The Regionalisation of Agrarian Struggle:
La Vía Campesina, ALBA, and the Road to 'Food Sovereignty'

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Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the intersections between social movements, states and regional institutions on the Latin American continent, with a specific focus on the inter-relations between the transnational peasant movement, La Vía Campesina, and the inter-state regional institution known as *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA) in the context of social struggles bound up with realising the goal of 'food sovereignty' in Latin America. The analysis will proceed along four sections: (1) the multiple and interconnected spatial scales of contention within social movements; (2) an alternative historical materialist approach to understanding the ways in which these spaces hang together; (3) a critical examination of the peasant movement La Vía Campesina, the concept of 'food sovereignty', and its implications for radical social change; (4) and an examination of ALBA's operational architecture as it pertains to the participation of social movement actors. I will then try to bring these considerations together in order to draw some conclusions on the limits and prospects of realising a radical 'Bolivarian' regional formation in the Americas.

1. *Spaces of Struggle: National, Transnational, or…?*

Social movements have been at the forefront of Latin American politics for some time. Their contemporary resurgence can be broadly traced to the crisis of the capitalist accumulation model on the continent, and became particularly prominent during the 'lost decade' of neoliberal reforms. During this time, the social science paradigm of 'transnational activism' (see, Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Guidry et al., 2000; Tarrow, 2005) became much more prominent in discussions of Latin American social movements. While no doubt a response to the increasing wave of neoliberal regionalisation projects on the continent, it soon seemed that transnational spaces of contention had become the Rosetta stone for anti-systemic mobilisation. From the

Zapatistas in Mexico (Holloway and Pelaez, 1998), to labour rights in *maquiladoras* (Carty, 2006), from indigenous rights struggles (Mato, 2000), to the resurgence of rural social movements (Deere and Royce, 2009), contentious politics in Latin America appeared to have an ever-greater transnational significance.

Thus, recent scholarship on social movements has begun to incorporate issues of space and scale into their analyses (e.g., Radcliffe, 2001; Featherstone, 2003; Leitner at al., 2008; Cumbers and Routledge, 2013). Of particular interest, for our purposes, is the work of Thomas Muhr, who has been instrumental in expanding our understanding of ALBA (see Muhr, 2010; 2012a; 2013). As he argues, today's global order is characterised by "transnational and transregional processes, rather than merely international and interregional ones", and whose key logics include "international financial markets; profound technological changes;… the development of 'free' markets shaped by classical economic theory", and so on (Muhr, 2010: 31). From this he concludes that the nation-state "is not necessarily any longer the primary scale of political, economic, and ideological struggles" (Muhr, 2013: 769).

But there are two potential problems with this approach. Critiquing the reification of the state potentially reifies entire historical epochs (see Lacher, 2003). For the transnationalism of today's globalising world was already present at the early stages of the capitalist world-system (van der Pijl, 1998), and even earlier (Buzan and Little, 2000) – think of the great migrations, maritime privateers, or even the trans-continental caravans of the ancient world. And while the rise of vertically integrated, transnational corporations (TNCs) are certainly specific to the 20th century it is questionable whether the accumulation strategies of TNCs dwarf more traditional territorial considerations given their reliance both on the home market and the power of their home state to fight in their corner during moments of crisis and devaluation on a world scale (cf. Apeldoorn and Graaff, 2012; Carroll, 2013).[1] More specifically, a lot hinges on what we take to mean "primary"; if this means "exclusive" then of course the nation-state is not primary; but if it means obtaining a *relatively* dominant weight among other determinations, then it is not so clear-cut whether the state (or *state-system*) is or is not "primary".

[1] Even the phenomenon of 'transnational migration' as a derivative of globalisation (e.g., Robinson, 2008), are in multiple ways refracted through territorial considerations dominated by political structures – i.e., the state-system (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004; see also Colas, 2002).

2. *Space as a 'Mode of Foreign Relations'*

It is possible to pursue a more rigorous perspective on the relationship between globalisation and the state-system through an alternative historical materialist approach to understanding socio-spatial relations in today's world. This approach views the diversity of the social world as in continual flux and transformation, but where phases of this flux tend toward certain historically specific configurations that display and over-determined character. In other words, it is possible to trace qualitatively different historical epochs by the ways in which the social totality is given overall form via the over-bearing weight of one determination over all others (Glassman, 2003).

Just as every country, or 'social formation', is constituted by a complex arrangement of social relations (or modes of production), so too is the world system made up of a specific mix of spatial relations, or what Kees van der Pijl calls a "mode of foreign relations" (van der Pijl, 2007). This framework offers a schematised account of four relatively distinct modes that have operated throughout history: the tribal, empire/nomad, sovereign-equality, and global governance (2007: 24). As we move form one mode to the other, we do not find a simple displacement of the old in favour of the new; rather, we find that new modes of foreign relations integrate previous ones in complex combinations. Thus, we find today a variegated mix of four relatively distinct modes of foreign relations permeating the world system (see Figure 1): tribal modes found among various ethnically based gangs within major urban centres; the Empire/nomad form captured by today's 'global war on terror'; sovereign equality embodied by the continuing power of the sovereign state-system; and the rise of global governance characterized by the increasing proliferation of complex networks of IGOs and INGOs – and these examples are certainly not exhaustive.

