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## La Via Campesina – transforming agrarian and knowledge politics, and co-constructing a field: a *laudatio*

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### ABSTRACT


La Via Campesina has revalorized agrarian politics, transformed knowledge politics, and co-constructed the field of Critical Agrarian Studies. It has shown the important role of agrarian movements in anti-capitalist struggles and the radical reimagination and construction of a positive future. The significance of LVC is found not in the shrinking numerical size of farming populations or in agriculture's dwindling macroeconomic contributions to national economies, in relative terms, but in the political heft of what it represents in terms of an alternative future that is so different from the current agrarian world.

### KEYWORDS

La Via Campesina; agrarian populism; agrarian Marxism; agrarian politics; knowledge politics; Critical Agrarian Studies

## Introduction

This essay is written as a *laudatio* for La Via Campesina (LVC) on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary. This does not mean that I have no criticisms of LVC and some aspects of its political projects. I have. But this essay is not the place for that. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how LVC has transformed agrarian and knowledge politics and co-constructed the field of Critical Agrarian Studies during the past three decades.<sup>1</sup> LVC was formally organized as a transnational agrarian movement organization in 1993 – exactly thirty years ago this year. Today, in 2023, it has 182 member organizations in 81 countries, and claims to represent more or less 200 million poor peasants, small and medium size farmers and landless rural laborers. It has become not only the most significant social justice-oriented transnational agrarian movement, but also one of the world-leading anti-capitalist social movements more generally. It has spearheaded global campaigns against exploitation and oppression, expulsion and repression, and has conceptualized and constructed systemic alternatives that have gained traction far beyond the ranks of the agrarian working class. For example, it took the lead in the campaign against the World Trade Organization (WTO) from the 1990s onwards, while it has also pioneered

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<sup>1</sup>Full disclosure: before I entered academia, I was directly involved in radical peasant movements in the Philippines and, in that capacity, I became a member of the International Coordinating Committee of LVC, representing Asia, in 1993–1996. I have not been officially associated with LVC since mid-1996, but I have followed its evolution closely.

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alternatives, notably food sovereignty and agroecology, which have gone on to become widely popular and adopted by multiple sectors beyond farming.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is organized in three main sections, structured as follows. The next section explains the major contributions of LVC in terms of revalorizing agrarian politics, transforming knowledge politics and co-constructing the field of Critical Agrarian Studies. The subsequent section explains how LVC has made its contributions amid dynamics of unity, diversity and adversity among and between social groups, issues and organizations. The paper concludes with a brief discussion about the difference between ‘half empty’ and ‘half full’ perspectives in assessing radical social justice movements like LVC.

## **Transforming agrarian and knowledge politics, co-constructing a field**

LVC has revalorized agrarian politics, transformed knowledge politics and contributed to the construction of the field of Critical Agrarian Studies. It is not the only important transnational agrarian movement organization and alliance, and its achievements would not have been possible without the various forms and moments of alliance with other left-wing movement organizations.<sup>3</sup> But LVC is among the politically most robust, organizationally most widespread, and ideologically most consistently anti-capitalist agrarian and rural movements. While LVC is centrally agrarian in composition and politics, its political configuration also includes elements of food, environmental and climate justice politics.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Revalorizing agrarian politics***

Henry Bernstein (2018, 1146) pointed out a paradox: ‘while the best of Marxism retains its analytical superiority in addressing the class dynamics of agrarian change, for a variety of reasons agrarian populism appears a more vital ideological and political force’. In the contemporary context, Bernstein and a section of orthodox Marxist academics refer to LVC and its constituent national agrarian movements, as well as the activists and scholars who are supportive of these movements, as ‘agrarian populists’, with the label usually deployed in pejorative terms. Without going into the history and politics of the term ‘agrarian populism’ here,<sup>5</sup> I interpret Bernstein’s statement in two inseparable ways. First, it is an explicit acknowledgement of the political significance of LVC, its affiliate movements and an entire global community of supporters and allies of these movements. Second, it is an implicit acknowledgement of its flipside: that what might be considered ‘non-populist’ movements that mobilize rural working classes or ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2006) are not so vital as a political force in contemporary times. The point being emphasized here is that LVC and its supporters are not the only ones making claims about the political significance of the international movement; even its critics seem to have conceded on this point.

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<sup>2</sup>For historical accounts of the rise of LVC, see among others, Desmarais (2007), Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010), and Edelman and Borrás Jr (2016).

<sup>3</sup>See relevant discussion in Edelman and Borrás Jr (2016), especially on movement organizations that belong to the IPC for Food Sovereignty; see also Mills (2021).

<sup>4</sup>See relevant discussions in Holt Giménez and Shattuck (2011), Martínez-Alier et al. (2016), Claeys and Delgado Pugley (2017), Scheidel et al. (2020).

<sup>5</sup>For relevant history on this topic, see Shanin (1983a, 1983b); and for a recent discussion, see Borrás (2020).

One of the most consequential developments on the agrarian front during the past three decades is the fact that LVC has revalorized agrarian politics at the local, national and international levels. The multiple crises in the international economy, climate, ecology and politics put the agrarian world under the spotlight. LVC's interpretation of the causes, conditions and consequences of the global crises, and the political projects that LVC launched that advance solutions to the current world problems, have contributed to the revalorization of agrarian politics in ways that challenge theoretical conventions. This has manifested in at least five ways.

*First, LVC has shown that the rural world remains key in the global economy, ecology and politics, and that any understanding of the causes, conditions and consequences of the problems facing humanity must pay equal attention to the rural.* LVC-led struggles have highlighted the fact that the rural world (agrarian and non-agrarian) continues to play a key role in the continuous process of expanded reproduction of capital. The agrarian world and rural working classes are key frontiers for global capitalism as sources of cheap nature and labor as well as markets for commodities in capitalism's effort to address its recurring crises of overaccumulation of capital (Patel and Moore 2017; Rasmussen and Lund 2018).<sup>6</sup> The rural has also been assigned the role of a global 'carbon sink' in the capitalist effort to address the climate crisis that capitalism caused 'non-accidentally', as Fraser (2021) argues, leading to all forms of 'green grabbing' (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Ojeda 2012; Franco and Borrás Jr 2019) and commodities associated with biofuels and 'flex crops' (Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2010; Borrás et al. 2016). LVC has contributed to demonstrating how capitalism caused climate change, and has identified capitalism as the cause of contemporary environmental crisis (as in Moore 2017). It has done this in part by consistently reminding the world that capitalist, fossil-based industrial agriculture is one of the single biggest contributors to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, at the same time that it exposes what it calls 'fake solutions' to climate change,<sup>7</sup> such as 'Climate Smart Agriculture', REDD+<sup>8</sup> and other land/nature-based solutions, and instead champions an idea of climate justice (McKeon 2015; Newell 2022). LVC has also relentlessly exposed how contemporary extractivism has mined the world's countrysides.<sup>9</sup> One implication of all this has been to show that anti-capitalist struggles should have a solid grounding in the rural world. The flipside is equally compelling, namely, that agrarian struggles have to go beyond being 'merely agrarian', and connect to broader issues across the board, system-wide.

*Second, LVC has shown that peasants can enforce their class interest, represent themselves, and pursue progressive and even revolutionary politics.* The birth of LVC was a direct outcome of the resolute stance to make the class of poor peasants and small

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<sup>6</sup>For example, extraction in the countryside has intensified (Veltmeyer and Petras 2014; McKay, Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete 2021; Andrade 2022), while it has also become key in new frontiers of the expanded reproduction of capital (new commodities, investments, etc.) especially in the era of financialization (Isakson 2014; Visser, Clapp, and Isakson 2015a; Clapp and Isakson 2018; Fairbairn 2020; Sosa Varrotti and Gras 2021).

<sup>7</sup>For a range of critiques of mainstream climate action linked to agrarian issues, see Paprocki (2021), Arsel (2022), Ribot (2022) and Yaşın (2022).

<sup>8</sup>For critiques of Climate Smart Agriculture from an agrarian studies perspective, see Clapp, Newell, and Brent (2018), Newell and Taylor (2018) and Taylor (2018); see Barbesgaard (2018) for an oceans perspective; Corbera and Schroeder (2011) on REDD+; and Hunsberger et al. (2017), Franco and Borrás Jr (2021) and Galvin and Silva Garzón (2022) on mitigation, land and agrarian issues.

