Until recently, few people seemed aware of the importance of peasants, trade, and food politics in today’s political economic system. With the food crisis and the related financial, ecological, and energy crises, however, the situation changed drastically. An increasing number of people, analysts, and government officials are talking seriously about the need to transform the agribusiness model of agriculture that is devastating the ecosystem and small-scale farming. With about half of the world population living in the countryside, agriculture and agrarian reform have resurfaced as major contentious sociopolitical, cultural, and economic issues. In response to the profound impact trade liberalization has on rural communities around the world, mobilized small-scale farmers and peasants are emerging as key players within alter-globalization movements.

This article focuses on the centrality of food in people’s everyday lives and culture as a means of social reproduction (much of which still occurs outside of formal market circuits), and the failure of the neoliberal order to ensure sustainable agriculture, access to nutritious food, and adequate living and working conditions for the majority of people, especially those involved in growing food. Today, what can be learned from peasant movements involved in national and transnational campaigns? Are they challenging the dominant patterns of development and agricultural trade politics when they call for
food sovereignty? Are they engaging in an alternative form of governance that escapes our analytical frameworks as international political economy (IPE) scholars seeking to understand the possibilities for innovations and change? By focusing on the global rather than the national or local, critical IPE scholars unwittingly tend to reproduce the “myth of powerlessness” often presented by state representatives, which has the effect of rendering local initiatives rather invisible, or worse, undermining their relevance as actors in the effort to meet the challenges currently faced by so many rural communities.³ I hope that this article will lead to research into the adequacy of theoretical frameworks in the study of globalization, global governance, and the practices of social movements involved in local, national, and transnational politics.

This article explores the alternative practices being developed by movements of small-scale peasant producers and landless rural workers in Brazil and their allies in Latin America.⁴ I argue that these place-based movements are challenging the neoliberal model of trade and agriculture and giving rise to bottom-up processes of democratic agricultural governance. Drawing on feminist political ecology and postcolonial approaches, this paper emphasizes how the practices of contemporary movements also challenge conventional critical thinking on the Left, and the need for IPE scholars to draw insights from other disciplines and grounded empirical research. As other researchers argue, these approaches are needed if we are to learn from, and give greater visibility to, the voices and practices of grassroots movements and activists who are simultaneously involved in transnational networks.⁵ Arguably, this analytical focus will enable scholars to gain a better understanding of the mobilizing strategies used by grassroots forces, the “messiness” of everyday peasant struggles, and the challenges they face in the area of agriculture and trade politics.⁶ It is particularly important to think about possibilities for social change in the context of the actual food crisis. As highlighted by Santos, the crisis signals two “temporalities” for resistance forces that are often blended in practice, urging scholars to rethink their own theoretical frameworks. One temporality is the urgency of democratizing the agricultural food system in order to respond to the needs of producers and consumers. The other is the call for a longer term
strategy to address the root causes of present problems and develop alternative practices to avoid deeper social and environmental crises.7

In what follows, I first clarify the concept of global governance as it is used in this paper, and explain why it is important to adopt a different analytical framework that can take into account the knowledge and practices of the sociopolitical forces that defy the dominant understanding of this contested concept and the politics of scale attached to it. Then, I introduce *Via Campesina* (VC) as a transnational peasant network of grassroots organizations and movements of small-scale producers from various places around the world. Finally, I examine the discourse on food sovereignty and peasant activism at different levels, with a focus on Brazil, to demonstrate how these forces, which are opening new spaces for democratic participation and governance, are agents of change in their own right.

**Conceptualizing Global Governance and the Politics of Scale** Global governance has emerged as a new framework of analysis to go beyond state-centred regime theories. The term generally refers to private and public, formal and informal regulatory mechanisms for coordinating socioeconomic relations, evolving and interacting from local levels to state policies and transnational norms and institutions.8 Since the mid-1970s, numerous analysts have recognized that the state is no longer the only source of regulation in a context of neoliberal globalization. In this paper, global governance is defined as a political project and its dominant neoliberal form is associated with greater economic integration, globalization, and the so-called Washington Consensus.9 It promotes a restructuring of the state in order to increase the efficiency of market forces and economic growth above all other sociopolitical goals, thereby leaving little space for democratic practices.10 In this sense, it facilitates neoliberal reforms imposed from above that include privatization, deregulation, and re-regulation (e.g., the strengthening of private and intellectual property rights); trade and financial liberalization; balanced budgeting; cuts in public expenditures; as well as intensive, export-led monocultures as a way of reducing the external debt overhang experienced by many countries.11
While it continues to be widely contested, especially since mid-2008 with the major economic crisis, neoliberalism remains the dominant form of global governance. As such, it has shaped not only socioeconomic norms and relations, but also cultural, political, and ecological relations and norms at various scales. Jan Aart Scholte uses the term “polycentric” to highlight the “dispersal of governance in contemporary history [that] has occurred not only across different layers and scales of social relations from the local to the global, but also with the emergence of various regulatory mechanisms in private quarters alongside those in the public sector.”

Hence, this new political framework was devised to include international financial institutions (IFIs); international regimes and norms; transnational corporations (TNCs); as well as municipal councils, neighbourhood associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, and transnational advocacy networks (TANs) as agents of regulation, which contribute to the management of our contemporary societies, alongside the Westphalian state system—or, as Susan Strange would argue, because of the Westfailure system. Many critical IPE scholars, therefore, have rejected the concept of global governance on the basis that it is a political strategy employed by dominant forces to justify existing power structures that serve their interests to the detriment of the majority. For some critical theorists, “civil society” forces that participate in global governance institutions are contributing to the reproduction and legitimization of the neoliberal order. They are often co-opted by state and market elites as an efficient way to provide minimal services to the most marginalized, while reducing discontent created by the negative effects of a globalizing market economy. For authors like Esteva and Prakash, such analyses justify a call for locally grounded activism and a disregard of global institutions and TNCs. In their view, by actively seeking independence, or at least diminished dependence on TNCs in terms of food production and distribution, grassroots organizations and actors are contributing to the delegitimization of global forces and the empowerment of local forces by developing alternatives that are more adapted to the needs and cultures of their communities. As this analysis highlights, the organizing and growing visibility of rural workers and peasants seek
both to devise locally grounded alternatives and to delegitimize, contest, or shape state and interstate institutions.

