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**Book review: Toward deglobalisation and food sovereignty? : Walden Bello
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Book reviews

Toward deglobalisation and food sovereignty?

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Walden Bello

The Food Wars, Verso: London, 2009; x + 176 pp: 9781844673315,
£7.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by Gerardo Otero, *Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada*

Walden Bello's chief accomplishment in this small book is to articulate the case for the 'deglobalisation' of agriculture and advance the programme for food sovereignty. Both goals entail a refocusing of national economies on local markets without shunning trade. The point is thus to strip away the neoliberal character of global capitalism while moving toward a radically democratic economy and society in which people, rather than transnational corporations and their suprastate institutions, rule the world.

Bello offers a wonderfully readable account of the food crisis detonated in 2007, but is not content with merely sorting out the main precipitating forces – financial speculation in agricultural commodities, and US and EU policies geared to promote agrofuels production (euphemistically labelled 'biofuels' by proponents) as a supplement or substitute for gasoline or diesel. He goes beyond these factors in search of the deep structural causes, so that proper alternatives can be sought. The main culprits, it turns out, are the neoliberal 'structural adjustment programmes' (SAPs), vigorously promoted since the 1980s by international financial institutions (IFIS) such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). By promoting trade liberalisation and private and transnational corporations in agriculture, these suprastate institutions greatly contributed to the already well advanced demise of small farmers and peasant producers the world over. Thus, from a logic of agricultural production centred on use values, simple reproduction and quality foods as key movers, modern agriculture has privileged exchange values and capitalist profits. As starkly put by Bello, the future outcome of the current food wars is either 'the global market-driven paradigm on the one hand or a local-market-centered paradigm on the other' (p. 15).

The first chapter outlines a theoretical framework for how to understand the antagonism between peasants and capitalism. It offers an implicitly Chayanovian perspective,

and an overview of world agriculture since the 19th century based on the food-regime framework originally developed by Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael (1989). While the British dominated the first food regime until the First World War, the USA took the helm of the second food regime after the Second World War. US double standards characterised the second food regime: pushing free trade for all but remaining protectionist over its own agricultural sector. This stand continues to pervade WTO agricultural trade talks. Combined with militant opposition by peasant groups including *Vía Campesina* (see Desmarais, 2007), the largest transnational organisation of a subordinate class (the peasantry and small farmers), US and EU protectionism have made it impossible for the WTO to conclude its 'Doha Round' of talks, specifically intended to finalise agricultural trade liberalisation.

The next few chapters offer empirical analysis of how neoliberalism has impacted on the peasantries of various countries. Chapter 2 starts with an excellent overview of how the Mexican government eroded the productivity of its countryside. Mexico is perhaps the paradigmatic case of 'structural adjustment' in this sector. As described by a World Bank executive quoted by Bello, it amounted to 'unprecedented thoroughgoing interventionism' (p. 40). From having been largely self-sufficient in food production and even exporting sizeable surpluses until 1989, beginning in 2010 Mexico has increased its food dependency substantially, particularly in the importation of grains, cereals and meat from the USA. Bello rightly sums up three decades of neoliberalism thus: 'Mexico is in a state of acute food insecurity, permanent economic crisis, political instability, and uncontrolled criminal activity' (p. 53).

Chapter 3 discusses the Philippines, Bello's country of birth. Its staple food is rice, which, unlike corn, is produced mostly for the internal market: only 10 per cent is traded in the world market. Bello's starting question for the Philippines, as one example of a number of Asian countries that used to be self-sufficient in rice, is that of why they have 'come to be severely dependent on imports' (p. 54). The chief response again lies in SAPs. Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippines' dictator until 1986, introduced moderate land reform and support for peasants. Ironically, the later democratic governments introduced all-out neoliberal policies pushed by the IFIs. The 1995 entry of the Philippines to the WTO had the same effects as Mexico's joining NAFTA in 1994, says Bello (p. 60). As in Mexico, US corn-dumping prices outcompeted Filipino peasants, and tariff reductions had the perverse effect of deteriorating fiscal revenues for the state. By 2008, twenty years after the start of the agrarian reform, only 17 per cent of targeted lands had been redistributed (p. 65), and labour productivity had declined in relation to other Asian economies. 'In one commodity after another, Filipino producers were displaced' (p. 67). The case is even more tragic than Mexico's.

