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Internationalism with national-popular characteristics: The politics of food and Sovereignty in the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization

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Introduction: “A vast hunger belt of global-continental dimensions”

This paper explores the contributions of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) to the anticolonial Marxist tradition, through an engagement with its journal *Development and Socio-Economic Progress* (hereafter *Development*) in the first ten years of its publication (1977-1987). Established in 1957, AAPSO brought together anti-imperialist, socialist currents from 75 Asian and African nations and national liberation struggles. On the pages of *Development* and in numerous campaigns, including the movement for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), AAPSO combined insights from advancements achieved by socialist projects with the specificities of the colonial and neocolonial experience. The paper focuses on AAPSO’s analysis of the colonial and neocolonial plunder of natural and human resources that maintained a crisis of hunger and malnutrition in the Third World.

In their introduction to the journal’s first issue, the editors wrote, “Obviously it is the moral duty—if not an international debt in earthly legal terminology—of those who created or were instrumental in creating a vast hunger belt of global-continental dimensions through long colonial plunder—to pay the penalty in reverse gear” (The Editors 1977, p. 7). In writing this, they evoked the historical and ongoing exploitation of the natural resources, ecosystems, and human populations of the Third World, which had only recently been able to reclaim agency over its history, previously interrupted by “the violent usurpation of the freedom of the process of development of the productive forces,” as Amílcar Cabral (1979, p. 141) described it. In the following decades, *Development* would document and historicize this “hunger belt,” advance a theory of sovereign Third World development premised on internationalism and socialism, and—anticipating its widespread invocation two decades later (Roberts and Parks 2009, People’s Agreement of Cochabamba 2010)—make the radical case for a debt owed by the core to the periphery, principally through the redirection of financial resources from, as recompense for historical and ongoing harms.

As Molinero and Pedregal (2024) have pointed out, recent scholarship has highlighted the ecological dimensions of both imperialism and national liberation. Building on Ajl (2021) and others, their article points to how ecological concerns were implicit but foundational to the anticolonial and internationalist spirit of the *Tricontinental*, the journal published by the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAL). The histories of AAPSO and OSPAAL are intimately linked: the former was one of the main initiators of the latter. For many years, AAPSO members had discussed expanding the organization’s scope to Latin America, and representatives from Cuba and Left movements from across Latin America attended several AAPSO conferences and meetings in anticipation of such a move. Ultimately, differences over the leadership of the new tricontinental organization—an outcome of the Sino-



Soviet split playing out on the terrain of Third World internationalism—led to the two organizations being formally independent, although they shared many members and there were significant overlaps in along ideological, political, and strategic lines.

In engaging with *Development*, this paper’s goal is to place AAPSO on this emerging map of Third World anti-imperialism, and to add to the historiography of the socio-ecological politics of the era. Intellectuals and organizers who contributed to *Development* rallied around the internationalist framework of “collective self-reliance” that had been popularized by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), giving it a radical social content. The paradigm of collective self-reliance that AAPSO advanced aimed to construct national sovereignty premised on the collective power of the producers, alongside industrialization oriented towards the needs of the (primarily rural) masses. They drew inspiration from the success of the worker-peasant alliance in the People’s Republic of China, in particular the idea of an industrial sector that is put at the service of agriculture. They also drew on Julius Nyerere’s *Ujamaa*, which sought to build national self-reliance on a foundation of rural socialism and cooperativism. In this sense, AAPSO and *Development* internationalized the “peasant path” framework of development planning, expanding on the lessons from China and Tanzania, and advancing a politics of self-reliance with a regionalist, and often internationalist, register.

Reflecting on the socio-ecological dimensions of collective self-reliance as elaborated in the journal, in which the questions of agrarian (under)development and the agrarian question of food were central, this paper assesses the significance of the linking of the question of agrarian development with national sovereignty and internationalism, asking what this history might offer to contemporary struggles waged around the demand of food sovereignty. This was an internationalist politics of food that prefigured the contemporary (also internationalist) politics of food sovereignty; the two have important similarities, but also significant political and strategic points of divergence.

