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To cite this article: Annie Shattuck, Jacobo Grajales, Ricardo Jacobs, Sergio Sauer, Shaila Seshia Galvin & Ruth Hall (2023): Life on the land: new lives for agrarian questions, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2023.2174859](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2023.2174859)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2023.2174859>



Published online: 16 Feb 2023.



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Life on the land: new lives for agrarian questions

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ABSTRACT

The politics of food, climate, energy, and the yet unfinished work of ending colonialism run square through questions of land. The classical agrarian question has taken on new forms, and a new intensity. We look at four dimensions of the agrarian question today: urbanization and labor; care and social reproduction; financialization and global food systems; and social movements. On this 50th anniversary of JPS, we as the journal's editors invite more research, vigorous debate, and scholar-activism on these issues in agrarian politics and beyond. We move into the journal's next era hoping we might continue to better interpret the world in order to change it..



KEYWORDS

climate change; extractivism; agrarian change; agrarian question

Introduction

There is no question on Earth as powerful as land: who owns it; how it is used; and whether it is treated as a commodity, as a living relative, as an ally in the climate fight, an extractive resource, as a home, or as a territory. Accelerating climate change and extractivism must change the way we think about the politics of land – and what is going to be politically and practically important in the decades ahead. After over 120 years of research on the agrarian question, some might say new debates are needed. Yet the original agrarian question – how capitalism develops in and through agriculture and the obstacles it confronts, what the fate of those who work the land might be, and how their political potential and allegiances might take shape – is more relevant than ever. The agrarian question has always been political at its heart, about transcending exploitation and violence in the countryside. This is even more true today, but in different ways.

Dispossession and inequality, now at an all time high, have created immiseration amidst spectacular abundance. By the end of this decade, two billion young people will come of age – and if current trends in land consolidation, imperial economic flows, and automation continue – another 120 million rural people will be thrown out of work (Brondizio et al. *forthcoming*). Nowhere are decent urban jobs – or often jobs of

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any kind – waiting for those thrown off the land. Jobs in agriculture have not mechanized much beyond commodity grain crops – most of the food people actually eat is still grown, harvested, and slaughtered by human hands in jobs that are increasingly done by exploited migrant workers in grim conditions and by small-scale farmers precariously surviving on the edge of crisis. Meanwhile, the deepening subsumption of petty commodity producers in global value chains results in complex patterns of differentiation (Amanor 2012; Li 2014). Despite rising productivity, global food security is getting worse, and a significant percentage of those suffering from hunger and malnutrition live in rural areas (FAO 2022).

The global land rush that took off amidst the food, fuel and financial crises in 2007–8 has not abated. The land rush is ongoing in less public and obvious guises, with pressures to open up new extractive frontiers for green energy, grab land for agribusiness expansion and industry, and reroute dwindling water resources to plantations (Dunlap and Arce 2022; Ashwood et al. 2022). The ecological foundations of modern agriculture are stressed to a breaking point: depleted and eroded soils, polluted water, biodiversity loss, and groundwater mining all undermine food production and the prospects for farm-based livelihoods in the coming decades. And the expansion of agribusiness plantations into the Amazon threatens to cross a threshold that will change the local climate and permanently collapse the ‘lungs of the world’ (Walker et al. 2019). Should such a scenario ensue, run-away climate change would be unavoidable. As it is, climate change and climate policies are already making rural life massively more difficult and violent, a fact which will shape everyday life and national politics for generations to come. All these challenges at their root are about control of land and the forms and relations of production in which it is used.

And yet nothing has provoked the will to fight as much as land. From the Haitian Revolution, to Mao’s peasant army to the Mexican, Russian, Vietnamese, Algerian, and Cuban Revolutions, those who work the land have reshaped the course of the twentieth century. And while peasant struggles have taken vastly different forms over the last fifty years, resistance by those tied to the land is still a world-historical force. Massive land redistribution in Zimbabwe reshaped the countryside and its colonial legacies (Moyo 2011). Resistance has, at times, turned the tide on major transnational corporate investments, top-down state projects, and regressive political reforms. Over the last twenty years there have been more than 1500 high-profile land protests in China, despite the escalating legal consequences (Jay Chen 2020). Some 7.8 million people in India are thought to be affected by ongoing land conflicts (LCW 2022), even if quantifying these things is notoriously difficult (Edelman, Oya, and Borrás 2013). In December 2021, the government of Narendra Modi was forced to reverse a set of three laws intended to liberalize agricultural markets and encourage contract farming, after the largest agrarian protests in India’s recent history, as tens of thousands of farmers occupied all entry points into Delhi for over a year (Baviskar and Levien 2021). Balwinder Singh, a protesting farmer¹ from the Mansa district of Punjab, captured the sentiment of more than just India’s farmers when he said, *‘Farmers are ready to die; this is a fight to the finish!’* (Sharma and Barkataki 2021). The brutal

¹While the international press portrayed the protests as originating from small scale farmers, the reality was more complicated with dominant and landed castes primarily joining the protests, yet they managed to mobilize broadly (Baviskar and Levien 2021) – yet another example of how complex agrarian questions can be in our time.

repression of peasant movements, by the state or by other power-holders, is not a tale from the past, but an enduring reality for those who mobilize in defence of their lands and territories. Thousands of land and environmental defenders are murdered every year, with Brazil, Colombia and Mexico the most deadly places in 2021 (Global Witness 2022; see also Prause and Le Billon 2021).

In short, questions about food, sustainability, the climate, development, inequality, justice, employment, renewable energy, and the yet unfinished work of ending colonialism run square through questions of land. The classical agrarian question has taken on new forms, and with it, a new intensity. In part because of the rise in rural movements and land struggles, interest in critical agrarian studies is at a high not seen since the peasant wars half a century ago. The agrarian question has always been political at its heart, about transcending exploitation and violence in the countryside, even if we now understand what that might look like differently than Engels ([1894] 1993), Kautsky ([1899] 1988) or Lenin ([1899] 1967) imagined it. The acceleration of climate change and extractivism necessarily changes the way that we think about the politics of land – and what is going to be politically, intellectually, and practically important in the decades ahead.

In this article, we review some key trends and questions posed by the changing realities of the rural world, most of them reflected in the past fifty years of peasant studies. We begin this discussion in a spirit of humble openness. There are many topics which rise to the surface as core themes for critical agrarian studies in the near future. We are certain to have missed some very important ones and over-emphasized others – and invite others to add. We start with a short review of recent changes, focusing on two contextual drivers as climate change and responses to it converge in the rural world: environmental challenges and rising extractivism. We then examine key questions that have yet to be worked out either in theory or in practice given these new realities. We look at four dimensions of the agrarian question today: urbanization and labor; care and social reproduction; financialization and concentration in global food systems; and social movements and the unfinished work of a world beyond colonialism and capitalism. More than a research agenda or a polemic, this editorial is an invitation to debate and engage with new agrarian questions and issues going forward and to co-create the next era of this journal.

