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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Peasant Way of a More than Radical Democracy: The Case of La Via Campesina

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Abstract
We investigate the rural resistance of one of the world's largest social movements, La Via Campesina, as a powerful enactment of radical democracy in practice. More than this, the paper describes how the movement challenges the framework of radical democracy by pointing towards the ethical importance of recognizing the relationship of human dignity with nature and considering ethico-political values inherent in the peasants' way of living. Their resistance is a rejection of depoliticizing silencing, and their everyday life is a commitment to a "more than human" radical democracy in its most radical sense, as they are always already "in parliament with land". We conclude by outlining a perspective which is both more than radical and more democratic, considering those who have not yet been heard but also that which, in the light of radical democracy, has never been counted as part of the political body at all: nature.

Keywords Decolonial practice · Post-anthropocentric radical democracy · Agrarian political ecology · Human-soil relations · Peasant resistance

Introduction

This paper applies the concept of radical democracy to the peasant movement La Via Campesina and its form of resistance, and investigates the question of whether the peasants[1] who come together in this movement are putting radical democracy into practice. More than this, the paper describes how the movement of La Via Campesina challenges the framework of radical democracy by pointing towards the ethical importance of recognizing the relationship of human dignity with nature and considering the "democratic or ethico-political values" (Machin 2013, p. 92) inherent in the peasants' way of living. The entanglement with the natural environment in political fights as enacted by the farmers organized in La Via Campesina and the view that La Via Campesina embodies a radical enactment of solidarity (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Patel 2006) by overcoming the global divide between actors from Northern and Southern countries (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Patel 2006), we read as something that exceeds the scope of radical democracy. In other words, and in following Connell's (2014, p. 219) call for "Northern intellectuals to […], more than anything else, […] start learning in new ways, and in new relationships", we analyze how the peasants' movement and their demands and political claims to address the socio-ecological crisis brings an opportunity of decolonizing the "Western" framework of radical democracy. This involves discussing relevant approaches from the discourse of radical democracy against the background of the movement, focusing particularly on the extent to which those approaches are actually lived out by the peasants.

In this paper, we not only discuss the rural resistance as a local alternative, but also give voice to a movement

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[1] In the following, we will use the term peasants and small-scale farmers interchangeably since we want to highlight their common struggle and argue that they are both intermingled with 'the land'. This perspective does not aim to obfuscate differences in oppression or living circumstances, but to highlight what they have in common. As the title may indicate, we only speak of those small-scale farmers that feel connected to the movement of La Via Campesina. We do not use the term "family farms" as the term "family" in a normative reading in German contexts is too often related to heteronormative understandings of families (Gioia, 2019).

which, under the umbrella of La Via Campesina, counts as the biggest social movement in the world. La Via Campesina comprises 182 member organizations and more than two million peasants in 81 countries. With its leitmotif of food sovereignty, the movement is diametrically opposed to the values that have achieved hegemony: the exploitative agricultural industry, the capitalization of nature and the resulting destruction of the environment (Borras 2008). In their resistance and their practice of living, these small-scale farmers contradict the neoliberal tendencies of the global economy, while they, who make up almost a fifth of the world population, feed the world (Edelman and Borras 2016). With member organizations from all parts of the world, La Via Campesina counts as a major actor in the current popular transnational struggles against neo-liberalism, demanding accountability from inter-governmental agencies, and resisting and opposing corporate control over natural resources and technology (Borras 2004; Desmarais 2007; La Via Campesina 2018). It is viewed not only as the "international peasant movement" (Martínez-Torrez and Rosset 2010), that fights on a multinational level against the WTO, and global corporate giants such as McDonalds and Monsanto (Borras 2004), but is also in different ways at the forefront of integrating critical issues such as feminist perspectives or gender equivalence in their demands (Fontoura et al. 2016, p. 427; Gioia and Redecker 2018, Gioia 2019, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). More than this, we argue that in everyday lives, through the most diverse forms of sustainable agriculture, agroecology and in fighting for and with their land, often confronted by massive violence[2], members of La Via Campesina not only put radical democracy into practice, but also exemplify a more than radical democracy, one that considers nature as an "active voice" (Plumwood 2010). By standing against land grabbing, they protect land against multinational concerns, industrial agriculture and monoculture, seeds against GMOs, and plants against pesticides (Fontoura et al. 2016; La Via Campesina 2015a, b). These struggles are not only violent but cause death, eviction, displacement, rape and loss of identity (Borras 2008; Desmarais 2007). They literally root their political demands in the earth, without losing the view of globalized agriculture.

It is important to note that, by looking at this movement in such a unified view, we do not aim to neglect local and global differences, colonial continuities or post- and neocolonial exploitation, but to highlight a movement that is counterhegemonic across North–South divides and identity politics, as María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset explain: "In fact, rural organizations and peasantries around the world share the same global problems even though they confront different local and national realities" (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, p. 150). As this quote shows and the word 'peasant' indicates, they are all rooted in and connected to land.

Who are *the* peasants? Who comes together under the banner of "La Via Campesina" to form this locally rooted and globally connected group and to what extent is it possible or meaningful to talk of a farming identity, or of *the* peasants? These questions have been discussed many times (Bové 2001; Desmarais 2007; Edelman 2003; Martínez-Torrez and Rosset 2010; Mc Micheal 2011; Patel 2006). However, by reflecting on them in the light of radical democratic approaches, we place these discussions in a concrete political framework. We do this in the knowledge that radical democracy is a framework of Western political thinking that takes for granted modern forms of state and organization. At first glance, it might seem contradictory to apply this framework to an anticolonial and counterhegemonic movement such as La Via Campesina. This paper, nevertheless, aims to do so to acknowledge ways of expanding radical democracy and to present it as an alternative reality—a decolonial option (Mignolo and Escobar 2013)—that offer answers to the current global crisis. Alaimo (2012) and others (e.g., Davis and Todd 2017; de la Cadena 2015; Tsing 2015) point out that this crisis demands a different human-nature relationship than the one enacted by post- and neocolonial Western thinking. Or, in the words of Martin Calisto Friant and John Longmore (2015, p. 64), "if humanity wants to survive the anthropocene, a reconceptualization of our model of civilization is in order". In reading radical democracy through the peasants way of political engagement, we would like to emphasize that their human nature relationships that question the hegemonic understanding of 'the social' or 'civilization' are already enacted but "not seen" (de la Cadena 2015). By going beyond the framework of radical democracy and highlighting the unifying power of their relations to their land, we will not only shed light on the everyday political work of the peasants but offer an approach to an extended form of democracy that is radical in its most literal sense, namely: rooted to the soil. We do so by focusing on the

