

Robin Dunford, *The Politics of Transnational Peasant Struggle: Resistance, Rights and Democracy* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016)

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The disappointments of contemporary political institutions are perhaps best captured in the seeming emptiness of concepts such as “democracy” and “rights.” However, along with a loss of faith in these concepts, there is an emerging understanding that alternative politics will have to be borne out of place-based struggles. The discontents of both national democracies and international organizations have led to a “re-localization” of resistance – not only in the practice of politics, but also in efforts to give these stories of struggle a place in academic research. Hence even International Relations is now being repopulated with subjects experimenting with radical politics – we are told that democracy and rights have to be practiced, *and* studied, bottom-up, for them to have any meaning. This is a more than welcome development for a discipline that has long operated on levels of analysis devoid of individual struggle. Robin Dunford’s *The Politics of Transnational Peasant Struggle: Resistance, Rights and Democracy* offers a valuable contribution to this project: it deals with theoretical debates on resistance, democracy, and human rights by engaging with one particular struggle, that of the transnational peasant resistance. By setting to learn *from* specific struggles without engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, the book goes beyond its explicit goals and challenges the scales of both political and academic practice.

While the book is organized around the concepts of resistance, democracy, and rights, it also offers a much needed introduction to the contemporary industrial, export-oriented model of food and agriculture as a site of both oppression and struggle in international politics. These politics of food are best captured in the eight vignettes that open Chapter Two and take us on a world tour of dispossession, local resistance, global governance negotiations, and elite investment meetings. The vignettes capture the multiscalar nature of international politics: they empirically track the dramas of food politics that

range from MST¹ activists shot at in Brazil in 1996, to UN negotiations on the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure. It is through being attuned to these issues of scale that the book makes a twofold contribution: it empirically tracks the intersections of scales through making visible specific struggles that are both particular and demand universality, and it challenges researchers to do the same through informing theoretical debates with place-based practices.

With Chapter Two having set the stage by providing a background on the contemporary industrial food system, Chapters Three through Six rework the concepts that make the book: resistance, rights, and democracy. Since the aim of the book is to use transnational peasant resistance to inform abstract debates surrounding resistance, rights, and democracy, each chapter is thus organized around a theoretical debate in the opening section, and a discussion of peasant resistance that transcends what seem to be opposing views in these theoretical debates.

Chapter Three shows how this agro-industrial capitalist food system is challenged through local practices of peasant resistance that call for food sovereignty. The chapter is situated within the debate around the possibilities of revolutionary change after the breakdown of the ‘traditional’ left politics (44). Dunford looks at transnational peasant resistance as an example of what he calls the “left arts of government” that provide a solution between competing calls for the restoration of a hierarchical party on the one hand, and anarchist celebrations of pluralist, place-based alternatives on the other. It tracks the MST’s land occupations to see how they *incite and facilitate* local spaces of resistance, how these practices have *extended resistance* transnationally to other grassroots groups, and how they have thus enabled the groups to *engage with* international institutions that are usually devoid of such voices (43-44). It is this inciting, facilitating, and engaging that explains how “particular, place-based alternatives go beyond providing isolated pockets of resistance [and] give rise to a broader, counter-hegemonic movement demanding a global alternative.” (43)

Chapters Four and Five use peasant resistance as “a site from which to reflect on the politics of human rights.” (77) Specifically, they focus on three critiques of human rights, emphasizing that there is nothing *inherently* emancipatory or dominatory about rights, but that this character of human rights depends on the context in which they are used. This leads Dunford to claim that “the politics of human rights is itself a terrain of struggle.” (78) And it is these politics that navigate the narrow road between two opposing views of human rights: one that

¹ Brazilian Landless Workers Movement – Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra.

advocates stripping them to a supposedly universal core and spreading them around the world, and the other advocating leaving them completely behind.

Chapters Four and Five deal with – indeed, criticize and go beyond – three contemporary critiques of human rights. Chapter Four shows how the MST's land occupations and Via Campesina's transnational demands for food sovereignty go beyond seeing human rights as anti-politics and the subjects invoking them as abjected victims. These two critiques are challenged by highlighting practices in which peasants themselves politically demanded their rights. Chapter Five in turn shows how the meaning of food sovereignty is made by grassroots actors and counterpoises the literature on the global diffusion of human rights 'norms' that focuses on elite agency and reads human rights as having some pre-existing universality. This addresses the third critique of human rights as West-centric and shows how their meaning does not always emerge from Western experience but can be made through exchange and dialogue.