Rapid climate change, environmental issues and agrarian questions come together

Over the last fifteen years climate change dramatically impacted the rural world. Headlines in Europe in the summer of 2022 were full of drought: French nuclear reactors had to stop production for lack of water to cool them; sunken Nazi boats emerged from the mud as the Danube dried up, and ‘hunger stones’ implored readers to weep at the sight of them on the Elbe. In China, by late August 2022, the government announced plans to seed the clouds in an effort to salvage the fall grain crop that contributes 75% of the country’s total grain, amid dramatic factory closures and hydropower shut-downs due to the drought. Drought was deadly in other regions. Between October and December 2022, after a fifth year of failing rains, one third of Somalia’s population experienced acute food insecurity. Meanwhile, floods left a third of Pakistan under water, displacing 33 million people (Tunio 2022) and putting the country at risk of severe

hunger. Yet to attribute such devastation primarily to extreme weather events obscures the ways in which the impacts of climate change unfold within complex political, economic and environmental histories (Watts 2013 [1983]; Marino and Ribot 2012; Baviskar 2020; Sultana 2022; Paprocki 2021). While the environment has long been a key theme in research on agrarian change (Bernstein and Byres 2001; Watts 2013 [1983]), the ecological contradictions of our present moment combined with rapid climate change are particularly acute.

Climate change is not the only agrarian ecological crisis hitting rural people. Soil loss, erosion, biodiversity loss, surface and groundwater depletion, pesticide contamination, cancers, water pollution, deforestation: the ecological challenges of making a living – and a life – in the countryside are keenly felt across diverse regions of the world (Barnes 2014; Barbesgaard 2018; Xu and Ye 2022). These various agrarian ecological crises do not unfold separately; forged in crucibles of ecology and political economy, they are intertwined as they collide to generate a permanent ‘climate of uncertainty’ (Matthan 2023; see also Scoones 1995; Scoones and Stirling 2020). They threaten to undermine the basis of current (cheap) agricultural production systems (Moore 2015; Patel and Moore 2018), increase costs, and threaten peasant livelihoods, as part of ‘the environmentalization of the agrarian question’ (Yaşın 2022). Yaşın (2022, 1358) sees ‘an agrarian question of nature with deepened and expanded consequences for the carbon/energy cycle and climate change’ as core to contemporary agrarian transformations and rural challenges. Yet how to approach such environmental agrarian questions is far from straightforward.

As the 2022 *JPS* conference on Climate Change and Agrarian Justice (re)affirmed, ecological changes and depletion are impacting the rural world; however, they cannot be dissociated from their broader economic and political context. This is not to deny the climate impacts, but rather to recognize that the everyday challenges of rural people require us to think differently about nature and ecology. The Sixth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) confirmed that increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather have and will continue to hurt food security and contribute to land degradation. But how and to what degree are these questions of power and political economy (Watts [1983] 2012; Davis 2001)? It is also a question of what kinds of transformations came before on the land; how land, soils, water, hydrology, labor, capital, and forests were re-ordered by the state and the market; to what degree extraction has altered landscapes, lives, and economies; and how those changes on the land – including under climate degradation – have conditioned the lives of rural people. These factors combine in contemporary agrarian questions of nature.

To take an iconic example, Bangladesh is constantly mentioned in the international arena as uniquely vulnerable to climate change (Adnan 2013). Flooding in 2022 left 7.2 million in need of aid, according to the International Red Crescent. Yet flooding was at one point central to Bangladeshi agriculture. Donor-funded ‘flood protection’ in the 1960s raised riverbeds relative to floodplain farm fields, making waterlogging floods more likely; and pre-colonization riverbank erosion was managed through different social forms of property relations (Paprocki 2021; Dewan 2022). Elite shrimp producers are now weakening embankments with illegal infrastructure for shrimp ponds for export, precipitating catastrophic failures of the embankments and violent displacement

of rural working people (Paprocki 2021; Dewan 2022). The shrimp industry is now heavily supported by both the Bangladeshi state and foreign donors, as development professionals praise it as a form of climate change adaptation. Agriculture and peasant lives are deemed to be doomed by the same development industry that supports rural out-migration as the only response to the ruin to come (Paprocki 2021). Therefore, while intensifying rainfall events and sea level rise are now a fact, they are filtered through an ecology restructured over decades to fit the desires of capital and the state, and to extract resources to other locales. In other words, both the biophysical ecology *and* the social consequences of floods are results of changes in land use and extraction as much as they are products of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Bangladesh's vulnerability is not rooted in topography but in a 'planned historical process of development within the global capitalist system' (Paprocki 2021, 196).

Throughout the twentieth century, diverse projects of agricultural modernization and industrialization layered onto histories and abiding modalities of imperial and colonial extraction and dispossession to fundamentally transform ecological relationships on and with land. The ascendance and durability of global capitalism, however, resides not only in transnational forces, corporations, and international institutions at world-historical scales but also, more subtly, in situated expectations, aspirations and efforts of peasants, pastoralists, merchants and small producers themselves (Chari 2004; Aga 2021; Korf, Hagmann, and Emmenegger 2015). For many, 'the idea of capitalism as a self-correcting system is not a corporate narrative' but something they actively participate in as they encounter state and internationally-funded climate adaptation and mitigation programs (Camargo 2022, 715).

Capital and labor relations have re-structured nature to serve the needs of capital, which increases the vulnerability – both socially and ecologically – of agrarian systems. Cash crop agriculture, pesticide dependence, hybrid and transgenic seeds, and chemical fertilizers are known to increase the risk of debt and land loss for small-scale farmers. In addition to its effects on social differentiation and rural proletarianization (Patel 2013), capitalist agriculture has brought about often-irreversible ecological changes. In India, the crisis of Green Revolution agriculture resulted in cascading ecological crises such as soil degradation, water contamination, and loss of biodiversity (Baviskar and Levien 2021; Jodhka 2021; Sethi 2021). It has also fundamentally altered the ecology on which agriculture depends. For example, the soybean boom in Madhya Pradesh's Malwa Plateau through the 1990s changed the hydrology of the region by eliminating the monsoon season fallows that charged the shallow local aquifers (Kumar 2016). This paradoxically reinforced peasant farmers' dependence on soy – a crop that can tolerate moderate drought and maintain some yield even on semi-marginal fields – even as it exposed farmers to the vagaries of dependence on a single cash crop (Kumar 2016). Such productivist approaches to development were replicated in the Cerrado, a vast savannah-forest zone in the center of Brazil, where the expansion of large-scale irrigation depleted aquifers and made it impossible for peasant communities to remain on their land (Sauer and Cabral 2022). In spite of the social and environmental damages inflicted on the Cerrado, its model has been imported in countries like Colombia (Grajales 2020) and Mozambique (Shankland and Gonçalves 2016; Monjane and Bruna 2020) by technocratic elites fascinated by the Brazilian agribusiness path to development.

