

Agrarian Extractivism, Peasant Culture and Law from Below

Theodora Valkanou¹

1 Introduction

In recent years, the ‘transformation’ of food systems has emerged as a particular focus of public discourse on climate change and the future of our planet. It is now uncontroversial that food systems contribute greatly to climate change and large-scale ecological decline more broadly. The interference of food systems with the natural world has been so pervasive that the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has described their operation as part of a ‘war on nature’ (United Nations 2021).

The current organisation of our food systems is just one facet of the extractivist ethic that has penetrated all aspects of our everyday lives. Extractivism has been aptly described as

a complex ensemble of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion, and non-reciprocity (Chagnon et al. 2022: 760).

While extractivism has habitually been used as an analytical framework to describe mining and oil extraction practices (Veltmeyer 2012, Torres Wong 2018), food and agriculture are being increasingly interrogated through the prism of extractivism by critical extractivist scholarship

(Veltmeyer & Ezquerro-Cañete 2023, McKay et al.. 2021). Agrarian extractivism involves corporate-controlled, large-scale, intensive monocrop production of food that is dependent upon chemical inputs and is destined for export. Predicated upon a utilitarian logic that is directed towards accumulation and driven by profit, agrarian extractivist practices are interwoven with capitalist development processes.

The domination of extractivist practices in food systems has had a profound ecological impact destroying natural ecosystems and driving biodiversity loss. In addition, agrarian extractivism has deeply affected rural communities that rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Peasant communities have been seeing their traditional farming cultures, modes of socio-economic organisation and ways of life severely disrupted. Environmental degradation and peasant dispossession have in fact been necessary conditions for the prevalence of extractivism in food systems.

This article contributes a legal perspective to the growing body of critical extractivist literature by putting forward peasant culture as a counter-hegemonic pathway out of the violence of agrarian extractivism. It does so with reference to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas ('UNDROP') (United Nations 2018). UNDROP was driven by grassroots politics of the food sovereignty movement and constitutes the most recent international law instrument on the governance of food systems. This essay focuses solely on the novelties of the legal text of UNDROP (rather than its implementative prospects) and showcases how peasant values challenge the ideological limitations of international law and its connection with capitalist development by advancing on community structures, subaltern knowledge and ecological embeddedness. Such values are in turn key for a reconfiguration of food systems towards more sustainable and equitable futures. While being aware of the dangers of romanticising rural life, my main objective is to call attention to the possibility of different ways of being and organising life outside of the confines of capitalist relations.

My contribution to this Special Issue proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss agrarian extractivism as the central mode of organisation that

structures socio-economic and ecological relations within our food systems. My aim is to provide a short account of agrarian extractivism as the dominant mode of agricultural development and trace its relation to international law. Second, I shift our gaze to the worlds and lifeforms that agrarian extractivism has sought to supersede. In particular, I focus on peasant communities and their culture apropos of their recent legal recognition under international law. Third, I reflect on the importance of the legal pronouncement of peasant culture as an ontological alternative to agrarian extractivism, and contemplate its radical potential for food systems and international law.

2 Agrarian Extractivism as (a Presumed) Prefiguration

Agrarian extractivism is the dominant modality currently structuring the organisation of our food systems. The origins of extractivism as a *modus operandi* of global food systems is historically entangled with the colonial project of the late 19th and early 20th century. During that period, European colonial powers orchestrated the commodity production of basic grains and livestock in the colonies with a view to exporting them back to Europe. The outsourcing of food production in order to meet the demands of European consumers overhauled subsistence farming systems in the colonies through the violent displacement of Indigenous communities from their ancestral lands. This forceful introduction of agrarian extractivism disrupted local smallholding agriculture attuned to natural cycles, making way for the exploitation of colonised lands by emigrating settlers (Friedmann 2005, Hippert 2019). Deriving its resonance from the ‘civilising mission’, the colonial interference in agriculture was justified as a practice aimed to “‘improve’ (or as we would now say “develop”) lands taken by force from Indigenous peoples’ (Friedmann 2005: 126). The idea of extractive domination over nature and local communities emerged as an integral part of the broader colonial project and laid the foundations of modern forms of agrarian extractivism.

In the decades that followed, as the Green Revolution unfolded, the colonial domination of farming systems in the colonies mutated

into other forms of control and subordination. The Green Revolution marks a major extractivist turning point in the history of agriculture which has conditioned food systems ever since. The Green Revolution refers to a series of practices adopted in the 1960s and 1970s which aimed to increase agricultural production (in economic terms) through new technologies. Promoted by the United States and backed by international organisations, these practices facilitated the implantation of industrial agricultural models practiced by economically developed countries across the Global South (Clapp 2020). The Green Revolution was first introduced in Mexico, and subsequently spread to Asia, Latin America, and only later Africa (Patel 2013). Premised upon the idea that the primary cause of food insecurity is the 'underperformance' of traditional modes of agricultural production, the Green Revolution promoted the deployment of 'advanced' agricultural practices that increased agrarian productivity to solve the conundrum of global hunger².

Although the promise of the Green Revolution to end global hunger proved false, its effects have been enduring. Since the adoption of the Green Revolution in the second half of the 20th century, food systems around the world have been increasingly organised around agrarian extractivism. Agrarian extractivism is characterised by the large-scale, intensive extraction of resources to produce food for export, and involves capital accumulation, dispossession and ecological degradation (Veltmeyer & Ezquerro-Cañete 2023, McKay & Veltmeyer 2021). Industrial agriculture is an agrarian extractivist model that employs practices for intensive agricultural production with a view to maximising crop yields without regard for natural ecosystems. Industrial farming systems make use of vast land tracts to grow a single variety of crops ('monoculture') relying on manufactured inputs, such as fertilisers, pesticides and hormones in order to produce standardised food products. Other inputs include commercially-bred 'quality' seeds of high-yielding varieties, fossil-fuel-powered farm machinery for planting and harvesting, and intensive irrigation infrastructure (Clapp 2020).

