



## **A Twenty-first Century Socialist Agriculture? Land Reform, Food Sovereignty and Peasant–State Dynamics in Venezuela**

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**Abstract.** This article examines state–peasantry dynamics in Venezuela in regards to the formation, implementation and contestation of land reform and agricultural policy. As a self-proclaimed socialist state, the Chávez Government has framed its agrarian policies as a reordering of the food system that prioritizes land redistribution, smallholder agriculture, and sustainable forms of production. Yet, despite an apparently positive policy context, rural dynamics have been characterized by conflict over land and a geographically and temporally uneven process of policy implementation in rural areas.

This article examines how peasants have engaged with Venezuela’s land reform processes and their role in shaping the character and scope of state policy. In particular, it investigates the dynamics of technically illegal peasant occupation of estates in a seemingly ‘pro-peasant’ policy context. Peasant–state dynamics are analysed through the lens of food sovereignty, where land reform processes and struggles represent contestation over conceptions of what constitutes ‘appropriate’ production in a ‘socialist’ agricultural regime.

### **Introduction**

The election of Hugo Chávez Frias to the Venezuelan presidency in 1998 marked the end of an era in Venezuela. The old political regime that had provided stable and peaceful transfers of power for some 40 years had collapsed under its own weight. An oil economy that had once delivered the highest per capita income in Latin America was in crisis and had left almost 70% of the population in poverty (Márquez, 2003). Neo-liberal economic reforms introduced in the 1980s and 1990s had only heightened popular discontent and further emphasized the glaring gap

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between Venezuela's haves and have-nots. Chávez swept into the presidency promising to completely overhaul the political system, turn the country away from neo-liberal economic policies, and use the country's oil wealth to benefit the vast numbers of the Venezuelan poor.

The Chávez Government's political programme is the Bolivarian Revolution, or socialism for the twenty-first century,<sup>1</sup> a process of social change that is, as government supporters put it, *pacífica pero armada* (peaceful, but armed), a democratic turn to the left. The Chávez Government has framed its policies as an explicit counter to neo-liberal development ideology and has reasserted a more activist role for the state in economic and social policy. In the agrarian realm the government has introduced policies aimed at, in words of officials, developing an agricultural regime that is tropical, sustainable, agro-ecological, and socialist, and that will guarantee national food sovereignty (Interview, 18 July 2011). A centrepiece of the government's agricultural policies is a land reform programme that purports to place smallholders at the core of this agrarian transformation. The reform redistributes both state land as well as, in what Chávez has declared as a 'war on the latifundio', estates from large landowners to the landless (Univision, 2005). Yet, a central problematic has emerged. Despite an apparently positive policy context, aggressive pro-campesino state rhetoric, popular support for Chávez in rural areas and oil wealth to fund agriculture development, rural dynamics have been characterized by conflict over land and geographically and temporally uneven processes of policy development in rural areas.

This article examines the Venezuelan agrarian reform process and relationships between the Chávez Government and campesinos (small farmers). Passed by presidential decree in 2001, the agrarian reform law (Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario [LTDA]) can largely be seen as a state-led process of agrarian change. This article, however, examines how campesinos have engaged with land reform processes and their role in shaping the character and scope of state policy. In particular, I investigate the dynamics of technically illegal peasant occupation of estates in a seemingly 'pro-peasant' context. Using the government's framing of agriculture and other policies as a direct challenge to neo-liberalism and US imperialism, I examine peasant-state dynamics through the lens of food sovereignty where land reform processes and struggles represent contestation over conceptions of what constitutes 'appropriate' production in 'socialist' agriculture policy. I argue that the occupations and campesino conflicts with the state grow out of the contradictions that occur in attempts to institute 'revolutionary' reform via an electoral road to change in combination with how peasants define their own roles within this process of change. In addition, I examine how campesino participants in Venezuela's agrarian reform employ government rhetoric of twenty-first century socialism and food sovereignty to define their roles as smallholder producers and actors central to the Chávez Government's project of broader social change.

### *Methodology*

This article is primarily based on ethnographic fieldwork performed in Venezuela with campesinos occupying land in the Venezuelan states of Cojedes and Yaracuy in April–August 2005, as well as additional field visits in 2006, 2009, 2011 and 2012. To examine state–peasant dynamics within the agrarian reform process, I interviewed

representatives of peasant organizations, campesinos involved in land petitions and occupations, as well as state- and national-level government officials in institutions involved with various facets of the reform. Interviewees were selected using key informant and snowballing sampling, in order to gather data from individuals familiar with key processes of the agrarian reform programme. In addition, I observed local and regional government and campesino meetings and forums. I also interviewed representatives of a number of farming associations, such as FEDEAGRO, who are critics of the Venezuelan government generally, and of the agrarian reform specifically.

## **Food Sovereignty and Agrarian Reform**

### *Agrarian Reform in Latin America*

In the twentieth century practically every Latin American country implemented a programme of state-led redistributive land reform. Agrarian reforms were implemented with a diverse and often contradictory set of goals, as reform was frequently seen as a panacea for a host of problems. Reform was to help modernize agriculture by breaking up inefficient colonial estates, increase agricultural production, reduce rural poverty, mobilize political support for governments, and undercut potential support for armed revolutionary groups. These diverse and often contradictory goals often meant that small producers, the sector that the reforms promised to aid, frequently received little long-term benefits from reforms.

Indeed, campesinos in the reform sector often became a class of minifundistas whose land parcels were not sufficiently large to fulfill subsistence needs. Forced to look for wage labour for supplemental income, reform beneficiaries served as seasonal, semi-proletarianized labour on new, capitalistic estates (De Janvry, 1981). Agrarian reforms often failed to directly challenge the power of the latifundio as large landowners were able to avoid expropriation by of estates (De Janvry et al., 1998; Kay 1998). Even when large estates were broken up, the highest quality lands often remained with estate owners who then incorporated them into modern farms (De Janvry et al., 1998, p. 7). The more marginal lands distributed to campesinos reinforced their inability to subsist from familial farming.

Additionally, while campesinos may have received land, a 'landlord bias' saw the majority of government support captured by larger farmers, whose favourable position also provided them with more access to technology and private credit (Kay, 1998, p. 12). In countries such as Venezuela, limited access to resources resulted in abandonment of parcels by reform beneficiaries and reconcentration of land (DeLahaye, 2003). Governments' increasing emphasis on export-crop production also undercut reform efforts, as capitalist estates monopolized the best lands and peasant producers were pushed farther into marginal areas. In addition, the 'urban bias' of cheap-food policies kept agricultural prices artificially low in order to stall upward pressures on wages and thus ease industrialization costs in urban centres (Thiesenhusen, 1995, pp. 176–177; Kay, 1998, p. 12). This wider economic policy made investment in agriculture less attractive in general and, as the majority of credit was monopolized by larger farmers, profitable production by small producers became increasingly difficult.