Food and sovereignty, then and now

In the twentieth century, newly independent countries of Africa and Asia grappled with a long process of recovery from a colonial situation marked by recurrent famines, memories of which remained fresh for many young nation-states.¹ Colonial famines are generally understood to have been political-economic phenomena whose underlying structural causes were the decimation of indigenous food systems, diversion of agricultural lands for export-oriented monocropping, and impoverishment of rural populations through, for instance, colonial taxation policies (Davis 2001; Watts 2007; Patnaik and Patnaik 2021). Given the high levels of hunger and impaired food producing capacities, the question of food self-sufficiency² became intimately entangled both with

¹ Independent India, for instance, was recovering from a famine that killed upwards of two million people in Bengal in 1943; Kenya suffered four famines in the period 1904-1945; Malawi experienced a famine in 1949 (Ochieng 1988; Vaughan 2006; Patnaik and Patnaik 2021).

² I use the term “food self-sufficiency” here as an umbrella term meant to capture the politics of national sovereignty in and through food during the era of Third World power on the global stage. Another appropriate term might be



the concept of national sovereignty and with international solidarity. During the height of Third World anti-imperialist power on the international stage (1955-1980), there emerged a number of internationalist organizations and political tendencies, each of which sought in distinct ways to address the crises of agrarian underdevelopment and national food scarcity that were understood as perpetuating continued dependence on the West. Self-sufficiency in food was seen as a necessary premise of national sovereignty and was understood as achievable through a combination of national economic reform, transformations in the international economic system, and international cooperation and solidarity, particularly within the Third World.

The shift to neoliberal triumphalism marked a reconstitution of North-South relations, and the liquidation of the gains made by the latter. In response to the advent of liberalization, the change in the function of the state, and the evaporation of a Third World internationalism premised on the capacity of the state to effectively manage production and reproduction, there has emerged a distinct discourse and politics around the democratic management of food systems, under the label of food sovereignty. Such a politics emerged in the 1990s, from popular peasant and workers' movements typically occupying a position of antagonism to global South states seen as increasingly hostile to goals of land redistribution and the eradication of sedimented rural hierarchies. International peasant network *La Via Campesina* (LVC) is perhaps the most well-known proponent of food sovereignty, credited with first articulating it on the global stage. Other important struggles have since also formed around the slogan and taken on internationalist dimensions, such as the People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty.

Internationally, the contemporary movement for food sovereignty works to transform the architecture of international trade, while seeking to solidify “the articulation between peasant struggles, human rights and international law.” LVC, for instance, concluded at its third international conference in 2000 that “the peasant movement should enter the sphere of international law and take its place in international negotiation forums, and that international legislation on peasants' rights, written by peasants, was needed.”³ A key aspect of this work has been negotiating for the creation of legal instruments recognizing the rights of peasants; the successful passage of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) in 2018 is an example. However, the translation from Declaration to implementation is the meat of the matter, and it is here that organizing necessitates a national outlook, because it is the state that ultimately decides whether to abide by the letter of non-binding legal instruments.

During the 1970s and 1980s, anti-imperialist movements like AAPSO worked extensively to bring about the transformation of the capitalist world system, devoting considerable energies towards North-South negotiations with the support of institutions such as UNCTAD and UNIDO. AAPSO's archives, and the discussions and debates in *Development* in particular, documented

“national food sovereignty,” notably different from the contemporary politics of *popular food sovereignty* advanced primarily by peasant movements. Moreover, the term used by contributors to *Development* was generally “self-sufficiency.”

³ <https://defendingpeasantsrights.org/en/the-story-of-the-undrop/>



these negotiations in detail, examining their possibilities and limitations. Most significantly, these contributions highlight the centrality of a dialectic between the international and national scales, offering a nuanced picture of the pitfalls of an anti-imperialist struggle that neglects the national question. From the era of decolonization to the present, the challenge encapsulated in the agrarian question is the "defense and deepening of the already conquered sovereignty" (Moyo et al. 2013, 105) threatened by monopoly capital's ever-expanding appetite to control the planet's resources and undo the gains of national liberation.

The Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization

AAPSO was formed two years after the Bandung Conference. Bandung, and the Non-Aligned Movement it birthed, were projects that brought together leaders of states pursuing a variety of postcolonial developmental paths. If Bandung can be credited for bringing the agenda of sovereign development to the world stage, AAPSO, while broadly aligned with the NAM and tracing its genealogy to Bandung, can be understood as seeking to imbue that sovereignty with a radical, popular, and socialist content. Its members included leaders of national liberation struggles and, from countries that had gained independence, either state representatives (in cases where states were pursuing socialist paths, or some degree of delinking, such as Egypt, Tanzania, and Ghana) or members of Left opposition parties and grassroots movements. The organization received significant funding from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and the former had a seat on the organization's Permanent Secretariat.

