

Prof. **Mariarosa Dalla Costa**

Department of Historical and Political Studies
University of Padua, Italy

Course/Conference: *Globalizacion y desarrollo desigual. El desafio politico de los movimientos subalternos (Globalisation and uneven development. The political challenge of subaltern movements)*

Universidad Complutense Madrid
Foro Complutense. Universidad Nomada.
Madrid, 25-29 June 2007

Food sovereignty, peasants and women

(Translated by Arianna Bove)

Some thoughts

The emergence of a large movement of peasants and other rural figures who want modalities of work and life that belong more to tradition than capitalist tendencies, has often had to confront, in the ideas of the movement itself, judgments of *backwardness* and *utopianism* as well as the assumption that there is *no turning back*. But we could observe that this “past” is the “present” of a very large part of humanity since in the world there are only 27 million farmers working with tractors, 250 million using animal traction and around 1 billion, in which there are many women, working just with their hands.¹ And above all, from the point of view of these subjects, the agricultural policies conducted hitherto, much more so in the neo-liberal version, are revealed as a real politics of genocide, and keep causing more and more hunger and death also through the forced mass suicide of indebted peasants. For these the first objection is that to sign up to these policies on behalf of those who work in agriculture today, in particular in the so-called developing countries, would be to sign up to a high risk of death. The *necessity of an alternative* is not only non-deferrable but also already present in the concrete systems of traditional cultivation guaranteeing many more possibilities of life and nourishment.² This does not prevent further research into improving traditional methods in the direction of reducing human efforts through the appropriate environmentally friendly technologies that do not expel populations and the cost of which is affordable in the economy of these agricultures. Such research can be financially sustainable, but the source, typology and conditions of its funding must be debated and agreed by the people involved, because their efforts can be less burdensome than debt. The *desire to defend and re-establish a peasant based agriculture* that uses traditional methods, such as is today demanded by peasants’ networks around the world, is meant to mark a *historic shift* towards the realisation, at the global level, of the fundamental human right to food and hence life, and of the right to resist against extinction, expulsion, and emigration.

Let us return to the origins of this question: the capitalist mode of production was established five centuries ago and was founded on the expropriation and enclosure of common land, and on the resulting ongoing expulsion of populations. Deprived of their means of production and reproduction, these were reduced to mere labour power and forced to either blindly accept the working conditions in the factory, or to vagabond, beg, and thus be confronted with criminalisation.

1 J. Bové and F. Dufour (2001), *Il mondo non è in vendita*, Feltrinelli, Milano, pag. 205, (*The world is not for sale. Farmers against junk food*, London: Verso, 2001).

2 It should be noted that these are actual *systems* developed over millennia that take into account the autochthon plant and animal species, the availability of labour and instruments compatible with the local economic levels, and the protection of natural resources and ecosystems.

Today, this expropriation and privatisation continues, and continues to produce impoverished and expelled multitudes that are doomed to either crowd in the slums of megalopolis or opt for emigration, and often death, as they traverse the desert, the sea, or end up in prison.

This large process of expropriation that accumulates land on the one hand and impoverished multitudes on the other, that is, the *process of primitive accumulation* that was necessary to initiate the mode of production we inhabit, is *more than necessary today* so that capitalist relations, the re-establishment of class relations and the processes that re-stratify global labour can further expand and penetrate even the mechanisms of the reproduction of life.

Consequently the question of the land, of the *resistance* against its expropriation, and above all, the *desire to re-establish* a relation with it that opposes these policies, is a crucial issue for those who risk expulsion or have already been forced out, as much as for the social working body at the global level. At stake are its chances of employment, level of precariousness and low wages, as the number of work opportunities generated cannot conceivably match that of the people expelled (and whom these policies are in fact decimating). After all, it is equally *hard to believe that a form of guaranteed income of such proportions could be expected*.

But, above all, *how much freedom* would we enjoy if all inhabitants of the planet depended *only and exclusively on money* for their survival?

And, can we really exclusively *limit our debate to the availability of money* in the face of an *agricultural produce* that, in the *industrial and neo-liberal version*, pollutes the land, damages the health of our bodies and devastates the environment?

The *great pledge* of the agricultural modernisation of the *first Green Revolution* to solve the issue of famine in the world has in fact *generated it* for many people through the expropriation of the best sizable lands, often preceded by *military intervention*. Today levels of famine are higher than before the Green Revolution. Alongside considerable profits for the large agro-industrial establishments, it generated misery for the many people whose land has been taken away, chemical pollution of the soil, and the destruction of biodiversity, entire ecosystems, and of the safeguarding of life and abundance of food resources. Since then, the expelled population has been labelled as excessive and there have been increasingly alarming signs of demographic explosion. As I have often pointed out, the *Green Revolution follows the path of war*, not only for the deep inequalities and conflicts it generates, but also because both expropriate land and pollute it, one with chemical products, the other with increasingly lethal military devices that often cause infinite damage and no turning back. To land enclosures corresponds a proliferation of the enclosures of humanity within the belts of degradation that surround the metropolis, in refugee camps and temporary detention centres.³

The term '*second Green Revolution*' refers to a shift to the cultivation of *genetically modified species* and concerns the introduction of a system of *patents*. This shift has effectively reflected a process whereby multinational corporations appropriate the reproductive powers of seeds, thus tampering with their genetic assets by means of their privatisation. Through this process, they have *privatised and fenced off the mechanisms of spontaneous reproduction of the life* that seeds represent, with their cycles of birth, growth, death and renewal. Natural seeds had always been treated as a common good and selected by the peasants, who would exchange them and replant them year after year. So, they constituted a source of life and abundance outside of the reach of

3 I already have further developed this point in the framework of an analysis of structural adjustment policies and various projects funded by the World Bank in 'L' indigeno che é in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo', presented at the Turin conference on *Per un'altra Europa, quella dei movimenti e dell'autonomia di classe* [For another Europe, of the movements and class autonomy], March 1996, and published in A. Marucci (1999), *Camminare domandando*, Roma: DeriveApprodi; English trans.: 'The native in us, the land we belong to', in *The Commoner*, n. 6, 2002 (<http://www.thecommoner.org>). See also M. Dalla Costa and G. F. Dalla Costa (1996; 2003 2nd ed.), *Donne, sviluppo e lavoro di riproduzione. Questioni delle lotte e dei movimenti*, Milan: FrancoAngeli; English trans. (1999): *Women, development and labor of reproduction. Struggles and movements*, Trenton, New Jersey, USA, Asmara and Eritrea: Africa World Press.