<sup>9</sup>For various strands of relevant literature, see Burchardt and Dietz (2014), Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini (2016), Ye et al. (2020), McKay, Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete (2021), Andrade (2022) and Chagnon et al. (2022).

farmers heard as a distinct class voice, with LVC representing that class interest. The founding of LVC in 1993 was a decisive political act, to put a stop to the misrepresentation of peasants by IFAP (International Federation of Agricultural Producers), the international organization of large and medium commercial farmers that had claimed to represent all strata of the farming population. Since then, LVC has been able to promote this distinct class interest and political ideology in many ways and arenas of actions, such as in demanding recognition and representation for the class of poor peasants and small farmers – which is so markedly different from pre-1993: while IFAP saw GATT/WTO as economic opportunity for well-to-do farmers, LVC saw it as a threat to small farmers and poor peasants. This is an indirect rebuke to a section of contemporary orthodox Marxists who believe that peasants are like ‘potatoes in a sack’ who ‘cannot represent themselves’, following one of Marx’s most influential writings, the 1852 *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1968), despite the fact that the contemporary peasantry is significantly different from Marx’s French peasantry in the middle of the nineteenth century. Emphasizing the atomized nature of peasant systems of production and way of life, Marx talked about the conservative political stance of the French peasantry around mid-nineteenth century France. He believed that peasants:

are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. (Marx 1968, 170–171)

*Third, LVC has shown the significance and possibility of a plurality of movement organizations and alliances, scales, sites and forms of anti-capitalist struggles.* This has challenged the long history of sectarianism in political party-led left-wing movements known for continuous internal schisms that are almost always caused by a zealous belief that there is only one correct analysis, organization, strategy and form of struggle; that everything that deviates must be wrong and must be shunned, and those who do not conform must, at times, be cast away as counter-revolutionaries. An example is the tendency among Left revolutionary movements that take clandestine armed struggle as the principal form of struggle, and all other forms (e.g. open legal mass movement and legal parliamentary work) as secondary and subordinated to it. Many open peasant mass movements of the old generation of revolutionary struggles had difficult experiences within such a framework (see, e.g. Putzel 1995). Many of the member organizations of LVC, and LVC itself as the international umbrella movement, challenged and broke away from this instrumentalist tradition.<sup>10</sup> LVC also broke away from the long tradition in agrarian politics in which the scope of mobilization and organization is limited to the subnational and national level, by adding the international as a new level and site. LVC has given importance to the coordinative works that bring together movement organizations and alliances operating at various scales, located in various sites, and

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<sup>10</sup>There is, however, a more recent political development in which left-wing agrarian movements were part of broad Left political parties or alliances that got into power. Once in power, relations between agrarian movements and the Left government were fraught with contradictions and tensions around undelivered promises, violations of agreements, or problematical interpretation of agrarian movements’ political projects such as food sovereignty. For a range of critical literature, see Giunta (2014), McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dillely (2014), Clark (2017), Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017), Tilzey (2019), Andrade (2020), Monjane and Bruna (2020).

pursuing various forms of collective actions and struggles, in a way that is reflected in Wright's typology of twenty-first century anti-capitalist struggles (Wright 2019). LVC thus sparked studies of scales of action (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015; Roman-Alcalá 2016).

*Fourth, LVC has contributed to the global construction of an idea and a political project of how to frame an alternative positive future beyond capitalism, with a socialist perspective.* Following Fraser's logic in her critique of environmental struggles as being 'merely environmental', and unable to consistently connect to broader systemic issues and struggles (Fraser 2021), some of the national and subnational member organizations of LVC may be closer to what we might call 'merely agrarian'. However, LVC itself as an international movement is definitely not. IFAP, the international organization that represented the farming sector in international inter-governmental platforms from 1946 to 2010, had pursued a future for the rural world that was firmly founded in the logic of capitalism. When LVC put an end to IFAP's institutional monopoly, IFAP's very notion of a positive future within capitalism was decisively challenged. LVC has taken the position that since capitalism is the root cause of the problems of humanity, it is hard to believe that a positive future could be found within capitalism. Food sovereignty and agroecology, while not at the same level as capitalism, as a social order, target key components of the capitalist social order – industrial agro-food system, global food regimes, land/nature property systems – while laying down some building blocks for the foundation of an alternative social order beyond capitalism, which may well be some form of ecosocialism (Fraser 2021). This is an indirect rejection of long-standing assumptions among a section of orthodox Marxists that portray peasants as generally conservative and reactionary (and when and where they are progressive, they are seen as politically wrong) partly because of their petty bourgeoisie impulses with regards to petty private property – their own private parcel of land.

*Fifth, diminishing but not diminished – this is how LVC has reframed the image of what the agrarian world under neoliberal global capitalism is at present, and what the agrarian world ought to be in the future.* LVC slogans such as 'small farmers feed the world' directly counter the current condition of the world's countryside and agriculture as captured in phrase such as 'agriculture without farmers' and 'countryside without people'. The LVC slogan, and 'small-scale sustainable farmers are cooling down the earth' revalorizes peasant farming in the era of climate change. They depict an iconic contribution of LVC: historically grounded, aspirational, regenerative struggles for a positive future. When seen through the lens of this kind of historical treatment, agrarian struggles are not necessarily nostalgic, restorative and romantic utopian struggles. The number of farmers and their macroeconomic contribution to national economies are diminishing in relative terms, but the rural is not diminished politically. Rural areas are being abandoned, especially by young people, at an increasing pace, or being converted to urban societies quite rapidly, but rurality itself, both its agrarian and non-agrarian domains, continues to retain its materiality and ability to attract attention not only from working classes, but even from the state and big capital. For big capital, the rural world represents a wellspring from which to tap resources for the endless expanded reproduction of capital, and a sink to manage the capitalist production's waste. For the working classes who remain primarily based in rural areas, it provides the space and means of production and social reproduction. For rurally rooted working classes fluidly straddling rural and

urban spaces, rural areas offer a key source of resources for productive and social reproductive activities that supplement their main, but more distant, productive work, and a place for convalescence and retirement (Ye et al. 2013; Shah and Lerche 2020; Borrás et al. 2022a). The rural will play a much bigger role in the contemporary confrontation with global capitalism and in building an alternative future than its current population size and its economic contribution in relative terms.

Political struggles for a just, fairer and kinder world are necessarily historical. This implies the centrality of temporal dynamics – in Bloch’s and Hobsbawm’s notion, the interconnect-edness of the past, present *and* future (Bloch [1954] 1992, Hobsbawm 1971). But for social justice struggles, the future is not something that is waiting to happen; it is something to be consciously imagined and constructed based on normative notions of values and justice. The future is thus not seen from the value-neutral *what might be*, but from an ethically purposive frame: *what ought to be*. The temporal trajectory of struggles therefore connects what was, what is, and *what ought to be*. Small LVC agrarian movement organizations in the extremely depopulated northern Spain, along the trail of the Camino de Santiago, especially the portion in the *meseta* region, are politically important less because of their actual weight as a socioeconomic category in the here and now, but because of the political weight of what they represent in terms of an alternative future world so different from the current agrarian communities along the Camino trail. In the words of McMichael (2008), paraphrasing Marx: ‘Peasants make their own history but not just as they please ...’ (‘they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’; Marx [1852] 1968, 98). Its leadership in what Tony Weis called the ‘battle for the future of farming’ (Weis 2007) is what gives political heft to LVC, especially when battles are fought on extremely difficult grounds like the crumbling agrarian villages along the Camino.

Ultimately, it is not surprising that LVC has been robust for the past three decades and has been in the forefront of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles. Perhaps what is paradoxical is that the massive and ever-increasing size of the informal sector, the precariat or ‘classes of labor’ has not produced a similarly vigorous organized class movement of the same scale, intensity and inspirational impact as LVC. Why this is so, should be an urgent research question. There are recent studies that may show some of the paths forward in this regard, such as Shah and Lerche (2020) and Pattenden (2023).

These five contributions by LVC to anti-capitalist struggles and the reimagination and construction of a positive future are not the only important contributions it has made to revalorizing agrarian politics. LVC has, for example, played a significant role in feminist struggles, even as it has, in the process, benefited immensely from feminist politics (Calvário and Desmarais 2023; Rodriguez and Sosa 2023). LVC and affiliate movement organizations were in the forefront of struggles against regressive populism in many countries (Scoones et al. 2018; Coronado 2019; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020; Monjane and Bruna 2020; Sauer 2020). LVC has also made various contributions to what Fox (1990) conceptualized as ‘rural democratization’ (see also Levkoe 2006; Wittman 2009) and democratization more generally.<sup>11</sup> But the five explored above are among those that have directly challenged some of the most popular assumptions in left-wing practical politics and

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<sup>11</sup>See Von Redecker and Herzig (2020) for an interesting discussion of LVC’s contribution to a different framing of radical democracy.

scholarship. In addition to LVC's contributions in revalorizing agrarian politics, the movement has also transformed knowledge politics. We now turn our discussion to this.

