

Leading the assault



Since winning a referendum in February that will allow him to stand for re-election in 2012, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez has radicalised. Saying that he wants "to accelerate the transition to socialism", the president has focused much of his attack on the food industry. In early March he ordered troops to occupy the country's rice mills, after accusing manufacturers of circumventing government controls by supplying flavoured rice instead of basic white rice, the price of which is controlled by the authorities. "They invent flavoured rice, which is more expensive, because it means higher profits", Chávez said. "They've denied they're doing this 100 times. But I'm tired of it."

This move was accompanied by a flurry of other measures. Chávez told the Grupo Femsa, a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, that it had two weeks to vacate a plot of land used as a parking lot for its delivery vans to make way for housing for the poor. He also expropriated a 1,500-hectare eucalyptus plantation owned by Smurfit Kappa, a large Irish package and paper manufacturer, saying that the trees were doing serious ecological damage by depleting the aquifer.

All worthy measures, no doubt, which pleased the president's supporters. But do they take the country closer to socialism? We have yet to be convinced.

Peasants, like pandas, are to be preserved

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*,¹ Paul Collier, professor of economics at Oxford University, wrote provocatively of the need to put an end to "the middle- and upper-class love affair with peasant agriculture". Because of the near-total urbanisation of both these classes in the USA and Europe "rural simplicity has acquired a strange allure.... Peasants, like pandas, are to be preserved. But distressingly, peasants, like pandas, show little inclination to reproduce themselves. Given the chance, peasants seek local wage jobs, and their offspring head to the cities." He goes on: "Reluctant peasants are right: their mode of production is ill suited to modern agricultural production, in which scale is helpful.... Far from being the answer to global poverty, organic self-sufficiency is a luxury lifestyle. It is appropriate for burnt-out investment bankers, not for hungry families."



So, by constantly promoting peasant agriculture as the way forward, are we in GRAIN romantic idealists? Not everyone thinks so. In January 2009, two US professors (Carol Thompson and Lucy Jarosz), together with an activist, William Aal, wrote a stinging response to the Collier article.² "We disagree quite strongly with Collier's derisive depiction of 'peasant agriculture'.... This overly general category of 'peasantry' seems to include the very diversified category of small-scale farming, which comprises the majority of farm operations throughout the world. These smallholders (often female farmers) are highly entrepreneurial and innovative." They continue: "Commercial agriculture, according to Collier, may increase yields 10-20 per cent. Yet long-term analyses from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

demonstrate, across the globe, that 'best practices' of smallholder agriculture will double yields. 'Best practices' include sharing of seeds (farmers' rights), research following farmers' requests, available and affordable credit and, yes, agricultural extension." Very much the kind of thing we have been saying for years.

Now that the boot is on the other foot...

For many years the US authorities have been promoting Monsanto's genetically modified crops around the world, insisting that there is no need for governments in the South to carry out their own independent health and environmental tests. But - surprise, surprise - the US authorities are not quite so keen to accept on trust imports of GE rice from China. A recent USDA audit report alerted:

"They [other nations] have also begun developing transgenic plants and animals of their own. Some of these new plants and animals will be unknown to, and therefore unapproved by, the U.S. regulatory system. As this trend continues, other nations could begin exporting - inadvertently or deliberately - unapproved transgenic plants or animals into the United States."

It continued:

"While the consequences of the unapproved transgenic plants or animals entering the U.S. food supply are difficult to foresee, such an event could provoke health and environmental concerns and interfere with commerce." China "has committed to investing US\$500 million in biotechnology by 2010 and has recently announced the creation of a new transgenic rice. To mitigate any risks to the U.S. environment, agriculture, and commerce from unapproved transgenic plants and animals entering the U.S. food supply, USDA will need to monitor such developments closely."

