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Food Sovereignty, the National Question, and Post-colonial Development in Africa

Max Ajl

Across Africa, agriculture, land, peasants, food, seeds, and agrarian reform are centre stage in the theatres of capitalist accumulation and resistance. From colonialism and the birth of the capitalist world system, land and the commodities grown upon it have been central to accumulation on a world scale. The African continent, which spurred the creation of world systems theory, is now ground-zero for escalating agrarian dispossession and a 'new scramble' for its resources, alongside potentially genocidal mechanisms of population management for its people.¹ How might we make sense of new dependencies – financial, nutritional, and technological? Are African nations fated to remain constrained and immiserated? Will the fields, factories, cities, and slums of the global South forever haemorrhage value to the North? How do the African countryside and heterodox development theories help us understand how dependency is reproduced, how it might be challenged, and how agrarian change might thicken the gossamer shell of sovereignty?

This chapter explores linkages between food sovereignty, agroecology, dependency, and African heterodox theories of development. I analyse them with an eye towards how they might help draw up roadmaps to depart dependency relations and melt apart the manacles, from technology transfer and aid, to unequal exchange and persistent declines in the terms of trade for agricultural products, enchainning the creative, self-managed, and free play of production in the South. And I put the national question front-and-centre.

Agricultural trade is central to economic sovereignty, since continental agriculture has suffered from an excess of imports over exports over the last decade.² Furthermore, exports like cacao, coffee, and olive oil have extremely erratic prices, imperilling long-term planning.³ They are subject to ebbs and flows largely outside the control of African states. Agricultural trade and production based on comparative advantage erodes rather than enhances economic sovereignty. Conversely, food sovereignty based on producing for a widened home market, with prices engineered around social needs and goals, could lead to greater macro-economic stability and economic sovereignty.

In these ways, the land question, threatened national liberation, and dependent insertion into a polarised world-system mold how African nations must understand and act to change the world. In particular, they must foreground the national frame to understand exploitation and underdevelopment. Following upon that, I focus on developing and nationally and environmentally embedding production and creating and using agricultural surplus beyond subsistence (not merely surplus value). I ground the discussion in regional theories of development/southern theory, auto-centred development, the heterodox agronomy of Slaheddine el-Amami, and the newer approaches of agroecology and food sovereignty.

This chapter's first section discusses the origins of dependency analysis. The second section discusses postcolonial dependency thought, explains self-reliant development more broadly, and presents the thinking of Slaheddine el-Amami, a Tunisian agronomist. The third section treats agroecology as it relates to surplus creation and decreasing import reliance. The conclusion shows how such research programmes and analyses mesh with a programme for smallholder agroecology/food sovereignty as a peripheral development path.

DEPENDENCY: VALUE AND THE CONCRETE

Dependency theory emerged out of a radicalisation of the structuralist thought cultivated at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean thought (CEPAL, in its better-known Spanish acronym). Clusters of researchers in Chile, a centre for continental economics, sought to understand the inability of Latin American countries' to

lock in value and improve their peoples' lives. One of the lenses which brought their subjugation into clearest focus was the Prebisch thesis. This argued that, for a variety of reasons, primary commodities faced constantly deteriorating terms of trade against manufactured goods.⁴ That is, if one widget traded for one bushel of coffee in 1940, in 1945 one widget would buy two bushels of coffee. Under such circumstances – all things being equal – it is better to make widgets than to grow and export coffee. Logically, CEPAL thought Latin America should make rather than import widgets: import-substitution industrialisation. Furthermore, it would be easier to manufacture widgets if there were a broader market in which to sell domestically crafted widgets: increased urban buying power.

As Latin America applied these policies, it began to industrialise. But it did not close the gap with Northern incomes. With the epochal eruption of the Cuban revolution, socialism burst over the horizon. Southern social scientists and economists were radicalised by the working-class and peasant revolt.⁵ Indeed, one of the founders of Marxist Latin American dependency theory, Vania Bambirra, devoted volume after volume to Cuba and the 1960s wave of Latin American insurrection.⁶

Thus enchanted and empowered, these thinkers advanced an array of ways to understand dependency, focusing on internal class relationships and how they co-evolved with imperialism. Through the work of Ruy Mauro Marini, who peered at an industrialising Brazil and a broken and brutalised Brazilian rural and urban proletariat, they realised that one major mechanism of dependency was super-exploitation: paying workers so little that their salaries fell below the cost of their social reproduction, or what it would cost to reproduce their own labour power. In a sense, salaries cut into the well-being of the workers themselves, compressing consumption to famine-like levels.⁷ Marini showed how dependency was not just about flows between nations, but fights between classes.