Headquartered in Cairo, it held large conferences every two years that brought radical forces from Asia and Africa together along with allies from Latin America, the socialist bloc, and Europe. Despite its explicit anti-imperialist and socialist orientation, it had substantial legitimacy within international institutions. In dialogue with United Nations institutions, it organized a number of conferences, such as the International Conference on the Role of Transnational Organizations (Paris, April 1979), the International Seminar on the New International Development Strategy (Geneva, October 1979), a symposium on the Brandt Commission Report (New York, 1980), and an International Seminar on Internal and External Factors in Development Strategies (Grenoble, July 1981). Moreover, it enjoyed consultative status within United Nations branches such as UNESCO and UNCTAD, and the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid (SCAA) frequently drew support for its anti-apartheid resolutions from AAPSO. It was, therefore, committed to bringing about the peaceful transformation of international economic relations by way of engaging in negotiations with the industrialized countries, and using the institutions of the liberal world order as arenas for the expression of a collective Third World anticolonial sentiment.

AAPSO's membership reflected the diversity within the Third World, and its task was, to some degree, to articulate a fundamental shared interest despite these differences. Several axes of differentiation cut across the Third World, and therefore through AAPSO itself; these had to do with the level of economic development, the nature of the relationship with the metropolitan core (general alignment or relative independence), the nature of external economic relations (reflected in overall surplus or deficit, degree of diversification of exports), and the nature of the political-



economic system (countries pursuing outright free-market policies, those with mixed economies, those pursuing socialist development paths).

From the perspective of the historian, AAPSO's mixed composition is particularly valuable, offering a granular view of converging and divergent interests within the Third World. Debates that took place at AAPSO meetings and in the pages of its periodicals offer a dual perspective: firstly, of the domestic contradictions in countries where the national bourgeoisie was insufficiently redistributive or anti-imperialist, and secondly, at the international scale, of imperialism's machinations in response to postcolonial states pursuing sovereign developmental paths. At the time, however, it made for a complicated terrain in which to build an organized front against imperialism. The contradictions of the historical process of decolonization—ideological battles, struggles over the class character of national liberation movements and postcolonial states, and different alignments in the Sino-Soviet rift—often played out in AAPSO's meetings. Samir Amin, who followed AAPSO's activities closely, attended some of its meetings, and contributed to *Development*, described its diverse composition as occasioning "...a contradiction [that] had cut across AAPSO from the beginning" (Amin 2019). AAPSO was one among a handful of often-competing frameworks and geographies of anticolonial internationalism. For one thing, the United Arab Republic under Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah competed for the leadership of the pan-African movement, and so Cairo-headquartered AAPSO and the All African-People's Conference in Accra regarded one another with mutual suspicion for several years (McCann 2019, Vitalis 2013).

The Sino-Soviet conflict and subsequent split had a particularly crippling impact on AAPSO. Samir Amin observed at the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference in Winneba, Ghana in 1965 that "the Sino-Soviet 'diatribe' hid a quiet conflict between the representatives of states and those of movements" (Amin 2019), with the former tending to favor an alliance with the Soviet Union and the latter—those representing national liberation struggles, such as the Portuguese colonies, Algeria, and South Africa—more closely aligned with China. A CIA document from 1961 remarked hopefully that "...it seems probable that the Afro-Asian-Latin American anti-imperialist front, which has been in the making since December of 1957, may well founder in the turmoil of the Sino-Soviet conflict" (CIA).

These early tensions within AAPSO notwithstanding, it remained an effective and significant steward of Third World socialist internationalism into the 1990s, after which its activities slowed down, and it has maintained a low profile since. Between the 1960s and late 1980s, however, it was prolific both in its efforts to transform the neocolonial world system, and in its commissioning and publication of a significant body of empirical and theoretical work intended to understand the predicament of the Third World in the postcolonial era and articulate a cogent case for an alternative, socialist world system where national sovereignty and socialist internationalism would flourish. *Development and Socio-Economic Progress*, which was circulated in English, Arabic and French, was the platform for much of this work.

