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Historicizing Food Sovereignty: a Food Regime Perspective

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Abstract

To historicize food sovereignty is to situate it: first, as a strategic countermovement in/of the food regime; and second, by historicizing the food regime itself to identify the shifting terrain of food sovereignty politics. While the global agrarian crisis of the late-twentieth century precipitated the movement, it was part of a continuing crisis accompanying the long-twentieth century food regime and its competitive assault on farming systems across the world. This assault, in the name of free trade, development and food security, has imposed a model of 'agriculture without farmers' in a world equating industrial efficiency with human progress. Food sovereignty is a culminating protective movement against the deceit of 'feeding the world' by undermining farming with the false economy of value relations of the food regime.

At the same time, transformation of the current food regime poses new challenges with schemes to capitalize lands in the global South. Whereas in 2000 *Vía Campesina* claimed: "the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people," now the massive movement of capital around the world increases the movement of people, and food. Beyond deepening this unsustainable scenario, the capitalization project aims to feed the world a new deceit by converting smallholders into value-chain 'outgrowers' for world markets. Such appropriation of food sovereignty claims for smallholder recognition nonetheless confronts smallholders with extractive market relations including a form of land grab. Fallout from the recent 'food crisis' indicates that neoliberal re-colonization has the potential to consolidate food sovereignty alliances around the politics of food grabbing.

Introduction

To historicize food sovereignty is not simply to recognize its multiple forms and circumstances, but also to recognize that it is integral to capital's dialectic. In other words food sovereignty is neither an ungrounded vision, nor an atavistic initiative. Arguably, some of the first forms of food sovereignty emerged during the collapse of the slave regimes in the nineteenth century, during which slaves fought for the right to have and maintain garden plots for subsistence (Tomich 2004). This micro-phenomenon expressed a self-determining impulse that is common enough in interstitial struggles across capitalist time. There are countless manifestations of this impulse today: from CSA's through Slow Food/fair trade operations (Fonte 2008, Friedmann and McNair), seed networks in Europe (Da Via 2012, Bocci and Colombo 2013) and *in situ* conservation of Mexican maize culture (Fitting 2011), to the phenomenon of the 'new peasantries' (van der Ploeg 2009). Their specificity lies in their claims to use exchange not for purposes of accumulation, but for reproduction of particular socio-ecological relations anchored in principles of self-determination/organization.

Whether such initiatives are alternative or oppositional may depend on class location and/or concerns with social justice, or simply survival. It all depends on the (interpretation of the) circumstances. The unifying thread of course is ‘food sovereignty,’ the meaning of which is evolving with an elasticity that implicates groups and practices beyond its roots in the countryside. Irena Knezivic (2014), for example, argues that anti-smallholder European Enlargement policies in the Balkan states have galvanized civic resistance via informalization, including proliferating farmers’ markets, as an incipient form of food sovereignty appropriate to this episode of shock therapy. As José Bové and Francois Dufour of *La Confédération Paysanne Européenne* (CPE) observed of the food sovereignty movement:

The strength of this global movement is precisely that it differs from place to place... The world is a complex place, and it would be a mistake to look for a single answer to complex and different phenomena. We have to provide answers at different levels – not just the international level, but local and national levels too. History shows that each phase of political development has a corresponding institutional form: France’s response to the Industrial Revolution was the nation-state; the WTO is the expression of this phase of the liberalization of world trade (2001:168).

This quote invokes the question of sovereignty. While the term employs a form of ‘strategic essentialism,’ addressed below, it foreshadows a more complex reformulation of the ‘territory of self-determination,’ which, as Michael Menser (2014) argues, can only be resolved through a re-territorialization of class war, given the violent histories of the state system, and of course appropriate bioregional spatial patterning (Duncan 1996).¹ Karl Polanyi anticipated *food* sovereignty when, observing competitive pressure on European producers from cheap New World grains in the initial food regime, he remarked: “it had been forgotten by free traders that land formed part of the territory of the country, and that the territorial character of sovereignty was not merely a result of sentimental associations, but of massive facts, including economic ones” (1957:183-4).

To raise the ‘territorial’ question is to underline the salience and immanence of the food sovereignty movement – an immanence, I might add, over-determined by an unfolding global ecological crisis compressing time by space, as current trends in energy, water and food flows from countryside to city become unsustainable.² We are becoming aware of this future as the food regime crisis deepens.

¹ Here, the recent Land Sovereignty manifesto: Towards a Peoples’ Counter-Enclosure, represents a practical grounding of the food sovereignty theme (Borras and Franco 2012).

² For instance, the severity of drought in the American Southwest now portends a new ‘dust bowl’ devastating the land, crops and farm communities, and an EU commission predicts biannual occurrence of severe heat waves like that in 2003 by 2040 (Abramsky 2013).

The food sovereignty countermovement

The recent ‘food crisis’ is a manifestation of a deeper agrarian crisis associated with the long-twentieth century food regime, and its reproduction of capital’s labor force via cheap food provisioning. How such provisioning is accomplished, and under what geopolitical relations and institutional rules, registers the food regime’s cumulative forms (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). But the constant is a deepening metabolic rift as food supply chains have lengthened and insulated consumers from a sustained process of ecosystem plundering. The central agro-exporting principle of the food regime has served to displace producers by violent processes of land grabbing on the one hand,³ and market dumping on the other.⁴ While the former process characterizes the capitalist era at large, a cheap food regime has only been institutionalized, *globally*, during the neoliberal era (Rosset 2006). Here, agro-exporting via *both* southern debt management and northern subsidies has systematically undermined smallholder economy — precipitating a peasant counter-movement, organized around the principle of ‘food sovereignty’ (McMichael 2005). This principle ultimately concerns the question of appropriate ways of living on Earth at a time of rising urban redundancy and ecosystem crisis.

However, this counter-movement is not simply a peasant movement. While the origins of ‘food sovereignty’ lie in a peasant response⁵ to a sharpening agrarian crisis under the neoliberal project, the movement’s political calculus has been governed by the demands of the historical conjuncture rather than a conventional peasant demand for agrarian reform *per se*.⁶ Thus, for example, the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty declares: “In the context of food sovereignty, agrarian reform benefits all of society, providing healthy, accessible and culturally appropriate food, and social justice. Agrarian reform can put an end to the massive and forced rural exodus from the countryside to the city, which has made cities grow at unsustainable rates and under inhuman conditions” (2006).⁷ One of many such proclamations,

³ Colonial land grabbing includes requisitioning of subjects’ grain reserves (Davis 2001).

⁴ Dumping of northern foodstuffs in southern markets characterized the 1980s-90s, and this has extended in the twenty-first century to the experience of Eastern European countries joining the EU and being subject to German and French supermarket colonization (LVC July 25, 2013).