DEPENDENCY IN AFRICA

Although Samir Amin defended his dissertation on dependency in 1957, African/Arab dependency thinking acquired its sharpest edge only after states, especially on the continent's Northern rim, had begun their attempts at industrialisation.

In the post-independence agrarian sector, countries either left colonial agrarian export structures in place, or tended to focus on what they considered the more productive farmers, those with enough land to mechanise and use all kinds of inputs and the modified seeds, hybrids, and chemical fluids of the Green Revolution; a 'programme of agricultural intensification' using industrial inputs and targeting medium and large farmers, 'for achieving national sufficiency in food grain production'.⁸ Such farmers produced some cereals for domestic markets. But North Africa remained stuck within colonial channels of commodity crop exports: olive oil, dates, and later increasing amounts of fruits and vegetables. As did Africa more broadly, sending out cotton, coffee, and cacao. These germinating policies produced a disappointing harvest. While continent wide during the early post-independence period – through roughly, 1970 – countries were more or less self-sufficient, imports then began to rise continuously, almost irrespective of developmental regimes.⁹

Amongst the major causes of developmental lock-in was deliberate imprisonment. The US and other settler states furnished their own excess cereal grains to North Africa through non-market channels. What seemed like manna was the very opposite. The food flows were political engineering to constrain more wide-ranging agrarian revolution.¹⁰ They were also meant to keep grain reliant states in check, afraid of the consequences of departing too much from US policies.

Furthermore, African states often engineered prices to ensure nascent urban working classes could labour cheaply in newly built factories, the better to outcompete imports of Northern industrial goods and to compete with other countries' exports on world markets. Technology and know-how became central to the subjugation and immiseration of the South, as industrialisation became a path to perdition rather than the promised land.

In this way, these countries became dependent in multiple senses, opening the way for multiple ways of understanding how they had become subjugated. In the broadest sense, they were increasingly outward-oriented, structured to complement the core rather than cater to their popular classes. Such obeisance took on many a form, morphing and shifting over time. We cannot necessarily reduce it to mere reliance on cereals (although this has been important throughout), reliance on commodity exports, or the gradations of industrial capacity. Rather,

the fundamental constant reflects the Leninist thesis of a dominating-dominated-dyad: dependency 'consists of the transfer of surplus value from a less-developed total national capital to a more developed one'.¹¹ Cereal import dependency and food dependency are woven into an under-developmental or de-developmental matrix across Africa. But once one has identified the location and nature of a problem, one can move on to solutions. If agrarian crisis is the skeleton key to open up our understanding of pervasive socio-economic and environmental crisis, it may likewise unlock the door to a largely untested African development path in the twenty-first century.¹² Let us see how.

AUTO-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT AND AFRICAN THEORIES

Africa has been a people's laboratory for some of the most impressive and lesser known thinking on how to break from dependency relationships. From the 1950s onward, partially due to Chinese support for African national liberation, the Chinese revolution had become enormously well known amongst continental theorists and planners.¹³ For that reason, the Chinese example was an inspiration and insight for plans for balanced rural-urban growth, and criticisms of technology transfer soon abounded. Maneuvering within intellectual and political space opened up by the Chinese people, throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the stars of figures such as Samir Amin, Mohammed Dowidar, Fawzy Mansour, A. M. Babu, Walter Rodney, and countless others in the firmament of African heterodox thought shone like beacons. They marked the path to liberation. As a result, the dependency school dominated development discussion on the left in Africa, offering a framework for understanding concrete situations of underdevelopment.¹⁴

As in Latin America, dependency's anatomies of postcolonial underdevelopment were devastatingly accurate. To some extent, unlike in Latin America, Africa, and the Arab region which it overlaps, have been able not merely to state why attempted development was stillborn, but to offer ways to reanimate the developmental process.¹⁵ Above all, life and spirit came from their temporal and spatial closeness to that stunning example of postcolonial development, freed from imperialism by a countrywide people's war that turned the peasants into subjects of

social revolution and the keystone of postcolonial planning: China.¹⁶ In Tanzania, China trained postcolonial self-defence forces, and provided massive amounts of aid. And China's model of self-reliance was partially inscribed into, and a major influence on, the Arusha Declaration.¹⁷ Relying on one's own resources became the basis for, at the very least, a new way of thinking about development – not the fool's errand of trying to copy the 'Western path' of modernisation and its hidden motors of colonialism, slavery, and genocide, but a new path based on building up the wealth of the domestic direct producers.¹⁸