capitalist control.⁴ Through the vicissitude of GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms), capital managed to expropriate the *millennial knowledge* of the populations who, in cooperation with nature, had improved the seeds as well as the *biodiversity* produced by *natural evolution* and this *cooperation*, the latter being mainly handled by women. *Up to five centuries ago, expropriations and enclosures had “only” involved land; today, they invest the fundamental sources of life, biodiversity and the knowledge that makes it possible to obtain abundance.* The capture of these resources was motivated by the intention of not only *turning them into the source of high profit gains*, but also of *using them to restrict the freedom and self-subsistence* of populations. In order to create an increasing global dependency of humanity on the markets and laboratories, a dependency on money for every aspect of the life, a dependency on the sources of life (and diseases) over which people have no more knowledge or control. This process was carried out in order to facilitate the *spread of neo-liberalism*, which aims to worsen the conditions of labour and existence without meeting any opposition. *Food self-sufficiency* in fact, at the level of villages, provides a formidable chance to *resist* low wages and indecent living conditions.

The second Green Revolution yet implemented policies of privatisation of the land and water, in compliance with the neo-liberalist dictate according to which every good, life sources included, must become a commodity geared primarily to export.⁵ Complementary to this, the other globalisation policies, championed above all by multinational corporations via the WTO (World Trade Organisation), outlined devastation strategies by imposing on many developing countries the lifting of customs duties, so as to invade them with agricultural produce that benefits from high subsidies in more industrialised countries, with devastating effects on small local producers. The very imposition of GM seeds is ruinous for the peasants who are thus made to depend on multinational corporations and face the high costs of seeds and pesticides, whilst the harvests are poorer than promised and the income neutralised by the price fall resulting from the liberalisation of markets imposed by the WTO.

Therefore grounded on *land expropriation*, especially in its current form as it *appropriates and overturns its reproductive powers*, the same model of development is reproduced: multitudes are forced to flee and global labour is stratified again to reach conditions of slavery. But tampering with the spontaneous mechanisms of life reproduction, patents, international debt, and structural

⁴ The European directive 98/95 issues guidelines for national seeds regulations where the mutual, even if free, exchange of seeds and reproductive material is deemed illegitimate. But in the absence of this exchange, ‘there is no possibility of passing down the local varieties by means of community customs and, in fact, there is no possibility to keep the chance of safeguarding their dynamic conservation in the rural and local context that makes them so valuable’ (M. Angelini, ‘Il valore complesso delle varietà tradizionali e locali’, in M. Angelini et al. (2004) *Terra e libertà/critical wine. Sensibilità planetarie, agricoltura Contadina e rivoluzione dei consumi*, Roma: DeriveApprodi, p. 112). It should also be noted that in 1980 the European Community created a common European register of seeds, which incorporated all of the national registers listing seeds authorized for sale, and led to the cancellation from the index of 1,000 types of plants that were regarded as synonymous (the aim was initially to eliminate 1,500 types). The eliminated species were in fact non-hybrids and thus less profitable on the market. Seed companies prefer to market hybrid vegetables that cost five to ten times more than ordinary ones, which do not produce seeds and force the farmers to buy them every year. Thus, 360 Italian plant species have disappeared. Amongst them: the King Umberto tomato that had populated Italian lands for 120 years (see the report by A. Olivucci (2001), *Civiltà Contadina per la protezione della biodiversità*, on <http://www.civiltacontadina.it/seedsavers/intro.htm>).

⁵ A significant victory over the privatisation of water was achieved in the so-called ‘circuit of waters’, a unique region in the world, with numerous water sources rich in mineral salts with great therapeutic virtues in Minas Gerais, Brazil, half way between San Paolo and Rio de Janeiro. There are four towns in this area, including San Lorenzo, the smallest but famous spa (37,000 inhabitants). Here Nestlé started producing bottled water called Pure Life, which, in order to become such, underwent a process of total demineralisation and subsequent addition of salts thus compromising taste and properties, and completely betraying the typology of water that flows from the source. As well as this natural resource, so fundamental and available to the community, its activity also had adverse effects on local tourism and the economy. Residents accused Nestlé of not only changing the water without authorisation, but also of working without permission and, by draining large quantities through its production processes, of damaging the water table and altering the taste and features of the waters in the area. The citizens’ protest succeeded and Nestlé had to leave and give up its activities in the area.

adjustments are all *elements of the same game* by which this system tends to establish a *food dictatorship*, and, with it, the greatest possible dependency of populations and their *vulnerability to all sorts of potential blackmail*. Until we begin to address this problem, the need to abolish such dictatorship, all of the activism emerging in global struggles and peoples' initiatives will have built a house without foundations. The peasants' movement faced the problem of *building the foundations*. The relationship it wants to establish with land is completely opposite to that of the neo-liberal version of agriculture. But to start wishing to re-establish a relationship with the land, the denial of which lies at the basis of this development, entails subverting its conditions and creating the grounds on which to create an alternative form of development.⁶ The latter would be different in so far as it would oppose the spreading of famine and death as the inevitable presupposition to create wealth in the form of capitalist value. Building this alternative is the agenda of 'food sovereignty'.