A weapon in the struggle for sovereignty



The journal’s envisioned purpose, as described by its editors in the first issue, was to “express the problems and aspirations of the peoples of the developing countries, and become a new weapon added to the arsenal of our peoples, in their struggle for establishing a new international economic order based on justice, equality, and free will...” (The Editors 1977, 4)⁴ In its first decade, it regularly published reflections on negotiations related to the NIEO, alongside assessments of the limits and possibilities of such negotiations in securing an environment conducive to sovereign and peaceful development in the Third World. It was a forum for healthy debate on the topic, and contributors often expressed significant skepticism in regard to the NIEO. Samir Amin, for instance, argued that some of the demands reflected the limitations of a bourgeois-led struggle for sovereignty, one that would further immiserate the majority of the Third World by entrenching the unequal international division of labour (Amin 1978).

Contributors to *Development* ranged from well-known Third World intellectuals and leaders of national liberation struggles and Left parties, to lesser-known academics, journalists and organizers. Some prominent contributors were Samir Amin, Julius Nyerere, Egyptian communist intellectual Fouad Moursi initially of *al-Raya* and later the United Egyptian Communist Party (Ide 2015), Indian communist Baren Ray who served for a while as AAPSO’s Deputy Secretary-General, Vital Balla of the Congolese Labour Party, and French Marxist economist Gérard de Bernis. There were occasional contributions from representatives of UN institutions, such as a paper on energy policies and collective self-reliance by Surendra Patel, then-Chief of the Transfer of Technology Department at UNCTAD. The journal was also, importantly, a forum for discussion between Third World and Soviet intellectuals and organizers, with several social scientists from the Soviet Union, Hungary, and East Germany contributing reflections on socialist development strategies. Many of them, such as Judit Kiss, of the Afro-Asian Research Centre at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Hans Ulrich-Walter, from Leipzig, were scholars of Asia and Africa. Additionally, there were many contributions from Left allies in Europe and North America. Most notably, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz contributed a number of articles on the predicament of Native Americans in the United States, linking the underdevelopment of Native reservations with that of the Third World.

An understanding of the significance of the class character of national liberation struggles, of the postcolonial state apparatus, and of the forces representing the collective Third World at the global scale, runs through much of the journal. It was because of this perspective that its authors were able to discern potential shortfalls in the NIEO, diagnose its ultimate failure, and propose alternative paths. The agrarian question figured centrally in all of this. They argued that better terms of trade and access to markets in developed countries would not occasion a transformation of Third World societies; it would merely enrich the bourgeoisie and perhaps the middle classes, while leaving the masses—peasants, the landless, agricultural workers, the semi-proletarianized, the urban lumpenproletariat—further in the trenches.

⁴ The Editors, “Triangle of Economic Cooperation,” *Development and Socio-Economic Progress*: 1977(1), p. 4.



An essential complement to the transformations on the scale of the world—as envisioned in the idea of the NIEO—they argued, was structural social and economic transformation within nations. As Ahmed A. Shalaby wrote in a 1980 issue, sovereignty “requires a process of total decolonization as well as a process of internal national struggles in Third World countries. The goal will not be achieved by one-shot-measures, such as declarations and negotiating conferences.” (Shalaby 1980, pp. 67-68) Instead, he wrote, it has to be the product of mass struggle and the rise in mass consciousness. And given that the majority of the populations of the Third World drew their living from the land, any industrialization that took place would necessarily have to be oriented to agriculture, and the needs and demands of the international market be subordinated to domestic needs.

Between 1970 and 1977, external indebtedness of Third World countries increased from \$72.9 billion to \$244 billion. Writing about the debt crisis in the early 1980s, Juan Sanchez Arnau argued that the phenomenon was a structural feature of the growth model pursued by most Third World states, which privileged modernization of infrastructure and industrial development in ways meant to address the needs of the minority with high purchasing power. The way out of the grip of financial and technological dependence was the pursuit of alternate kind of development planning based on “internal command over the national economy” which would involve “upsetting large numbers of conventional notions of development.” (Arnau 1980, 97)

The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the onset of a new phase of imperialism characterized by the centralization of capital in the triad and a system of generalized monopolies (Amin 2019). It was within this context that the organizers and intellectuals associated with AAPSO and *Development* argued with urgency for a sovereign industrialization that was firmly integrated with the agrarian sector, national sovereignty over natural resources, and large-scale reparations from the North to the South. Together, these were seen as measures to wrest sovereignty back from the fingers of a newly consolidated monopoly capital.