The full USDA Audit Report can be viewed at:

<http://tinyurl.com/cu9lzs>

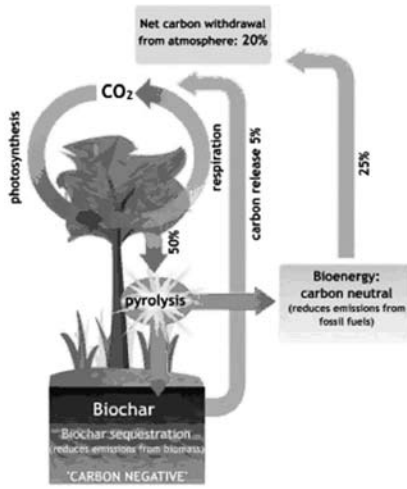
1 Paul Collier, "The Politics of Hunger - How Illusion and Greed Fan the Food Crisis", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008

2 Available on the Stuffed and Starved website. <http://tinyurl.com/d455uy>

This section of *Seedling* is devoted to short topical items. We welcome contributions from readers. Please send them to seedling@grain.org or to our postal address in Barcelona.



Biochar: the latest technical fix for climate change



At the UN climate conference in Poznan last December, a new proposal for “climate change mitigation” was formally submitted. The idea is to apply vast amounts of fine-grained charcoal, called “biochar”, to soil in the hope that it will form a permanent “carbon sink”, as well as improving fertility and restoring “degraded lands”. Charcoal is a by-product of a process in which biomass is exposed to high temperature in the absence of oxygen. The process, called pyrolysis, can be used to produce heat and power. It is particularly attractive to the agrofuel industry as a first step for producing “second generation” agrofuels from solid biomass.

Proponents claim that biochar is “carbon negative” because the charcoal sequesters carbon. Lobbyists such as Tim Flannery, Peter Reid and Johannes Lehmann say that by converting hundreds of millions of hectares of land to biochar plantations and burying the charcoal in soil, we can take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and cool the planet down.

None of the claims made by the biochar lobby has been proven: there are few field studies, none of them long-term. Although ancient charcoal-rich soils created by indigenous peoples exist (such as *terra preta* in the Central Amazon), this is very

different from modern biochar. Carbon in charcoal can remain in soil for very long periods, but it can also be lost quickly. No one knows if biochar would remain stable in different soils. There is also evidence that charcoal increases soil microbial activities which can turn carbon in the soil into atmospheric carbon dioxide.

The only certainty is that, if it is given the go-ahead, biochar will produce profits for industry. The governments of Micronesia, Belize and 11 African countries are formally supporting a proposal that biochar should be made eligible for large-scale carbon credits through the Clean Development Mechanism. Without strong opposition, there is every chance that the UN climate conference in Copenhagen will put in place unproven measures to ensure yet another major land-grab in the name of “climate change mitigation”.³

A stinging attack on Monsanto⁴

A quirky alliance that brings together organic farmers, anti-capitalism activists, churches and politicians from the conservative Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats, is seeking to expel the biotechnology giant Monsanto from

Germany. The latest phase of the dispute involves an amateur beekeeper, Karl Heinz Bablok. When he wants to relax after his shift in a BMW factory, Bablok gets on his bike and pedals to Kaisheim, a quiet town in south-west Germany where he keeps his beehives. Bablok got involved in the controversy because he realised that some of his bees were collecting pollen from fields where the Bavarian State Centre of Agricultural Research is carrying out tests on Monsanto’s GM maize (MON 810). He asked the authorities to test his honey to see if it had been contaminated.

To Bablok’s dismay, the tests showed that up to 7 per cent of the pollen collected by his bees came from GM maize. A local court decided that Bablok was not allowed to sell – or even to give away – his honey. He became the first beekeeper in the country’s history to be told to send his honey to an incinerator. He is now suing the agricultural centre and demanding €10,000 in compensation. It is proving a complicated case and has already been referred upwards twice. A third court is due to reach a decision soon. Bablok has received a great deal of public support. It seems clear that a decision in Bablok’s favour would be seen by the public as definitive proof that GM crops pose a risk to human health, and that it is perhaps time for a badly stung Monsanto to leave the country.



³ For more information see Almuth Ernsting and Rachel Smolker, “Biochar for Climate Change Mitigation: Fact or Fiction?”. <http://tinyurl.com/csf14a>. To find out more about biochar and the case against it, contact biochar_concerns@yahoo.co.uk

⁴ For a fuller account of this dispute, see Uwe Buse, “Monsanto’s uphill GMO fight in Germany”, *Business Week*, 6 March 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/cfcefcm>