The ecological consequences of agrarian extractivist processes in

food systems have been profound. Ironically, although the agricultural sector is highly dependent upon climate for its operation and, as such, is particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change, food systems constitute the largest single cause of climate change, accounting for over one third of global greenhouse gas emissions (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2022). High yields of monocultures of wheat, rice and maize are only possible through the excessive interference with natural ecosystems. The extensive use of chemical fertilisers and other inputs degrades land, soil and water, and greatly contributes to biodiversity loss (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2021). At the same time, plastic contamination and deforestation present other serious challenges (United Nations Environment Program 2022).

The violence of agrarian extractivism has also had far-reaching effects on rural food producing communities. The expansion of industrial agriculture has displaced ecologically integrated farming practices and traditional knowledge by disrupting peasant communities' access to natural resources and curtailing their autonomy in the process of food production (Fernandes 2024). By design, the agrarian extractive economy has made farmers heavily reliant on chemical fertilisers, fostering relationships of dependency in agribusiness-controlled commodity chains (Fakhri 2022). Relatedly, the replacement of small-scale farming practices by high-yielding monocultural agriculture has led to traditional food sources that are embedded in local cultures and geographies to be debilitated (Peschard & Randeria 2020). As a result, traditional foods have been abandoned in favour of manufactured food, which has progressively changed subsistence patterns eroding cultural specificity (see Zambrano et al. 2022).

Key to the prominence of agrarian extractivist processes has been the liberalisation of food and agricultural markets as part of neoliberal globalisation. In the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed conditionalities upon indebted developing countries under structural adjustments programmes that required them to open up their food and agricultural markets, in

particular by removing barriers on food imports (Clapp 2020). The conclusion of the World Trade Organization ('WTO') Agreement on Agriculture in 1994 was the most significant milestone, launching the inclusion of agriculture into the trade liberalisation regime of the WTO. This marked the beginning of an international market for food regulated by international trade norms. An essential corollary of agrarian extractivism and its enabling infrastructure has been the rise of transnational corporations as powerful actors in contemporary food systems. Today, the global food system is highly concentrated – with a handful of transnational corporations controlling the entire supply chain, from the seeds sector and the fertiliser industry to processing, distribution and commodity trading (Clapp 2023, Howard 2016, Chadwick 2019).

Agrarian extractivism is firmly tied to processes of capitalist globalisation whereby productivity is solely measured on the basis of commodity output, profit maximisation and economic growth. Typically presented as a neutral, pragmatic way to tackle the calamity of global food insecurity, the extractivist narrative has been based upon sophisticated theories that espouse liberal market economy as the foundation of development (Escobar 1995).

Legal arrangements have been critical to the consolidation of agrarian extractivism and the furtherance of its underlying ideologies. A robust architecture of international law norms and institutions ranging from international trade and investment law to international human rights law underwrites the extraction of natural resources (see Cotula 2020). The instrumentality of law in driving extraction is most obvious in international economic law. Premised on the dogma of the free market, international economic legal norms sanction the liberalisation of markets and globalisation of production, permitting the commodification of any good or activity (see Linarelli et al. 2018). The protection of transnational flows of capital through a network of international economic law treaties enables the operation of a lopsided globalised economy that promotes the interests of transnational capital (Gonzalez 2014). As transnational corporations are positioned to reap

the benefits of economic liberalisation while often being absolved of any liability, international economic law facilitates the expansion of transnational corporate control in food systems.

At the core of agrarian extractivism lies an epistemological process of disregarding lifeworlds and ways of life that are at odds with its own vision of appropriation. In congruence with the tenets of the capitalist political economy, agrarian extractivist processes are predicated upon a productivist appropriation of nature and are directed towards accumulation and profit. The epistemology of extraction encompasses a self-indulgent imaginary that ‘has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits’ (Blaser & Cadena 2018b: 3, see also Adelman 2015). Extractivism reproduces the practice of *terra nullius* by making invisible the socio-ecological worlds that pre-existed its imposed extractivist materiality (Blaser & Cadena 2018b, see also Guerrero Lara 2023). The extractivist logic that underpins food systems – part of a broader capitalist logic – attributes a market value to nature and reduces food to a commodity. This logic views nature as an infinite resource subject to perpetual non-reciprocal exploitation and produces a fabricated disconnection between food systems and the socio-ecological worlds that sustain them (see Natarajan 2022, Gudynas 2013).

The dispossession of peasant communities and the displacement of traditional modes of production and knowledge have been essential to practices of agrarian extractivism. Central to peasant disenfranchisement has been a pejorative imaginary of peasants as backward, ignorant, underdeveloped and perverse – a class of people that ought to be ‘civilised’ (see Handy 2009). During the colonial era, the practice of imperial agricultural interventions in the colonies was often presented as the ‘white man’s burden’ to upgrade ‘primitive’ peoples perceived as ‘savages’ or ‘brutes’ (Kipling 1940, see also Tzouvala 2020, Rittich 2019). In more recent years, with the expansion of the Green Revolution, a similar narrative has prevailed which has assumed that small-scale agricultural production has had

to be ‘modernised’ by technological advances for the sake of economic growth and development (see McMichael 2008). This narrative, which is underpinned by a framework of capitalist modernity that devalues and subjugates peasant life, supported a process of ‘global depeasantization’ which displaced traditional farming systems that were largely viewed as anti-scientific and unproductive (Araghi 1995, see also Murthy 2021).