[2] This violence has many dimensions. It destroys life indirectly when farmers commit suicide due to oppression and dependency caused by companies like Monsanto (Patel, 2006), but also includes explicit forms of direct violence, like the shooting of 19 people by military police officers that happened during demonstrations of the MST movement in Eldorado dos Carajás on the 17th April 1996. More than this, the loss of land means for many peasants the loss of income and food and lead to hunger and starvation. "Death is in fact a recurring theme, and reality, of the peasant struggle in Latin America and the world. It is both the deaths from hunger-related illnesses in impoverished rural areas and the deaths from the on-going criminalisation and repression of peasant struggles" (Martinez-Torrez and Rosset 2010, p.163).

extent to which the farmers take the so-called 'environment'[3] into account in a radical way in their work and in their ethical principles, or more precisely, how they "think with" the environment in Donna Haraway's sense (Haraway 2016). In other words, we outline a radical democratic perspective not only taking into account those who have not yet been heard, but also being concerned about what has never been counted as part of the political body at all: nature. In so doing, we follow the claims of various indigenous perspectives and decolonial scholars and the work of Jane Bennett (2005) which provide the ground for a joint discussion of the concepts of radical democracy and a "more than human" understanding of "the social". Referring to Agarwal (1994) and others (Davy 2009; Maia 2011), Connell (2014, p. 218) reminds us in this context: "Certainly, there are important propositions to be advanced from southern perspectives, such as the great importance of the land for social theory and practice". Or, as Walter Mignolo states: "Alternatives to modern epistemology can hardly come only from modern (Western) epistemology itself" (Mignolo 2000, p. 9).

Based on these perspectives, from different approaches across North/South boundaries, we argue for a "more than human" ontology, implying an extended view of radical democracy that helps us to understand and explain the plurality of La Via Campesina peasants in a performative manner. As such, they are directly relevant to our "decolonial" understanding of the co-existence of the approaches' difference: "the solution is not to eliminate the difference but to decolonize the logic of coloniality that translated differences into values" (Mignolo 2011, p. xxvii). Thus, we believe the movement of La Via Campesina can foster an unlearning of preassumptions that are based on colonial continuities and modernist norms (Quijano 2000), be it in academia or activism, political organization or democratization attempts.

The Post-political in Current Agricultural and "Environmental" Policy

Discussing the breaking away of radical left-wing politics and criticizing current party-political demands, which have been uncritical in their capitulation to neoliberalism, Chantal Mouffe (2010, p. 3) argues that the left have "given up on questioning the existing power relationships and are limiting themselves to pointing out ways in which neoliberal globalization could be structured in a more 'human' way". With this, she takes a swipe at the left who no longer set their sights on large-scale change, but instead remain idle and uncritical, orientating themselves according to the existing liberal guardrails, which gradually hollow out democracy. If they do push for change, then this is only within the given framework, which is seemingly insurmountable and thus cannot be questioned. Real debates are avoided and replaced with a liberal politics of consensus which obscures differences. This politics of consensus is not only destroying democracy from within, but also the political itself (Brown 2015; Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw 2010; 2013).

But how can change be possible, if the change itself always remains within what has been established as an unchangeable hegemony? In this "post-political" (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 1997) spectrum, if anything happens at all, it is a shift within the current state, while the current state, the hegemonic arrangement of the ruling constellations of power, remains untouched. This situation does not come about by chance, but stems from a deliberate guarding of the status quo, as Eric Swyngedouw (2010, p. 215) shows in his discussion of the "post-political frame":

> "This post-political frame is structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative."

All these given and unquestioned norms are situated in the thinking of Western modernity thinking which does not take into account non-western or indigenous world views. In the context of the peasant movement and its demands, this uncritical continuation of a disastrous status quo is exemplarily demonstrated by the fact that the world is still (and in some ways more than ever) threatened by climate change: soil is being degraded, poverty and hunger rule and agricultural production is directed by an economic model which has destructive consequences for the so-called "environment". While the human population, and thus the demand for food is growing, fertile soil is disappearing at a rate of 24bn tonnes every year mainly due to intensive and industrial agriculture, and with it the basis for food production (UNCCD 2017).

In relation to the so-called "ecological crisis"[4], Eric Swyngedouw explains that a permanent "apocalyptical" threat situation has been created, but despite, or rather because of that, so-called environmental policies only produce attempts at solutions within the existing, dominant

[3] We call into question the underlying connotations of the word 'environment'. In the discourses which form part of the hegemonic narratives, environment refers to something which is held at a distance. The word supports an anthropocentric perspective which places the human being at the center, surrounded by a passive environment. Precisely this concept is questioned here, in the sense of indigenous and new materialist approaches and of that very entanglement which the peasants practice in their various locations.

