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# Their agriculture, our agriculture: applying critical Latin American agroecological thought to England

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## Abstract

Agroecology research on the Global North is recognised by scholars in the Global South as technical and environmental, ignoring the political dimensions of agroecological movements and change. This article applies the epistemological traditions of critical Latin American agroecology to a Global North case study: England, in the United Kingdom. As the origin nation of capitalist industrial agriculture, the application of Latin American agroecological thought can tell us a lot about the dynamics of the English situation, colonialism, and the barriers to agroecological transition.

**Keywords:** Colonialism; land; decoloniality; land grabbing; private property.

## Sua agricultura, nossa agricultura: aplicando o pensamento agroecológico crítico da América Latina à Inglaterra

## Resumo

A pesquisa agroecológica no Norte Global é reconhecida pelos estudiosos do Sul Global como técnica e ambiental, ignorando as dimensões políticas dos movimentos e mudanças agroecológicas. Este artigo aplica às tradições epistemológicas da agroecologia crítica da América Latina a um estudo de caso do Norte Global: Inglaterra, no Reino Unido. Como nação de origem da agricultura industrial capitalista, a aplicação do pensamento agroecológico latino-americano pode nos dizer muito sobre a dinâmica da situação inglesa, o colonialismo e as barreiras à transição agroecológica.

**Palavras-chave:** Colonialismo; terra; descolonalidade; apropriação de terras; propriedade privada.

## Su agricultura, nuestra agricultura: aplicando el pensamiento agroecológico crítico latinoamericano a Inglaterra

## Resumen

La investigación sobre agroecología en el Norte Global es reconocida por los académicos del Sur Global como técnica y ambiental, ignorando las dimensiones políticas de los movimientos y cambios agroecológicos. Este artículo aplica las tradiciones epistemológicas de la agroecología crítica latinoamericana a un estudio de caso del Norte Global: Inglaterra, en el Reino Unido. Como nación de origen de la agricultura industrial capitalista, la aplicación del pensamiento agroecológico latinoamericano puede decirnos mucho sobre la dinámica de la situación inglesa, el colonialismo y las barreras a la transición agroecológica.

**Palabras clave:** Colonialismo; tierra; descolonialidad; acaparamiento de tierras; propiedad privada.

## Introduction

In a recent episode of *Cultivating Justice* (Farmerama, 2022), a UK farming podcast, land activist Sam Siva argued that a transition to agroecology is impossible in the UK if practitioners don't pay attention to politics as well as pesticides, because agroecology is about more than organic methods. As a representative of *Land In Our Names* (LION) a group that campaigns for racial justice in UK land access, Siva argued the English countryside "*has never been completely isolated from British history…the trajectory for rural spaces now is that they are holiday escapist fantasies for people that can afford to be there, and those who can't face a lot of exclusion and hostility... there is such a responsibility for farmworkers within the agroecological movement to not just see this as 'okay, I grow organic and I don't really care about social justice things because they are not that important'*."

In this article I aim to contribute to the move elucidated by Siva through an application of a theoretical approach developed in Latin America, identified as *critical Latin American agroecological thought* (Rosset et al, 2021), to English agriculture. Through a case study of four agroecological projects in England (two large-scale, and two small-scale) I will discuss how the English agroecology movement is shaped by social, economic, and political histories, and argue that recognition of these should be incorporated into the local agroecological movement for agroecological transition to be achieved. I argue that the theoretical framework of "critical Latin American agroecological thought", described by Rosset et al (2021), has potential as an emancipatory epistemology for England, as well as in Latin America.

The aims of this paper are threefold. First, to engage in decolonial praxis by 'provincializing Europe' (Chakrabarty, 2000) and combating normative Eurocentrism that posits Europe as the subjective-knower, and 'the rest' as the objective-known (Quijano, 2007) through translating English experience through a Latin American lens. Second, to improve understandings of, and debates around, agroecology in England by the application of Latin American critical social theory. Third, to contribute to thinking on 'the peasant' in agroecological practice, through a case study of the first territory to lose its peasantry to capital dispossession. I believe this approach elucidates the dynamics of social and agricultural organization, and therefore the prospects for agroecology in England, better than dominant local approaches. This is because particular historical contingencies in the development of English philosophical thought ignore key historical and structural aspects of the politics of English agriculture, particularly around agrarian struggle and access to land.

I will do this through a discussion of how the concepts of *their agriculture* and *our agriculture*, presented by Rosset et al (2021), apply to the English context; and if and how the perspectives of critical Latin American agroecological thought as defined by those authors

(co-constitution of humans and land; primacy afforded to ancestral and traditional knowledges; relationship between agroecological practice and collective decolonial struggle) could be used to understand the prospects for agroecology in England. In this discussion, I will draw on the historical-geographical significance of the Norman Conquest in 1066 for English land ownership and land law; and the development of allotment schemes in response to centuries of English land struggle. I argue these historical developments are vital components of the contemporary organization of English agroecology, and—considering the significant ongoing contribution of the Conquest to English economic and political organization—are best understood through a postcolonial lens, which critical Latin American agroecology provides, where dominant local approaches do not.

This will be illustrated through a discussion of four case studies of agroecological projects in England: the Mapperton Estate in Dorset, the Broughton Estate in Yorkshire, the Bolton Diggers Initiative in Greater Manchester and Earthed Up! in Derbyshire. Mapperton and Broughton are large-scale, rural agricultural rewilding projects, and Bolton Diggers and Earthed Up! are small-scale, urban permaculture plots. Using the historical genealogies of these case studies, I will argue that the agroecological landscape and barriers to the advancement of agroecology in England cannot be fully understood without considering the colonial nature of the English state, and a long history of peasant and later wage-worker struggles around land.

## Critical Latin American agroecology

'Critical Latin American agroecology' is a term created by Rosset et al (2021) to describe what they identify as a particular epistemological and practical approach to agroecology, rooted in Latin America. The authors contrast this with an overly technical, apolitical understanding of agroecology in the 'West', arguing that while globally, agroecology may be understood as science, movement and practice, critical Latin American agroecology is differentiated by being "politically charged and popularly organized" around particular Latin American epistemological traditions.

