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Food sovereignty: Forgotten genealogies and future regulatory challenges

Marc Edelman

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Abstract

'Food sovereignty' has become a mobilizing frame for social movements, a set of legal norms and practices aimed at transforming food and agriculture systems, and a free-floating signifier filled with varying kinds of content. Canonical accounts credit the Vía Campesina transnational agrarian movement with coining and elaborating the term, but its proximate origins are actually in an early 1980s Mexican government program. Central American activists nonetheless appropriated and redefined it in the late 1980s. Advocates typically suggest that 'food sovereignty' is diametrically opposed to 'food security', but historically there actually has been considerable slippage and overlap between these concepts. Food sovereignty theory has usually failed to indicate whether the 'sovereign' is the nation, region, or locality, or 'the people'. This lack of specificity about the sovereign feeds a reluctance to think concretely about the regulatory mechanisms necessary to consolidate and enforce food sovereignty, particularly limitations on long-distance and international trade and on firm and farm size. Several regulatory possibilities are mentioned and found wanting. Finally, entrenched consumer needs and desires related to internationally-traded products—from coffee to pineapples—imply additional obstacles to the localisation of production, distribution and consumption that many food sovereignty proponents support.

Introduction and disclaimers

As is well known, criticizing one's friends is more demanding and therefore more interesting than to expose once again the boring errors of one's adversaries.

—Albert O. Hirschman, *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (1995, 58).

Since the mid-1990s, 'food sovereignty' has emerged as a powerful mobilizing frame for social movements, a set of legal and quasi-legal norms and practices aimed at transforming food and agriculture systems, and a free-floating signifier filled with varying kinds of content. It is at once a slogan, a paradigm, a mix of practical policies, and a utopian aspiration. As a banner or frame it contributed to the formation of broad-based transnational coalitions, such as the People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty, based mainly in Asia (PCFS 2007), the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, involved in pressuring the FAO since 2002, and the Nyéléni Forum, which includes Vía Campesina and various other coalitions of peasants, pastoralists and fisherfolk. It has been the subject of regional presidential summit meetings, as in Managua in 2008 (Cumbre Presidencial 2008). As a set of policy prescriptions, measures intended to enhance 'food sovereignty' run the gamut from relatively conventional types of protectionism to innovative forms of linking small-scale producers and consumers. 'Food sovereignty' has

been incorporated in legal norms, sometimes at the level of national constitutions, in a growing number of nation-states, including Venezuela, Senegal, Mali, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Nepal and Bolivia (Beauregard 2009, Gascón 2010, 238–242, Muñoz 2010, Beuchelt and Virchow 2012) and localities (Sustainable Cities Collective 2011, Field and Bell 2013, 44). Some civil society organisations have sought to institutionalise food sovereignty at the international level through an international convention that would supersede and obviate multilateral free trade agreements (PCFS and PAN AP 2004, Bové 2005, PCFS 2005, Claeys 2013, 4), though this initiative has languished in recent years.¹

This paper acknowledges right up front that the idea of ‘food sovereignty’ has gained extraordinary traction and that it has contributed in numerous ways and in many parts of the world to the realization of a progressive agenda on food and agriculture issues. At the same time, the concept and the way it is typically understood have several evident limitations.² The paper cannot and does not pretend to cover the burgeoning literature on ‘food sovereignty’. Its objective instead is merely to broaden the discussion by briefly analysing several dimensions of ‘food sovereignty’ that thus far have received insufficient attention and that are arguably important in understanding the history of ‘food sovereignty’ and in advancing ‘food sovereignty’ policies. At the outset it is important to emphasise that the sceptical observations that follow are offered in a spirit of deep sympathy and solidarity with the food sovereignty project, which can only advance further if its proponents sharpen their critical focus and acknowledge how daunting the challenges are.

