

BRICS and Global Agrarian Transformations

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Introduction

There is no doubt that Euro-American imperialism and colonialism were powerful forces shaping agrarian dynamics worldwide in the past few centuries. Imperial and colonial metropolises placed themselves at the center of a global regime of capitalist agrarian accumulation, dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land and resources, enslaving some and subjecting others to adverse incorporation into export-oriented production of cash crops, expelling landless peasants to settler colonies, and establishing uneven terms of trade between (post-)colonies and metropolises in increasingly complex global markets. After World War I and II, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as competing leaders of a seemingly bipolar world order. Both Cold War hegemonies promoted 'agricultural modernization' worldwide, interlinking development assistance, technological transfer and geopolitical realignment in these efforts. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US and its model of neoliberal globalization appeared to become hegemonic worldwide, simplifying even further the terms of agrarian studies to a technocratic discussion of neoliberal rural development towards a US-modeled idea of modernity.

After almost two decades of supposed hegemony, US-led neoliberal globalization failed to end food insecurity, rural poverty and economic instability, and came to a head with the global financial and food price crisis of 2007-08. Meanwhile, new agroindustrial powerhouses were emerging in Brazil and China with strong state support, while India led resistance to further neoliberalization of international agriculture markets at the WTO, and a resurgent Russia began to challenge the geopolitical dominance of the US. In 2009, the presidents of these countries came together to formally establish the BRICS group, soon joined by South Africa in 2010, and declared the need 'for a more democratic and just multi-polar world order'. Global agribusinesses, agroindustrial technologies, rural development practices and global food markets could no longer be understood or defined simply from the perspective of the US and Europe alone, nor simply reduced to a North-South dynamic of post-colonial relations. The rise of emerging economies is changing the fundamental dynamics of global agrarian transformations (Cousins et al. 2018). Thus, the purpose of our chapter is to examine how the field of critical agrarian studies is now fully engaged in the effort to grasp the transformations occurring within these countries, and through

new transnational relations they establish among themselves and with other regions of the world. Furthermore, the field must itself transform with the incorporation of scholars from these countries, and their own endogenous theories, concepts, epistemologies, methodologies and debates. One such effort to do just this is the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS) which is a collective of largely BRICS-based or connected academic researchers and scholar-activists concerned with understanding the BRICS countries and their implications for global agrarian transformations. Specifically, BICAS sets out to produce cutting-edge research around four key themes: (1) agrarian transformations in the BRICS countries, (2) agrarian transformations in the BRICS regions, (3) new dynamics in the agro-food system, and (4) BRICS and Middle-Income Countries (MICs) in relation to the old hubs of global capital (McKay et al. 2016b). BICAS has held numerous international conferences in the BRICS countries, produces a Working Paper Series and has released several Special Issues in peer-reviewed academic journals.¹

The chapter is structured as follows: the next section discusses some of the new dynamics of agrarian change in relation to the rise of BRICS. The third section provides an overview of three broad competing perspectives regarding the implications of the rise of BRICS for global agrarian transformations. The fourth and final section concludes and points to the importance of understanding the rise of BRICS for global agrarian transformations, not just in terms of the new elites, but also the scholars and activists pushing for new alternatives.

The rise of BRICS: new dynamics of agrarian change

'BRICS' as a concept first emerged during the 2000s in discussions of Brazil, Russia, India and China as 'emergent economies' that were projected to become increasingly important targets for investment and drivers of global economic growth. After its institutionalization, the explicit purpose of the bloc was to reform global financial institutions, establish a global reserve currency (as alternative to the US dollar), and better coordinate development among emerging economies, having the global financial crisis (centered in the US and western Europe) as a backdrop (Cooper 2016).

Beyond their creation of the New Development Bank, which has already taken a backseat to the China-led establishment of the much larger Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, there is

¹ See McKay et al. 2016b; Cousins et al. 2018; Oliveira et al. forthcoming; McKay et al. forthcoming. More information can be found at <https://www.iss.nl/bicas>.

Please cite as: Oliveira, Gustavo de L.T., and Ben McKay (forthcoming) "BRICS and Global Agrarian Transformations", in *The Edward Elgar Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*, Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Kristina Dietz, Bettina Engels, and Ben McKay (eds.). Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar. 2

little evidence of significant achievements of those goals. This is generally credited to the imbalances within the group, with China far outpacing all the others in all economic categories, Russia holding disproportionate geopolitical influence with its nuclear arsenal, Brazil sliding from a moment of strong economic growth to its deepest recession in modern history, India turning inwards with a strong nationalist movement, and South Africa becoming entangled in domestic crises (ibid.).

