

SHORT ESSAY

Is there a future for left-wing agrarian populism?

Maybe so ...

By Jeroen Adam and
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Dear Jonas,

Is there a future for a left-wing agrarian populism? I know this is quite a question to digest in this email I send you on a cold Friday afternoon (April 1, and having a snow storm here in Belgium, I am not kidding you). It is also primarily not my question; it is a question being raised in a recent essay by the Philippine scholar Jun Borrás in the [Journal of Agrarian Change](#). In fact, the whole title of the journal article is quite a mouthful; *'Agrarian social movements: The absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda of defeating right-wing populism and exploring a socialist future'*. One can hereby comfortably state that the title already hints at the answer to the question being posed above. Is there a future for a left-wing rural populism? Yes! Even more so, there is an absurdly difficult, yet, not impossible possibility that these progressive agrarian populist movements might put a halt to the rising tide a right-wing populism one sees popping up in so many corners of the globe.

How then, one might wonder. Taking a risk of maybe cutting the argument too short, I think it is obvious that according to Borrás, there will be no future for left-wing agrarian populism by giving in to the temptations of moderate left-wing movements. In fact, one might argue that in the view of the author, this is the fastest route to absolute irrelevance. Rather than giving in to or aligning with consensual and centrist social democrats, the future of agrarian populist movements can only be guaranteed by staying true to the radical and revolutionary ideals that characterize the original peasant movements of the 20th century, presumably a century when peasant wars (Wolf 1969) were still being won by the peasants. Only by presenting themselves as a radical alternative to current-day neoliberal hegemony, can agrarian populist movements gain credibility and carve out a future for themselves in the 21st century

Before starting to position myself in this debate and explaining whether I agree or not (or agree/disagree a little) allow me to first ask you a couple of questions based on your ongoing fieldwork on agro-ecological movements in Argentina.

- How far do you consider the agro-ecological movements you are studying in Argentina to fit the description as agrarian populist movements?
- Do you see any possibility these movements acting as a defense, in some cases even acting as an alternative to a rising right-wing populism in the region?

I sincerely hope that these questions do not give you any nightmares. In the meantime, take care of yourself and good luck with the fieldwork.

Jeroen

Hi Jeroen,

Seems like the climate played its own April Fool's joke on Belgium. Although, in all seriousness, the current changes in climate patterns can most certainly be dedicated to our current production systems, and not so much to the climate playing supposed jokes on us. Which brings us to agroecology and agroecological movements: do I consider them to be agrarian populist movements? Let's take a look at how we might define agroecology as a populist movement.

In their book "Political Agroecology", Petersen & Gonzalez de Molina outline their view on what they call food populism. In their view, food populism is an instrument to build global discourse capable of producing social change; and **because** of its agroecological content, this discourse is supposedly also based on class and anti-capitalist analyses. Strangely enough, they partially reject the idea of class analysis some paragraphs later and although I do not really agree with their general dismissal of Marxist theory to analyse agroecology in their book, I find it interesting that they consider the agroecological approach to rest inherently on class struggle and anti-capitalism. This is akin to what Akram-Lodhi (2021) writes in a recent paper, where he focuses on the compatibility of Marxism and agroecology and where he states that the ties that bind the agrarian question and agroecology is that they are both components of a post-capitalist future that is being built in the present. What can we take away from these two authors? That they disagree on the usefulness of a Marxian framework to analyse the current "corporate food regime" and agroecology, but they agree on the fact that agroecology is a central element in building a new counter-hegemonic bloc based on the intersectional democratization of political and economic power.

Now to answer the first question, do I consider the Argentinian agroecological movement(s) to be an example of agrarian populism? Yes! Although it is crucial to make the distinction here with centrist populist **governments**, as is the case with Peronist governments, and populist **movements** – depending on the context in which it is used, populism acquires a very different meaning in Argentina. Most movements here use the word "popular", for it to reflect a broad intersectional alliance of peasants, indigenous communities, academics, students, civil servants, activists and more. There are certainly internal differences between these actors and I have already noticed some very remarkable differences between the more "technical" agronomic stances and the stance that a farmer's union member might occupy, but they all agree on the fact that the agroecological project entails a so-called "paradigm change" borne by a multitude of societal sectors and scientific disciplines. The agroecological movement here is populist both in language and in the social actors they represent.

As a way of moving on to your second question, I would like to answer to your short segment on staying true to radical politics. I feel that actors active in agroecology are very wary about possible cooptation by the capitalist system. A staggering amount of people here, from activists to civil servants, say that one of the main challenges of agroecology is “not to become the next organic agriculture”. Central to this argument is the inherent anti-capitalist stance that they have taken and the focus on agroecology as more than just a “collection of agronomic practices” – what they want to achieve is radical social and political change and most do not see the agroecological project as being compatible with the current dominant industrial agricultural system. This inherent incompatibility reflects their rejection of “lukewarm politics” (as they call it here) on social, ecological, political, economic and cultural matters and thus their rejection of a possible realization of agro-ecological proposals within capitalist economic structures.

