



La Via Campesina Calls for the End of the WTO

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to better understand global civil society and how the activities of rising social movements contribute in shaping it. It offers a glimpse of the diverse theories of globalization that shed light on the way in which scholars apply a specific theory to frame their analysis on various aspects of global civil society. The theoretical foundation is further used to perform an analysis of La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement which, this paper argues, supports the pessimistic globalist perspective. This social movement essentially brings together people from all around the world who share common values in order to promote and materialize its primary mission: food sovereignty. This paper assesses the most important goals of this social movement's through the specific conceptualization of global civil society as described by both authors Hugh Mackey (2004) and Patrick Hayden (2007). Finally, it expresses how the International Studies lens may unlock new avenues for such transnational social movements to understand and face their challenges.

Résumé :

Le but de cet essai est de mieux comprendre la société civile internationale et la façon dont les activités des mouvements sociaux ont contribué à la façonner. Il offre d'abord une introduction des diverses théories de la globalisation qui permet ensuite d'éclairer le lecteur sur la façon dont les spécialistes appliquent une théorie particulière à la formulation d'hypothèses sur des aspects variés de la société civile internationale. La base théorique est utilisée ultérieurement afin de performer une analyse de La Via Campesina, un mouvement international de paysans qui, selon l'argumentaire de cet essai, supporte la perspective globaliste pessimiste. La Via Campesina rassemble des gens des quatre coins du monde qui partagent des valeurs communes afin de promouvoir et de matérialiser sa mission la plus chère : la souveraineté alimentaire. Cet essai jauge les plus importants buts de ce mouvement social à travers les conceptualisations de la société civile internationale spécifiques aux auteurs Hugh Mackey (2004) et Patrick Hayden (2007). Il exprime enfin de quelle manière la lentille des Études internationales permet de débloquent de nouvelles avenues pour comprendre et répondre aux défis de tels mouvements sociaux transnationaux.

This paper seeks to better understand global civil society and how the activities of rising transnational social movements contribute in shaping it. Firstly, it will present a glimpse of the diverse theoretical frameworks divided in three approaches aiming at defining globalization, which authors Allan Cochrane and Kathy Pain discuss in their piece “A Globalizing Society” and refer to as “the big debates” in terms of the actual global change on governance, culture, information and economics.¹ A better understanding of these conceptualizations of globalization will then shed light on the ways in which scholars apply a specific theory to frame their inquiries on various aspects of global civil society. This theoretical foundation is further used to perform an analysis of La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement that literally translates to “The Peasants’ Way”.² This social movement essentially brings together people from all around the world who share common values in order to promote and materialize its dearest mission: food sovereignty. This paper argues that La Via Campesina supports the negative globalist perspective of globalization and assesses that the social movement’s most important goals are better understood through the specific conceptualization of global civil society as described by authors Hugh Mackey (2004) and Patrick Hayden (2007).

Theories of Globalization

Many definitions of globalization can be found in the literature and rare is a single one accepted by all. As David Held (2004) puts it: “Globalization is the buzz-word of our

¹ Cochrane, Allan and Kathy Pain, “A globalizing society?,” in *A globalizing world? Culture, economics, politics*, ed. David Held, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 2004), 22.

² Grassroots International, 2014, Global Partnership/Campesina.

time”,³ yet it does not mean that it is an easy concept to explain or understand; it is rather complex and may be approached from various angles notably cultural, social, political, and economical. Most importantly, contradictory opinions on a particular subject matter are explained through different points of view, which depend on the theoretical standpoint that each person associates with. The literature on globalization offers three main theoretical positions, one of them with sub-categories: positive and pessimist (or negative) globalism, internationalism, and transformationalism.⁴ Both positive and negative globalists believe the world has become increasingly global and that it requires a new global structure.⁵ According to them, states are losing their power and have become eroded and fragmented while still taking some decision, but no longer making them.⁶

The positive globalists find beneficial repercussions to the phenomenon of globalization and “focus on the potential of stretched social relations to improve the quality of life, raise living standards and bring people together (...) making us all world citizens through global communication.”⁷ Positive globalists often concentrate their argument on the benefits of the liberal perspective and are in favour of the free market, while others “focus on the progressive possibilities of the ‘global village’”,⁸ a notion that values the development of new communication technologies enabling stretched social relations.⁹

³ Held, David, “Introduction,” in *A globalizing world? Culture, economics, politics*, ed. David Held, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁴ Held, “Introduction,” 3.