Widespread hunger was one of the most visible aspects of the contradiction between neocolonialism and national development. The dialectic between transformations in domestic social relations and the international confrontation with neocolonialism crystalized in the contributions on the topic of food and hunger in the Third World. In contrast to the bourgeois social science of the time, which proposed increased food production as the remedy, *Development* contributors described in detail the structural factors underpinning hunger: deepening income inequality, the marginalization of the peasantry and rural poor, and export-oriented agriculture monopolized by transnational corporations. This resolution to this situation was the strengthening of national autonomy and internal democracy premised on collective power of the producers. This in turn would allow for a path to inward-oriented or autocentric development (Amin). A programme for collective self-reliance encapsulating national sovereignty, popular-democratic control of the state, autocentric development, and the prioritization of the rural economy was thus developed and advanced in the journal.

Collective self reliance



“As underdevelopment was the product of colonialism, the recent crisis of development is the product of neocolonialist powers and the new elites in the developing countries.” - Fouad Moursi, “The Deepening Crisis of Development in Developing Countries”

The idea of collective self-reliance can be traced to the third summit conference of the NAM at Lusaka, after which it was discussed at subsequent non-aligned summits and meetings of the Group of 77, which eventually put out the Arusha Programme for Collective Self-Reliance and Framework for Negotiations after its 1979 meeting in Tanzania. Its substantive content and actionable politics remained somewhat broad, but the fundamental principles were the creation of “interdependent and symmetrical political, economic and socio-cultural structures” (Matthies 1979) and relations between developing countries, with the goal to ultimately break free of the hold of the industrialized countries, with whom the relationship was structurally unequal and dependent.

Many ideas were put forth as to how to transform the idea of collective self-reliance into social reality. It was argued that some kind of institutional basis was necessary, beyond the regional secretariats such as CARICOM, the Andean Pact, and the East African Community (Patel 1975). Such a measure would also potentially facilitate a conceptual strengthening of the concept, by offering an institutional framework from which to identify the nature, terms, scope, and geographical reach of cooperation between various countries in the Third World. A programme of collective self-reliance, however, did not materialize, as we know. The reasons for this failure are beyond the scope of this paper. But early on, contributors to *Development* raised key issues with the idea in the form in which it was proposed in North-South negotiations and South-South deliberations. The points they raised dovetail with the measured approach of the journal to the NIEO. While AAPSO was fully supportive in principle, discussions in its meetings and contributions to *Development* maintained that without a radical social content, neither the NIEO nor CSR would come to fruition.

The argument was that genuine self-reliance would necessarily be popular and national. This was an argument that derived from the anticolonial Marxist understanding of the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to enact transformational change, as figures such as Walter Rodney (2022), Amílcar Cabral (1979), and Frantz Fanon (2001) wrote about extensively. It was also on that derived from pragmatism: a degree of economic strength and self-reliance at the national level would improve developing countries’ negotiating powers. In an article published in 1979, Samir Amin argued that the previous years of dialogues and negotiations on the NIEO, effectively stalled by the developed countries, had demonstrated conclusively that it was only a change in “a real balance of power” that would occasion a transformation in the international order. And the only way to build and assert strength, he wrote, would be to “build a national economy which, having a maximum of autonomy, can better resist external pressures and so make it possible to negotiate for participation in the [international division of labour] under more favourable conditions” (Amin 1979, 47).



Moreover, the class character of an autonomous national economy would be the key determinant of its strength vis-a-vis the advanced capitalist powers. A framework of collective self-reliance would be premised on establishing mutually advantageous and complementary trade relations amongst developing nations and reorienting away from the capitalist world to the socialist bloc for support in the arenas of advanced technology and capital goods; a collective de-linking from the imperialist and neocolonial powers. But a precondition for such a possibility was national autonomy, which in turn required a revolutionary upheaval of social relations within each country, enabling internal democratic reforms that would center the collective power of the producers.

Organizers and intellectuals in AAPSO were skeptical at the prospect of self-reliance in countries pursuing market-oriented development paths, as productive activity would be determined by the needs of the international market and dictated by transnational corporations that persisted in having a monopoly over production (Kiss 1985). Therefore, the only practicable path towards collective self-reliance—if it were to gain enough strength to dilute the power of imperialist forces—was national autonomy with popular content, and state/national control over the exploitation of natural resources. A central goal of such measures would be the support and development of agriculture, necessary to break the cycle of reproduction of a cheap labour force. This would require a fundamental rethinking of resource allocation, with the industrial sector linked to and supportive of the development of the agrarian sector, and rural collectivization in turn building the capacity to feed and support national development (Amin 1978, 20-22).