*Neo-liberal Agriculture and Land Reform*

In sum, state-led agrarian reform in its various manifestations primarily served to foment the establishment of capitalistic agriculture in the countryside (De Janvry, 1981; Bernstein, 2002, p. 433). While some campesinos benefited from reforms, complexities and contradictions in the process left the majority mired in poverty, stimulating migration to urban centres. As neo-liberal reforms gained prominence in the final decades of the twentieth century, state-led redistributive land reform became increasingly marginal. A neo-liberal perspective saw state-led land reform programmes as having created irregularities and inefficiencies in agricultural and land markets that hampered production and development (Borras, 2003). Agricultural policy increasingly shifted from a broad state-interventionist approach to one that was directed at selectively removing the hand of the state from the agriculture sector in order to better promote export production (Thiesenhusen, 1995). Neo-liberal reforms in Latin America overall functioned primarily to open up protected sectors of national economies to foreign investment by shifting the hand of the state in economic policy in order to strengthen a property rights regime that facilitated capital accumulation (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Margheritis and Pereira, 2007; Potter, 2007). The World Trade Organization's Agreement on Agriculture that prohibited trade or production controls, pried open previously closed markets to an onrush of subsidized agricultural products, devastating small producers across the Global South and contributing to continued de-peasantization of the countryside and swelling of the ranks of the urban poor (McMichael, 2009b).

Yet, recognizing the volatility represented by continuing unrest over land issues, the World Bank and other lenders have promoted market-led agrarian reform (MLAR). MLAR's seek to liberalize land markets, clarify titling to improve tenure security, and to affect redistribution via non-coercive means (Bernstein, 2002; Borras, 2005). Market-friendly reforms, however, have largely not lived up to their proponents' promises, failing to alter the latifundio–minifunido character of the countryside, and even functioning as a barrier to change (Borras, 2003, 2005; Boucher et al., 2005; Rosset, 2006). At the heart of MLAR failures is that such programmes tend to remove land distribution issues from larger trading regime contexts, depoliticize processes that are fundamentally political in nature, and do not address the central question of power relations in the countryside. The food crisis of 2006–2008 further punctuated the failures of the current world food regime.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite acknowledgement from the World Bank that policies that dismantled government support programmes diminished the productive capacity of the agricultural sector, its solution for overcoming current problems has been a further corporatization of the agriculture sector (Bello and Baviera, 2009).

It is within this context that many new rural social movements have emerged, such as Via Campesina and the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, which reassert redistributive land reform as central to supporting peasant agriculture. In one view, these movements can be seen as part of a Polanyian double movement that emerges in an attempt to counter the destructive effects of policy seeking to impose an idealized self-regulating market onto more areas of society (Polanyi, 2001). However, while emerging social movements can be seen, on the one hand, as new resistance growing out of the pains of neo-liberal globalization, it is more accurate to think about them as a new stage in continuous resistance against dispossession. In other words, responses to neo-liberal globalization is a framework more suited to describing the *forms* of current social resistance, rather than their origins (Yashar,

2005). Similarly, as shown above, neo-liberalism in the agricultural sector is not as a phenomenon *sui generis* but rather a form in a historical process of capitalist penetration into the rural sphere.

Given the failure of historical land reform process, the spread of neo-liberal structural adjustment, the opening of the rural sector to transnational capital, global land grabs and the resultant undermining of smallholder agriculture, peasant agriculture appears increasingly under threat. Yet the while relative numbers of peasants have dropped, absolute numbers are high, with 1.2 billion peasants worldwide (Van der Ploeg, 2008). The persistence of the peasantry as a political and productive force and current struggles over land and visions of agricultural and economic development reflect the continuing relevance of Kautsky's (1988) original agrarian question and its more contemporary formulations that seek to understand the nature and forms of capitalist transformation of agriculture and the role (potential and actual) of the peasantry in the political realm (see Bernstein, 1996). As explored in the next section, the concept of food sovereignty has brought the latter issue into sharp relief, placing *campesinos* as central actors in the reframing and creation of alternative agriculture regimes, as well as articulating a new ideological framework for agrarian reform.

### *The Enemy is the Model: Food Sovereignty and Agrarian Change*

Food sovereignty articulates an evolving rights-based ideology that seeks to lay out an alternative paradigm of agricultural development, production, and trade where *campesinos* form the basis of both national food self-sufficiency but also a challenge to the current neo-liberal global food regime. There is no singular definition for what food sovereignty means or what it looks like in terms of a policy package (Windfuhr and Jonsén, 2005; Patel, 2009). A thorough and nuanced exploration of the varied elements falling under the rubric of food sovereignty is beyond the scope of this article, yet a basic outline is useful for understanding food sovereignty as a general trend within agrarian reform movements and how the concept is employed by different actors in the Venezuela agrarian reform process.

First coined by the peasant organization *Via Campesina* in 1996 as 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce the staple foods of its peoples, respecting productive and cultural diversity' (*Via Campesina* in Menezes, 2001), the concept of food sovereignty has evolved to make stronger claims on trade policy, food as culture and an ecologically sustainable production system that privileges peasant over corporate-controlled agriculture. A more recent wording by *Via Campesina* states:

'Food sovereignty is 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 offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal – fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability' (*Via Campesina*, 2007).

Food sovereignty emphasizes not just a right *to* food, but also a right of farmers to produce food locally and to do so in culturally relevant terms. Social movements and theorists have employed the concept of food sovereignty in attempts to articulate a model of agriculture production, policy and trade that directly challenges the dominant model of globalized agriculture. Again, food sovereignty is an evolving concept that can be conceptualized differently by various actors. However, most formulations retain common elements that emphasize:

- redistributive agrarian reform;
- local production of food stuffs by smallholder farmers aimed at supplying domestic markets;
- democratic control of agriculture policy;
- equitable and non-oppressive social relations;
- the exemption of the agricultural sector from trade agreements;
- the cessation of the 'dumping' of subsidized crops in South nations; and
- a sustainable production model based on agro-ecological farming techniques (see Windfuhr and Jonsén, 2005; Rosset, 2006; Via Campesina, 2007; Altieri, 2009; Isakson, 2009; Patel, 2009).

Food sovereignty's focus on trade and redistributive land reform contrasts with a food-security framework often employed by international institutions, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), concerned with hunger and poverty in the Global South. Food security advocates often call for targeted investment in agriculture, including the peasant sector, to raise production, increase food supplies, and nutrition-rich crop availability, and counteract rising prices (see De Schutter, 2010; FAO, 2012, 2013; Gates Foundation, 2013). In addition, global and borderless food markets are seen as key to feeding the poor. Food security is by no means monolithic, and while some, such as the Gates Foundation via the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, have argued for an extension of green revolution technologies in Africa to boost production, others have pointed to agro-ecology as a way to raise peasant production and address sustainability concerns (De Schutter, 2010).