⁵ The progenitor of food sovereignty, La Vía Campesina, emerged at a meeting of farmers’ organizations, from Latin America and Europe, in Managua in 1992. As founding member, Paul Nicholson of the International Coordinating Committee put it: ‘At that time, we issued a “Managua declaration” where we denounced the “agrarian crisis” and “rural poverty and hunger” resulting from the neo-liberal policies’ (Nicholson 2008, 456). Four years later, in Tlaxcala, Mexico, a Vía Campesina working group coined the term ‘food sovereignty,’ which ‘was adopted by the whole movement and then defended publicly for the first time at the FAO World Food Summit in Rome’ later in 1996.

⁶ This is a key point made by Alana Mann (2014).

⁷ Sofía Monsalve Suárez (2013) underlines this point in distinguishing between land rights and human rights -- the latter involving states directly in addressing the socio-ecological function of land, including rights for the landless.

this statement links the land question to the broader policy issue of producer rights, poverty elimination and reversal of a perverse process of urban bias. Contrary to the classical agrarian question problematic, the movement privileges peasant agency in a programmatic approach to restoring the viability of the countryside for farming and addressing domestic food security (McMichael 2013c). This has been a first step, anticipating ecological initiatives (see, eg, Massicotte 2014).

A superficial understanding of this intervention would be to cast it as mere populism. But an historicized understanding might recognize this peasant reflex as expressing the proverbial ‘canary in the mine,’ where “the condition of the world’s peasantries today is an indicator of a toxic combination of ignorance of the ecological and social harm to the planet by industrial agriculture, and its enabling policies of neo-liberalism” (McMichael 2008:504). Peasant mobilization may be seen as the (not too) early warning of a socio-ecological catastrophe in the making – with a unique ability to name the problem. The uniqueness is not an abstract function of being “capital’s other,” rather it is the ability to problematize current world ordering from the most fundamental perspective of its form of food provisioning (integrating environment, energy and resource flows with urban ‘civilization’).

Phenomenally, the problem is cast, by *La Vía Campesina* (2000), as the food regime’s “massive movement of food around the world forcing the increased movement of people” (displacement). *Substantively* (and historically) this is about dispossession – not simply of land, but of landed knowledge and ways of life critical to planetary survival. Rather than restoring a romantic Eden, the countermovement has a positive agenda: re-envisioning the conditions necessary to develop sustainable and democratic forms of social reproduction. That is, the advocacy of farming rights is framed within a broader vision of how to rethink the ecological conditions and scale at which human communities can live, and survive. Instead of a “dying echo of populist thought,” this movement represents “an active anti-systemic struggle” (Ajl 2013:9).

Thus, at the time of Rio +20, *La Vía Campesina* declared:

20 years after the Earth Summit, life on the planet has become dramatically difficult. The number of hungry people has increased to almost a billion, which means that one out of every six people is going hungry, mostly children and women in the countryside. Expulsion from our lands and territories is accelerating, no longer only due to conditions of disadvantage imposed upon us by trade agreements and the industrial sector, but by new forms of monopoly control over land and water, by the global imposition of

intellectual property regimes that steal our seeds, by the invasion of transgenic seeds, and by the advance of monoculture plantations, mega-projects, and mines.

We should exchange the industrial agroexport food system for a system based on food sovereignty, that returns the land to its social function as the producer of food and sustainer of life, that puts local production of food at the center, as well as the local markets and local processing... (2012a)

In other words, the current food regime⁸ stands in the way of human food security, democracy, ecosystem restoration, and livable scales where urban forms might be calibrated with rural proximity to repair and reduce the metabolic rift (Lappé 1971, Duncan 1996, Friedmann 2000, Schneider and McMichael 2010).

Accordingly, rather than center its politics in peasant claims alone, the movement chose a political target with a broader, conjunctural theme: the ‘food security’ claims of a privatizing trade regime. ‘Food sovereignty’ politicized this naturalized claim for market rationality in global food provisioning by counterposing a historic claim for food self-reliance as a sovereign right of peoples: in effect challenging the operating principles of the food regime.

Three issues stem from this strategic intervention. First, food sovereignty is centered on the ‘right to food.’ Second, food sovereignty drew attention to the deceit of feeding the world with the claim of providing food security through a marketplace in which only a minority of the world’s population participates. And third, food sovereignty’s politicization of agri-food policy includes demands for a democratic resolution to the question of food security, anticipating a broader political alliance focusing on ecological and public health (cf Lang and Heasman 2004). The ‘food sovereignty’ initiative thus outlined a critique of the institutional structuring of the current, corporate food regime at the same time as it reformulated conditions necessary to food security – rooted in a restatement of the social contract appropriate to an era of ecological crisis. Hannah Wittman’s term ‘agrarian citizenship’ (2009) captures part of this sensibility – problematizing modernity’s urban bias, as reproduced in Mike Davis’ notion of the Ark-like responsibility of the metropolis in combating climate change (Davis 2010, but see Ajl 2013).

While championing an International Convention on the Rights of Peasants, who include farmers, landless and indigenous people who work the land themselves, Paul Nicholson suggests, aptly, that the name *Vía Campesina* refers to “a process of peasant culture, a peasant ‘way’.” He continues:

⁸ As the “political face of global value relations” (Araghi 2003) the ‘food regime’ implies historically specific forms of geo/political and human-ecological ordering premised on flows of (artificially) cheap food and energy.

The debate isn't in the word "farmer" or "peasant." The debate is much more about the process of cohesion.... It is a process of accumulation of forces and realities coming together from the citizens of the entire planet. Food sovereignty is not just resistances, as there are thousands of resistances, but also proposals that come from social movements, and not just peasant movements. From environmental movements, among others, come many initiatives that develop proposals of recuperation, of rights, of policies. This is also an autonomous and independent process. There is no central committee, and food sovereignty is not the patrimony of any particular organisation. It's not La Vía Campesina's project, or even just a peasants' project. It is a proposal, based on principles of struggle and objectives, coming from social movements, not from institutions or organisations. It is being constructed from the local level, and we're going to continue accumulating strength towards a national force and an international expression (2009: 678-80).

It is in this sense that Marc Edelman suggests 'peasantness' is a political rather than an analytical category (2009). That is, more than an atavistic populism, food sovereignty is a historical wedge to recognize and promote 'alternative' socio-ecological relations in a crisis conjuncture of material and epistemic dimensions. Those skeptical of such revisioning risk normalizing the path taken by a predatory political-economic system, dedicated not only to land concentration, but also to an unsustainable agriculture that feeds and fuels a world minority with purchasing power,⁹ reproducing an overconsumption/underconsumption relationship on a world scale (Patel 2007, Araghi 2009). In short, food sovereignty is a civilizational movement, combining a conjunctural critique of neoliberal 'food security' (as a corporate power play and a confidence trick in equating agro-exporting with 'feeding the world') with long-held principles of self-determination reframed as democratic rights for and of citizens and humans. The central ethic — food as a right, not a commodity — expresses the movement's potent politicization of neoliberal 'food security.'