### ***Transforming knowledge politics***

Who gets to generate, claim attribution, circulate and use what kinds of knowledge, and which and whose knowledge make what impact in the world are fundamental questions about knowledge politics (Scoones 2009; Ribot 2022). This framing of knowledge politics also helps us locate key domains in the global circuits of knowledge – the spheres of knowledge generation, attribution, circulation, exchange and use. This global knowledge complex, especially as it relates to the rural world, has been partially transformed by LVC. This has happened in at least four ways.

*First, LVC has changed the subject and transformed the agenda of knowledge politics.* Academics, states and big capital were notoriously dominant in defining the subject of what is being researched and debated; depending on the balance of social forces among them, one or more of these three gets to decide which and whose knowledge is considered, pursued and made influential in global social life. In the field of global agro-food, LVC changed the subject and transformed the agenda of the conversation, even if only partially. It put an end to what in the pre-1993 era was the uncontested notion of 'food security', and in its place advanced the idea and political project of 'food sovereignty' (Patel 2009; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010; Edelman et al. 2014). The concept of food sovereignty may be quite straightforward to many these days, but in the early 1990s, this was not the case.<sup>12</sup> The framing of food sovereignty was not only a demonstration of LVC's creativity in terms of knowledge generation, it was also politically bold. By showing what *ought to be*, LVC exposed very concretely what *is* in the global food system. By showing what ought to be, LVC has been able to inspire younger generations to co-own the struggle, partly resolving one of the most challenging questions in agrarian political economy today: the generational question. Most rural young people are leaving agriculture (White 2020), or, in the case of Europe, young people who want to enter agriculture cannot afford to do so (Ody and Shattuck 2013). It has become one of the most important lenses for many to understand how a nebulous idea such as global capitalism actually works and unfolds in working people's daily lives.

LVC has done an enormous amount of work changing the subject and transforming the agendas of knowledge politics, and this can be seen in other elements of its political projects, such as those related to agroecology, agrarian reform, land politics and land grabbing, land struggles, international trade, GMOs, seed politics, corporate monopoly and control of the food system and food regime, productivity of small farms, and climate change.<sup>13</sup> Some of the most popular themes in academic research during the

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<sup>12</sup>Food sovereignty defined in the most generally way as the right of peoples to produce, circulate and consume sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food in socio-ecologically sustainable, also entails coordinated rights of (most) states to manage their own national territorial food systems, respecting the rights of domestic food producers (in the interests of real food security/public good). This means reversing the diminishing of public oversight/protection by the global private. This is huge when we consider that the context was liberalization of agricultural trade.

<sup>13</sup>For key literature related to the current discussion, see Rosset and Altieri (2017), Giraldo and Rosset (2018), Akram-Lodhi (2021), Holt-Giménez, Shattuck, and Van Lammeren (2021), Montenegro de Wit (2021), van der Ploeg (2021) on agroecology; Mehta, Veldwisch, and Franco (2012), Monsalve (2013), Rosset (2013), Scoones et al. (2013) on agrarian reform,



past decade or so have been the topics advanced and formulated by LVC and its allies. [Figure 1](#) is a compilation from Web of Science, 1975–2020, of the frequency of usage of four key words/phrases closely associated with the political campaigns of LVC: agroecology, food sovereignty, agrarian reform, and struggles against land grabbing. We can see that the frequencies for these started to pick up in the mid-2000s, and have steadily increased since then.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, these data cover academic publications not only by authors who are inspired by the ideas by LVC, but also by critics of the movement. We can thus see how LVC has transformed the subject and agenda of academic research – a reality that is recognized (perhaps grudgingly) by some of LVC’s critics. It is very likely that it has already influenced future emerging issues in Critical Agrarian Studies (see [Shattuck 2023](#)).

*Second, LVC has contributed to the democratization of the ranks of knowledge producers.* Academics, states and big capital have been the dominant framers of knowledge, and fractions of these entities are in a constant tussle for hegemony – although it is almost always the knowledges produced by and introduced through the academy that tend to be accepted as ‘real science’, thereby disqualifying those that are not academy-stamped. LVC has not only questioned this, but has contributed to the ongoing democratization – even if only to a modest extent, for now – of knowledge production by adding the rural working classes, such as poor peasants, Indigenous Peoples, artisanal fishers and small pastoralists, to the ranks of what are considered legitimate knowledge producers. Agroecology is an example of knowledge that does not originate from academia, is not well-recognized in the mainstream academy, and is quite unpopular among a particular section of Marxist academics. Nevertheless, it has steadily become accepted as real and legitimate science by an increasing number of individuals and groups worldwide, and has slowly but surely encroached in the mainstream academy and in international governance spaces such as the FAO and IAASTD ([IAASTD 2009](#); [Perfecto and Vandermeer 2010](#); [Lieblein et al. 2012](#); [Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen 2013](#); [Rosset and Altieri 2017](#); [Rosset et al. 2019](#); [Val et al. 2019](#); [Herren and Haerlin 2020](#)).<sup>15</sup> LVC did not invent agroecology, and it is not the only body that tries to promote and advance it. But LVC has played a key role in bringing agroecology into the global spotlight that it deserves; it has supplied the political energy it needed, and provided a socio-political umbrella in the form of ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘climate justice’ through which it could gain broader traction, adaptation and support ([Altieri and Toledo 2011](#); [Rosset et al. 2011](#); [Ajl 2021](#)).

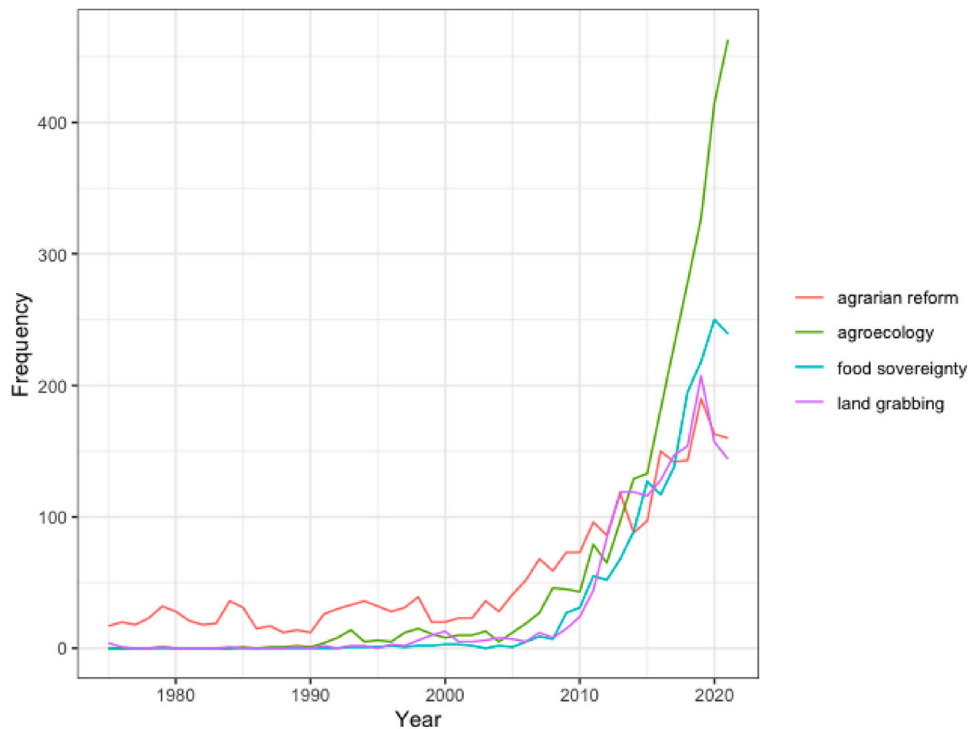
*Third, LVC has opened up the sphere of knowledge circulation, rendering it plural and diverse, and broadened the ranks of knowledge users.* Determining what knowledge is being circulated by whom to whom, from where to where, and how, are issues that have traditionally been controlled by the academy, states and big capital. The circulation

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resource grabbing, land politics; [Moyo and Yeros \(2005\)](#), [Peluso, Afiff, and Rachman \(2008\)](#), [Deere and Royce \(2009\)](#), [Wolford \(2010\)](#), [Lund \(2021\)](#) on land struggles (see [Kay 2023](#) for historical context on land struggles); [Bello \(2008\)](#), [Burnett and Murphy \(2014\)](#), [Hopewell \(2022\)](#) on international trade; [Scoones \(2008\)](#) on anti-GMO campaigns; [Montenegro de Wit \(2019\)](#), [Peschard and Randeria \(2020\)](#), [Lyon \(2021\)](#), [Hernández Rodríguez \(2022\)](#) on seed politics and activism; [Friedmann and McMichael \(1989\)](#), [McMichael \(2020\)](#), [Canfield, Anderson, and McMichael \(2021\)](#), [Guttal \(2021\)](#), [Montenegro de Wit et al. \(2021a\)](#), [Clapp \(2022\)](#) on global food system and food regimes; [van der Ploeg \(2013\)](#), [Graeub et al. \(2016\)](#), [Akram-Lodhi \(2021\)](#) on family farms; [Tramel \(2016\)](#), [Claeys and Delgado Pugley \(2017\)](#) on climate change.

