Foreword

by Walden Bello

The two most dominant modernist ideologies of our time give short shrift to the peasantry. In classical socialism, peasants were viewed as relics of an obsolete mode of production and designated for transformation into a rural working class producing on collective farms owned and managed by the state. In the different varieties of capitalist ideology, efficiency in agricultural production could only be brought about with the radical reduction of the numbers of peasants and the substitution of labour by machines. In both visions, the peasant had no future.

These modernist visions, propagated by urban intellectuals, created tremendous social upheavals. In the North, in many parts of which agricultural labour has been reduced to 5 percent or less of the work force; giant agribusinesses dominate production, determine what is consumed, and completely control agro-technology. In almost all countries that industrialized, whether via capitalism or socialism, confiscation of the peasant surplus — either through onerous taxation or through the market — was the key mechanism for the rapid accumulation of capital, which was then invested in industry. In societies throughout the South today, the fatal combination of land consolidation, surplus dumping of agricultural goods by the rich countries, and the technologies of the Green Revolution and genetic engineering is driving many peasants to suicide and forcing great numbers to cities, where they are trapped in big shantytowns, forming a gigantic “reserve army” of the unemployed and underemployed.

Hand-in-hand with these social tragedies are ecological tragedies associated with chemical-intensive agro-technology, deforestation, and uncontrolled industrial pollution. Climate change is the end point of the arrogant modernist dream of creating an artificial environment based on an imperialistic industrialization process to supplant an ecology rooted in a more harmonious relationship between community and the biosphere based on smallholder agriculture.

The twentieth century was one of tragedy for the peasantry, and the twenty-first century promises more of the same modernist tragedy masquerading as progress. But not if the rising movements of peasants and farmers can help it. For too long peasants have been the objects of history.
Now they are stirring and stirring angrily. La Vía Campesina is probably the most effective of these movements of people who now want to be subjects of history. La Vía Campesina not only fights for farmers’ rights and for land reform, it is also fighting for a way of life that has proved its worth for eons. It is fighting for a relationship between people and their environment that was snapped by short-sighted industry-first strategies, whether these came in socialist guise or in that of neoliberal capitalism.

This book by Annette Aurélié Desmarais is the best full-length study that has yet been done of a movement that has distinguished itself in the forefront of the struggle against the World Trade Organization and corporate-driven globalization. Herself a farm activist, Desmarais has the trust of the key leaders and participants in a rising movement, allowing her to produce this dynamic portrayal of a community forged in a struggle to preserve its way of life. Desmarais lets the people of La Vía Campesina speak in their own voices about their problems, dreams, and challenges. She situates these voices in an analysis that also looks very carefully at the causes and dynamics of the destabilization and dislocations spawned by agribusiness in the era of globalization. Marx was definitely on a bad modernist trip when he wrote about “the idiocy of rural life.” But he was right about capitalism creating its own gravediggers. It was capital’s overreaching in the era of globalization that made possible the coming together — based on the consciousness of a common condition and the realization that they either had to hang together or hang separately — of the groups that make up La Vía Campesina today.

In our common struggle against neoliberalism and the WTO, I had the privilege of coming into contact with many of the admirable and memorable activists of La Vía Campesina — people like Nettie Wiebbe, Rafael Alegría, José Bové, Henry Saragih, João Pedro Stédile, and Paul Nicholson. I was always very impressed by their politics, their dedication, and their analytical acuity. Annette Desmarais’ book has helped me better understand these friends and comrades in the struggle. It has also convinced me that La Vía Campesina’s vision of agriculturally rich and diverse societies based on the principle of food sovereignty is a future that is not only worth fighting for, but also one that may be our only way out of the massive social and ecological predicaments spawned by corporate-driven globalization.

Walden Bello
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Recipient of the Right Livelihood Award for 2003, Walden Bello is executive director of Focus on the Global South and Professor of Sociology at the University of the Philippines.