When such longer term ecological-agrarian changes confront climate change in the form of intense storms, droughts, floods, heatwaves and other extreme events, their effects alter and compound, making attribution complex (see Watts [1983] 2013; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr 2015; Baviskar 2020). For example, the 2020 floods in southeast Sulawesi in Indonesia left dozens of villages underwater and forced thousands of small producers and rural workers to evacuate their homes and fields. But the social and environmental impact of these floods cannot be disconnected from the political economy of plantations in this area where, since 2009, more than 300 concessions have been granted. These concessions are directly implicated in substantial tree cover loss, landslides, and siltation of local river systems which until recently were not particularly flood prone (Kelley, Shattuck, and Thomas 2022). The year prior to these floods, in 2019, more than 300 people were laid off from a nearby oil palm plantation as their vegetable fields were flooding. Without access to swidden agroforest lands, many people migrated in distress (Kelley, Shattuck, and Thomas 2022). In this case, labeling such distressed moves as ‘climate migration’ obscures the root cause and the underlying agrarian politics, and prevents the kinds of redistribution of power and resources that might help effectively adapt to increasingly wild weather (Ribot, Faye, and Turner 2020).

Attempting to explain the effects of climate change, or create strategies to adapt to and mitigate it, without reckoning with these longer-term agrarian transformations in ecology, land and labor risks normalizing and exacerbating already stark inequalities and differentiated vulnerabilities. This is the case with the narrative of the Anthropocene which, in attributing to ‘mankind’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) an unprecedented geological agency ignores the fundamental fact that a substantial proportion ‘of humanity is not party to the fossil economy at all’ (Malm and Hornborg 2014), and that the very premise of this agency is founded on over five hundred years of imperial expansion, colonization, and racialized dispossession (Davis and Todd 2017; Yusoff 2018). Reckoning with this, some have termed our current moment the ‘Plantationocene’ (Haraway 2015; Wolford 2021; Stock 2023) to highlight the centuries-long force of the plantation form in processes of agrarian and environmental change at a planetary scale. Another comprehensive and much more accurate notion than that of the Anthropocene is the ‘Capitalocene’, which puts at the core of the climate question the ‘system of power, profit and re/production in the web of life’ (Moore 2017). Such a conceptualization goes far beyond ideas about the social or ecological impacts of climate change, or notions of climate vulnerability caused by delimited inequality. It asks us, more fundamentally, to understand value as a way of organizing nature and human relations, and to imagine that we can reorganize nature and productive activities in other ways.

Predominant scientific framings of climate change write out these social, political, economic and long-term environmental changes entirely to focus on anthropogenic climate change as the primary cause of climate-related loss and damage in what Jesse Ribot (2022) calls ‘violent silence’ (alluding to Watts 2013 [1983]). This is not to say that drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions or even removing carbon from the atmosphere are unessential – in fact they are crucial (Borras et al. 2022c). Precisely because the manifestations of climate change are filtered through an ecology already built by capitalism with all its attendant violence, the effects of climate change and other forms of ecological change must be read, and addressed, together with the political economy that created them (Watts 2012 [1983]; Davis 2001; Thomas et al. 2019; Ribot 2022; Dewan

2022; Paprocki 2021). Dystopian climate narratives absent these histories, naturalize crisis and dispossession (Paprocki 2021; Baviskar 2020). Thus, broader social, political, and ecological dimensions of agrarian questions are crucial for understanding both the ability to respond to climate events, and who is responsible for their outcome (Ribot 2022).

Rising extractivism, land and green grabbing

Just as today's landscapes are shaped by the combined effects of climate change and capitalist development, current transformations in extractive capitalism converge with the climate crisis to redefine the conditions of rural lives. The notion of extractivism aims to capture some of these transformations, as it points to ways of structuring the processes of production such that these are delinked from human and non-human reproduction. They are capitalist modes of appropriation and accumulation based on the expropriation of land and nature with large monocultures, intensive raw material extraction, and exports resulting in ecological depletion and destruction that render social and environmental reproduction unfeasible (Gudynas 2015; Svampa 2019; Ye et al. 2020; McKay, Alonso-Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete 2021; Pereira and Tsikata 2021; Nygren, Kröger, and Gills 2022; Chagnon et al. 2022). But extraction cannot be reduced to raw materials. Extraction also 'targets the labor and life of populations, aiming at extracting value from them in such a way that it expands and complements the notion of exploitation itself,' in terms of *how* surplus is appropriated (Gago and Mezzadra 2017, 579).

A consequence of these transformations of extractive capitalism has been the growing concentration of land ownership and control. By one estimate, the top 1% of the world's largest farms operate over 70% of the world's farmland, while very small farms (under 2 hectares) represent 84% of all farms (Lowder, Sánchez, and Bertini 2021). Small-scale farmers now occupy roughly 25% of agricultural land by one recent estimate yet still produce the largest percentage of food people actually eat (Lowder, Sánchez, and Bertini 2021). Since land grabbing made headlines in 2009, dispossession (and resistance to it) has again become a central theme of critical agrarian studies. Commodity booms, contract farming, land concessions, 'green grabbing' for conservation, and other modes of changing who has control of land have proliferated. Longstanding trends of deagrarianization, reagrarianization, circular migration, and multi-sited livelihoods have reshaped everyday life in the countryside over the last twenty years (Borras et al. 2022b).

Such overwhelming levels of land concentration are generated by deep transformations in the relationships between local and national power holders, transnational capitalist agents and social struggles unfolding in various arenas (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Peluso and Lund 2011; Grajales and Allain 2020). This change of scale in land control is related to various transformations concerning corporate agriculture, the political economy of food and the internationalization of public policies. The financialization of agriculture, for instance, connects the relations of production in specific localities to distant and global networks of decision-makers (Clapp and Helleiner 2012; Martin and Clapp 2015; Fairbairn 2020). The transformation of agribusiness corporations, the staggering increase in foreign direct investment in agriculture, and the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a few corporate actors (Clapp and Fuchs 2009; Clapp 2017) also comprise a reorganization of power relations governing land access and exclusion. In these interactions, the states that govern the territories where

land rushes unfold are not passive agents but play an active role in creating – at least on paper – secure and attractive conditions for investors (Wolford et al. 2013; Sauer and Borras 2016; Levien 2018).