[4] For further criticism of the concept of ecological crisis, see Plumwood (2002).

framework (Swyngedouw 2010). Similarly, Sybille Bauriedl shows that the looming apocalypse emerging in climate discourse, the prevailing alarmism, has brought about an atmosphere which signals that we have to act very quickly (Bauriedl 2015). This discourse of urgency leads people to seek quick solutions only within existing structures and established ideologies. From this, solutions arise which are in no way revolutionary (ibid.). If we consider this alarmism in connection with the problems at hand, with which the peasants themselves are particularly confronted, this approach becomes a farce (or rather a deliberate tactic): in spite of the available knowledge and a series of negotiations, no changes have emerged which point in a new direction. The negotiations, whether they take the form of international climate conferences or new interpretations of the Common Agricultural Policy in the EU, bear witness to an insistence on all that is actually the cause of the natural and social exploitation of "human" and "non-human" victims. Neoliberal policies influenced by agricultural lobbying are promoted and are, both economically and technologically, put into practice ever more intensively in the fields of the world (La Via Campesina 2018; Fontoura et al. 2016; Lanka et al. 2017). Paradoxically or tellingly, this intensive agricultural method, which is not adapted to different locations, is one of the main reasons for the loss of fertile land (Montgomery 2007; Rosset 2011). Wendy Brown (2015) points out this very problem in her discussion of the destruction of democracy: the economy has become the organizing and regulatory principle of the state and of post-national structures such as the European Union, and environmental sustainability, as she quotes from Obama's speech on the state of the nation in 2013, can only be pursued to the extent that it furthers economic goals. Rather than switching to organic agricultural models, or even discussing them, quick solutions are supposed to produce short-term results. However, what is needed, as Bauriedl (2015) also states, is a fundamental change in thinking, profound societal changes, experiments and the invention of new practices. Žižek (1999, p. 199) points out in relation to post-political persistence: "Authentic politics is, rather, the exact opposite, that is, the art of the *impossible*—it changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation".

It is precisely this which the peasants are committing themselves to in their practice of food sovereignty in its many dimensions, as shown by Raj Patel (2006, p. 84) and Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010, p. 169), who both highlight the multifaceted issues that are addressed by the food sovereignty model, which include trade, subsidies, access to land, hunger, investment, crop prices or the handling of seeds. In an unwary view, food sovereignty could be understood as just a peasant proposal for how to produce food, but in building a sophisticated counter-narrative to the neoliberal idea of food-security, food sovereignty should be better understood as a "policy framework that Via Campesina has advanced to counter the development project" (Patel 2006, p. 82). La Via Campesina describes itself as a "proposal for humanity to rethink how we organize food and agricultural production, distribution and trade, how we make use of land and aquatic resources and how we interact, exchange and organise with one another" (La Via Campesina 2018, p. 2). Patel (2006) argues that their innovative approach would change the parameter of what is considered to be possible. With this policy framework the movement extends its demands to the call for system change as a response to climate change (Mc Keon 2015), for "an alternative to the prevailing capitalist system as manifested in its worldwide operations" (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001, p.111). More than this, they not only call for this in the hope of future change, but they enact an "interstitial revolution" (Dinerstein 2012) operating in the "ruins of capitalism" (Tsing 2015) and revolutionizing "otherwise", i.e. in little steps through laborious everyday praxis that creates radical social change (Redecker 2018). This happens not (only) in confrontation with the hegemonic but in an "pre-enactment" of that which is to come (Marchart 2014). Due to this, one could argue that they are not post-political, but could be understood as agents who anticipate a different domain of the political.

"The" Peasants: Pluralism from Within—Radical Democracy Beyond the Field

If we talk about farming identities from the point of view of radical democracy and in connection with a reworking of the human-nature relationship, new perspectives open up. How has it come about that within the movement of La Via Campesina, but also in the various reflections on it, repeated references are made to "*the* peasants"? Why is there such an insistence on this categorization? Does it not contain, in the context of a critically questioning perspective, a certain paradox? We, too, subscribe to deconstructivist approaches, which aim to reveal and work against the implied power relationships within categorical labels. From the perspective of New Materialism, for example, the supposedly fixed idea of who is human is called into question and attention is drawn to the agency of the non-human, or rather to the intertwining of these two categories, which are often constructed as a dichotomy. In relation to the lost language of her ancestors, indigenous scholar Robin W. Kimmerer (2017) underlines this interwoven understanding by pointing out: "There is no *it* for nature" to encourage a re-thinking and unlearning that is needed for a decolonial and counter-hegemonic project. The following argumentation should be understood against the background of this stance, which takes a generally critical view of fixed categories. Thus, we start from a political construction of identity which is valuable in the sense that

while it may make use of one name to refer to a heterogeneous group, and thus strengthen the group members through a shared identity, it does not enforce limitations in the sense of making diverse elements seem the same. This becomes clearer when we consider ways in which identity politics is understood by proponents of radical democracy. As the discussion of the post-politics has shown, a key concern is to avoid levelling everything in a liberal consensus. Here, we take the ideas developed by Chantal Mouffe with regard to antagonism and democratic parties and groupings, and transfer them to the process of building groups among peasants.

La Via Campesina includes, as has been shown many times (e.g., Desmarais 2007), the broadest possible variety of representatives of alternative agricultural-political demands. This is already made clear in the introduction to the "Declaration of Nyéléni", in which a strong "we" is followed by a list which gives a picture—and after all, otherwise such a list would be unnecessary—of a diverse group of people working the land. The "we" is therefore very plural (Nyéléni 2007):

> "We, more than 500 representatives from more than 80 countries, of organizations of peasants/family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest communities, women, youth, consumers and environmental and urban movements."

This collection of people could hardly be more diverse. They differ not only in their ways of life and their circumstances, but also in the local situations in which they are embedded and the threats to which they are exposed. The group brings together people from the indigenous resistance in Ecuador, organic milk farmers from North Germany, fishing people from Iceland, urban gardening activists from Baltimore, migrant agricultural workers from the borders of Europe, and many more. However, what connects them is their protest, their resistance, as diverse as it might be. The following two statements underline this alliance across differences. José Bové of the French Confederation Paysanne explains (Bové 2001, p. 96, cited from Borras 2004, p. 10):

> "For the people of the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us, it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming. There's no contradiction there at all. Of course there are different points of view in Vía Campesina—it's the exchange of opinions and experiences that makes it such a fantastic network for training and debate. It's a real farmers' International, a living example of a new relationship between North and South."

Nettie Wiebe further explains in an interview (cited from Edelman 2003, p. 187):

> "As long as you keep us in separate categories and we're the highly industrialized farmers who are sort of quasi-business entrepreneurs and they're the subsistence peasants, then we can't see how closely we and all our issues are linked."