The abstraction of the natural world and rural communities by agrarian extractivist processes has not, however, proved to be viable. The purported mastery over nature and the subaltern – that is, a *pseudo*-mastery – has been imploding under the weight of its own disastrous socio-ecological effects (see Castoriadis 1991: 220, Amin 2013). The ‘boomerang’ effects of the excesses of agrarian extractivism have not only manifested in climate change but have also taken the form of human uprising. Resistance has indeed been symptomatic of the violence of extractivist food systems (McMichael 2014). Since the 1980s and 1990s, rural communities whose livelihoods, ways of life and environment were disrupted have pushed back against agrarian extractivism by organising transnationally into grassroots movements focused on advocating for ‘food sovereignty’.

Popularised by the work of the transnational agrarian movement La Via Campesina, the idea of food sovereignty was conceived as a counter-narrative to ‘food security’³. Food sovereignty advances grassroots claims for a structural transformation of food systems so that rural communities can determine their own food systems. It encompasses a vision of food systems in which small-scale farming communities reclaim control over land and other natural resources that are essential for food production, deploy traditional ecological farming practices to feed their communities, and participate in decision-making processes related to food and agricultural policy (Wittman et al. 2010a, Claeys 2015, Canfield 2022). While the food security paradigm merely focuses on adequate food supply and nutritional content without regard to structural inequities within food systems, food sovereignty revolves around the construction of an alternative model of agrarian development aimed at dismantling the current extractivist food system.

More specifically, food sovereignty targets the asymmetrical power relations within food systems that sustain peasant disempowerment, and foregrounds the intertwinement of food with complex socio-cultural and ecological practices.

Over the past decades, the determined activism of the food sovereignty movement against the extractivist organisation of food systems has taken multiple forms (see Claeys & Peschard 2020, Canfield 2022). One tactic has been grassroots human rights-based resistance aimed at mobilising international law to advance the interests of rural communities. In 2018, peasant advocacy efforts culminated in the adoption of UNDROP. UNDROP, as a legal instrument, aims to recognise peasant communities and their lifeways within the realm of international law.

3 Centring the Peripheral in International Law – Peasant Communities and their Culture

UNDROP is a pioneering international legal development that establishes human rights for peasant communities on the basis of their distinct modes of economic and socio-cultural organisation. Initiated by rural social movements that substantially contributed to its development (Claeys 2018), it represents a grassroots normative intervention that is aimed to upend peasant subjugation, and reverse the legacy of inequitable and unsustainable food systems. UNDROP breaks new ground by recognising peasant communities and their culture as worthy of protection under international law. By virtue of UNDROP, the term ‘peasant’ is reclaimed with pride as a non-subordinating term that describes rural communities’ cultural identity and socio-economic practices (Edelman 2022, Claeys 2015, Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2010).

Article 1(1) provides a definition of the peasantry according to which a peasant is

any person who engages or who seeks to engage, alone, or in association with others or as a community, in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, and who relies significantly,

though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other non-monetized ways of organizing labour, and who has a special dependency on and attachment to the land (UNDROP: art 1(1)).

The definition of the peasantry under UNDROP captures the range of economic, social, cultural and ecological features of smallholding cultivation. The engagement of peasant communities with agriculture is focused on subsistence and it is primarily aimed at feeding their families and local communities rather than at accumulation and the creation of surplus production. In contrast to industrial agriculture whereby food is reduced to a commodity whose production and trading is geared towards the creation of surplus value, small-scale farming is destined to serve local and domestic markets. Unlike commercially grown ‘food from nowhere’ produced at large scale with detrimental socio-ecological effects (Wittman et al. 2010b: 5, Friel et al. 2020), family- and community-scale agriculture is based on direct links between producers and consumers. As such, it operates outside the rationale of global markets and performs a distinct societal function (McGreevy et al. 2022). In addition, peasant agriculture largely relies on community structures of the family or other non-monetised labour (Bessa & Gilbert 2022). Community-based social relations anchored on kinship, collaboration and care are central for local livelihoods, and reflect how peasant communities relate materially and culturally to their occupation.

Another fundamental element of peasant agriculture is the profound socio-cultural connection of smallholder food producing communities with their natural world. Small-scale farming communities have a special attachment to the agricultural land, traditional seeds and other resources that comprise the productive basis of their food systems. Natural resources are crucial for the subsistence and collective community survival of the peasantry but also closely intertwined with their way of living, worldview and sense of belonging (Ferrando & Vivero-Pol 2017). For peasant communities, their rootedness and enduring spatial ties with their natural resources correspond to an idea of dignity and integrity. This intimate relationship with the natural

world is a definitional element of the peasantry under Article 1 of UNDROP – an attribute that has been primarily tied to indigeneity to date. This element indicates that small-scale agriculture – except for an economic activity that provides for subsistence – has a distinctive cultural dimension (see Donders 2015, Human Rights Council 2017 para. 261).

Peasant agricultural practices are weaved into rural cultural traditions based on a wealth of traditional knowledge on natural resources and surrounding ecologies. The traditional knowledge of rural communities, often maintained over generations, are an integral part of peasant heritage (Niles 2018, Koohafkan & Altieri 2010). Integrating ecological entanglements into agricultural practices, peasant traditional knowledge is nothing but intricate. As Angela Hilmi finely describes

[t]he act of farming is an act of high sophistication. When, how, where and what to plant, to raise, to care for, to sacrifice, to multiply. Seeds transform into plants, plants interact with each other, above and below ground, animals and microorganism join, and the cycle continues, permanently transforming and evolving year after year, season after season.

No simple mind can orchestrate such a symphony. An immense array of qualities is required to bring it all together, adjust, adapt and raise the fruits of individual, family and collective labour to provide fulfilling lives. The existence, functionality, quality of the system is based on the level, number and quality of relationships, connections and links between living and non-living organisms, mineral and organic worlds, peoples and place, present and past, material and immaterial, rational and irrational, bodily and spiritual. (Hilmi 2018: 125).