<sup>14</sup>A word of caution: part of this increase is likely a consequence of the increasing number of journals during the past couple of decades.

<sup>15</sup>For an important collection related to this, see [People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective \(2017\)](#).



**Figure 1.** Selected keywords, Web of Science, 1975–2020.

and exchange circuit itself has become a multibillion-dollar industry involving these three key entities, setting up a global institution that structures access to knowledge – that is, who is on which side of the paywall that controls access to formally published knowledge, especially printed books and journals. Part of this is the result of neoliberalization of universities worldwide (Burawoy 2014). Aside from transforming the agenda and democratizing the ranks of knowledge producers, LVC has also altered the sphere of circulation of knowledge outside, through and within the academy. LVC has promoted and scaled up direct people-to-people learning processes, such as the farmer-to-farmer initiatives that are important and effective in many ways, and happen outside the academy (Holt-Giménez 2006). It has also initiated and promoted knowledge circulation through the academy by forging different forms of alliances, at multiple scales, with radical academics and scholar-activists, and using these alliances to transmit knowledge from the trenches to the academy, and from the academy to the trenches. By changing the subject and agenda of research, LVC has also acquired some influence within the traditional institutions, and has recruited militants and supporters inside academia who have in turn facilitated further circulation of complementary and/or alternative knowledge within the academy<sup>16</sup> (Edelman 2009; Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021b; Duncan et al. 2021; see also Hale 2006).<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, LVC has enhanced the reach of relevant knowledges from and to the trenches by contesting the monopoly of English in global knowledge politics. It has

<sup>16</sup>Discussion on this topic draws on Borrás and Franco (2023) which is to be released around the middle of 2023.

<sup>17</sup>Even in a politically complicated setting like China, the influence of LVC and its political projects such as food sovereignty is slowly but steadily gaining ground; there is, for example, a loose community working on food sovereignty (with Chinese characteristics) involving important scholars like Yan Hairong. For contextual discussion on scholars and activists in China, see Yan, Bun, and Siyuan (2021).

struggled against the use of language to (intentionally or not) politically disenfranchise poor peasants, as a barrier to democratic participation and genuine representation. This struggle has taken place internally inside the movement, and externally in its work in various (inter-)state and non-state institutional spaces. LVC's internal meetings have always been conducted in multiple languages, and most of its external engagements, whether with (inter)governmental or civil society entities, are done in the same way. This did not come on a silver platter; LVC had to work hard to make it happen. It is easy to take this gain for granted these days, to see it as a peripheral issue. To counter this, we have to remember that it was absolutely not the case before 1993, and that without this radical change the voice of poor peasants and small farmers would have remained inaudible, practically and politically. In relation to this, an important component of the rise of transnational agrarian movements like LVC has been the emergence of 'rooted cosmopolitans' (to use Tarrow's 2005 term) among the ranks of agrarian movement leaders who have been able to overcome language barriers, especially during the formative years of LVC, and a corps of politically committed language translators who either work free of charge or for what is called 'solidarity rates', that is, much lower fees. The role they play is key, even though their contributions are most often invisible, especially for movement outsiders.

*Fourth, LVC has contributed to developing a plurality of methods of knowledge work.* The most dominant method to date has been knowledge work that is instigated by any one or a combination of academics, states and big capital, in which the rural world and rural working classes are mere objects of those enquiries and users of the knowledge. In rejecting this method of knowledge work, LVC has contributed to strengthening three subversive methods that are multi-sited: (a) LVC independently sets the agenda; researchers follow and work within the parameters set by the movement; (b) radical academics set the agenda, and agrarian movements engage with it; and (c) radical agrarian movements and activist academics set the agenda together. Knowledge works that involve LVC in various ways are located in any one or a combination of these three modes, depending on specific context and histories of engagements between academic researchers and movement organizations and activists. The principal concern for LVC is to interpret the world in various ways in order to change it, to move towards greater degrees of social justice, to make the world fairer and kinder. This starting point has significant implications for how the research process is understood: the sense of timing (analytical closure, timing of research and research outputs), hierarchy of forms of knowledge work outputs, and many other aspects, may be quite different from purely academic work. A key guiding point here is that the autonomy of LVC must be respected, just as LVC must reciprocate by respecting the autonomy of academics and scholar-activists in setting their own agenda, method of work, forms of research output, and so on.<sup>18</sup> It is an affirmation of pluralism in knowledge politics.

### ***Co-constructing the field of Critical Agrarian Studies***

Critical social sciences, such as Critical Agrarian Studies (Edelman and Wolford 2017; Akram-Lodhi et al. 2021), emerge through the dialectic of field construction 'from

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<sup>18</sup>Discussion on this topic draws on Borrás and Franco (2023) which is expected to be released around the middle of 2023.

above' and 'from below'.<sup>19</sup> Field construction 'from above' entails initiatives by critical researchers working inside the academy and other research institutions who engage with those working 'from below'. Construction 'from below' refers to efforts by those primarily working in the trenches who engage with researchers working in the academy and other formal independent research institutions. On their own, each of the two streams can make important contributions to building a field. But it is when the two streams come together that new fields emerge. It was when the two streams engaged in the agrarian world started to interact with each other that the field of Critical Agrarian Studies began to take a concrete form. The co-construction 'from above' and 'from below' is both the origin and the outcome of the three interlocking defining features of Critical Agrarian Studies: politically engaged, pluralist and internationalist (Borras 2023). LVC has taken a key role in the co-construction of the field of Critical Agrarian Studies 'from below'.

Critical Agrarian Studies enquires into the causes, conditions and consequences of societal transformations by focusing its analysis on the interaction between social structures, institutions and actors that shape the processes of change in, and in relation to, the rural world. It pays attention to questions of agency of the exploited, oppressed and marginalized groups in the rural–urban and agriculture–industry entanglement, particularly their autonomy and capacity to interpret – and change – their conditions to achieve greater degrees of fairness and justice, even as 'fairness' and 'justice' are themselves contested concepts. It is critical in three ways: it interrogates mainstream neoliberal theories; it is sympathetic to radical social movements and their proposed alternatives, but is vigilant in scrutinizing these in theory and practice; and it questions, and works to transform, the very institutions of the global circuits of knowledge (Castree 2000). Critical Agrarian Studies today is marked by these three interlocking features of political engagement, pluralism and internationalism – as actually existing and as aspirational reference points – that together connect the worlds of academic research and practical politics. Its methods center on the fundamental guiding questions of political economy, focusing on social relations of property, labor, income, consumption and reproduction, and on how power relations emerge and are contested and transformed. From there, it branches out widely to intersect with other issues and themes pertaining to social processes, intellectual traditions, fields and disciplines. Critical Agrarian Studies traces its provenance to what can be called the 'classical agrarian studies' or 'peasant studies' that was dominant during the previous century.<sup>20</sup>

Critical Agrarian Studies is an academic field that has been co-constructed by LVC directly and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally. Its agendas and methods of work reflect those that are both promoted and eschewed by LVC. It has internalized the controversies in academia and contradictions in practical politics. It is for this reason that the future of the field will be shaped in part by the future of LVC and its political projects.

Anti-capitalist political struggles in and in relation to the countryside during the past three decades have largely been framed and led by LVC. Academic engagement with

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<sup>19</sup>The use of 'from above' and 'from below' is not to be interpreted as suggesting hierarchy. It is used here to show differentiated domains, along the lines of 'sandwich strategy' (Fox 1993).

