The 4-th International Conference of BICAS:
Agro-Extractivism Inside and Outside BRICS.

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The fourth International Conference of BICAS was held in Beijing, China, on November 28–30, 2016. BICAS is the abbreviation, which means BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies. BICAS is the emerging network of academics focused on agrarian and rural studies. Its central focus is on the role of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries in the global agrarian and rural transformations. Thus, it is not just a network of academics from BRICS countries, but a global network of scholars focused on studying BRICS countries in the context of contemporary agrarian changes worldwide. BICAS encourages multidisciplinary (in the framework of social sciences and humanities), inclusive (academics and social activists working together), and critical research. Critical agrarian studies imply consistent academic critics of capitalist and neoliberal foundations of modern agrarian and rural development.

The College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD)— China Agricultural University in Beijing, organized the conference. The most well-known project of COHD is the "Left Behind", which tells the life stories of Chinese rural people at the backyard of economic progress, the so-called "Chinese miracle". Extensive economic growth in industry and urban territories requires more and more labor force and attracts it en mass from rural areas focusing foremost on young men. Though marginalized, laborous migrants nevertheless integrate into the newly emerging Chinese economy, while massive rural strata including split families of those migrants found themselves left behind the new, "progressive" capitalist economy. Those people are the social cost of progress, and COHD research team brings them into the spotlight by collecting their voices. The results are published in the Journal of Peasant Studies in three articles about three groups of left-behind rural people: children[1],

1. Ye J., Pan L., Wang C., Wu H., He C., Zhang K., Lu J. (2011) Left-behind children: The social price of China's economic boom. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp.613–650.

women[2], and elderly[3]. For a Russian reader this approach corresponds with the project "Peasant's Voices" conducted by Shanin's research team from Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSES).

It was the fourth BICAS conference. The previous three conferences were held in China (2013), Brazil (2014), and South Africa (2015). The title of the conference was "Agro-extractivism inside and outside BRICS: Agrarian change and development trajectories". Thus, the general goal of the conference was to discuss the phenomenon of the so-called agro-extractivism in the framework of BRICS countries. What is agro-extractivism? And what is the role of BRICS countries in it?

Agro-extractivism refers to the predatory exploitation of rural resources (natural resources of any kind and/or labor) by mostly export-oriented and often transnational business. Therefore, agro-extractivism issues refer to the globalization discourse (primarily its negative effects) as well as to the anti-capitalist and anti-liberal rhetoric.

Being post-Third world or post-socialist, BRICS countries are now playing significant role in this neoliberal agro-extractivist model participating in the global resource and commodity flows. Instead of providing an alternative to the predominant capitalist food regime, these countries are becoming more and more integrated into the global neoliberal system, playing the varying roles of its victims and predators. However, agro-extractivist model does not expand not facing resistance at various levels. Moreover, it is not homogeneous and has specific features in different regions. Therefore, BRICS countries, instead of moving on a one-way highway of neoliberal model with well-predictable outcomes, have to engage in complex and diverse interrelations, trends, and countertrends.

The central goal of the conference was to provide a more nuanced vision of the global agro-extractivism with the focus on BRICS countries. The conference organizers suggested five core topics: (1) comparison of agrarian structures and development trajectories, (2) processes of accumulation, (3) differentiation of smallholders, (4) counter-movements and resistance, (5) mainstream development models and alternatives. Certainly, the variety of topics at plenary sessions and parallel panels was far more diverse.

2. Ye J., Wu H., Rao J., Ding B., Zhang K. (2016) Left-behind women: Gender exclusion and inequality in rural-urban migration in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 07 June (published online).
3. Ye J., He C., Liu J., Wang W., Chen S. (2016) Left-behind elderly: Shouldering a disproportionate share of production and reproduction in supporting China's industrial development. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 18 August (published online).

The conference consisted of five plenary sessions and fifteen parallel panels. Plenary sessions covered the following issues: (1) agrarian changes in BRICS countries, (2) global investments in agriculture, (3) understanding agro-extractivism, (4) peasants and peasant agriculture, (5) agriculture and the countryside. Parallel panels provided a wide range of issues, so I will focus just on few of them, which reflect the nuances of agro-extractivism and go beyond an abstract critics of neoliberalism.