As with transitions between modes of production, modes of foreign relations and their variation are merely outcomes of wider social struggles, which are in no way predestined or teleological. But their transition does signal a specific crisis inherent in a previous mode that must be resolved one way or another. Thus, on the one hand, I would argue that while capitalism is the currently dominant mode of production globally, it is the sovereign equality mode of foreign relations that continues to over-determine the rest of the world system. On the other hand, we are clearly seeing a structural crisis within these two modes – the world economic crisis is a clear

Table 1: Modes of Foreign Relations and their Defining Characteristics

Modes of Foreign Relations	*Sovereign Occupation of Space*	*Organisation of Protection*	*Patterns of Exchange*
Tribal Relations	status in shared space, ancestral claims	symbolic rituals, feud, threats	barter, gifts, exchange of women, raiding
Empire/ nomad Relations	sedentary versus mobile occupation, incorporation	recruitment of nomad warriors on frontier	tribute, frontier trade trade diasporas
Sovereign Equality	exclusive territorial jurisdiction	popular armies, natural boundaries power balance	mercantilism, dissemination of national cultures
Global Governance	functional multiplication of sovereign spheres	rapid deployment police forces, collective security	homogenisation/ differentiation globally integrated production chains

Source: van der Pijl, 2007: 24.

expression of capitalism's structural contradiction, while the ever-mounting series of global problems is mismatched through a concerted absence of global government. I would argue that a potential solution to this latter crisis can be seen in the proliferation of supra-national regional formations that attempt to solve the collective action problems seen in the ruptures of ecological crisis and global war. van der Pijl outlines three necessities for the realisation of a global governance mode of foreign relations that might help alleviate these crises: (1) the formation of *multiple sovereignties*, from communal autonomy through to sub-regional, national and supranational forms of interaction and reciprocity; (2) a *multilateral framework for security* that is based on emancipatory principles, rather than those that merely perpetuate imperialist domination; (3) equitable organisation of the world's productive capacities (2007: 200).

With these suggestive criteria put forward, I argue that it is ALBA that represents the closest approximation we have today of this potentially liberatory global governance mode. Firstly, the principle of *Bolivarianismo* that animates ALBA's discourse and practice actually promotes multiple autonomous sovereignties that work together by combining horizontal and vertical forms of organisation (Muhr, 2012a; Martinez, 2013). Secondly, it endorses collective security action based on the principles of social liberation – a good example being its humanitarian mission to

Haiti after the earthquake disaster in 2010 (Muhr, 2012b). Finally, ALBA seeks to mobilise the resources of the continent through modes of equitable distribution of consumption goods, via 'Grandnational Enterprises', holding the potential to form a new mode of productive organisation based on participatory democracy in both the workplace and everyday life, and in establishing a harmonious relationship with the ecological base.

Of course, as anyone familiar with Latin America's left turn is surely aware, these promising tendencies are permeated with contradictions and limitations (see, e.g., Bebbington, 2013; Veltmeyer, 2013). In order to elucidate these limits, we will analyse the institutional structure of ALBA itself, in tandem with the various social movements that seek to engage with it. To do this, I will firstly focus on a particularly prominent social movement on the Latin American scene, La Vía Campesina, and examine some of the current debates surrounding its guiding principle: 'food sovereignty'. These considerations will then be integrated into a more focused analysis of ALBA and its institutional organisation.

3. *Contradictions of the Food Security/Food Sovereignty Nexus*

By the 1990s, the discourse of food security, which was largely a question of geopolitical statecraft, had shifted towards issues of peasant autonomy and cultural specificity – under the banner of 'food sovereignty' – primarily due to La Vía Campesina's (LVC) declaration in 1996. It argued, as a "basic human right", "access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity" (LVC, 1996). By now, LVC's philosophy has come to dominate academic discussions over the future of food (e.g., Desmarais, 2007; Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2008; Rosset, 2009; McMichael 2011; Torrez, 2011), but much of this literature is riddled with inconsistencies and juxtapositions. Unfortunately, there is not enough space here to adequately address this vast literature (though Bernstein, 2014 gives a good overview), but I will pick up on two specific limits within the food sovereignty debate: differentiation in agrarian class structures; and the deep structural conditions that complicate the move away from uneven capitalist development.