Under UNDROP, peasant culture is valued as a distinct culture subject to international law protection. Article 26(1) establishes the right of peasants ‘to enjoy their own culture and to pursue freely their cultural development, without interference or any form of discrimination’ (UNDROP: art 26(1)). The provision further stipulates that peasants have the ‘right to maintain, express, control, protect and develop their traditional and local knowledge, such as ways of life, methods of

production or technology, or customs and tradition' (UNDROP: art 26(1)).

Relatedly, the peasant right to land under Article 17(1) includes the right of peasant communities to have access to, sustainably use, and manage land and other resources as well as their right to 'develop their cultures' (UNDROP: art 17(1)). In the same vein, traditional knowledge and associated practices of agricultural production and conservation of natural resources are protected under UNDROP. Article 16(1) establishes the right of peasant communities to freely engage in traditional ways of farming as part of their right to an adequate standard of living (UNDROP: art 16(1)). The newly recognised right to seeds also protects peasant communities' right to maintain and control their traditional knowledge of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture as well as develop their own seeds and related knowledge (UNDROP: art 19(1)(a), 19(2)). Traditional peasant knowledge is complemented by, and overlaps with, agroecology – another important feature of peasant culture that is acknowledged by UNDROP (see Pimbert 2019, Bell & Bellon 2018). As its Preamble sets down,

peasants [...] should be supported in their efforts to promote and undertake sustainable practices of agricultural production that support and are in harmony with nature, also referred to as Mother Earth in a number of countries and regions, including by respecting the biological and natural ability of ecosystems to adapt and regenerate through natural processes and cycles (UNDROP: preamble, 3).

More specifically, Article 16(4) establishes a state obligation to 'stimulate sustainable production, including agroecological and organic production', while Article 20(2) demands states to take appropriate measures to promote and protect the traditional knowledge and practices of peasant communities including 'agroecological systems relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity' (UNDROP: arts 16(4), 20(2)).

Peasant culture transcends peasant collective identity and has deep contemporary significance in the current state of climate emergency. In recent years, the conventional wisdom that global food security is

dependent upon industrial corporate farms has been challenged, and the contribution of small-scale agriculture to food security is increasingly being acknowledged. It is now widely accepted that smallholder farmers produce one third of the global food supply while occupying only about 12 percent of all agricultural land (Lowder et al. 2021, Ricciardi et al. 2018). As small-scale farming is however often excluded from national accounts, the actual and potential contribution of peasant agriculture to food security remains a matter of controversy (McGreevy et al. 2022, see also United Nations General Assembly 2021 para. 74). Equally important is that the capacity of smallholder farmers to feed the world is accompanied by enormous benefits, including greater biodiversity and nutritional benefits (Ricciardi et al. 2018, Peschard & Randeria 2020). Small-scale agriculture can also mitigate greenhouse gas emissions by minimising the use of fossil fuel-based machinery and chemical inputs. At the same time, smallholder farming practices can support climate change adaptation due to their resilience to extreme weather events thanks to crop diversity, and increased organic matter and water-holding capacity of the soil (Gonzalez 2015).

UNDROP recognises the value of the work of rural communities and the significance of peasant culture and practices in tackling current societal and environmental challenges. Its Preamble acknowledges the contribution of peasant communities in ensuring the right to food and food security in accordance with internationally agreed development goals (UNDROP: preamble, 2), while Article 20(2) recognises the significant role of traditional peasant knowledge and practices in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (UNDROP: art 20(2), preamble, 2). Furthermore, Article 18(3) provides the right of peasants to contribute their traditional knowledge and practices in the design and implementation of domestic climate change adaptation and mitigation policies (UNDROP: art 18(3), see also Alabrese & Savaresi 2020). This positive recognition of the work and aptitude of peasant communities under UNDROP foregrounds their tremendous value and relevance, and corresponds to a core argument of rural social movements: that peasants are capable of sustainably producing food for their communities and acting as stewards of the natural world

(Larking 2019).

In sum, the recognition of peasant communities and peasant culture under international law is particularly significant in that it validates the peasantry as a socio-economic and cultural identity distinguished by their traditional farming cultures. UNDROP encapsulates the highly multi-faceted nature of the engagement of peasant communities with agricultural production. Small-scale agricultural practices involve compounded social, economic and ecological processes that are community-based, are aimed to provide food for local communities, and are embedded in grounded knowledge built around the stewardship of the natural world. These practices are intimately cultural and integral to peasant communities' traditional ways of life. As I argue in the next section, the recognition of peasant culture under UNDROP opens space for peasant communities to reclaim control over their foodways and implement a vision of development of their own that contests agrarian extractivism. The possibilities UNDROP presents to this end are explored in more detail below.

4 Peasant Culture as a Pathway to Counter-Hegemonic Reworlding

UNDROP provides a legal framework that makes the rethinking of extractivism as the dominant mode of operation of our food systems possible. It is a normative intervention that gives articulation to peasant culture as a matter of international law and provides a viable cultural alternative to the extractive organisation of food systems (see Monteduro et al. 2015, Gonzalez 2011, Kamari-Mbote & Cullet 1999). Peasant culture is designated as an alternative worldview aimed to reverse the destructive ecological effects of agrarian extractivism and the subjugation of peasant communities. In doing so, peasant culture in essence deconstructs the idea of development as conventionally understood, and offers a conceptual basis to challenge the unsustainable and inequitable model of agrarian extractivism currently dominating our food systems.

The significance of culture in realising sustainable development

was underscored in a recent report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Alexandra Xanthaki (United Nations 2023a). The report emphasises that

[d]evelopment can only be sustainable if it is both determined by and infused with the values of the people that it involves and the meanings they give to their existence, takes into consideration their aspirations, protects their resources and incorporates their heritage in all its dimensions – tangible, living and natural (United Nations 2023a para. 1).

In the same vein, the Special Rapporteur underlines that sustainable development must be

self-determined and community-led, contextualized to specific cultural environments and seeking to fully align itself with the aspirations, customs, traditions, systems and world views of the individuals and groups most likely to be impacted (United Nations 2023a para. 3).