In terms of both academic production and social movement organization, Latin America leads the agroecology debate (Altieri and Toledo 2011). More than this, Rosset et al (2021) argue that Latin-American agroecology (in both theory and practice) is not just larger and more significant than in other geographical regions but has a qualitatively different character (see also Barbosa, 2016). This character emerges from the strong histories of critical social theory in Latin America, which produce cogent critiques of colonialism and its epistemologies (for example, Quinjano, 2000; 2007; Mignolo, 2011); indigenous political organization and grassroots and social group mobilization in the region (Escobar and

Alvarez, 1992; Fernandes, 2020; Quinjano, 2005) and the local importance of the agrarian question (Teubal, 2009).

Despite increasing co-option by agri-business and the state, agroecology remains primarily a movement that foregrounds peasant agriculture, not least through the powerful advocacy of movements like *La Via Campesina* (Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2012). Although territorial contestation exists between 'grassroots' and 'institutional' agroecology (Giraldo and Rosset, 2018), the centrality of peasants to agroecology is clear in the definition given by Pimbert et al (2021) who state that: "*Agroecology is an alternative paradigm for agriculture and food systems that is simultaneously: (a) the application of ecological principles to food and farming systems that emerge from specific socioecological and cultural contexts in place-based territories; and (b) a social and political process that centers the knowledge and agency of Indigenous peoples and peasants in determining agri-food system policy and practice*."

The inclusion of 'Indigenous peoples' with peasants in this definition is notable, as it shows the strong links between colonialism and the green revolution model of agriculture, which agroecology stands in opposition to. The centrality of green revolution socio-ecological organization in colonialism is typified by the term 'plantationocene' (Haraway, 2015; Jegathesan, 2021). This identifies the plantation, a particular model of capital-intensive, commodity-crop oriented monocultural agriculture, tended by slave, indentured or wage-labour as opposed to a free peasantry, as central to capitalism and environmental harm (Murphy and Schroering, 2020).

Pimbert's definition also shows the importance of Indigenous peoples in the contemporary movement for agroecology, which has been most significant politically in Latin America (Altieri and Nichols, 2017), where peasant movements are among the strongest in the world (Fernandez, 2020). Agroecological practices are here closely tied to food sovereignty, decolonization, indigenous rights and—most importantly—land. As Figueroa-Helland et al. (2018, p. 182) state, *"[i]ndigenous resistance… grows from the defense of Land/Earth as the sacred basis of life and freedom—thus the Zapatista's 'Tierra y Libertad!' No counter-hegemonic resistance can sustain long-term struggle without firm roots on the grounded necessities of material social-ecological reproduction*." The centrality of land and agriculture to political emancipation is exemplified by their fundamental importance to organizations like the Zapatistas and Brazil's Landless Worker's Movement (MST). These political and epistemological foundations underpin Latin American understandings of agroecology.

This 'critical Latin American agroecological thought' is defined by Rosset et al (2021) as consisting of three perspectives: the close relationships between humans and the land they inhabit (partly as a response to the fallacious 'terra nullius' justification for colonialism,

see also Giraldo, 2018; Barbarosa, 2018); the primacy afforded to ancestral and traditional knowledge (Guzmán Luna et al. 2019); and finally the inherent relationship between agroecological practice and the politics of decolonial struggle (Barbarosa & Rosset, 2017).

Rosset et al (2021) place the historical origins of critical Latin American agroecology in the contrast between the "landlord estate" of the "feudal system established by colonial powers"—*their agriculture*—and the small plots of Indigenous and Afro-descendant "enslaved workers dedicated to food production, [relying] on local resources, seed saving, and complex intercropping."—*our agriculture* (ibid, p. 50, see also, for similar ideas in a different geographical context, McKittrick, 2013; Wynter, 1971; Carney, 2021; Jegathesan, 2021). This description identifies the *'latifundio–minifundio*' organization of agriculture in Latin America, with large commercial estates alongside subsistence plots allowing for wage-labourer or slave subsistence (see Fernandes et al. 2012). The liberatory practice of autonomous agriculture, in opposition to plantation labour, is key to the conceptualisation of Latin American agroecology, as is the potential for the autonomy of the peasant, as seen in the Canudos War in Brazil or Mexican Revolution (Fernandes, 2020). Agroecology, in this conception, carries an inherent connection to colonialism and land struggle, going beyond more ecologically aware agricultural methods.

## South-North learning: provincializing Europe

In this article, I want to make the case for viewing England through the critical Latin-American agroecological lens developed by Rosset et al (2021). I believe this has value for three reasons: one, as a decolonial exercise in reverting the traditional relationship between global North as originator of theory, and global south as object of theorisation; two, because I believe the epistemological foundations of much anglophone or British social theory carry certain implicit biases, or blind spots, which the application of Latin American critical thought elucidates, and three, because England is long-recognised as the first country in the world to lose its peasantry (see Patriquin, 2007), making it an interesting, because extreme, case study for critical agroecological thought. In this analysis, I will focus on the close relationship between critical Latin American agroecological thought and colonialism, as elucidated in the dichotomy of *their agriculture* and *our agriculture.* I do this by arguing that historical colonial events in England still have social, political and economic significance in the organization of agroecology locally, yet the significance of this is largely ignored in locally produced academic thought.

In making the argument for the distinctive flavour of Latin American agroecology, the authors interviewed twenty prominent Latin American agroecologists. One of the questions they asked participants was if they saw a contrast between Latin American

agroecology and agroecology in 'the industrial north' (North America and Europe). The authors surmise, based on participant responses, that the *"agroecologies practiced in the industrial north… are perceived as a set of agronomic practices and technical developments detached from the political, social and cultural dimensions of agroecology. These northern agroecologies are seen more as a market-driven transition of family farmers to organic production to meet the demands of the healthy food market*."

They quote two participants on Europe. Professor Manuel Parra of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur in Mexico states: "*Latin American Agroecology is commonly associated with peasant agriculture. But in the US or Europe the contexts are very different, in terms of the scale of production, forms of organization, markets, and culture*." Walter Pengue, of the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento in Argentina, argues that "(…) *the European view of agroecology, which is much more limited to the production processes of organic production (…), and to some newer perspectives that seek to impose so-called smart agriculture and ecological intensification (which use essentially agroecology as a battering ram), seek only to achieve "efficiencies" in the agricultural system. This empties agroecology of content, of the farmers, of their land, and of the food they produce*."