These various forms of land grabbing often work through the production of spaces as ‘vacant’ or ‘uninhabited’; as pristine natures to be protected or lands of opportunity to be more efficiently improved – in short, as frontiers of capitalism. As Rasmussen and Lund (2018, 388) put it, ‘frontiers represent, most basically, the invention or discovery of new resources’, allowing the expansion of extractivism. But frontiers are not only places where promises are made; they are also locations where investment can be reasonably thought to be secured, not least because ‘to assemble ‘land’ as a resource for global investment takes a great deal of political and cultural work’ (Li 2015, 560). Very often, this work includes the repackaging of land deals in the language of mutually beneficial cooperation. Such claims target places where people are the least able to resist, not only because they lack the material and political resources but also because their dispossession can be repackaged as pro-poor development (Dwyer 2022).

Yet, if ‘development’ results, it unfolds in the form of highly unequal social differentiation. Land grabbing is not only good business for outsiders bringing in capital but also for those intermediaries – civil servants, local authorities, land dealers, and development brokers – who stand to benefit in multiple ways (Baka 2014; Sud 2014; Vel 2014). More broadly, land grabs have differential impacts that run through pre-existing inequalities: while well-off farmers can benefit from speculative land markets, others are thrown into poverty by direct dispossession or by their incapacity to maintain access to land via leasehold or sharecropping (Levien 2018). As land grabbing generates social differentiation, its corporate manifestations are also connected to smaller-scale forms of land accumulation and dispossession. In Mali, for instance, the failure of transnational land deals did not stop the rush for land. In their place, land accumulation is now driven by urban investors, some of whom made their fortunes in the midst of the country’s security meltdown (Coulibaly and Grajales 2023).

The effects of land grabbing then, are neither limited to the places where land deals take place nor to the temporalities of ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ deals. Of course, any form of dispossession is intrinsically political: land is about property as much as it is about authority and belonging (Sikor and Lund 2009; Lund 2016), and land grabbing typically involves states redistributing land from one class to another (Levien 2018), sometimes in a violent way (Grajales 2021). But land deals also generate legal and institutional impacts *beyond* the people directly affected. Legal reforms undertaken in the name of easing business and attracting investors, durable disenfranchisement of people and communities for the benefit of state administration, and the institutionalization of policies to identify ‘idle land’ are among the most enduring effects of the land rush (Sauer and Borras 2016; Borras et al. 2022b).

While land grabbing has been pushed by recent transformations in global capitalism and its interface with the state, it also bears an intimate relationship with climate change and climate politics. Efforts and narratives of restructuring – to transition away from oil – are impacting land and agrarian relations as well. Oil is not simply a feedstock for energy and fertilizer – it is literally the raw material of commodity production writ large (Hanieh 2021; see also Newell and Paterson 2010). From the 1950s onwards, commodities

derived from paper, rubber, wool, soaps, metals, wood, and cotton were gradually replaced by plastics, synthetic fibers and other petrochemicals. For much of humanity, 'the very substance of daily life was transformed, alchemy-like, into various derivatives of petroleum' (Hanieh 2021, 27). A hypothetical transition away from petrochemicals – even in part – would put enormous pressure on farms and forests to replace that feedstock for basic commodity production of all kinds, from industrial inputs to fiber, bioplastics and energy. Already biofuels and flex crops are leading drivers of land grabs (Borras et al. 2022a).

Land-based efforts to reduce emissions run headlong into extractivist dynamics, as they create shifts in access to and control over land-based resources away from rural inhabitants who depend on agrarian livelihoods (Bluwstein and Cavanagh 2023). Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), a set of techniques promising a 'triple-win' approach – the incorporation of intensification, adaptation and mitigation goals into a single rubric' (Taylor 2018, 89; see also Clapp, Newell, and Brent 2018; Newell and Taylor 2018), is a good illustration of this. New resources are invented by portraying existent uses as economically inefficient but also, in the case of CSA, environmentally harmful (Clay 2023). In these ways, frontiers convey promises of improved productivity, but also social development, food 'security' and climate resilience: a powerful mix.

Carbon offsetting is another powerful illustration of the link between green capitalism and land and resource dispossession (Kosoy and Corbera 2010; Scheidel and Work 2018; Nightingale et al. 2020). Such initiatives can transfer the rights to emit and the right to use forest resources away from agrarian communities towards the core economies with the greatest responsibility for climate change (Bruna 2022). These programs may require more labor from smallholders or legitimize outright dispossession in the name of climate mitigation (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Franco and Borras 2019). They tend to overlook the connections between historical trajectories of agrarian dispossession and present-day discourses of conservation (Paredes and Kaulard 2022). Yet such schemes are on the rise. While some donors and development professionals seem to be losing faith in REDD+, carbon trading is reshuffled through 'landscape' approaches, integrated into large corporations' pledges of carbon neutrality (Galvin and Silva Garzón 2023), and into the promotion of negative emissions technologies (McElwee 2023), but also embedded in agricultural value chains for tropical products such as palm oil or cacao (Maguire-Rajpaul et al. 2022). Moreover, carbon justifications are further stiffened by the material and ideological repertoire of biodiversity. Saving 'charismatic' wildlife while making money through carbon offsetting, eco-tourism and payment for environmental services: such is the hopeful promise of neoliberal conservation (Ojeda 2013; Verweijen and Marijnen 2018; Duffy 2022).

But the connections between climate politics and land grabbing go beyond the most obvious examples, as climate imperatives, justifications, and rationales are instrumentally appropriated – but not necessarily embraced – by a large variety of political and business agents. Franco and Borras (2019) identify some of these linkages. The development of flex crops has been nurtured by a growing demand for alternatives to fossil fuels, even if the demand for farmland has pushed for further deforestation. At the same time, the expansion of conservation areas, epitomized by the 30 × 30 initiative,² which aims to encourage

²See <https://www.campaignfornature.org/why-30-1> for an overview of rationale for the 30×30 initiative

governments to designate 30% of the world's land and ocean areas as protected areas by 2030, is not unfolding at the expense of the agro-extractive business. On the contrary, they might result in a 'balloon effect' – a mere displacement of large monocrops and plantations to areas not deemed worthy of conservation (Franco and Borrás 2019, 195). Not only are we observing these territorial dynamics in cases as diverse as Liberia, Guatemala, and Colombia, but the use of conservation language by companies and states alike to conceal the relationship between areas fenced off for conservation purposes, zones of agribusiness expansion, and the people in the middle.