We have witnessed the recent rise of rural and urban opposition to the neoliberal form of governance and, in turn, a growing number of academic studies on resistance forces. A key question for IR/IPE scholars thus concerns the potential of an emerging transnational/global civil society in democratizing and/or strengthening the norms and institutions of global governance. However, few analyses are adopting a governance framework that goes beyond state-centrism, or an evaluation of the power of TNCs and TANs to shape formal regulation mechanisms adopted by state and interstate institutions. For instance, Peter Newell’s insightful analysis explains how agribusinesses and biotech industries are deeply involved in shaping the environment, and possibilities and limits of global biotechnology regulation, thus looking at policy regulations within dominant governance structures. Devlin Kuyek’s analysis of the Canadian seed regimes demonstrates a shift from farmers, to state, to a few TNCs “that seek proprietary control of seeds as a way to build new markets and to secure their positions in a restructured global agrifood system.” O’Brien et al. examine the power of global social movements (GSMs) to contest global governance, but they explore only global movements’ limited impacts on interstate institutions. There is no exploration of the discourses and practices that such movements are developing in other spaces, like that of the World Social Forum or the so-called global campaign to promote food sovereignty.

Such studies are essential because they highlight the contentious aspects of existing governance structures. Nonetheless, more attention should be given to the various strategies and alternatives promoted by resistance movements, grounded in specific places, that may or may not focus on state and interstate regulations. While these scholars are interested in sociopolitical changes, they focus on major nonstate actors—mostly TNCs, TANs, and GSMs—in their interaction with (inter)state rules and policies. This article, on the other hand, explores the potential of peasant movements in democratizing governance from below through grounded practices. As will become clearer in the following section, grassroots rural movements are
challenging the existing social order and the project of neoliberal governance that organizes sociopolitical and economic relations. By fighting inequalities and struggling for a piece of land they can call home, these forces are developing their own discourses and practices. They are repoliticizing a public sphere of their own, a space in which they are organizing and getting involved in peasant agriculture, national movements, and transnational networks. In so doing, they are contesting and redefining the politics of place and scale, that is, the sociopolitical construction of the local, the national, or the global, which usually serves to confine rural movements into a bounded local place associated with traditional—read premodern or backward—ways of life, identities, and cultures.

These movements are opening spaces to recreate innovative and dynamic face-to-face meeting places, where peasants and their allies can learn from each others’ experiences. A Brazilian peasant leader noted how, in their struggles for land, land reform, and a just and democratic society, small-scale producers contribute to alternative forms of governance across multiple scales. Creating networks and interacting with peasant organizations in different countries “was a common learning experience that enriched and made it possible to have this understanding, this view, this level of solidarity.” In that sense, locally grounded peasant movements also fight for greater inclusion, as relevant political actors, citizens, and food producers, thus contributing to the well-being of their family, the community, the movement, the country, and society as a whole in interaction with other locally grounded peasants and popular forces across state and cultural boundaries. Far from waiting for state officials to respond to their needs, many peasants and rural women organize and share knowledge. They know best what is needed to protect their land and provide for their people. As ecofeminists remind us, “[t]heory is made more relevant, accurate, and compelling when it incorporates the perspectives, knowledges, and voices of those who are struggling for change ‘on the ground.’”

**La Vía Campesina and Mobilized Peasants as Agents of Change** Peasant movements are rooted in specific places and local struggles, like the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais*...
Sem-Terra (MST)). Created in 1984, the MST has used the power of collective action to take control over the most fundamental resource in their lives: land. In one of the most unequal countries in the region in terms of concentration of fertile land, an MST leader explains how they have challenged the dominant patterns of agriculture and trade politics. In the short term, the movement privileges direct action, through collective organizing and land occupations, as a way to provide “an alternative for employment for millions of families…to live and feed themselves…working mainly in the agricultural sector.” In the medium term, it fights for land reform “to modify the level of land ownership concentration, to democratize the ownership of land in Brazil.” In the longer term, it seeks “structural changes…to build a society that is more just, more human, more democratic.” The MST has indeed produced innovations in democratic governance from below through participatory decisionmaking, collective action, and access to education for all.

The other place-based Brazilian movement under study is the Peasant Women’s Movement (Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC, affiliated with VC)). The MMC also emerged during the 1980s, but was formalized as an organization at the national level in 2004. MMC activists fight for a more just and democratic society that, they argue, cannot be accomplished without the full recognition and valorization of women’s participation. In particular, they promote rural women’s rights and emancipation as full citizens contributing in multiple ways to the well-being of their communities. They have gained, for instance, the recognition of rural women’s rights to social services, including maternity and retirement benefits. As a peasant movement, the MMC’s key objective is the fight for national food sovereignty, including the protection, conservation, and preservation of biodiversity and a comprehensive land reform in order to end the possession of large real estates.