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe explain this unity in spite of difference in terms of an externally constituted "we" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Collective identities, Chantal Mouffe writes, always contain a differentiation between "us" and "them" (Mouffe 2005). The "we" therefore has no need to be uniform; the unity comes from its combined opposition to the "they" which it confronts. Responding to this, Manon Westpahl continues to explain that differentiating themselves through a shared demarcation against an outside force is ultimately not based on a shared positive identity but a negative one: "in their shared rejection of the outside, they become equivalent" (Westphal 2013, p. 6). From this, we could now conclude that it is only the all-encompassing, far-reaching hegemonic power of the multinational agricultural conglomerates and of the neoliberal agricultural policies which create the identity of the peasants. This does not yet explain the extent to which this "identity", this plural grouping, can then still come to a strong and rebellious "we". Henry Veltmeyer (2010, p. 30) states in his paper "Dynamics of agrarian transformation and resistance":

> "Over the course of the twentieth century, the virulence of the capitalist land concentration has led generations of analysts to argue that there is no defense—that the forces of capitalist concentration are so strong as to extinguish alternative modes of production and bring about the demise of the peasantry as a socioeconomic and political formation."

This once again demonstrates the strength of the enemy which the small farmers have to confront. The question remains: how do the peasants still succeed in standing their ground against this dominant power? They are not just an identity which is separate from the "they" which they face, but rather a visible resistance or, as pointed out in the introduction, the largest social movement in the world. As Raj Patel (2006, p. 81f.) argues:

> "If the neoliberal agrarian project is experienced differently in different places, by dint of discrete processes and relations of power, then the mere naming of the project as 'neoliberal' cannot be expected to generate robust solidarity by itself between these places. If this were the case, the authorization of solidarity would lie in a sign for oppression, an 'enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend' politics. Such politics exist, no doubt. But for alliance to become solidarity requires an optic of mutual recognition."

So how have the peasants managed not to be entirely defeated by the dynamics described by Veltmeyer, but instead to become a "strong voice of radical opposition to the globalizations of an industrial and neoliberal model of agriculture" (Desmarais 2008, p. 138) and to form the solidarity brought up by Patel (2006).

Here we should, above all, take account of the fact that the peasants possess the powerful tool of what Mouffe names "disarticulation" (Mouffe 2005, 2008) or "the mutual recognition of subjects" (Patel 2006, p. 82) that is rooted in a constructive, programmatic process of policy formation rather than being found in a firm rejection of neoliberalism. Assuming that every hegemonic order is susceptible to challenges from anti-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to introduce a different form of hegemony, Mouffe (2008, p. 5) demands that "the process of social criticism which has characterized radical politics can no longer constitute a retreat from the existing institutions, but has to be an intervention in these institutions, in order to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is constructed and reproduced, with the aim of creating a different hegemony". This is precisely what the peasants achieve, since they go beyond the narrowest framing of resistance, which starts by stipulating that resistance is always a reaction against something, or as Roth and Ladwig (2006) put it, a response to something which seems wrong. Their "response" actively intervenes in existing institutions and their disarticulation already contains a new concept, that their alternative way of working with the land contains the idea of a new praxis. In line with Walter Mignolo (2011), one should read their resistance and everyday business not as an alternative that accepts a point of reference to which "nothing but an alternative could exist" (Mignolo 2011, p. xxix) but as an "option" that operates on the same level (ibid.) than that which they alter from. They are bound together in creating this option in common and not connected by facing the same enemy.

It would therefore not be enough to suggest, as Pahnke et al. (2015) do in the text "Understanding Rural Resistance", that the peasant resistance is just a counter-movement, an active or passive "re-action". Instead, the small farmers are fighting for an "option" which they have already tested out with fruitful results, and which they have at their disposal. It is not just an objection which is being made public, but a clear commitment to something: to the protection of biodiversity, to the recapturing of indigenous land or to the establishment of fair working conditions and an organization across lines, that in a hegemonic view count as borders. Through this, the small farmers fulfil the condition which Mouffe (2008, p. 5) sees as decisive when it comes to successful counter-hegemonic intervention: "that the moment of disidentification is accompanied by a moment of new identification and that the critique and disarticulation of the existing order goes hand in hand with a process of re-articulation".

What also becomes clear here is the fact that, as Roth and Ladwig (2006) explain, resistance does not have to set its sights on the whole picture. Regarding the farming resistance, the next question would be: what is the whole picture here? It can hardly be possible to develop one single resistance which would direct itself against all the shortcomings of the whole global system of food production. What is clear, however (perhaps because of this very fact), is that the local struggle for a particular cause, such as biodiversity, better working conditions for migrant seasonal workers, or the prevention of further falls in the already low milk price in a certain area, is also radical democratic resistance, even if it does not take account of the whole constellation of problems in the global agricultural system (as if it could). The peasants also clear the next hurdle of connecting these local struggles, through the movement of La Via Campesina. With reference to Gramsci, Mouffe (2008, p. 7) goes on to say that in order to establish a new hegemony, "a war of position" is necessary, which has to be sparked in a number of different places (also Mouffe 2005). Or, as Böhm et al. (2008, p. 177) put it, in reference to Laclau and Mouffe, "a range of different forms of resistance [are mobilised] […] in order to build alliances and solidarity among groups with different interests and political identities". Hence, connecting these struggles is then the core of radical politics. The peasants do this in two ways: they are organized enough that they do not just take to their individual streets in pursuit of local goals, but also, as Mouffe has already stipulated, intervene in institutions. As Annette Desmarais (2007, p. 5) writes: "whenever and wherever international institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) meet to discuss agricultural and food issues, the Via Campesina is there". Additionally, they are there in two different ways: on the one hand, because the organization has proved that it has meaningful points to make, its representatives do sit at the negotiation table, but at the same time, the movement has not stopped making its protest felt in the streets outside the negotiations and drawing public attention. A further step with which the farming movement follows the requirements of radical democracy, is that it combines its concerns with those of the broader socially left-wing movements. The movement thus does not just understand itself as the voice of small farmers, but also stands up for systemic change in a larger framework (Mc Keon 2015). This is reflected, for instance, in reports on the participation of La Via Campesina in the Bonn Climate Conference in 2017. Paula Gioia, who is La Via Campesina's International Coordinating Committee member from the European Coordination Via Campesina, said in this context: "we must change the system, and by this, stop the system from changing the climate" (La Via