The Caravan of *desaparecidos*

This *new and ancient peasants' discourse* was brought to attention by *networks* that grew particularly in the 1980s in the various countries invested by the drastic application of structural adjustment policies. These networks attracted the world's attention especially in the 1990s thanks to the new opportunities of communication provided by information technologies, and the large demonstrations against neo-liberal globalisation, of which they were an essential part, starting with the intercontinental meetings that followed the Zapatistas uprisings. Both during these gatherings and in the Caravan of '99 in preparation for the protests of Seattle, a movement of peasants, fishworkers, indigenous people and other agents from the rural world, the *desaparecidos of development reached the North*, where political culture, the left included, had abandoned questions of agriculture and relegated the rural world to the past and the sphere of backwardness, regarding the new directives of the large establishments of industrial agriculture as inevitable, but, above all, *failing to grasp their strategic position in the new strategy of domination of humankind*.⁷ On the other hand, the attention of the movements was polarised around issues such as precariousness and citizenship income, and the potential for liberation opened up by new information technologies. Nonetheless, even the North *experienced the food crisis*, not so much for lack of food, but because of the *insecurity* caused by continuous scandals and alarms in the sector. It also experienced the crisis of *continuous job losses*, as more and more small and medium size rural businesses were forced to close down.⁸ The issue of 'food sovereignty', which we will dwell on later, despite its need for a different articulation tailored to geographical areas, responded not only to the *fundamental demands* of various rural contexts both *in the global South and North*, but also to urban issues that *converged on the need to implement alternative models of agriculture that opposed the dominant model*. The latter is characterised by an industrialist and mono-cultural bias that marginalizes peasants' forms of labour, drastically reduces employment, and follows the so-called "long cycle" that increases the distance between producer and consumer, rewards through

⁶ As far as livestock farming is concerned, this denial can occur through a particular kind of contract known as the 'agistment'. The farmer remains the owner of the land and the structures where animals are kept, but makes it available to firms that provide the animals. The latter, however, decided on every aspect of the farming activity, from food to health issues, and the farmer has no decision making power.

⁷ The Caravan brought into European countries 500 people from all over the world representing peasants' and fishworkers' organisations, indigenous people, Zapatistas from Chiapas, peoples of were fighting the building of dams, the mothers from Plaza de Mayo, consumers' associations and others. The Caravan's activities took place over May and June 1999 after preparations in place since January 1999, allowing these subjects to present to the world their first person's account of the everyday problems of the South, primarily caused by policies of the North, and making their struggles and demands known. The Caravan played an essential role in the preparations for the no-global protests against the WTO in Seattle that took place in November 1999.

⁸ In Italy, 50 small and medium size rural businesses close down every day, one every half an hour. On this issue, see 'Le ragioni di una battaglia del Foro Contadino – Altragricoltura', by the Cooperativa Eughenia (<http://www.altragricoltura.org/dirittoallaterra/eughenia-6feb04.htm>)

subsidies the stage of processing and marketing of the product to the detriment of the first producer, i.e. the peasant, as well as the freshness and authenticity of the food and the transparency of the production process. This model is primarily geared towards export, competition in the global market, seeking areas for cheaper production and more profitable markets for the sale of 'food as any other commodity', seeking the specialisation of geographical areas for the liberalist internationalisation of markets, and the employment of chemical input and genetic tampering of nature also because the "food as any other commodity" has first of all to travel.⁹ Interestingly, there are 1,500 varieties of tomatoes in Russia, but none of them can travel. We hope they never will. Let man travel with something to discover still.

The Caravan brought to Europe farmers' organisations networked in La via Campesina, and with them an *alternative proposal that matched the strategy* of the adversary. *Focusing on peasant based agriculture*, the re-establishment of traditional systems, and local rather than global markets, its goal is the greatest autonomy and self-sufficiency of populations. Its *decision* is to *find emancipation once and for all from capitalist food policies* that, with their *ability to produce food* that has no sense of measure, fundamentally feed the profit gains of multinationals whilst *making an increasingly larger section of the population go hungry*. The 840 million people who according to the FAO report presented in Rome in 1996 are suffering hunger, contrary to the forecast of the food agency according to which the number was to be halved by 2015, have increased in the past 10 years to 854 million, 820 million of whom live in developing countries. In 1996, 1.2 billion people suffered serious food shortages; this number has now increased by 170 millions, mainly in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The same agency reports that where agriculture doesn't flourish there are higher levels of hunger; where there is no access to water there is no agriculture; three out of four people suffering hunger live in rural areas and depend for their survival on natural resources such as water and soil.¹⁰ However, I would claim that the relationship with these resources must have been deeply damaged. The areas where cultures of GM seeds have been imposed risk ruinous consequences. Water, soil, and seeds are issues that can't be treated separately; they are organs of the same body, the body of nature.

In India, within the transgenic cotton sector, tens of thousands of suicides of peasants crashed by debts have been registered. According to India's National Centre Bureau, 16,000 suicides took place in 2004; 1,860 in Andhra Pradesh in the first six months of the year alone.¹¹

In China, the processes of modernisation have produced a country with the highest suicide rates. Out of one million suicides occurring per year, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 287,000 took place in China in 2003, 157,000 of which involved women in rural areas, in poverty and often maltreated. It is estimated that in the past ten years, ingesting pesticides was the chosen method for between 60% and 90% of suicides in China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Trinidad.¹² This practice has spread to many other Asian countries and in Central and South America, according to WHO sources.

⁹ See G. Sivini, 'Puntare sulle filiere corte per uscire dalla subalternità dell'agricoltura all'industria', in M. Angelini et al. (2004), p. 134ff.

¹⁰ These data emerged from the documents produced by FAO at the conference in Porto Alegre on agricultural reform and rural development, which took place from 7 to 10 March 2006 and focused on the exploitation of water resources.

¹¹ As V. Shiva (2005) notes in *Il bene comune della terra* (Feltrinelli, Milano) pag. 135 (Engl. transl., *Earth democracy. Justice, sustainability and peace*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press) the cause of this lies in the structural adjustment measures introduced in 1998, which imposed on India acceptance of the involvement of multinationals such as Cargill, Monsanto and Syngenta in the seeds industry. In a short period of time, this led to the substitution of the natural seeds that had traditionally been put aside by the peasants for use year after year, and the introduction of GM seeds that require the purchase of costly chemical products and that have to be re-purchased, as they cannot be re-used.

¹² http://www.epicentro.iss.it/temi/mentale/suicidi06_oms.asp. We would like to point out that China is the fourth largest producer of GM food in the world (primarily of transgenic rice), after the United States, Argentina and Canada. José Bové claims that 'this practice is consistent with the current logic of the Chinese government, which would like to make 250 million peasants disappear. But where to? And to do what?' J. Bové & F. Dufour (2001), p. 98.