This framing draws upon Margot Salomon's argument proposing culture as an alternative to 'sustainable development' that is embedded in capitalist structures (Salomon 2022). Salomon argues, in particular, that the distinct mode of economic organisation of peasant communities should be understood as a culture that not only provides an alternative to capitalist development (and for that matter 'sustainable development' ingrained in it) but is 'reflective of a *cultural value system that defines their model of development*' (Salomon 2022). By using a cultural lens for the understanding of development, this framing challenges long-held certitudes about the present and future of progress, and creates space for a diversity of cultures to determine development processes.

Premised upon a community-based model of organisation, peasant culture pronounces a fundamentally different value system for the ordering of political economic forces within food systems. It breaks from ideological patterns based upon economistic notions of growth, productivity and market value that underpin extractivist practices, and advances 'a more integrated, interdependent and cooperative economy of agriculture' (Trauger & Passidomo 2012: 282; see also Claeys &

Peschard 2020, Levkoe et al. 2021). In contrast to capitalist values that exalt individualism, capital accumulation and non-reciprocity, peasant culture fosters community, subaltern empowerment and ecological embeddedness as foundational in the reorganisation of food systems (Salomon 2020). In doing so, it consolidates a vision towards the restitution of natural resources, knowledge systems and community-based traditional practices displaced by extractivist processes. As a framework for the governance of foodscapes, peasant culture reflects a distinct ideology that envisages a radical reorientation of socio-economic relations in food systems. Situated openly outside of the confines of market economy, this ideology encompasses an alternative ‘civilisational’ model that is founded upon subaltern culture and a relational interaction with the natural world as a viable alternative to ‘capitalist civilisation’. In this context, food becomes ‘a powerful tool to reimagine relations of community and economy’ (Cohen 2015: 132). Peasant culture introduces a counter-hegemonic force into the extractivist organisation of food systems that challenges the prevailing liberal economic order and the material conditions that produce peasant subordination (Yaşın 2022). As such, it posits a different narrative aimed at discontinuing capital accumulation and ecological devastation, and normalising food systems embedded in community structures and operating within ecological boundaries.

The recognition of peasant culture under international law is also deeply significant on an epistemological level. As peasant culture represents a mode of organisation of food systems viewed through the material sites of peasant communities, UNDROP adds an uncommon intercultural perspective in the realm of international law. The inclusion of peasant culture as an ontology within international law amounts to the validation of knowledge systems based upon subaltern socio-cultural and ecological values. Such normative acknowledgment of peasant culture in turn agitates the epistemological frameworks upon which agrarian extractivism is premised, and decentres the power of epistemic elites and technocrats (Claeys & Peschard 2020, see also Haas 2014). This emerging ‘epistemological openness’ unsettles established hierarchies within international law and carves out space for different

cultures to be understood as part of the development of international law rather than as external to it (Natarajan 2022, see also Rajagopal 2003, Gathii 2021, Escobar 2018). The receptiveness of subaltern epistemologies by virtue of UNDROP is a rare occurrence that could unlock the counter-hegemonic potential of international law.

Relatedly, peasant culture introduces conceptions of international law that are congruent with grassroots worldviews and ways of life. UNDROP gives credence to long-established practices of peasant communities, and contributes to the visibilisation of previously invisibilised worlds – ecological and socio-cultural alike. By recognising peasant culture as an integral element of food systems, UNDROP deviates from other legal structures that conceptually separate the social and cultural from the natural (see Natarajan & Dehm 2022, Raftopoulos 2017). The ecological embeddedness of peasant culture is at odds with the extractive imaginary of nature that often characterises international law. Likewise, peasant culture upends the underlying logic of the existing international legal systems by seeking to shift power to peasant communities (Claeys & Peschard 2020, see also van der Ploeg 2008). In effect, UNDROP contributes to the construction of alternative ideological structures within international law and reminds us of the range of normative possibilities beyond the capitalist society.

This discussion about peasant communities and their culture is not about romanticising or oversimplifying agrarian practices and ways of life. Rather, it is about drawing attention to the possibility of different lifeways that challenge currently normalised (and supposedly insurmountable) modes of organisation and being. That said, it is important to acknowledge that a structural reorganisation of food systems is bound to be fraught with challenges – ranging from normative (Salomon 2020) and material ones (Edelman 2022, Blake et al. 2023) to the constant risk of appropriation of the counter-hegemonic food sovereignty discourse by hegemonic forces (Peschard & Randeria 2020, Fakhri 2022, McMichael 2021). Another challenge relates to the conundrum of the implementation of UNDROP. To date, the domestic enforcement of food sovereignty policies has been far

from unproblematic (Claeys & Peschard 2020). However, the recent establishment of a United Nations Working Group on Peasant Rights with the mandate to advance the implementation of UNDROP is a promising development (United Nations 2023b).

Despite the structural obstacles in its path, UNDROP offers a conceptual framework of practical and heuristic relevance for a reworlding of our food systems (see Niles 2018). Drawing upon grassroots visions of rural communities, UNDROP provides a new set of legal rules for the governance of food systems that turns international law from a site of domination into a site of emancipatory possibilities for the subaltern (see Cogan 2021). The recognition of peasant culture under international law represents an epistemological and political economic rift that aspires to transcend dominant extractive relations in food systems, and avert the reproduction of established socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. As such, it exemplifies a different way of engaging with, thinking about and articulating legal doctrine with a clear vision for thwarting power discrepancies, and enhancing ecologically embedded ways of living and being.