While being locally grounded, the MMC and the MST are active in transnational networks and initiatives such as Via Campesina (VC: “Peasant Path”), the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC: “Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations”), the World Social Forum (WSF), and various protests against genetically modified
organisms (GMOs) and the dominant model of trade agreements promoted through the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The MST has contributed substantially to the founding and consolidation of the CLOC, VC, and the WSF. *Vía Campesina* was created in 1993 as a transnational network to give a voice to organizations of small-scale farmers, rural women and youth, peasants, indigenous people, and agricultural workers. It is now present in 69 countries in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia.³⁵ It self-identifies as an “autonomous, pluralist and multicultural movement, independent of any political, economic, or other type of affiliation”³⁶ challenging the neoliberal model of governance and trade, based on corporate agriculture. The latter was entrenched in the WTO in 1995, thus institutionalizing agricultural trade policies and governance mechanisms from above.³⁷ With its Latin American counterpart, the CLOC, *Vía Campesina* strives for global justice, food sovereignty, gender equity, and an alternative model of agriculture that is respectful of diverse cultures and the environment.

**Place-based Movements and Transnational Networks** Members of VC are territorially based movements in the countryside that are actively building transnational solidarity and advocacy networks. Towards the end of the 1990s in the Americas, they became key players in politicizing and contesting the prevailing agricultural trade model. They are particularly interesting to examine because they may provide a starting point from which to fill the gaps in the literature on the role of (global) civil society actors in democratizing global governance. First, they are place-based, grassroots rural movements, predominantly from the majority world/global South. Most literature on transnational activism looks at urban-based, NGO-led coalitions, which generally have their headquarters in the advanced industrialized countries of the global North, and, therefore, elicit much criticism regarding the lack of democratic practices, legitimacy, accountability, and representation of popular forces. Moreover, as Escobar has argued, too often Western thinkers, especially theorists of globalization, have ignored the continued relevance of place and the local in favour
of a greater focus on transnational and global agency, space, capital, mobility, and the increased porosity of borders.\textsuperscript{38}

While it remains essential to understand contemporary movements in the larger context of global political, economic, and cultural processes, it is equally important to evaluate the social (re)production of specific places and territories where movements emerge and usually maintain a strong attachment. These places are also contested terrain of struggles, power dynamics, and political imaginaries. Escobar notes that scholars and activists are “faced with the growing realization that any alternative course of action must take into account place-based models of nature, culture and politics,” thus acknowledging the agency of locally grounded movements and their imaginaries that provide insights to “reinvent both thought [theory] and the world [practice] according to the logic of a multiplicity of place-based cultures.”\textsuperscript{39}

Similarly, Santos reminds us that “what we call globalization is always the successful globalization of a particular localism...there [are] no global conditions for which we cannot find local roots.”\textsuperscript{40} Hence, globalization and localization are two sides of the same coin. Today’s neoliberal globalization is therefore a process of “unequal exchanges” through which a set of local practices was imposed “beyond its local or national borders,” thus making, or replacing, other practices as local, bounded in place, and “hierarchically inferior.”\textsuperscript{41} Santos’s concept of “globalized localism” refers to what is successfully globalized by dominant forces and the “winner side” of globalization, like American fast food, or the laws of intellectual ownership, patents, and telecommunications as first defined in the United States. “Localized globalism,” on the other hand, refers to “the specific impact on local conditions” imposed by so-called global practices able to “dictate the terms of integration, competition and inclusion.” This can lead to the expropriation of small-scale subsistence farmers and their replacement by export-led agro-industries seeking to gain market shares in the global economy and maximize profits.\textsuperscript{42} This example shows how the processes of globalization, competition, and inclusion for some translate into localization, dispossession, and exclusion for others. Nonetheless, Santos also points out that these are contested processes. Some local forces—or insurgent cosmopolitans—are
organizing resistance from below “through local/global linkages” between less powerful movements representing those “groups victimized by hegemonic globalization and united in concrete struggles against exclusion.” Along with indigenous movements, peasants have been among the most dynamic forces in recent years, building alliances and mobilizing both locally and across borders to oppose neoliberalism while concretely seeking to implement alternative practices.

Another reason for studying peasant movements is that their discourses and practices challenge the divides between domestic-global politics and between different theoretical perspectives on resistance movements. Indeed, these place-based movements call for greater autonomy on the land (e.g., reterritorialization, local activism) and for better living conditions (e.g., ecological subsistence, material and reproductive needs) while being strongly involved in transnational initiatives contesting state-centric approaches to governance and citizens’ participation. They frame their struggles as being central to the preservation of peasants’ identities, knowledges, and cultures, and to the promotion of gender equity and sustainable environmental practices and ways of life. They call for a radically different model of trade and agriculture (i.e., longer-term struggle involving a “war of position” to transform people’s values and priorities) by rejecting existing market practices, as well as state and interstate policies through actions such as land invasions and roadblocks. More than many other social forces, their fight for justice is anchored in lived experiences, including some rural families’ violent dispossession from their means of production, subsistence, and reproduction. Yet, many peasants still consider the state as a key site of struggle in their efforts to contest certain policies, and to strengthen or create new regulations intended to bring about some significant changes, such as agrarian reforms.

The following analysis begins to explore the extent to which the discourses and practices of peasant movements are helping to democratize agricultural governance from below. As I have argued elsewhere, examining the complex strategies, discourses, and practices of contemporary movements can provide crucial insights for rethinking critical theorizing. It can help scholars avoid misleading categories, such as radical/outsider versus reformist/insider movements, which have led some scholars to discredit a wide variety of
forces as significant agents of social change on the basis that they were reformist insiders.\textsuperscript{45}

**Snapshots into Agricultural Trade Politics and Peasant Activism** Thanks to local and transnational activism, there is a growing recognition of the problematic nature of agricultural trade politics and the global food industry, both for the majority of people and for the ecosystem.\textsuperscript{46} For many rural communities, neoliberal governance often means dispossession (e.g., land, seeds, knowledge), displacement (e.g., increasing migration, enlarging pool of workers in urban areas and foreign countries, with related expansion of slums and remittances), insecurity, and dislocation of local cultures and communities.\textsuperscript{47} Many studies highlight the concentration of market power in a few mega-food corporations, such as Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Bunge, and Tyson Foods, ranked respectively at 158, 191, and 298 of the 500 most profitable companies in the world.\textsuperscript{48} Ten TNCs now control more than 60 percent of the international food chain through their involvement “in seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, processing, and shipments.”\textsuperscript{49} Trade and financial liberalization and stricter regulations of property rights (TRIPs) over the past 25 years or so have translated into mergers and acquisitions in search of ever more profits.