In spite of all these contradictions, the mainstream green capitalist discourse remains an extremely powerful ideological frame, not least because it conveys the promise that capitalism can save human civilization from its self-inflicted doom. But its efficiency is also based on a more prosaic feature: a depoliticizing gaze common to most development interventions that privileges simplifications while erasing traces of violence and exploitation (Ferguson 1994; Ribot 2022). By the same token, green capitalist discourse negates the fact that climate change plays out through landscapes molded by the historical unfolding of class struggle, coloniality and capitalism. Crucially, it conceals how these legacies shape the differentiated impacts of climate change along geographical, class, gender, and racial lines: what places are the most affected and how, but also who are the people who can adapt, who will move or perish, and who will thrive (Arsel 2023; Newell 2022). Green grabbing does not simply add to previous forms of land grabbing. It reconfigures and sometimes reshuffles the most brutal forms of extractivism and dispossession by providing the powerful legitimating discourse of green transition. Not only has the global land rush not receded, but it is mutating before our eyes into forms of exploitation that strive to appear 'sustainable' (Sauer and Borrás 2016).

New lives of agrarian questions

The acceleration of ecological transformations and extractivism must change the way that we think about agrarian questions in the twenty-first century. They are the backdrop on which a whole host of other contradictions are unfolding. What these extractive developments make clear is there is no singular agrarian transition, no unidirectional march of history. Depeasantization and re-peasantization are happening simultaneously, producing rapid political shifts. Amid these disruptions, the dimensions of the agrarian question have morphed. New issues have arisen, and new categories of analysis that are adequate to the concrete realities on the ground are needed to keep up (Hart 2018). Issues that have been crucial for agrarian studies for some time – urbanization, financialization, social reproduction, gender, race and caste (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018) – all need to be seen and studied in light of these shifts.

The classic agrarian question was at its core a political one – a question about the transition beyond capitalism (Engels [1894] 1993; Kautsky [1899] 1988; Lenin [1899] 1967). Its original formulations about the impact of capitalism on agrarian society were in the service of the pressing political question about the role of the peasantry in revolutionary movements (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010). Understanding these processes was central to efforts to *transcend* capitalism, even if ideas about how to do so were based in the illusion of stagist development (Jacobs 2021; Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018). Today, agrarian questions are often debated in terms of class differentiation, capital accumulation from

the countryside, dispossession of the world's remaining peasant farmers, and the production of an increasingly jobless working class (Bernstein 2010; Cousins 2022; Batubara and Fauzi Rachman 2022; Shivji 2017). The concentration of land in a few hands, the fate of increasingly dispossessed, often racialized rural working people, accumulation of wealth at the expense of the countryside, and questions of the political alliances of rural people are as pressing today as they were at the turn of the last century (Pattenden 2023; Scoones et al. 2018; Bernstein 2006). And yet, the original purpose behind the agrarian question – how to transcend capitalist relations in the countryside – is often lost (Jacobs 2021).

What are the dimensions of this question in our time? How might we understand the dynamics of capitalist change in the rural world, and what does this tell us about how to create a more human, just way of living in the countryside? The dimensions of a contemporary agrarian question are already under development as scholars work to keep up with the changes in the everyday lives of rural workers and the proposals put forward by their movements. New forms of imperialism, with their relationship to race and caste amid the rise of transnational corporate and finance capital, have raised new issues which have to be confronted today, and which did not exist 100 years ago (Patnaik 2014). The ecological contradictions of our present moment did not exist even 30 years ago to the same degree (Moore 2011). As the costs and contradictions of global capital add up, the role of race, indigeneity, ethnicity, and caste in dispossession has become more salient than ever.

The problem of urban 'housing hunger' (Araghi 2000, 153), urban settlement evictions, and urban informal sector workers are inseparable from the agrarian question (Batubara and Fauzi Rachman 2022). As rural working people migrate to cities and back, they bring agrarian class structures, caste segregation, and peasant characteristics with them (Chari 2004; Jacobs 2018; Ranganathan 2022). As circular migration becomes the norm in much of the world, the role of the countryside in social reproduction is more present than ever before (Faye, Ribot, and Turner 2019; Peluso and Purwanto 2018; Rigg et al. 2018; He and Ye 2013; Ye et al. 2013; Ye 2011; Isakson 2009). If the purpose of studying agrarian questions was to understand how to transcend capitalism, then the challenges of rural movements, what they are facing, how they organize, who they ally with, and how they see the world can give a glimpse at a future-in-the-making (Jacobs 2021).

In this spirit, we examine a few of these new lives of agrarian questions. While we will certainly not give all the emphasis they deserve, and will doubtlessly miss other important dynamics, our reflections below serve as an invitation to ongoing discussion, debate, and inquiry.

Labor, class formation and urban agrarian questions

The twenty-first century has been marked by a massive process of urbanization and expansion of 'surplus populations'. Through migration, such populations have been scattered internally from rural to urban, rural to rural, and simultaneously transnationally to countries of the global south and particularly the global north. Urban spaces are becoming important sites of agrarian and class struggle. These unfolding developments have also sparked interest in the urban dimension of the agrarian question or what has been characterized variously as 'agrarian urbanism' or the extended urban agrarian question (Jacobs 2018; Gururani 2020; Ghosh and Meer 2021; Bowness and Wittman 2021;

Balakrishnan 2019). A core feature of the debate is how the countryside and urban spaces are interconnected and constitutive of each other (Kay 2009), or how the spatial and class parameters of the agrarian question are shifting beyond a focus on the countryside or a peasant or small-scale farmer question. These 'urban agrarian struggles' raise the question: what happens to dispossessed classes both historically and in the contemporary period when they enter urban spaces? What type of class formation is unfolding in urban spaces from dispossessed classes, now that 'commodity relations have been established everywhere ... signaling the final completion of capitalist domination of everyday life'? (Harootunian 2015, 1).

These monumental changes prompted an emerging research agenda within critical agrarian studies to understand the type of urban agrarian structure emerging. For some scholars the processes of agrarian change spurred by neoliberal capitalist globalization renders any historical sense of the peasantry obsolete, and instead what we have are fragmented classes of labor grappling with the question of social reproduction (Bernstein 2006). In contrast, scholars from the global south argue that the form and character of global capitalism have led to a generalized semi-proletarian condition, where repeasantization is a response from below to the global crisis of social reproduction. Issa Shivji, closer to the latter perspective, and building on Walter Rodney, argues that primitive accumulation under neoliberalism renders traditional conceptions of the 'worker-peasant alliance' inoperable. Instead he advocates for the concept of 'working people' to capture the diverse conditions of struggle for everyday life across spatial and sectoral divides (Shivji 2017). These ongoing debates reflect general processes of global capitalism and its specific manifestations as it unfolds in different parts of the world economy. The resolution of these questions is an object of both theorization and empirical investigation, but more centrally to be resolved through struggles in both rural and urban areas (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018).