The origin story

All social groups have origin stories and myths. These serve to reaffirm shared identities and values, to mobilize and bound collectivities, to define adversaries, and to connect the present to the past. Like other invented traditions, they are not necessarily about accurate historical reconstruction, but instead often serve to legitimise contemporary practices and doctrines (Hobsbawm 1983). Intellectual and social movements—and not just tribes or other imagined or epistemic communities—also typically have origin myths (McLaughlin 1999). Some of them are

¹ In contrast, an Intergovernmental Working Group of the UN Human Rights Council, mandated with drafting a Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, held its first meeting in July 2013. The first draft under discussion contained several provisions related to food sovereignty. See Edelman and James (2011) and Golay and Biglino (2013). A Convention on Food Sovereignty was one demand of the NGO Forum and allied social movements at the 2001 Rome +5 World Food Conference (Shaw 2007, 359).

² As Clapp warns, ‘a broad conceptualization may work well in the early stages of a movement, but it is likely that the concept will need to be more precisely articulated, which may in turn cause it to lose some of its supporters’ (2012, 176).

almost as fanciful as the tale about how the goddess Minerva was born fully grown from the head of Jupiter, wearing her armour and accompanied by her wise owl.

In the case of ‘food sovereignty’ the canonical account is repeated more or less the same way in almost every analysis, whether by pro-food sovereignty scholar-activists (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, 45–52, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Wittman *et al.* 2010, Focus on the Global South 2013) or by sceptics (Beuchelt and Virchow 2012, 260, Hospes 2013). The following elements recur in most of the now very substantial food sovereignty literature:

- (1) ‘Food sovereignty’ was first discussed by Vía Campesina at its Second International Conference at Tlaxcala, Mexico, in 1996.³
- (2) Vía Campesina and its allies ‘launched’ or went public with a call for food sovereignty at the FAO-sponsored World Food Conference in Rome in 1996.
- (3) They juxtaposed ‘food sovereignty’ to ‘food security’, which was seen as a contrary and deficient concept, for reasons that will be elaborated below.
- (4) The idea and practice of food sovereignty were refined at various international conclaves of peasant and farmer movements and other civil society organisations, including those in Havana (Foro Mundial 2001), Rome (NGO/CSO Forum 2002), Sélingué, Mali (Nyéléni Forum 2007) and Mexico City (Vía Campesina 2012).⁴

A few accounts of the history of food sovereignty provide greater specificity, though not much. Chaia Heller, for example, remarks that ‘the precise origin of the term is unclear’. She notes, however, that ‘On December 4, 1993, [French] union paysans joined eight thousand other smallholders from across Europe to travel to Geneva, carrying a banner that for the first time read *Souveraineté alimentaire* (Food sovereignty)’ (Heller 2013, 97).

There’s an additional wrinkle to the food sovereignty origin story, which concerns academics who have written on the concept and its regional origins. In October 2012, Olivier De Schutter,

³ The proceedings volume from this meeting states, ‘Food sovereignty, simply defined, is ensuring that land, water, seeds and natural resources are controlled by small and medium-sized producers. It is directly linked to democracy and justice’ (Vía Campesina 1996, 21).

⁴ A more complete listing of relevant meetings and framing documents is in Windfuhr and Jonsén (2005, 47–52). This process of refinement produced increasingly precise definitions, but also ‘increasing levels of inconsistency’ (Patel 2009, 666). Key ideas include protection for food producers, especially small-scale ones; regulation of agricultural production and trade; an end to dumping of developed-country surpluses in developing countries; sustainable, agro-ecological production practices; and democratic control, by ‘the people’, ‘local producers’, or by those who ‘produce, distribute and consume food’; management of resources, seeds and territories by small-scale food producers; and gender and other kinds of social equality. Occasionally food sovereignty enthusiasts (Patel 2009, 666–667) acknowledge that such capacious framings contain internal or even ‘fatal’ contradictions, elisions, and substantial doses of wishful thinking.

the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, received a Food Sovereignty Prize awarded by the New York-based NGO Why Hunger. De Schutter began his acceptance keynote to the audience of New Yorkers by remarking that ‘the first researcher who actually used the concept of food sovereignty is somebody from New York. He is Marc Edelman in a book called *Peasants Against Globalization* in 1999’ (De Schutter 2012, Edelman 1999, 102–103).⁵ Not long after, Priscilla Claeys, a member of the Special Rapporteur’s research team and one of his PhD students, echoed this claim, albeit in less categorical terms, in an article in *Sociology* (Claeys 2012, 849) and, more definitively, in a personal communication with the author (February 1, 2013).⁶

