



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

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Introduction

- There has been a constant hunger and malnutrition crisis for almost two billion people worldwide
- Recently, more acute global crisis like the world food price crisis of 2008 or the economic crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 brought upheavals for agricultural producers and consumers which constitutes a threat to food security for many vulnerable people
- There is a general agreement that there is a need for more resilient and sustainable farming systems
- One way of creating resilient systems is by letting the people who are affected by these systems have a greater say → emancipatory solutions are needed because they have a big potential to be effective
- Farmers organizations can play a big part in building better systems because many problems and potentials are located in farming
- The two biggest farmers organizations worldwide, the social movement *La Via Campesina* and the World Farmers Organization, both claim to be emancipatory - but they have completely different approaches with different ideas about what emancipation looks like
- However, the "clash" of their discourses is not theorized much in the literature
- Therefore, this research examines this "clash" with the post-structural perspective of the philosopher Michel Foucault who claims that all discourses are characterized by a nexus of knowledge and power which helps understand why certain discourses emerge the way they do and to examine their emancipatory potential

Objectives

- Examine the discourses of both organizations and contrast them with each other by drawing on the information that they provide on their websites
- Conduct a discourse analysis inspired by the work of Michel Foucault by examining the Knowledge/Power nexus of each discourse
- Examine to what degree elements of their discourses are emancipatory for their members as well as from a general standpoint
- Draw conclusions on the nature of the debate and think about implications for policy making



Theoretical Framework

- Michel Foucault's approach to discourse analysis is the 'historicization' of supposedly timeless and universal concepts like knowledge, reality and truth (Landwehr 2001 in Kerchner and Schneider 2006) which leaves them open for „historical refiguration“ (Gutting 2005)
- For Foucault, **Knowledge** is understood in the following way: Because *knowledge* is always socially constructed in a given society, there is no place from which it can be independently assessed
- For Foucault, **Power** is located "...outside conscious or intentional decision. He does not ask: who is in power? He asks how power installs *itself* and produces real material effects; where one such effect might be a particular kind of subject who will in turn act as a channel for the flow of power itself" (McHoul 1995)
- **Power and Knowledge** are related in the sense that "...power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1977 in Gutting 2005)
- How this is related to **Emancipation**: Since for Foucault there is no situation that can be outside of some sort of a power/knowledge relation, therefore this relation should be designed with as little domination as possible

Method

- From each organization's website ten publications were chosen, for *La Via Campesina* from the years 2006-2019 and for the World Farmers Organization from the years 2012-2019
- The software NVivo was used to code the publications according to Kathy Charmaz' *Grounded Theory* (2006): the text was paraphrased and then sorted into emerging themes which enables an in-depth understanding of the text as well as the identification of interesting patterns, which constitute a good starting point for the Foucauldian discourse analysis

Results

La Via Campesina	Basic Info	World Farmers Organization
 <p>1993 in Mons, Belgium</p> <p>200 million peasants</p> <p>Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) from India, Movimiento de Trabajadores sin Tierra (MST) from Brazil, Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft e.V. (AbL) from Germany, National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) from USA</p> <p>United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) (2018)</p> <p>IFAD's Farmers Forum, Committee on World Food Security (CFS)</p>	<p>Year founded → 1993</p> <p>Number of members → 200 million peasants</p> <p>Examples of member groups → Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) from India, Movimiento de Trabajadores sin Tierra (MST) from Brazil, Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft e.V. (AbL) from Germany, National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) from USA</p> <p>Recent declarations → United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) (2018)</p> <p>Forums that they take part in → IFAD's Farmers Forum, Committee on World Food Security (CFS), Climate Change negotiations</p>	 <p>formerly IFAP (International Organization of Agricultural Producers) founded in 1946, since 2000 World Farmers Organization</p> <p>Representing around 570 million farms</p> <p>United Farmers Front in India, Zimbabwe Smallholder Farmer Forum (ZIMSOFF) from Zimbabwe, Deutscher Bauernverband in Germany, National Farmers Union from the US</p> <p><i>The Farmers' Route Declaration</i> (2019)</p> <p>IFAD's Farmers' Forum, Committee on World Food Security (CFS), Climate Change negotiations</p>

- **Problems:** Neoliberal policies and free trade pushed through by the World Trade Organization destroy the possibility of peasants to maintain their livelihoods, the environment equally suffers from agro-industrial practices and the commercialization of agriculture
- **Solutions:** The general economic conditions for farmers need to be improved, integrated land reforms should make access to land possible for everyone, solidarity between people needs to be re-established, agroecology can save biodiversity, stop climate change and provide humans with healthy food
- **Food security:** can only really be achieved when there is Food Sovereignty which is when the people to determine what their agro-food systems look like. When social conditions are improved, this will be achieved.
- **Image of agricultural producers:** "The peasant" on his or her 'family farm' is described as fulfilling his or her central role in providing food for the community by working the (ancestral) land with mostly agroecological methods. Farming is not just a "profession" for the peasant but his or her purpose in life, humans and nature are always perceived as being inseparable.

