and have systematically co-opted or disarticulated autonomous rural social movements, facilitating deepening differentiation and undermining resistance in the countryside (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017). Instead, a more radical transformation needs to be imagined, rooted in mutualist, embedded forms of organisation of life and economy, ones that are simultaneously local and transnational, yet attuned to class difference and identity. Any alternatives must reclaim the ‘public sphere’ (Fraser 1990), reinventing citizenship, drawing on new forms of communalism and solidarity, and linking to a broad front of resistance.

In addition to exploring the contours of the ‘emancipatory’ through such perspectives, we also have to understand the elite, the reactionary and the non-emancipatory, and how regressive practice so often becomes hegemonic ‘common sense’. We have to understand how this emerges through media representations, through the undermining of political voice and capabilities, through various forms of violence, and through the psychological appeal of authoritarian power. How was a vote for Trump or Brexit seen as a triumphant act of resistance? How do we understand the side-by-side pro- and anti-Dilma protests in Brazil or the simultaneous (and connected) rise of progressive rural movements and the entrenched politics of a minority agrarian elite (Sauer and Mészáros 2017)? The structures of oppression need to be revealed, in order to be resisted and overcome. We must ask: How are new alliances built between progressive urban and rural movements, within and outside mainstream political formations? How do informal, unruly styles of politics intersect with more formal organised movements and electoral and institutional politics? How have conflict and violence both closed down and opened up new spaces for politics?

The perspectives on emancipatory politics discussed above (along with many others) entail very different positions on core themes such as power, class, mobilisation, citizenship, institutions and democracy. By offering here a variety of perspectives, often in tension with each other, we want to encourage debate about emancipatory possibilities, and also about what is being resisted. There will never be a one-size-fits-all version of emancipatory rural politics, and locating our debate about alternatives in different contexts will hopefully generate a more nuanced and variegated view. Emancipatory politics must necessarily emerge in context, through longer histories of struggle that condition pathways

of transformation. Analysing such politics requires tacking back and forth between broad theorisation and located, empirical enquiry. What we can do now is pose the questions, engage with wider theorisation and explore unfolding dynamics in particular places, both to understand the current conjuncture and to elaborate alternatives.

### **Resisting, organising and building alternatives**

Where is resistance happening, against what, for what reasons and how? Rural and urban movements across the world are showing inspiring examples of resistance. The power of transnational coordination and organising was illustrated by the historic Women's March in Washington, DC, and around the world on 21 January 2017. People also struggle in small, often isolated ways, but how do they come to understand a particular situation and engage in collective action? How can an emancipatory politics emerge that is not just bottom-up, but also horizontal, connecting across class, gender, racial, generational and ideological divides and transcending geographic boundaries? What redistributed material base is required to generate the freedoms to engage with existing authority structures? And what democratic institutions can facilitate and enable such connections to emerge and become robust?

In different places and times, a new politics may emerge in distinct ways, combining 'everyday' with 'official' and 'advocacy' politics, frequently throwing up contradictions and new challenges (Kerkvliet 2009). For example, resistance to 'land grabs' and extractive industries has highlighted profound questions about what precisely is being defended and what constitutes a defence (Conde and Le Billon 2017; Hall et al. 2015). Confronting investments by global capital may be seen as progressive, yet defending existing informal and customary tenure can be exclusionary, patriarchal and in other ways oppressive (Ribot 2013; Ribot and Peluso 2003). In many rural areas, protagonists have struggled to unite around critiques of corporate takeovers of rural land and resources, but have also faced challenges in generating alternative visions. In exploring resistance and the promotion of alternatives, we must not assume emancipation, but interrogate its construction.

There has been increasing convergence of issues and problems, rural and urban, across sectors and across the Global South and North (Borras 2016). A broad conception of the land and agrarian question helps us link between social justice movements, whether agrarian, food sovereignty, environmental justice or climate justice movements (Claeys and Delgado Pugley 2017; Tramel 2016; Edelman and Borras 2016; Brent, Schiavoni, and Alonso-Fradejas 2015; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Alternatives are increasingly framed as inherently relational, multi-class and multi-sectoral, historical and global. Across the world, movements around environment/food/energy and sustainability/justice are building alternatives based on distributive networks and the collaborative commons. In exploring alternatives to authoritarian populism, we must ask: What experiments in rural solidarity economies are emerging that offer rural employment and new livelihoods, providing the base for a new politics?