Edelman had been unable to attend Why Hunger’s Food Sovereignty Award event. Alerted by a colleague who was present, he viewed the video of De Schutter’s keynote, feeling flattered of course but also experiencing a certain disbelief, since he didn’t recall having ‘used’ ‘food sovereignty’ in *Peasants Against Globalization* (though he did remember that by the late 1980s peasant activists in Costa Rica occasionally employed the term).⁷ He first went back to the index of the book and then to field notes and transcriptions of recorded interviews from the late 1980s and 1990s, where he found scattered references to ‘*soberanía alimentaria*’, usually in relation to the dumping of US surplus maize, which undermined domestic producers.

In Central America, and especially in Costa Rica, these scattered mentions of ‘food sovereignty’ occurred (and gradually became more frequent) in a flow of much more commonly-used, related terms that peasant movements employed during their apogee in the late 1980s. At least as early as 1988, for example, the term ‘food autonomy’ (*autonomía alimentaria*) was utilised by more radical Costa Rican peasant groups, such as the Atlantic Region Small Agriculturalists Union (Unión de Pequeños Agricultores de la Región Atlántica, UPAGRA), which was made up mainly of maize producers (La República 1988, 3). UPAGRA was the dominant force in a coalition of peasant movements called the Justice and Development Council (Consejo Justicia y Desarrollo), several leaders of which played key roles in founding Vía Campesina.

The politically centrist National Union of Small and Medium Agricultural Producers (Unión Nacional de Pequeños y Medianos Productores Agropecuarios, UPANACIONAL), similarly, demanded,

Food self-sufficiency [*autosuficiencia alimentaria*] and rejection of the importation of agricultural products at “dumping” prices... [and the] promotion

⁵ The relevant section in the book was based on an article Edelman published in 1991 in the now-defunct journal *Peasant Studies* (not to be confused with the *Journal of Peasant Studies*). See Edelman (1991, 229). Edelman also mentioned ‘food sovereignty’ in another article (1998, 59) published one year before the book De Schutter mentioned.

⁶ In another work, Claeys locates the origins of ‘food sovereignty’ in Central America in the mid-1980s (2013, 3).

⁷ A few years later this was true in Honduras (and perhaps elsewhere in the region) as well. See Amador (1994).

and the establishment of sovereignty in exports, so that these do not concentrate in the hands of transnational companies (UPANACIONAL 1989, 2).

The documentary record of a roundtable held in early 1991 again indicates that Costa Rican rural activists employed the term 'food sovereignty' in relation to dumping and also to argue for 'sovereignty in exports' (*soberanía en las exportaciones*) (Alforja 1991, 1, 7). They understood this as meaning that foreign firms ought not to control Costa Rica's agricultural export trade. Notably, at least two of the activists at the roundtable, including the one who spoke of '*soberanía alimentaria*', were involved two years later in some of the earliest meetings of Vía Campesina. In April 1991, a letter that three other peasant leaders sent to the president of the republic similarly specified '*soberanía alimentaria*' as an objective 'so that [the country] would not have to depend on surpluses from other countries that could vanish and the prices of which are subject to the international market' (Campos R. *et al.* 1991).⁸

Importantly, Central American governments of varying orientations occasionally used similar kinds of language at least as early as the 1960s (Boyer 2010, 322) and very explicitly in the 1980s. In Nicaragua in 1983, for example, the Sandinista government's Ministry of Agricultural Development and Agrarian Reform (Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria, MIDINRA) produced a major 'Strategic Framework' that viewed 'food security' as (1) access to an adequate quantity and quality of food by the entire population; and (2) national self-sufficiency (*autosuficiencia*) in the supply of food (Biondi-Morra 1990, 64).⁹ In 1989, in Costa Rica, the then-Minister of Agriculture, an individual generally hostile to the peasant organizations claimed 'to back the policy of self-sufficiency [*autoabastecimiento*] in [rice] and other basic grains' (La República 1989, 10A).