<sup>20</sup>The discussion and the text in this paragraph are borrowed from Borras (2023).

the burning issues confronting the rural world – free trade, a global food system that has resulted in the co-existence of a billion hungry and a billion over- and mal-fed people, a fossil energy-based agriculture that contributes significantly to climate change, land grabs, monocropping plantation agriculture without people, and so on – necessarily means engaging at least partly with LVC and its political projects, directly or indirectly (De Schutter 2011; Li 2011; White et al. 2012; McMichael 2013; Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017; Patel and Moore 2017; Levien 2018; Grajales 2021; Li and Semedi 2021; Wolford 2021; Wolford et al. 2013). A critique of any of the political projects of LVC, such as food sovereignty and agroecology, has a flipside. If food sovereignty and agroecology are not the answer (i.e. will not be able to feed the world, will not be able to produce at a scale needed and in a sustainable way, etc.), then the question that is turned back on the critic must be: what then is the alternative that will work? Critics of food sovereignty and agroecology are curiously silent regarding their own ideas of what alternative food system (and accompanying mass movement) will be effective in an era when a billion people have food-based health issues such as obesity, while another billion go hungry, a climate-change era when the fossil-based industrial food system centered on large-scale farming contributes up to 40 percent of GHG emissions. I do not want to assume that their alternative is the same fossil-based industrial food system but with an ‘equity caveat’ added. Or is it?

How LVC defines political relevance and political timing inevitably influences academics, drawing them into engagement with LVC issues. This includes those who do not support or are skeptical of LVC and its political projects (or aspects of the latter), such as Bernstein (2014), Agarwal (2014), Jansen (2015), Henderson (2018) and Soper (2020), for instance, on food sovereignty and agroecology. Meanwhile, for those academics who do believe in LVC and its political projects, the act of political engagement – directly and indirectly, intentionally or not – has the effect of persuading, requiring or otherwise influencing them to adopt a pluralist stance on issues at hand, including an appreciation of the plurality of anti-capitalist struggles in terms of organizations, scales, sites and forms. Thus, the range of radical academics who are engaging, more or less sympathetically, with LVC and/or its political positions and projects range from variants of Marxist agrarian political economy to the various mutations of radical agrarian populism, from ecological Marxism and ecosocialism to anarchism (e.g. Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000; Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Ashwood 2018; Holleman 2018; Dunlap 2018; Akram-Lodhi 2021; Roman-Alcala 2021; Grubačić, Gerber, and Rilović 2022; Kass 2022), as well as a range of fields and communities that have been built by combining elements of pre-existing intellectual traditions, such as world-ecology (Patel and Moore 2017; Patel 2022), food regime (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2013), an ‘environmentalism of the poor’ type of environmental justice (Martinez-Alier 2003), and the various currents within degrowth (Gerber 2020; Guerrero et al. 2023). This might also mean that the academics who are attracted to LVC or its initiatives are those who already believe in pluralist approaches. Finally, the internationalist position taken by LVC on agendas and methods of work is perhaps summarized in its principal slogan: ‘Globalize struggle! Globalize hope!’. It suggests that, since problems are global and so are their roots, the solution has to be global as well, while deeply grounded in local communities.

## Unity, diversity, adversity

The discussions above around transforming agrarian and knowledge politics and co-constructing the field of Critical Agrarian Studies do not imply that LVC directly, consciously and purposely made all this happen, or that LVC's achievements have been straightforward. I am not suggesting that the movement and its work are flawless. In reality, many of the outcomes outlined above were achieved through complex and often contradiction-ridden political processes both internal and external to LVC. In some cases, it could have been the messiness of the situation in and around the movement that caused events to unfold as they did. It is not possible to grasp the essence of LVC and its political projects, and how it has transformed agrarian and knowledge politics as well as the field of Critical Agrarian Studies, without understanding the many contradictions internal to LVC, and the many contrasts and inconsistencies that are uncovered and arise when academics try to make sense of the movement and its political projects. When unity, diversity and adversity meet one another on a dynamic historical trajectory, unintended and unexpected outcomes can trigger some revolutionary processes and produce some important results. Some rough sketches of these are provided below.

## Voice

Prior to 1993, there was no voice representing poor peasants and small farmers in international political spaces. LVC has given a voice to this social category. It is not that movement organizations and alliances of poor peasants and small farmers did not exist before then; they did, but they operated mainly at the subnational and national level, even when they struggled against neoliberal globalization (Edelman 1999). In the 1980s and early 1990s, their presence was thin, scattered and ad hoc at the emerging international governance gatherings that were starting to occur regularly around the Uruguay Round of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) negotiations, and the environment-related conferences such as the 1992 event in Rio de Janeiro. There were progressive transnational networks representing, to some extent, poor peasants and small farmers in some of these fora, such as the Catholic Church-based FIMARC and MIJARC,<sup>21</sup> and the European Farmers' Coordination (CPE).

There were powerful groups that claimed to speak for poor peasants and small farmers before 1993. In reality, IFAP was the international organization of rich farmers – large and medium commercial farmers mainly based in rich countries – whose executive committee members were all white farmers from its founding year in 1946–2008. IFAP's position in the GATT negotiations (and later, in WTO) was to support trade liberalization with some minor tweaks on provisions related to subsidies and food dumping. For internal reasons IFAP self-liquidated in 2010 (Desmarais 2007; Edelman and Borras Jr 2016). Most of its members founded a new international group, the World Farmers' Organization (WFO). There were also big international and national NGOs who made representations in the name of poor peasants and small farmers.

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<sup>21</sup>In full: International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements and International Movement of Agricultural Rural Youth.

The representation claims by IFAP and the NGOs were loudly challenged in 1993 with the birth of LVC, and were brought to an abrupt end immediately after that.<sup>22</sup> One of the reasons why the national agrarian movements that founded LVC in 1993 decided to establish their own international movement was to give a distinct voice to poor peasants and small farmers at the global level. And they did. They also strongly criticized all other groups who purported to speak on behalf of poor peasants and small farmers, and demanded distinct representation in global governance institutions. ‘Nothing about us, without us’ became a rallying principle. LVC’s most historic contributions to the transformation of agrarian politics were, firstly, to bring agrarian politics to the international level and, secondly, to give a distinct voice to the class of small farmers and poor peasants. While LVC’s voice has most often been like a voice in the wilderness, it did succeed in using that voice to gain some institutional victories. Perhaps the most significant of these were the adoption by the UN General Assembly of UNDROP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas) in 2018 (Hubert 2019; Claeys and Edelman 2020; Alabrese et al. 2022), and the VGGT or ‘Tenure Guidelines’ (Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security) in 2012 (Brem-Wilson 2017; Brent et al. 2018; Franco and Monsalve Suárez 2018).

The birth of LVC was a manifestation of class agency. It signified a defining moment of class politics in what would become a multi-scalar, multi-sited agrarian politics involving diverse forms of actions<sup>23</sup> – which in turn partly defined the agenda and methods of work of the emerging field of Critical Agrarian Studies. This brief historical account is also a reminder to observers of agrarian politics not to commit an elementary error by assuming that LVC is comprised of rich and middle farmers the way IFAP was and WFO is. The class configuration of LVC is radically different from those of IFAP and WFO.<sup>24</sup>

## Voices

LVC is a distinct voice in the context of the historical account discussed above, but that is not to suggest that it is a single voice, internally unified. LVC is best understood as both a ‘single actor’ and an ‘arena of action’; there is no way to grasp the meaning and manifestation of each separately because they are dialectically linked. LVC has features both of a movement organization and of an alliance. A movement organization has a clear membership base, a coherent common strategic program and a strategy to pursue that program, and a higher level of unity. An organizational alliance is composed of two or more organizations, where the level of unity on issues and strategic programs may not be as high and coherent as those in movement organizations (Fox 2010). LVC is a single actor in the context of the discussion above, a movement organization of rural working classes, mainly poor peasants and small farmers in the Global South and

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<sup>22</sup>For historical accounts, see Biekart and Jelsma (1994), Desmarais (2007), Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010) and Edelman and Borrás Jr (2016).

<sup>23</sup>The national movements that originally comprised LVC were quite uneven in size and political capacity. While MST was perhaps at the height of its political power, others were smaller and less organized. Yet, each had something to bring to the collectivity. In this context, for example, the Korean movement, while not as large as MST, has been able to make a powerful contribution on the issue of international free trade (see Yoon and Robbins 2023).