China was not merely an inspiration because of its apparent success in a country previously subject to Western imperialism, or because of the efforts China made to help national liberation across the continent. In terms of domestic development, China did many things that any African country could do. It radically shifted the organisation of labour and broke apart large plots.¹⁹ With labour rationalised, people were free to devote as much energy as needed to immediate labour on their own plots or cooperative lands. And because they could be sure they would be fed, they were also available to take on the onerous work of land restoration and hand dug water works to expand the quantity of land available for land constrained China to meet its peoples' needs without relying too much on imports. Most under-known, China often sought to formalise and improve people's knowledge through decentralised scientific experimentation, an emphasis on village level self-reliance and productivity increases, and proto-agro-ecological modes of intellectual-practical work based on exploring 'traditional' practices with an eye as to how they could be improved under a political system which worked to that end.²⁰

The Chinese model was seriously studied. Based on their research, writers like Babu, Mansour, Dowidar, Amin, and Amami developed an extremely wide array of suggestions for an auto-centred model. Self-reliance meant thinking about converting political sovereignty into economic sovereignty. First, of course, this meant understanding what was awry. As they saw clearly, in one way or another, peasants were, at best, labour reserves left with small subsistence plots, while industrialisation was not really offering any kind of technological upgrading of peasant agriculture.²¹ The self-reliant model meant shifting the logic of accumulation – qualitative use values rather than what the logic of the law of value demanded be produced. States and their peoples

would try to weave together domestic industrial or manufacturing sectors with domestic peasantry to do the impossible – increase the productivity of each, feed the people, balance rural-urban growth, avoid headlong hyper-urbanisation, maintain national sovereignty, and find some way to extract a surplus for sovereign industrialisation. The model, of course, was China, which had commanding advantages of scale, but in other ways seemed a suitable course for such countries to copy. And such scale is also why pan-Arabism loomed large in most early national-popular thought.

Throughout Africa, the model remained essentially untried, even in its original heartland, Tanzania itself. But that did not prevent it from flourishing on an intellectual and continental scale, from Dar es Salaam to Dakar, where Amin and his collaborators worked together to think through the implications of the Chinese experiment for African and Arab sovereign development. That line of flight also radiated outwards, as Dakar was a hub for African social science. Amin's influence was particularly heavy in North Africa, where his monographs on Maghrebi development and futures circulated with speed, and were read with enthusiasm. In North Africa and France, Francophone young people could easily access his texts. And Maoism was warmly embraced across the left, and more quietly within state intellectual-agronomic research institutions. One of those figures took to thinking about auto-centred development and applied it through direct agronomic research: Slaheddine el-Amami, in the process prefiguring the wide array of work which now goes under the banner of agroecology.

SLAHEDDINE EL-AMAMI'S PRESCIENT FOOD SOVEREIGNTY VISION

Slaheddine el-Amami emerges as a prescient and unique progenitor of a holistic and sovereign vision for environmentally sound rural development, based on building up from the strengths of traditional farming systems. This was very far from an antiquarian treasure hunt, but was instead a search into the past in the quest for a different modernity and a different future.

Amami's quiet penchant for Maoism was likely picked up from the Perspectives group, where he had been a close comrade of the

Maoist-influenced agronomist, Gilbert Naccache. Both sought to re-direct national agricultural planning, then primarily an imposition from above, into a patient process of accumulation from below. Indeed, both sought to emplace a radical land-to-the-tiller agrarian reform during the 1960s, the 'Ben Salahiste' cooperative experiment, helmed by the country's 'super-minister', Ben Salah, a former trade union leader.²² But the top-down model prevailed until the 1967 US-Israeli aggression against the Arab states led to massive protests in Tunisia, rupturing the legitimacy of dirigiste planning and setting in motion a shift to state regulated capitalism.²³