National autonomy and popular control of the state

In effect, *Development* writers argued, the state apparatus was a key element to the establishment of national autonomy and collective self-reliance. The most important question was in regard to the class character of the state and the social content of its policies: it would have to be premised on the collective power of the producers—the vast agrarian population and the relatively small rural and urban working class. The alternative would be to leave decision making in the hands of the small domestic capitalist class and the market economy, which would only further deepen the conditions of unequal development within nations, and, most crucially, leave the rural economy stagnant, as the domestic bourgeoisie had demonstrated its disinterest in investing in the development of the agrarian sector (Ray 1979, 61). But in fact, it was precisely the suite of rural measures that the capitalist class was uninterested in that writers identified as necessary for building strength and autonomy at the national level: land reforms, opening up the vast agrarian economy, and supporting the development of agriculture, necessary to break the cycle of reproduction of a cheap labour force. This would require a fundamental rethinking of resource allocation, in which the industrial sector is linked to and supports the development of the agrarian sector, and rural collectivization in turn builds the capacity to feed and support national development. (Amin 1978, pp 20-22).

Egyptian economist Fouad Moursi wrote, "The first casualty [of the bourgeois development model] was authentic mass participation or democratic decision-making...This type of democracy is a crucial element for the building of a new society where the workers enjoy the benefits of their



labour and where, at last, democracy is no longer a hollow notion utilized to manipulate and deceive the hopes of peoples." (Moursi 198, 14). AAPSO writers rejected the paradigm of liberal democracy, arguing instead for a form of democracy whose content was the collective power of workers and producers. And given the principally agrarian nature of the economies of the Third World, such a perspective on democracy centered the political agency of the peasantry.

Only the strengthening of the national economy, through “genuine agrarian and other reforms that will lead to a qualitative expansion of the economy” (Ray 1979, p 62) would be capable of deterring the pressures of neocolonialism. The sixth AAPSO Congress in Algiers in May 1984 led to the declaration on the NIEO, which was published *Development’s* third issue of the year, and which demanded the freedom of nations to draw up agricultural plans compatible with national needs in order to “face up to the food blackmail exercised by the capitalist industrialized countries” (Declaration 1984, p 10). Fundamental to this was the “creation of raw material-producer organizations in order to ensure...the consolidation of the collective bargaining power which will force the developed countries to accept and negotiate the desired changes” (Declaration 1984, p 10). The degree of national strength, therefore, was evaluated in terms of the collective strength of the producers. This was in line with Hans Ulrich-Walter’s emphasis, in an article in the same issue, on the need to shift the center of gravity of the anti-imperialist struggle from the transformation of the sphere of distribution to the restructuring of the sphere of production, thereby changing the terms of the international division of labor.

Significant space was devoted to the question of nationalization, particularly of natural resources. Majeed Al-Radhi provided a meticulous reading of international law to this end in his article “Legal approach to nationalization” (1980). He, too, was keen to clarify the crucial question of the class interests behind nationalization, quoting the Soviet Encyclopedia, which stated that “the social, economic and political content of nationalisation differs according to the class interests and the historical epoch in which it is accomplished” (Al-Radhi 1980, 61). Nationalisation undertaken under the auspices of a state dominated by the bourgeoisie would be qualitatively different in its content and in its effects from a project of nationalization undertaken by a democratized state formed out of deep-rooted social transformation. The latter would be an expression of “national sovereignty and national determination” (Al-Radhi 1980, 74) that puts the natural resources of a nation in the hands of its people, and accumulates surplus for reinvestment in the social and economic development of the society.

Soviet Economist Bragin Helen wrote with similar urgency of the need in developing countries for the "consolidation of state sovereignty over natural resources." Under the specific conditions of the developing countries in a time of neocolonial encirclement, “the most efficient way of achieving [comprehensive socio-economic transformation] is the system of state economic planning and the leading role of the state economic sector, which functions on the democratic basis with an active participation of working people for the benefit of the whole nation” (Helen 1982, 37). Surveying Asian food production and self-sufficiency in a 1984 article, Vietnamese economist Le Hong Phuc wrote that in spite of increased food production across the board, true self-sufficiency had not been met. The primary reasons for this was immense rural inequality, and the



appropriation by agribusiness transnationals of “the highest part of peasants’ surplus incomes” by their control over inputs and procurement (Phuc 1984, 28).