Conspicuously absent from food-security frameworks, however, is any serious attention to trade policy or agrarian reform<sup>3</sup> that address structural inequalities in the food system. Food security does little to question the dominant model of capital-intensive agriculture, which, within a context of globalized neo-liberal trade policy, weakens the position of peasant farmers, foments rural poverty and outmigration, contributes to environmental degradation, and drives further displacement of peasant agriculture in favour of large-scale, industrial farms.

While food security and food sovereignty are not necessarily incompatible, as both call for increased resources for agriculture, sustainable production and increased food supplies, food sovereignty goes deeper to pull agricultural policy out of a technocratic, economic policy poverty framework. The emphasis on trade within food sovereignty ideology recognizes land redistribution in isolation does not address the livelihood crises in the rural sector fomented by a globalized food system increasingly dominated by transnational capital. In addition, calls for democratic and non-oppressive social and power relationships and a reordering of production priorities towards agro-ecological farming denotes an understanding that while liberalized trade and a diminished state role in the direct management of agriculture were central components of neo-liberal structural adjustment, reclaiming roles for the state in economic planning does not in itself address the underlying logic of

technocratic, top-down policy formation. If we understand neo-liberal globalization as not isolated economic policies but as a larger ideological project that is inherently exclusionary, undemocratic, and conflictive (Harvey, 2005; Margheritis, 2007, p. 42) then it is clear that alternatives to neo-liberalism require more than bringing the state back into the economic arena. Agrarian movements (and some national governments such as Venezuela) have used food sovereignty increasingly as a call for a new model of agriculture that is expressed as explicitly anti neo-liberal. As the MST has articulated, 'the enemy is the model' (Rosset, 2006), and food sovereignty rhetoric places small farmers in the Global South as central agents in a local, national and international struggle to upset the status quo of global capitalism.

### *Seeds of a New Model: Agrarian Reform in the Twenty-first Century*

Redistributive agrarian reform is one key to an alternative agriculture model that includes food sovereignty (Rosset, 2006; Altieri, 2009). Agrarian reform in the twenty-first century is often seen as a partial solution to both rural and urban poverty in the Global South. Small farms on expropriated farmland could reduce settlement pressures in ecologically fragile frontier areas, and the urban middle class may come to see deepening agrarian reform as one way to reduce social problems exacerbated by rural to urban migration (Thiesenhusen, 1995, pp. 180–181). De-peasantization is not the inevitable migration towards the pull of better job opportunities, but is a reflection of failed land reform, cheap food and industrialization policies and the transformation of the countryside into a space more appropriate for capital accumulation. Reforms aimed at re-peasantization of the countryside seek to undermine or reverse these rural-migration patterns by providing for more stable peasant livelihoods. It has been shown that in Cuba, government emphasis on the creation of a small-farm sector has contributed to re-peasantization (Enrriquez, 2003). In Brazil, urban members of the MST have moved into the countryside after successful land occupations. In Venezuela, the programme *Vuelta al Campo* seeks to revitalize the countryside and slow, if not reverse, migration trends by creating opportunities outside of the urban sector.

In addition, redistributive agrarian reform can potentially affect food production issues by supporting smaller producers. Small farms are argued to be more productive than large farms, the so-called inverse relationship (Thiesenhusen, 1989, p. 22; Griffin et al., 2002, pp. 286–287; Rosset, 2006). While output per worker may be higher on a larger, more capital-intensive farm, total productivity per unit of land is higher on smaller farms. As the above discussion of food sovereignty demonstrated, effective land redistribution must be accompanied by trade policies that support local production and insulate local markets from subsidized food grown in the North. Meaningful restructuring of trade policy and land redistribution to smaller producers could, therefore, raise total food production, address rural and urban poverty and provide for higher average income levels.

### **Agrarian Reform, Production and Twenty-first Century Socialism in Venezuela**

While grass-roots agrarian reform movements such as the MST have gained prominence in the last two decades, Venezuela is an example where a self-proclaimed 'socialist' government is taking the lead in redistributive land reform. As mentioned

above, the land reform process is linked with the broader vision of Socialism for the 21st Century, Venezuela's discursive and political response to disenchantment with the economic and political structures of neo-liberal globalization. As structural adjustment packages have diminished the institutional power of the state in the Global South, some analysts (see Smith, 2008) have focused their search for alternatives on other actors – social movements such as the MST, NGOs and indigenous movements, for example – that exist outside the sphere of the state. In Venezuela, however, it is the state that has taken centre stage in redefining priorities for development outside of the established trends of global capitalism. Apart from extensive spending on new social programmes, such as the missions,<sup>4</sup> the Chávez administration has created community councils aimed at decentralizing elements of political decision-making, and foreign and local capital has found itself under increasing state scrutiny and regulation or, in some sectors, nationalized by the Venezuelan government. In addition, the Chávez administration has spent much political energy promoting regional integration accords and institutions such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the America, (ALBA, envisioned as a regional alternative to the US-promoted Free Trade Act of the Americas), and the Bank of the South (as a counter to World Bank and IMF financing) in attempts to buttress Venezuela's geopolitical position vis-à-vis the United States.

It is within this context of an explicit attempt to upend the geopolitical status quo that Venezuela's agrarian reform is constructed. Tying the process to the greater framework of the Bolivarian Revolution, the agrarian reform fits into a larger scheme of re-peasantization, that seeks to revitalize the countryside. Through pro-peasant policies, the Venezuelan government states it hopes to reduce both urban and rural poverty, promote food sovereignty, and diversify the economy so that Venezuela's fate no longer marches lockstep with the price of petroleum. Chávez often emphasized the anti neo-liberal character of the government's agricultural policies. 'Under neo-liberalism everything that we are doing is inconceivable; we couldn't do it if we were tied to the neo-liberal model. All of this, the Plan de Siembra, Plan de Semilla, Plan de Tractores, would be impossible' (Castillo, 2005). Thus, food sovereignty's critique of a food system dominated by export imperatives and foreign capital is a natural discursive tool for proponents of the Venezuelan agrarian reform and helps distinguish policies from earlier land reform projects.

### *Venezuela's Land Question*

The landscape of land reform in Venezuela is complicated by structural constraints stemming from an economy dominated by oil development that displaced and marginalized agriculture. In the first half of the twentieth century, oil revenue quickly replaced plantation agriculture as the driver of the Venezuelan economy<sup>5</sup> and rural development largely began to follow a logic beneficial to the oil sector (Ríos and Carvallo, 1990). Oil-price booms have furthered agriculture's relative decline as petrodollars facilitate food imports that undercut domestic farmers who also face upward pressure on production costs via oil-driven currency appreciation.<sup>6</sup> In addition, oil-producing regions in Venezuela experience higher local wages, further eroding agriculture profitability (Page, 2010, p. 263). Such challenges to agricultural development have exacerbated rural to urban migration, and Venezuela is highly urbanized by Latin American standards, with 93% of the population living in cities in 2005 (World Bank, 2007, p. 321). While a weak agriculture sector potentially

diminishes the relative power of landed sectors to oppose land reform efforts, the peasant population is also smaller and more fractured in regards to peasant organizing than in many neighbouring countries, which hinders their ability to influence policy formation and implementation.