As the space for radical thought narrowed, with leftists in prison or exiled, Amami entered into state agricultural research institutions, coming eventually to head the Centre de Recherche en Génie Rural (CRGR). The state research institution became shield and cage. As a shield, it gave Amami an institutional position from which to research alternative technologies, and to call for better state policies for rural people in an Arab region where state directed development still reigned.²⁴ This took place within the authoritarian Habib Bourguiba regime. As a result, Amami was unable to call for the substantive shifts in political power needed to carry out such a programme.²⁵

Within the CRGR, Amami wrote quietly and unobtrusively within the dependency paradigm, attentive to how Tunisia had put in place an ensemble of technologies utterly unsuited to its biomes, the amount of capital it had available for development projects, or the number of people who needed jobs.²⁶ He also was entirely aware of deteriorating terms of trade for Arab exports, and crafted programmes with that in mind.²⁷ His analysis exposed and proposed with every word. With every attack on the prevailing imported technological system, he forwarded ambitious alternatives, drafting blueprint after blueprint, nationwide planning schematics, local level investigations and proposals for sustainable alternatives, and appropriate forms of agricultural technology for a people-centred and auto-centred development strategy.

In what follows, I begin with one of Amami's broadest and densest works – a manifesto for local agronomic research, which he reprinted again and again. He dissected the national research structures and their connections to the larger dependent national technological style. Because he was debating and criticising agronomists who did not see as he saw, or as he thought things should be seen, he emphasised how the

institutions produced an ideology which favoured technological choices that helped reproduce dependence.²⁸ He highlighted how Tunisian agronomists had barely studied those plants and animals that were the living technological inheritance of the producers of the past, which had been bred and selected for hundreds, if not thousands, of years to produce a species that was best suited for semi-arid and arid Tunisia.

He drew the connection between the kinds of thinking encouraged in the national schooling system, and the ways foreign corporations could turn Tunisia into an arena for profit. He began with an analysis of the engineering schools' contempt for the 'traditional' and the technologies to which the slur referred. In disdaining over a millennium of precolonial polytechnics, such contempt became 'in reality a colonial ideology favouring the supremacy of imported technology and wanting to disown any specificity to the colonised country'.²⁹ He insisted that colonialism and neocolonialism/postcolonialism were fettering the social relations of production. The disarticulation and rearticulation of agriculture was inseparable from colonial and neocolonial capitalism. First, the bequest from the past had been slowly shrunk: 'Just some pockets and enclaves have been preserved from colonial destruction and constitute the true national libraries of Maghrebi agricultural technology'.³⁰ Neocolonialism had broken apart the labour and attention heavy agricultural systems of old. It had not done so with an eye towards improving them to lighten that which broke backs. Second, the new system, through schooling, 'dangled the mirage of an urban life getting rid of centuries of prejudice and downgrading in which the rural world bathed. To "modernise" is to erase and surpass all of the traditional systems of managing natural resources [...]. The choice of techniques is almost never inspired by the local patrimony'.³¹ Amami saw that Tunisia's development project hinged on an ideological buy-in, alongside a hefty dose of derision towards the rural world where most Tunisians lived.

Amami grounded his criticisms in a dependency-style relational account of how technology was a mechanism for value flow, from Tunisia to the wealthy world, from the periphery to the core. He focused on seeds and water works. He saw the very physical stuff of agriculture had become conduits for value outflow from Tunisia to the merchants and 'large foreign conglomerates' that monopolised supposedly improved seeds. Even the institutions in Tunisia for developing its

agricultural capacity were functioning 'as a gigantic technological relay between the exterior and the interior'. Research focused on Green Revolution wheats. The institutions barely looked at barley, although it was adapted to aridity and [a crop] which covered half the Northern cereal lands and almost all the seeded lands of the Centre-South. Such plans discounted local heritage. State agricultural institutions barely fostered agronomic research into the animal species and plant landraces central to precolonial agriculture. In Tunisia, 'a zoologist who might be interested in the pasturing of camels will be ridiculed. The growing of cactus is paralysed by this prejudice that it is a symbol of underdevelopment. A tree as noble as the date palm is totally ignored', while research programmes that needed a minimum of a decade to produce results were disdained. Botanists and agricultural engineers in the post-independence era did little more than carry out descriptive inventories of the cactus landraces covering Tunisia.³²