Discussions on the topic of the role of the state—while generally agreeing on the point of the centrality of a popular-democratic state apparatus as a preserver of national autonomy and a catalyst for development—were nuanced and attentive to the importance of cultural specificities, traditional economies, and the importance of small-scale production. Self-reliance did not reside solely on the scale of the nation; the latter drew its strength from the cultivation of self-reliance "at all levels of society, from the individual to the whole country, including the village community, the cooperative, the workshop, the factory, the local collectivity, etc." (Abdalla 1980, 24). Far from being totalizing, the role of the state could be to “give traditional activities an institutional context and the means which would render them more effective and capable of enhancing development potentials.” (Abdalla 1980, 26)

What *Development* writers were arguing against was the indefinite claim of transnational corporations on the land, human labour, and resources of the tropics and subtropics, causing “great devastation to the environment, climate and agricultural cultivation in general and food production in particular” (Phuc 1984, 12). The centering of the political agency of the producers, particularly those who worked the land, had the potential to supplant the economic logic characterizing the relationship of humans with the natural environment. Thus Moustapha Teyba argued for the resurrection of the “dialectical relationship between the development of science and technology on the one hand, and socio-economic progress on the other” (Teyba 1980, 62), in the development of a scientific research agenda in which the rift between the natural and social sciences is repaired in the advancement of a Third World agenda for economic development that does not repeat the history of industrialization in the west, but rather follows a path that is attuned to and will benefit from the geophysical, environmental, and natural resource endowments of each country, and prioritizes the basic needs of the masses.

Inward-oriented development and centrality of rural economy

This national-popular path could also offer nations a buffer against the economic and political pressures of foreign capital and the international market. Hans Ulrich-Walter argued that there was a “dialectic interrelationship” between the rational utilization of internal sources of accumulation—premised social and economic restructuring along mass, democratic lines—and the decolonization of the relationships between advanced capitalist and developing countries (Ulrich-Walter 1984, 14). In the domestic realms, he proposed an inward-looking arsenal of policies aimed at manufacturing according to domestic needs: inter-linked and primarily rural-oriented industrial branches producing basic necessities for the masses as well as investment goods. This idea of “inward-looking” industrialization likely drew significantly on the idea of auto-centered development advanced by Samir Amin and was in part a criticism of prevailing policies of import-substitution.



Amin himself, in his 1978 contribution to *Development*, had elaborated on the centrality of inward oriented development for a radical programme of collective self-reliance, which for him was not feasible “without withdrawing from the world system of exchange of commodities, technologies and capital” (Amin 1978, 9). With few exceptions, political independence paved the way to the strengthening of the national bourgeoisie, which implemented a kind of industrialization through import substitution. However, industrial productive activity was skewed towards luxury goods and consumer durables, not mass consumption goods, whose production remained handicapped from a lack of demand, itself caused by depressed wages in sectors such as agriculture. Thus there remained a self-reinforcing cycle that tethered domestic production to the export market. Auto-centered or inward-oriented development, on the other hand, would be premised on a symbiotic relationship between industry and agriculture, with the former principally oriented towards supporting and expanding the productive capacities of the latter. Such a system, Amin wrote, would “challenge the main features of the international division of labour shaped during the last century” (Amin, 1978, 8).

Judit Kiss, in a 1985 piece titled “Why is Africa Starving?” attributed widespread hunger in part to unequal and asymmetrical international relations of production, causing dependent agricultural development. This was made possible by the narrow emphasis on industrialization and urban development for the larger goal of import substitution, at the cost of investment of capital and resources in agriculture. Similarly, Soviet economists Zevin and Bragina argued that industrialization alone was insufficient if not accompanied and fueled by “progressive socio-economic transformations aimed at removing outdated social structures, first and foremost, in agriculture, since they hinder the modernization of the economy, block the solution of food problems and the mobilization of all potential resources for the purpose of development.” This would necessitate limiting the ability of the “exploiting strata...which strive to use industrialization to their own benefit,” more equitable distribution of incomes, effective agrarian transformations, state funding of social infrastructure and state control over prices and distribution of goods (Zevin and Bragina 1980, 28).