In the UK, in terms of the academic literature on agroecology, Pengue and Parra's statements are broadly correct. Scholarship on agroecology in the UK focuses on the potential ecological performance of existing farms, and the role government policies play in encouraging a sustainability transition (see, for example, Ajates Gonzalez et al. 2018; Cusworth et al. 2021; Padel et al. 2020; Geelhoed, 2022). Even studies that take a political approach to agroecology appear to do so within the narrow framework of monocultural productivism versus ecological diversity (e.g. Tilzey, 2021). Most notable UK-based agroecology work that does look at the social does so through case studies in the Global South or North America (e.g. Milner, 2021; Pimbert and Moeller, 2018; Frousin et al. 2014). Isolated research efforts have come from the *Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience* at Coventry University, such as Julia Wright encouraging debate on the ignored role of spirituality in UK agriculture; Colin Anderson and colleagues' discussion of farmer education in Europe; and Chris Maughan and colleagues' discussion of the food justice implications of Brexit, but this is a very small field (Wright, 2021; Anderson *et al.* 2017; Maughan et al. 2020).

However, although the distinctions made by the Latin American agroecologists are valid—in that scholarly approaches to agroecology in the UK *are* qualitatively different to the Latin American school in the ways described above—the paucity of European scholarly approaches to the social aspects of agroecology 'at home' mean, I believe, that key aspects of the *practice* of agroecology remains undescribed and unaccounted for in academic circles, while being understood, prioritised and discussed by British agroecological practitioners such

as Sam Siva, quoted at the beginning of this article. The application of a Latin American understanding of agroecology to a UK context, particularly in England—the 'colonial core' of the uneasy (and currently weak) alliance that makes up the 'United Kingdom'—provides richer, more nuanced understandings of agricultural and social organization than home-grown theoretical approaches, and aligns more closely with the concerns and priorities of many small-scale agroecological producers and activists, who are not currently finding their experiences met, or elucidated, in the academic literature. This paper therefore aims to make a local intervention by more closely matching theoretical approaches to English agroecology to the experiential understandings of practitioners; a move that I argue critical Latin American agroecology allows. Furthermore, because of the huge importance of the British Empire (and later American empire, built on British ontological and legal paradigms) in global organization, a richer understanding of the cultures exported from England with colonialism should be of some interest to scholars and activists around the world.

## Agroecology in the UK: four case studies

Methodologically, the argument for the importance of historical colonialism in the organization of English agriculture—and therefore the importance of postcolonial agroecological thought for understanding local conditions—will be made through four case studies. These case studies illustrate two key sectors involved in agroecological transition in England. Mapperton and Broughton estates (and Knepp, which is also mentioned) are examples of very large (over one thousand acre) privately-owned land holdings, established with the Norman Conquest, which, with state financial support from Countryside Stewardship Schemes, are being transitioned to agricultural rewilding, where increasing biodiversity sits alongside regenerative farming and high-end meat production. Bolton Diggers and Earthed Up! are examples of small plots (mostly less than one acre) of community-focused vegetable production following permaculture principles, on rented land, often provided by local councils as part of an allotment scheme. I argue that these opposing models, when looked at in the historical context of land ownership and land struggles in England, can be clearly mapped onto the principles of *their agriculture* and *our agriculture* described by Rosset et al (2021).

### *The Mapperton Estate*

Mapperton is a 1,900-acre private estate in Dorset, southern England. There are five tenant farms on the estate, producing livestock and arable crops. In 2021, the owners decided to turn 438 acres of the poorest land over to rewilded regenerative agriculture, reducing management intervention, and purchased a small herd of White Park cattle, a

British traditional breed, to graze the area. They further transitioned a 300-acre dairy farm onsite to organic, mob-grazed regenerative farming (Mapperton Estate, 2022). According to Rewilding Britain (2022a), a charity established in 2015 to promote the rewilding of Britain, the owners of Mapperton Estate have applied for a UK Government Countryside Stewardship Grant, which will pay £499 per hectare per year for a ten-year period to support their rewilding project: "*This is what makes it all possible,*" the estate's owner told Rewilding Britain (2022b).

The focus on increasing biodiversity in a livestock-focused agricultural setting characterises Mapperton as an example of what Corson et al (2022) call "agricultural rewilding," a subset of agroecology that is particularly popular in "*the United Kingdom (UK), which appears to be fertile ground for agricultural rewilding*" (ibid. p. 3). The transition to agricultural rewilding at Mapperton was initiated after consultation with the Knepp Castle Estate in Sussex, the first agricultural rewilding project in England, established in 2001. The 3,500-acre Knepp produces thirty-five tonnes of meat a year. Combined profits from this, tourism, and government subsidies mean Knepp now has a turnover of around £800,000 annually, with a 22% profit margin (Rewilding Britain, 2022c). "*Mapperton may be just at the start of its rewilding journey*," states Rewilding Britain, bit it is anticipated "*the Estate will eventually earn more income by embracing rewilding than if it had continued with business as usual."* (Rewilding Britain, 2022b).

### *The Broughton Estate*

Broughton is a 3,000-acre private estate in Yorkshire, in northern England. Approximately 1,100 acres of Broughton has been turned over to agricultural rewilding since 2021. This started with a first phase of tree-planting in 2021, funded by a UK Government Countryside Stewardship Grant. Their stated aim is "*the large scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself*." (Broughton Hall, 2022a). This 1,100-acre 'nature recovery area' is intended to, "*support small numbers of widely roaming grazing animals such as suitable rare breed cattle, pigs and ponies.*" For food production the project will focus on livestock, the same as the conventionally farmed areas of the estate, which currently farm sheep.

According to the Broughton website: "*there will certainly be a significant reduction in sheep numbers and thus an overall reduction in the amount of lamb produced on the estate, but there will be an increase in beef cattle numbers and potentially a few pigs as well. So there will be a greater variety of meat production, but it will be of high quality. Over time, the rewilding will also increase the amount and variety of wild foods available including fungi,*

*honey, nuts and berries, which fits nicely with the planned development of our wild food foraging activities.*" (Broughton Hall, 2022b).