The importance of agroecological movements in Argentina in countering right-wing populism is reflected in how they represent “the countryside”. A current of right-wing populism in Argentina is embodied by Javier Milei, a conservative libertarian economist who famously said that he would amputate his arm before raising taxes and who surprised everyone by coming in third in the primary elections in Buenos Aires in 2021 with 14% of the votes. In a recent article, Javier Milei stated that he supported producers as the government wished to impose a new export tax on soy oil and flour. These so-called producers are monolithically represented as “the countryside” to create a duality between the “urban politicians” and the “rural producers”. This of course renders a lot of small-scale producers and indigenous communities invisible. The agroecological movement here plays a big role in demonstrating that “the countryside” is more than just soy producers in Argentina and that many rural actors have completely different social objectives. The fumigations that make many small-scale producers and their children sick, the forced migration that happens as communities are dispossessed of their lands, the droughts and wildfires that follow large-scale monocultures and the centralization of power in rural areas as the “agricultural frontier” expands are all issues that affect certain rural actors and these are thus concealed when we talk about “the countryside” as if there existed one single objective in those areas for all actors present. Another example of the counter-hegemonic nature of agroecology is the fact that in the National Institute for Agrarian Technology in Argentina (INTA), the institution I am collaborating with, agroecology as a word is taboo and those subdivisions working on agroecology or “sustainable agriculture” as they call it here, are chronically underfunded. Still, different actors within INTA have now created an “agroecological network” in close contact with producers and social movements and their main objective is to educate researchers and

extensionists within INTA in order to provide a counterbalance to the prevailing industrial framework that dominates the institution.

I don't know if I answered your questions adequately with this short reply? It is always difficult to formulate short answers to extremely complex issues. I do want to know how you have seen agroecological or food sovereignty movements evolve in your experiences as a researcher. Can you tell me something about your own experience with these movements and how they do or do not have the potential to counter right-wing populism? And definitely feel free to criticize any point that I have made or ask questions around my fieldwork.

I hope everything is well over there in Belgium,

Jonas

Hi Jonas,

Many thanks for this thoughtful answer. I understand from your reply a couple of things. First, it is clear that the agroecological movement that you are studying in Argentina can indeed be labeled as an agrarian populist movement. They aim for a cross-alliance among different marginalized sectors in (rural) society, they are aware of crucial class differences and they seem to be united by a true aversion for middle-of-the-road politics (organic agriculture!) that do not present a true alternative to the current corporate food system. I also sense from your answer that there might be a more complex Latin American/Argentinian history as to the concept of 'populism' that I am not familiar with. Above all, what I take from your answer is that an agrarian populist/popular movement is aware of crucial class differences and a homogeneous 'countryside' simply is non-existent.

As to the question whether these movements will be able to - and I quote again - *'The absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda of defeating right-wing populism and exploring a socialist future'*, you seem to be more hesitant (side-note, it is always wise as a researcher not to make too strong predictions of the future as these generally tend to be wrong).

With the risk again of providing short answers to very difficult questions, my experience is different from yours. As you might know, I have been working in close collaboration with agrarian movements in the Philippines for the past 15 years. These movements have their roots in the anti-Marcos struggle in the sixties, seventies and eighties. It was also during these decades that the peasant movement was at its strongest in the Philippines, despite the brutal repression by an authoritarian state. The peasant movement in the Philippines was also strongly influenced by Maoist ideology; uniting and mobilizing peasants in the countryside and vying for revolutionary change against the capitalist Marcos dictatorship. Typical was also their call for a true land reform, transferring land from large landowners to the peasants, hereby taking away the material base these landowners' political power was rooted in.

My reading of the Borrás paper and the larger call for a renewed 21st century left-wing agrarian populism needs to be understood against this background. The 20th century in many places in the world (such as the Philippines and multiple Latin-American countries as well) was characterized by vibrant and strong revolutionary peasant movements. The fundamental question is to what extent these movements still have a future in the 21st century. According to Borrás, and what I also take from your answer, is that these movements indeed have a future and relevance as left-wing agrarian movements.

Fast forward to 2022 in the Philippines and the honest but sad answer is that right-wing populism has massively won, the military is back as if the Cold War has never ended and the opposition from left-wing agrarian organizations is weak to non-existent. Friends from 'the movement' personally explain that they feel suffocated in a tsunami of right-wing populism, that is just too massive to resist. Hence, many have left the ranks and, literally in quite some cases, started cultivating their own garden.