The claim for a civilizational movement suggests that the long-term vision of food sovereignty elevates human security over the principle of national security. This is where 'sovereignty' has multi-dimensional meaning. Initially a form of strategic essentialism, using the idiom of sovereignty to reclaim lost juridical ground (including land) in the short term, it reformulates the meaning of 'sovereignty' in the long term. In addition to reclaiming the right of national autonomy over food policy, the food sovereignty movement seeks restoration of a territorial understanding of food security, which at the present time may strengthen and require state

⁹ Recent evidence establishes the relative/superior productivity of non-industrial, organic agriculture (eg, Pretty et al 2006, Badgley et al 2007, IAASTD 2008).

involvement in food provisioning but also in the longer term encourage ecosystem stewardship in the interests of humanity at large. The drive for domestic food security may appear to promote national self-interest, but there are two parts to this process: (1) revaluing our agrarian foundations requires a 're-territorialization' of food, and (2) such domestic food security initiatives explicitly challenge the violence of the 'comparative advantage' principle in the state system, which enables agribusiness to construct (and reconstruct) world producing regions, promoting agro-exporting at the expense of the land and its inhabitants everywhere. Democratization of food systems has potential to recalibrate urban and manufacturing forms as partners rather than predators of the countryside, and eliminate the redundancy and disorder of inter-state competition.

Food crisis

As above, the food crisis was/is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. As Giovanni Arrighi (1994) might say, this is a signal crisis. And it is recognized in an array of responses, ranging from the UN *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005) through the 2006 *Stern Review*, the FAO's *Organic Agriculture and Food Security* (2007) report, and the World Bank's belated recognition of agriculture in its *World Development Report* (2008), to the UN/World Bank *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development* (2008). The World Food Summit in Rome, June 2008, set the stage for a series of value chain initiatives, largely focused on Africa, from AGRA to the African Agricultural Growth Corridors initiative associated with The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013, see also Patel 2013). Overnight the African smallholder, representing a substantial remnant of the world's peasantry, has become the new object of development (McMichael 2013b).

In context of the 2008 Rome Summit, the IPC for Food Sovereignty drafted the *Terra Preta* Declaration, stating:

The serious and urgent food and climate crises are being used by political and economic elites as opportunities to entrench corporate control of world agriculture and the ecological commons. At a time when chronic hunger, dispossession of food providers and workers, commodity and land speculation, and global warming are on the rise, governments, multilateral agencies and financial institutions are offering proposals that will only deepen these crisis through more dangerous versions of policies that originally triggered the current situation.... Small-scale food producers are feeding the planet, and we demand respect and support to continue. Only food sovereignty can offer long-term, sustainable, equitable and just solutions to the urgent food and climate crises.

While the corporate world views crisis as a new profit frontier, being unable to imagine

solutions outside of this paradigm, those most directly affected were already mobilizing (as opposed to differentiating) – at least a decade earlier against the conditions that would manifest in the agflation of the late-2000s. The peasant counter-movement had already anticipated the ‘crisis,’ as its members were already experiencing the contradictions of the food regime in a global agrarian crisis.

The canary-like response of the peasant movement at the turn of the twenty-first century is, as suggested, a warning. The capitalist development narrative may have portrayed the peasantry as an historical relic and an “unlimited supply of labour” -- reformulated now perhaps as an “agrarian question of labour” (Bernstein 2010) -- nevertheless this *telos* has justified (normalized) what might be called an enduring ‘holocaust’ for people of the land (cf Davis 2001). The narrative itself directs attention to the processes of differentiation and disintegration of the peasantry as capital’s home market forms (Lenin 1972). Classical analysts may consider *how* de-agrarianization is accomplished as the very stuff of the agrarian question, but *why* is the more urgent and encompassing question (McMichael 2013c). Why concerns the paradigmatic assumption about the direction of human (and capitalist) development: an epistemic issue regarding an economic calculus that discounts human and ecological consequences. The most dramatic version of this episteme is the current state plan to urbanize up to 250 million Chinese peasants by 2025 (Johnson 2013) – purportedly to sustain Chinese economic growth by enlarging capital’s home market. Nothing could be more faithful to the theoretical scenario of capital subordinating landed property, and nothing could be more symbolic of the hubris of capitalist modernity.

Who else could give voice to such calamity but the ‘canary in the mine’? And the canary is the ‘tester’, and as such in this case assumes a prophetic role as a defender of the land against capital’s juggernaut and presumption of smallholder obsolescence. Thus a founding member of La Vía Campesina, Nettie Wiebe, claimed: “It’s a movement of people of the land who share a progressive agenda. Which means we share the view that people – small farmers, peasants, people of the land – have a right to be there.... That it’s our job to look after the earth and our people. We must defend it and we have to defend it in the global context” (quoted in Desmarais 2002: 98).

Food regime crisis

The food crisis of the late 2000s registered the crisis of the food regime. The food regime rested its legitimacy on its claim for ‘food security,’ and it was this claim that the peasant counter-movement politicized, from direct experience of public neglect and price assaults from the grain traders (Nicholson 2008:456). The agrarian crisis of this neoliberal conjuncture included an “income deflation” via neoliberal policies, rendering social

reproduction of smallholders increasingly unviable. Such “accumulation by encroachment” contributed to a deepening stagnation in food supply, and smallholder inability to respond to price hikes by growing more food (Patnaik 2008:113).¹⁰

The agrarian crisis was compounded by falling agro-industrial grain yields -- from increases between 5 and 10 percent at the height of the green revolution (1960s) to 1 percent or less in the new millennium (Cribb 2010:8). Tony Weis notes that “the volume of per capita grain production on a global scale has been level since peaking in 1986” (Weis 2010:327). Such material limits are socially constructed, of course, including: annual losses in soil erosion exceeding nutrients applied worldwide as fertilizer at a rate likely to destroy two-thirds of the world’s productive land by 2050; the collapse of the global nutrient cycle with phosphorus peaking in 2030; rising competition for available freshwater for agriculture, which already uses 70 percent; the predicted collapse of the ocean fish catch by 2040; and a calorie inflation since the 1960s of 20 percent per average global citizen (Cribb 2010:10–11, 54, 76; Cordell 2009). As Weis maintains, the “ecological hoofprint” is not only amplifying the “biophysical contradictions” of industrial agriculture, but also it comes at a very unequal social price (2013).

Food regime crisis was expressed in a cascade of ‘food riots,’ the most notable in Haiti, Italy, Uzbekistan, Morocco, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, India, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Yemen, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mexico and Argentina -- with up to thirty countries experiencing food protests over this period (Jafri 2008). In the first eight years of the 2000s, world grain production lagged steadily behind consumption (Cribb 2010:3), from 2005–07 food prices rose 75 percent and world grain reserves reached their lowest level (Holt-Giménez and Kenfield 2008:3). By mid-2009, almost one-sixth of humanity (about 1 billion) were considered hungry or undernourished, especially women. And almost three-quarters of this world sub-group reside in rural areas. By 2011, the food crisis had returned with a vengeance, food prices surpassing those of 2008.