As a result, the Global South lacked the institutional mechanisms that had been the *sine qua non* for Global North productivity increases. In his framework, the national commodity offices, charged with overseeing entire commodity chains, whether for oils (the National Oils Office, ONH) or the Office of Cereals, had to link research to plans to embed research nationally. They also had to have national popular priorities, with decisions, programmes, schematics, grants, research, and funding reflecting those priorities and values:

In order to advantageously and effectively use the research infrastructure, every decision and technical choice of the research organisms, including the importation of seeds and plants, the choice of agricultural material, development of zones, and also the technical content of planning objectives, all these operations and activities which are now actually carried out in a more or less improvised fashion, and without previous studies or experiments, must be condoned by the research organisms. The orientations and the technical choices will then be taken on rational bases and as a function of norms and trials elaborated in Tunisia and not artificially transferred.³³

Amami had a great many possible treatments for the wound and stanching the value flowing out from it. His polymathic grasp of Tunisian agriculture allowed him to recommend solutions in sector after sector, remoulding every institution and project into a mechanism

for an alternative system – national and popular at the same time. Research had to be collective, but the problem was clear. The non-stop replacement of precolonial indigenous polytechnics with imported technology were creating ‘double agricultural dependence, downstream and upstream, [which] is the most alienating of the relationship of unequal development between the affluent countries and the underdeveloped countries’.³⁴ For Amami, agriculture – in days past the least alienated portion of the productive process – was becoming the most alien to the farmer herself. He saw the farmer becoming a kind of organic factory tied to transnational supply chains, inputs, and outputs subject to the fluctuations and price movements made by monopolies and monopsonies.

Here, I pause and extract a series of crucial elements from Amami’s work. One, the question of scale. Amami began but did not end with thinking of the problem at the level of Tunisia as a nation state. This was not a nationalism that expressed the desire for inclusion within the capitalist system on a world scale, or ending the domination of the national capital of the periphery by the national capital of the core, but a nationalism which aspired to a sovereign national-popular path of development. Tests and trials to see what new plant breed or which technologies would be most suited for Tunisia would occur first *in* Tunisia, pursuant to domestic social choices. Furthermore, he did not simply reject foreign technological innovations. As with the Chinese experiment, his almost certain model, the idea was not to create a hermetically sealed technical sphere, but to selectively draw on other technologies when and where they were needed.³⁵ Amami was well aware, for example, that the water technologies of Tunisia drew on the accumulated wisdom of Andalusia. His was a cosmopolitan, not cloistered, sovereignty.³⁶ Nor was there any trace of atavism or prelapsarian romance. The use of the word ‘library’ to describe the repositories of knowledge within traditional farming systems was not accidental. It spoke to a way of thinking of using archives and the technology contained therein in the service of a different modernity. He also knew that technology was never innocent. It was not merely that Tunisia was dependent on imported technologies as part-and-parcel of protecting value flows. He also noted that the application of a ‘model’ – which assumed that Tunisian agriculture would ever look like the agriculture that French or US agronomists took as normative – would

ensure that Tunisia would forever fall short of its capacities by denying its specificities. In dealing with living biomes and beings, creativity and ingenuity unfolded within limits.

Furthermore, Tunisia was simply a starting point. Amami knew that Tunisia had a dazzling variety of biomes, from the semi-arid plains of Sidi Bouzid to the cereal fields of the wetter North, to the oasis archipelago spotting a sea of pastoralism in the south, to the olive plantations blanketing the central coast. Different bioregions were best suited to different crops, and that specificity was not merely a question of the North versus Tunisia, but of territories within Tunisia itself. For that reason, he urged the decentralisation of research, given that scientists ought to conduct their experiments in proximity to the peoples and plants they were meant to serve. Furthermore, he focused on the relational constitution of core and periphery. He knew dependence was not a thing, but part of a 'relationship of unequal development', an understanding clearly drawn from the framework of uneven development on a world scale.³⁷ He was always thinking about the strategic deployment of the nation's resources to produce a closed national circulatory system, keeping use values within the country to the greatest extent possible, rather than bringing the country wholly into the global law of value where it would be sure to suffer. And given that such relationships, such flows of expertise and technology, were made, they could be unmade – the mandate Amami set for himself.

Much of Amami's work broadened, or had been a build up to these themes and synthetic conclusions, or was a plan for intensifying production to increase the surplus. He seldom applied a merely technical approach to such questions, although institutional pressures and restrictions weighed on his writings, such that he often covered calls for redistribution in the shroud of technicism. He always knew the problem of development was social.