Although Venezuela implemented a land reform programme in the 1960s few lasting benefits reached small farmers. Delahaye (2001) and Soto (2003) argue that trends of land concentration during the reform period demonstrate that the small-farmer sector was not significantly affected by the reform. Between 1961 and 1997–1998 the acreage controlled by small producers rose only from 1% to just 6% of arable land, while 1% of landowners continued to control 46% of arable land at the end of the reform period (Soto, 2003) (see Table 1).

Additionally, land distributed to small farmers was often of low quality and in areas with little established infrastructure, and peasant abandonment of land was common and contributed to reconcentration (De Janvry, 1981, p. 217; Delahaye, 2001, p. 106). While agricultural production rose after the reforms, critics maintain the reform was largely a colonization project, and that production increases occurred primarily through the extension of the agricultural frontier rather than the break-up of large estates (De Janvry, 1981). Therefore, while official numbers for the reform cite that almost 14 000 000 hectares of land were distributed to 371 814 families from 1958 to 2000 (Delahaye, 2003, p. 244), the figures illuminate little about the reality of the reform's impact. Indeed, by the end of the century Venezuela's land distribution continued to be one of the most unequal in the world, with a Gini index for land distribution of 0.88 in 1997 (World Bank, 2007, p. 324).

### The Land Law

Passed by decree in 2001, the Ley de Tierras and Desarrollo Agrario (LTDA) calls for the elimination of Venezuela's latifundio and the establishment of 'integrated and sustainable' rural development. Under the law there are a number of mechanisms for distribution of land by the National Land Institute (INTI). Informal tenants on state land that have been farming for three years can have their status regularized.<sup>7</sup> The LTDA also allows for redistribution of land claimed by private actors. The state can 'recover' land (*rescate*) if owners cannot produce documentation demonstrating a chain of ownership dating back to 1848. According to government representatives, such a requirement comes from a philosophical decision to not recognize colonial land structures (Interview, 25 June 2005). Any gaps in documentation denote an illegal purchase, and the land, even if productive, belongs to the state.

In addition, Article 69 of the LTDA gives the Venezuelan state the right to expropriate land from latifundio in the countryside. Legal landowners, however, are

**Table 1.** Venezuela's first agrarian reform.

Farm size (ha)	Number of farms		Hectares controlled	
	1961	1997–1998	1961	1997–1998
1–20	72%	76%	1%	6%
20–1,000	27%	23%	10%	48%
>1,000	1%	1%	89%	46%

Source: Soto, 2003, pp. 28, 29.

eligible for compensation for seized lands. In its original form, the LTDA defined latifundio in terms of acreage and soil quality; estates of over 100 hectares on land with high quality soils and of over 5,000 hectares on lower quality land (sixth and seventh grade) were subject to expropriation. In 2005 the law was modified with a new definition based not on acreage but on productivity. According to Article 7 of the LTDA, latifundio are currently defined as estates whose land-use yields less than 80% of ideal production for the category of soils present. However, even lands deemed to be productive and legally owned, however, are not immune to seizure under the law. Article 68 of the LTDA states all agricultural land must serve a food security<sup>8</sup> function as defined by the central government or it can be declared as failing in its social function. In addition, Article 84 of the LTDA gives INTI the right to initiate expropriation on any estate if the state deems it necessary to implement social projects. Theoretically, this allows seizure of any estate, regardless of size or level of productivity.

Land redistribution requires that a group of campesinos make a formal request for a parcel of land they believe to be idle or technically state owned.<sup>9</sup> INTI inspects the disputed property and, if it rules in favour of the campesinos, it grants them a *carta agraria*, which gives usufruct rights to the parcel. Reform beneficiaries have three years in which to put the land into production, after which they can apply for a *carta de adjudicación* that allows for permanent residence on the land. Land can then be inherited by reform beneficiaries' families, but cannot be broken up or sold. All redistributed land ultimately remains property of the state.

Critics of the land law argue that the retention of ownership by the state reinforces paternalistic structures and can make reform beneficiaries worse off than before. Although the 1960s land reform also prohibited the sale of land, Delahaye (2002) has shown that plots were, nevertheless, sold by reform beneficiaries on the black market. Furthermore, their position outside of formal markets provided campesinos with less legal and market protections and they were, thus, disadvantaged in land sales (*ibid.*). The government argues that the prohibition of land sales is to avoid repurchase and reconcentration of land. While abandonment of land occurred during the 1960s-era reform, reform supporters argue that this was not a titling issue, but due rather to the failure of the central government to support reform beneficiaries with sufficient credit, technical assistance and market support.

Idle land on an estate, however, does not necessarily lead to expropriation. If a landowner's estate is declared unproductive an appeal can be made to an agrarian court and an additional inspection is made in 60 days, a time lapse that landowners can use to occupy previously idle land with cattle, infrastructure, or crops (Sanoja, 2005). Landowners can also submit a production plan and receive certification as a *finca mejorable* (an estate in the process of becoming productive). This gives landowners two years to establish production, after which it can be classified as a productive estate. While the LTDA still reserves the right to expropriate the land in order to establish special production projects or to distribute to the landless, productivity debates provide landowners with tools that can be used to stall the expropriation process and, thus, one important aspect of the agrarian reform in general.

The agriculture ministry has reported that between 2003 and 2011 the government recovered 5753264 hectares, and regularized 5859087 hectares (PROVEA, 2012).<sup>10</sup> However, a closer examination is warranted as, as seen in the first reform, the numbers illuminate little about how the reform is playing out on the ground for beneficiaries. Key to reform is the ability of the LTDA to challenge power structures

in the countryside through land redistribution. According to Griffin et al. (2002), the relative success of agrarian reforms in other contexts occurred only with significant confiscation of land. While it is true that the Venezuelan state owns large quantities of land for redistribution, high-quality land is often claimed by private interests and in many states conflicts centre on such parcels, not on government-owned properties. I argue, therefore, that understanding this conflict over land is central to understanding broader agrarian reform processes.