As above, the food crisis of the late 2000s revealed the truths identified by the food sovereignty movement a decade earlier, namely the inability of the food regime to guarantee its ‘food security’ claims. Furthermore, the counter-movement argued that the food regime was predicated on generating food insecurity (McMichael 2003). This latter outcome was written into WTO protocols stipulating an end to food self-reliance policies in the name of free markets – as Sophia Murphy wrote: “The Agreement on Agriculture prescribes a model for agriculture that has basically only one dimension: increasing agricultural production for exports, importing what cannot be produced without tariff protection or subsidies to producers” (1999:2). Devinder Sharma noted, for India: “whereas for small farmers the subsidies have been

¹⁰ Agri-chemical (including fertilizer) costs spiked during this time also, putting the squeeze on farmers.

withdrawn, there is a lot of support now for agribusiness industry... The result is that the good area under staple crops is now shifting to export crops, so we'll have to import staple food" (quoted in Madeley 2000:79). While 90 percent of agricultural expenditures in Latin America were devoted to food crop research in the 1980s, during the 1990s 80 percent focused on export crops (Madeley 2000:54-5). WTO protocols institutionalized a structural adjustment assault on public supports for domestic food systems beginning during the debt regime of the 1980s – the consequence being a renewal of agrarian crisis that spawned *Vía Campesina*. The universalization of agro-exporting not only depleted the economy of smallholders, but also it rendered food dependent populations vulnerable to a series of export bans implemented by some key grain exporters in 2007-08.¹¹

The spike in world hunger in the late 2000s underscored the food insecure consequences of the food regime, at the same time as the dynamics of the crisis (export bans in particular) revealed the tenuous and contradictory nature of a state-centered free trade regime. Harriet Friedmann notes that food regimes embody naturalized assumptions as "implicit rules guiding relationships, practices and outcomes" (2005:234). One such assumption is that the market is the most efficient provider of food security in a divided world. Here, moving food across borders is ideally a market operation, and adherence to the principle of comparative advantage guides WTO trade protocols (debilitating smallholder agriculture). Friedmann's point is that when these assumptions are breached, what was implicit or normalized may become explicit, problematic and contentious. Arguably, 'comparative advantage' as the rationale of market-driven 'food security' has become problematic and contentious as export bans and commandeering offshore land for food supplies call the trade regime into question. In other words, it's not that capital's 'other' has named the food regime's contradictions, but that these contradictions are manifest in material crisis and a process of food regime restructuring.

The food crisis embodies the entwined energy, climate and financial crises, crystallized in the so-called 'land grab' for food and agrofuels (Houtart 2010), carbon sinks (Fairhead et al 2012), and as a new financial asset (Russi 2013, Fairbairn 2013). Capitalizing a new land frontier for agro-industrialization deepens capitalism's second contradiction (O'Connor 1998),¹² at the same time as it threatens the rights and habitats of people of the land.¹³ Capitalizing grassland

¹¹ In 2008, wheat export restrictions in Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, and Argentina closed off a third of the global market, and for rice, export bans or restrictions from China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, India and Cambodia left only a few export suppliers, mainly Thailand and the United States (GRAIN 2008:2).

¹² Terry Marsden points out that the assumption that "sustainable intensification" resolves a "yield gap" misleads insofar as the bioeconomic paradigm reproduces generic and aggregated solutions that override specific ecosystems and their sustainability (2012:263).

¹³ In this regard, Smita Narula comments on the World Bank's approach to land acquisition:

In many respects, the use of satellite imagery to identify investment-worthy sites stands as a metaphor for the Bank's current approach. Technocrats, physically and professionally removed from the land in question,

and forestland with agro-inputs degrades the natural foundations of production. Global fertilizer use is now intensified by agrofuels and the removal of cellulose fiber from fields (ETC 2009).¹⁴ When displacement of food crops by agrofuels is paired with financial speculation on food futures and rising fertilizer costs,¹⁵ the ability of the land-grab frontier to provide cheap energy and food supplies to reduce capital's costs of production and reproduction, will be short-lived.

The land grab is a phenomenal form of the restructuring of the food/fuel regime, via the transformation of its geography and governance, and a renewed challenge to the world's smallholders. The land grab contributes to the general process of relocation of food production for the global market to the South, combining cost saving and 'agro-security mercantilism' (McMichael 2013a). The consequence is to reverse patterns of food circulation associated with the previous food regimes -- originating in grain exports from the settler regions and then the global North in general (USA/Europe), with rising Southern agro-exporting creating a multi-centric geography of food and agrofuel circulation enabled by a complex of (hitherto soft law) rules and codes of conduct, beyond the jurisdiction of the WTO (McMichael 2012). Such land acquisition protocols (such as the Bank's Principles of Responsible Agricultural Investment) -- aptly characterized as "responsibly destroying the world's peasantry" (de Schutter 2010) -- foreshadow global enclosure in the name of market rule. This process promises to reconstitute circulation patterns of commodities increasingly fungible as food, feed, fuel, and plant matter.¹⁶ As such, a 'flex crop' syndrome is unlikely to reduce the upward pressure on food prices, as was evident during the 2008 'food crisis.'

The challenge to smallholders is intensified here, as not only is some of their land subject to, or under consideration for, appropriation – for productive, speculative or even political motives (cf Kerssen 2013), but a perhaps more subtle 'grab' (as in control) is foreshadowed in the (primarily African) 'value-chain project.' Here the value-chain is a conduit of global value relations, drawing producers into competitive markets over which they have no control, in return for contracting for agri-food inputs (seed, fertilizer, chemicals) that extract new value from producers via their products and centralize agricultural knowledge as 'intellectual property,'

use tools that are even further removed in time and space in order to assess land's current and potential value. This approach assumes that land and resources can be quantified by objective, distant images, and that the myriad uses, customs, and benefits informing the interests of land users can be captured, guaranteed, and marketized through written, formally-demarcated rights. These assumptions belie the complexity of land's real value to those who depend on it as a source of spiritual, social, and economic sustenance as well as a guarantor of rights (2013:169-70).

¹⁴ FAOSTAT reports from 1990-2002 China increased fertilizer usage 44%, India 33%, Pakistan 61% and Brazil 137% (Cribb 2010:122).

¹⁵ In addition to oil price inflation, peak phosphate (no substitutes) occurred in 1989 (Cribb 2010:76).

¹⁶ Borras et al (2012) describe the materiality of these crops as 'flex crops.'

with increased exposure to debt and dispossession for producers, and reduction of local food security (McMichael 2013b). The value-chain project is designed to convert otherwise local farming into commodity-producing labor for a deepening global market in food and fuel. While the infrastructure and mode of circulation is still forming, it is likely to produce a similar outcome to the green revolution, where a sub-set of consumers and farmers prosper (for a time) without altering the incidence and/or geography of hunger (Patel 2013).

Food sovereignty politics

The food sovereignty counter-movement anticipated the food crisis as the eventual consequence of decades of agricultural restructuring and weakening by structural adjustment and its institutionalization in the WTO regime.¹⁷ Politicization of ‘food security’ was confirmed in the food crisis, giving new impetus to the agenda of food sovereignty.¹⁸ Arguably, the world is in a new/transitional phase, acknowledged widely as a crisis conjuncture.