But the destruction of African agriculture was worse (Chapter 4). Having had an annual per capita income growth of 3 per cent between 1970 and 1973, by 2007, sub-Saharan Africa experienced a reversal of poverty gains made in the period 1990 to 2004. SAPs accelerated 'Africa's downward spiral' (p. 71), and got stuck in a low-level trap. As in Mexico and elsewhere, the good lands were devoted to export crops, and the local market abandoned to the volatility of import prices. In an interesting reflection on the World Bank's role, Bello writes that while in most countries it 'macromanaged', in the sense that it set up strict parameters for structural adjustment, in Africa it 'micromanaged', in that it sent its

own agents to monitor the government officials implementing it. It took a long time for the World Bank to own up to its responsibility for the SAPs' utter failure. Worse, it came up with a new grand strategy to establish labour reserves, in which poverty alleviation programmes are to be set up to prevent unrest, but deep causes are to be left untouched.

Chapter 5 presents a fine synthesis of the historical evolution of peasantry-party relations in China. It shows that, except for the period 1978-1984, when peasants saw their incomes rise, the Chinese Communist Party has used peasant surpluses – and even parts of their replacement fund (when 30 million died) – to finance and promote export-oriented industrialisation. Still, China continued to be self-sufficient in basic grains, was a net exporter for three decades, and in 2008 was the fourth biggest agricultural exporter. But Chinese self-sufficiency is under threat thanks to five issues, argues Bello. The increased 'meatification' of the Chinese diet requires heavy imports of soybeans as feed-stuffs for livestock; its WTO entry in 2001 is leading to increased food dependency by de-peasantisation and increased grain imports; there are ecological limits due to water scarcity; investments in research and development have declined; and millions of hectares of agricultural land have been lost to urban-industrial uses. In sum, the peasant constituency of Mao's revolution has been largely sacrificed to the gods of industrial and urban development.

The relation between agrofuels and food insecurity is discussed in a superb Chapter 6. Agrofuels have aggravated food-price volatility, contribute to global warming (mostly through deforestation to clear new land), and in the USA alone, they will suck up \$92 billion in subsidies in 2006-2012. Furthermore, the main beneficiaries are transnational corporations like Cargill and ADM, and transnational financiers like George Soros and Bill Gates have invested heavily in agrofuels futures (pp. 109-10). At the root of both US and EU agrofuels policies is the idea of 'fuel security', when the key concern should be the search for a green transportation paradigm. Worse, at least for the EU, where 58 per cent of biodiesel is imported, it will cause further deforestation in developing countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil. The latter is regarded as the most efficient producer of agrofuels, mostly from sugarcane, but it is very 'labour inefficient', as it uses slave-like conditions (p. 113). The ultimate victims in agrofuels policies are thus workers and the environment, thanks to attempts to correct the symptoms and not the real malady brought on by the energy-intensive transportation paradigm.

Chapter 7, 'Resistance and the road to the future', makes an excellent case for the peasant and small-farmer route to remaking agriculture. Inspired in part by Karl Polanyi, Bello calls for "reembedding" the economy in society, instead of having society driven by the economy' (p. 146). The new paradigm must move in the direction of both food sovereignty and deglobalisation (a concept proposed earlier, see Bello 2002), understood as the confluence of food self-sufficiency, subsidiarity, equity, community, industrial policy, income and land redistribution, quality versus economic growth, subordinating private and state sectors to civil society, mixed economy, and environmental congeniality. Most of these ideas are drawn from the actual practice of Brazil's MST (Landless Workers Movement) and *Vía Campesina*. The MST is rightly regarded as the most dynamic global movement, and its success is attributed to three main factors: a dedicated 'in-class' leadership of politicised activists, a land-occupation strategy which provides the movement with space for its own reproduction, and the MST's determination to remain

autonomous from political parties. A contrast with Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) movement is that the latter focused too much on its indigenous constituency, rather than framing the movement more broadly to appeal to all peasants and workers. The MST has also explicitly advocated what Hannah Wittman (2009) has called 'ecological citizenship', or an agrarian practice that turns farmers into guardians of the land, ensuring ecological equilibrium.