### *Peasant Occupation*

The occupation of property is not a phenomenon limited to agriculture, as witnessed by occupations of vacant housing and factories in countries in and outside of Venezuela. In terms of land reform, campesino pressure is vital for reform advancement (Barraclough, 1999, p. 26) and occupation is often an effective tool that campesinos have to put pressure on government institutions. In Brazil, the MST has used organized occupations with relative success to force the hand of the central government to decide land claims. Article 89 in the original form of the LTDA allowed for pre-emptive occupation (*ocupación previa*) of land by campesinos while INTI investigated the claim. However, the Venezuelan Supreme Court annulled Article 89 in 2002. Campesinos, thus, lost a vital tool for pushing the agrarian reform forward and the position of peasant groups that had occupied land was called into question. The LTDA states that those who occupy land after 2001 lose the right to adjudication under the law. Despite this, peasant occupations of land occurred after the court's decision and often came into conflict with government institutions overseeing the land reform.

In the following section, I examine land occupations in Yaracuy and Cojedes states and explore why campesinos moved into conflict with government institutions in the midst of a 'revolutionary' land reform process. I then examine the use of the Constitution and the food sovereignty and Bolivarian Socialism rhetoric of Chávez by campesinos to conceptualize and rationalize these technically illegal land occupations.

### *Occupations and Conflict*

This study component is based largely on peasant occupations occurring in the early agrarian reform period in Yaracuy and Cojedes states between 2002 and 2005 but also draws from more recent land occupations in Venezuela. Yaracuy and Cojedes represent two facets of the contention over land reform. In this time period Yaracuy occupations occurred primarily on sugar estates while in Cojedes disputed land was claimed by cattle ranchers. Yaracuy has been home to a long history of conflict over land, including in the second half of the twentieth century as campesinos attempted to use the first agrarian reform law to recover estates, while Cojedes has not seen the same degree of historical land struggles.

When decreed in 2001, the LTDA was immediately controversial. Its perceived attack on private property quickly became a rallying point for Venezuela's political opposition, and has been cited as one of the primary motivations for the April 2002 coup that briefly ousted Chávez (Wilpert, 2006, p. 254). Peasant occupations (*tomas*) are what critics of the agrarian reform are primarily referring to when they cite a state of 'anarchy' in the countryside. Critics claim that Chávez's inflamed rhetoric

against latifundio incites occupations or that *tomas* are often organized by urban groups and are used as political weapons against the political opposition (Hidalgo, 2005). However, rural organizing and occupations by peasants have placed them in danger of violence, both from *sicariato*, the Venezuelan term for hired assassins, and, at times, from state police forces and the National Guard.

Between 2003 and 2011, an estimated 256 campesinos were killed, likely by *sicariato* (PROVEA, 2011, p. 223). According to campesino groups, no one has been convicted of any of the killings (Suggett, 2010). In December 2010, a peasant leader was shot and killed in Cojedes (PROVEA, 2011, p. 222). In 2005, a well-known campesino leader and current National Assembly representative, Braulio Alvarez, was shot twice at close range, the third assassination attempt that Alvarez had survived since the 1980s (Interview, 24 July 2005). At the land reform settlement of Santa Lucía, in July 2003, two campesinos were assaulted by armed men and doused with gasoline; three months later a cooperative member was shot and killed while working in the fields (Quevedo, 2003; *Yaracuy al Día*, 2003).

The threat of violence from opponents to agrarian reform and the lack of prosecution of killings highlights the influence landowners held in some areas of government, especially in the court system. This contributed to a siege mentality on settlements. 'You don't sleep well out here because you know something can happen at anytime', an occupying campesino told me. 'This is part of how they beat you... They want to make it last as long as possible so that it gets more difficult to stay' (Interview, 12 July 2005). Weapons, however, were scarce at the occupations; most campesinos brought only their machetes to guard duty.

In addition to the risk of private violence, the illegality of land occupations also exposed occupiers to the threat of state violence, in the form of official *desalojos* (removals) by state police and the National Guard. *Desalojos* by government bodies were common in both Cojedes and Yaracuy in the earlier years of the reform. A campesino couple in Cojedes were moved off their occupation on three separate occasions by government officials, with bulldozers knocking down their *rancho* (shack) they had erected and uprooting their crops (Interview, 11 July 2005). In January 2000, firing tear gas and buckshot, the now-defunct Yaracuy state police *Pataneros* removed the cooperative Santa Lucía from a land reform settlement (Quevedo, 2000). In 2002, the Supreme Court's reversal of *ocupación previa*, led then governor Eduardo Lapi of Yaracuy to declare another occupation at Aracal estate as illegal and again used the *Pataneros* to clear the settlement, in what turned into a bloody confrontation (*Yaracuy al Día*, 2002). While Aracal and Santa Lucía each eventually obtained a *carta agraria* and successfully reoccupied the land, other land distributions by INTI have been overturned in Venezuelan courts (PROVEA, 2004, p. 227).

The fate of occupations in terms of state intervention highlights the role that state governors and local elites opposed to the reform have played in the agrarian reform. The governors of Cojedes and Yaracuy at the time of the removals were aligned with the political opposition to Chávez. When Chavista candidates took control of the governorships in both states, the threat of violent removal by local police largely dissipated, at least temporarily. However, the role of the National Guard (NG) was more uncertain. The NG warned campesinos occupying estates to stop felling sugar cane; the campesinos responded that they would continue. Unannounced visits by the NG were, thus, moments of uncertainty for occupiers. At one settlement, campesinos reported that the NG had arrived late at night, taken photos and left. In July 2005 an agrarian judge arrived at another occupation with the NG and lawyers of

the supposed owner to inspect claims of property damage. They were not allowed to enter and left without initiating further action (Arias, 2005).

Many campesino leaders wanted the NG to act as security for the occupations and, thus, support the agrarian reform process. 'The presence of the national guard would show that the government is not leaving us on our own and it's safe to have our wives and children here', a campesino leader said. 'It would bring more participation from the cooperatives' (Interview, 22 July 2005). However, the role of the NG and the police in dealing with occupations remains ambiguous at best. In 2011, the NG removed six peasants from an occupation in Yaracuy whom were then detained by the local police (PROVEA, 2011, p. 208). Thus, relations between occupiers and law and order state institutions and officials continue to be uncertain.

So without a right to pre-emptive occupation and the risks that *tomas* bring, why did campesinos choose to occupy contested land? For some, occupation of the estates was a continuation of decades-old struggles over land that had been begun in the era of the 1960s reform. With the promulgation of the LTDA in 2001, many campesino groups reinitiated old legal struggles for lands that had been unsuccessfully occupied decades earlier. This was the case with the land claimed by the cooperative Santa Lucía in Yaracuy, which had been occupied a number of times in the 1960s and 1980s, often by family members of the current cooperative members.