In this context a series of high-level initiatives emerged from and around the 2008 World Food Summit in Rome, refocusing ‘food security’ around smallholder agriculture (McMichael and Schneider 2011), potentially diluting FAO responsibilities and relocating food security initiatives from the UN. Civil society organizations countered with South American countries in implementing a reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to reassert the importance of a truly multilateral governance system against those versions of the World Bank, the WTO and the OECD countries (Vía Campesina 2012b:4). Despite its shortcomings (eg corporate membership, absence of explicit food sovereignty reference), the reformed CFS acknowledges the right to food, includes ongoing civil society input, and recognizes the subsidiarity principle – all essential elements of food sovereignty. The key is that the CFS is a new space for debate at the global level informed by social movement and civil society representations of food security initiatives beyond the corporate vision. As La Vía Campesina claims:

social movements now have a new international tool they can use when the time comes to demand from their governments local or national measures to stop land grabbing. An important methodological step has also been taken as the [voluntary] guidelines illustrate that direct participation in the drawing up of policies by the people most concerned by the topic is both possible and fruitful... To have managed to withdraw

¹⁷ Analogously, Susan George noted that famines represent a final stage in the extended process of deepening vulnerability and fracturing of social reproduction mechanisms (1977).

¹⁸ At least two dozen countries have embraced the right to food, with half a dozen (Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nepal, Mali and Senegal) including food sovereignty in their constitutions (Rose 2012:174).

from the hands of the World Bank the monopoly on the definition of policies in the area of land access and agrarian reform is a significant achievement (Ibid:11).

However, it also acknowledges:

For social movements participation in a body such as the CFS is a huge challenge for which they are not necessarily prepared, due in particular to their lack of familiarity with the culture of negotiation and tiny steps forward that lies at the heart of negotiations in a multilateral system. On some topics such as the FAO Voluntary Guidelines., representatives of movements such as La Vía Campesina can rely on like-minded organizations. These collaborations are efficient as they respect the character and skills of the different parties. But on other subjects it may be impossible to monitor everything. An active participation in the Civil Society Mechanism may demand huge resources in time and people from social movements...Representatives are also faced with the problem of the working language...The other main difficulty is the discrepancy between what social movements experience on the ground and the documents discussed by the CFS (Ibid:8).

Nonetheless, on balance the reformed CFS is a positive development, providing opportunity for a food sovereignty presence, and particularly a forum for domestic food security debate and initiatives (see McKeon 2011). Here, the CFS, in countering the Bank's PRAI and its support for the rights of capital, has refocused on the rights of inhabitants on lands targeted for agricultural investment. Key to this initiative are two alternative policy frameworks: the Voluntary Guidelines (designed to strengthen recognition of customary property tenure and address gender inequity), and the Minimum Human Rights Principle proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food.

The food crisis has strengthened initiatives within the UN to recalibrate the trade regime to legitimize domestic food security measures. In this post-global food crisis context, UN Human Rights Rapporteur Olivier de Schutter recommends:

WTO members should redefine how food security is treated in multilateral trade agreements so that policies to achieve food security and the realization of the human right to adequate food are no longer treated as deviations from but as recognized principal objectives of agricultural trade policy. *Food security is presently treated under the WTO as the grounds for exceptions for a very limited range of trade liberalization commitments.* A more appropriate reframing of agricultural trade rules would explicitly recognize that market-determined outcomes do not necessarily improve food security

and that the purpose of agricultural trade rules should be to facilitate food security-enhancing policies, even though this may require limiting the pace of trade liberalization in some sectors and/or granting States additional policy flexibility in pursuit of international recognized food security objectives (2011:16, emphasis added).

Food crisis de-legitimization of ‘free trade’ in the form of new food insecurity vulnerabilities, and land grab-based overrides of WTO rules via food-dependent states, deepens the crisis of the WTO-based food regime.¹⁹ Space is opened for reformulations of food security that ultimately connect to support of smallholder farming via the principle of the right to food (as opposed to an investor-driven ‘right to food’ via land grabbing). Arguably this is the pivotal issue at stake at the local as well as the ‘high-level’ scales. With respect to the food insecurity fallout from the ‘food crisis,’ de Schutter observes that adopting “a human rights framework... may guide the redefinition of the policy priorities triggered by the current crisis. The question ‘for whose benefit?’ is at least as important as the question ‘how to produce more?’” (2008).

In this context, however, the World Economic Forum and the G8 have countered with the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (2012), for example – not only to re-appropriate ‘food security,’ but also to regroup and reformulate governing mechanisms to commandeer African land, water, and labor, and to monopolize seeds and markets. As British PM David Cameron put it so bluntly, this initiative will “unleash the power of the private sector,” with a pledge of aid to the tune of \$22 billion, stipulating that recipient governments “refine policies in order to improve investment opportunities” (quoted in Paul and Steinbrecher 2013). If the trade regime is vulnerable to price shocks and export bans, then non-trade partnerships²⁰ solutions based on direct, subsidized investment by agribusiness become the new institutional mechanisms of the food regime.

GRAIN’s account of rice markets in Côte d’Ivoire is telling in terms of the current food regime trajectory: formerly self-sufficient in rice, the national rice company was privatized along with elimination of public support for agriculture via structural adjustment. By the 1990s two-thirds of rice consumed was imported from Asia (the new global rice bowl?), but, with rice price inflation in 2008, local rice “costs 15 percent less than imports...demand is growing.. [and]

¹⁹ More recently, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (with 11 members) is looming as a regional ‘free trade’ agreement aimed at China’s growing world influence, intensifying agricultural liberalization rules (that following WTO paralysis), and representing a further end-run around domestic food security initiatives. Led by the US, the TPP is a confidential, corporate-focused initiative aimed at dismantling remaining market protections and it “would expand protections for investors over consumers and farmers, and severely restrict governments’ ability to use public policy to reshape food systems” (Karen Hansen-Kuhn, quoted by Muller et al 2012:3).

²⁰ To date, the G8 has signed Cooperation Frameworks since the New Alliance formed in May 2012 with Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique and Tanzania (GRAIN 2013:3).

women rice traders have recently formed several cooperatives and have even created brands for local rice” (2013:1). To northern governments, donors and corporations the re-establishment of control via *non-trade* solutions is irresistible. Thus:

Under its Cooperation Framework, Côte d’Ivoire promises to reform its land laws and make other policy changes to facilitate private investment in agriculture. In exchange, it gets hundreds of millions of dollars in donor assistance and promises from eight foreign companies and their local partners to invest nearly US\$800 million in the development of massive rice farms (GRAIN 2013:1).

Governance mechanisms for the NASFN include policy commitments by African states to facilitate access to key agricultural lands, using data bases, resettlement policies and measures authorizing communities “to engage in partnerships through leases or sub-leases” (Ibid:5). *In other words, elites from the national down to the local level are being mobilized to participate in a process that La Vía Campesina might well rephrase as: “the massive movement of money around the world is forcing the increased movement of people.”* Governance includes New Alliance partners confirming their “intentions” to “take account” of the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) and the Voluntary Guidelines (Ibid:6).