Consequently, most debates have turned on whether the category of BRICS is meaningful at all, given drastic differences in the sizes, character and prospects of their economies, insufficient ability to (or even interest in) coordinating structural transformations to multilateral governance institutions, and lack of cohesion in major geopolitical and geoeconomic contentions. Debates have focused on whether, how and to what extent the BRICS (either as a bloc or more generically as key actors among a broader set of emerging economies) may drive a 'global convergence' between the Global North and the Global South, cultivate a 'new development paradigm', and construct a 'new multipolar world order' (Bond and Garcia 2015; Gray and Gills 2016).

Within the field of critical agrarian studies, these debates have taken place in parallel with a high-profile discussion of renewed interests in farmland and agribusiness investments worldwide. Often called a 'global land grab' (Borras et al. 2011), this process has unfolded as investors sought safer havens for financial capital than the crisis-torn financial centers of the Global North, high-returns from commodity speculation and valuable assets for the long-term. All of this is underpinned by the conviction that a growing global population, rising incomes, and declining environmental conditions for food production will ensure rising prices and profits for agribusinesses, as well as the strategic importance of the sector for state actors. Unlike previous eras, however, the post-2008 moment was marked by the prominent participation of state and agribusiness investors from the BRICS alongside the usual actors from the Global North (Margulis and Porter 2013).

Attempted, perceived, or even imagined 'land grabs' by Chinese investors have been particularly prominent in discussions of this phenomenon, even while several scholars demonstrated that Chinese and other 'emerging' investors remain dwarfed by US, European and Japanese investors in transnational land and agribusiness deals worldwide (Yan and Sautman 2010; Hofman and Ho 2012; Oliveira 2018). Nonetheless, the role of Brazilian, Indian and Chinese state and private endeavors in African agriculture became a central concern to critical agrarian studies,

as well as cross-border deals by these and other emerging economies in their regions, such as Thai companies expanding their influence across Southeast Asia, and Argentinian agribusinesses operating across Latin America (see Oliveira and Hecht 2016; Scoones et al. 2016; Craviotti 2016; Schoenberger et al. 2017).

Accusations of land grabs as neo-colonial incursions are balanced in the literature not only with demonstrations that actors from the Global North remain far more prominent in such endeavors, but also with arguments that the BRICS and other emerging economies are in fact developing new forms of 'South-South cooperation' that may transfer agroindustrial technologies and successful agrarian development paradigms to less developed countries around the world (Li et al. 2013).

Debates about the rise of emerging economies encompass various forms of rural development assistance, policy and technology transfer, and new terms for investment and trade across 'South-South' relations. Going beyond simplistic narratives of either mutually-beneficial emerging partnerships or a new imperialism, scholars have pointed to the politics of resource control which underpins and remains the driving force behind both the Washington and Beijing Consensus, led by new and old classes of political and economic elites (see McKay et al. 2016a). Critical agrarian studies tend to question the highly optimistic and technocratic narratives that Brazilian public and private actors may transplant the 'success story' of soy, maize, cotton and sugarcane agribusiness expansion over the Brazilian cerrado to the savannahs of Africa, the highlands of Colombia or the plains of Southeast Asia (Wolford and Nehring 2015; Monjane 2015), including its world-leading biofuel programs (McKay et al. 2016c; Oliveira et al. 2017). Instead, critical agrarian scholars highlight the dramatic socio-ecological damages and opportunity costs of this agroindustrial development paradigm that consolidated Brazil's historically imbalanced land concentration in the hands of a minute class of large-scale land owners, financiers and agribusiness corporations (Oliveira 2016). Moreover, many point to India to show how both neoliberal capitalism and modern state-making alike plunge emerging countries into agrarian crisis, even despite government efforts to sustain public procurement and price assistance for (larger-scale) farmers (Lerche 2013), ultimately sacrificing its peasantry to ethnic and caste conflict (Ramakumar 2017) and landlessness in order to advance urban and industrial development (Vijayabaskar and Menon 2018).