<sup>24</sup>It is also an elementary error to lump all progressive food movements together because the class, ideological and political differences among them are significant (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

North. It is, at the same time, an alliance of various movement organizations of mainly but not solely poor peasants and small farmers. National and subnational movements launch their own collective actions, enhance their political legitimacy, strengthen their legal shield, and extend the reach of their political influence through, in, around and even, at times, in opposition to, their international umbrella, LVC. LVC is the representation of its member organizations, although it is more than the sum of its parts. LVC is the distillation of class agencies, political struggles and the politics of class and other axes of social difference (gender, race, ethnicity, caste, generation, religion, nationality, region) and culture, as well as ideologies of its organizational and alliance members. As such it can only be understood when seen in its whole as well as in its parts, and in political motion, with all the tensions and contradictions that come with it. And there is no doubt that there are class, ideological and political tensions and contradictions.

Class politics has been a source of tension and contradiction inside LVC throughout its lifetime. A couple of high-profile founding organizations of LVC that were associated with the politics of well-off strata of farmers and ranchers (in their own contexts) have left or were asked to leave LVC. This was the case of Nicaragua's UNAG (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Nicaragua), a key movement at the inception of LVC that decided to leave almost immediately after LVC was formally constituted. UNAG was a member of IFAP. Another organization that was represented in the International Coordinating Commission of LVC during its formative years was Poland's Solidarnosc Rural that also took the political stance of well-off farmers in the context of the European Union's agricultural policies. It was persuaded to leave LVC in the 1990s. The situation which arose in India was somewhat different because the organization associated with the politics of well-to-do farmers in India was also at the forefront of anti-WTO, anti-GMO and anti-big capital campaigns that were all key battlegrounds for LVC.<sup>25</sup> In the late 1990s, the Indian group attempted to block efforts within the LVC to orchestrate a global campaign for agrarian reform, but it was overwhelmed by most other movements, and agrarian reform has remained a signature global campaign by LVC.

Ideological tension has underpinned far more important dynamics within LVC, but it is a complicated issue that has been difficult to address openly. One relevant example is the sidelining from the core leadership of movements associated with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideological leanings, mainly in Asia. Most of them remain inside LVC but they have less ideological and political influence. The reasons for this are multiple, diverse and complex, and are not tackled in this paper; my main objective here is only to show that there are different voices within LVC. One event which can be seen as both an outcome of and a reason for internal tension within LVC concerning this group was the formation of the Asian Peasant Coalition (APC) in 2003.<sup>26</sup> This is unfortunate because the APC is consistent and disciplined in terms of class analysis and class politics that privilege the full range of rural working classes, including especially landless laborers. There are other ideological tensions too, albeit not as significant as the cases just described. One of these is the presence of groups opposed to socialism inside LVC which, although not widespread and coherent, could be a source of tension.

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<sup>25</sup>The latest round of political confrontation with the state and big capital was in 2020–2021. For critical analyses of the Indian farmers' protests of 2020–2021 that are relevant to the discussion here, see Baviskar and Levien (2021), Kumar (2021), Lerche (2021). For the historical contextual background, see Brass (1995).

<sup>26</sup>See: <https://asianpeasantcoalition.wordpress.com>. For further discussion, see Edelman and Borrás Jr (2016).



Political tensions, meanwhile, are far more widespread than is (or can be) publicly acknowledged, and this manifests in various ways. One example is that while LVC members in various regions and countries are mainly poor peasants and small farmers who have agreed on a common global platform, the political histories and character of these movement organizations differ from one another, having been shaped in part by the social structures and institutions in their respective societies. This is one of the material bases for some of the political tensions inside LVC. For example, some Latin American LVC leaders think that there are not many good African agrarian movements. Some African leaders take offense at this kind of remark, and in turn criticize some LVC activists as overly focused on issues that do not resonate much with ordinary peasants in Africa.<sup>27</sup> A major site of political tension relates to the national level. As a movement organization, LVC has devised clear procedures on how to recruit new members; one such procedure is the right of an existing member organization in a country to object against the application or recruitment of any group from that country. As a result, the international LVC has internalized many political tensions and antagonisms among national organizations in a given country. This has resulted in the non-recruitment of ideologically and politically left-wing and vibrant movements into LVC.<sup>28</sup>

LVC's single unified voice was made possible by the ability of the movement to allow for multiple, conflicting voices to be heard, and to handle these in a way that avoided demobilization and disintegration of the transnational movement organization. LVC is a pluralist movement, but politically defined and bounded in broad Left political terms; thus, it is not an open-ended liberal movement with random members. Within the ideological bounds of LVC, grasping the nature of the competing and tension-filled voices matters because these are articulated within a movement which itself speaks with a unified voice. Conversely, this unified voice only makes sense when understood as a distillation of voices at a given moment but across a dynamic historical trajectory. Class, ideological and political tensions as well as internal struggles of ideas are signs of good health in a movement. What would be problematical would be to have a large transnational movement organization and alliance such as LVC in which such tensions were absent, either because the movement is artfully – and artificially – packaged to appear united, or because dynamics of dissent and disagreement are being suppressed. Neither of these situations applies in the case of LVC. LVC is a pluralist left-wing movement, and as such it has become an arena of competing ideas among various agrarian Left groups in ideological terms (Marxist, Leninist, Maoist, Trotskyist, anarchist, socialist, eco-socialist, democratic socialist) and in radical social justice advocacy terms (environmental justice, climate justice, feminism, racial justice, food justice) – and is a welcoming political space because of this. It has allowed for struggles of ideas to flourish, without necessarily being dragged into endless, unproductive theoretical and political debates, or personality-based bickering – or at least this is how it seems publicly. It is perhaps one of the reasons why, after thirty years, there have been no significant splits in LVC.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>For an example, see the 2007 interview with Joao Pedro Stedile (Stedile 2007) and a recent interview with Ibrahima Coulibaly (Coulibaly and Grajales 2023) on the tension between Latin American and African leaders in LVC. See also Baletti, Johnson, and Wolford (2008) on the issue of the Brazilian MST's efforts to organize the Landless People's Movement (LPM) in South Africa.

<sup>28</sup>Information gathered by the author over a period of three decades, most of which is privileged information, and thus details are not mentioned here.

<sup>29</sup>See interview with Paul Nicholson who has noted this with pride (Nicholson and Borrás Jr 2023).

### ***Broad, broader***

LVC has been able to make an impact at a global scale because of its coherent configuration as a representative of poor peasants and small farmers, unlike IFAP which subsumed these social categories and subordinated them to the class interests of a stratum of better-off farmers. The poor peasant/small farmer-centric framing and narrative of LVC has been its main strength, and since 1993, the movement has worked to deepen its mass base in this social category. But at the same time, this is also, arguably, its relative weakness because there are other sections of the rural working classes that are not part of the 'poor peasant/small farmer' category.

One of the profound impacts of neoliberal global capitalism on the countryside has been the fragmentation of the rural working classes through the uneven processes of deagrarianization and depeasantization (Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij 2000; Bernstein 2010a; Shivji 2017). There has been an increasing number of peasants – landless agricultural workers, poor peasants and small farmers – who combine different livelihood activities in order to survive. Alongside those who remain primarily in agrarian production, there are those that straddle in-country rural–urban and rural–rural as well as international corridors, to seek waged work. Some of them are already completely separated from agricultural means of production (farmland), others still have some form of access to a range of land/nature for productive and social reproductive activities. Some are in urban (and peri-urban) spaces but carry out complementary forms of agrarian livelihoods such as urban guerrilla food gardening and animal raising (Jacobs 2018; McClintock 2014; Siebert 2020). Still others have left the agrarian production sphere but remained in the rural areas. The result is a mix of multi-sited productive and social reproductive activities for the rural working classes (Bernstein 2010a; Levien, Watts, and Yan 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020; Harriss-White 2022; Pattenden 2023).