The first issue, reflected in many presentations, is the role of China as a global investor. Indeed, Chinese capital became very active on the global arena, grabbing more and more land, resources, and facilities all over the world. For instance, *Mindi Schneider* (ISS, Erasmus University) devoted her presentation to the analysis of transnational agricultural corporations related to China. She indicated counter processes here: while the traditional Western-based transnational corporations are still holding strong positions with China (or even inside China), the Chinese corporations are actively expanding. Critical scholars often prefer to conceptualize this practice in terms of accumulation and/or grabbing. The issue of Chinese investments in foreign agriculture and land accumulation is often seen as predatory land grabbing when nation states either cannot resist that aggression or are corrupted by the powerful landgrabbing corporations. However, this view often masks the details of the Chinese expansion into the foreign agrarian sectors. The report by *Juliet Lu* (Berkeley University) put this vision under question by providing evidence of Chinese investments in Laos. Chinese companies actively entered Laos land market organizing agribusiness concessions with extensive support from Lao government seeking for foreign investments in the vast areas of "empty" land. However, it appeared that the actual amount of land given to Chinese companies was far smaller than the land on paper. By analyzing seven Chinese agribusiness concessions, the author argued that fragmented and uncertain land governance as well as local politics and land relations prevented the investor-state coalition to accumulate land easily.

The story of Chinese agribusiness investments in Brazil presented by *Gustavo Oliveira* (Berkeley University) also differs from the story of predatory and almighty landgrabbers. The author argues that Chinese agroindustrial capital follows diverse strategies to enter Brazilian markets and get access to its resources through mergers and acquisitions. Furthermore, those companies form groups of winners (the author calls them Dragon Heads) and losers (Paper Tigers). Successful Chinese investors use their ties with transnational capital and international professionals in agrarian sphere (managers, lawyers etc.) to get access to Brazilian agriculture while failed investors rely largely on domestic (Chinese) capital and staff.

Siu Sue Mark (ISS, Erasmus University) shows the difficulties for Chinese land-based investments in Myanmar, where Chinese business has been dominating for decades. Political changes in Myanmar (i. e.

the end of the military regime), increased the demand from the civil society for socially and environmentally friendly investments, and competition from the Western investors, who offer that kind of investments, forced Chinese enterprises to correct their investment policy.

The rise of the Chinese activity in the global agro-investments gave rise to competition with the traditional centers of agrarian capital in Europe and North America. The left wave in Latin America caused the attempts to become independent from the United States, which traditionally consider those countries as its own backyard. *Ben McKay* (ISS, Erasmus University) studies the case of Bolivia, where Evo Morales' government tries to achieve independence from the US in political as well as economic issues. In those circumstances, Chinese capital (as well as Brazilian) is seen as an alternative. However, it is not clear, whether this substitution is able to change the nature of investment relations, or it just reproduces the old agro-extractivist relations.

The questions of financialization of agriculture were also widely discussed at the conference. *Nadine Reis* (University of Bonn) suggests analyzing agro-extractivism as just a part of the global capital accumulation regime controlled by the global finance. *Shigehisa Kasahara* (ISS, Erasmus University) examines the opportunities of the BRICS New Development Bank to provide an alternative form of the global finance (opposed to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund). *Xing Yang* and *Shuji Hisano* (Kyoto University) investigate the growing financialization of Chinese agriculture, which is spreading through corporate investments with the promotion of government officials. As a result, corporations establish financial control over food chains.

Speakers provided numerous examples of capital accumulation in agriculture in different countries. For instance, *Mural Arsel* (ISS, Erasmus University) drew attention to the non-capitalist (and even non-economic) forms of accumulation (so-called primitive accumulation) and the role of the state (which is often underestimated) on the example of modern Turkey. *Clara Craviotti* (University of Buenos Aires) focuses on intellectual property rights as one of the various mechanisms supporting the global regime of accumulation. She describes its functioning on the example of local producers of genetically modified soybeans in Argentina and their relations with seeds producers (transnational corporations).

The topic of so-called boom crops and their impact on the rise of agro-extractivism, capital accumulation, landgrabbing and rural inequality was discussed during one of the parallel panels. Boom crops are those, of the rising demand and prices on the global food markets. It makes them very attractive for various stakeholders (farmers, investors, financial institutions, state etc.), which try to substitute other forms of agriculture (including traditional crops) with these market "champions". This can change the nature of a regional agriculture

by turning it into exclusively export-oriented monocrop system with all its downsides for rural population.