While these debates continue to inspire a new generation of scholarship, we have witnessed a new wave of rural and urban struggles that are putting new social and research questions on the agenda. These struggles are challenging the intellectual horizons and angle of vision of the field of critical agrarian studies. In Latin America, an uprising by indigenous 'peasants' in 1994 in Chiapas against the free trade agreement, Zimbabwean radical land reform from 2000, the Standing Rock Sioux protest against the Dakota access pipeline, the Indian Farmers' protest in 2020-2021, the tenacious Xolobeni protest against mining companies in the communal areas of South Africa, urban agriculture as a demonstration of anti-racism and self-determination in the settler-colonial cities of Canada, USA and South Africa, the national strike in Indonesia against the labor laws and deforestation: all these struggles are synchronizing land, labor and ecological issues as a foundation of everyday resistance.

Questions of indigeneity, caste, race, gender, and gender non-conformity are inseparable from new agrarian questions. New avenues are opening to explore how colonial capitalism and dispossession structure indigenous, black and classed landscapes creating enduring racialized social formations and ongoing struggles for the return of the land and dignity (Gill 2021; Montenegro de Wit 2021; Gonda et al. 2023). It has long been understood that property is a race-making institution, and this is no less the case in urbanizing agrarian social formations; resistance to urban exclusions are also taking the form of anti-caste and anti-racist struggles (Ranganathan 2022; Ranganathan and Bonds 2022). In

practice these forms of resistance are ‘denaturalizing dispossession’ (Hart 2006) and advocating for new forms of emancipatory land ownership and tenure relations. These forms of resistance differ from the previous generations in that the identities through which people understand their place in the world have shifted. Such identities are more complex than those imagined by a previous generation of peasant struggles. Race, caste, or gender may be at the forefront of struggle, pointing to the complex ways that class articulates with other forms of difference, and pointing to the importance of issues beyond the economic in how capitalism is lived.³

Care work and social reproduction

The work of care, childrearing, gender divisions of labor and sexual violence are changing dramatically under pressures from rising extractivism and agrarian environmental challenges (Levien 2016; Ojeda 2021; Fernandez 2018). Social reproduction in relation to land is an important question of feminist power and struggles, key to understanding exploitation and oppression, and a central question for agrarian movements (Ossome 2021; Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018; Bhattacharya 2017). Beyond the oft-cited disproportionate impact of capitalist development or dispossession on women and girls (Levien 2016), fundamental changes are underway in the most intimate aspects of the lives of rural working people. Dispossession, accumulation, production and social reproduction are, as Bina Fernandez helpfully notes, ‘inter-relationships *within a system*’ (Fernandez 2018, 159). The extra-economic conditions under which agrarian extractivism and land grabs occur and are reinforced run precisely through gender and the sphere of social reproduction, including the natural processes that sustain life, and the affective and solidarity relations that form the basis for survival (Ojeda 2021; Fraser 2014).

A social reproduction framing demands a corrective to the ‘productionist bias’ in understanding the outcomes of dispossession. Dispossession amid agrarian extractivism is often seen as a violent single event, but dispossessions have afterlives: they set in motion incremental slow processes of depletion of the capacity for social reproduction in people’s everyday lives (Fernandez 2018). This depletion can occur in at least three ways: the slow erosion of the biological ability to reproduce the next generation through ill health, both physical and emotional; a lack of ability to reproduce peasant labor power; and the declining ability to reproduce working people as a class. Class, culture, community, and kinship bonds are depleted due to violence and extractive relationships (Fernandez 2018). Dispossession at its core is ‘a violent process of sociospatial configuration under which what is being taken are the possibilities to sustain life’ (Ojeda 2021, 86). Amid rising extractivism and environmental damage, understanding dispossession requires a detailed analysis of social reproduction as life-sustaining social and ecological structures (Ojeda 2021).

Land grabs throughout history, from the English enclosures to state-led infrastructure development projects and agribusiness expansion, have varied but profound consequences for gendered divisions of labor (Levien 2016). Women may have had little to say over where and how they resettle, and almost universally experience a rise in domestic violence (Levien 2016). Sexual and gender-based violence has long been one way

³These remarks result from our conversation with Amita Baviskar.

that the extra-economic forces of dispossession are enacted and reproduced (Ojeda 2021). As violent expulsion gives way to everyday life, gender-based violence becomes a mode of spatial disciplining of feminized bodies, even as the work of women, children and the elderly subsidizes capital accumulation (Ojeda 2021). Femicide, missing and murdered indigenous and peasant women, sexual violence and gender-based spatial exclusions reinforce persistent coloniality, gang territorializations, and the exercise of state power. They have also triggered some of the most powerful resistance movements of the last several decades.

Care labor makes working in exploitative conditions on new frontiers of accumulation possible when it otherwise might not be. New industries and informal sector work depend on the continued social ties to the countryside to make life possible. Gabriel Volpato and colleagues give one recent moving example of these dynamics as floriculture workers in Kenya, mostly young women, count on transfers from rural areas to offset low wages, access culturally meaningful food, and tie families together across distance (Volpato, Benegiamo, and Ellena 2022). Those transfers are shared among migrant workers, practices which together shelter migrants from exploitative conditions enough to reproduce life (Volpato, Benegiamo, and Ellena 2022). Off-farm informal sector work can be a source of respect and freedom, as well as income, even as such income is supplemented by provisions from rural homes, and connections to rural life are maintained (Kumar 2021, Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018). As migration is increasingly one way of making life work in the countryside, connections of care and reciprocity between rural and urban family members make otherwise unlivable conditions possible.

Such migratory relationships reinforce the countryside as a sphere of social reproduction. In Thailand for example, land consolidation has not happened as predicted by development economists because smallholdings ensure a place where the work of caring for the young, the elderly, and the sick might continue to occur (Rigg et al. 2018). Precarious migrant workers have kept their land and their ties to villages precisely because of the role of the countryside in reproducing life (Rigg et al. 2018). This dynamic is not limited to Southeast Asia: the care for China's 'left-behind' generation in rural areas makes possible the migrant labor building the Chinese industrial urban economy (He and Ye 2013; Ye et al. 2013; Ye 2011), children raised by grandparents and aunts in Bangladesh make circular migration possible (Dewan 2022), and remittances build homes and lives, landscapes and possibilities for families of absent workers from Senegal to Central America (Faye, Ribot, and Turner 2019; Peluso and Purwanto 2018; Isakson 2009). Across Africa's former settler colonies in East and southern Africa, in what Samir Amin (1972) termed 'Africa of the labor reserves', such reciprocity links are not only sustained amid jobless urbanization, but increasingly link sites of social reproduction in both rural *and* urban areas as families disperse members across these spaces not in order to access industrial employment, but to gain access to education and health facilities.