5 Conclusion

In our market-based globalised world, the ethic of extractivist domination has been an underlying driver of the ongoing ecological and social crises. This article has shown how extractivist logics have structured food systems and how food systems have, since the advent of the Green Revolution, been geared towards export-oriented industrialisation, the commodification of food and an extractivist control over nature. Enabled by international legal norms and institutions, extractivist practices in food systems have played a central role in ecological decline and the marginalisation of rural communities and cultures. Agrarian extractivism has contributed greatly to climate change and the subjugation of peasant communities whose lifeways challenge capitalist ideas of development.

The violence of agrarian extractivism and the reductive ideas of economic, social and cultural development accompanying it has made it

urgently necessary to imagine and enact different ways of organisation and relating to nature. Such re-envisioning has been led by peasant communities whose livelihoods and rural cultures have been profoundly affected by agrarian extractivism. Peasant communities have organised transnationally into rural social movements with a view to challenging the dominant extractivist development model, in an attempt to reclaim control over their natural resources. Peasant resistance has led to the adoption of UNDROP in 2018. This represents a significant intervention within international law that has the potential to drive a structural reorganisation of food systems.

This article has argued that a particularly important aspect of UNDROP is its recognition of peasant systems of practice and knowledge under international law. Through UNDROP, peasant culture is recognised as a distinct culture that comprises sophisticated systems of governance of natural resources for agricultural production that are based on traditional knowledge and practices. Premised upon community-based traditional farming systems, social and biological diversity, and the socio-cultural value of food, UNDROP challenges the ideological undercurrents of agrarian extractivism, and aims to upend peasant subjugation and ecological violence in food systems. By situating peasant culture as a viable basis for the socio-economic configuration of food systems, UNDROP contests the very structures of agrarian extractivism and its practices of material and cultural dispossession. This is, in essence, a battle over the epistemological and ontological narratives that shape food systems.

Originating from grassroots politics, UNDROP is an exercise of reimagining legal frameworks to advance counter-hegemonic visions. The recognition of peasant culture under UNDROP prompts a new paradigm of law and social change, driven from the bottom up, that deploys international law as a terrain of economic, social and cultural struggle. Institutionalised by international law, peasant culture consolidates an alternative non-extractivist mode of organisation that can animate future imaginaries of food systems. At the very least, UNDROP demonstrates that, as much as international law has been

Theodora Valkanou

entangled in the project of extractivism, it can also play a role as a dismantling force. This very conjuncture of ecological collapse and existential threat might well be the exact right moment for a structural transformation of food systems.

Endnotes

1. Theodora Valkanou is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Law. I would like to thank the editors of this Special Issue, Kathleen Birrell, Julia Dehm and Martin Clark, for their insightful comments and kindness. In addition, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions. All errors and omissions are mine alone.
2. This narrative drew upon a theory developed by the influential 18th century British economist Thomas Robert Malthus (Malthus 1798); for a discussion see Saab 2019: 5–7.
3. Food security was introduced as a policy objective at the United Nations World Food Conference in 1974 (United Nations 1975). Food security was initially portrayed as a production issue that would supposedly be achieved by means of increased agricultural productivity and liberalised international trade. While the dominant definition has expanded over time to include elements, such as accessibility, distribution and nutrition, the central premise of the food security discourse has remained that more food needs to be produced through agricultural expansion and technological innovation. In reaction to this productivist discourse, the food sovereignty movement came forth seeking to foreground overlooked facets of the food systems, namely what food is produced, how it is produced and by whom (Wittman et al. 2010a, Wills 2017, Canfield 2022).

References

Cases, Statutes and United Nations Materials

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2022 ‘Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Agrifood Systems: Global, Regional and Country Trends, 2000–2020’ Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/cc2672en/cc2672en.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2025)
- 2021 ‘The State of the World’s Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture: Systems at Breaking Point’ Available at: <https://www.fao.org/land-water/solaw2021/en/> (accessed 10 February 2025)

Human Rights Council 2017 'Report of the Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group on a Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas' UN Doc. A/HRC/36/58

United Nations Environment Program 2022 'Plastics in Agriculture – an Environmental Challenge' Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/40403/Plastics_Agriculture.pdf (accessed 10 February 2025)

United Nations 1975 'Report of the World Food Conference, Rome 5-16 November 1974' UN Doc. E/CONF.65/20

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas 2018 UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/39/12

United Nations General Assembly 2021 'Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri' UN Doc. A/76/237

United Nations General Assembly 2023a 'Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Alexandra Xanthaki, Development and Cultural Rights: the International Governance' UN Doc. A/78/213

United Nations General Assembly 2023b 'Resolution Adopted by the Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas' UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/54/9

United Nations, Press Release 2021 'Secretary-General Calls Food System Major Driver of Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Biodiversity Loss, Citing 'War on Nature', in Message to Pre-Summit' Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20838.doc.htm> (accessed 10 February 2025)

Books, Articles and Reports

Adelman S 'Epistemologies of Mastery' in Grear et al. 2015: 9-27

Akram-Lodhi A H, Dietz K, Engels B and McKay B eds 2021 *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies* Edward Elgar Cheltenham and Northampton

Alabrese M and Savaresi A 'The UNDROP and Climate Change: Squaring the Circle?' in Alabrese et al. 2022: 165-176

Alabrese M, Bessa A, Brunori M and Giuggioli P F eds 2022 *The United Nations' Declaration on Peasants' Rights* Routledge London and New York