Helena Perez Nino (PLAAS, University of Western Cape) analyzes the situation with tobacco boom in Southern Africa (Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Tanzania). She contends that this boom indicates crisis rather than development. Agricultural liberalization led to the very insecure positions of the local farmers, which tried to get stable access to inputs, finance, machinery, markets etc. Therefore, they became easy prey for tobacco companies, which offered farmers the desired production contracts in the frame of outgrower schemes assuming control over the food chains from global tobacco traders. Thus, tobacco boom appears to be the second stage of agrarian crisis leading to the agrarian changes in large regions. More complex and ambiguous stories came from China. *Yunan Xu* (ISS, Erasmus University) explores the diverse reactions from rural population to the land control changes caused by the rise of industrial tree plantation sector in China (Guangxi province). She shows that villagers do not act collectively as a cohesive group (or class) resisting against land dispossession. She distinguishes between two groups: included in the value chains created by large-scale newcomers, and excluded from the value chains. Therefore, villagers' reaction to the changes in land control dramatically differs. *Chunyu Wang* (COHD) presented the case of sugarcane industry, which also demonstrated uncertain consequences and diverse reactions of rural population varying from acceptance to struggle.

I finish this short review of the conference with the resistance issues. Indeed, many presentations were about the costs of capitalist agriculture. However, it faces various countermovements from below. Thus, many presentations were devoted to the diverse forms and aspects of the resistance in different parts of the world. *Tijo Salverda* (University of Cologne) provides the review of victories and defeats in the struggle between agro-extractivist corporations and its countermovement, which includes NGOs, local and peasant movements, scholars, journalists, etc. *Eric Hoddy* and *Jonathan Ensor* (University of York) provide a case study of Brazil's landless movement (MST). They analyze ideological aspects of human rights discourse, which constitutes the common ground for MST activists. They reveal the dynamics of the discourse distinguishing the sequence of three stages from 1984 to 1995. This dynamics reflects the changing claims of MST members. *Fabiano Escher* and *Sergio Schneider* (University of Rio Grande do Sul) examine the alternatives for the dominating global food regime in Brazil and China. They suggest the notions of "alternative food networks" and "new nested markets" for challenging agrarian countermovements, which the authors conceptualize in Polanyian "double movement" term. The alternative food practices refer to ecological agriculture, new relations (first of all, direct negotiations) between farmers and consumers (beyond the dominating

infrastructure and institutions established by corporate farming), and certification (food quality issues). The authors underline that alternative forms of food production and distribution should be analyzed from the positive perspectives, i. e. as establishing new relations, networks, institutions, organizations, etc., and not just from the perspectives of confrontation with the dominating food regime. The cases of Indian bottom-up rural resistance were presented by *Awanish Kumar* (St. Xavier's College) and *Silva Lieberherr* (University of Zurich). Those movements have risen in the situation of internal caste-feudal system combined with the increasing dependence from the global markets inducing the extension of farmers' suicides. The presented case studies demonstrate the diverse nature of the movements of taking into account the regional (as well as many other) contexts instead of assuming the similarity of the global bottom-up rural resistance. The report by *Bernardo Mancano Fernandez* (Sao Paulo State University) and *Philip Hirsch* (University of Sydney) demonstrates the findings of the comparative study of responses to the agro-extractivist practices in Brazil and the Mekong region. The nature of those responses is determined by various factors including the views and actions of agro-extractive capital, local governments and smallholders.

The overall impression of the conference is that every year it gathers scholars, who try to promote the alternative visions of the agrarian development worldwide. Their common enemy is the existing neoliberal paradigm of economic growth, which is criticized (more or less radically) mostly from the left (socialist, communist, Marxian etc.) perspectives. The most popular terms in the discussions were accumulation, landgrabbing, exploitation, dispossession, extractivism, financialization, commodification, resistance, struggle, etc. Together these concepts describe the drawbacks of the capitalist neoliberal economic model in agriculture and rural development. Therefore, the empirical data presented at the conference were collected from the non-Western world, mostly from oppressed and exploited regions in Africa, South Asia and Latin America as well as from the most subaltern classes like smallholders, peasants, and rural population at large.