Another important source of 'food sovereignty' talk was the Food Security Training Program (Programa de Formación en Seguridad Alimentaria, PFSA), funded by the European Community, which held seminars in Panama for peasant activists from throughout Central America in late 1990 and 1991 (Edelman 1998, 57–62). This followed a related Food Security Program that focused on empirical research in the different countries of the region. While the abundant documentary materials these programs produced contain few, if any, mentions of '*soberanía alimentaria*', the peasants who returned from the seminars sometimes began to use term, although often almost interchangeably with '*seguridad alimentaria*'.¹⁰

⁸ These leaders were from leftist and centrist organisations; none of them became involved in Vía Campesina.

⁹ According to Spalding, 'In the absence of any competing, long-term national development plan, this MIDINRA document served as the main expression of the regime's economic vision' (1994, 73).

¹⁰ As late as 2008, the declaration of the Latin American Presidential Summit on Food Sovereignty and Security also used the terms largely interchangeably (Cumbre Presidencial 2008).

An important new tool for lexicographical research sheds additional light on the origins of ‘food sovereignty’ and also refutes once and for all De Schutter’s notion that Marc Edelman was ‘the first researcher who actually used the concept’. Google—ever respectful of norms governing intellectual property—usually won’t let researchers view all of the pages it has scanned for its Google Books database, but it does provide a search tool called the Ngram Viewer that permits them to search for the relative frequency with which particular words or phrases appear in the texts.¹¹ It is possible, as well, to explore specific sources that employ the search term within delimited periods. Figures 1 and 2 provide a graphical representation of Ngram data for ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘soberanía alimentaria’ respectively. Both graphs show a steep increase in mentions of the search terms at the end of the 1990s, a reflection of the growing traction at that time of the food sovereignty concept as employed by Vía Campesina and its allies. The Spanish graph, however, shows a significant, though smaller, upturn in the early to mid-1980s. Scrutiny of this data complicates the origin story of food sovereignty still further.

In 1983 the government of Mexico announced a new National Food Program (Programa Nacional de Alimentación, PRONAL) (Comisión Nacional de Alimentación 1984).¹² The first objective of PRONAL was ‘to achieve food sovereignty’, a concept that was understood as

more than self-sufficiency in food; it implies national control over diverse aspects of the food chain, thus reducing dependency on foreign capital and imports of basic foods, inputs and technology. The key factor of this strategy is the adoption of a holistic focus on policies related to the phases of production, transformation, commercialisation, and consumption (Heath 1985, 115).

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss PRONAL in any depth, it is clear that the upward blip in the Spanish graph in the mid-1980s (and the smaller rise in the English one) is very clearly related to this Mexican government program and its rhetoric about ‘soberanía alimentaria’.¹³ Many researchers writing in English and Spanish—including Austin and Esteva (1987), Heath (1985), and Sanderson (Sanderson 1986)—used the term in this context. The genealogical complication that this represents for the Vía Campesina food sovereignty origin story (and its near-universal acceptance by scholars) is obvious.¹⁴ What is less clear (and

¹¹ On the Ngram, see Egnal (2013) and Rosenberg (2013).