At the same time, the G8 threatens to override the CFS Tenure Guidelines (the VGs) by launching a new transparency in land transactions initiative. While the Voluntary Guidelines (which insist on Free, Prior and Informed Consent procedures to honor the rights of landed peoples), embody the legitimate requirements of the CFS and to which states (including the G8) have committed, the G8’s new initiative “is attempting, yet again,²¹ to enforce the principle that money and markets decide what is best for the world” (FIAN 2013). In other words, political and corporate elites are maneuvering to undermine the newly established authority of the CFS as the appropriate forum for global initiatives on land, food and nutrition. A corporate counter-movement is in full swing, as is evident in the new land grab.

Not only has the crisis called into question the trade regime, but also its encouragement of land grabbing highlights the subordination of agricultural land to financial markets. The fetishization of agriculture via speculation in land as a financial asset, and episodes of land grabbing, is clearly on display. There is a direct, and an indirect, consequence for the peasant counter-movement. In the direct sense, the peasant movement (and allies) is confronted with ongoing construction of appropriation protocols, direct expropriation and expulsion from lands acquired by national or foreign interests. In this context, agrarian counter-movements are substituting a human rights framework to defend territory and land access for the landless as

²¹ Following rejection of the Bank’s RAI principles by the CFS, and substitution of the VGs.

an effective legal method of avoiding entrapment in a discourse of market-based rights -- insisting that “rights are social conquests” (Henry Saragih, quoted by Monsalve Suárez 2013:277), and that “the home states of these companies to regulate the behavior of their companies abroad” (Ibid:243). Reference to international human rights law brings into play international advocacy networks and international forums such as the CFS. This struggle has the potential to build on “broader alliances among different actors, for instance, peasants, consumers, law professionals, policy makers and scientists, and on the capacity to simultaneously operate at different levels and arenas of action” (Ibid:248). Land grabbing’s open season is already focusing public attention on its violations of rights and sovereignty, becoming an increasingly irresponsible way of threatening the world’s peasantry, and world food ecosystems resilience.

Indirectly, there are the more seductive methods of tenuous chaining of smallholders to new value circuits controlled by agribusiness and subsidized with public monies. Alongside AGRA, for example, is the African Agricultural Growth Corridors initiative, associated with The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) - composed of the African Union (AU), its planning body The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), several African governments, and 45 companies²² – many of which represent “the whole supply chain, from seeds, chemical inputs, production, processing, transport and trade to supermarkets” (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013:2). The NAFSN goals are “to identify suitable land for investors; to help the private sector to control and increase the use of agricultural inputs (fertilizers) and ‘improved’ (hybrid or GM) seeds and halt the distribution of free and ‘unimproved’ seeds (farmer varieties, often well adapted to local conditions and needs); and to mobilize public services to assist investors” (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013:4). Part of the latter include northern pension funds, regarded as ‘patient capital’ for infrastructural and climate proofing investment and as a public complement to private investment by agribusiness. While such initiatives promise to bring development opportunities to smallholders the consequence is more likely “to put Africa’s land, water and seeds [and labor] under the control of international traders and investors” (Ibid: 13).²³

Land grabbing via such direct or indirect methods is a recipe for intensifying the over-consumption/under-consumption/reproduction relationship that organizes the food regime, revisiting the global cascade of food riots across in the late 2000s. Predictions of rising food prices associated with energy, soil and climate crises, financialization and land grabbing, have

²² Eg, Monsanto, Cargill, Dupont, Syngenta, Nestlé, Unilever, Itochu, Yara International etc.

²³ Mozambique, for example, is required to write legislation promoting ‘partnerships’ and to eliminate distribution of free and unimproved seeds, while “any constraints on the behaviour of corporate investors in Africa (such as the CFS’ guidelines on land tenure) remain voluntary, while the constraints on host nations become compulsory” (Monbiot 2013).

the potential to not only politicize urban populations, but also to direct such politicization towards recognition of the importance of domestic agricultural sectors. As Farshad Araghi (2000) has reminded us, the agrarian question reaches beyond the countryside to the city, as destination of the dispossessed, and this link operates in reverse as the strategic importance of agriculture to cities becomes clear.²⁴

Arguably, the twenty-first agrarian question inverts the classical agrarian question with its theoretical focus on proletarian political opportunity, converting the question of capital's reproduction to a question of the reproduction of the food producer (McMichael, 2013c). In this context we might consider how Karl Kautsky's formulation has turned. As he remarked at the turn of the twentieth century:

What decides whether a farmer is ready to join the ranks of the proletariat in struggle is not whether he is starving or indebted, but whether he comes to market as a seller of labour-power or as a seller of food. Hunger and indebtedness by themselves do not create a community of interests with the proletariat as a whole; in fact they can sharpen the contradiction between peasant and proletarian once this hunger has been stilled and debts repaid, should food prices rise and make it impossible for workers to enjoy cheap food (1988:317).

The contemporary hunger regime (Araghi 2003, 2009) is not only shared across the rural/urban divide, but food price inflation does not trigger disaffection between the urban proletariat and the peasantry, rather it refocuses attention on the structuring of food systems and the politics of inequality. Thus:

In many different parts of the world – Egypt, Mexico, Mauritania and Bangladesh – rioter protest went beyond calls to reduce the price of food. The largely urban-based protests also critiqued the impact of existing globalization, international food regimes that transformed local systems of production and distribution, and political elites (authoritarian regimes) that benefited from the status quo... And it was mostly among the urban poor that violent protest erupted with hundreds of deaths worldwide... (Bush 2010:121).

²⁴ Related to this, Cohen and Garrett note: "in most countries, in cities other than the very largest 'primary' ones, agriculture is even more fundamental. Merchants and mechanics provide agricultural inputs and tools. Traders dynamically connect city and countryside. In some cities, a notable proportion of urban residents farm for a living (most likely on land outside the city). In Egypt and Malawi, 10 per cent of urban dwellers outside major metropolitan areas claimed agriculture production as their main occupation... As much as 40 per cent of the population of some African cities and up to 50 per cent in some Latin American cities engage in urban or peri-urban agriculture" (2009:6, 8).

In Haiti, for example, where President Préval was ousted following an impassive response to rice price doubling in a single week, income inequality is second only to that of Namibia in global terms, and the cost of living was the key cross-class complaint. Formerly a rice-exporter, Haiti imports about 82 percent of total consumption, and it is widely acknowledged (including by Presidents Préval and Clinton, the latter bearing substantial responsibility) that Haiti lost its food security and food sovereignty following externally imposed neoliberal measures (Schuller 2008). Interestingly, Schuller equates Haiti to ‘the canary in the mine,’ claiming: “Haiti needs to be seen as an early warning. Haiti’s geopolitical position – especially its proximity to the U.S. and its level of dependence on foreign aid – highlights the contradictions and flaws in the system of international aid and growing global food crisis. As such, the ‘riots’ are not expressions of an incomprehensibly backward Haitian mentality but rather a clear example and early warning if significant changes are not made to the system” (2008). It is therefore not surprising to read recently in *The New York Times*:

Across the Caribbean, food imports have become a budget-busting problem, prompting one of the world’s most fertile regions to reclaim its agricultural past. But instead of turning to big agribusinesses, officials are recruiting everyone they can to combat the cost of imports, which have roughly doubled in price over the past decade. In Jamaica, Haiti, the Bahamas and elsewhere, local farm-to-table production is not a restaurant sales pitch: it is a government motto.