For those remaining in the countryside, the work of sustaining life is increasingly difficult. Accelerating dispossession of the rural commons combined with precarious labor conditions have led to a reproductive squeeze on rural women in India, driving women away from paid work (Rao 2018). Environmental conditions contribute to the burden of social reproductive labor. From accessing water (Sultana 2011), weathering droughts, restoring soils and agrobiodiversity (Bezner Kerr et al. 2019) to the work of adaptation, survival, and the work of ecological repair are also urgent matters of social

reproduction. The metabolic rift will not heal itself. Care work, including work to reproduce life in all its forms, will be central to understanding and changing the world we are inheriting.

Concentration and financialization in global food systems

If contemporary agrarian questions play out at the scale of the home and the body, they are also profoundly shaped by geopolitics, transnational finance capital, and the changing food regime. Shifts in the composition of transnational corporate capital have created dynamics that did not exist in the same way in earlier periods (Patnaik 2014). The global food system is more vulnerable to shocks than in the past, with corporate concentration at an all-time high.

The early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the role of agricultural and food workers in keeping regional and global food systems functioning. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2021 and the ongoing war have been blamed for food price spikes across the world, driven by disrupted input industries and grain crop exports. The prospect of famine in Yemen, a country already suffering from acute hunger, is directly linked to this new cycle of international war. In one view, these cataclysmic events, invariably externalized as 'shocks' from outside the system are held responsible for the suffering and hardships unfolding today around access to, and the production of, food (Hall 2023). Yet, along with the situated and specific impacts that such events have, moderate and severe food insecurity has been increasing globally since this data was first gathered in 2014 (FAO 2022; see also Monsalve Suárez and Dreger 2022, 11).

Crisis and shock, and the language of it, conceal forms of slower, structural harm. Food regime analysis has focused attention on political economy, and the position of food and agriculture within a broader and longer world-historical perspective. Food regime debates share a common concern for the 'politics of food relations' (McMichael 2009, 1; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). This comes down to disentangling how food production, distribution, and consumption are shaped by relationships of power, exploitation, and domination, and how food producers and consumers are connected through global food chains, not only by the effect of food imports and exports, but also through the movements of capitals, the trade of seeds and chemical inputs, and the transformations of the tastes and consumption habits of urban consumers in the North and the South.

Concentration is certainly a crucial dynamic in the contemporary food regime. At a farm level, seeds, crops, and other inputs increasingly connect farming and peasant households to a handful of global agribusinesses (Clapp 2023). Just six firms control 58% of the world seed market, with intense firm-level concentration observable in agrochemicals, farm machinery, and livestock genetics and pharmaceuticals (ETC 2022). Compounding this, a handful of countries are responsible for the world's production of staple food, grains, and fertilizer, rendering food-importing countries vulnerable not only to interruptions of supply but also to price volatility and inflation – as the war in Ukraine shows. Yet even as nodes of concentration intensify at the firm level, there is some notable diffusion beyond the traditional North-Atlantic geographic centers of contemporary agro-capital, with China, India, Brazil, and the Gulf states now all major players (ETC 2022; Henderson 2022; McMichael 2020). Concentration, however, is an outcome of

other processes even if it also produces effects itself, and for this reason it demands closer inspection. We see several interrelated phenomena at play that contribute to concentration but are also distinct from it, and cluster these under two headings: data and technology; and private finance and financial instruments. Independently, and together, they are likely to be significant in shaping food and agricultural systems in the years ahead.

Data and technology are set to become even more pivotal in driving concentration in agrofood systems, as major technology companies join forces with agribusiness to produce new alliances of corporate capital (Fairbairn 2020). This raises the prospect of ever-intensifying concentration at the firm level, while also opening the door to a new avenue of accumulation within food and agrarian systems as data itself becomes a commodity (Galvin and Silva Garzón 2023; Fraser 2019). We flag the rapid growth of digital applications in agriculture as an under-developed area in critical agrarian studies and urge more critical and empirically-grounded work on the drivers, actors and implications for labor displacement, surveillance and control, accumulation and corporate concentration (Fraser 2019; Prause, Hackfort, and Lindgren 2021).

Private finance and financial instruments are further agents of concentration, shaping how and on what terms the work of producing food is organized. Questions of financialization came to the fore in the wake of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, prompting large-scale land grabbing and speculation in food and agricultural commodities (Clapp and Isakson 2018; Fairbairn 2015; Borras et al. 2016). In past and present crises, the severity of price spikes and therefore the magnitude of the effects on food access, have been shaped by financial speculation on food and other commodity markets (Clapp 2023). In recent years, the reach and hold of finance in these domains has extended and strengthened considerably, while also exhibiting tendencies to concentration in global food systems more generally. Three of the world's largest asset management firms collectively control more than one quarter of institutional shares of some leading agribusiness corporations (ETC 2022). As these firms become significant shareholders in some of the world's largest agribusinesses, the practice of 'horizontal shareholding' has emerged whereby assets are held in several different, ostensibly competing, companies leading to what has been described as 'interlocking oligopolies' (ETC 2022). Horizontal shareholding in already concentrated corporate environments promises to further cement the connections between financial and corporate centers of power.

Such profound interconnection entails both an unprecedented concentration of power, and new forms of vulnerability in the global food system (Clapp 2023). These changes come at a time in which the center of gravity in the food regime may be shifting to a more multi-polar world (McMichael 2023). At the same time the calls for food sovereignty initiated by agrarian movements have been taken up by a broadening base of social movements, from indigenous peoples to climate justice movements and degrowth advocates. New alliances are being formed from the international to very local levels, generating new ways of imagining people of the land, and a life beyond exploitation (Bjork-James, Checker, and Edelman 2022).