In short, rural working classes have assumed at least three basic social categories: agrarian, non-agrarian rural, and rural–urban (the last category including domestic and international). There are common issues across these three social categories, but there are also differences. For example, all of them have land issues, but not the same issues: they include, among others, farmland and home plots for agrarian households, land/nature access for non-agrarian rural groups for home plots and other social reproductive purposes, and a combination of the first two for rural–urban groups (Borras et al. 2022a; Cousins 2022). Therefore, a farmland-centric framing of land campaigns will gain traction unevenly and incompletely among agrarian, non-agrarian rural and rural–urban social categories. Similarly, calls for higher wages and better working conditions may be the most important demands for non-agrarian and rural–urban groups, as well as landless agricultural laborers, but not for small and medium farmers. These are complex class dynamics that have an important impact on rural politics. LVC is doing excellent work in mass base-building among poor peasants and small farmers, but may have an important task ahead if it is to gain more ground among landless agricultural laborers, non-agrarian rural working classes, and the more fluid rural–urban/rural–rural precariat (domestic and international) that are very much part of Bernstein's 'classes of labour' (Bernstein 2006).<sup>30</sup> LVC

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<sup>30</sup>For discussions on issues related to rural laborers, including labor interns on organic farms and migrant farmworkers, in the context of contemporary agrarian mobilizations, see Welch and Sauer (2015), Chambati (2017), Shivji (2017), Ekers (2019), Pye (2021), Xiuhtecutli and Shattuck (2021).

is already broad, class-wise, and that is why it is powerful; but it may become even stronger if it is able to increase its presence, organizationally and politically, among the other strata of the rural working classes.<sup>31</sup> Doing this, however, will have implications for some of its current political projects, such as small farmer-centric agrarian reform, or small farmer-anchored conceptions of food sovereignty. These will need to be tweaked in order to embrace more of the different sections of the rural and rural–urban working classes, including migrant farmworkers (Borrás et al. 2022a; Pattenden 2023; White, Graham, and Savitri 2023).<sup>32</sup>

### Half empty, half full: concluding discussion

That beyond everyday forms of agrarian politics (Scott 1976, 1985; O'Brien and Li 2006; Malseed 2008; Kerkvliet 2009), rural working classes more commonly do not get mobilized and organized into coherent associations that carry out sustained overt and contentious collective class actions, is not surprising, at least in academic terms, although it can be frustrating politically. This is in part because of the way that social relations in production and social reproduction are organized, as discussed in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1968 [1852]), and in part because the structural and institutional embeddedness of this social category makes it too costly and risky to engage in contentious politics. This is, for example, manifested in the latest (and ongoing) wave of global land grabbing where it is less common to see rural villagers who are negatively impacted by land grabs being able to get organized and launch sustained resistance against the enclosures (Borrás and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015; Mamonova 2015; see also Dell'Angelo et al. 2021). Thus, one of the central problematics in both classical agrarian studies and Critical Agrarian Studies concerns questions about the 'trigger' for and 'moment' of qualitative change in the behavior of rural folk, and which section of the agrarian classes could take the lead and to what kind of probable outcome, from acquiescence to overt contentious resistance. Different scholars have offered competing answers to such questions (e.g. Popkin 1979 versus Scott 1976; Paige 1975 versus Wolf 1969; see also Gaventa 1982). These are open-ended conversations that have endured through time. That rural working classes do not easily and always get organized and mobilized is therefore not the main analytical challenge. The really surprising thing is that these rural working classes have managed, in different places and time, to get organized, to launch contentious politics and to sustain it. Why and how did this happen? When our starting point is an assumption about the extreme difficulty of achieving a basic level of coherence in movement organization and in the engagement in contentious politics, then bewildering layers of misses, imperfections, flaws, shortcomings, contradictions and highly uneven degrees of coherence, geographically and temporally, in the processes and outcomes of mass movement-building and political struggles are only to be expected – even if they still require rigorous explanation and even if they remain disappointing. On the other hand, when we start from the expectation that the rural working classes can

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<sup>31</sup>For a broader contextual discussion on rural–urban linkages, see Kay (2009).

<sup>32</sup>Political adjustments are also necessary to correct or avoid errors in relation to extending 'peasant-centric' calls to other social categories in the countryside, which may have inadvertent impacts despite good intentions. When extended to pastoralist communities, agrarian reform may mean sedentarization on private ranch-type lands (Scoones 2021), or may undermine the integrity of Indigenous Peoples communities.

easily self-organize and mobilize everywhere, all the time, in an ideologically, politically and organizationally coherent manner, that is an expectation that is impossible to meet. This is the context for my concluding discussion about 'half empty' and 'half full' approaches to the critical examination of agrarian movements.

LVC has significantly transformed agrarian and knowledge politics, and co-constructed the field of Critical Agrarian Studies, and in the process, the academic and political valorization of LVC has been immense. But LVC's highly valued status in academia should not lead to a relationship with the field of Critical Agrarian Studies in which the interaction between academic researchers and the movement is stripped of a vital element that ensures the vibrancy of social movements, namely, criticism and self-criticism. The field of Critical Agrarian Studies and LVC and other anti-capitalist agrarian and rural movements are mutually reinforcing only because of the capacity for continuous critical reflection. As Paul Nicholson says, 'Peasant Studies [i.e. Critical Agrarian Studies] plays a very important part, and it still has a huge role to play. We don't know all the solutions to the problems of the world'. He concludes: 'Via Campesina too needs to be criticized. We need new solutions to ... a changing world, and for that, we need Peasant Studies. We need to have a critical thinking base, and the role of Peasant Studies is basically that'.<sup>33</sup>

LVC is a movement that takes criticism and self-criticism seriously. For progressive academics, there are two ways to be critical of LVC, or, for that matter, of any anti-capitalist agrarian and rural social movements and their political projects, such as food sovereignty and agroecology: the 'half empty' and 'half full' approaches. A *half empty approach* to criticism is focused on the failings and shortcomings of a movement, its political projects and campaigns. This approach is compelling and important, especially when it concerns quite popular and highly influential movements. One way to infuse realism into movements is to remind the movements and their admirers that they are imperfect or flawed. Criticisms from this perspective, when rigorous in content and comradely in tone, are quite powerful. This approach to criticism is also relatively easy to do. Often, the failings, shortcomings and contradictions of and within the movements and their political projects are quite obvious even to distant observers. One does not even need to do serious fieldwork. Simple extrapolation, done well, can yield quite important and relevant insights. At the same time, this approach has the least to offer politically in building and maintaining radical movements. In focusing on the failings, shortcomings and contradictions, which are often intimately known to movements cadres, militants, organic intellectuals and the layers of other movement activists, such criticisms are usually stating the obvious to movement insiders. Moreover, if the criticism is unconstructive or communicated in an uncomradely way, it can undermine the movement; it can be demoralizing and demobilizing for those who are operating, fully or partly, in the trenches. When it is a left-wing radical anti-capitalist rural movement that is being targeted, it undermines the broad anti-capitalist front. This is why Bernstein's words of caution not to be dismissive of so-called progressive agrarian populists is important. Overall, the 'half empty' approach, when done constructively, has a role to play. But there is a better way – a 'half full' approach.

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<sup>33</sup>See the concluding part of the recent interview with Paul Nicholson (Nicholson and Borras Jr 2023).

A *half full approach to criticism* gives primary attention to the gains and breakthroughs of a movement or political project even while flagging serious shortcomings, flaws and pending tasks. Or put differently, a half full approach sets failings, shortcoming and flaws within a broader context, seeing them as dialectically linked to the achievements of the movement or political project. This approach recognizes the significance of such achievements, given that it is not common for rural working classes to get coherently organized and to engage in overt contentious politics. In this approach, shortcomings and errors are not seen as dynamic forces that proliferate and cancel out whatever achievements the movement has accomplished. Rather, this approach sees achievements as positives that can be reproduced and multiplied. This is not always an easy task, because the achievements of a movement or a political project may not be obvious, especially to movement outsiders. They tend to be relative and context specific. Gains can arguably be seen as losses at the same time; breaking new ground always mean introducing new questions. Therefore, it takes time and effort to grasp what a movement has achieved, and how. It is often those who already believe in the movement or political project that are willing to put in the time and effort to investigate and understand what has been achieved. It is not surprising, then, that they are the types of researchers who will not be dismissive of the achievements of the movement or political projects. This does not mean they should not raise difficult questions or advance sharp critiques. They should, and they do. It can be argued that those who subscribe to the half full approach are biased (although the same can be said for the half empty perspective), but this does not mean that they do not carry out robust scholarship.<sup>34</sup> This is what scholar-activism is all about. In this sense, the half full approach is not to be confused with what we might call a '100 percent full' approach that is completely uncritical, too celebratory and does not allow for difficult questions to be raised or criticisms to be advanced, a position which many powerful movement leaders, gate-keepers and brokers try to impose upon others quite often. Such an approach is not at all helpful to movements.