⁵ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 22.

⁶ Held, “Introduction,” 3.

⁷ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 22.

⁸ Mackay, Hugh, “The globalization of culture?,” in *A globalizing world? Culture, economics, politics*, ed. David Held, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 2004) 55.

⁹ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 15.

In contrast, pessimistic globalists focus on the problems created by globalization affecting particular groups of people.¹⁰ It strongly criticizes the global financial order, which structure allows for a powerful role of multinational corporations (MNCs), and of the main global financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO).¹¹ The central claim of pessimistic globalists lies in the increasing global poverty and radical inequality, important issues that impact billions of people,¹² which they blame on the global politico-economic order.¹³

Internationalists firmly resist the argument that the contemporary global occurrence has no precedent, and one of their strong arguments lies in the field of economic globalization.¹⁴ While they acknowledge the increase in international activities in the last decades, they bring attention to the current level of some international activities such as trade, which they claim is comparable to the level it was during other eras. In this sense, they condemn the fact that most globalists look into empirical evidence within a very narrow time range, which internationalists consider an ineffective and unrepresentative analysis of proper economic cycles.¹⁵

Transformationalists acknowledge that numerous changes are conveyed by globalization, notably in the fields of economics and politics, which have been transformed and are no longer exclusively based on nation-states.¹⁶ They believe that “the

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Hayden, Patrick, “Superfluous humanity: An arendtian perspective on the political evil of global poverty,” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35(2), (2007): 290.

¹² Ibid., 287.

¹³ Ibid., 280, 285, 291, 293, 300.

¹⁴ Held, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁵ Kelly, Bob and Raia Prokhovnik, “Economic globalization?,” in *A globalizing world? Culture, economics, politics*, ed. David Held, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 2004), 114.

¹⁶ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 23.

socio-spatial contexts of states have been altered”,¹⁷ however they are sceptical about the impacts instigated by all these changes. Like the internationalists, they argue that the globalists are exaggerating their case and more specifically that the forms of globalization occurring today are not inevitable and are potentially reversible.¹⁸

It is important to grasp the nuances of each of the above-mentioned theories to be able to perceive the foundation of an argument. This enables a better understanding of the author’s point of view and allow for a proper analysis of the argument based on the theory being used. Considering that each unique perspective entails its own focus, the inability of recognizing the theory behind an argument would thus fail to produce constructive debates on the matter of globalization.

Conceptualization of Global Civil Society

The phenomenon of globalization has created what we call global civil society, a broad concept that includes social, cultural, economical and political aspects. It also incorporates various actors: individuals, ethnic groups, social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and many more. The analysis of global civil society may lead to different results depending on the theoretical standpoint adopted, but every theory tends to focus on essential aspects of global civil society when evaluating the impacts of globalization. The fact that globalization is a multi-dimensional process also contributes to explain the eclectic assortment of inquiries on the subject. An inquiry may speak from a specific standpoint on globalization and focus on one or more of its four key concepts: stretched social and economic relations,

¹⁷ Held, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁸ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 23, 24.

the intensification of communication flows, the increasing interpenetration of economic and social practices and the emergence of a global infrastructure.¹⁹

As a pessimistic globalist, Patrick Hayden (2007) focuses on the concept of political evil of global poverty based on the Arendtian perspective of modernity, which includes a very cynical analysis of “capitalist expansionism”, the notion of “human superfluousness” and the “bureaucratization of modern life”.²⁰ Although the four key concepts of globalization are relevant and highly interconnected throughout his analysis, he stresses the importance of the roles of global infrastructures. Not only does Hayden associate “powerful institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO”²¹ to global poverty, which is eloquently described by Thomas Pogge as “the largest crime against humanity ever committed”,²² but he also supports Pogge’s latter claim blaming those institutions for the increasing radical inequalities.²³

Hugh Mackey (2004) on the other hand points out that pessimistic globalists are not always drastically negative about globalization; he uses the argument of Howard Rheingold to describe a more mitigated opinion whereas the increase in communication may be a good thing while contemporary development may not be as great.²⁴ This is an interesting point of view because it ties both sub-categories of globalism together while demonstrating how pessimistic globalists manage to measure the positive and negative outcomes of globalization. The end result of that assessment clearly is that the negative effects outweigh the positive ones, which will be further demonstrated throughout the

¹⁹ Cochrane & Pain, “A globalizing society?,” 15-21.

²⁰ Hayden, “Superfluous humanity,” 280-281.