The largest driver for occupation, however, was the slow pace of land redistribution by INTI. While some requests for land eventually met with an initial measure of success, witnessed by the *cartas agrarias* received by the cooperatives of Santa Lucía and Aracal in 2003 and 2004, respectively, overall, in the eyes of the land hungry, progress was too slow. Recognizing the sluggish pace of reform in the state, a new Chavista governor elected in 2004, issued Decree 090, which created a technical commission to determine the status of the disputed *fundos* (estates) and to initiate their recovery by the state. The commission concluded that the *fundos* were indeed state land, although this was disputed by the supposed owners. Delays and lack of a right to *ocupación previa* meant that the cooperatives soliciting the parcels had no legal recourse but to wait until the appeal process available to the landowners was exhausted. In June 2005, the cooperatives, some having submitted the required paperwork six months earlier, were unwilling to continue waiting and occupied the *fundos*. Rather than risk reversals of land distributions, which had occurred earlier in the reform, Yaracuy's INTI office condemned the occupations and stated that campesinos must accept other, undefined, parcels until the courts made the final decision on disputed lands. For INTI, the tactic of occupation undermined reform processes regardless of the legitimacy of land claims. Commenting on an occupation in Yaracuy in 2005 the regional director of INTI declared, 'we know that this land is for the... cooperatives, but we do not support the seizure of the hectares in this way; they are making a grave mistake' (Espinoza, 2005a).

The wariness of INTI, however, was not shared by all local institutions involved with the land reform. The local branch of INCE (Institute for Educational Cooperation)<sup>11</sup> had supplied food, albeit unofficially, to help supply the *tomas*. The Office of the Secretary of Land and Food Security (STSA), a state institution unique to Yaracuy created by the new governor in 2004, also supported the occupations. The STSA's director lobbied the Caracas INTI on behalf of the occupiers and her support resulted in at least one attempt on her life (Field notes, 13 July 2005). Nevertheless, INTI is the principal actor in regards to land distribution and without some sort of document authorizing the *tomas* the occupiers had no access to credit. Even the *toma* at the

*fundo* Bella Vista, which was perpetrated by cooperatives trained by the government mission Vuelvan Caras and already had a MINEP (Ministry of the Popular Power for the Communal Economy) approved project and guaranteed credit, could not access funding until the occupation was given some right of permanence by INTI.

Thus, peasant groups have confronted a fragmented state in terms of reform implementation. At times, occupiers received support from some government institutions, even as others, including the key reform institute INTI, were perceived by campesinos as aligned with landowners. That peasants have faced forced removals from land settlements by police and the National Guard, as well as the lack of prosecution of killings in the justice system, demonstrate the influence and power landowners have continued to wield inside of a 'revolutionary' state.<sup>12</sup> The fact that state-level institutions and the political control of governorships have been key to reform progress highlights the centrality of local power structures in policy implementation. In addition, occupation dynamics are symptomatic of an attempt at structural reform via electoral means. The bureaucratic delays that stem from working within non-revolutionary structures (the rhetoric of revolution notwithstanding) have meant difficulties in challenging entrenched agrarian power structures via legal means and have pushed Venezuelan campesinos into oppositional roles vis-à-vis the ostensibly reform-friendly government. I now move to discuss how campesinos conceptualize this contestation with the state over the nature of policy implementation.

### **Conceptualizing Occupation: Twenty-first Century Socialism and the Politics of Production**

Government rhetoric of twenty-first century socialism, food sovereignty and evolving debates and policies over productive versus idle estates are central components in both how the Chávez government markets the shape and direction of reforms and how campesinos conceptualize and talk about both their identity as campesinos and rationalize land occupations that are illegal in the eyes of the state. Although occupations are aimed at latifundio interests, their illegality within the reform process make them indirect attacks on the reform-friendly state itself. Campesinos are also disputing the terms placed on them and their actions. In the local press the occupiers are often referred to as *invasores* (invaders) and to the occupations as *invasiones* (Carabali, 2003). Campesinos, however, disagree. 'We are not invaders, it's the latifundia that are the invaders. We are recovering this land for the state' (Interview, 13 July 2005).

In conceptualizing their roles as occupiers, campesinos largely used the ideological framework of the Constitution and the rhetoric of Chávez of the Bolivarian Revolution. The Constitution is heavily promoted by the Chávez Government; copies are widely distributed and its articles are reprinted on posters and even on packages of the subsidized food sold at government markets. Chávez, himself, who often pulled a pocket-sized version of the Constitution out during speeches to illustrate a particular point, became the Constitution's main spokesman and a primary shaper of how the public perceived and understood the rights and duties associated with it. And while campesinos in Cojedes and Yaracuy also justified the illegal occupations in a number of more conventional ways,<sup>13</sup> the primary emphasis lay elsewhere. While issues of individual social justice invariably arose when speaking with campesinos,

their rationalization of occupation reflected the context of Bolivarian Socialism as represented by the Constitution and Chávez's rhetoric.

### *Taking Chávez at His Word*

Campeños involved in land occupations emphasized that the Constitution and President Chávez had given them the right to take direct action. Article 333 of the Constitution states that all citizens have a duty to defend the Constitution from attack from any source; Article 5 declares that the 'organs of the state emanate from and are subject to the sovereignty of the people'. Such articles are perhaps rhetorical flourishes, but campesinos interpreted them to mean that if the INTI was not functioning to fight latifundio, responsibility devolved to the citizenry. The Secretary of Land and Food Security of Yaracuy argued that this superseded any illegality of land occupation. 'The Constitution is very clear. And Chávez himself says that if things aren't getting done, that the people have to go to the streets and demand action' (Interview, 22 July 2005).

This last statement describes a central conceptualization around land occupations in Venezuela. The rank and file of occupying campesinos, invariably explained their actions in terms of Chávez's continual exhortation that in the Bolivarian Revolution, the people are the sovereign and that '*el pueblo manda*' (the people rule). 'Chávez has given us the power and even he has to respect what we say', a campesino told me (Interview, 7 July 2005). Campesinos were essentially taking Chávez at his word that Venezuela's masses are the protagonists of the Bolivarian process, and employed the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and national food sovereignty to conceptualize themselves as members of the vanguard of the revolution. In this way, when the local branch of INTI condemned the occupations, campesinos envisioned themselves as aligned against 'false revolutionaries' within the state, but in harmony with the greater ideals of the Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, many campesinos declared that occupations were not only justified, but were essential expressions of the direction of the Bolivarian Revolution. 'We campesinos are the true soldiers of the revolution', a campesino explained, 'because we are the only ones who are fighting our own government for it' (Interview, 12 July 2009).

Chávez, himself, however, was not questioned by campesinos in the occupations nor in the cooperatives that had already received land. Institutional problems were seen as products of bureaucrats with the mentality of the old political regime, and 'false' Chavistas in the government, those who 'put on a red t-shirt [the colour associated with the Chávez Government] but do the same things that they did in previous governments' (Interview, 11 July 2005). 'They have Chávez deceived', a campesino explained, 'Chávez is with the campesinos but he gives orders and many in the government do not follow through with them' (ibid.).