“We’re in a food crisis,” said Hilson Baptiste, the agriculture minister of Antigua and Barbuda. “Every country is concerned about it. How can we produce our own? How can we feed our own?” (Cave 2013:6).

States can certainly respond to food crisis -- in Jamaica “members of rival parties have also been mostly unified in support of expanding agriculture by experimental means: Jamaica is now one of several countries that have given out thousands of seed kits to encourage backyard farming” (Idem). This may not be about restoring a Caribbean peasantry, but food sovereignty is not simply about peasants – its salience is universal, but with distinctive local meaning. Food provisioning is the Achilles heel of government: “failure to provide (food) security undermines the very reason for existence of the political system” (Lagi et al 2011). Under these conditions, the ‘food sovereignty’ slogan is no empty vision, its power vested in the increasingly obvious shortcomings of a competitive state system that has acquiesced in a regime commodifying food. Even President Clinton was able to understand this when he waxed Polanyian in his *mea culpa* of 2008: “food is not a commodity like others... it is crazy of us to think we can develop a

lot of these countries [by] treating food like it was a colour television set” (quoted in Patel 2010).

This sentiment gets to the point, namely that the food riot “concerns the political economy of food provisioning. From a world-historical perspective, the food riot has always been about more than food – its appearance has usually signaled significant transitions in political-economic arrangements” (Patel & McMichael 2009:11) – arguably the world is at a crisis threshold as the political-economic arrangements of the food regime are laid bare. The clustering of food riots, as in Figure 1, is indicative of a “rebellion against the political economy of neoliberalism, as expressed in local and national settings” (idem).

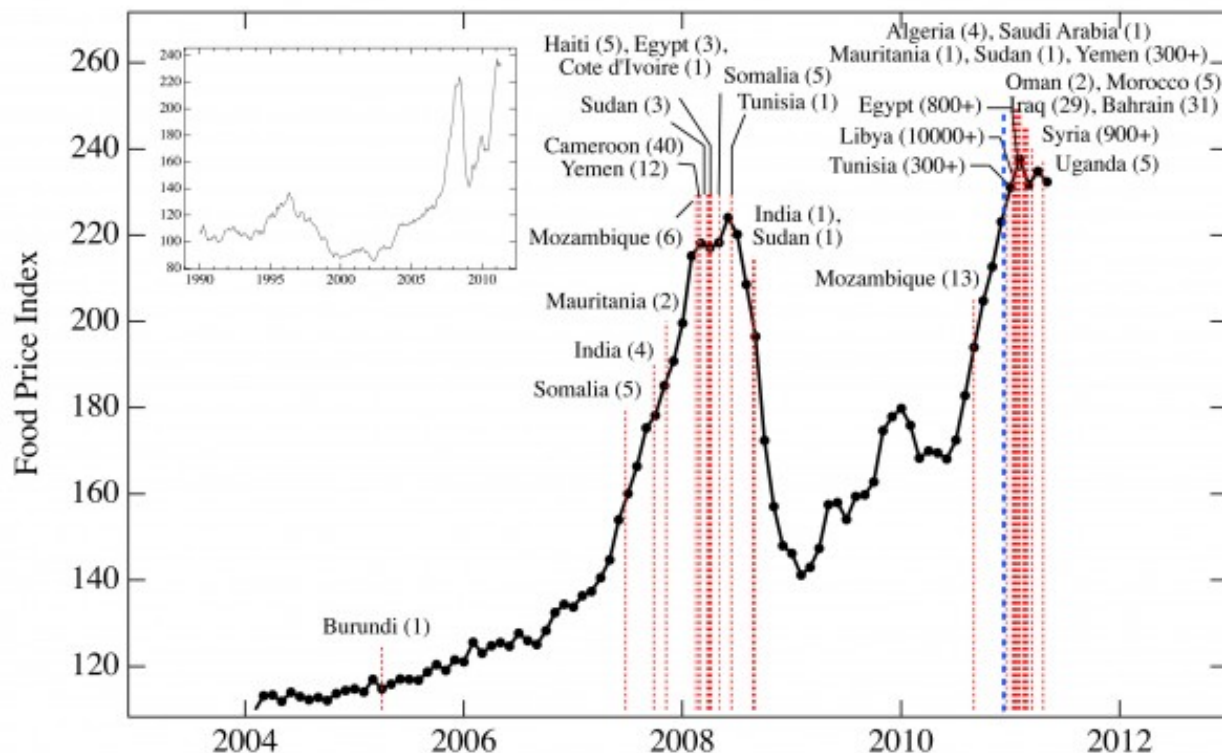


Figure 1: Food price inflation and protest.

Note: The Food Price Index from January 2004 to May 2011, superimposed over a timeline of global mass unrest. The overall death toll associated with each event is reported in parentheses (Myerson 2012).

The Tunisian uprising of January 2011, which sparked the Arab Spring, called for “bread and water without dictatorship.” Alia Gana’s study of the Tunisian food riots and the domestic spatial inequalities linked to liberalization policies discriminating against the rural sector,

concludes: “the politicization of the protest movement indicates that people were making a direct link between political choices and development orientations and the deterioration of their living conditions” (2012:207). Under these circumstances, the issue is not about the immanence of ‘capital’s other,’ so much as it is about capital’s consequences, and the immanence of a politics of food sovereignty given capital’s need to reproduce its exploitative relations. As Diamantino Nhampossa, co-ordinator of the National Peasants Union of Mozambique, remarked: “These protests are going to end. But they will always come back. This is the gift that the development model we are following has to offer” (quoted in Patel 2008).²⁵ The world (or parts of) is in crisis mode, and how food politics unfold depend not only on the struggles between the corporates and the agrarian movements over land and food rights, but also on the potential alliances between town and country prefigured in the recent food riot patterning. Ray Bush claims that: “The Middle East provides many cases where urban and rural poor as well as the middle class demonstrated against spiraling food prices and persistent local corruption, repressive government and poverty” (2010:123), also noting: “Rioters knew too why governments had to be forced to mitigate the social costs of food inflation, why and how authoritarian regimes appeased transnational food companies, and how national food strategies impoverished food producers: low farm-gate prices were well-tested mechanisms to extract surplus for largely urban-based development” (Ibid:121).