In sum, *The Food Wars* is an excellent book which I strongly recommend for use in undergraduate and graduate courses on the sociology of food and agriculture, regional geographies, development studies and other fields concerned with the nature of neoliberal capitalism. It is also accessible for a general public concerned with these issues. Yet I have some critical comments regarding conceptual lapses in the book, peasant essentialism in the analysis on China, at least one insufficiently substantiated assertion, and continued usage of the 'Global South' as a concept, as if it really existed in reality.

On the first point, Bello equates surplus value with profit in defining capitalism as 'the organization of production to extract surplus value or broadly, profit, from workers in the production process' (p. 19). Strictly speaking, profit is not directly surplus value, since not all capital is invested in the purchase of labour power: constant (or 'dead') capital must also be invested. Therefore, profit must be measured against the sum of both types of capital. A related lapse on the same page is the assertion that peasants produce principally for subsistence (which is right), 'but secondarily for *monetary gain* through the marketing of the surplus product' (p. 19, emphasis added).

By definition, however, the peasantry does not produce a surplus product, but only enough for simple reproduction. When/if they do produce a surplus product, several things may happen, namely: 1) in most cases it is appropriated by some dominant class or the state; 2) they may increase their standard of living, while remaining in a simple-reproduction mode; or 3) the surplus product could become the material basis for bourgeoisification, i.e. the systematic hiring and exploiting of the labour power of others beyond household labour (see Otero, 1999: Ch. 4).

These conceptual nuances are extremely important to strengthen Bello's food-sovereignty programme: if peasants, like capitalists, also pursued 'monetary gain', what would be the difference between them? The fact is that peasants have historically had to convert part of their production into money, not because it represents a surplus but because, in order to supplement their subsistence, they require other use values different from the ones they produce. For instance, coffee producers cannot live on this commodity alone. Even when peasants are diversified, they will require other use values, such as agricultural implements, clothing, etc. Thus, the logic of peasant production is geared primarily to ensure subsistence and replacement rather than monetary gain per se.

And yet, essentialism about the peasantry would be best avoided. In relation to China, Bello makes an excellent case about how the urban industrial economy has been built on the shoulders of peasants, and urban incomes were six times higher than rural incomes in 2000; and how increased taxes on the peasantry contributed to a great increase in the bureaucracy, etc. He laments the extent to which China has become dependent on cotton imports. But then again, cotton is not food. On the contrary, it could be seen as an indication that China is reversing the traditional centre-periphery relation in the world economy: importing a primary good to generate new jobs in

industry. While much of the peasantry has surely become a pauperised pool of surplus labour power for industrialisation, Bello never considers the extent to which former peasants have also been reincarnated into an urban proletariat, and perhaps part of the growing middle classes.

Bello quotes an alarming fact about modern agriculture: that it takes much more caloric-energy input than it produces in food. But there is trouble with the numbers and sources. On page 36, global industrial agriculture 'employs three calories of fossil fuel energy to produce one calorie of food energy' (citing a Sierra Club report); but on page 140, Bello cites another source claiming that 'between production, processing, distribution, and preparation, 10 calories of energy are required to create just one calorie of food energy'. Given the seriousness of these figures and claims, it would have been best for Bello to seek at least a few more sources and straighten up the 'facts'.