### *The Bolton Diggers Initiative*

The Bolton Diggers Initiative is a grassroots voluntary group that provides access to food, growing space, agroecological training, and mutual aid for people in the Greater Manchester town of Bolton. Bolton is a former mill town, which during the industrial revolution was the site of over 200 cotton mills, the "*capitalist industry par excellence*" (Williams, 2022 [1944] p.120) spinning cotton supplied by the slave plantations of the Americas (Baptist, 2016; Williams, 2022 [1944]).

The Bolton Diggers group has existed in some form since 1999, and under the current name since 2013. They run three agroecological community growing spaces: two of these are on allotment sites, local government administered units provided under UK legislation (the 'Allotment Acts'). Allotments are small areas of land that are let at a low cost for people to grow food. Under law, the standard size for an allotment is 25m by 10m, although high demand means that half-size allotments (12.5m by 10m) are now more common. The community gardens run by Bolton Diggers are "*about seven or eight allotments*" and "*about three allotments*" in size (their unit of measurement) and have been running for between ten and fifteen years. They also use a third, smaller site, on land belonging to a local social housing provider, which they have rent-free, though with some insecurity of tenure. The organization is entirely voluntary. They received approximately £3,000 of funding from the UK Council for Voluntary Service in 2017, which was spent on community education projects.

Bolton Diggers' allotment sites are open access, and anyone in the community is welcome to come to grow food. There is specialist provision for refugees and those dealing with mental health issues. The Diggers also ran mutual aid food provision during the covid-19 pandemic. Describing their agroecological project, Alan Brown of the Bolton Diggers explains, "*the social underlies the economic, that's where we focus. It's the relationships between people that's the important thing*."

### *Earthed Up!*

Earthed Up! is a workers' co-operative plant nursery based in Belper in Derbyshire, in the English midlands. Belper is a town of approximately 20,000 people within the *Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site*, designated by UNESCO in 2001 because it was the site of the first cotton mills in England, and thus where, "*the factory system was born–an event*

*which transformed economies and landscapes far beyond the valley itself*" (Vaizey, 2014). Established in 2021, Earthed Up! is principally a plant nursery run on permaculture and forest garden principles, though the remit of the co-op stretches far beyond this, partly as a necessity for financial viability. They run educational horticultural courses for the community, priced on a sliding scale, with an option for free courses for those with limited financial resources. Earthed Up! also donate free nursery stock to community projects, though there are few of these in the valley, due to limited access to land. There is a local 'friendship orchard' initiative, whereby people are supported in planting fruit trees on the edges of private land, where the fruit is publicly accessible, which Earthed Up! are working with to provide free fruit to the community.

Earthed Up! has a patchwork of small sites, all rented with insecure tenure: one eight-by-ten metre "*allotment-style*" plot (their wording: note this refers to a modern half-size allotment) and a thirty-by-ten metre plot, which are both privately rented, plus a further 0.2 of an acre gifted on a free lease. They also make use of a council allotment plot (10m by 20m) in Alfreton (approximately ten miles from Belper). This is separate to the business, but one co-op member developed a micro forest garden there, which they use for educational purposes. The allotment is six years old, but the tenure is not completely secure, as many allotments in Derbyshire are at risk to land development. As a business, Earthed Up! are not entitled to a council-run allotment plot, and as private individuals, it is difficult to get allotments in Belper, due to oversubscription. Earthed Up! member Ryan Sandford-Blackburn described how in the minutes of a Belper town council meeting in 2019, the council said they could not meet the local demand for allotments as they could not find suitable land for provision: his explanation being "*It's all owned by the Strutt Estate*."

Being a perennial nursery with a focus on forest gardening, Earthed Up!'s insecure tenure does come with some problems, as it takes up to three years to prepare plants for sale. Discussing their tenure arrangements, Sandford-Blackburn said, "*we can't possibly buy. There is nothing to buy, and we don't have capital. To buy just one acre we would need twelve thousand pounds, and we can't get anyone to sell us an acre, because they are sheep farmers that get paid for having sheep on there, and it's not worth the legal fees to sell a corner of their field to be a vegetable plot*." Earthed Up! is funded by private loan stock from members and the public, with all profit reinvested. They have received no government grants, although Sandford-Blackburn states that their primary issue is: "*not about money, it's about access. I can sit on my windowsill and look at acres and acres of forest and know it's owned by two people*."

## Their agriculture: land distribution in England and the colonial estate

The agricultural rewilding of estates like Broughton and Mapperton is a direct manifestation of English colonial history, with deep roots in the Norman conquest, almost one thousand years ago, and clear linkages to the colonial project internationally. It is not typical to think of England as a 'colonised country', but the legal and material basis of land ownership in the UK is rooted in colonialism. In the Norman Conquest of 1066, William the Conqueror, with an army from Normandy in France, led an invasion through which a foreign minority, with a different ethnicity, language and culture to the extant population, seized full political and economic control of the country and, ignoring pre-existing laws and social structures, William declared himself absolute owner of all land. England was divided into large tracts, and fighters in the invading army granted lordship over these as a reward for loyalty. The violence of the invasion, particularly in the north of England, is well documented, with approximately one-third of Yorkshire (the biggest county in England) described as 'waste' in the Domesday book, a colonial property leger produced in 1086 to establish "*whether more could be taken from each estate than is now being taken"* (Baxter, 2011 p. 105). On the impact of the invasion on the north, "*Simeon of Durham… spoke of the great famine; the exodus of refugees; the decaying corpses and the land deprived of anyone to cultivate it, reduced for nine years to an extensive solitude… there was no village inhabited between York and Durham*" (Carpenter, 2003 p. 77).

With the invasion, the population of England became tenants, rather than owners, of the land they worked. The Normans' intentions were to "*exploit the peasantry, not replace them*" (Carpenter, 2003, p.78) and many members of the new aristocracy (including William himself) were absentee landlords, domiciled in France, or with holdings spread over too large an area to manage directly. The command of money rents was thus the preferred method of resource extraction. The formation of a rentier-elite and a tenant-peasantry by the conquest made England unique in Europe, and the specificities of this arrangement is credited as a key factor in why capitalism developed in England (Meiksins Wood, 1999). It is also the key factor in the enclosures, the progressive removal of the English peasantry from the land between the 16th and 19th centuries, as landowners shifted land use to more profitable export-oriented farming (see Morton, 1999).