For example, a recognition of the importance of local control and 'sovereignty' (of land, food, energy) underlies multiple critical initiatives, such as 'food sovereignty' (Schiavoni 2017; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015; Borras, Franco, and Monsalve 2015; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010; Patel 2009) and 'agroecology' or environmental justice (Martínez-Alier et al. 2016; Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset et al. 2011), with significant rural–urban/local–national (Robbins 2015) and urban dimensions (White 2011). Equally, some view the sharing, solidarity economy as allowing for the regeneration of livelihoods (Avelino et al. 2016; Utting 2015) and reclaiming the 'commons' as offering new forms

of economic and political imagination (Bollier 2014). Others argue that new technologies allow for open-source innovation and the support of community-based grassroots initiatives (Smith et al. 2016; Kloppenburg 2014). New forms of community organisation are generating alternative ways of delivering energy, food, water and other services in rural settings (Smith and Seyfang 2013; Seyfang 2011). And perspectives on ‘de-growth’ and the indigenous Andean *buen vivir* or ‘living well’ are refashioning the ways in which we think of consumption, economy, nature and society (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014; Kallis 2011; Fatheuer 2011; Hamilton 2004).

These appear to be isolated cases, but do they together add up to a substantial new wave of innovation and political energy? Comparatively, across cases, we can ask: what alternatives are emerging based on collaborative commons, distributed networks, mutualism, reciprocity and moral economy, sovereignty and solidarity? And around what forms of production, service and provisioning in rural areas (such as agriculture, food, energy, water or housing services)? How are such alternatives being organised in rural areas, and by whom? What are the class, gender and identity politics involved? What relationships exist with the state and capital (and with which fractions of capital)? In surveying experiences comparatively, we must ask: what new forms of democratic organisation are emerging, with what political implications? How are rural movements connecting with each other locally, regionally and globally, and with other movements linked to urban areas?

When rethinking economies in a ‘post-capitalist’ age, some see non-hierarchical, distributed networks making use of open-source technology as offering potential for challenging the neoliberal order (Mason 2016). Beyond the hype, we need to ask what new forms of open science and technology might support decentralised, locally led alternatives; can, for example, information and communication technologies or blockchain registers open up space for democratic innovation? Or, as with other socio-technical transitions, can such spaces be closed down and captured with new forms of control? Whether in relation to small-scale agriculture in Africa or networked ‘fab labs’ in rural industrial clusters in Europe, linking new pathways of socio-technical change to social, cultural and political considerations is vital if new styles of innovation and democracy are to emerge (Smith and Stirling 2016; Scoones, Leach, and Newell 2015).

Many initiatives that challenge capitalist relations also improve livelihoods and enhance sustainability in rural spaces. In various guises, whether as community food or energy projects, or new approaches to building and settlement, they can be seen as part of diverse mobilisations against financialised capitalism’s assault on rural landscapes and livelihoods. However, many such alternatives do not explicitly articulate a wider, emancipatory political vision, and sometimes their discourses and practices can be quite conservative, exclusionary and technocratic. A populist localism, framed in terms of ‘community’, for example, will remain isolated, perhaps the preserve of the relatively privileged and organised, or potentially captured by narrow, regressive forces if it does not confront basic questions of class, race, gender and identity that are at the heart of any emancipatory politics (Tsikata 2009). For example, in India the Natural Farming movement, centred on low-cost agroecological production, has been open to co-optation by regressive Hindu nationalists, who deploy cultural symbols and arguments about local sovereignty (Khadse et al. 2017). The radical potential of these local, rooted alternatives therefore may only be realised when they are connected to a wider debate about political transformation, in rural spaces and beyond. This in turn requires situating practical, grounded ‘alternatives’ in a broader historical, social and political context, where deepening, linking and scaling up become essential.

This means thinking about forms of mobilisation from above and below, and how they can connect, through both informal, unruly politics as well as more organised forms. It involves rethinking the politics of mobilisation, drawing on classic ‘social movement theory’ (Tilly and Tarrow 2006), as well as, for example, crowd psychology (Nye 1975) and life-cycle theory, and extending these to the challenges of ‘big organising’ in the digital age, connecting communities through lateral, voluntary organising, both inside and outside the state and transnationally (Bond and Exley 2016; Edelman and Borras 2016). Change needs to be understood less in terms of managed transitions, guided by policy and technocratic elites, and more in terms of unruly, relational, horizontal transformations and new forms of innovation and democratic practice (Smith and Stirling 2016; Stirling 2015).