This palatable faith in the persona of Chávez was a further rationalization for pursuing occupations, based on the belief that if only the president were to find out what the actual situation was like, that he would order INTI to act on their claims. At a meeting in 2005, a peasant leader used this argument to propose a march to shut down the main transport artery between Caracas and western Venezuela. 'If we block the highway for eight hours with a peaceful march... they'll pay attention in Caracas and Chávez will find out' (Field notes, 24 July 2005). These beliefs were not always based on mere wishful thinking. After a January 2005 'Aló Presidente' programme that Chávez held in Yaracuy, problems brought to the president's atten-

tion often received quick attention. Machinery was repaired and tractors delivered, albeit without plow implements, to a cooperative soon after the requests were made to Chávez (Field notes, 27 July 2005).

But while Chávez's rhetoric provided a framework in which campesinos rationalized occupations, it would be inaccurate to say, as some critics maintained, that it *caused* them. The 2005 Yaracuy occupations took place only after waiting for up to six months for a reply from the land institute, not an insignificant time period, considering another state institution had declared the lands state owned in addition to the fact that members of the cooperative were unemployed. Indeed, Chávez had called for acceleration of the land reform in early 2005 and it was only after the newest phase of the reform appeared stalled that frustration led to occupation.<sup>14</sup> Along with the larger pressures faced by the land institute and others on a national level, local conditions and power structures continued to affect the implementation of reform and created the conditions that foment occupation. While the discourse of Chávez provided rationalization for occupations and fed the hope that they would be successful, it were these local conditions that lay at the foundation of occupations. But even as local dynamics created conflict, it is ironic that, inasmuch as Chávez's rhetoric could be considered the official discourse of the state, this discourse provided the primary rationalization for confrontations with the rules of the state.

#### *Food Sovereignty and the Politics of Production*

Government rhetoric of food sovereignty and evolving debates and policies over productive versus idle estates were also central components in how campesinos rationalized occupation of estates and how they conceptualized their identity as campesinos within Venezuela's Bolivarian Socialism. By rationalizing occupation in terms of what constituted 'appropriate' production within Venezuela's Bolivarian agricultural programme, campesinos contested the meaning of production within a project framed in terms of food sovereignty.

As Bobrow-Strain (2007) has argued, understandings of production are often a central component of cultural production of identity of those involved in agriculture and frames different claims to land. Ideas around production not only consider material levels of production or idleness but also center on what *should* be produced on land (ibid., p. 161). The replacement of sugar-cane or cattle pasture with food crops on occupations in Venezuela reflected a contestation of 'appropriate' productivity and was a central justification employed by campesinos occupying disputed parcels. Campesinos drew a strong distinction between latifundio uses of the land, and how the production that the occupiers would implement would serve the Bolivarian Revolution.

For Venezuela's campesinos production was not necessarily conceived in a fallow-versus-planted logic. Many of the estates occupied in Yaracuy between 2002 and 2005 were intensely cultivated with sugar cane at the time of occupation. Land-owners of sugar estates often claimed that the lands were productive, contributed to the national economy, and provided jobs to local families (Espinoza, 2005b). Others attempted to turn government discourse back on itself saying the sugar production on their estates fulfilled a vital part of the food security needs of Venezuela (Arias, 2005) and that campesinos would not be able to produce efficiently on the land. Campesinos, however, often claimed that much of the land was badly planted and crops were only there to occupy the land with a 'false' production in order to keep it

from being expropriated (Interview, 22 July 2005). Even if it were to be well planted, however, campesinos argued that the mere presence of sugar cane meant the land was underproductive. According to INTI officials, much of the disputed land at the Yaracuy occupations was of first or second quality and was apt for all types of food production, while sugar cane can be cultivated in lower quality soils (Interview, 27 July 2005). The occupying campesinos were well aware of this fact. 'These lands are first category', one campesino told me. 'This land could be growing food. Just the fact that there's sugar cane here is a crime against the Constitution' (Interview, 15 July 2005).

Campesinos had taken up the rhetoric of Bolivarian Socialism and food sovereignty to conceptualize their place within Venezuela as a nation, the Chavista political project, and in a broader global movement against globalization and US imperialism. When speaking to their future role as food producers, many emphasized production as an act of solidarity. 'We are going to produce for the country', a campesino at a land occupation explained, 'good quality food at low prices for the nation' (Interview, 14 July 2005). 'This is our [campesinos'] role in the revolution', another said, 'to produce food' (Interview, 17 July 2005). Agrarian production also fit into an international context where Venezuela was a potential food exporter that could supplant US influence. 'Chávez has talked about Africa', another occupier told me. 'We can produce enough food to send it to the hungry people over there as well' (Interview, 13 July 2005).

While campesinos initially occupied sugar estates without cutting the sugar cane, they eventually began to burn and strip the fields. This became both a symbolic and strategic act. Cutting the sugar cane removed the supposed owner's crops and, thus, his or her claims to productivity. Replacing the sugar cane with crops materially occupied the land on another level beyond the physical presence of the campesinos, and in addition, made a statement of 'appropriate' productivity on the land. The campesinos were, thus, challenging one of the fundamental ways that landowners laid claim to estates in the midst of a redistributive reform process.

It is noteworthy that, despite this contestation over production, the actual legal challenges were not based on the lack of productivity of disputed estates. The petitions for land were to be decided by INTI on the issue that the supposed landlords did not possess the necessary documentation to prove ownership of the *fundos* and, therefore, the land at the occupations belonged to the state. Campesino claims around productivity issues, however, further buttressed their argument for redistribution and also reflected a positioning of campesino production as central to food sovereignty and Bolivarian Socialism.

## Conclusion

The land reform process in Venezuela highlights important questions in regard to the roles that peasants play in agrarian struggles and food sovereignty movements. Although the agrarian reform in Venezuela is largely state led and implemented from above, campesino occupations have played a crucial role in pushing reforms forward and defining the scope and nature of the reform process. As noted by Barraclough (1999, p. 26) peasant pressure is central to the advancement of agrarian reform. That many twentieth century redistributive reforms left landowners in dominant economic positions (Thiesenhusen, 1995, p. 173) indicates that redistributive reform must confront power structures directly. Challenges and roadblocks to

reform emerging from the state and landowner class in Venezuela demonstrate that even in an ostensibly pro-peasant reform environment, the capacity of campesinos to influence policy implementation is vital.

I have argued that arguments around production as articulated by campesinos have been central to the justification of land occupation. Employing the government's food sovereignty discourse, campesinos have articulated their position as central actors in the advancement of a pro-peasant agricultural system and the Venezuelan government's larger political project of Bolivarian Socialism.