Since 1988, 8,995 people lost their lives whilst trying to reach Europe, 6,503 of whom died in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean.¹³

More and more individuals, men and women in the world, must ask themselves whether their fate as future victims of policies of genocide is inevitable, or whether there are alternatives to it. They must ask themselves what is to be done: how to expose these policies for what they are, how to oppose them, and to save themselves, their spirit and life.¹⁴ Since the 1990s, the international networking that has joined groups of peasants from many countries against neo-liberal globalisation, faces these questions head on, and comes up with answers.

What is to be done

The alternative, a *proposal of food sovereignty*, was coined by La Via Campesina, also known as the network of networks because of its size, comprising of 70 organisations and a total of 50 million members.¹⁵ This international movement of agricultural workers began to take shape in 1992 in Managua, Nicaragua, when various members of peasants' movements from Central America, North America and Europe, met to participate to the conference of UNAG (Congress of the National Union of Farmers and Livestock Owners). The first meeting where La Via Campesina was formalised and constituted itself as a world organisation with guidelines and a structure, was in Mons, Belgium, in 1993. The second world conference took place in Tlaxcala in Mexico in 1996 and saw the participation of 37 countries and 69 organisations. It focused on questions of interest for small and medium agricultural workers: accessibility of land, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, the conditions of credit, international debt, appropriate technologies, women's participation, rural development and other issues, but *food sovereignty* above all. This perspective and project was *launched globally* at the *conference of NGO* alternative to that of the *FAO in Rome* during the *same year* (13 – 17 November, 1996) on the world food summit. The alternative conference also hosted 'Women's Day on Food', an initiative that involved many women from different countries, including members of La Via Campesina.¹⁶ Since then, this network has expanded to reach seven regions: Europe, the North East and South East of Asia, North America, the Caribbean, Central and South America. To mention less known networks, amongst them are: the Sem Terra in Brazil, with their history of struggles and land occupation, who bring together over half a million occupying families;¹⁷ the Confédération Paysanne in France with José Bové, a network representative of around a third of French farmers; the National Family Farm Coalition, founded in the United States in 1986; the KMP, the Movement of peasants from the Philippines; the Karnataka Farmers' Union, established in India since 1980 with circa 10 million members and

¹³ Data from Fortress Europe.

¹⁴ At a meeting with the students of the Agrarian Department of Padua in December 2001, Luis, a trade unionist who represented networks of Columbian agricultural workers, whilst referring to the logics and technologies of agriculture that keep being imposed on developing countries, said: 'This science leads to death. But it also kills man's spirit. Because we believe that the spirit is outside of man, it is in the earth, the trees and rivers. If we destroy all of this, man will have destroyed its spirit'.

¹⁵ See <http://www.viacampesina.org> for all of the information on the network contained in this article.

¹⁶ The women's groups promoting this initiative, on June 20, 2006 in Leipzig, where the FAO had organized a conference on genetic vegetable resources, had already made a *Leipzig Appeal* (<http://www.ecn.org/food/leipzig.htm>). This concerned food security from women's point of view (the perspective of food sovereignty had not yet been arrived at by these women's networks; this was adopted at the Rome conference in 1996 organised in alternative to the FAO summit, thank to the debate with La Via Campesina). Their appeal asserted a 'no' to new food (the result of genetic manipulation) and to the patenting of life. During the FAO conference in Leipzig, the most important cause of the great reduction of diversity of species and autochthon seeds was seen to be lying in the introduction of new GMO varieties.

¹⁷ Via Campesina put forward a proposal which found the acceptance of the World Forum of Port Alegre in January 2001, to declare the April 17th as the international day of peasants, in memory of the massacre of Sem Terra people who were protesting in their thousands in Eldorado dos Carajás in Brazil, during the second international conference of this network in Mexico, Tlaxcala (18-21 April, 1996). During the demonstration the police opened fire killing 19 people.

founder of the bank of natural seeds in Bangalore, which freely distributes seeds to the population for cultivation.

The *Conference of Nyeleny* held in Africa (Selingué, Mali) in February 2007 saw the participation of spontaneous movements of agricultural workers and other people from the rural world and was very important to start a new network of work and cooperation in this continent too.

The *concept of food sovereignty* is, as I have previously claimed, one to work on and adequately articulate depending on the situations and countries concerned.

In *Rome, in 1996*, our concern was to *distinguish* the notion of food sovereignty from that of *food security*, affirming the right of every population to *decide what to eat and how to produce it*, having access to land and low interest loans, as opposed to the mere right to access whatever food others decide to produce and distribute. To put it more clearly: the objective was the possibility of accessing land as well as the water that runs through its veins, of accessing the biodiversity of the vegetation and animal life that populates it, and to be able to manage these fundamental sources of reproduction of life on which the possibility of nutrition is founded, adopting fully sustainable methods that make these sources renewable.

The *framework* for this new relationship with the land and food production and distribution hinges on a *concept of food as common good* rather than any other commodity, which gives substance to the *fundamental right* of everyone to food and thus life.

The *outlook* is not that of *competition on the global market*, but of *cooperation, solidarity and equality* between peasants, geared to offer *authentic and varied agricultural products* to the *local and national markets*, and the excess to other markets; with a primary concern for the satisfaction of the food needs of the populations in the place one belongs to. Considering that even *Eskimos* have always used their own food systems, any doubt over whether this framework might fail to cater for anyone ought to be dispelled. This is to say that on every corner of the earth, even under extreme conditions, populations have always managed to establish systems for the production of food capable of satisfying the local demand. *Moreover*, this outlook of solidarity, cooperation and equality concerns the *relationship between producers and consumers*. Each one of these figures guarantees the life of the other, because *the earth can provide work and life opportunities to many people*, rather than force them into emigration caused by poverty or by expulsion enforced through further agricultural modernisation and other kinds of capitalist investment (such as dams, roads, mines, oil rigs, etc.).¹⁸