Campesina 2017a). Here it becomes apparent that the project of the small farmers' movement interlocks with broader contexts and does not see itself as separate from larger (left-wing) political demands. This is further exemplified by the fact that La Via Campesina initiated a panel on the rights of migrants in the context of the climate crisis, and took part, on the fringes of the conference, in the "Ende Gelände" protests for the phasing out of coal power (ibid.). This shows how the movement connects with a larger movement and embodies an all-encompassing (left-wing) critique. La Via Campesina creates that collective will which, Mouffe (2008) argues, is only possible through the construction of chains of equivalence, and intervenes in institutions with the aim of changing them, and stirs up that critique which Mouffe regards as the soul of radical politics.

The small farmers are capable of all that despite their diversity, or in fact because of it. For it is not just the groups cited in the Declaration of Nyéléni that are coming together here—fishing people from the Global North with small farmers from the Global South. These too are once again pluralized through their connected sets of identities, which should be read in intersectional terms. An example of this is the current debate about the recognition and visibility of queer ways of life in the countryside and the greater inclusion of LGBTIQ people in the movement (Gioia and von Redecker 2018). Here it can be seen that La Via Campesina is not only strengthened by the fact that it brings together various local struggles with larger political demands, but that the movement is also strengthened by its inherent pluralism. It tests radical democracy from the inside out, as within La Via Campesina, antagonistic opponents become "friendly enemies" who share "a set of democratic or ethico-political values" (Machin 2013, p. 92). The small-scale farmers choose a path missing from the left-wing project of change, according to the view of the radical democrats. Here, trans people from the landless movement MST ("Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra") in Brazil go "hand in hand" with the family farm, which may be built on the classic heteronormative nuclear family. The movement withstands such differences without levelling them. Putting this into the vocabulary of radical democracy, within the movement there is an effort to transform antagonistic hostilities into "agonal" oppositions, and enable work on a shared larger project (Mouffe 2005, p. 48ff). Detailed disputes and conflicts over these alliances prevent enforced uniformity and help, instead, to make further aspects of global and specific structural inequalities visible. This is precisely what the radical democrats describe as being necessary for the democratic project (Machin 2013) and what José Bové (Bové 2001, in Borras 2004) refers to when he states that there are, of course, different points of view in La Via Campesina, making the recognition of differences more important than to dissolving them.

It is this very plurality, the multitude of voices, the countless demands within the global system of food production, which show that although what they are opposed to may be virulent, it is still, on many levels, brittle and inconsistent, challenged by alternatives. The label "the peasants" is therefore neither intended to claim that "the peasant" exists as a single figure which has to be understood as coherent, nor to suggest that the various demands and acts of resistance can be encapsulated in a single, homogenous sum. However, because their opponent, the industrialization and neo-capitalist financialization of the global food system, has such far-reaching and diverse consequences and encompasses the widest possible range of areas of the global (food) system, it remains valuable to view the different counter-movements together. They should still be seen in a differentiated manner, but they do share the same tone—and it should be possible to approach them as a group without ignoring their individual context-specific location or their intersectionally differentiated specificities. Thus, the different groupings, whether they involve migrant workers from the South of Spain, the Campesinos in the East of Mexico, or the dairy farmers of Northern Germany, each find themselves confronted with quite different aspects of the current global crisis: social, ecological and economic shortcomings are interconnected in different ways and are expressed in non-existent workers' rights, in multi-faceted discrimination against queer people of color who are fighting for access to land, in the felling of the rainforest, in land grabbing, in the repressive power of company mergers or in the neo-capitalist management of agricultural subsidies. Nevertheless, Joan Martinez-Alier and his co-authors ask in their text "Is there a global environmental justice movement?", since these locally situated resistance fighters share common goals and demands (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016). Pahnke et al. reinforce this, stating that "these identities and meanings [of the peasants] resonate globally even as they themselves are always context-specific, constructed in particular times and places and embedded in long histories of production and social reproduction" (Pahnke et al. 2015, p. 1070).

In this context, calling attention to the impending disappearance of the peasants themselves, or of the land which is the essential condition for their livelihood, does not entail painting an apocalyptic picture of a looming threat. Nor does it mean presenting the farmers as victims, but rather as active political subjects. The farmers are participating, as Veltmeyer (2010) says, in the academic and political debate about their disappearance, whether in the form of radical social movements or in the form of struggles with and within international organizations. They respond to their disappearance by raising their voices all the more loudly, showing that they are here and that they will fight for their continued existence, and against the problems which affect them.

Perhaps, against this background, the practice of small-scale farming is already a form of resistance. This becomes clear when we consider what "the disappearance of the peasantry" (Veltmeyer 2010, p. 30) actually means. The vanishing of small farmers leads to the emptying of the countryside, to overpopulation in cities, to poverty and hunger, to desertification, to migration, to the destruction of indigenous land, to monoculture and the expansion of the climate catastrophe. Thus, the struggles of the small farmers worldwide are reflections of many current political problems. This is not meant as a grandiose conclusion, but as a reminder of what we are talking about and what we are looking at when we consider the resistance of those who attempt to prevent such problems on their own initiative and/or because of their understanding of the global environment. They are not only fighting against their own disappearance, but are also taking a unique stand against "the multiple crises" (Brand 2009) of our time. This justifies the claim that it is helpful to continue speaking of "the" peasants, since already in that term there is the potential strength of resistance and also the formulation of a counter-narrative. The small farmers are not a group which should be romanticized, who enjoy the kind of life presented in countryside lifestyle magazines, nor are they simply workers to be transferred into the capitalist system, who can be, along with their work, subordinated without further consequences to the tenets of efficiency and financialization—their work cannot be subjugated to these developments without causing social and ecological crises.