State and peasant engagement with the concept of food sovereignty has helped to shape the nature of the agrarian reform as well as the broader Venezuelan agricultural system. Within a food sovereignty framework, agrarian reform supports an agricultural system where peasant producers form the backbone of rural development. The fact that food sovereignty movements call for a pro-peasant model of agriculture that explicitly challenges the current global food regime (Patel, 2009) places Venezuela as an important case in terms of the shape of possible alternatives. Food sovereignty's emphasis on local and democratic control of food-systems (Rosset, 2006; Holt-Giménez, 2009) highlights the continuing importance of peasant-state dynamics, especially in a largely state-led agrarian-reform process.

Further research is warranted into the evolving position of the peasantry in Venezuela's agricultural system and process of food sovereignty. Key to the potential of the agrarian-reform sector moving forward is the question of what type of state policies receive the lion's share of government attention in attempts to increase agricultural production. While campesinos have used the politics of production historically to advance their interests, perceived production failures in the reform sector potentially weaken their position as the state looks to guarantee food supplies for political stability.

Tensions exist between social and economic goals of policy and the shape of agricultural production in most South nations as the state must negotiate the competing needs and influence of economic and social sectors. For example, even as the MST in Brazil is widely seen as a successful case of a 'new' land reform movement, a broader view of Brazilian land policy sees redistributive land reform functioning primarily as social policy to mitigate social unrest while agribusiness continues to capture the focus of economic development (Wright and Wolford, 2003). The agrarian reform process in Venezuela potentially faces a similar dynamic.

Food price inflation and shortages of some foodstuffs are increasingly problematic for the Venezuelan government and have contributed to agrarian policy becoming increasingly focused on spurring absolute production levels and intervention in input and distribution networks. Indicative of this trajectory is the establishment of the AgroVenezuela programme in early 2011. AgroVenezuela registers producers of all sizes and in all sectors, including commercial growers, to facilitate delivery of credit and inputs with the aim of augmenting production levels. Some promoters of agro-ecology in Venezuela have also suggested that state attention is increasingly oriented towards larger-scale agricultural development based on Green Revolution technologies (Griffon, 2011), including plans for large soy farms in the south-east (Field notes, 23 July 2011).

In addition, perceived failures of cooperatives have led the government to look elsewhere for organizing structures where new reform beneficiaries could be integrated as wage labourers on state or co-managed farms (Field notes, 27 July 2011). Combined with strategic interventions into other segments of the food system, in-

cluding distribution and agricultural input firms, signs point to an emerging model of agriculture where total production figures drive policy formation and implementation. The implication is that agrarian reform and the transformation of relations of production may become increasingly marginalized within agrarian development.

The closer than expected election of Nicolás Maduro following the death of President Chávez in 2013, likely reinforces this tendency, as a tightening electoral landscape increases the vulnerability of the government to food supply and price issues. Indeed, in response to shortages Maduro recently announced the importation of 700 000 tons of food (*Universal*, 2013) and the increase of oil for food deals with trading partners (*Nacional*, 2013).

If state-led agrarian development in Venezuela is trending towards a largely productionist model, where food production and supply concerns capture increasingly large shares of resources and policy attention, social goals of pro-poor agrarian policy and the transformation of rural productive relations, although still present, are relatively diminished. That is, while investment in agrarian reform and peasant production could remain part of the Venezuelan agrarian landscape, state-driven large-scale agriculture projects, green revolution research and development, and policies that bolster the commercial agriculture sector may be increasingly more central to agriculture policy. A more marginalized peasantry in terms of resource control and policy influence could see the potential for food sovereignty to devolve into food self-sufficiency. Therefore, the ability of campesinos to articulate and advance a pro-peasant framework of production in agriculture remains key to agrarian reform. The Venezuelan context highlights the need for research across countries to examine the position of the peasant sector in terms of its relationship with the broader agrarian system and the possibilities for peasant production and agrarian reform to form integral parts of food systems rather than being sidelined as rural social policy.

## Notes

1. In this paper I also use the term Bolivarian Socialism.
2. Following McMichael (2009a), I use food regime to mean a globalized system where agricultural production is seen as a strategic component in a globalized capitalist economy as opposed to isolated crop production and distribution networks.
3. Indeed, ensuring property rights has been cited as key to raising investment in agriculture (FAO, 2012), which redistributive agrarian reform potentially challenges.
4. To address the many social problems facing Venezuela, the Chávez Government created the missions, parallel government institutions that provide public services such as education, health care and subsidized food. While the missions themselves are not necessarily socialist, Harnecker has argued that their existence is indicative of attempts to develop structures that function outside of the logic of free-market capitalism (Fuentes, 2005).
5. From 1921 to 1939 coffee and cacao dropped from 63% to 6.7% of the value of total exports, while petroleum rose from 8.8% to 89% of exports over the same time period (Ríos and Carvallo, 1990, p. 204).
6. This describes what economists refer to as 'Dutch disease', an economic dynamic caused by resource booms where the national currency becomes overvalued, making imports cheaper and leading to local industries being unable to compete with cheaper foreign products (see Karl, 1997).
7. In addition, a 2010 reform to the LTDA established a 'land to the tiller' clause that provides for distribution of land to tenant farmers, although, to date, there is little evidence to suggest that this part of the reform law has advanced.
8. Article 305 of the Venezuelan Constitution defines food security as 'the sufficient and stable availability of food throughout the nation and the timely and permanent access to said food by the public' (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2000, p. 270). The Constitution was written before food sovereignty (*soberanía agroalimentaria*) became prevalent in government discourse.
9. Although individual campesinos can request land, priority is given to those organized into cooperatives of at least five heads of household (Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario). However, general per-

- ceived difficulties and failures of cooperatives have led the Venezuelan government to currently shift emphasize away from cooperative structures as a basis for agriculture.
10. PROVEA has, however, pointed out inconsistencies across government institutions in reporting of agrarian reform data. According to PROVEA, INTI has reported that by September 2012 it had regularized 8.1 million hectares and recovered more than 3 million hectares (PROVEA, 2012, p. 224).
  11. Now INCES (Instituto Nacional de Capacitación y Educación Socialista).
  12. In analysis of Venezuela's agrarian reform, Enríquez (2013) has used Trotsky's (1957) concept of 'dual power' to describe the incomplete control over the state a revolutionary government exerts vis-à-vis capitalist sectors. Thus, landowner power continues to manifest itself in Venezuelan government institutions, such as the justice system, to undermine reform processes.
  13. The standard issues of the agrarian problem, land concentration and the poverty associated with it, were referred to by campesinos at many of the occupations. 'I'm here', one campesino told me in Cojedes, 'because I'm very poor, too poor. With this land I can have a better life... it's unjust that all this land benefits just a few people when there are so many people who don't have anything' (Interview, 12 July 2005).
  14. On 10 January 2005, Chávez signed a decree aimed at speeding the agrarian reform's implementation. The decree gave the government the right to 'intervene' in estates, public or private, in order to investigate their ownership and productivity status (*Yaracuy al Día*, 2005).

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