

Review of *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*

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La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants

Annette Aurelie Desmarais

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Three-quarters of the world's poor are subsistence farmers. A significant minority have forged one of the largest transnational activist networks of our time in order to ensure that peasants, indigenous, and other rural people are not erased from the global equation and instead to demand that their voices be taken into account. They have also articulated an alternative path to development centered on "land, food, dignity, and life." Annette Desmarais's *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* is at once an authoritative and authentic treatment of this remarkable surge in peasant activism at the dawn of the 21st century.

La Via Campesina means the "peasant road" or "peasant way." It is a global network of small and medium farmers, agricultural workers, fisherpeople, and rural organizations encompassing women's and indigenous agricultural groups, claiming to represent tens of millions across the planet. Thus, it is probably the largest single organization resisting neoliberal globalization today, and particularly those targeting the free trade regime. Desmarais demonstrates, however, that the Via Campesina is much more than just a reactionary or defensive protest movement. These activists have collectively articulated a rural, socially-embedded, counter-hegemonic alternative to growth-obsessed liberalism. This program aims to preserve and revalorize peasant ways of life and identities while simultaneously proposing alternative peasant roads to sustainable development wherein the peasantry would be a vital socio-economic class.

The book begins by situating the Via Campesina within the current globalization debate and juxtaposes their brand of grassroots, democratic, and direct activism to the more staid, NGO-led "civil society" organizations. The author credits this global peasant network with putting the concept of *food sovereignty* on the international and many domestic agendas. She then analyzes the enclosure of agriculture under the most recent round of capitalist expansion, and asks "which way forward" for development praxis in this anti-peasant terrain where, until very recently, globalization's losers have been largely ignored or, when they question the subsumption of all societal values to that of market efficiency, were chastised with Thatcher's mantra "there is no alternative" (TINA).

The rest of the book answers the question of which way forward by descriptively analyzing the Via Campesina and their challenge to the TINA's hegemony. It shows how diverse strands of rural activists and organizations forged common ground and solidarity as "People of the Land", and how they have carved out an autonomous space independent of those who had

paternalistically claimed to represent them, namely the Church, conservative political parties, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It traces how the Via Campesina has constructed itself from the local to the regional and finally to the global level in opposition to its main target, the World Trade Organization. By devising an organizational structure that promotes democratic participation and mass mobilization, in addition to forging strategic alliances with NGOs willing to play a supportive, not directive, role, the Via Campesina has remained locally embedded while at the same time flexing its muscle globally at protest events and in NGO and inter-governmental organization (IGO) fora. Desmarais concludes with a candid yet sympathetic treatment of how these activists incessantly work to expose, challenge and address power disparities and oppression within their own body with regard to gender, race, economic wealth, and nationality. On this score, the Via Campesina is an innovative experiment yielding potentially important lessons for other transnational social movements, NGOs, and IGOs alike.

Desmarais' book is an exemplary work of Critical Globalization scholarship. It is researched and written by a truly organic intellectual: The author has transitioned from conventional to organic farmer, to international peasant activist, and finally to scholar-activist. This insider's vantage point is not only ethically-consistent with her emancipatory and feminist methodological approach, it is also pragmatic and probably necessary if one is to understand or explain marginalized and under-studied social classes and movements such as rural *campesinos*. Although the risk of bias certainly accompanies a "committed insider" position, in this particular case, the benefits outweigh those of striving to be an "objective" outsider. Desmarais worked as technical support for the Via Campesina for a number of years. Furthermore, her mutually-arrived-at decision to pursue a doctoral dissertation (on which this book is based) in consultation with the Via Campesina's elected leadership gave Desmarais the much-needed access to organizational resources and key informants and helped her gain trust and establish rapport with her *partners* in—not objects of—inquiry. Finally, this insider position provided the scholar-activist with an opportunity to support and accompany a movement in its efforts to bring about social change.

At a more general level, the work challenges intellectuals, activists, NGO workers and policy-makers across the political spectrum to confront their deeply-rooted biases against peasants and rural people—be they that when it comes to producing food, "bigger is better," that the peasantry is a backward and disappearing class, or that urban professionals know what is best for rural people, the environment, and creating sustainable societies. In each of these ways, *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* is a model for critical, challenging, socially-engaged and purposeful scholarship.