Even for a country in the North, such as France, Jose Bové claims that ‘the first form of sovereignty is food sovereignty, the ability to feed and choose how and what to feed on’¹⁹ and that the land can provide work and life opportunities to many people so long as *peasant based agriculture* is practiced. This, he claims, must meet a number of requirements: two conditions, three dimensions and an approach developed in ten principles and a verifying perimeter, i.e. a space for acts of ascertainment.²⁰ The first principle is here that of solidarity rather than competition amongst peasants. The two conditions are that the peasant decides to have in his or her farm a place for initiative and responsibility as well as a political context that supports peasant based agriculture rather than industrialisation and concentration. The decisions of peasants and government policies can both contribute to the repartition of production. As for the three dimensions, Bové claims that

¹⁸ On this basis many initiatives were set up in the developed world, such as the network of National Food Security Coalition in the United States at the beginning of the 1990s (which I write about in *The native in us, the earth we belong to, op. cit.*). In Italy, see GAS (Gruppi di acquisto solidale – Groups for solidarity purchase) made up of citizens who agree with producers on what agricultural produce to buy in compliance with five basic ethical rules: respect for human beings (first and foremost the produce must not result from social injustices), respect for the environment, health, taste and priority purchase in solidarity with small producers who follow these rules. GAS discuss their practices and problems at national meetings and are currently opening to include other sectors of production too. They involve around two million citizens. On this issue, see A. Saroldi (2001), *Gruppi di acquisto solidali. Guida al consumo locale*. Bologna: Emi.

¹⁹ J. Bové and F. Dufour (2001), p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176-178, 121 and 180.

the first one is social, based on possibility of occupation, on solidarity among peasants and among different regions and peasants of the world. Respecting every peasant's and regional right to produce is fundamental; otherwise the powerful would manage the right to other people's lives, which has no place in human balance. On the contrary, industrialisation and the ensuing concentration of agricultural companies induce to increase production while reducing more and more the number of workers. The second dimension concerns agriculture, which must be economically efficient and thus create added value to the chosen means of production and product quantities. This relates to the ability of peasants to live on relatively modest amounts of produce, a necessary condition for the maintenance of high numbers of active workers. This kind of economically efficient production goes hand in hand with that of produce of quality.²¹ This condition can be better understood when also considering Bové's fourth principle, which is the need to valorise abundant resources and economise on scarce ones. Labour is clearly an abundant resource and should thus be valorised. Substituting it with capital requires a large expenditure of often non-renewable energy.²² As Bové seems to suggest through his entire speech, this substitution can lead to excessive levels of debt and thus to a continuous and unbearable pressure on life. This is both a refusal and a critique of the productivist and technologist approach that treats investment and innovation as inevitable. The third dimension is that consumers must be respected and offered healthy food, as nature is to be respected by helping, through agricultural activities, the protection of biodiversity and the environment. The perimeter is a space for verifying the indicators, i.e. the limits derived by the adoption of these principles, such as the number of animals that can be pastured on a piece of land and what are the acceptable levels of nitrogen to be used per hectare. Bové defines a triad for peasant based agriculture, which he identifies in producing, giving possibilities of occupations, preserving. These are interdependent in as much production is not understood as constantly increasing, in so far as the peasant's function is not only to produce but to manage the territory as a whole, maintaining it as habitat of animal and plant species and as a lively and dynamic environment for social relations. Therefore, the peasant's relationship with the other figures of the territory is very important. Speaking of peasants, Francois Dufour, a livestock farmer and Bové's comrade, said: 'Our objective and our labour is not production. We inhabit a space, manage it and participate to the social connection with the countryside'.²³ From these words the project of peasant based agriculture moved its first steps.

We have so far only highlighted some of its features, but we can already clearly see how a *total convergence* between the peasants of the South and those of the North is emerging, first of all on the issue of *solidarity, responsibility and sense of limit*.

Food sovereignty refers then to an *alternative project of organisation of production and social relations, a different social project* founded on *peasant based agriculture*, which as such can offer *work opportunities to many people*, as opposed to the industrial agricultural model and the monoculture that too often deprives people, not only of any income, but also of autonomy and identity, especially in the case of small producers turned into employees of multinational corporations. The issue of the possibility of a mode of agriculture that is *sustainable in all respects: economically, socially and environmentally*, and that re-establishes the traditional methods that are respectful of nature by allowing its regeneration and thus the yearly generation of reaps and fruits, is the *core element of the path towards food sovereignty*. Only the spreading of this kind of agriculture that requires the *resumption of livestock farming on land and of integrated systems of cultivation, farming and forestry*, but above all the culture of different species, *can provide more food security* as a possibility of nourishment for everyone, because it can be articulated to match the characteristics of different territories and is in the hands of the populations rather than multinationals, thus allowing for food to be accessed even independently of money; because it is diversified and can provide food that is environmentally and culturally adequate for the people who

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176, 180.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

live in the regions; it can guarantee that the food is healthy, varied and nourishing as opposed to the impoverished and homogenised set of produce that some can afford to buy when the majority of the land is privatised by large companies. I am here referring to countries in the global South in particular.²⁴ In the North, the question is one of accessing healthy, fresh, tasty and thus quality food.

Behind the decision of practicing peasant based agriculture is seeing, suffering the consequences and paying the high hidden costs of the *deceit of capitalist productivity*. The costs are more than the ones mentioned above, from the purchase of seeds and chemical products, to the loss of biodiversity, the poisoning of the soil, the deterioration of food and the damage on health and the environment. A few examples will suffice to illustrate them.

Intensive farming in Europe presupposes so-called shadow hectares in developing countries; these are hectares of land dedicated to the cultivation of corn for our farms and that amount to *seven times* more than those dedicated to it in Europe, field after field taken away from the diversified agriculture that could have benefited the local populations.²⁵

The so-called *White Revolution*, consisting in the transformation of what used to be the *holy cow* in India into a milk machine, entailed the loss of all the other functions of this animal which were *very important for the agriculture and life of the villages*. First of all, the engine power used to plough the fields, and the cowpat used as manure and fuel (when dried, it used to cater for two thirds of the energy needs of Indian villages).²⁶

The dairy industry managed by women flourished around the cow, whilst still making it possible to feed babies, and sometimes the poor, with milk derivatives that were as rich in nutrients as the parts that were sold, thus reproducing a whole set of craftsmanship and monetary incomes for women, who employed them for the improvement of the family and community. Nowadays, wherever the holy cow was turned into a milk machine, this has all been made to vanish. The animal has a single function, the production of milk, and all of the fresh milk is delivered to industrial dairies with nothing left for the production of derivatives for children and jobs for women.