Similarly, critical agrarian studies have emphasized the negative aspects of China's rapid industrial and urban development, particularly the challenges of sustaining labor-intensive agroecological production (Wen 2007), the plight of 'left behind' elders, women and children in 'hollow villages' (Ye et al. 2013; Zhang forthcoming), growing social inequality and elite capture of cooperatives (Yan and Chen 2013; Zhang 2015), and the dramatic food safety crisis the country is now facing (Zhang and Qi 2019). And even when challenging simplistic narratives about the 'neo-imperialism' or 'neo-colonialism' of Chinese foreign investments in farmland and agribusiness, they also question optimistic views that China's agricultural demonstration centers in Africa and contract-farming schemes across Southeast Asia may produce positive socio-ecological results (Yan and Sautman 2010; Lu 2017).

In addition, South Africa's apparent achievements in modernizing agri-food distribution through supermarket chains and capital-intensive investments in agricultural production are frequently promoted as a model and mechanism for similar developments across southern Africa (Campbell 2016; Hall and Cousins 2018). Yet the reemergence of intense land conflicts in South Africa belies any sanguine technocratic narratives in that direction. Critical scholars debate in turn how radical land redistribution and agrarian reform may unfold in South Africa, avoiding elite capture on the one hand, as well as the breakdown of agricultural production if smallholders are not provided with effective means to succeed on redistributed land (Cousins 2017).

Debates about the rise of these emerging economies extend from examination of their domestic agrarian transformations, transnational investments, and development cooperation efforts to their role in reshaping geopolitics and global agroindustrial markets. Illustrative cases include the denouement of sanctions and counter-sanctions imposed on and by Russia in the aftermath of its annexation of Crimea in 2014. The European Union, United States and some allied countries imposed sanctions and restricted imports from Russia, which in turn restricted its own purchases of agri-food products from those countries. While in previous decades Russia would have been isolated to markets in its immediate periphery (that is the former Soviet Union), which would not be able to satisfy the volume and diversity of agri-food products restricted, now a wide array of countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America quickly seized the opportunity to replace US and European exports. Brazilian grains, Chilean fruits and nuts, Argentinian cheeses, Nigerian vegetables, Tanzanian flowers, Vietnamese seafood and Chinese processed foods fulfilled Russian demand and essentially turned the economic pressure from Russia back on Europe and the United

States (Wegren and Elvestad 2018). Not only does Crimea remain under Russia's control, but the latter became emboldened to reassert its geopolitical influence even further.

Another notable example regards the US-China trade war. Ostensibly focused on the trade imbalance that favors China, China responded to US tariffs on Chinese imports with its own tariffs on US exports. Before 2000, it was unimaginable that China – a net soybean exporter – would become the largest market for US soybeans. And hand-in-hand with that massive transformation in global demand, there has also been a fundamental transformation to global soybean supplies, as Brazil quickly matched and now surpassed the US as the world's leading exporter (Oliveira and Schneider 2016). Consequently, when Trump initiated tariffs in March 2018, US soy exports had already been largely depleted but global markets were flush with a bumper crop from Brazil. Brazilian soy exports were further redirected from Europe, Japan and other markets to attend Chinese demand well into 2019, when the new US soy harvest was seeking markets but finding insufficient buyers to substitute China's demand, which amounts to about 2/3 of global trade. As Brazilian agribusinesses and soy farmers rake in windfall profits, China stands its ground in the trade war, and US soybean prices collapsed, forcing the Trump administration to scrounge for 12 billion dollars in subsidies to protect its soy farmers from bankruptcy. Meanwhile, China's leading agribusiness companies consolidate their mergers and acquisitions of some of the world's leading trading, agrochemical, seed and biotechnology companies, placing COFCO and ChemChina shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Cargill, Bunge, Monsanto-Bayer and Dow-Dupont. In places like Bolivia, these Chinese agribusinesses already control more market-share of agroindustrial inputs and trading than their US and European counterparts (McKay 2018).