Finally, Chapter Six reflects upon the concept of global democracy. Here, Dunford criticizes the idea of cosmopolitan democracy by pointing out how it reproduces coloniality by universalizing a particular worldview, and imagining the global elites who benefit from unequal structures as agents of change (143). The chapter thereby shows how the contemporary democratic deficit cannot be resolved either by returning to the ideal of strong national government nor by strengthening the power of international organizations (155). By focusing on "practices of collective emancipation and transnational connection" of the peasant movement, the chapter demonstrates how grassroots actors can become agents of democratic change (162). This acting on multiple scales allows the globality of democracy practiced by the peasant movement to emerge "through processes of transnational and intercultural dialogue" which are inevitably place-based, instead of being presupposed and then "elevate[d] to a global scale." (164)

The book engages the scalarity of politics that oscillates between place-based struggles and their universal demands directly, claiming that "the local and transnational are not opposed." (132) Food sovereignty presents an ideal case study for this exploration because the struggle for it is at the same time particular and universal: it is inevitably based in specific locales that experiment with land use and growing food, but its contemporary imagination is inescapably global as it understands that food sovereignty cannot exist *alongside* the agro-industrial food regime that constantly undermines it ecologically and economically, but must replace it globally. Such a struggle, concerned with the micro while maintaining its global vision, "operates simultaneously as a form of place-based resistance and as a form of transnational and global resistance," and

its protagonists act on multiple scales simultaneously. It is this empirical unpacking of scale that Dunford's book excels in, from the vignettes that open it to its conclusion on the potentials of global democracy.

Yet the book also challenges the constitution of scales in academic research. It explicitly contests epistemic coloniality by refusing to treat peasant actors as having only "'local' or 'vernacular' forms of knowledge and understanding." (118) To do so, Dunford engages with peasants' struggle through secondary literature and publications of peasant organizations themselves. The positive reading of transnational peasant struggles as offering a way out of multiple theoretical debates might seem overly optimistic. And surely, the first critique that might be raised against such an account is that it is a case of Ortner's "ethnographic refusal" so common in *ethnographically thin* resistance studies. The charge against such studies is that they are *sanitizing politics of resistance* by focusing only on the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate (in this case, the industrial food regime and the peasants) and erasing the politics *among* the subaltern and the many hierarchies they operate within.² Moreover, such ethnographic refusal results in *thinning culture and subjectivity* by presupposing authenticity and coherence where there is complexity of "intentions, desires, fears, projects."³

While the book does not address the complexity of intentions and projects of peasant activists, what sets it apart from other accounts of resistance and moves it beyond the above critique is its explicit goal. Instances of ethnographic refusal are acknowledged in the book: the efforts to include voices of women, and youth are glanced over, the indigenous attachment to land is seen as something culturally essential,⁴ and the multiplicity of subjectivities is recognized in footnotes that provide the caveat that the book's reading is selective. What makes this permissible is the explicit positioning of the book: it is not an attempt to "give a definitive account of practice of peasant resistance," nor to provide "a richer, more theoretically informed account [...] that should then inform, from the vantage point of the theorist downward, their struggles" – its goal is to take peasant resistance seriously and learn *from* it to inform debates around democracy, rights, and resistance – debates that are not of immediate concern to peasants themselves (9-10). And in stating and doing this explicitly, the book also challenges the scales of academic research.

² Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995) 1: 179.

³ *Ibid.*, 180, 190.

⁴ For a different account of attachments to land, see Tania Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014).

Without doing fieldwork, Dunford seriously engages with peasant transnational struggles through accounts of organizations like MST and ethnographic literature, and thus transcends the bounds of 'theory' and 'field' that we are used to. The book shows that meaningful engagement is possible without subscribing to the myth of the anthropological field⁵ – not just through paying attention to the world of political practice, but also by making a conscious effort to learn from it. While concerned with informing theoretical debates, the book showcases the importance of particular local struggles. Namely, they are productive in two ways. Firstly, if there is to be a global emancipatory project, its globality has to emerge through local politics instead of being presumed and bound up with an epistemic coloniality that gives particular values a universalist veneer. And secondly, the local should also be productive of our theories, regardless of how much we (do not) engage in fieldwork. To make these two crucial arguments, the transnational peasant movement is used strategically: Dunford's book is politically aligned with the peasant struggle without the hubris of trying to advise it, and it is politically concerned with introducing existing politics into abstract debates on the promises of resistance, rights, and democracy.

Dunford is aware the book might be of "little concern to peasants" and that any attempts to provide "more sophisticated readings of their struggle" or recommendations, would go against the spirit of the book. As such, the book is reflective of its position and its relation to its object of study. Yet, it is its position in academic debates on resistance, rights, and democracy that brings out its most important points: the productive power of place-based struggles, which works to challenge the scales of both contemporary atomized political practice and neoliberal academia.

⁵ For a discussion on 'the field,' see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1997), especially chapter 1.