In all honesty, I have no large explanation for this implosion as I am also not having any grand theory for the enormous and ongoing popularity of right-wing populism in the Philippines. In all honesty, I also have to admit that it feels painful to describe this downfall as I have the deepest respect for the epic decades long struggle for democratization by vast sections of this peasant movement.

Without pointing fingers, it is obvious that contemporary agrarian struggles in the Philippines do no longer generate the energy they used to. For me, this lack of dynamism contrast sharply with ongoing mobilizations around race, indigenusness and gender one sees popping up in so many places in the globe. In all honesty, this is also a dimension I am greatly missing in the Borras article wherein a systematic discussion about gender is simply lacking. I still have the impression that that class remains the overarching principle through which contemporary agrarian struggles need to be waged in the 21st century according to Borras. Gender and indigenusness hereby are nothing more than secondary social markers that will, by some sort of magic formula that nobody yet really understands, align themselves to the dominant principle of class. To put it another manner: the word 'class(es)' is mentioned 128 times in the article, indigenus is mentioned 5 times, gender is referenced to a shameful 4 times. In all honesty, I think that, when agrarian populist struggles in the 21st century wish to remain meaningful, and might have a chance in combating right-wing populism, a much more serious interaction with other marginalized sectors of society needs to be taken up.

Curious to hear thoughts about this.

Jeroen

Dear Jeroen,

It is interesting to hear about your experiences in the Philippines and how they differ from mine in Argentina. Although peasant movements passed through a similar period of repression during the military dictatorship between 1976 – 1983, it did not induce a shift to the right like in the Philippines, even though it did also include a calculated effort to erase anything left/indigenous/unionized. And while it did not erase the left as such, it did leave its mark on liberation theology, for example. Priests that took the side of oppressed and excluded indigenous communities were killed and the church was “cleansed” of its progressive elements.

A great example of how progressive populism did not disappear in Argentina but rather became a strong political force, is related to your statement about gender and diversity. The feminist movement in Argentina has established itself as a leading political force in recent years, with influence on the Argentinian and the broader South American political spectrum. Through their pressure, they compelled the government to legalize abortion and make it free for its population. The #NiUnaMenos campaign also started in Argentina, a movement which has gained traction even here in Belgium. And though the feminist movement used to be predominantly urban, women in rural areas have taken tremendous initiative in recent years and as such, this influence is also exerted through peasant movements. Feminism and the fight for the position of the woman in rural areas is a core component of many agroecological movements in Argentina, even though it would be tremendously misguided to suggest that equality is close to being reached. This is a struggle that is waged day after day, in theory and in practice, on the fields and in the streets. And although women take up positions of leadership in social movements here, their position in society is still one of oppression, exclusion and vulnerability.

This goes for indigenous communities as well. Indigenous communities are central to both Argentinian history and agroecology. The eradication of indigenous communities and culture is the original sin of Argentina's existence and much like in the United States, European settlers usurped lands through a process of colonization and ethnic cleansing. Nonetheless, agroecological movements and, by extension, political ecology academics have partially based their foundational critiques of neoliberalism and industrial agriculture on indigenous perspectives of human-nature relationships. Indigenous movements have taken a pioneering role in setting the tone for and determining the direction of agroecology in Argentina, and are still the most vulnerable groups in society with regards to extractivist enclaves and the expansion of the agricultural frontier. This is why the struggle for agroecology in Argentina

is necessarily a struggle for the emancipation of indigenous communities, a struggle that goes back to when European colonizers first set foot in their territories. And, linked to the part above, it is a struggle that is necessarily feminist as well. Or, as they often say here: “La revolución será feminista o no será”, which is roughly translated to “the revolution will be feminist or it won’t happen”. To this, one might add: “La revolución será indígena o no será”.

I thus think that, as Borras states in his article, agrarian populist movements will have to incorporate different social, economic and political struggles if they ever want to be relevant to a large part of society. But what is important here is not just mentioning it, categorizing it and then hoping it will be resolved by itself. First, one needs to realize that even within social movements there are issues of sexual and gender discrimination, racism and nationalism, among others – these movements are not monoliths but themselves contested territories of power and inclusion/exclusion. Secondly, these struggles are linked to the specific contexts that they take place in and need to be analyzed as such. Although alliances will need to be drawn between movements worldwide, one should not forget the contextual differences that emancipation struggles take place in. Feminisms of certain countries in the Global South will not necessarily align with feminisms of other countries in the Global South and definitely not with countries in the Global North (to give one specific example, although it is immensely more complex than that). Thirdly, I agree with your point that gender and diversity are still very much underexposed themes. Anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles are still too often just an asterisk in academia and need to be analyzed and represented with the same vigor as anti-capitalist struggles.

Jonas

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