In Parliament With Soil—Radical Democracy from the Fields of the World

As we have seen, Mouffe (2008) argues that the critique and disarticulation of the existing situation must be accompanied by a re-articulation. The peasants enact this model: they do succeed in coming together in positive formations of identity. They are bound together not only in a negative sense in opposition to their common adversary, but in a positive sense by the unifying strength which they share. We will now explore this positive commonality further, which we believe makes the powerful unity of the peasants possible. On this point, Mouffe goes on to say that identities are always the result of "identification processes" (ibid.). We argue that this process of identification, which the peasants seem to have accomplished despite being geographically scattered and despite the differing demands and problems which shape their resistance, can be explained through the particular connection of the farmers to their land. Land, as José Borras (2004, p. 5) explains, is "key" to the peasants and has "multiple dimensions: economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual". "It is more than the sum of its parts as not only soil, water and soil biota, but also landscapes as intangible dimensions contribute to personal and cultural identity, community cohesion and the sense of belonging (Fontoura et al. 2016, p. 431). By arguing this we suggest extending the radical democracy project to environmental concerns and a decolonial rethinking of the human-nature relationship, which may help the framework to be more open to non-anthropocentric and non-Western approaches and ontologies. This is written in the belief that the Western worldviews, the "othering" of nature, most strikingly articulated in terms such as the 'Anthropocene', deepen the current socioecological crisis as well as postcolonial exploitations.

The relationship between the farmers and their land, which manifests itself in a variety of ways, strengthens the group and influences its identity. More than this, from an indigenous point of view "all elements of nature", including land, possess "agency" and are "active members of society" (Watts 2013, p. 23). That very connection, that entanglement with their "environment", has features of a radical democracy but goes beyond it. Regarding the question of what defines a "peasant", Nettie Wiebe from the Canadian National Farmers Union explains, "it's the land and our relationship to the land and food production that distinguishes us" (Desmarais 2008, p. 140). In her paper "The power of peasants: reflections on the meaning of La Via Campesina", Annette Aurelie Desmarais evokes this point of connection as a foundation for the farmers' conception of themselves, when she terms the unifying identity of the peasants a "deep commitment to place", which is based on the fact that they are "people deeply attached to a particular piece of land" (Desmarais 2008, p. 140). Marisol de la Cadena (2015) underlines this when telling the story of the Awajun-Wampis indigenous group who were protecting their territory against oil exploration. As she reports, the clash between police and Awajun-Wampis caused more than thirty deaths. De la Cadena (2015, p. 4) tells of a woman who refuses to sell her land "even for what is most likely an amount of money she will not see in her lifetime. Countless times, the national police force has attacked her, her family, even her animals—as I was writing this piece, the police destroyed the woman's crops. The property has been under siege for more than three years now. "I fight to protect the lagoon" has been one of her responses. And asserting attachment to place, she adds: "I am not going to stop; they will disappear me. But I will die with the land."".

Thus, that connection to the particular land which is being worked—the actual practice of farming, as different as that may be in these various locations—connects together the farmers of the world. Of course spiritual, cultural or economic backgrounds affect this relationship, but a small-scale farmer from a Northern country would agree that indigenous understandings of "place-thought" (Watts 2013) correspond better to their connections to land than any western neoliberal idea that calls it a 'resource' or uses it as a commodity. It

seems that the farming identity as a whole cannot be understood separately from the so-called "environment" which surrounds it; rather the farmers are who they are through and with their land and their daily work, their practice. Nor can their radical form of a "more than human" democracy function without this relationship since they form a "human-nonhuman working group" (Bennett 2010) together with the land, in which they work, run their businesses and formulate and realize their ethical principles. Just as the peasants cannot be understood separately from their connection with their land, Jane Bennett shows in the new materialist text "In Parliament with Things" that the democratic project can also no longer be thought of or conducted only among human actors. Bennett shows that if we start from the assumption that "human life is inextricably enmeshed with that of nonhumans" (Bennett 2005, p. 137), our understanding of democracy also has to take account of this changed interpretation of the subject. "Sumak Kawsay", also known as "Buen Vivir", based on a worldview of indigenous people from the Andean region, shares this non-anthropocentric worldview (González and Vázquez 2015). It conceptualizes nature as "*pachamama*" (mother earth), representing the source of all life of which humans are an intrinsic part (Friant and Langmore 2015). Buen vivir can be described as a "local, decolonial, indigenous concept of good life" (Ranta 2016) that through a consideration of nature as a horizontal partner challenges neoliberal understandings of development, globalization and extractive economy. As we have mentioned, the farmers live and experience this sense of being "inextricably enmeshed" every day through their work. As a farmer, working (with) the land, one is an intrinsic part of nature, as the weather, the climate, the soil type, the earth worms or microorganisms affect and sometimes dictate one's actions. If that praxis alone can already be understood as counter-hegemonic, since the approaches of food sovereignty and the protection of land against industrialized companies and farming practices entail responsible interactions with the so-called "environment" which clearly contrast with neo-capitalist and neoliberal approaches, they already belong to a critical political intervention. Farming the soil sustainably and protecting it in the long term comes at a high cost in terms of time and work, which would not be necessary if the peasants were using the methods offered by industrial agriculture. The timescales which are necessary for sustainable protection of the soil also fundamentally contradict capitalist thinking and practices (de la Bellacasa 2015). Prioritizing food sovereignty precisely means not just choosing the way which is most economically efficient. Not selling the land as stated above in the example given by Marisol de la Cadena is often also not the most efficient decision, but one that safeguards attachment to the land, to one's own, which is often not separate from the self when it comes to farmed land. If the peasants decide to farm their land according to good agricultural praxis, with crop rotation, without pesticides, and without quick-release fertilizers, that means additional expenditure in terms of time, which is not valued proportionately within the capitalist economic system. One could say that it is an enactment of buen vivir, that becomes more vivid than it became when implemented through state policies (González and Vázques 2015). The peasants are conducting a form of care work which is rendered invisible but represents a subversive form of resistance. Following Malcom X, who argues that "land is the basis of freedom, justice and equality" (cited from Penniman 2018), we might conclude that the peasants' engagement, which stretches beyond both the regional and the generational limits of the individual farm/ers, is a way to a more democratic and just world. But how does that everyday praxis become a relevant intervention in the sense of expanding radical democracy?