Advanced by organic intellectuals linked with anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles, these and other contributions to *Development* offered an epistemological challenge to the bourgeois social science of the time. On this, Fouad Moursi wrote in 1981 that “Bourgeois theories of recent years have been trying in one form or another to substantiate and develop the concept of a just world order. The developing countries' demands are counter-poised by theories of human solidarity, mutual sacrifice and international integration” (Moursi 1981, 12). Jacques Chonchol, once Chilean Minister of Agriculture under Salvador Allende, elaborated on the inadequacy of bourgeois frameworks in a 1981 article titled “World Food: Failure of Productivist Solutions.” He wrote about the failure of the World Food Conference of 1974 to appropriately diagnose the crisis in the food system as one emerging from a generalized lack of economic sovereignty and the absence of national-popular control of the productive forces. The Conference’s prescription—increased food production in the Third World, and investments and technology transfers from the industrialized countries to help the Third World realize this goal—had failed to yield results, evidenced in the continuation of widespread malnutrition and undernutrition amongst the poor



populations of the Third World. In contrast, Chonchol pointed to the long arm of imperialism, reaching past the defenses of political sovereignty, themselves foundationally brittle, to continue to organize the relations of agricultural production. Obstacles to food availability in the Third World arose from “the production system...[which] gives priority to export agricultural products rather than to traditional food products consumed by the majority of the indigenous population” (Chonchol 1981, 64).

Confronting the state

As negotiations on the New International Economic Order (NIEO) at the United Nations hit repeated dead-ends and the early signs of the debt crisis began to reveal themselves, contributors to *Development* increasingly reflected on the limitations of international negotiations in the struggle to establish and safeguard conditions for sovereign development. An emphasis on the prioritization of national autonomy and internal strength was, in part, a result of the failure of negotiations to materialize in concrete transformations of the international economy. It was at other scales, they felt, that such a transformation could more practicably be sought: the nation, and a unified Third World. The internationalism of both state and popular-insurgent actors in the era of Third Worldism viewed the state as the institution invested with the sovereign power to shift productive capacities and bring about food self-sufficiency. Contributors to *Development* placed the agrarian and food questions squarely within the framework of national sovereignty, premised on an understanding of the state’s role as an enabler and protector of sovereignty in a context of neocolonial predation and the persistence of its emissaries—transnational corporations—in attempting to hollow out the meaning of this sovereignty.

In contrast, contemporary movements for food sovereignty emerged in and are confronted with a situation characterized by the increased collusion of domestic elites and state policy with the interests of capital and imperialism. A critique of and distancing from the capacities of the state have thus become central to the evolving politics of food sovereignty on an international scale. The upshot of this has been the decoupling of food sovereignty with national sovereignty, and therefore with the question of political power, and of the possible role of the state as an instrument of power. The contemporary movement for food sovereignty plays an increasingly important role in highlighting the interrelations of social and ecological systems and offering the example of agrarian practices that restore the relationship between the two (Schneider and McMichael 2010). These are crucial contributions in a time of ecological crisis brought about by the capitalist plunder of the global commons, and particularly through the colonial and neocolonial entrapment of the tropical and subtropical landmasses. But the neglect of the question of state power leaves important questions unanswered. Engaging the history of revolutionary movements that maintained a belief in the state’s ability to catalyze social change will advance ongoing conversations on an aspect of food sovereignty that scholars have argued is in urgent need of sharpening: which political institutions will administer sovereignty, and what is the possible role of the state?

The neoliberal counterrevolution of the 1980s and 1990s transformed the Third World state into a manager for the unhindered workings of the free market. Shorn of its potential as a vehicle for



economic self-determination, the state maintained “its role of domination and regulation with respect to the relations of production” (Gilmore 1993, p 78), relations that were determined by transnational—and in some instances domestic—capital. Prior to liberalization too, with the exception of Cuba and socialist East Asia, political independence culminated in the domination of the national bourgeoisie and paved the way to its strengthening. But the capture of the state apparatus by a certain class is not reason enough to abandon serious engagement with the possible role of the state in facilitating sovereignty. A consideration of the history of anti-imperialist socialist organizations like AAPSO helps us complicate the question of the state. This is, after all, a history of struggle over the class character and developmental function of the postcolonial state and therefore offers important lessons for the present—lessons that are arguably crucial in the present conjuncture, witness to converging crises that can only be confronted with a politics aimed at liquidating imperialism and establishing socialism. Moreover, the state—and the international political and economic order in which sovereignty is (at least in name) premised on statehood—is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

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