What their discourse looks like



- **Problems:** Lack of recognition for farmers, farmers are disadvantaged, lack of government support, unstable market conditions, poor farming techniques, lack of agricultural infrastructure
- **Solutions:** Professionalization of agriculture, achieve international standardization and harmonization through countries joining the Codex Alimentarius, attract investments, expand their approach globally
- **Food Security:** also called „nutrition security“, is mostly defined in terms of *nutrients*: in order to fight food insecurity, therefore, improved varieties, optimal fertilizing as well as modern processing and preparation are necessary as well as biofortification, and in general increased production. Improving food security is depending on working markets and more general economic targets.
- **Image of agricultural producers :** They draw an image of a 'family farmer' who is a „nutrition gatekeeper“ and eager to be part of the solution to current crisis, and who is able to bring about with his or her activity food security and economic growth by acting upon the incentives of the market and innovations.

Knowledge, power and emancipation

La Via Campesina	Knowledge, Power and Emancipation	World Farmers Organization
<p>In the discourse of <i>La Via Campesina</i>, <i>Knowledge</i> is conceptualized in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>La Via Campesina</i> suggests a radically different way of conceptualizing what counts as „knowledge“, they want to turn around existing hierarchies which determine who can produce valid knowledge: <p>“Decolonizing methodologies/strategies can range from day to day practices that promote more harvesting, cultivating and sharing Indigenous foods, to a more complex challenge of critical thinking and redesigning institutional frameworks and methodologies in research”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceiving of processes in social and political terms is appreciated, and also spiritual notions are respected • With this understanding, <i>La Via Campesina</i> successfully identifies the weaknesses of one-dimensional understandings of knowledge in development which opens the door for new ways of thinking, moving away from „capitalist“ knowledge • However, an interesting friction emerges when at the same time to stressing this „openness“, <i>La Via Campesina</i> produces some essentialist knowledge about farmers by portraying them as timeless subsistence farmers, which already decided that „the right way to go“ is by striving towards a peasant agriculture which precludes other options (Ziai 2002) 	<p>Green - emancipatory Red - less emancipatory</p> <p>Knowledge</p> <p>Power</p> <p>Power Knowledge</p>	<p>In the discourse of the World Farmers Organization, <i>Knowledge</i> is conceptualized in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of their objectives are expressed in <i>economic</i> terms, economic goals seem to be equitable to goals like food security • Many relationships are conceptualized in <i>biological</i> terms, for example the way they define food security (see above) <p>“Poor soil quality is a significant factor that leads to micronutrient deficiencies in humans”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because they do not have the agenda of „overthrowing“ all existing knowledge like <i>La Via Campesina</i>, they are sometimes able to better accommodate „middle ground“ ideas which can be very meaningful to agricultural producers • However, since this always happens in a depoliticized manner, the effects of this „middle ground“ approach are limited because they still remain fixed in a mainstream idea of what constitutes knowledge by only focussing on increasing production and expanding markets without seriously considering other perspectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>La Via Campesina</i> locates <i>Power</i> mainly in the hands of a global capitalist/neoliberal elite, whereas farmers are in the position of victims, who, however, when they join the „struggle“ in solidarity, have the power to change „the system“ • Here, <i>La Via Campesina</i> rightfully recognize that there are power imbalances which need to be counteracted in order to improve the situation of vulnerable people in agro-food systems • However, when they say that the power should be with „the people“ they forget to keep in mind Foucault's warning that there will always be power relations, even among „the people“, but these antagonistic notions are not made specific 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the discourse of the World Farmers Organization, <i>Power</i> is conceptualized by portraying the farmer powerless and therefore as a victim of a lack of attention vis-a-vis the rest of society • This problematization helps bringing to the attention that there is a power imbalance and the strong encouragement towards improving the economic conditions for farmers to lift them out of an economically weak position is meaningful • However, at the same time, unequal power relations within the movement are mostly left unproblematicized, for example the fact that their discourse is dominated by the needs of <i>big</i> farmers to the disadvantage of <i>small</i> farmers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By radically rejecting the status quo, <i>La Via Campesina</i> actively tries to establish themselves as a counter discourse to the existing policy situation by overcoming existing power/knowledge relations • Their analysis of the downside of the status quo is insightful in many ways and they actively suggest a new knowledge/power setup as an alternative • On the other hand, however, the approach of <i>La Via Campesina</i> is characterized by its very own (unconscious?) knowledge/power relation: Producing knowledge about the peasant by describing him or her and making statements about his or her „nature“ is also a way of executing power because here the peasants are being „discursively utilized/digested“ and determined, which forecloses certain other ways of conceptualizing the struggle for a better future • This discourse might even change the way the farmer perceives of him or herself • Also, by not making specific antagonistic forces within the movement, <i>La Via Campesina</i> might paradoxically take away the stage from the people they claim to represent (landless workers for example) which benefits small farmers who employ them 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knowledge/power nexus of the World Farmers Organization points towards being strongly rooted in capitalist notions • The strong notions of improvement mobilize a lot of energy by helping to lobby for the benefit of the farmers in order to influence policy makers • However, drawing on knowledge about what it means to be a „farmer“, the farmers are subjugated to a strongly normalizing power and their responsabilization of farmers towards doing „the right thing“ • Their conceptualizing knowledge mostly in economic and biological terms has the consequence that problems and solutions are mostly defined in a way that they can be solved by „smart“ solutions, which however avoids any kind of challenge of existing power imbalances in social relations inside and outside the organization is precluded, which leads to a depoliticized discourse