AGROECOLOGY

Some of what Amami wished to do was happening in parallel elsewhere across the Third World, especially in Latin America, through early work on traditional farming systems as an intellectual and genetic treasure which could be drawn on freely for people-centred and peasant-centred

peripheral development. By the early 1990s, agroecology began to apply scientific experimentation to the processes underlying traditional farming systems, and to formalise these investigations in a coherent approach to rural development.³⁸

Traditional farming systems, or farming systems which have not 'modernised' or industrialised, share six features. One, high levels of biodiversity, regulating the functioning of ecosystems and providing ecosystem services. Two, land, landscape, and water resource management conservation systems. Three, diversified farming systems, or polycultures. Four, resilient agroecosystems that can cope with disturbances and absorb the caprice of inconsistent and sometimes inclement weather. Five, they are nurtured by traditional methods, not purely book based knowledge systems and the technologies with which they are bound. And six, cultural values and forms of social organisation which ensure wide access to resources. Such systems integrate livestock and poly-cropping, and maintain *in situ* (on the farm) genetic diversity. Another important, but not universal, feature of these systems is their seamless weaving into a natural matrix. Agroecology overlaps with and grows outwards from these logics and focuses on closed metabolic cycles secured through a series of principles. First, recycling of biomass. Second, strengthening the 'immune system' of the larger farming system by promoting natural enemies of pests. Three, promoting healthy soil. Four, minimising the loss of water, energy, or nutrients by both conserving and regenerating soil, water, and biodiversity. Five, promoting species- and genetic-level diversity over time and space. And six, enhancing synergies amongst various ecological and biological processes.

Such systems work within rather than against the tendency of natural systems to grow polycultures and recycle wastes. In terms of yield, and thus potential surplus, the golden grail of productivist-oriented technologies may yield less on a per crop basis. But when evaluated on a per-unit area, they produce far more than the monocultures beloved of Western agricultural modernisation projects – at least on the periphery.³⁹ Furthermore, on marginal lands agroecology may also considerably outyield conventional systems, whether for cereals or agroforestry. They also fail far less frequently than do monocrops in reaction to climate change induced disasters, and better tolerate or bounce back from extreme weather events.⁴⁰ And they do so while strengthening rather than sapping environmental health, which keeps farms functioning.

Agroecology increases national production of exchange values and use values in multiple ways. First, within peripheral farming systems, it has the capacity to considerably increase national food/agricultural production. Second, it can do so using fewer or no capital intensive inputs, thus reducing import bills. Third, it protects ecological health and potentially increases the level of CO₂ in the soil, thereby increasing the national soil's capacity to resist floods and drought, the output of too intense or too intermittent rainfall, due to climate change.⁴¹ Fourth, because it relies on building upon the knowledge that exists within existing *campesino* or smallholder communities, it does not rely on foreign experts or technical attaches, nor on the more pernicious forms of development aid. In these ways, agroecology and the food sovereignty project with which it is interwoven reduce or eliminate the dependency of peripheral social formations on core commodity and expertise flows. Furthermore, agroecology and food sovereignty, calling for agrarian reform, have a social logic which works against monocultural exports and the insertion of peripheral countries into the global division of labour in a subordinate position. Whereas agroecology and food sovereignty tend to operate on family farms or smallholder subsistence farms producing for familial, local, or regional consumption, all things being equal, large-scale and capital intensive farms tend to produce for export using more industrialised methods.⁴² Because margins are higher, even with the same productivity on smallholder farms, there is a greater surplus, whether counted in terms of use values for domestic consumption or sales within the community. Reciprocally, given a greater surplus for non-farm use, markets for non-agricultural goods expand, which can facilitate sovereign industrialisation. Feeding the population and providing it with the manufactures it needs alongside just reward for labour, while caretaking the environment, is also what many understand as socialism.