²¹ Hayden, “Superfluous humanity,” 290.

²² *Ibid.*, 290.

²³ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁴ Mackay, “The globalization of culture?,” 57.

following case study.

Case Study

La Via Campesina (LVC) is best described as a transnational social movement²⁵ and was founded in Belgium in 1993. It is now constituted of about 150 organizations from 70 different countries, thus representing over 200 million farmers.²⁶ With negotiations of the WTO's first Agriculture Agreement starting in 1986 through its former version of international trade organization – the GATT – many local and national organizations were already well established before LVC was formed.²⁷ Amongst others, the Papaye Peasant Movement in Haiti – MMP (1973),²⁸ the Small Farmer's Association (Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft - ABL) in Germany (1973),²⁹ the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil – MST (1984),³⁰ and the Peasant Confederation in France (1986)³¹ all share similar interests in sustaining local agriculture and achieving food self-sufficiency. While still keeping their own identity, those existing movements and organizations of various ethnic backgrounds all merged to the ideology of LVC and, as such, made LVC an integral part of global civil society.³² Furthermore, this fusion invokes perfectly Mackay's theory of mitigation within the globalist perspective³³ whereas a social movement with traditional values fights an international superpower using global communication tools. It also takes advantage of the concept of stretching in

²⁵ Martínez-Torres, María Elena & Peter M. Rosset, "Diálogo de saberes in La Vía Campesina: food sovereignty and agroecology", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2014).

²⁶ Via Campesina, 2014, Organization/What is La Via Campesina?

²⁷ World Trade Organization, 2014, Trade Topics/Goods/Agriculture.

²⁸ Papaye Peasant Movement, 2013, Who we are/History.

²⁹ Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft, 2014, Die AbL/Geschichte.

³⁰ Landless Workers' Movement, 2014, About the MST/History of the MST.

³¹ Peasants' confederation, 2012, Qui sommes-nous/Notre histoire.

³² Via Campesina, 2014, Organization/Our Members.

³³ Mackay, "The globalization of culture?," 57.

order to reach out to other groups that share the same values, thus creating a strong and united global movement that remains mostly pessimistic about globalization.

The main complaint of LVC lies in the global politico-economic structure, which it claims is marginalizing and oppressing women, small-scale farmers and indigenous people by its patriarchal and neoliberal processes.³⁴ LVC's conceptualization of globalization relates to Mackay's cultural imperialism³⁵ and compares to that of Jan Aart Scholte (2007), which he defines as westernization and refers to as Americanization or even "westoxification".³⁶ "As such, globalization is regarded as a particular type of universalization, one in which social structures of modernity (capitalism, industrialism, rationalism, urbanism, etc.) are spread across all of the humanity, in the process destroying pre-existent cultures and local self-determination."³⁷ According to its members and to the allies of the movement, the results of this westernization are economically and socially significant for the peasants located all around the world; they go from surplus dumping from rich countries to the technology of the green revolution and have led to the death of some peasants,³⁸ forced others to relocate and eventually formed a "reserve army" of the unemployed and underemployed".³⁹ Hayden borrows this same expression from Zygmunt Bauman to explain how the political evil has ultimately made human beings superfluous.⁴⁰ This concept of globalization is often explained through the greed of multinational corporations and the control of international

³⁴ Via Campesina, 2014, Organization/What is La Via Campesina?

³⁵ Mackay, "The globalization of culture?," 60.

³⁶ Harney, Alexandra, "Journal from the WTO protests: Day 3," *Financial Times* (FT.com), Hong Kong, 15 December 2005.

³⁷ Scholte, Jan Aart, "Defining Globalization," *The World Economy* 31, no. 11 (2008); 1476-1477.

³⁸ Business News, "Honduran workers seize farm land," *Globe & Mail*. Toronto, Canada, 19 Apr. 2012, B7.

³⁹ Bello, Walden, "Foreword," in *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the power of peasants*, ed. Annette Aurélie Desmarais, (Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Pub 2007): 3.

⁴⁰ Hayden, "Superfluous humanity," 288.

institutions, which are the front-runners of capitalism and the core of Hayden's "political evil", while in this case the direct enemy of LVC being the WTO.