Discussion

- The findings suggest quite radical epistemological differences with the two organizations: *La Via Campesina* as a left-populist and the World Farmers Organization as a liberal-conservative approach
- Following Foucault, the two organizations utterances can be understood as being the expression of broader discourses while, in turn, shaping these broader discourses, too
- Both organizations use a *knowledge/power* nexus to extend their reach: both build a discourse that enables and discredits *knowledge* through their *power*, and, in turn, this *knowledge* creates new *power*, both *knowledge* and *power* directly imply each other
- When the two organizations are confronted, there is a struggle between two power/knowledge nexus: both try to establish their version of reality and at the same time co-construct each other in an interesting and antagonistic dynamic
- However, while focussing a lot on the antagonism between each other, both organizations *internal* antagonism are not made explicit, which leads one to ask to what degree they are actually able to represent the needs of agricultural producers and other rural people
- For example: Both organizations wish for the improvement of the overall economic conditions for „family farmers“ which seems to be an attractive narrative as it suggests some hope for small agricultural producers vis-a-vis the problems that agricultural producers face worldwide
 - However, the World Farmers Organization rather seems to use this as a „slogan“ to obscure that their policies deepen capitalist relations which is actually counterproductive for small family farms
 - *La Via Campesina* paints a picture of their peasants being independent from capitalist relations which is not necessarily the case because even small farms today are mostly embedded in capitalist relations; Therefore Brass (2015) suggests that *La Via Campesina*'s discourse is very attractive to be taken up by *small* capitalist farmers to get supported vis-a-vis *big* capitalist farmers since they then get supported from other institutions that sympathize with these values
- These strong knowledge/power implications might follow either ideological aims or the interests of a certain subgroup of members (for example big farmers) and not really the interest of the mass of the agricultural producers
- These notions jeopardize the assumption that both organizations are emancipatory by representing their interests on the international stage
- Further, observations of the Farmer's Forum 2020 in Rome, where both organizations meet, showed that there is almost no communication and cooperation between the two organizations which might further weaken the emancipation of the position of farmers

Conclusion

- Both organizations increase the direct influence of agricultural producers in the international development scene – in recent years, especially *La Via Campesina*'s entry into the scene has broadened the discursive space
- The differences between both organizations' discourses create some sort of political competition which offers choices for farmers which is particularly important in times of multiple crisis,
- However, political competition does not automatically guarantee that everybody's voices are heard which is even more a problem during a crisis, as for example urban and rural labourers that lost their livelihoods due to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Using Michel Foucault's concepts of *Discourse*, *Knowledge* and *Power* has helped to think about how both organizations try to convince the reader with their version of reality, revealing interesting dynamics for both organizations
- Both organizations claim to being emancipatory was constrained because they are either too *managerial* (World Farmers Organization) or too „romantic“ (*La Via Campesina*) – instead, a *political* approach is needed to make emancipation happen for agricultural producers

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