One the first count, it is quite common to hear that neoliberal restructuring has proceeded "in such a way that class or cultural differences are no longer the barrier

they once were" (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2008: 307). But given the importance class differentiation has had on previous historical transformations (cf. Byers, 2009; López-Alves, 2000), surely any differences today will have equally significant effects on peasant mobilisations. Take the debate on the Karnataka State Farmers Association (KRRS) in India. It is often referred to as merely a node within the "diversity" of LVC (Desmarais, 2007: 27); Patel (2006: 73) refers to it as an "important part" of LVC; and McMichael (2011: 474, fn. 2), while acknowledging the organisation as "traditionally dominated by rich farmers" also notes that it "espouses a neo-Ghandian vision of modernity based in agro-ecology and village self reliance". What many of these accounts leave out are the ways in which the KRRS class structure employs various forms of labour control over other poor peasants, its use of caste dynamics as modes of control, and its various forms of gender oppression, all the while lobbying for continued subsidies for fertiliser and other chemical inputs (Bernstein, 2010: 121; see also, Pattenden, 2005). This does not mean that everything done by the KRRS is bad; often they have been able to mobilise across class lines, sometimes through struggle for higher agricultural wages (Harriss, 2013: 180). But it does mean that we must be sensitive to class differentiations that wax and wane out of the twin pressures of capital accumulation and class struggle.

This brings us to the second difficulty with the food sovereignty literature and its depiction of peasant mobilisation vis-à-vis LVC. This depiction can be characterised as one that randomly oscillates between mobilisations at either the transnational or local/national level. But these juxtapositions fail to adequately address the notion of *sovereignty* within any post-capitalist food regime. One exception to this is Raj Patel (2009: 668); as he says, "the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified territory – the state… [B]y pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent on the others." In other words, how do we *territorialise* (i.e., bring sovereignty to bear on) a post-capitalist food regime? One possibility, outlined above, is to institute multiple nested sovereignties, which encourage local/participatory autonomy while maintaining organic links to other spatial scales and concentrations of institutional power. But this would certainly necessitate, at the very least, that peasant movements "first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie" (Marx, 1969). This strategic necessity requires not just a struggle inside the peasantry itself – for the realisation of

internal democracy, equality and so on – but also with the wider institutional apparatus of the state as a means of forging a hegemonic bloc with other social classes without which agrarian classes would be too isolated to garner any substantial impact.

Again, these considerations are not entirely absent in the food sovereignty literature, but there is certainly not enough emphasis placed upon them, given that it is often the nebulous "small-peasant producer" that is thought to hold the key to food salvation *at the national scale*. As a cursory examination of Venezuelan agrarian reform reveals (Keppeler, 2013; Page, 2010) this is an entirely romanticist argument. As Kappeler (2013: 15) argues, a "food system based on the material interests of the peasantry… may not correspond with the food interests of the mostly urban nation." Thus, when talking of food *sovereignty*, the national question looms large. So what role does ALBA play in this struggle for food sovereignty?

4. *ALBA and the Road to Food Sovereignty: What Role for La Vía Campesina?*

Like all regionalisation projects, ALBA represents a collective pooling of resources in order to solve specific problems beyond those of the nation-state. Unlike other projects, however, ALBA puts particular emphasis on solidarity, complementarity, justice and cooperation (Muhr, 2012a). One way to understand ALBA is through the lens of *transformative regionalism* (Gurcan, 2010), which emphasises the role of civil society actors in the creation of regional institutions. ALBA would be a good candidate for this framework, particularly given the discourse of participatory democracy espoused by each ALBA country, and the institutional inclusion of civil society through the 'Council of Social Movements' (CSM).

But there are specific difficulties faced by civil society actors when trying to translate their demands into concrete. Firstly, like most Latin American regional institutions, ALBA is prone to a type of 'hyper-presidentialism' that tends to put actors within the CSM into a subordinate position (limited simply to proposal setting and advocacy). Thus, any convergence of interests between civil society and state leaders will be dependent on the whims of the latter group (Serbin, 2012). Secondly, this hyper-presidentialism is merely the articulation of the wider patters of socio-political development that has characterised the region. Having barely escaped the 'lost decade' of the neoliberal era, we are now seeing "a 'return to politics' as much as a 'return of the state' in social development policies" (Serbin, 2012: 148; cf.

Tinker, 2008). This therefore limits the role ALBA can play as a vehicle for social movement power, given that its structure tends to express differential state interests (Malamud and Gardini, 2008: 123; Emerson, 2013: 204-5). This can be seen, for instance, in the ways in which state elites more or less monopolised decision making processes during the People's World Conference on climate change in 2010 (Cutler and Brien, 2013; Martinez, 2013). This would seem to demonstrate the over-determination of the sovereign-equality mode of foreign relations that continues to reign over the tentative transition on the road to a global governance mode. How do these concerns play out with respect to ALBA's productive organisation of the region's agriculture?