Many analysts have highlighted the influence of some top leaders from the private sector and agro-exporting states (from organizations such as the Cairns Group), which is indicative of who is shaping agricultural trade policies.\textsuperscript{50} US agribusiness lobby groups have been particularly active around trade negotiations as they are well connected with some high positions in government. For example, McMichael traces the prominent role of a former vice president of Cargill (a giant grain trade corporation representing about 50 percent of US grain exports) who joined the US Department of Agriculture and drafted the original US proposal to the GATT Uruguay Round.\textsuperscript{51} Beyond the concentration of market power in the hands of a few TNCs, which allows them to control supplies and market prices (and which explains, in part, recent increases in food prices\textsuperscript{52}), many agribusinesses “have exerted advisory power” during trade negotiations to further “liberalize” the market for agricultural products.\textsuperscript{53} Field research has confirmed that many
Brazilian peasants are well aware of such influences, arguing that their governments are very supportive of agribusinesses, as “there is such a close relation between the governments, the states, and these TNCs…” This has “an end...to finish...with life on this planet...Now we are creating the articulation between us peasants, but...we need to extend further these articulations with those in the city, those who consume...”

The domination of agriculture and trade by economic and political leaders from core agricultural countries has shaped trade politics in such a way that a great number of small- and medium-scale producers went bankrupt, in the North as well as in the South. Market competition has also translated into a reversal of trade flows so that developing countries now import at a high price what they used to produce at home, as happened with corn in Mexico, for example. Collectively, VC members identify the concentration of power in the hands of a few TNCs as their common enemy. A spokesperson for the MST highlights the changes that accompanied neoliberal policies, noting that “When the MST began, our principal enemy was the large landowners...Now our principal enemies are the multinational [agribusiness] corporations, which are taking over land that should be used for agrarian reform.” This context helps to explain peasant dispossession from their land and the growing number of people going hungry on a daily basis worldwide. Some peasants, however, are building alliances to resist (inter)state regulations and TNCs that support a model of development and agricultural governance that threatens their ways of life and their capacity for social reproduction.

**Food Sovereignty: A Right-based Mobilizing Tool** How are place-based resistance movements in the Americas acting as agents of sociopolitical and cultural change that can help democratize agricultural governance from below? In the context of neoliberal restructuring, and of increasing TNC and financial institution influence, many movements (like VC’s affiliates) felt an acute need to strengthen transnational networks in order to build solidarity, share experiences, collectively defend their rights, and address specific needs and aspirations. Despite very different local contexts and experiences, this cross-border strategy challenges macroeconomic processes that
restrict their respective capacity to influence state policies. In turn, it can contribute to developing or maintaining alternative development models, identities, and cultures. McMichael argues that mobilizing peasants are “reframing...what is possible on the land, in contradistinction to what is being done to the land and its inhabitants by the neoliberal regime.”

Through an ethnographic study of MST’s settlements in Mato Grosso, Hannah Wittman argues that members of this grassroots peasant movement are negotiating and enacting a new agrarian citizenship based on political participation and environmentally sustainable local food production; a citizenship that goes beyond “liberal conceptions of rights...[b]y contesting the equation of property with citizenship.” Like McMichael and Patel, Wittman shows that through their everyday forms of resistance, members of the MST (and VC) are deepening democratic practices and calling for substantive rather than formal citizenship rights. Michael Woods also explains that a “new critical politics of rural citizenship,” commonly performed at a local scale, is seeking to redefine power relations through practice. It is engaging in a contestation over “representations of place and rurality.”

Such political struggles are directly connected to democratic governance from below, as rural communities reclaim their rights to participate and to govern themselves. In many instances, they are organizing themselves because the state has failed, or deliberately abandoned, its public responsibilities. An MST activist observed that:

When I talk about our collective and organized actions, I’m talking about occupation...marches...the shared work (multirao) in the camp, the settlement... In the struggle to win land, we as landless workers rescue our right to have our own consciousness and to use it to participate in a different life...we begin to mark our right to be conscious of our rights. We also go on changing our role, as citizens, in conducting our own history. To the extent that we fight, we begin to occupy a geographic and political space in society.

Since 1996, many peasant organizations have linked to VC, but a growing number of NGOs and environmental and food justice movements also converge around the call for “people’s food sovereignty.” This rallying slogan goes beyond the demand that each person should have enough to
eat. Food security was the goal of the green revolution and was often used to justify large-scale monocultures and the use of GMOs. In contrast, food sovereignty is framed as a right, and food sovereignty movements seek to ensure that local communities produce and provide healthy, nutritious food for their people, in harmony with their culture and with the ecosystem.65 Only food surplus, they argue, should be dedicated to trade.66 Here, trade is described as a means towards an end, that is, greater social, economic, and environmental justice that prioritizes people before profit. In this sense, food sovereignty is defying agribusiness and the global food regime's constant search for ever more growth and profit, which has impoverished and commodified land, peoples, and cultures. Food sovereignty also disputes the state's abandonment of policy options that could promote a healthier food system and a more balanced relation between rural communities, urban communities, and nature, as well as between men and women.67