The ultimate goal of the movement is to build a new agricultural frame that would be radically different in that it would be based on the concept of food sovereignty.⁴¹ The members and enthusiasts of LVC consider that this new model of agriculture would be the most appropriate way to promote crucial values of our society like social justice along with human dignity.⁴² In other words, this idea gives

the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.⁴³

To win this claim, governments would need to get full rights on agricultural lands and also restore their exclusive rights and freedom of food production, distribution, imports and exports because as we stand, governments have handed over a big chunk of their sovereignty to the WTO for whatever reason.⁴⁴ With the WTO's sole purpose of regulating trades,⁴⁵ it might become increasingly difficult and complicated for governments to take back control over their sovereignty from a multilateral system denying their right to do so.⁴⁶ LVC puts up a real fight to be accepted in Free Trade Meetings, keep updated with the latest news in trade negotiations and make sure their

⁴¹ Desmarais, Annette Aurélie, *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the power of peasants*, (Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Pub (2007): 26.

⁴² Opinion and Editorial, "Food sovereignty - a concept to fight for," *Castlegar News* (British Columbia, 11 May 2012): 1.

⁴³ Provost, Claire, "La Via Campesina celebrates 20 years of standing up for food sovereignty," *theguardian.com*, 17 June 2013.

⁴⁴ Sadeque, Najma, "How WTO kills farmers," *The Nation*, Asianet, (Pakistan) 11 September 2013.

⁴⁵ World Trade Organization, 2014, About WTO/What is the WTO?/What We Do.

⁴⁶ Patel, Raj, "'Sovereignty' takes its place at the table; Comment," *Financial Times* (London, England) November 20, 2013.

discontent is heard.⁴⁷

The numerous efforts of LVC are not in vain and certainly not fading, although some at the WTO may have thought that “the fighters (were) becoming more rare within activist groups”.⁴⁸ In fact, they have now gotten the support of an important player in international relations; according to a report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “governments in rich and poor countries alike should renounce their focus on agribusiness and give more support to small-scale, local food production to achieve global food security and tackle climate change”.⁴⁹ Additionally, the United Nations Human Rights Council is currently working on a United Nations declaration on the rights of peasants,⁵⁰ and the fact that the voice of the social movement was heard and taken into account is considered an immense accomplishment.⁵¹

Conclusion

While peasants lose their livelihood to the profit of big corporations and international institutions, La Via Campesina’s campaign to end the reign of the World Trade Organization is a powerful reminder of Hayden’s conceptualization of globalization blaming the global infrastructure for global poverty and radical inequalities. The fact that

⁴⁷ Hiebert, Murray and Mei Fong, “Leading the News: Protesters, police clash --- Arrests top 1,000 outside WTO talks; Korean farmers' fear,” in *The Wall Street Journal Asia, Hong Kong, China*, 19 December 2005.

⁴⁸ von Reppert, Juliane “WTO: The Global Trade Talks: Activists seek to shape, not disrupt, meeting --- Groups redefining free-trade position since '99 gathering,” in *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 13 December 2005.

⁴⁹ Provost, Claire, “Food crisis fears prompt UN wake-up call to world leaders,” *theguardian.co.uk*, 18 September 2013.

⁵⁰ United Nations Human Rights, 2014, Human rights bodies / Human rights council / Rural Areas / First Session.

⁵¹ Agazzi, Isolda, “Switzerland: U.N. Human rights Council exhorted to defend peasants’ rights,” *Inter Press Service*, 12 March 2012.

the movement is using a positive aspect of globalization, by using the world interconnectedness created by communication technology improvements, reminds of Mackey's take on pessimistic globalists. Both these authors succeeded in discerning the subtleties of pessimistic globalism and LVC clearly falls into that theoretical framework.

The field of International Studies explores the paradoxes of international society through a multidisciplinary approach. Transnational social movements such as LVC may serve as useful tools to understand contemporary global challenges. Against all odds, LVC still remains a solid opponent to the WTO's attempts for agricultural globalization. Its quest for food sovereignty comprises multiple facets of global civil society that were shaken by globalization especially at the social, cultural, economic, and political levels. Studying social movement's issues through the lens of International Studies allows us to craft action plans and develop solutions that answer them in a constructive manner, whether at the local, regional, national or global level, in a noble attempt at creating a more peaceful and just world order.

Without denying the predominance of giant institutions in global governance, one cannot nullify the efforts of such transnational social movements and their potential in shaping the modern global civil society. Although LVC has a broad participation internationally, it is unlikely that its efforts alone will overthrow the activities of a deeply embedded transnational organization as powerful as the WTO. However, all its endeavours along with its alliance with superpowers such as the United Nations may ultimately give some power back to the people and counterbalance the negative effects of globalization.

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