Agrarian Extractivism, Peasant Culture and Law from Below

- Alam S, Atapattu S, Gonzalez C G and Razzaque J eds 2015 *International Environmental Law and the Global South* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Amin S 2013 *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* NYU Press New York
- Araghi F A 1995 'Global Depeasantization, 1945-1990' *The Sociological Quarterly* 36/2: 337-368
- Bell M M and Bellon S 2018 'Generalization Without Universalization: Towards an Agroecology Theory' *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 42/6: 605-611
- Bessa A and Gilbert J 2022 'Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Local Communities in the UNDROP: Synergies and Challenges' in Alabrese et al. 2022: 32-46
- Blake LJ, Chohan J K and Escobar M P 2023 'Agro-extractivism and Neoliberal Conservation: Campesino Abandonment in the Boyacá Páramos, Colombia' 102 *Journal of Rural Studies* 102: 1-15
- Blaser M and de la Cadena M eds 2018a *A World of Many Worlds* Duke University Press Durham
- 'Introduction: Pluriverse Proposals for a World of Many Worlds' in Blaser et al. 2018b: 1-22
- Canfield M C 2022 *Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance* Stanford University Press Stanford
- Castoriadis C 1991 *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Chadwick A 2019 *Law and the Political Economy of Hunger* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Chagnon C, Durante F, Gills B K, Hagolani-Albov S E, Hokkanen S, Kangasluoma S M J, Konttinen H, Kröger M, LaFleur W, Ollinaho O and Vuola M P S 2022 'From Extractivism to Global Extractivism: The Evolution of an Organizing Concept' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 49/4: 760-791
- Claeys P 2015 *Human Rights and the Food Sovereignty Movement: Reclaiming Control* Routledge London and New York
- 2018 'The Rise of New Rights for Peasants: From Reliance on NGO Intermediaries to Direct Representation' *Transnational Legal Theory* 9/3-4: 386-399

- Claeys P and Peschard K 'Transnational Agrarian Movements, Food Sovereignty, and Legal Mobilization' in Foblets et al. 2020: 679-700
- Clapp J 2020 *Food Polity* (3rd edn)
- 2023 'Concentration and Crises: Exploring the Deep Roots of Vulnerability in the Global Industrial Food System' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 50/1: 1-25
- Cogan J K 2021 'A History of International Law in the Vernacular' in Schäfer et al. 2021: 485-488
- Cohen A J 2015 'The Law and Political Economy of Contemporary Food: Some Reflections on the Local and the Small' *Law and Contemporary Problems* 78/ 1-2: 101-145
- Cotula L 2020 '(Dis)Integration in Global Resource Governance: Extractivism, Human Rights, and Investment Treaties' *Journal of International Economic Law* 23/2: 431-454
- Donders Y 'The Cultural Dimension of Economic Activities in International Human Rights Jurisprudence' in Vadi et al. 2015: 33-49
- Duncan J, Carolan M and Wiskerke J S C eds 2021 *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems* Routledge London and New York
- Edelman M 2022 'Defining Peasants in the UNDROP' in Alabrese et al. 2022: 19-31
- Escobar A 1995 *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* Princeton University Press Princeton
- 2018 *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* Duke University Press Durham
- Fakhri M 2022 'The Food System Summit's Disconnection From People's Real Needs' *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 35/16: 1-9
- Fernandes S 2024 'Food for Internationalist Thought' *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* Available at: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/52215/food-for-internationalist-thought> (accessed 10 February 2025)
- Ferrando T and Vivero-Pol J L 2017 '“Commons and ‘Commoning’: A ‘New’ Old Narrative to Enrich the Food Sovereignty and Right to Food Claims’ Right to Food and Nutrition Watch Available at: <https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/en/publication/commons-and-commoning-new-old-narrative-enrich-food-sovereignty-and-right-food-claims/> (accessed 10 February 2025)

Agrarian Extractivism, Peasant Culture and Law from Below

- Foblets M-C, Goodale M, Sapignoli M and Zenker O eds 2020 *Oxford Handbook of Law and Anthropology* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Friedmann H 'Feeding the Empire: The Pathologies of Globalized Agriculture' in Panitch et al. 2005: 124-143
- Friel S, Schram A and Townsend B 2020 'The Nexus Between International Trade, Food Systems, Malnutrition and Climate Change' *Nature Food* 1: 51-58
- Gathii J T 2021 'The Promise of International Law: A Third World View' (2021) *American University International Law Review* 36/3 377-477
- Gonzalez C G 2011 'Climate Change, Food Security, and Agrobiodiversity: Toward a Just, Resilient, and Sustainable Food System' *Fordham Environmental Law Review* 22: 493 -521
- 'International Economic Law and the Right to Food' in Lambek et al. 2014: 165-193
- 'Food Justice: An Environmental Justice Critique of the Global Food System' in Alam et al. 2015: 401-434
- Grear A and Kotzé L J eds 2015 *Research Handbook on Human Rights and the Environment* Edward Elgar Cheltenham and Northampton
- Gudynas E 'Transitions to Post-Extractivism: Directions, Options, Areas of Action' in Lang and Mokrani 2013: 165-188
- Guerrero Lara L et al. 2023 'Degrowth and Agri-food Systems: a Research Agenda for the Critical Social Sciences' *Sustainability Science* 18: 1579-1594
- Haas P M, 'Ideas, Experts and Governance' in Ambrus M, Arts K, Hey E and Raulus H 2014: 19-43
- Handy J 2009 'Almost Idiotic Wretchedness': A Long History of Blaming Peasants' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36/2: 325-344
- Hilmi A 2018 'Peasant Farming as a Source of Life' *Development* 61:122-128
- Hippert C 'Agriculture and Colonialism' in Thompson et al. 2019: 95-100
- Howard P H 2016 *Concentration and Power in the Food System* Bloomsbury London and New York
- Kameri-Mbote A P and Cullet P 1999 'Agro-Biodiversity and International Law – A Conceptual Framework' *Journal of Environmental Law* 11/2: 257-279