Competing perspectives in CAS

The debates in critical agrarian studies about the rise of emerging economies and its consequences for global agrarian transformations can be roughly synthesized into three camps. First, there are those who celebrate the rise of post-colonial economies as a counter-balance to the hegemony of European, US and other industrialized and imperialist nations (Moyo et al. 2013; West 2014). In their view, the fact that Brazil emerged as a global agroindustrial leader, Russia regained its power to confront US and western European geopolitical ambitions, India was able to coordinate a halt to agricultural neoliberalization in the WTO, poverty reduced most dramatically in China, and South Africa can represent an independent model for development of the continent are all positive

aspects that should be further advanced. Second, there are others who argue all these developments amount simply to the reproduction of neo-colonial dynamics between these emerging powers and an impoverished and under-developed global periphery (Langan 2018; Reeves 2018). Brazilian land grabs in Paraguay and Bolivia, Chinese efforts to steer infrastructure developments around the world to satisfy its natural resource demands, India's pressure on neighboring countries to resist China's infrastructure construction priorities, and Russia's opportunistic defense or sacrifice of geopolitical partners worldwide are often invoked to sustain such skeptical views. Both views have merit and can draw upon significant empirical evidence to sustain their arguments.

Nonetheless, we argue a third approach to these debates holds a far stronger position and provides the most fruitful implications for critical agrarian studies. That is the view that we should not examine the rise of the BRICS and MICs primarily in geopolitical and macroeconomic terms, naturalizing nation-states as actors with precedence over the multiple class and other socio-environmental struggles that take place within these countries, and amidst their global interactions. This means that the so-called 'rise of the BRICS' is nothing to be celebrated in its own right, if it ultimately amounts merely to the inclusion of new elites from the Global South into an unjust and unsustainable system of global capitalist exploitation. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that this shifting global political economy does create new opportunities for class struggle all around the world, and the global challenge to the US-led neoliberal development paradigm results in fractures within a hegemonic project that may be exploited by rural social movements for food sovereignty, agro-ecological sustainability and anti-capitalist mobilization.

According to this third point of view, it is not only Brazilian-based multinational agribusiness corporations that are reshaping global agrarian transformations, but also the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) through its collaborations with rural movements worldwide for the establishment of La Via Campesina as a peasant international for the advancement of food sovereignty. What matters is not simply that Russia can confront US geopolitical hegemony, but that discourses of food sovereignty and agroecology make gains within Russia despite the post-socialist absence of organized mass social movements (Visser et al. 2015). Similarly, India's power at the WTO should not be attributed simply to the acumen and authority of its national leadership, but fundamentally to the power of its peasant social movements and even the intractability of its Maoist insurrection (Ramakumar 2017). On the other hand, China's spectacular urbanization and industrialization are not to be celebrated uncritically, without

acknowledging their foundation in socialist redistribution and collective social infrastructures, condemning the socio-ecological contradictions of capitalist restoration, and recognizing the rise of 'quiet' social movements for agroecology, feminism, and food sovereignty (Zhang, forthcoming). Finally, if South Africa is to be described as model for the rest of its continent, it is not because of its capitalist agribusinesses but rather because of the militancy of its youth who put the demand for land expropriation without compensation on the national agenda once again (Cousins 2017; Hall and Cousins 2018).

Conclusion

Understanding the rise of emerging economies like the BRICS is central to analysis of contemporary global agrarian transformations. Yet it is not simply their associated geopolitical transformations that call attention from and provide new insights for critical agrarian studies. The point is not to debate whether new agribusiness companies and development models from the BRICS are a success of resistance to the Global North, or a new sub-imperialist project against middle-income and the least developed countries. Instead, these global agrarian transformations must be rooted in the conflicts and contradictions within emerging economies themselves, as subaltern actors struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in a protracted struggle against neoliberal elites, populist authoritarianism and conservative nationalist movements. Our goal here is not to fully describe and analyze these struggles and their repercussions for global agrarian change, but rather to emphasize that such conflicts and heterogeneities are the most fruitful springboard for new insights in critical agrarian studies. Debates that focus upon 'global convergence', 'multipolarity' and 'new development paradigms' but understate grounded socio-ecological struggles and transformations (cf. West 2014; Reeves 2018) are misguided and misplaced in the social sciences in general, and critical agrarian studies in particular. As climate change advances further and the socio-ecological foundations of human life become increasingly more unstable and vulnerable, new theories, methodologies and debates are required. The dramatic transformation of the global political economy of food and farming due to the rise of the BRICS is fertile ground for the cultivation of such new ways of thinking, and critical agrarian scholars from these regions are stepping up to the task at hand, inviting colleagues who remain snagged in the provincial terms of bygone scholarship rooted in fallen and decaying empires.

Further Readings

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