This medieval invasion is notable because the system of law, property, justice and government it established still structures life in England today (and was exported by the British Empire—see Nichols, 2020; Castellani, 2007; Sarre, 2014). The titled descendants of the Norman invaders still hold considerable property and power. The current English monarch, Queen Elizabeth the Second, is a direct descendent of William the Conqueror, and owns the superior interest in all land in England (as well as Wales and Northern Ireland) in accordance with William's decree. The "*Norman cousinhood*" (Adams, 2019) is estimated by

Shrubsole (2019) to still own about 30% of England, though this figure may be a significant underestimate due to the minimal requirements for public land registration in the country: a further 17% of land, which has unrecorded ownership as it has never been sold, is likely to also belong to the aristocracy, taking the land ownership of this small clique up to almost 50%. Like much of Latin America, Britain has some of the most unequal land ownership in the world.

The significance of the conquest for land ownership is evident in the public material provided by Broughton and Mapperton. According to the Broughton Estate website (Broughton Hall, 2022b), the estate "*has been the home of the Tempest family since 1097 and enjoys a rich history stretching back over the Millennium… The Tempest family are believed to have come to England from Normandy during William the Conqueror's 1066 invasion of England and were given land in the aftermath of the invasion. The Tempests are one of England's oldest Catholic landed gentry families. Roger Tempest, the current custodian of the Broughton Hall Estate is the 32nd Tempest in a recorded line dating from the 12th century*."

Mapperton is owned by the Earl and Countess of Sandwich, a branch of the Montagu family, whose landed interests were founded in Somerset by the Norman fighter Drago de Montaigu. The title of the Earldom of Sandwich was later created to honour his descendent Edward Montagu, a prominent civil war parliamentarian and important leader in British imperialism. Montagu played a key role in the expansion of the Royal Africa Company, and the acquisition of Mumbai and Tangier (Ollard, 1994). The fourth Earl, First Lord of the Admiralty during the American wars of independence, also played a vital role in British imperialism, particularly for the sugar industry in the Caribbean. These personal linkages demonstrate the close relationship between the slavery and dispossession of the British Empire and the English rural landscape, as described by Fowler (2020); as well as the interdependence of the state, military, colonialism and the corporation (such as the Royal Africa and East India Companies) in English political organization (Koram, 2022). The prominence of the corporate form in English legal and political systems, alongside the 'rentier' nature of the English economy adopted after the Norman Conquest, is further implicated in the further 35% of English land which is owned by corporations, oligarchs and financiers, on top of the 30-50% owned by the aristocracy already described (Shrubsole, 2019; Christophers, 2020; Heron and Heffron, 2022).

Knepp Castle Estate, the pioneering agricultural rewilding project that inspired Mapperton, is owned by the tenth Baronet Sir Charles Burrell. According to the book '*Wilding: the return of nature to a British farm*' written by the Baronet's wife, Isabella Tree (2018) Knepp Estate was established in the twelfth century by Norman William de Braose, though the current owners are not his direct descendants. It was purchased in 1787 by Sir Charles

Raymond, who "*thanks to family connections*" occupied a prominent role in the British East India Company (Green, 2018 p.232). The current 10th Baronet grew up on his family's tobacco plantation in Rhodesia (for more on Knepp, see Heffron and Heron, 2022). The interlinkages of these colonial epistemologies are evident in a video produced by the Viscount Hinchingbrooke Luke Montagu, heir to the Earldom of Sandwich, about rewilding at Mapperton (Mapperton Live, 2021). The Viscount enthuses about the agricultural rewilding potential of "*British wildlife safaris*", directly comparing his visit to Knepp to "*walking into the African savannah. Of course these aren't African animals, but there was a wildness, there was a thrill, to the natural environment*." The environmental colonialism of the African safari, presented here as an ideal-type model for English rewilding, was designed and owned by British imperial hunters and fortress conservationists to "save Africa from Africans" (Akama, 2004; Nelson, 2003).

The focus on livestock in these large-scale projects is also meaningful. The converted sheep-pastures of Broughton, and the shift from ordinary to 'regenerative' livestock farming at Mapperton, occur in the context of a long history of the enclosure of English food-producing commons in favour of depopulated livestock pasture for commercial production. Early enclosed land was adapted for the export trade in wool, funded by colonial exploitation abroad (particularly the influx of gold from the plunder of the Americas, and later, the wealth created by Atlantic slavery). The 'man-eating sheep' made famous in Thomas More's Utopia (2014 [1551]), refers to this boom in wool production for international trade, as does a fifteenth century conversation with the Lord Chancellor of England reported in Wojciehowski (2011, p.157):

> *"Your sheep… that commonly are so meek and eat so little; now, as I hear, they have become so greedy and fierce that they devour human beings themselves. They devastate and depopulate the fields, houses and towns. For in whatever parts of the land sheep yield the finest and thus the most expensive wool, there are nobility and gentry… are not content with the old rents that the land yielded to their predecessors. Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive harm. For they leave no land free for the plough; they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping the churches—but only for sheep-barns."*

In twenty-first century rewilding, where people are brought into the vision of estate owners, it is as paying tourists, volunteers, or consumers of high-end meat (although Broughton does mention the benefits of agricultural rewilding to anyone using public footpaths that skirt estate land, and Mapperton is "*developing a social prescribing programme*" which will allow "*doctors and other healthcare professionals to refer patients to*

*non-clinical activities, such as gardening and volunteering*" (Mapperton Estate, 2022). The public are tourists, or income streams, for these projects; the vision of agricultural rewilding is a depopulated one.

This fortress conservation an approach to regeneration that sees environmentalism as being based upon the exclusion of people (Brockington, 2002)—is intrinsically tied to the colonial history of England: first through the creation of very large-scale land holdings with the conquest, and second, thanks to the tenurial arrangements instated by William the Conqueror, the legal ease with which landowners could remove people from 'their' land, by either rent-hikes or enclosure: a process mirrored by the tenurial arrangements instated in British colonies (see, for example, Youé, 2002). Most literature on the aims of the agricultural rewilding projects references the ideal of recreating a 'wild' and decidedly unpeopled past (see Mapperton Live, 2021). Of the thirty-four English rewilding projects listed on the *Rewilding Britain* website, fifteen are based on private country estates: eleven of these owned by historically landed families, and four by 'new money' ('new money' is here understood from the longer-term English perspective, including fortunes originating in the industrial revolution). A further fifteen are owned by large institutions like the Forestry Commission and Ministry of Defence. Only four are smaller-scale or community projects.

