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Examining the Emancipatory Potential of the Counter-Discourse of *La Via Campesina* by Conducting a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

In the face of global crisis like the world food price crisis of 2008 or the economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and consequent upheavals for agricultural producers and consumers, there is increased interest in building alternative agricultural systems which are more resilient and sustainable. One of the most radical suggestions is articulated by the international peasant organisation *La Via Campesina* which positions itself opposite the established organisations with their peasant-led approach of food sovereignty which struggles to change the current “agro-industrial“ system towards one that is democratically controlled by the people, bringing about fair power relations. A broad academic literature theorizes and supports this counter-discourse and attributes to it a huge emancipatory potential in political and economic terms.

However, the debate about finding meaningful alternatives would benefit much from complicating the claims of *La Via Campesina*, which could for example be attempted from a post-structuralist perspective. Following Michel Foucault, an analysis of the way *La Via Campesina* conceptualize “knowledge“ and “power“ is conducted and deepened by the comparison with its “counter“ organisation, the World Farmers’ Organisation. Both organisations’ key documents are studied for this purpose.

Overall, the analysis revealed many emancipatory aspects in the discourse of *La Via Campesina*, such as the powerful suggestion to radically redefine the criteria based on which success is measured by putting the needs of the vulnerable into the centre, signifying a change of discourse towards more emancipation. However, following Foucault’s scepticism about alternative movements proclaiming the creation of a space which is free of “power“, the way *La Via Campesina* conceptualizes change brings to the surface some problematic notions: for example, the movement’s internal contradiction between land owners and landless labourers is not made a subject of discussion, but instead the line of conflict is exclusively drawn between “the people“ and “evil“ neoliberalism. This covering-up of power relations within the movement for the sake of a “cleaner“ discourse may carry with it new forms of suppression. This suggests calling for more ambiguity in their discourse to be able to offer meaningful solutions for past, present and future crisis.

Keywords: Counter-discourse, emancipation, food sovereignty, Foucauldian discourse analysis, *La Via Campesina*, world farmers organisation