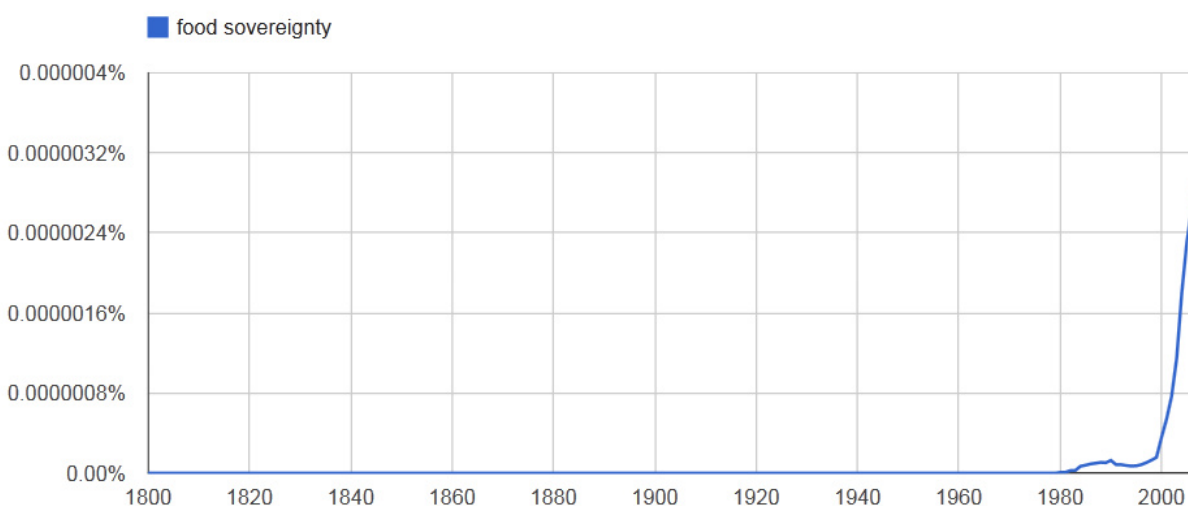
¹² Two years earlier, the phrase ‘food sovereignty’ appears in discussions of Canada’s food aid program, with one speaker asserting that ‘the first test of any emerging nation’s real sovereignty is food sovereignty’ (Canadian Institute of International Affairs 1981, 107). The mention, however, failed to gain traction at the time.

¹³ Journalist Alan Riding charged accurately that PRONAL ‘emerged as a SAM without money’ (Riding 1986, 286). SAM—the Sistema Alimentario Mexicano—was the previous government’s food program (dismantled in 1983), which tried simultaneously to provide support prices to farmers and subsidies to consumers, thus worsening an already critical fiscal deficit.

¹⁴ Martínez-Torres and Rosset are right that ‘[f]ood sovereignty is a concept coined by actively appropriating and inventing language’ (2010, 161). What they and other Vía Campesina activists fail to realise, however, is that the

probably unknowable) is whether Mexico exported the language of ‘food sovereignty’ to Central America, via mass media or actual contact between peasant movements or other civil society groups, or whether the emergence of the term in Central America is a case of simultaneity of invention.¹⁵

Figure 1: Relative frequency of “food sovereignty” in Google Books English database, 1800-2009

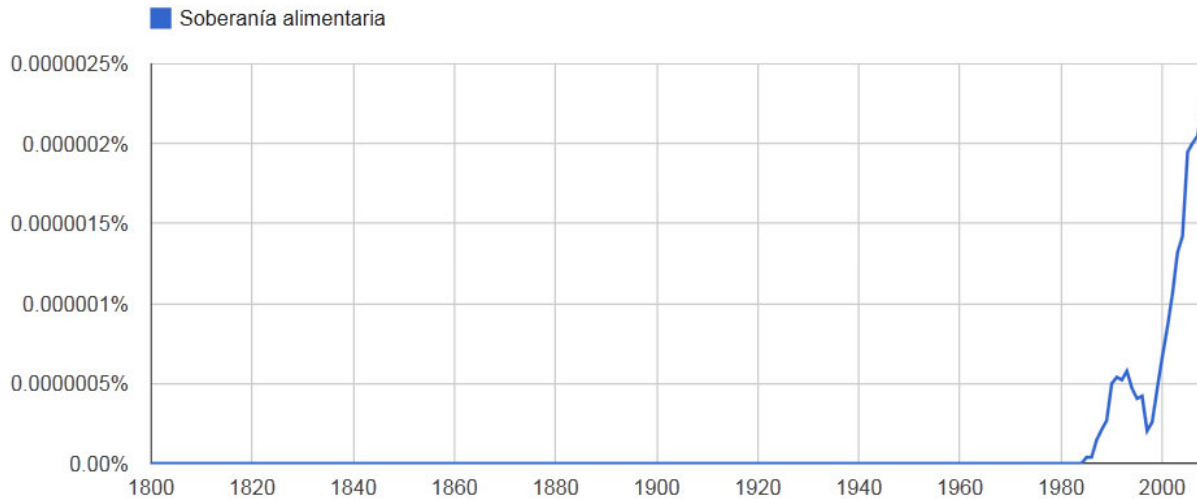


Source: Google Ngram, July 23, 2013

language appears to have been appropriated—even if indirectly—from PRONAL and Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid—surely not the most inspiring political-intellectual ancestor for these Mexico-based scholar-activists.