Conclusion

Returning to the food regime/food sovereignty dialectic, my overall point is that through the long-term agrarian crisis there have been various forms of peasant resistance (Wolf 1969) and movements for reform of the agri-food system (Friedmann 2005, Patel 2007). But it is only now, as a final enclosure ensues in the shadow of “the nemesis effect” (Bright 1999),²⁶ rising energy and food prices, and destabilization of human populations, that a more holistic ontological alternative is meaningful. The canary imagery is simply to establish that at a historical moment like this, with its destructive path-dependency and market obsession, a seemingly unthinkable vision can emerge with such power to remind us of our agrarian foundations. The reminder is driven by direct experience of dispossession, and the obvious deceit of feeding the world with exchange, rather than use, -value food. The absent subjects in the original agrarian question have spoken, shifting the focus from capital’s subordination of landed property to the question of stewardship of the land as an act of social provisioning and human survival. If capital is our

²⁵ A recent IFPRI report notes: “Food security presents a serious challenge for the region because of high dependency on food imports, diminished capacity for generating foreign exchange to finance food imports, rising food demand driven by continued high population growth, and limited potential for agricultural growth because of severe water constraints and water resource management issues” (Breisinger et al 2012:2).

²⁶ “Burdened by a growing number of overlapping stresses, the world’s ecosystems may grow increasingly susceptible to rapid, unexpected decline” (Bright 1999:12).

point of methodological departure we risk committing to an episteme that renders peasant struggles as resistance to agrarian transition only, not as embodying or foreshadowing an alternative agrarianism, at this moment of crisis.

As the corporate food regime has evolved, from dumping cheap (subsidized) food on increasingly unprotected farmers and appropriating land for agro-exports to a breakdown of WTO trade rules as the agrarian crisis compounds with energy, climate and accumulation crises, the initial food sovereignty intervention has matured in vision and circumstance. Crisis lends credibility. But it also empowers new capital initiatives to rollback the claims and gains of the movement – a process enabled by the complicity of neo-liberalized states. This syndrome explains in part why food sovereignty travels beyond states to local communities, even while the civil society movement at the global level continues the fight for recognition and redistribution of both largesse and perspective. But states/governments will face the music as conditions deteriorate and new food price spikes spark cross-class/sector alliances.

While these alliances are momentary and/or incipient, it is likely they will consolidate under pressure of crisis, as the food question is understood for what it is: an enduring political relationship that cannot be reduced/fetishized to a question of ‘how much.’ Such understanding requires making public the substantial evidence regarding the productivity and ecological resilience of diverse smallholder farming. The latter requires a politics of representation (Patel 2006), with counter-narratives of smallholder capacity and practices (even when assisted by, for example, ecologists). Counter-narratives are necessary to anchor the claim that, as Marx maintained (and as current history demonstrates):

The moral of the tale...is that the capitalist system runs counter to a rational agriculture, or that a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system (even if the latter promotes technical development in agriculture) and needs either small farmers working for themselves or the control of the associated producers (1962:216).

In this regard, the reality that over half of the world’s food is produced by smallholders -- with some estimates of up to 70 percent (ETC 2009) -- provides a rationale for advocating support for this producer class (like reversing subsidies from the energy sector, from agribusiness and its export assistance). This includes the urban ‘peasantry’ – thus: “By one estimate, some 200 million city dwellers produce food for the urban market, accounting for 15–20 per cent of total global food production... In West Africa, around 20 million households (20 per cent of the urban population) are engaged in urban agriculture. They supply 60–100 per cent of the fresh vegetable market in those cities” (Cohen and Garrett 2009:9). This is clearly a basis for domesticating food security, and offers a palpable rejoinder to those who fetishize agro-

exporting as the solution to global malnutrition. It should be a key part of a counter-narrative – one that also underscores the importance of regenerative local farming practices as solutions to the combined crises facing the planet. Not an easy task, but easier as conditions deteriorate?

Despite the temptation to offer a crude correlation between ecological decline and heightened socio-ecological rationality, this paper is simply arguing that the inherent wisdom of food sovereignty, as a real utopia, inspires adjustments. It already has. And it is implicit and/or explicit in the association consumers, smallholders and urban classes make between the food regime and food insecurity. The bigger question is how a massive political-economic infrastructure of fossil-fuel geopolitics and agro-industrialization will manage deepening energy, food and climate crises, and attendant social crises. The signs are already there, with security politics on the rise, climate-proofing strategies including climate-ready seeds (McMichael 2009), targeting of ‘unproductive lands,’ and the expansion in Trans-Pacific Partnership planning of “the scope and scale of what is patentable” (Muller et al 2013:2). At the same time, communities are developing adaptive strategies that intersect with food sovereignty visioning, whether they call it food sovereignty or not. While largely under the radar, nevertheless many of these initiatives reach toward resilient practices. Not without contradiction, especially when neglecting social justice concerns. But these are the seeds of survival as the shit hits the fan. From transition town origins in Kinsale, Ireland, through the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and D-town Farm, to a decentralized “social movement rooted in communities across Mexico but linked to global food sovereignty efforts,” represented by such alternative food network initiatives as Itanoní Tortillería, Nuestro Maíz, and the Michoacán Centre for Agribusiness (Baker 2013: 3, 4), political communities are forming in anticipation.

The world is turning: how is yet unclear, but analyzing peasant differentiation and/or disintegration may not be the optimal way to understand agrarian change, food relations and political possibilities in such a crisis conjuncture. As above, these possibilities operate at different scales. Keeping them connected is the challenge. In his analysis of the politics of the *Movimiento Campesino a Campesino* (MCAC), Eric Holt-Giménez details the “capillary action” of networks in generating circuits of knowledge and seed exchange — but in regenerating agroecological *practices* farmer networks were unable to focus on the socioeconomic and political *conditions* for sustainable agriculture (2006:180). His solution is for alliances between farmer networks and NGOs, with dialogue about structural issues. Parallel to this strategy is Sarah Martin and Peter Andree’s claim that food sovereignty in Canada is expressed in the increasing role of NGOs in service provision associated with food access – the key development being the implication of food sovereignty in Canada in new governance sites abandoned by the state, giving rise to community food governance schemes (cf Friedmann 2011).

As a final comment, all of this will be over-determined by climate crisis. The World Bank warns “African food productivity could decline by as much as half in the next twenty years or so, while that of Central and South Asia could fall by nearly a third due to warming, changes in rainfall patterns, the impact of pests and diseases, and so on” (Cribb 2010:138). Meanwhile, scientists calculate “that by 2080 Russia/Siberia could gain an extra 40-70 percent of new farming land, while North America may gain 20-50 percent” (Ibid:142). Even if these predictions are based in path-dependent projections of current modes of agricultural production, which discount alternative modes of farming, the ecological impact of global warming in privileging some world zones over others clarifies the boundlessness of climatic relations (and, therefore, the artificial boundaries of the state system, and perhaps the accelerating irrelevance of nationalism?). The interaction of climate with historic uneven economic relations (Parenti 2011) demands a combination of support for land-based populations (which is either lacking or predatory) and a global moral-economy elevating human security over national security. This is a key task for international food sovereignty politics, but its success depends on the viability and vibrancy of more localized expressions of the food sovereignty vision.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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