As for GMO, let us remember how they are weaker plants that can be easily struck by diseases and require the use of many chemical products to prevent this, thus *impoverishing the soil*.

Another *cost* for the peasants of the global South is constituted by the *great dispute over intellectual property rights on living matter*, when they are forced to defend the results of their labour and knowledge as a common, against the pirate appropriation of multinationals.

The *productivity of these plantations hides* the progressive impoverishment of peasants that is caused not only, as we have previously pointed out, by land expropriation, the destruction of the biodiversity that is the source of food, the impossibility for numerous farmers and peasants to have an income from agriculture, and the precariousness of the wages of the few who are granted any, but also by the *aggravation of the international debt on their shoulders* because these cultivations, the water they require and the infrastructures they need are heavily subsidised, and the governments hosting them indebt themselves to face the costs by reducing the financial support for small agriculture and basic services for the population.

Behind *these plantations lies the imposition* placed by economic and political powers in the North to *take decisions that are disastrous in many respects* for those who are subjected to them. For instance, in countries on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) following the agreements made with the European Community and then with the European Union, the imposition to produce fruit and vegetables for export and reduce the cultivation of cereals and pulses compromised the wholeness and levels of self-sufficiency of their dietary system.

²⁴ It is indicative that the price of tortilla, one of the most popular and least expensive foods, has risen in Mexico ever since corn was used to produce bio fuel.

²⁵ V. Shiva (2001) *Vacche sacre mucche pazze*, Roma: DeriveApprodi, p. 70 (original title: *Stolen Harvest, South End Press*, Cambridge MA, 2000).

²⁶ V. Shiva, *Ibid.*, p. 65ff; see also V. Shiva (1990) *Sopravvivere allo sviluppo*, Turin: Isedi, p. 202ff (original title: *Staying alive: women, ecology and development*, London: Zed Books, 1989).

Thus these countries were faced with an increased debt not only for the purchase of what they used to produce and are now made to import, like cereals and oil, but also for the building of infrastructures used for watering and other necessary purposes for the new produce. They were also confronted with the impoverishment of their environmental resources, mainly due to the hardly efficient exploitation of soil and water. They saw an increase in the small farmers and peasants' exodus from the countryside. They were put in competition for this produce with agricultural workers from the Mediterranean coast of Europe (Portugal, Spain, Southern France, Italy and Greece).

And yet behind these agricultural policies *also lies the exclusion and, more seriously, the impoverishment and precariousness of women's lives and those of disadvantaged people* who depend on them, as well as an attack on women's struggle for autonomy and the improvement of the conditions of families and the community, which often occurred through the selection and cultivation of plant species and the preparation of food, but also through the income that small-scale craftsmanship was able to generate. Significantly, on 8 March 2006, women in Brazil occupied the Aracruz Celulosa plantation in Barra do Ribeiro, Rio Grande do Sur, to draw attention to the devastating social and environmental impact of the growing green desert of monocultures of eucalyptus, a plant notorious for its absorption of large quantities of water and disastrous consequences for the soil.²⁷ After the occupation, those women joined the demonstration for the international women's day in Porto Alegre where they showed their solidarity with working women from all over the rural and urban world, while in the same city FAO was holding its conference on agrarian reform and rural development.

A reading of the Declaration of Nyeleni highlights further important elements in the debate on food sovereignty, bearing in mind that these are also key and recurring questions in the documents of Via Campesina. At the *Forum of Nyeleni, all of the desaparecidos and defectors of development* gathered together: peasants, traditional fishworkers, indigenous peoples, people without land, rural workers, migrants, nomadic herdsmen, communities who inhabit forests²⁸, women, men, young people, consumers, and environmental and urban movements.²⁹ Over 500 representatives from more than 80 countries were present. The conference was the result of an organisational effort from various networks, including La Via Campesina, ROPPA (Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs Agricoles de l'Afrique de l'Ouest – Network of organizations of the peasants and agricultural producers of West Africa), the World Fishermen and Fishworkers' Forum, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, the International Committee for the Planning of food sovereignty, the World Network for Food Sovereignty, the Women's World March, and Friends of the Earth.

The *Women's Forum*, to attest to the fundamental role of women in agriculture, constituted the *preparatory stage* for the work of the conference. Amongst the main points emerging immediately out of the Declaration were the dimension of *ethics, responsibility and sense of limit*.

Firstly the declaration affirms that food producers are aware of their crucial role in the future of humankind, to which they reinstate their desire to provide healthy and quality food in abundance, and so, we deduce, they aim to take on this role in a *responsible, ethical and generous* manner. This

²⁷ The Aracruz Celulosa is a state funded agro-industrial enterprise that owns the largest green deserts in the country. Its plantations extend over more than 250,000 hectares of land, 50,000 of which are in the Rio Grande do Sur alone. Its factories produce 2.4 millions tons of whitened cellulose per year generating great pollution in the air and waters and damage to the health.

²⁸ The inhabitants of forests in particular are victims of vicious attacks from 'higher levels of development' that not only undermine their chance of survival by preventing them to practice agriculture, hunt, and fish, but also threaten their lives by spreading diseases. The people of Achuar in the Amazon forest of Peru are an example of this: due to the oil extraction in their area, the whole land and the waters of the Corrientes River are polluted. Finding alternative water sources is of little use given that animals drink anywhere and eating animals involves eating the pollution spread by oil, become ill and die. This area was used first by Pluspetrol, then by Petroperu, and Oxy Peru. This is one of the many cases that are lesser known than the one of the Niger estuary in Nigeria, marked by a long history of resistance by the Ogoni people and today brought to the attention of the world.

²⁹ www.viacampesina.org

resolve is prevented, as asserted in numerous points, by the policies of capitalism and neo-liberalism. To these *irresponsible* policies, matured over the course of the first and second Green Revolution, the declaration opposes an agriculture that aims to be *responsible* towards both *land* and *humans*.

It recognises that *women and indigenous peoples* have historically been the most important agents in the creation of food and agricultural practices, but were also generally underestimated, and declares its wish to take on *responsibility for preserving and re-establishing the legacy of their creation and to allow* their abilities and knowledge to continue and develop, to take on responsibility not only for the *future generations* but also for the *past generations*, their labour and knowledge, so as to not negate the *efforts they made*.