New materialism places theoretical emphasis on practices which have long been well known to the farmers of the world. The non-anthropocentric perspective of new materialism understands human beings not as facing the surrounding environment in a dichotomy, but as being enfolded in it in multiple ways, a worldview indigenous people/scholars have taken for granted from the beginning. Colonial dichotomies such as human/nature are deconstructed and approaches which transgress the traditional boundaries are proposed instead (Barad 2003; Kimmerer; 2017; Watts 2013). Decolonial scholars such as Morgan Ndlovu (2014) and others argue that the crisis of the 21st century calls for an engagement with indigenous knowledge, as "the current hegemonic Western ways of knowing, imagining and seeing the world have proved to be inefficient in providing solutions to many of the global challenges that they have caused" (Ndlovu 2014, p. 84). It is argued that the Western way of thinking is not capable of solving problems; instead, it has brought us this crisis. Arturo Escobar (2004) argues in a similar way when he states that today's modern problems are not met adequately by modern solutions.

From a New Materialist perspective, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explain: „As human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed by matter." (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 1). Thus, the material in New Materialism is understood from the perspective of its imminent, ontogenetic, self-organizing potential, and not seen as passive matter which is just waiting to be worked on or cultivated by humans (Folkers 2013). As a result, agency is extended to the non-human, whereby—as Jane Bennett's phrase, "human-nonhuman working group", makes clear—the key point once again is that the entangled nature of agency is brought into the foreground, as the independence of the human being from the surrounding world is deconstructed. This entanglement is termed "assemblages" by Bennett (2010) building on Deuleuze and Guattari,

concieved as sympoiesis by Donna Haraway (2016), while others borrow the notion of "networks" from Bruno Latour (Haraway 1991) and coin the term "intra-actions" (Barad 2003, 2014). Similarly, from a decolonial perspective, Robin Kimmerer (2017) refers to land as a living being: "birds, bugs, and berries are spoken of with the same respectful grammar as humans are, as if we are all members of the same family".

Such entangled connections rest on the very constitution of farmers' subjectivity. Relating to the land with one's whole praxis and identity, living out a project which criticizes hegemony, and pursuing more sustainable forms of relationship with the "environment" as a guiding ethical principle allows the soil, the environment, nature, the non-human to participate in the democratic project itself. This becomes particularly clear when we look at what the farmers take to the streets for and which demands are central to their criticisms of the status quo or if we consider that La Via Campesina in their fight for a declaration of peasants' rights conclude through the voice of Sofía Monsalve: "More profound questions lie behind this debate: the relationship of human dignity with nature is an underdeveloped vision within human rights. It's a matter of finding other ways of relating to Mother Earth, which we in Latin America debate under the principle of Living Well, or Buen Vivir." (Campesina 2017b, p. 47) They are rarely (only) fighting for their own rights and survival, but are instead fighting against monocultures, against the felling of the rainforest, against the construction of industrial feedlots in their neighborhoods or for an agricultural policy which would ensure biodiversity. They raise their voices directly for the environment to which they have dedicated themselves and which is not understood as a non-living surrounding. When they take to the streets to protest against falling milk prices or land grabbing, the main point is not their own profits or only the protection of their property, the protest is rather dedicated to the larger leitmotif of food sovereignty, and to a less exploitative relationship to the human and the non-human. Anyone who protests against falling milk prices is indirectly also protesting for a form of dairy farming which is appropriate to the animal, and anyone who takes to the streets against land grabbing is demanding that that land continue to be farmed in a sustainable manner, rather than destroyed through monoculture. Thus, the farmers shift the area which the radical democrats describe as "das Politische" ("le politique") (Flügel-Martinsen 2017, p. 161ff), and make it clear that a separation of human and nature in the crisis constellations of the present time will ultimately preclude radical democracy and any counter-proposal to the prevailing hegemony of neoliberalism.

They also shift the boundaries of what is recognized as part of the democratic, as the question of the subject becomes a question of community and the question of community is not limited to humans alone. In order to reach that point, many processes of negotiation are necessary and the radical democratic project has to become sufficiently radical that it does not stop at the anthropocentric border. Only through this endeavor, through the "art of the impossible", can new perspectives become possible and hegemonic practices be thrown off balance. For Jacques Rancière, as Amanda Machin (2013, p. 91) summarizes, democratic politics is "about the interruption of the normal order […] by those who were previously not heard, those who were assumed not even to have a voice". In the resistance of the peasants, we must also recognize the call to give a voice—a voice which must be heard—to the environment with which we are so closely interlinked—as this call draws attention to the manifold ways in which this movement is radical. The effort to be aware of nature and to think with it is a decisive step which, in spite of all attempts to solve the socioecological crisis, has not yet been made. However, the extent to which this step forms part of a radical democratic project is encapsulated in this quotation from Bennett, who, in turn, ends on a quote by Latour (1999, p. 297):

> "Persons, worms, leaves, bacterias, metals, and hurricanes have different types and degrees of power, just as different persons have different types and degrees of power, different worms have different types and degrees of power, and so on, depending on the time, place, composition, and density of the formation. But surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs: 'Are you ready, and at the price of what sacrifice, to live the good life together? That this highest of moral and political questions could have been raised, for so many centuries, by so many bright minds, for humans only without the nonhumans that make them up: will soon appear, I have no doubt, as extravagant as when the Founding Fathers denied slaves and women the vote.'" (Bennett 2010, p. 109)

Here we also see how the inclusion of inanimate material, the supposedly silent, the inaudible, represents a political component which even without ecological interests would be significant: "are you ready to live the good life together?" is a question which runs through all the democratic political discourses, demands, visions and struggles of our time, or at least it should. To extend this question to the "environment" as the buen vivir project proposes, whether animate or inanimate, to integrate it into this "together", seems unavoidable, given that—as the protesting farmers are trying to show—this environment is not "the other" as opposed to the human, but is something which is tightly interwoven with us. This is also the only way to confront the urgent "social"

crises of our time. This community will not involve a harmonious process of becoming one, but will instead make the disputes which Swyngedouw (2013) demands, and which he sees as being absent from the post-political frame, absolutely necessary. For them, the question about the readiness to live the good life together will also require conflicts and changes which go well beyond the political status quo and which cannot be solved without disputes, at least not with those who would only move within what is currently regarded as a "social" society—those who, as Swyngedouw writes, stay within the space "that remains of course fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations." (Swyngedouw 2013, p. 5). This invitation calls on us to see boundaries as moveable and surmountable—a point which in our human and non-human "environment" should be higher than ever on the political agenda.