¹⁵ On contacts in this period between Mexican and Central American peasant activists, see Boyer (2010) and Holt-Giménez (2006). It may be significant that the 1996 *Vía Campesina* conference that adopted a food sovereignty program was held in Mexico, where local movements would have been aware—at very least—of the De La Madrid government’s rhetoric about ‘food sovereignty’.

Figure 2: Relative frequency of “soberanía alimentaria” in Google Books Spanish database, 1800-2009



Source: Google Ngram, July 23, 2013

How different is food security?

In 1996 Vía Campesina advanced ‘food sovereignty’ as an alternative to the FAO’s concept of ‘food security’.¹⁶ Some analyses describe ‘food sovereignty’ versus ‘food security’ as a ‘global conflict’, characterised by ‘fundamental antagonisms’ (Schanbacher 2010, ix), others as a ‘counterframe’ (Fairbairn 2010, 26–27) or as part of a ‘conflict between models’ (Martínez-

¹⁶ The conventional view is typified by an editorial in the *Nyéleni Newsletter*:

Food sovereignty is different from food security in both approach and politics. Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under environmentally destructive and exploitative conditions, and supported by subsidies and policies that destroy local food producers but benefit agribusiness corporations. Food sovereignty emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources; agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers; agro-ecology; biodiversity; local knowledge; the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers; social protection and climate justice (Focus on the Global South 2013).

Torres and Rosset 2010, 169–170). Raj Patel points out that ‘food sovereignty’ was ‘very specifically intended as a foil to the prevailing notions of “food security”’ (2009, 665).¹⁷

But were these or are these diametrically opposed ideas? Even in the mid-1990s there were about 200 definitions of ‘food security’ in published writings (Clay 2003). One FAO study sensibly advises that ‘[w]henver the concept is introduced in the title of a study or its objectives, it is necessary to look closely to establish the explicit or implied definition’ (Clay 2003, 25). A number of those 200 or so definitions overlapped substantially with the emerging idea of ‘food sovereignty’. And—as Patel acknowledges—‘food sovereignty is... over-defined. There are so many versions of the concept, it is hard to know exactly what it means’ (2009, 663).

‘The concept of ‘food security’, according to Flavio Valente,

was first utilised in Europe after World War I. In its origin it was profoundly linked to the concept of national security and to the capacity of each country to produce its own food so that it would not be vulnerable to possible politically- or militarily-related sieges [*cercos*], embargos or boycotts (2002).¹⁸

‘Food security’ was considered part of the human rights agenda as early as the 1943 Hot Springs, Virginia, conference of allied governments, which gave rise to the FAO (Valente 2002, Shaw 2007, 8–10). Three decades later the 1974 World Food Summit, held in the context of worsening scarcities, narrowed the definition of ‘food security’ to the ‘availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices’ (quoted in Clay 2003, 27). Notably, this definition focuses on countries and on overall consumption rather than on the household or individual level. During this period ‘food security’ became increasingly delinked from human rights concerns and centred instead on production and supply in relation to criteria of physical and nutritional necessity (Shaw 2007, Valente 2002). Over the next two decades, the FAO added additional elements to its definitions, including ‘access’ for all people, food safety and nutritional balance, and cultural preferences (Clay 2003). This new emphasis on consumption and on access by all people, including vulnerable populations, reflected the influential work on ‘entitlements’ of Amartya Sen (1981). Omawale, among others, has argued that Sen’s concept of ‘entitlement’ constituted a ‘bridge between the structural and human rights approach[es] to food in development’ (Omawale 1984; see also Schanbacher 2010, 110–111). But entitlement theory also contributed to a shift in food security thinking away from the

¹⁷ Fairbairn rightly suggests that ‘food sovereignty is both a reaction to and an intellectual offspring of the earlier concepts of the “right to food” and “food security”’ (2010, 15).