Transnational movements, anticipatory alternatives

In recent decades, rural social movements have gained strength in the international arena, and begun to re-define rural working people as a more expansive class. This

expanded notion of peasantry or rural population is reflected in the recent UN *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas* (UN 2018; Edelman 2013; Claeys and Edelman 2020). This UN Declaration is a political achievement because, first of all, it stated that people working and living in the countryside are subjects with rights and recognized 'the special relationship and interaction between peasants and other people working in rural areas, and the land, water and nature to which they are attached and on which they depend for their livelihood' (UN 2018, 2). In maintaining the centrality of labor on the land, the declaration is evidence of a theoretical and political broadening occurring in rural movements from peasantries to rural working people. This social diversity is a theoretical and political challenge for future critical agrarian studies, adding important political subjects to the environmental agrarian question.

These UN declarations and guidelines are in part responses to increasing mobilizations, disputes and political actions across and beyond national borders by indigenous and agrarian social movements. In alliances with food security and environmentalist movements, they are acting in the international arena, demanding recognition, rights, and participation in debates and policies far beyond rural and agrarian issues. These mobilizations have 'presented themselves as bearers of ecological knowledge', and 'as stewards of land, and as participants in global environmental politics' (Bjork-James, Checker, and Edelman 2022, 589). These 'transnational social movements [are] generative spaces for novel concepts and new ways of organizing society, on local and global levels' (Bjork-James, Checker, and Edelman 2022, 584; Martinez-Alier et al. 2016). Thus, the nation-state and its legal responsibilities remain, but these transnational actions expand the classic notion of the agrarian question as a national problem. The inclusion of agendas and demands such as climate justice, solutions to the 'ecological debt' – a result of labor exploitation and nature expropriation – sustainable production, and food sovereignty, open perspectives and challenges for the environmental agrarian question(s) (Yaşın 2022).

Rising transnational movements for indigenous resurgence are also pushing different ways of imagining people of the land and fighting for a decent life (Whyte 2017; Daigle 2019). Some of the most effective modes of rural resistance in the last decade have been local, but with global perspectives and alliances, as indigenous communities demand the ability to maintain their lives and cultures on the land in the face of mining companies, agribusiness expansion, elite land grabs, logging, dams, and other infrastructure projects (Global Witness 2022; Temper et al. 2018). From Ausangate in Peru to Niyamgiri in India (Kröger 2020) or the Pacific lowlands of Colombia (Courtheyn 2018; see also Escobar 2008), resistance movements are putting forward new conceptualizations of what development means and demands for economic justice that have repercussions well beyond local fights. These struggles often face brutal repression under the form of legal and extralegal violence, to the point that rural people's capacity to respond to state and elite-sponsored aggression becomes a core venue where struggles for social democracy are fought (Coronado 2019; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019; Allain 2020). These popular organizations and resistances bring about political novelty with important theoretical reflections for critical agrarian studies and concepts of development. Some fundamental political-theoretical contributions have been, for example, the constitution of historical subjects – and subjects of rights – in the countryside. These subjects have been struggling for territory – and for territorial rights – contributing to a holistic understanding of land as a place of work and life. The struggles for

land have gained more inclusive perspectives, overcoming reductionist views of land and nature.

Another component of these new waves of resistance is the (admittedly varied) degree to which these struggles rethink and prefigure post-capitalist alternatives. This is so far under-investigated within critical agrarian studies. The idea of food sovereignty, created in the process of organizing La Via Campesina, has become an enormously powerful political and intellectual organizing frame, and a way of imagining an alternative agrarian future (see Borrás 2023; Wiebe 2023). Today's movements that fuse multiple struggles may have a similar anticipatory character, drawing inspiration for such alternatives from far afield and forging solidarities across space. Dalit slum dwellers in Bengaluru are drawing connections to Afro-Brazilian queer and women slum dwellers in Rio and making common cause with working class struggles in and through forms of social difference (Ranganathan 2022). In the mass strike in Indonesia in 2020, protests over the conditions of labor, deforestation, and women's rights converged and were expressed in a single demand (Saifullah 2020; Firdaus and Ratcliffe 2020). And while the strike only lasted a few weeks, such experiments are potentially important; if harnessed, they may have an anticipatory character that prefigures new ways forward. Scholars have much to learn from the transnational connections, experiments in resistance, and alternatives as they are created out on the ground, and we propose an agenda of work to engage with, analyze and theorize the anticipatory character of such converging struggles and their emancipatory politics.

Conclusion

Given the twin rise of extractivism and environmental contradictions piling up in the rural world, the dimensions of the agrarian question will continue to change as new contradictions emerge. These new lives of agrarian questions will require rigorous theoretical engagement, an openness to the specificities of different histories and conjunctures, and a willingness to learn alongside working people. The classic agrarian question was not, at its core, about the intricacies of rural class formation, or about whether peasants would continue to exist in the same way as in prior eras – matters about which extensive scholarly debate has centered over time. The classic agrarian question has *always* been about the possibilities of transcending exploitation in the countryside, about the possibilities for revolutionary change, about what comes beyond capitalism, how we might get there – and, we would add, the ways people are already creating non-capitalist forms of social life. We write this editorial as an invitation to re-examine agrarian questions in ways that spark new insight; analyze, inform and imagine new alliances; and illuminate the most important relations and possibilities of our current conjuncture – so as to understand the world, and to change it.

Confronting new directions in agrarian political economy requires both a rigorous examination of the past, and concepts that are adequate to the concrete in history (Hart 2018). The approach to these questions may be plural, and adapted to the realities of different conjunctures in different places. In his opening 2009 editorial, Borrás set a compass for the *Journal of Peasant Studies* going forward: to (re)engage with critical theories, (re)engage with real world politics, and a dedication to rigorous methods (Borrás 2009). As Borrás sets out in this issue, a politically engaged, pluralist, and internationalist

perspective has emerged in critical agrarian studies over the last fourteen years (see Borras 2023). Politically engaged, timely work in critical agrarian studies emerged from conversations between activists and scholars, with scholar-activism as a framing to understand and change the material conditions of rural life. The pluralist perspective in these pages – openness to multiple theoretical approaches, an allergy to sectarianism, a commitment to methodological rigor, and dedication to a culture of mutual respect – is part of what has enabled politically engaged scholarship to be timely and effective. Over the last thirty years, agrarian movements like La Via Campesina, indigenous movements, labor movements, and feminist movements have, by building alliances, put forward visions and advanced struggles to address the agrarian question in practice. As the vibrant field of critical agrarian studies evolves, JPS will remain a space for scholars, activists and scholar-activists to examine how life is changing on the land, engaging these new visions as they are being created, analyzing spaces of struggle, of emancipatory rural politics, of decommodified social relations, and energizing new generations of critical scholars to join in solidarity with working people to take forward the long fight for a kinder, more just world.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mike Levien, Diana Ojeda, Amita Baviskar, Ian Scoones, Marc Edelman, and Jun Borras for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. The remaining shortcomings are all ours.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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