When Steven Corcoran, in reference to Rancière's concept of dissensus, writes that it "consists in challenging the very logic of counting that marks out some bodies as political beings in possession of speech and consigns others to the mere emitting of noise, some as beings of decision and action, others as consigned to the passive sphere of reproduction" (Corcoran 2010, p. 5), it is hard to believe that Rancière specified in a debate with Jane Bennett (2005) that this demand only applied to humans, since it so strongly invites us to transfer it to the project of radical democracy as lived by the farmers, a radical democracy which would not hold fast to anthropocentric boundaries and would aim to be decolonial from the very beginning. One part of Rancière's argumentation, according to Bennett (2005, p. 139), was that "Any political efficacy (apparently) associated with nonhuman entities is ultimately a function of human agents." Our arguments do not contradict this, so long as we start from an understanding of the subject which sees the human as inseparably interwoven with the non-human. As for the farmers—it is ultimately they who go into the streets and shift the boundaries of what is recognized as the "Demos", but they are guided in doing so by political demands which concern the land, and by their identity, which is inseparable from the land. Even if Rancière continues to cling onto the idea that the non-human cannot be understood as a political actor, since it does not have the ability to use language, then this is just another example of the hegemonic postcolonial tendencies of the Anthropocene, in which we find ourselves. "It was the colonizers, of course, who refused to believe local and Indigenous people's claims that the plants can sing". This quote by Myers (2018, p. 57) ought to strengthen the counter-hegemonic radical democratic project rather than making it impossible, and should attest to the fact that democratic practices, as Romand Coles also shows, are always a "multifaceted and never-ending engagement with otherness" (Tønder and Thomassen 2005, p. 9). The question of who can act in the political sphere and which boundaries can be drawn will always be among the questions surrounding the democratic project. If the alternative project of radical democracy continues to neglect nonhuman-actors and non-western, non-anthropocentric worldviews, the framework misses the chance to enact the radical project that seemingly gave it its name. To withstand these differences and imbue them with new life is at the core of radical democracy, and at the point where the concern is to stop excluding the non-human, such disputes should continue to rage.

In this sense, the farmers who have come together within La Via Campesina have developed their own unique form of *a* radical democracy, which not only calls the democratic project into question in a radical way and attempts to extend it, but also renews the form of the radical, since they have not only raised their voices, but also established a voice which is quite new—one which, as Rancière would say, was hitherto ignored as just "noise" (Rancière and Corcoran 2010, p. 45ff). How threatening this "noise" can become is shown by the climate-political apocalyptic scenarios of the post-political response to the current multiple crises. What the farmers make clear is that this noise has to be perceived and that we have to negotiate with this "noise" and the resulting disputes have to be fought out in order to counter the hegemonic status quo and by this rework the ontological preassumptions that lead to the oppression of naming the voice of the land "noise". According to this, the peasants of La Via Campesina live not an alternative modernity but an alternative to modernity (Mignolo 2011). When we consider the fact that, as was mentioned at the start, this option is still what feeds 'us', it should be taken more seriously than it has been done so far, or 'we' (we across North–South and human and nonhuman differences) will gradually lose the ground beneath our feet, and that is not a threat scenario but a description of the status quo, which the farmers of the world are confronting every day. They do not limit themselves to making neoliberal globalization "more human" (Mouffe 2010, p. 3), but focus on a bigger change, as a movement which, in the words of Walden Bello, "has distinguished itself in the forefront of the struggle against the World Trade Organization and corporate-driven globalization" (Bello 2007, p. 4).

We feel we should not stop at this conclusion, but think about the fact that the loss of ground enacted in land grabs is the central problem that all small-scale farmers and peasants from Northern to Southern regions face today, destroying not only livelihoods but also lives that are rooted in these lands. As Vanessa Watts (2013, p. 25) teaches us:

> "in many indigenous origin stories the idea that humans were the last species arrive on earth was central, it also meant that humans arrived in a state of dependence on an already functioning society with particular values, ethics, etc. (Beton-Benai 2010). The

> inclusion of humans into this society meant that certain agreements, arrangements, and ethical standards had to be made with the animal world, plant world, sky world, mineral world and other non-human species."

Considering this, we need to acknowledge that rooting radical democracy to the soil is a friendly gesture that still starts from a colonial assumption: that the human is the center that is in control of deciding what is allowed to be included in ideas like democracy or who and what can speak and take part. The peasants' life and their "place-thought" (Watts 2013) hints at an approach, in that relational thinking is not a voluntarily decision but a precondition to arrive at a radical "more than human" and more decolonial project of democracy. Following La Via Campesina, one might ask how a radical democracy would look like if it were founded on "the idea that indigenous knowledge can serve as a basis on which another world outside the present Western-centric one can be imagined" (Ndlovu 2014). In line with Dinerstein (2012), Redecker (2018) and Marchart (2014), the peasants are acting out a world, a political solidarity and a "more than human" radical democracy that does not yet exist in hegemonic contexts. Their everyday fights should not only be read as the persistence of the peasantry, but should be understood as an intelligent and informed engagement with the current socioecological problems and an option for "future non-imperial societies" (Mignolo and Escobar 2013, p. 18), which are yet to come.

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