In examining this unmarked nexus and its relation to sovereignty, the question is how national or sub-national food and agricultural systems – encompassing production, processing, and consumption – can contribute to economic autonomy and auto-centred sovereign projects, or the capacity for national decision-making according to a popular and non-capitalist law of value.⁴³ Three traits are relevant. First, such systems should be self-reliant, or non-import dependent. Countries that can supply their own subsistence needs are better positioned for

economic sovereignty, since they need not expend hard currency on basic goods needed for survival. This is essentially the vision of food sovereignty. Second, such systems need to be articulated internally. In other words, they should be closed systems at the national level. If capital inputs, such as tractors or organic fertilisers, are needed on farms, they should be procured nationally, whether through effective nutrient recycling or national manufacturers, relying minimally on international markets, international prices, and international technology transfer. Third, they should use agroecology, which strengthens the farm level environment, while reducing the need for off farm capital inputs. All three traits reduce or eliminate food and agricultural imports. Countries that develop stronger economies are less likely to incur unpayable debt, and they cut off an avenue for external pressure and constraints over political decisions: the ability of powerful states to turn food into a weapon via embargo. Through applying such measures – not merely or even primarily by the state, but with the necessary use of the state as carapace and shield for the people to amass power and restructure their lives – agrarian revolution alongside the back-to-the-future of agroecology could provide the basis for an untested African peasant path to development.

AGROECOLOGY, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, AND SOVEREIGN DEVELOPMENT

As is clear, African agrarian systems and peripheral agrarian systems more broadly, alongside dominant food consumption patterns, are structured in ways that reinforce value flows from periphery to core. These patterns coexist and constitute hierarchical differences between overall consumption and the two ideal-typical components of the world system: the core and the periphery. Dependency manifests as: unequal exchange, compressed prices for primary goods, reliance on technology transfer or inputs, and ecologically unequal exchange. It is also socially reproduced time and again by the lack of sufficient social power in the hands of the working people.⁴⁴ Breaking dependency means moving away from the law of value towards more auto-centred systems of production. While food sovereignty does not use this language, it very much shares much of the horizon.

I have explored theoretical precursors and fellow travellers to the food sovereignty discourse, as well as those treating issues of sustainable manufacturing and industrialisation. I have done so by exploring the ideas of Slaheddine el-Amami, an outstanding theorist of postcolonial dependent development. My aim was only to implicitly show convergences between food sovereignty, agroecology, and Amami's pioneering thoughts. Still, there are many convergences: the call for the devolution of power to the powerless, the call for national food production to meet the nutritional needs of the nation, and the call for agriculture to be protector rather than predator of the environment. Agrarian reform was a more muted convergence, above all amidst Tunisia's censorious neocolonial dictatorship.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most telling area of agreement was around the call for the use of local agricultural technologies, from seeds to rotations, to water harvesting technologies. The break from the Green Revolution/modernisation paradigm and the intellectual-practitioner turn or return to the peasant as the core of a sovereign project is the common basis and taproot of the North African theorists of development and those who, above all in Latin America, originated the theories of agroecology and the related idea of food sovereignty. Given agriculture's centrality to future development strategies in the periphery, returning agriculture to a mode of production that produces an energetic surplus and an ever increasing amount of use values for national populations is a central component of repairing the holes within national circulatory systems through which exchange values gush and flow. Every step taken in that direction, and every move to make agriculture into a sector for the production of use values, also works against the unequal exchange and price compression of agricultural products on a world scale – a central element in imperialist value transfers and social control.⁴⁶ In this way, we can see that a peasant path to peripheral development is, in fact, not merely untried in most of the world, and certainly most of Africa, but is, in fact, the only path that will allay rather than aggravate the environmental de-development of various industrial regimes of the 'development' project, and is the only one which does not rely on capital stocks that do not currently exist across the periphery.⁴⁷

In the current context of the Afro-Arab region – and increasingly, Venezuela – where food dependency is not merely a mechanism of value transfer, or securing tropical foods for the core, but is, rather,

potentially or presently a mechanism of political coercion, food sovereignty takes on even more enhanced value. Countries capable of feeding themselves have more freedom to refuse onerous trade deals, or assume a sovereign foreign policy position contradicting the interests of major cereal exporters within the world system.⁴⁸ Food sovereignty, as one expression of the politics of national and popular liberation, is linked to, but transcends, balance of payments constraints. It is connected to the broader agenda of peripheral political decision-making and political alliances which could lead to a non-hierarchical world. And, indeed, it is increasingly popular at least at the level of discourse in North Africa, where the agrarian question is slowly being forced back onto the development discourse.⁴⁹ In this way, as in others, the project for a sovereign Africa, including North Africa and the Arab region of which it is a part, has a rich heritage upon which to draw as it attempts to build up independent and sovereign projects – in this century, and beyond.

NOTES

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