Listening to the voices of VC activists promoting food sovereignty, one gets a much clearer sense of how they use food sovereignty to reclaim their right to regulate, and to define for themselves, what agriculture should be. They propose priorities and democratic processes that are generally incompatible with neoliberal patterns of governance and agriculture. As Raj Patel reminds us, for VC members, food sovereignty includes:

Prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit…the right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced; the right of countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports; agricultural prices linked to production costs…the populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices; and the recognition of women farmers' rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food.68

Here, we note the experiences and knowledge brought by peasants and farmers themselves. They are the ones directly affected by agricultural trade regulations. Their definition of food sovereignty also illustrates their rejection of the dominant form of global trade policies and governance mechanisms, which allowed “80% of farm subsidies in the OECD countries” to be “concentrated on the largest 20% of (corporate) farms,” thus rendering
small-scale farmers extremely vulnerable to cheap, subsidized imports, especially in the majority world.\textsuperscript{69} Strategically, food sovereignty activists have joined forces beyond local rural communities and across borders, in the North as well as in the South. In Seattle (1999), Cancun (2003), and Hong Kong (2005), place-based organizations affiliated with VC joined their voices to oppose the WTO. They called for a different form of (inter)state regulations that would abolish “all direct and indirect exports aids,” promote agroecology,\textsuperscript{70} and provide access to “land, water, seeds and credit,” as well as remunerative prices for men and women food producers, as key “producers of society” itself.\textsuperscript{71}

The peasant-led discourse on food sovereignty at first was marginalized and/or dismissed by economic and political rulers, but the food crisis offers a growing resonance to their call for action and transformation, even in formal institutions of global governance. Already in 2007, a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) paper argued that organic agriculture could feed everyone on this planet, just like conventional agriculture, but with greater social justice and “reduced environmental impact.” The FAO thus called on governments to “allocate resources for organic agriculture and to integrate its objectives and actions within their national agricultural development and poverty reduction strategies.”\textsuperscript{72} In March 2009, the United Nations special rapporter on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, did not recommend the usual increase in food exports, but rather “strengthening the production of domestic small-scale farmers through access to land and resources, labor rights enforcement for landless farmers, and government programs to insulate peasants from price swings.”\textsuperscript{73} In Bolivia, the government of Evo Morales—who participated in the founding of VC—seeks to implement a law promoting food sovereignty principles. In a letter to participants of the VC International Conference in October 2008, Morales denounced the privatization of water and electricity, opposed agrofuel production, and insisted on prioritizing local production and consumption.\textsuperscript{74} While many obstacles remain, there is a new recognition of the food sovereignty agenda, which clashes with existing agrarian policies in the continent. These priorities did not emerge so much of a revolutionary, global program to abolish capitalism, but mostly from grounded practices in many
places and peasants’ assessment of the devastating impacts of corporate-led agriculture.

**Putting Democratic Governance and Food Sovereignty into Practice**

The growing attraction and use of the values and principles associated with food sovereignty as a strategic tool and organizational framework for peasants is particularly noteworthy. This framework has succeeded in unifying a diversity of actors around common global campaigns and strategies aimed at advancing peasant rights and a different model of development and agriculture, which requires, first and foremost, the full participation of peasants themselves. The way they define their own priorities also shows how they reclaim dignity and the right to choose their own way of life as valuable to the whole society.

A leader of the MST explains the role of peasants as knowledgeable agents of change, producing and nurturing a better society, respectful of the environment:

It was farmers who protected all that is [associated with] a model of agriculture...They were like experts, constantly improving the model of production, the way of preserving seeds and the genetic improvement that they were able to achieve naturally...humanity only survived because [of all this]...We have the ancestral knowledges...because we always have had this daily knowhow in...producing food...What has changed is that companies, and principally the capital, [are] looking at this system of money....they got involved with transgenic seeds that have this terminator technology...Before, the peasant...was planting, harvesting, selecting and saving the best seeds for the next sowing. Now, peasants...need to buy the seeds [but they] are sterile!...After, they need to buy new seeds [from those TNCs]. This is the most perverse system that humanity has seen.75

As a leader of the MST illustrates, peasants are key agents of cultural politics rather than passive victims of corporate globalization.76 It is precisely because they possess the requisite skills and expertise that they are capable of producing their own analyses through which they open new spaces for envisioning and experiencing alternative models of agriculture, community, and governance.77
The importance of practising an alternative form of agriculture that promotes peasants’ active participation (democratic governance) is also seen in the centrality of popular, organizational, and technical education by and for peasants. In a number of conversations with activists, this was seen as necessary to build peasant movements, defeat the agribusiness model, and create a just society. The creation of different training programs and schools by VC and some of its members can be seen as a political strategy of resistance and citizenship building. In August 2005, for instance, the first Latin American School of Agroecology was inaugurated in the southern municipality of Lapa (Paraná), within the Contestado settlement of the Movimento Sem Terra. This initiative emerged from a partnership between the MST, the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), and the governments of Venezuela and the state of Paraná. Despite the constant risk of setbacks and difficulties, this example, like many previous initiatives, shows how some VC movements have succeeded in gaining the support of allies and official institutions of governance in order to obtain much needed resources (e.g., professors, funding) and to give legitimacy to the training they offered. The three-year agroecology course allows young Latin American peasants from the MST and other VC member groups (like the MMC) to share their time between school (60 to 70 days) and their community, which allows them to put into practice newly acquired knowledge and technical skills.