While intra-ALBA trade almost doubled from 2000-2004 to 2005-2009, in this latter period we find that food and beverages represent the highest growth category for traded goods, from 12 to 32 percent (Aponte-García, 2011: 192-3). This model diverges sharply from the dynamics of capitalist accumulation by putting the state front and centre in both upstream and downstream components of production/distribution, but it also contains an institutional mix between small-scale cooperative producers and larger capitalist firms. This institutional mix reflects the comments by the BoliVían vice president, Álvaro García Linera, who argues that:

> "The State is the only 'thing' that can unite society, it is the one that involved the synthesis of the general will and the one that plans the strategic framework and the first cart of the economic locomotive. The second one is private BoliVían investment, the third is foreign investment; the fourth is microenterprise; the fifth, the peasant economy and the sixth, the indigenous economy. This is the strategic order in which the economy of the country must be structured" (cited in Aponte- García, 2011: 188).

This mix between all manner of institutional levels in the production of society's material basis is of course in keeping with the overall direction of developmental change for Latin America's left governments, each of which are keen to sacrifice a utopian socialism that attempts to institute the entire package at once in order to *maintain their desired direction* of post-liberal development.[2] But here the precise

[2] This contains some interesting parallels to the other great historical transformation from feudalism to capitalism in what many Marxian scholars consider to be the purest and most radical example of

balance of social forces is difficult to ascertain with respect to productive operations operating across the ALBA space, notably due to the lack of concrete data available, and this is no doubt a consequence of the fact that ALBA (and specifically the transnational institutions concerning food production) are in their infancy. What is clear, however, is that (in accordance with Linera's argument) the state constitutes the hegemonic force that maintains the tricky balance between large-scale industrial infrastructures (with private capital maintaining a strong role in this regard) and more subaltern levels of productive participation. While each country will maintain its own institutional mix, the primacy of the state – the dominance of politics over economics – seems universal (cf. Ebenau, 2014).

It is therefore imperative that we come to understand much more about the concrete, micro-foundational aspects surrounding the real relationships between a group like La Vía Campesina and ALBA's institutional architecture. Of course, we know that LVC is highly supportive of this regional initiative, as clearly stated in their declaration at the fourth CLOC/Vía Campesina congress (see Harris and Azzi, 2006: 14). But we also need to know how this cooperative partnership periodically ruptures. One example would be the Latin American Institute for Agroecology. Set up in 2005 in the Venezuelan state of Barinas through an ALBA-brokered agreement between Venezuela and La Vía Campesina, various tensions between workers and students on one side, and the Directive Council on the other, came to a head in 2011 when a worker-student alliance occupied the institute in the name of participatory democracy (Latin American Institute of Agroecology, 2011). To what extent the institute continues to run along these more radical lines today will be an interesting area of investigation, and one that I intent to pursue in my own research. But needless to say, the road to food sovereignty is not only winding, it will be paved in the tracks of class struggle.

transition: England. As Giovanni Arrighi notes: "[England's] industrial policy was far more reasonable than later critics or historians have been willing to acknowledge… [A] slowing down of the *rate* of change may be the best way of keeping change going in a given *direction* without causing social disruptions that would result in chaos rather than change" (Arrighi, 2006: 194, emphasis in original).

Conclusion: Sembrando Soberania, Cosechando Socialismo?

The four sections above represent an organic framework for understanding the subaltern struggles in Latin America today in pursuit of a more just food system. Firstly, the mobilisation of social movements occurs at many spatial scales and through many spatial relations. In contrast to most approaches, however, I claim that we should be sensitive to the ways in which these different spaces are structured together, and pay mind to the fact that while new spatial relations are beginning to emerge, they are constantly held back by the over-determining power of the sovereign-state space.

Equally, however, social space is itself relational and is nothing but the totality of social relations (Massey, 2005). As should be obvious, these relations are prone to historical change through the unforeseen outcomes of social struggles by a wide variety of actors. I claim that the class struggles in Latin America over the past 20 or so years have reached a point where there is a critical mass of revolutionary politics (represented by the 'Pink Tide' states and the social forces that constitute them), in which revolution itself is beginning its march to the regional level. The institution of ALBA is therefore a key player on this path to 'socialism in the 21st century'. But given the over-determining character of the state-system, ALBA is also hampered by the dominant position held by state managers and managerial cadres relative to civil society actors.

This contradiction is precisely the one I intend to investigate over the next few years of my research. To this end, I will seek to understand more deeply how the transnational agrarian movement, La Vía Campesina, and the ALBA institution intersect, to what extent they cooperate or conflict, and the reasons for why this is so. By better understanding the structural constraints faced by transnational movements, the array of strategies open to them, and the means through which they prioritise these strategies, I believe we will gain a better handle on how the road to a post-capitalist 'food sovereignty' order can be traversed.

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