

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis  
A collective work by CES



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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# RURAL RIGHTS: THE REGROUNDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN CONTEMPORARY PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Irina Velicu

Sustainable transformations in agriculture and food systems are crucial when it comes to coping with climate change: thus, small farming and rural livelihoods are seen as planetary ecological assets. Still, people living in rural areas are some of the most marginalised and impoverished, affected by droughts, floods and fires. Moreover, while seed biodiversity is crucial for the sustainability of future food systems and for climate change adaptation, the ancient practice of saving-replanting seeds is being increasingly criminalized. The work and knowledge of peasants remains unrecognised, while their efforts to reproduce grain and seed are misconceived as weak or inefficient.

Scholar-activists are concerned about the growing class of rural labourers and peasants who are dispossessed and precarious. A main focus of agro-food sovereignty movements is, thus, the organisation of a global “politics of anti-enclosure”, which, in the attempt to create self-governance or popular self-rule, challenges both the modern liberal State and transnational capital.

The recent UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP 2018) represents an important success of agro-food movements in their efforts to institutionalise new rural rights in accordance with the ‘subversive’ paradigm of the ‘peasant way’ and to recognise peasants’

collective rights to land, food, seeds and other natural resources. Such innovations shift the international human rights architecture by unsettling and extending the conventional framing: thus, new rights are created for peasants, labourers and nature, with sovereignty being discussed critically in the literature as a way to decolonise the human rights system. Claiming sovereignty over food, seeds or land is a political-democratic move through which peasants are credited for their role in ‘cooling the planet’, reversing urban unemployment, migration or hunger, which will potentially result in a revaluing of the countryside while building ecosystem resilience. In this paradigm, farmers are no longer seen as historically anachronistic, but rather as a contemporary foundation of civilisation.

With the ‘peasant way’ under critical scrutiny, given the increasing commodification of subsistence, there has been a growing recognition of the value of food sovereignty in today’s movements of social transformation, which places peasants at the centre of agro-food politics as a potential ontological alternative to capital’s food regime. Therefore, avoiding the drama of optimism and disappointment in the search for justice is also a matter of working with the limits and fragilities of the new subjectivities in the making and with the inevitable tensions and contradictions that divide them.