In terms of land tenure, indirect rule, and 'modernization' by the invader; as well as the disregard shown for human welfare, connection to place and use or customary rights over land, the history of England in many ways parallels (and is inextricably linked to) that of Latin America (and in other colonised regions, see West, 1999) in a way that is still of material consequence today. The tenurial system of the Norman conquest was exported with colonialism, and the wealth procured by colonialism and racial capitalism afforded the continuing dispossession and alienation of the English peasant. Viewed through a critical Latin American agroecological lens, large-scale agricultural rewilding projects in England such as Mapperton and Broughton—*their agriculture*— are a clear continuation of the colonial project.

## Co-constitution of humans and land in England: from peasant to allotment

The history of internal struggles against this colonial project can also be read in the agricultural projects at Bolton and Belper. The key to understanding this lies in the historical origins of the 'allotment': the tiny (12.5m by 10m) areas of rental land, usually provided by local governments, which are a key feature of public access to land for agriculture in England.

The enclosures, as mentioned above, were a process beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries whereby the English peasantry were pushed off the land they 'rented'.

This process was closely related to colonialism and imperial plunder abroad. The influx of money from imperialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade allowed both a new colonially enriched bourgeoise-class to buy land from the existing rentier landlord aristocracy, and further increased the wealth of those aristocracy who partook in imperial adventure (Smith, 2006). The riches of exploitation and dispossession abroad pushed up land values, demand, and rent (with English land being a perennial investment priority of colonialists and slavers, see Williams 2022[1944]), leading to enclosure and eviction of peasant tenants.

The masses of newly landless peasants roaming the English countryside without the means to sustain themselves, victims of the riches created by imperial expansion, were hard to govern, and threatened revolution. This meant that at first, the English state tried to legislate against such land-grabs. The success of this legislation was limited considering its enforcement rested with the landlords benefiting from enclosure. In response to this failure, the state moved to getting rid of dispossessed peasants via penal means, increasing execution for infractions such as begging or vagrancy, as well as participation in anti-enclosure and anti-aristocracy riots (Manning, 1977).

A more benevolent, but less common, solution was the provision of charity for the dispossessed, either in the form of small handouts of money or food, or (more popular among recipients, due to the inherent lack of dignity in dependency) the provision by the church or philanthropists of permission to work tiny plots of land, on field edges or roadsides, on which they could grow food, which were called ‘allotments’ as they were ‘allotted’ to the poor (Patriquin, 2007). Here we see in England a socio-economic process with a close correlation to the *'Latifundio–minifundio'* organization of Latin America, that has to-date received little analysis in academia: perhaps because of the systematic lack of interest in the perspective of the peasantry in the English context.

For the next 400 years, the weak land-rights of the English peasant meant enclosure accelerated, now with full state support, thanks to the release-valve of settler colonies and industrial wage-labour to soak up the dispossessed ‘surplus population’ that disconnection from land created (Balasopoulos, 2016). Between 1604 and 1914 over 5,200 enclosure Bills were enacted by Parliament, covering 6.8 million acres, or about one-fifth of the total area of the country (UK Parliament, 2022). Rents were forced so high as to become unpayable, and customary rents were replaced by the less secure and more expensive leasehold, which favoured the landlord over the tenant (Patriquin 2007). Large numbers of people without access to land, and thus the means to provide for themselves, presented a potentially expensive burden for the state and a revolutionary threat to the elites, and the provision of ‘free’ land in the colonies (as well as the transportation of revolutionary criminals) was an important preventative of revolutionary change (Aidt et al. 2022). But not everyone was willing to emigrate, and by the late eighteenth century allotments had become the most

popular means of allowing the poor and landless to feed themselves ‘at home’. This was seen as a potential ‘win-win’ for landowners, because the poor wanted access to land, and allotment holders typically paid higher rents than farmers, enriching the landowner, rather than requiring charitable donation or philanthropy (Burchardt, 2002).

Increasing allotment provision became a key governmental response to land protests and riots as the enclosures progressed (such as the ‘Swing Riots’ of the 1830s, and the ‘Revolt of the Field’ of 1873), though there was much political controversy about this. Records show that allotments in the nineteenth century were between one-eighth and half an acre in size, and privately rented at market rates (Moselle, 1995). According to submissions to the Poor Law Commissioners Report of 1834 reported in Moselle (1995) there was a significant fear at the time that allotments, like the commons, would increase the self-reliance of the poor, making it harder to press them into wage labour. Over time, allotments became smaller, partly as an attempt to ensure they staved off starvation without granting the poor too much autonomy. In response to growing unrest and political agitation for land in the nineteenth century (such as the popular demand for “three acres and a cow”, see Baxter, 2022) in 1887 it became a legal duty for local authorities to provide allotments at a low rent, rather than the dispossessed poor relying on the vagaries of the private market.

Allotments can be considered either a victory of radical access-to-land protest by dispossessed peasants, or more cynically (and perhaps accurately), an example of the elites giving ‘just enough’ (in this case, the right to rent 12.5m by 10m, or less than one thirtieth of an acre, at below market rates) to stave off any real threat to their property in land. In 1886 William Morris acidly observed that “three acres and a cow, duly reduced to a very humdrum allotment scheme, will not bring about a very great revolution” (Chase, 2003 p.86). It is notable that the Bolton Diggers project takes place on a council provided allotment site, which exists thanks to the rural uprisings of the Swing Riots and Revolt of the Field (Burchardt, 2002). Earthed Up! uses an “allotment style” rented plot, similar to pre-1887 private allotments, as well as using a public allotment for community education purposes. The importance of the allotment movement for the ordinary people of England is exemplified by the fact both projects adopted “*an allotment*” as a unit of measurement when describing their projects.