There are plenty of experiments with alternatives – around long-term challenges, sectoral interests and society-wide visions – but they will be more profound and long-lasting if they are better understood and connected. We can take inspiration from existing spaces of resistance and galvanise new thinking about how, in rural spaces in the North and South, emancipatory alternatives are emerging to authoritarian populist politics. On-the-ground experiences of alternative practices and mobilisations that are transforming rural economies and creating new forms of democracy in practice can help us (re)theorise emancipatory politics for a new era. However, we must go beyond the documentation of multiple, particular cases to a wider synthesis that allows us to reimagine rural spaces and democracy, underpinned by an emancipatory politics.

### **A challenge for scholar-activists**

Imagining a new politics in and linked to rural areas is an essential political and research task. Emancipatory politics has to be generated through styles of research that are open, inclusive and collaborative, although always informed by theory and disciplined by empirical data. A commitment to emancipatory research of the rural should be situated in a deep historical perspective and attentive to hinterlands, margins and frontiers. It should be interdisciplinary, comparative and integrative, articulate the local and the global, attend to class, gender and generational dynamics, and utilise multiple approaches and methods to corroborate findings and to highlight the many different meanings and perspectives at play.

What combinations of approaches and methods from critical social science can help us understand changing rural contexts and focus attention on critical conjunctures, diverse standpoints and patterns of everyday life, and point to important trends, meanings, relationships and processes? No single approach will do; each must engage in conversation with others, and respond to contextually defined questions. For example, ethnographies of elites and those excluded can be juxtaposed, exposing both the exceptional and the mundane, across different social groups and ages and between time periods (e.g. Moreira and Bruno 2015; Bobrow-Strain 2007). Sustained engagement in and across places is essential, generating ‘deep histories’ of change, ones that do not reify a mystical former golden age, but in which all possible paths are illuminated, as well as the decisions and detours taken (e.g. Quiñones 2015; Li 2014). Spatial perspectives, drawing on critical cartography, can help us understand how boundaries, landscapes and rural spaces are being recast, providing insights into the mapping of rural life and encouraging us to draw out new spatial relationships (e.g. Dwyer 2015). Visual methods – video, photography, art, performance or installation – may speak to how diverse actors perceive and understand rural settings (e.g. Kashi and Watts 2010). And, finally, wider understanding of patterns over time and across large populations may be enhanced by large-N surveys, both within and

across sites and countries, as well as analyses of financial and demographic flows, voting preferences, and land and housing markets (e.g. Monnat 2016).

Such research and action have multiple implications in terms of timing and pace, research team-building and participation, publication format and outlets, and the requirement for widespread and accessible platforms for broader conversation around research processes and outputs. The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI), in close collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI), will be coordinated by a network of scholar-activists/activist-scholars largely working in academic and independent research institutions, in both the Global North and the Global South. It brings to our analysis of and political action around the current conjuncture longstanding work with a rural perspective, most notably around ‘land grabbing’ through the Land Deals Politics Initiative.<sup>3</sup>

In this new initiative, we retain our focus on rural areas as sites of struggle and innovation, but of course recognise that rural and urban sites are connected. We aim for a global outlook, drawing lessons from everywhere, both North and South. We want to connect people and ideas, so that new conversations, collaborations and actions may arise. The challenge is to hear, to collect information, to turn analysis into a collective activity and to build bridges to other communities, and in so doing to construct a space where alternatives – in conception and practice – might be deepened and shared. We hope that we can help inspire more people to join in citizens’ movements, community debates and local innovations and experiments, wherever these may be.

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<sup>3</sup>[www.iss.nl/ldpi](http://www.iss.nl/ldpi)

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**Ian Scoones** is a professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and Director of the ESRC STEPS Centre. Email: i.scoones@ids.ac.uk

**Saturnino M. Borrás Jr.** is a professor of agrarian studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, the Netherlands, an adjunct professor at China Agricultural University in Beijing, and a fellow of the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI) and of the California-based Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First). Email: borras@iss.nl

**Ruth Hall** is a professor of land and agrarian studies at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Email: rhall@uwc.ac.za

**Marc Edelman** is professor of anthropology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Email: medelman@hunter.cuny.edu

**Wendy Wolford** is Polson Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University, USA. Email: www43@cornell.edu

**Ben White** is an emeritus professor of rural sociology at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Email: white@iss.nl