Both the half empty and the half full approaches look at the balance sheet, positives and negatives, achievements and shortcomings, accomplishments and flaws. The differences between the two approaches are not sharp, and in fact, are often blurred, shades of grey. The differences lie in the emphasis, either on the gains or shortcomings, and reflect the aim of the criticism. Some criticisms are made in order to disqualify and reject a movement and its political projects a priori, other criticisms are made in order to correct, repair and make a movement and its political projects more robust. Whether intended or not, a half empty approach may have the overall impact of diminishing a movement or a political project; in contrast, a half full approach may contribute to enhancing and improving the movement or project.

There is a contested 'dismissive/appreciative' attitude toward LVC and its political projects among radical academics today which can be largely traced back to the debate between some sections of the Marxist camp and the Russian populists of the second half of the nineteenth century, and which continued during the time of the so-called neo-populists inspired by Chayanov, all the way to Shanin, Scott and van der Ploeg (Chayanov

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<sup>34</sup>There are numerous academic publications coming from this perspective. On the issue of food sovereignty, my own list includes Burnett and Murphy (2014), Edelman (2014), Edelman et al. (2014), Alonso-Fradejas et al. (2015), Park, White, and Julia (2015), Robbins (2015), Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder (2015), Visser et al. (2015b), Kepkiewicz and Dale (2019), Gyapong (2021).

1968; Shanin 1983a, 1983b; van der Ploeg 2013). For Bernstein (2022, 13) the sticking point between these two camps ‘remains the latter’s insistence on the “peasant way” as the basis for any socially and ecologically progressive farming’. He elaborates that ‘the foundations of this position is Chayanov’s theorization of the peasant household, along with notions of the virtues and capacities of peasant “community” ... which Marxists see as both essentialist in intellectual terms and prey to a romantic utopianism’ (Bernstein 2022). Bernstein offers four explanations for such skepticism: (i) peasants’ strong petty bourgeois aspiration to own private property, the small plot of farmland; (ii) the belief that “peasants” are not a (single) class, nor can their places within capitalist production and reproduction enable them to act like one’; (iii) the increasing rural–urban entanglement including in the distributions and uses of land; and (iv) ‘the view of some, if not all, Marxists that “big is beautiful”: large-scale farming enjoys economies of scale, and with them productivities of labor, *that small-scale farming cannot hope to attain*’ (Bernstein 2022, italics added).<sup>35</sup> In the current era of climate change, the difficult question is whether it is possible to have large-scale farming that is ecologically regenerative. Bernstein himself had reflected earlier (2010b) on a possible intellectual deficit in agrarian Marxism’s conception of the development of productive forces in ecological terms.<sup>36</sup> There are alternative readings of Marx with regards small-scale farming. Akram-Lodhi (2021), for instance, disagrees with Bernstein’s position on the basis that, according to him, the evidence is clear that contemporary capitalist agriculture is fettering the development of the productive forces. For Akram-Lodhi (2021), the evidence is also clear that agroecological farming practices can be as productive as that of capitalist farming, on the basis of conventional metrics. This is because agroecology unleashes the productive force that is farmer knowledge to optimize energy flows within the web of life.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, Bernstein’s position on large-scale farming and his earlier reflections on the intellectual deficit of agrarian Marxism in ecological terms puts him and LVC on the same starting point, that is, both are aspiring for something that is yet to exist in a universal and sustained manner: ecologically regenerative large-scale farming with high labor productivity *or* socio-ecologically regenerative smallholder-based farming with high productivity/efficiency levels (for land/nature and labor) that can be carried out across the board and system-wide, geographically and across time, and not just on an experimental scale.<sup>38</sup>

All this brings us to the theme of the *comradely exchange* between Karl Marx and Vera Zasulich in 1881. This remains relevant, and it is worth revisiting the highlights. The intellectuals in the People’s Will (of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century) read Capital and got into direct contact with Karl Marx. Vera Zasulich wrote to Marx: ‘[W]e often

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<sup>35</sup>This last phrase from Bernstein should be seen against what Nettie Wiebe (who is a farmer, scholar-activist, and LVC leader) has reminded us in relation to LVC and its political struggles. She said: ‘To be an activist requires and demonstrates hope . . . Only those who share a willingness to believe that change is possible will engage in trying to make it happen’ (Wiebe 2023).

<sup>36</sup>In this context, Bernstein recognized the groundbreaking contributions by O’Connor (1998) and Foster (2000).

<sup>37</sup>Martinez-Alier (2011) offers a similar argument on energy flows and small-scale farming and LVC, and Ricciardi et al. (2021) offers an updated overview on the productivity of small-scale farmers. Weis (2010) discusses the accelerating biophysical contradictions of capitalist industrial agriculture – a discussion that becomes even more alarming when one looks at the trends in the global agro-chemical complex (Shattuck 2021).

<sup>38</sup>See Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. (2018), Anderson et al. (2019), Akram-Lodhi (2021), Holt-Giménez, Shattuck, and Van Lammeren (2021), van der Ploeg (2021). See also Chayanov (1991) and Hu, Zhang, and Donaldson (2022).

hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short, everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples par excellence: “Marksists”. She continued,

Their strongest argument is often: ‘Marx said so’. You would be doing us a very great favour if you were to set forth your ideas on the possible fate of our rural commune, and on the theory that it is historically necessary for every country in the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production. (Zasulich 1983, 98–99 [original February 16, 1881])

To which Marx responded, after several lengthy draft versions of his reply,

The analysis in *Capital* ... provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. (Marx 1983, 124 [original March 8, 1881])

The exchange between Zasulich and Marx has been the subject of much controversy and debate in the literature on Marxist agrarian studies of populism, and is likely to remain so (see Shanin 1983a, 1983b; Levien, Watts, and Yan 2018). It is useful to go back to Shanin (1983b, 271) who reminded us that ‘the crux of the originality and illumination of the Russian revolutionary populist lies ... in the posing of a number of fundamental questions concerning capitalist society, its “peripheries” and the socialist project’. He continued: ‘The decline of peasant Russia did not make those questions disappear; quite on the contrary, most of them became increasingly global and pertinent also in super-industrial environments’ (Shanin 1983b). And he concluded: ‘Such questions left unanswered come back to haunt socialists time and time again, and will proceed to do so until faced, theoretically and politically. They can be avoided only at socialism’s peril’ (Shanin 1983b).<sup>39</sup>

While the agrarian sector has been diminishing in the size of its population and its economic contribution in relative terms, its political value has not been diminished; quite the contrary, it has steadily gained currency. It is likely to gain more momentum and wider traction in the coming time as global capitalism continues to cause misery for working people and the politics of climate change heats up even more (Borrás et al. 2022b; Yaşın 2022). In contemporary anti-capitalist struggles, agrarian justice movements are among the most dynamic, alongside environmental justice movements (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Scheidel et al. 2020; Kröger 2021; Bjork-James, Checker, and Edelman 2022).<sup>40</sup> They offer political projects that, despite unresolved contradictions and shortcomings, arouse and enable a radical reimagining of *a world that ought to be*. They inspire various sections of the working classes, including rural working classes, as well as multi-generational and multi-racial communities, to unite, organize and mobilize in and across the Global South and North. In this process, LVC has played a key role, and is likely to continue to do so.

All great revolutionary movements go through ebbs and flows; strong movements grow weak, weak movements grow strong, some become irrelevant while others are able to reinvent themselves each time the structural and institutional ground shifts, famous movements implode while new ones emerge. While it is difficult to predict

<sup>39</sup>This paragraph is reproduced from Borrás (2020).

<sup>40</sup>The emerging overlap between agrarian justice and climate change in political struggles (framed as ‘agrarian climate justice’) is noteworthy. See initial thoughts in Calmon, Jacovetti, and Koné (2021), Sekine (2021), Shah (2022), and Yaşın (2022).

what might happen in the future to the great contemporary radical movement organizations such as LVC, there are two aspects that have a high probability of surviving: the movements' ideas of a better world and their political projects. This is because the latter, once unleashed, take on a life of their own, independently of the movement organizations that provided their initial political energy and impetus. Thus, while food sovereignty and agroecology are closely linked to LVC, they are both more autonomous and bigger than the former. The ideas of *what ought to be* as a positive future for the world in general, and the agrarian world in particular, that have been launched by LVC have also acquired a life of their own and have generated mass movements broader than LVC. So, for having transformed agrarian and knowledge politics, and for co-constructing a field, it is only appropriate that we should celebrate and praise LVC, its political projects, and its idea of a world that ought to be, on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary. *Padayon!*

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