During the Americas Social Forum of October 2008 in Guatemala City, food sovereignty and agroecology were also key themes in numerous workshops and panels organized by and/or with the participation of youth, rural workers, indigenous communities, and NGOs, many of them affiliated with the CLOC and/or VC. In one panel, two youth activists insisted on revaluing and revitalizing rural regions and work by increasing access to cinemas and the internet, and by promoting agroecology as an alternative way of life, as key strategies to attract or keep youth in the countryside. Movements and activists promoting food sovereignty are therefore active locally, nationally, and across borders. They seek ways to share experiences with other social justice activists within peasant movements and beyond, at home as well as during transnational meetings such as social forums. Such transnational campaigns allow peasant activists to consolidate their
networks and to better understand the varied experiences of place-based organizations in various contexts. As members of the MMC highlighted, despite the strong patriarchal culture in Latin America and among peasant organizations, their participation in transnational meetings and networks has led to some advancement in the fight for women’s rights. They viewed VC’s camp during the 2009 WSF as a crucial international space for building unity that can also “push forward women’s issues.” Alongside such local and global initiatives, many VC organizations continue to struggle to shape state and interstate regulations from below, based on the diverse experiences, needs, and wisdom of the people of the land.

Their cultural politics is deeply grounded in peasants’ work and lives on the land (i.e., material conditions), but they also assert the power to define their own identity as people of the land or peasants, and to give meaning to their struggles. This cultural politics of VC had an impact from the South to the North, as Karen Pedersen, ex-president (2002–2005) of the National Farmers Union (NFU, member of VC) in Canada, illustrates by reclaiming her peasant identity:

> Historically, we were peasants. Then when that term came to mean ‘backward’ we became ‘farmers.’ In these days...we are strongly encouraged...to see ourselves instead as...entrepreneurs capable of handling increasingly larger pieces of territory...Through my participation in the *Via Campesina*, I learned that I had much more in common with peasants than I did with some of my agribusiness neighbours. I am reclaiming the term ‘peasant’ because I actually believe that small is more efficient. It is socially intelligent, it is community oriented. Being a peasant stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build.”

Hence, VC activists fight as much for a different relationship to nature as for cultural values that emphasize the identity and capacity of rural communities to govern themselves and to contribute to a better society, including the central contribution of women. Despite numerous tensions, their call for food sovereignty and greater autonomy is shared by indigenous communities, landless people, environmental justice activists, and small-scale farmers in the majority world and advanced industrialized countries. The shared language, objectives, and identity contribute to sustain global campaigns.
and to nurture cross-border solidarity, respect, and mutual learning. Nonetheless, as Pedersen emphasizes, their discourses and organizing practices defy the dominant common sense about globalization and global governance, reaffirming the relevance and the efficiency of local rural communities. In short, food sovereignty activists are rejecting today’s agricultural trade regulations and practices by proposing decentralized, smaller-scale, and more cooperative models of agricultural (re)production and distribution, based on more human and ecological principles. In their view, sustainable development cannot be realized through a homogenizing market economy, which commodifies life and nature.82

Their analysis resonates with the demands of environmental justice movements and feminist political ecology approaches that bring together a critical political economic discourse with environmental concerns. Indeed, numerous studies on environmental justice highlight “themes directly relevant to trade: the disproportionate exposure of poorer populations to environmental risks from economic activity, unequal access to environmental goods and marginalisation from the political arenas in which decisions about these issues are determined.”83 Whereas the concept itself does not seem prominent in VC’s discourse, the principles of (feminist) environmental justice are central to its self-defined priorities and increasingly translate into its practices.84 Despite the usual complexity and tensions involved in movement and network building among a wide diversity of activists and cultural contexts,85 many VC members emphasize the urgent need for solidarity—with explicit recognition of the value of cultural and ecological diversity—to foster environmentally sound models of agriculture based on people’s needs. VC members are therefore calling for a radical transformation of existing power structures based on the principles of social, environmental, gender, and economic justice, which is well synthesized in their call for people’s food sovereignty.

It is in this context that one might understand the mounting rejection of the WTO and the neoliberal model of agriculture that has devastated many rural communities and cultures, thus limiting their capacity for democratic decisionmaking and for a people-centred, human-scaled model of agriculture. Food sovereignty is both a discourse that helps to create linkages
among peasants as well as other civil society forces, and a set of practices that insists on the urgent need for, and relevance of, alternative agricultural practices that build on the ancestral knowledge of those who work on the land, ensuring the reproduction of human beings, which also requires a respect for nature and democratic decisionmaking and participation of local producers.

**Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance** By looking at specific moments of mobilization and protests, which remain central strategies of progressive movements affiliated with VC, we get a better understanding of their potential for challenging trade liberalization and neoliberal policies at different scales. The MMC is one example of creative resistance and activism. For the 2008 celebrations of International Women Day, with other rural women of VC and the MST, they organized activities in 17 states of the Republic. Together, they denounced the negative impact of agribusinesses and promoted progressive social and land reforms that value peasant agriculture, by and for the people. In Santa Cruz das Palmeiras (Sao Paulo) for example, about 300 women occupied one of Monsanto’s research centres and cut the transgenic corn crops from an experimental field. This action was taken to denounce a decision by the Lula government (February 2008) to authorize the commercialization of two varieties of genetically modified corn (from Bayer and Monsanto), contributing to further increase TNC control over food production, dependency on technology and chemical products, and risk of contamination of conventional seeds, all of which threaten the livelihood of peasant and small-scale farmers. 86

After years of illegal cultivation and contamination of Brazilian fields with mostly transgenic soy, the Brazilian government was under pressure to recognize the new reality and officially legalized GMOs in March 2005. 87 Today, GMOs continue to progress in Brazil, despite peasant resistance and unfavourable scientific analyses, largely because of a correlation of forces in which state representatives tend to listen carefully to the demands of TNCs as a way to expand exports and gain foreign exchange revenues that could decrease Brazil’s dependency on IFIs. We can see here the kinds of policy decisions that marginalize the demands of a wide portion of the Brazilian
rural population. Nonetheless, this is also a clear example of how less powerful forces are fighting back and seeking ways to voice their opposition. These forces are promoting democratic practices and governance by fostering participation, by fighting for social justice, by interacting and learning to deal with official institutions and elected governments, and by seeking to maintain their autonomy. Strategically, they sometimes support a political party or reforms. They also sometimes denounce the dramatic impact of state policies on marginalized communities, even when it means opposing the Lula government that was brought to power because of the support of a great number of mass movements and marginalized people in Brazil.