The requirement to continue to develop this legacy, as claimed in the Declaration of Nyeleni, means that food producers, peasants, fishworkers, and farmers must be granted full *right to access and management* of lands, fields, waters, seeds, animals and biodiversity, and the recognition and defence of *women's rights* to take on an *absolutely central role*, which it claims to be *crucial* for the production of food and thus must be guaranteed by ensuring their *corresponding representation in all decision making bodies*. I ought to point out that this imperative in the peasants' and fishworkers' organisations oriented towards food sovereignty is closely followed in terms of *equal representation* of men and women. On the contrary, the industrial management of agriculture and fishing took away from women the plurality of crafts that they had previously had (as peasants, craftsman, and in their role in the preparation and sale of fish), it deprived them of their function and devalued them, leaving them impoverished and more exposed to the violence of individuals and organisations. Their taking on *decision making roles where their chance to live and be autonomous is at stake* is extremely important, as it is *indispensable* for men to work alongside organised women in this global struggle for food sovereignty. The conference in Pokhara, Nepal, held on May 13-15, 2007, saw the participation of around 1,500 peasant leaders from different regions of the country.³⁰ This was a historic event because it involved all of the interested parties, with the participation of a 45% strong women's contingent. After all, the participation in struggles and organisations often allows women to change traditions that oppress or limit their mobility even under the most difficult circumstances.³¹

The document of Nyeleni proceeds to confront three key interdependent issues. One is the right of different peoples to *develop in their own countries* and have the chance to live with dignity on the products of their labour, in other words, to not be forced to emigrate or die of privations. Another is the possibility to *preserve and re-establish rural environments, water resources, landscapes and traditional diets*, based on the sustainable management and the respect for the environment, soil, land, water, sea, seeds, animals and biodiversity; the implementation of a real and integral land reform that guarantees for the peasants full rights over their land and defends and recuperates the lands of indigenous populations, that ensures access and management to fishing zones and their ecosystems for the fishworkers, and recognises nomadic herdsmen or pastoralists the right to pasture and transhumance ... and offers *a future to youth in the countryside*. I would add to this that it is not true that young people only want to flee the countryside. Both in the North and the South, men and women would like to work in the countryside, but under decent conditions and in order to implement an alternative agriculture in particular.³² It is important to note the appeal of

³⁰ www.viacampesina.org

³¹ On the issue of women's participation to peasants' organisation in Pakistan and Afghanistan, see I. Munir, *Peasant struggles and pedagogy in Pakistan*, in M. Coté, R. Day and G. de Peuter (eds) (2007), *Utopian Pedagogy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

³² Cooperatives of young people who manage rural businesses often show an increasing desire to take on other functions and turn the business into a meaningful space for reshaping the relationship between city and countryside, opening the business and its territory up to different initiatives that are cultural and productive and create work for people in difficulties, to become a meeting place for those who come from the city, and a leisure ground for children. A good example of this is the Cooperative "Le terre della Grola – Ottomarzo" in the province of Verona (www.letterredellagrola.it/grola/html).

25 April 2007 during the preparations for the Rostock initiatives surrounding the G8 summit, where young people had planned a meeting for 3 June. They appealed against the forced closure of 300,000 agricultural farms in Europe every year due to the expansion of industrial agriculture that is also responsible for environmental degradation. They underlined that working the soil using sustainable methods is a right that is denied to them by the raising of land rents due to speculation and interest rates. As a result, unless one comes from a landowning peasant family, one is denied this right, whereas the development of this kind of agriculture requires that many young people take up this option. They also accused the *EPA (Economic partnership agreements)* according to which the EU demands from the ACP (76 countries, 39 out of which are identified as least developed countries) to lift their custom taxes for nearly all of European products.

Going back to reading the declaration of Nyeleni, we find that in the case of *natural or man made catastrophe* and in *post war situations*, food sovereignty must be intended as a guarantee capable of reinforcing local initiatives for reconstruction and minimising negative repercussions, because the communities that are struck and then abandoned are not unable to do so, and a solid social organisation is the key to recovering and rebuilding the region with their own means. This is set in opposition to the *policies of food aid*, the other side of food policies that often are too late, reach the 'wrong' targets, send inadequate food supplies or some kind of GM food already proven injurious to one's health, and further cripple local production.

I drew attention to these fundamental issues and neglected others to be brief. What has emerged is the determination and decision to follow a different direction that begins with the local, over which *control is reclaimed*, and to build a *different social project* that does *not presuppose the hunger* of the many for the well-being of the few. Their position is crucial because they are the producers of food, and this is the reason they were able to *trigger this turn-around*. *By initially questioning their chances to survive and then the quality of their and other people's lives, they questioned the meaning of their labour and of their relationship with the land and other human beings*. This element of the *decision*, that is, to take on a *different path*, is fundamental. Obviously they do not believe that they can 'play alongside the capitalist trend', because this trend, in the very policies of expropriation, aims at disregarding more and more land and humans by ignoring their life cycles and thus destroying both. Another kind of agriculture needs to be implemented. *Against the nonsensical moves* of capital, these people sought a solution to hunger in the building of a *meaningful alternative*, rooted at the local level but with global implications, with a sense of *measure and limit*. They understood peasant based agriculture primarily as *responsible agriculture*: towards the soil that should not be poisoned by chemicals, but treated with respect to preserve its life sources and cycles (and also realising that this is the most convenient option); towards other peasants around the globe, with whom to form solidarity rather than competition; towards the purchasers of the agricultural products, to whom authentic and abundant food should be provided as a guarantee of life for humanity as a whole. *Against a nonsensical food dictatorship* that keeps *issuing death sentences*, an *alimentary freedom* must be established as the other face of *food democracy*. Food democracy is the *indispensable basis of any democracy*.