In England, everyone has a legal right under the Allotments Act to rent a small allotment of land to grow food, and allotments are broadly recognised as a significant and important aspect of local food sovereignty and food autonomy (Anderson, 2017; Hawkes and Acott, 2013; Dobson et al 2021). However, despite the legal provision of allotment access, there is a considerable shortage of actual provision. Waiting lists of many years are common across the UK; newspapers reported in 2021 that the average waiting list for an allotment in the UK is three years, the longest, in Camden in inner-city London, is seventeen years, and

over 100,000 families are estimated to currently be on a waiting list (Tovey, 2021). It's worth repeating Ryan Sandford-Blackburn's description of Belper town council's reasons for not meeting the local demand for allotments: "*They couldn't find any suitable land locally. It's all owned by the Strutt Estate*." The Strutt Estate is a large, privately owned estate in the region, owned by the Barons Belper of Derbyshire. Allotments are a vital and central aspect of agroecology in England, but lack of provision means they are currently inadequate—due to limited availability and access—as a mechanism for agroecological transition at scale. Activism around allotment provision, particularly levereaging the legal framework of the allotments act, should be a key part in any grassroots strategy for food sovereignty. Allotments are also a lasting reminder of a long, and often ignored, history of popular struggles in English agrarianism.

The Bolton Diggers make direct reference to this history of land struggles in England with their name, which draws from the anti-enclosure movements of the seventeenth century, where a group called 'The Diggers' (in reference to digging up pasture to plant vegetables) protested for land access for the English poor. The Bolton Diggers also reference Latin American struggles in their movement: they produced a t-shirt for members with an image of Digger Gerrard Winstanley, in the familiar black-on-red, high contrast screen-printed style more familiarly associated with images of Latin American revolutionaries such as Che Guevara and Subcomandante Marcos. Asked about the t-shirt, Alan Brown of the Bolton Diggers said:

"*The t shirt really is just a bit of fun. But if you were to draw something from it, it would be to say that people in England on the Left always seem to have their eyes set on foreign radicals and revolutionary scenarios to draw inspiration from. This is fine, but there are indigenous traditions and inspiring individuals in this country and in its history which to me tends to get neglected. This might include for example Gerrard Winstanley, the Diggers and whole radical movement that arose in the English Civil War. So why not have him on a t-shirt instead of Che?"*

Alan went on to talk about the influence of Latin American thought on his own political activism: "*I have read about and been inspired by the Zapatistas since their first uprising. I was always struck by the fact that the movement was (and continues to be) the product of long processes and praxes involving a lot of different groups of people and going back a long way*."

## English agroecology as 'collective decolonial struggle'?

The history briefly outlined above explains the origins of contrasting estate-based and allotment-based models of agroecology in England, which I would argue can be aligned

to *their agriculture* and *our agriculture,* as conceptualised by Rosset et al's (2021) typology of Latin American agroecological thought, developed in the post-colonial context of Latin America. Although England is not usually conceptualised as a colonised, or post-colonial, country, the continuation of a colonially imposed, centralised state and acquisitive landed elite (West, 1999), the deep social stratification around land-access, and the relatively recent (twentieth century) extension of political rights to the dispossessed peasanty, are important phenomena that are drawn into focus by the anti-colonial lens.

These aspects of the social, political and economic organization of England tend to remain more-or-less hidden in Eurocentric theories. Less hidden in Marxism, which recognises dispossession, but also neglects the peasantry to focus on the urban industrial worker; and more hidden in dominant uncritical approaches that rest on 'Western' epistemologies developed in English enlightenment philosophy (such as John Locke and Jeremy Bentham) that completely naturalise the idea of private property. It is important to remember that these epistemologies were produced in intellectual establishments devoted entirely to serving and protecting the interests of the property-owning English elite, in the face of a peasantry that, at the time of their production, was subject to an active and ongoing regime of oppression and dispossession. This intellectual tradition therefore defensively and authoritatively naturalises private property, and the social and economic hierarchy of England, as an explicitly political move.

At the time John Locke was writing (during the period of the enclosures), education was a privilege of the elites in England, and the majority of the English peasantry were not only illiterate (Stephens, 1990), so therefore not in a place to produce written intellectual rejoinders to those oppressing them, which would leave a mark on the historical record; they were also dismissed by Locke as being incapable of rationality and therefore not deserving of civil or political rights (Macpherson, 1962). This narrative of an irrational working class who cannot be trusted with full democratic rights is still evident in England today; gaining particular prominence during the 'Brexit' debate and referendum on leaving the European Union (McKenzie, 2018; Telford and Wistow, 2020).

Political and voting rights were based on property ownership in England until the twentieth century (Tichelar, 2018), and the power-relations between the land-owning descendants of the Normans, and the dispossessed peasantry, were so absolute that even in the universal suffrage campaign of the 'radical' Levellers in the seventeenth century, it was accepted that the vote should not be extended to wage-labourers who didn't own land, but only to the smaller-scale propertied class (or higher-class tenants with large rented land-holdings), who were also excluded from political participation at that time (Macpherson, 1962). The exclusion of the peasantry from English intellectual life was so thorough that the 'working-class' did not have meaningful, mass access to university education until my own

generation in the late 1990s (Heath et al. 2013). Academic work about the English working-classes has historically been produced not by the people themselves, but by external interlocutors, who may have been more-or-less sympathetic (e.g. Thompson, 1963) or patronising (e.g. Orwell, 1937), but were always writing about 'the other' from the basis of an English intellectual tradition that had worked for centuries to actively oppress their subject. The English peasant, despite ostensibly owning the property of whiteness (Harris, 1993) was not granted subjectivity or epistemology, falling below the line of being, to use Fanon's term (Fanon, 1970). Personhood was dependent on property—something the peasant could gain by choosing the side of the oppressor; and taking his part in the project of colonialism and dispossession abroad, where property in land (and therefore humanity and recognition) would be granted for free, at the cost of the colonised and people of colour; or by trying to change the system by fighting for political recognition and the vote, a course that often resulted in violence and punitive retribution. Many chose the former.