In 2006, for example, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, a group of about 1,500 Brazilian rural women, many from the MMC, attracted much media attention. Having chosen International Women’s Day (8 March), these women took part in a highly visible collective action to bring their concerns into the public sphere. Through a direct action tactic, they destroyed some of the eucalyptus plantations and a laboratory exploited by the Brazilian TNC Aracruz Celulose S.A., which was, in 2005, the world’s largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp and Brazil’s largest pulp and paper manufacturer. Aracruz has acquired 800,000 hectares of land in five Brazilian states, mostly for eucalyptus plantations, in order to produce highly profitable paper products sold on global markets. The rapid growth (seven years) of mature trees from hybrid seedlings has had a devastating effect on the environment and society, which has sparked many conflicts with indigenous communities (i.e., Tupinikim and Guarani) and small-scale farmers living, farming, and hunting on these lands. With the expansion of Aracruz activities, “more than 30 villages were removed.” The amount of water and chemical fertilizers required to grow eucalyptus (i.e., an average of 30 litres of water per day per tree) meant high profit for the company, but severe soil degradation, freshwater depletion, and pollution. As indigenous chiefs and elders expressed in a 2005 open letter:

With the arrival of Aracruz Celulose, we lost our lands, our forests and our rivers. We gradually became poorer and ‘prisoners’ of the Aracruz project...Up to the present, we have been able to get back only a small portion of our land. Approximately 11,000 hectares are still in the possession of Aracruz
Celulose under an illegal Agreement that authorizes the company to exploit and degrade our land, which is our mother and on which we have built our dignity and identity.\textsuperscript{90}

In part because of such collective action and campaigns, it is now well known that monoculture plantations of eucalyptus, much like those of sugar cane and soy crops, have led to the clearing of large patches of rainforest. Discussing their national campaign for healthy food, MMC members noted how the 2006 “extraordinary” protests had numerous impacts, including increasing public concerns about monoculture plantations, as well as street protests by various Brazilian peasant movements calling for food sovereignty and denouncing the criminalization of activists.\textsuperscript{91}

This long-standing dispute explains the highly symbolic property destruction action that was organized in March 2006 by peasant women and supported by many local, national, and international allies. As Wiebe reports, this was a carefully prepared tactic that happened only after decades of negotiations with state authorities, pressure on the company—and the giant Finish-Swedish paper and cellulose company Stora Enso, with whom it has strong links and which VC also targeted in March 2008—and peaceful demonstrations against Aracruz’ invasive forestry methods. It responded to years of displacement, environmental exploitation, and major injustices, mostly for poor rural communities and ethnic minorities.

The timing and location of this direct action, during International Women’s Day and coinciding with the FAO conference on Agrarian Reform in nearby Porto Alegre, was also based on careful planning to give greater international visibility to their action and to reduce the risk of repression.\textsuperscript{92} The destruction of such plantations was considered necessary and legitimate to attract media attention and, in turn, to better inform Brazilians about the growing invasion of these green deserts. It was a survival strategy, using the power of collective action to take back control over their land, this fundamental resource where they live and seek to make a living.

We can see how the discourses and practices of the MMC and the broader VC network are redefining the political and broadening the meaning of democracy and citizenship.\textsuperscript{93} Most supporters of alternative agricultural
practices and global justice movements do not fight for more fragmentation or exclusion, but for their inclusion as full actors/citizens who have a right to difference, and a right to voice and live their differences. This often translates into claims for inclusion and full recognition of different identities (e.g., peasant, landless, indigenous peoples, rural women), needs (e.g., healthy food, land access, credit), and ways of life (e.g., community based, ecologically and culturally sensitive small-scale farming), as well as different political projects at various scales. When struggling to put the needs and interests of the peoples first, peasant movements often require specific solutions, adapted to the particular context in which people live. The above examples highlight the complex interactions between state, market, and civil society actors in the processes of trade liberalization in the Americas. Further empirical research of such pressures for new forms of governance within movements and in existing political institutions at different scales will hopefully help to improve our understanding of the challenges of governance, especially in the area of agricultural policy.

**Conclusion** Through an analysis of specific discourses and practices of resistance, I have argued that peasant organizations and networks are deeply involved in trade and agricultural politics, as well as formal and informal governance mechanisms to coordinate socioeconomic and cultural relations. They are developing innovative discourses, strategies, and practices to maintain their way of life and to reclaim their rights. Despite the very unequal power relations, some peasants are refusing to give up their land to industrial agribusinesses. In various ways, small-scale farmers and landless rural workers are challenging today’s trade policies and agricultural governance mechanisms, from local to global levels. By directly engaging with, and sometimes defying, formal political and economic institutions, some rural movements have demonstrated their determination to voice their concerns and to prove that other agricultural practices and trade politics are possible and happening.