New integrated scenarios

Utopia? It is hard to think so when 50 million people are moving in the same direction and building numerous opportunities for meetings and concrete initiatives to begin to establish food sovereignty in various regions. After all, the question of the consequences in terms of increasing hunger, of social problems, of environmental disaster, health damage that will derive if the current agricultural model is pursued, can no longer be avoided. It is indicative that the chairman of FAO, Jacques Diouf, on 13 September 2006, in San Francisco at the conference of the World Affairs Council of North Carolina³³, claimed that *100 million people risk forced migration* as a result of advancing

³³ This is one of the most important non governmental forums of discussion and debate on international affairs in the United States, with over ten thousands members.

desertification and soil erosion, whilst water resources are becoming more scarce in important regions for the production of corn, such as India and China, thereby suggesting that the key to increasing production whilst safeguarding natural resources lies in *agricultural development* that is also *sustainable* from an environmental point of view. He added that one must begin from the *village, where, through the integrated management of cultures and better techniques of cultivation, returns can be increased up to 30%*, and that *the new Green Revolution* will be based less on the introduction of new corn or rice varieties with high profits, and more on a *wiser and more efficient use of the natural resources* that are available. On the occasion, he also admitted that ‘it might seem incredible but we can save water whilst producing more food’. Peasants had known this for millennia. However, these remarks are an important indication of the fact that at the top of some institutions one recognizes the need for a change towards *local and sustainable agriculture*. Another important indication is that several states start including food sovereignty in their *constitution or in important documents*. It features in the new constitution of Bolivia, in the ad interim constitution of Nepal, in the new Loi d’Orientation Agricole of Mali, and in important documents of Senegal, Venezuela and Spain. After all, one of the intentions of this movement is for food sovereignty to be a right recognised in *juridical systems at the international level*. This and other important questions will also be discussed in Budapest at the end of September, where many European peasants, from Russia to Portugal, will debate and *launch proposals for agrarian policies in Europe*, on the *prerequisite* that access to land, water, seeds and biodiversity must remain available to the communities that produce food, and that their ability to preserve, gather and develop the knowledge acquired through their practice, allowing the conservation of biodiversity for millennia, must be placed above the needs of markets and enterprise in defence of the interests of future generations.

Bibliography and online sources

Leipzig Appeal, 20 June, 1996 (<http://www.ecn.org/food/leipzig.htm>).

Angelini, Massimo (2004) *Il valore complesso delle varietà tradizionali e locali* in Angelini Massimo *et al.*, (2004).

Angelini Massimo *et al.* (2004) *Terra e libertà/critical wine. Sensibilità planetarie, agricoltura contadina e rivoluzione dei consumi*, DeriveApprodi, Roma.

Bové José and Dufour François (2001) *Il mondo non è in vendita*, Feltrinelli, Milano. English translation: *The World is not for Sale. Farmers against Junk Food*, London: Verso, 2001.

Cooperativa Eughenia, 'Le ragioni di una battaglia del Foro Contadino. Altragricoltura', <http://www.altragricoltura.org/dirittoallaterra/eughenia-6feb04.htm>

Coté Mark, Day Richard J. F. and de Peuter Grieg (eds) (2007) *Utopian Pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto Buffalo London.

Dalla Costa Mariarosa and Dalla Costa Giovanna F. (eds) (1996), *Donne sviluppo e lavoro di riproduzione. Questioni delle lotte e dei movimenti*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2nd ed. 2003. English translation: *Women, Development and Labour of Reproduction. Struggles and Movements*, Africa World Press, Trenton, N. J., USA and Asmara, Eritrea, 1999.

Dalla Costa Mariarosa (1999), *L'Indigeno che è in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo*, in A. Marucci, *Camminare domandando*, DeriveApprodi, Roma. English translation: 'The Native in Us, the Land We Belong to', in *The Commoner* n. 6, 2002, in www.thecommoner.org.

Dalla Costa Mariarosa and De Bortoli Dario (2005), 'Per un'altra agricoltura e un'altra alimentazione in Italia', in *Foedus*, n. 11. English translation: 'For Another Agriculture and Another Food Policy in Italy', in *The Commoner*, n. 10, Spring-Summer 2005, in www.thecommoner.org.

Dalla Costa Mariarosa (2007) 'Food as Common and Community', in *The Commoner*, n. 12, Spring-Summer, in www.thecommoner.org

Dalla Costa Mariarosa (2007) 'Rustic and Ethical', in Dowling Emma, Trott Ben and Nunes Rodrigo (ed.) *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization*, vol.7 (1), in www.ephemeraweb.org

George Susan (1989) *Il debito del Terzo Mondo*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma (or.ed. *A Fate Worse than Debt*, Penguin Group, England, 1988)

George Susan (1991) *The Debt Boomerang*, Pluto Press, London.

George Susan and Sabelli Fabrizio (1994) *Crediti senza frontiere*, Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Torino.

Marucci Alessandro (1999) *Camminare domandando*, DeriveApprodi, Roma.

Munir Imran (2007) *Peasant Struggle and Pedagogy in Pakistan*, in Coté Mark, Day Richard J. F. and de Peuter Grieg (eds).

Olivucci Alberto, *Civiltà Contadina per la protezione della biodiversità*, written in 2001. (www.civiltacontadina.it/seedsavers/intro.htm).

Ricoveri Giovanna (ed.) (2006) *Capitalismo Natura Socialismo*, Jaca Book, Milano.

Saroldi Andrea (2001) *Gruppi di acquisto solidali. Guida al consumo locale*, Emi, Bologna.

Saroldi Andrea (2003) *Costruire economie solidali. Un percorso a 4 livelli*, Emi, Bologna.

Shiva Vandana (2006) *Il bene comune della terra*, Feltrinelli, Milano (or. ed. Earth Democracy. Justice, Sustainability and Peace, 2005).

Shiva Vandana (2001) *Vacche sacre mucche pazze*, DeriveApprodi, Roma (original title: *Stolen Harvest*, South End Press, Cambridge MA: 2000).

V. Shiva (1990) *Sopravvivere allo sviluppo*, Turin: Isedi (original title: *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Zed Books, London: 1989).

Sivini Giordano (2004) *Puntare sulle filiere corte per uscire dalla subalternità dell'agricoltura all'industria*, in M. Angelini et al., (2004).

www.epicentro.iss.it/temi/mentale/suicidi06_oms.asp

www.viacampesina.org

www.letterredellagrola.it/grola/html