The English intellectual tradition has always been that of a property-owning elite minority, fiercely guarding a potentially threatened privilege. This epistemological foundation means the naturalisation of private property is rarely questioned. When it is, it is primarily through the state socialism of Marx, whose principal attraction to the English labourer (who even to Marx, is 'other': Marx was not writing about his own class) could be argued to be the modernism of the particularly English (in the eighteenth and nineteenth century) disconnection from grounded, land-based tradition (or what the Manifesto of the Communist Party called "the idiocy of rural life"). Through this radical lens, land becomes just another capital resource to be managed via socialist property ownership (see also the critiques of the treatment of land in political economy by Obeng-Odoom, 2020). Land nationalisation (rather than the restitution of the peasantry, or any connection to tradition or place) slowly became the dominant model for land rights among the radical intellectual left after the introduction of Marxism to England (Tichelar, 2018). It is unclear to what extent such rationalised industrial modernism fully represented the desires of the English proletariat—rather than the urban intellectual elite. English workers so often frustrated Marx with their regressive small-c conservatism, ethnic nationalism (see Robinson, 2021 [1983]), and continuing support for the right-wing's political promise of petty peasant proprietorship, or partial redistribution of land within the context of private property (Tichelar, 2018). Despite the flaws of peasant proprietorship as a socialist political agenda, working class support for this agenda reflects how it nevertheless recognised the English worker as a frustrated peasant, rather than the distinctly modern agent of a revolutionary proletariat.

When dominant Western epistemologies are critiqued in a way that rejects the rationalism of industrial modernity, it is through the post-colonial or decolonial intellectual work of scholars operating in, or writing about, ex-colonies in the Majority World (for example

Quijano, 2007), or subaltern and indigenous populations in white-supremacist settler states such as Australia, Brazil, Canada or the USA. Increasingly, white Minority World academics (like myself—I am a white, British woman from a 'working-class' background) are adding their voices to this body of work, though usually in reference to the clearly defined colonial relationships elucidated in first instance by subaltern scholars: it is not uncommon, for example, for white academics at European universities to produce work about the Majority World, or racialised populations in the Minority World, which sits, epistemologically, within the 'decolonial turn'. Here I hope to do something slightly different, following the work of Robinson (2021 [1983]), and to 'other' naturalised understandings of England by privileging subaltern ways of understanding English society: which, I argue, are in this case superior to homegrown analysis, which tends to ignore certain aspects of social organization.

I believe the application of Rosset *et al*.'s (2021) conceptualisation of critical Latin American agroecological thought tells us a lot about England that 'home-grown' scholarly approaches miss; particularly in relationship to the socio-economic organization of land ownership, and the historical trajectories of this. It situates the potential for, and shape of, agroecological transition in colonial histories of possession and dispossession that the current social, economic and ecological landscape cannot fully be understood without. Estates like Mapperton and Broughton, and projects liked Bolton Diggers and Earthed Up!, fit uneasily together within the more technocentric understanding of agroecology usually adopted in the UK, yet their significant differences are foregrounded by the critical Latin American approach. Furthermore, this approach shows the deep linkages between colonialism and decolonial endeavour in both the periphery and the core. The economic wellbeing of ordinary people in England, under the current system, can only be sustained alongside the concentration of land and wealth in the hands of the elite by dispossession and appropriation from abroad. Colonialism has been vital in allowing the continued sustenance of excessive accumulation by the English elites; and international equity cannot be achieved without paying attention to, and addressing, these internal dynamics.

Much of the British Empire can be understood as the spread of a hierarchical, dehumanising social structure that was also practiced at home (Robinson 2021 [1983]). Colonial violence allowed the elites to retain their economic interests in the core, while staving off the threat of revolution from the domestic peasantry. This was not only through the removal of revolutionaries, or provision of land abroad, via settler colonialism. The dispossessed English peasants of the factory floor were sustained by a dietary shift from the traditional diets of home-produced vegetables, bread, cheese and beer to cod from North America, potatoes from Ireland, sugar from the Caribbean and tea from India (Lowe, 2015). Domestic peace was maintained in the turbulent nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by increasing state welfare provision for those who could no longer be self-sufficient, funded

directly by imperial subjects (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018). Empire allowed the living conditions of the English workers to eventually improve, despite the removal of their autonomy from capitalism, and independent means of reproduction.

Although the spoils of colonialism, and social and economic shifts under the labour movement of the twentieth century, dramatically increased the wellbeing of the English working class, the violent social order of European colonialism has always been domestic as well as international. The dispossessed of England, made comfortable in their alienation by the spoils of empire, cannot truly engage with decolonisation without being attentive to this, and the positionality of the ecologically and socially destructive capitalist modernity of English (and wider European) lifestyles in the continuation of colonial exploitation abroad.

So can English agroecology be defined as a collective decolonial struggle, a key aspect of the critical Latin American agroecology described by Rosset et al. (2021)? Yes and no. Though problems within the agroecology sector persist, as Sam Siva points out in the quote at the beginning of this article, it is notable that LION often work closely with the Landworkers' Alliance (LWA), a UK organization that is part of *La Via Campesina*—though as LWA represents both land-owning employers and employees in the agroecological sector, the complex histories of the UK (not just in England, but also Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, which were not covered in this article) mean this leads to some tensions.

Yet much agroecological activism in the UK is unambiguously decolonial. Siva is explicit in the *Farmerama* podcast in including the 'working-class' in their calls for justice. Ryan Sandford-Blackburn of Earthed Up!, the 'our agriculture' case study described above, is a member of the LWA, and therefore *La Via Campesina*, and it is notable that much of the work done by Bolton Diggers is focused on inclusion and equality for refugees, giving them access to land and community. Grassroots agroecology movements, and particularly race equality activists with subaltern positionalities within these movements, are pushing for important conversations about colonialism and socioeconomic equality in the UK, and recognition of the importance of English colonial history, and how this relates to agroecology: academic scholarship just needs to catch up. As participants in the global economy, people in England are both 'them' and 'us': with white and/or passport privilege, a close material relationship to global struggle, and a long historical experience of imperialism as a deciding force in land and resource access, colonialism is something in which the English working classes (of all races, though with differentiated effects) are both beneficiary and victim. A critical Latin American approach to agroecology elucidates these tensions and interconnections, and the significance of different ways of practicing agroecology in England. This brings new insight to England's global connections which are elided by dominant European epistemes.

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