- Kipling R 1940 'The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899' in *Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* Doubleday
- Koohafkan P and Altieri M A 2010 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems: A Legacy for the Future' FAO Available at: <https://www.fao.org/4/i1979e/i1979e.pdf>
- Lambek et al. eds 2014 *Rethinking Food Systems: Structural Challenges, New Strategies and the Law* Springer New York
- Lang M and Mokrani D eds 2013 *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions in Latin America* Transnational Institute/Rosa Luxemburg Foundation
- Larking E 2019 'Mobilising for Food Sovereignty: The Pitfalls of International Human Rights Strategies and an Exploration of Alternatives' *International Journal of Human Rights* 23/5: 758-777
- Levkoe C Z, Moragues-Faus A and Duncan J 'A Political Economy of Regenerative Food Systems: Towards an Integrated Research Agenda' in Duncan J et al. 2021: 12-25
- Linarelli J, Salomon M E and Sornarajah M 2018 *The Misery of International Law: Confrontations with Injustice in the Global Economy* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Lowder S K, Sánchez M V and Bertini R 2021 'Which Farms Feed the World and has Farmland Become More Concentrated?' *World Development* 142:1-15
- Malthus T 1798 *An Essay on the Principle of Population, As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr Godwin, M Condorcet and Other Writers* Johnson London
- Martínez-Torres M A and Rosset P M 2010 'La Via Campesina: The Birth and Evolution of a Transnational Social Movement' (2010) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37/1: 149-175
- McGreevy S R, Rupprecht C D D, Niles D and Wiek A 2022 'Sustainable Agrifood Systems for a Postgrowth World' *Nature Sustainability* 5: 1011-1017
- McKay B M, Alonso-Fradejas A and Ezquerro-Cañete A 2021 *Agrarian Extractivism in Latin America* Routledge London and New York
- McKay B and Veltmeyer H 'Industrial Agriculture and Agrarian Extractivism in Akram-Lodhi et al. 2021: 503-514

- McMichael P 2008 'Peasants Make Their Own History, But Not Just as They Please . . .' *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8/2-3: 205-228
- 2014 'Historicizing Food Sovereignty' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41/6: 933-957
- 2021 'Shock and Awe in the UNFSS' *Development* 64: 162-171
- Monteduro M, Buongiorno P, Di Benedetto S and Isoni A 2015 *Law and Agroecology: A Transdisciplinary Dialogue* Springer Berlin and Heidelberg
- Murthy R V R 2021 *The Agrarian Question: A Reader* Routledge London
- Natarajan U 'Who Do We Think We Are? Human Rights in a Time of Ecological Change' in Natarajan et al. 2022: 200-228
- Natarajan U and Dehm J 2022 *Locating Nature: Making and Unmaking International Law* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Niles D 'Agricultural Heritage and Conservation Beyond the Anthropocene' in Labrador et al. 2018: 344-348
- Orford A, Hoffmann F and Clark M eds 2016 *The Oxford Handbook of the Theory of International Law* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Panitch L and Leys C eds 2005 *The Empire Reloaded: Socialist Register 2005* Merlin Press London
- Patel R 2013 'The Long Green Revolution' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40/1: 1-63
- Peschard K and S Randeria 2020 'Keeping Seeds in our Hands': The Rise of Seed Activism' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 47/4: 613-647
- Pimbert M P 2019 *Food Sovereignty, Agroecology and Biocultural Diversity: Constructing and Contesting Knowledge* Routledge London and New York
- Raftopoulos M 2017 'Contemporary Debates on Social-environmental Conflicts, Extractivism and Human Rights in Latin America' *International Journal of Human Rights* 21/4: 387-404
- Rajagopal B 2003 *International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Ricciardi V, Ramankutty N, Mehrabi Z, Jarvis L and Chookoling B 2018 'How Much of the World's Food do Smallholders Produce?' *Global Food Security* 17: 64-72
- Rittich K 'Theorizing International Law and Development' in Orford et al. 2016: 820-843

- Saab A 2019 *Narratives of Hunger in International Law* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Salomon ME 2020 'The Radical Ideation of Peasants, the 'Pseudo-radicalism' of International Human Rights Law, and the Revolutionary Lawyer' *London Review of International Law* 8/3: 425-456
- 2022 'Culture as an Alternative to 'Sustainable Development'' *Third World Approaches to International Law Review, TWAILR Reflections* 44/2022 Available at: <https://twailr.com/culture-as-an-alternative-to-sustainable-development/> (accessed 10 February 2025)
- Schäfer R and Peters A eds 2021 *Politics and the Histories of International Law: The Quest for Knowledge and Justice* Brill Nijhoff Leiden
- Torres Wong M 2018 *Natural Resources, Extraction and Indigenous Rights in Latin America* Routledge London and New York
- Trauger A and C Passidomo 2012 'Towards a Post-Capitalist-Politics of Food: Cultivating Subjects of Community Economies' *International Journal for Critical Geographies* 11/2: 282-303
- Tzouvala N 2020 *Capitalism as Civilisation: A History of International Law* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Vadi V and de Witte B eds 2015 *Culture and International Economic Law* Routledge London and New York
- van der Ploeg J W 2008 *The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization* Routledge London
- Veltmeyer H 2012 'The Natural Resource Dynamics of Postneoliberalism in Latin America: New Developmentalism or Extractivist Imperialism?' *Studies in Political Economy* 90/1: 57-85
- Veltmeyer H and Ezquerro-Cañete A 2023 'Agro-extractivism' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 50/5: 1673-1686
- Wills J 2017 *Contesting World Order? Socioeconomic Rights and Global Justice Movements* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Wittman H, Desmarais A A and Wiebe N 2010a *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community* Food First Books Oakland
- 'The Origins & Potential of Food Sovereignty' in Wittman et al. 2010b: 1-12.

Agrarian Extractivism, Peasant Culture and Law from Below

Yaşın Z T 2022 'The Socio-ecological Question, the Global Environmental Justice Movement and Anti-systemic Environmentalism' *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 21: 466-489

Zambrano J L A, Dias da Cruz D and de Oliveira Paulino F 2022 'Impacts of the Transition from Family Farming to Monoculture Farming on the Eating Habits of two Cities in the Valle de Tenza, Boyacá—Colombia' *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 9/28: 1-15