Finally, it seems inconsistent to speak of a 'Global South' in referring primarily to issues dealt with within inter-governmental institutions like the WTO, on one hand; and in proposing a deglobalisation and food-sovereignty programme to be promoted by subordinate groups and classes on the other. The elementary truth is that, besides ephemeral groupings like the 'Group of 21' at the WTO, the 'Global South' exists only in the minds of progressive scholars and activists. But apart from *Vía Campesina*, there are extremely few actual, sustained organisations that struggle in 'global civil society' – another myth (see Otero, 2004). *Vía Campesina's* main accomplishment has been to contribute to derailing WTO negotiations, but the most tangible – and positive – successes for its constituency must take place at the level of the state. Pedro Magaña Guerrero, a Mexican peasant whose organisation is a member of *Vía Campesina*, put it this way after praising militancy at the global level: 'The consolidation of alternatives rests completely on what is happening at the local level, it depends on the development of organisations in their [peasants'] regions, in their countries' (quoted in Desmarais, 2007: 135). Therefore, if we really want to work toward the deglobalisation and re-localisation of food production, it is best to put political priorities in their place: that is, bottom-up linkages, including international solidarity, but firmly rooted in the state.

In spite of these limitations, *The Food Wars* is an outstanding contribution to understanding neoliberalism and food, as well as an insightful guide to transformative action in search of a sustainable future. I recommend it enthusiastically.

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Gerardo Otero teaches sociology at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, and in the development studies doctorate course at Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, Mexico. His latest book is *Food for the Few: Neoliberal Globalism and Biotechnology in Latin America* (University of Texas Press, 2008; forthcoming in Spanish with M.A. Porrúa). His research has been on the sociology of agriculture and food, neoliberalism, indigenous movements in Latin America, and migrant workers in Canada.

Alex Callinicos

Imperialism and Global Political Economy, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2009; 295pp: 9780745640464, £17.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by Eren Duzgun, York University, Toronto, Canada

Given the degree of devastation caused by the still-unfolding global economic crisis and the increasing propensity for already existing political fault lines to further break in the capitalist heartland, this book by Alex Callinicos could hardly have arrived in a more timely fashion. In it, Callinicos argues for the historical validity of the Lenin–Bukharin synthesis of capitalist imperialism in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the two distinct, though inter-related, forms of competition: the (geo)political and the economic. He holds that, once capitalist imperialism is conceptualised as the ‘intersection’ of these two forms of competition, ‘the interstate rivalries’ become ‘integrated into the larger processes of capital accumulation’, a process ‘which takes several centuries’ (p. 15). Also, since imperialism is now shaped by the indeterminate interplay of geopolitical and economic motives, this leads to a ‘non-reductionist treatment of imperialism’ which enables the theory to go beyond its reductionary readings, based on either the organisational structure of capitalism or that of the international system (p. 16).

The first part of the book consists of two chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a critical examination of the Lenin–Bukharin synthesis, as well as of other classical Marxist and non-Marxist theories of imperialism. Callinicos contends that classical Marxist theories of imperialism can be understood as a continuation of the ‘explanatory strategy’ that Marx developed in *Das Kapital* ‘to uncover the structural logic of the capitalist mode of production’ (p. 27). While searching the inner and necessary connections of phenomenal forms, Marx started from the most abstract, and progressively and non-deductively introduced ever-more concrete determinations in his analysis. Similarly, Marxist theoreticians of imperialism made ‘Marx’s research programme more concrete by building on to it an evolutionary theory of successive stages of capitalist development’, e.g. the introduction of the concept of finance capital and imperialism (p. 34).

Later in this first chapter, Callinicos attempts to pick up certain features of Lenin’s and Bukharin’s theories to reveal the source of his theory. While remaining fairly critical of Lenin and Bukharin, charging the former with ‘underconsumptionism’ and ‘a false theory of labour aristocracy’ (pp. 47–9) and the latter with an over-emphasis on ‘state capitalism’ (p. 56), he seems to combine Lenin’s notion of ‘uneven development’ (contra Teschke and Lacher, 2007) with Bukharin’s simultaneous processes of ‘nationalisation