Many activists involved in day-to-day struggles and social organizing do not romanticize the local, or opt out of globalization and regionalization processes. At the local level, they need to continually address problems of
credit, access to land, water and seeds, pollution or insect invasion, for example. The MST activists also know about insecurity and violence, as those living in encampments while waiting for formal title over a parcel of land always fear expulsions. The harsh conditions in which they live often make it difficult to come up with democratic and respectful decisionmaking processes to govern themselves and to organize collective life. Nonetheless, many rural organizations insist on greater participation and inclusion—democratization—of their needs and hopes within local, national, and/or international agricultural policies and governance processes. They claim that their agricultural models are not compatible with the priorities of free trade negotiators, agribusinesses, or those of international financial institutions pushing for greater “neoliberal” integration. Some peasants choose to participate in formal politics at the municipal or state levels to promote alternative rules and practices. Others have prioritized the strengthening of national and transnational networks and campaigns like VC’s, or the campaigns against the WTO and for food sovereignty. These various initiatives are defying dominant trade regulations while experimenting with alternative agricultural practices and governance mechanisms. Through such strategies, we can see that despite the unfavourable context, peasant movements are far from passive victims about to disappear. As a group, they are at the forefront of contentious trade politics.

This article has highlighted moments of resistance by peasants as a way to invite other researchers to rethink their own analytical frameworks, and to consider more seriously the possibilities and limits of less powerful forces, as actors in their own right. Through empirically grounded research, it becomes possible to dig into the very practices and discourses of specific grassroots organizations that are rejecting the neoliberal order and developing their own paths, locally and very often also across state and cultural borders. By participating in broad campaigns and networks, grassroots organizations are learning from one another and bringing different lessons and strategies back home in their communities. Too often, scholars on the broad Left have emphasized the structural power of capital and dominant forces, which tend to disempower or mute the voices and practices of resistance forces.
This analysis encourages researchers to examine more closely the role and practices of peasant movements and transnational networks that are challenging existing patterns of global governance and trade. Further research is needed to understand how and why some movements are lobbying and negotiating with agribusinesses, state, and interstate actors, and to what extent they shape and potentially democratize agricultural governance and trade agreements from below. Scholars also need to learn from movement activists in order to explore why some of them have opted out of formal trade politics and what kinds of implications this strategy may have.

What is the strategic thinking and rationale of peasant organizations when they choose one strategy over another? Why are many activists and organizations involved simultaneously in various strategies and practices at different scales? In the actual context, no one seems to know with certainty the best way or path to bring about greater democracy, as well as socially and environmentally sound agricultural practices. By analyzing the discourses and practices of grassroots peasant movements, scholars will be in a better position to offer an empirical understanding of the myriad of ways in which resistance movements and cross-border coalitions are trying to shape and potentially challenge predominant forms of agricultural governance, and to incorporate that new understanding into theorizing about trade politics and democratic governance.

Notes

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4. This analysis builds on discourse analysis, participatory observation, and field research, including more than 40 semistructured interviews conducted since 2005, mostly with leaders.
and grassroots activists of the Landless Rural Worker Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, hereafter MST), the Peasant Women’s Movement (Movimento de Mulheres Campesas Sem Terra, MMC) in Brazil, and their transnational counterparts, La Via Campesina (VC) and the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC).


26. MST member, interview 6 by author (Curitiba, June 2005).

27. Various interviews with Brazilian peasants (June 2005 to May 2009).


29. Ibid.


31. MMC members, interviews 24, 25, and 26 by author (Belém, January 2009).


34. The WSF is an innovative process that began in January 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, among diverse groups of social movements, NGOs and individuals. They converge in their rejection of the neoliberal model of globalization, and with a common desire to create a meeting space for resistance forces to meet, exchange and discuss their respective experiences and potential alternatives to promote another possible world, more democratic, more just, and more respectful of the environment. On the subject, see C. Whitaker, *Changer le monde, [nouveau] mode d’emploi* (Paris: Éditions de l’Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, 2006).


54. MST member, interview 17 by author (Belém, January 2009).

55. Robin, Le monde selon Monsanto, pp. 262–263.

56. Brazilian peasant activists, interviews 3, 6, 17, 24 by author (Sao Paulo and Curitiba, June 2005 and Belém, January 2009).


65. MMC members, interviews 24, 25, 26 by author (Belém, January 2009); panels and informal discussions with author, Americas Social Forum (Guatemala, October 2008).


67. MMC member, interview 24 by author (Belém, January 2009).


70. Agroecology usually refers to smaller scale, diversified production, free of GMOs and chemicals inputs, that produces healthy food, with ecological methods respectful of ecosystems and local cultures (interviews 24, 25, 26 by author (Belém, January, 2009)); S.R. Gliessman, Agroecology: Ecological Processes in Sustainable Agriculture (Chelsea, MI: Ann Arbor Press, 1998).

71. Desmarais, La Via Campesina, p. 34; VC quoted in McMichael, “Peasants Make Their Own History,” p. 217.


75. MST member, interview 17 by author (Belém, January 2009).
76. In *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures*, Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar define “cultural politics” as “the process enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other” (p. 7).


78. This section draws from field notes made in June 2005.

79. Field notes from Americas Social Forum (ASF), Guatemala City (October 2008).

80. MMC member interview 24 by author (Belém, January 2009).

81. Quoted in Desmarais, *La Via Campesina*, p. 196.

82. Field notes, ASF, Guatemala City (October 2008); MST members, interviews 3, 6, 17 by author (Sao Paulo and Curitiba, June 2005).


84. MMC members, interviews 23, 24, 25 by author (Belém, January 2009).

85. Field notes; Desmarais, “La Via Campesina”; Borras, “La Via Campesina and its Global Campaign.”


87. See Robin, *Le monde selon Monsanto*.


91. MMC members, interviews 23 and 24 by author (Belém, January 2009).