¹⁸ Fairbairn’s idea that ‘food security’ is a relatively new concept, dating to the 1970s, clearly requires rethinking (2010, 22–23).

nation and toward the household or individual as the relevant secure or insecure unit (Fairbairn 2010, 24).

Some of the most frequently cited definitions of ‘food security’ developed in the 1980s and early 1990s contain elements that figure later in the idea of ‘food sovereignty’. Take, for example Solon Barraclough’s definition, developed as part of a study sponsored by the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development:

Food security can be defined as sustained and assured access by all social groups and individuals to food adequate in quantity and quality to meet nutritional needs. A food system offering food security should have the following characteristics: (a) capacity to produce, store, and import sufficient food to meet basic food needs for all groups; (b) maximum autonomy and self-determination (without implying autarky), reducing vulnerability to international market fluctuations and political pressures; (c) reliability, such that seasonal, cyclical and other variations in access to food are minimal; (d) sustainability such that the ecological system is protected and improved over time; and (e) equity, meaning, as a minimum, dependable access to adequate food for all social groups (Barraclough 1991, 1).

Note the concern with ‘autonomy and self-determination’, ‘sustainability’ and protection of ‘the ecological system’, and ‘equity’. Now compare Vía Campesina’s ‘original’—i.e., 1996—statement at the Rome World Food Summit:

Food security cannot be achieved without taking full account of those who produce food. Any discussion that ignores our contribution will fail to eradicate poverty and hunger. Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a pre-condition to genuine food security (quoted in NGLS Roundup 1997).

Like the FAO definitions of ‘food security’, the relevant unit of sovereignty is the nation and respect for cultural diversity is a paramount concern. The ‘right to produce food’ is indeed a novel addition, as is the mention of ‘territory’, a term that has historically figured in the demands of indigenous peoples but that here appears to refer to nation-states.

Perhaps more indicative of the slippage between ‘food security’ and ‘food sovereignty’ in 1996 is the NGO Forum Statement to the World Food Summit, titled ‘Profit for Few or Food for All’

and subtitled '*Food Sovereignty and Security to Eliminate the Globalisation of Hunger*' (italics added). This extensive declaration highlighted six key elements, which are summarised in highly synthetic fashion here: (1) strengthening family farmers, along with local and regional food systems; (2) reversing the concentration of wealth and power through agrarian reform and establishing farmers' rights to genetic resources; (3) reorienting agricultural research, education and extension toward an agroecological paradigm; (4) strengthening states' capacity for ensuring food security through a suspension of structural adjustment programs, guarantees of economic and political rights, and policies to 'improve the access of poor and vulnerable people to food products and to resources for agriculture'; (5) deepening the 'participation of peoples' organizations and NGOs at all levels'; and (6) assuring that international law guarantees the right to food and that food sovereignty takes precedence over macroeconomic policies and trade liberalization (NGO Forum 1996, see also Shaw 2007, pp. 355–356).

By 2002, with the Rome +5 Summit and the formation of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (a massive coalition of civil society organisations, including *Vía Campesina*), an important shift occurred in the prevailing 'food sovereignty' discourse. In particular, the IPC replaced 'nation' with 'peoples, communities, and countries' in its definition. As Otto Hospes (2013) points out, this 'suggests a pluralistic approach to the question of who is the sovereign'.

By 2007 the Declaration of the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty reduced the scope of sovereignty simply to 'peoples':

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Nyéléni Forum 2007, 9).

'Healthy and culturally appropriate food', of course, was already part of earlier FAO definitions of 'food security'. As this and many other examples cited above suggest, in its origins and its contemporary expressions 'food sovereignty' intersects considerably and sometimes even converges with 'food security'. Both have been protean concepts, frequently imprecise, always contested and in on-going processes of semantic and political evolution.

The question of who is the sovereign in 'food sovereignty' is of crucial importance, since it is inevitably tied to the administration of food sovereignty. Is it the nation-state, a region, a locality, or 'the people'? Is the meaning of 'food sovereignty' the same in a giant country (e.g.,

Canada) or a tiny one?¹⁹ If the sovereign unit is a region defined as ‘a local food ecosystem that bases its boundaries on ecological parameters like water flow, rather than on arbitrary state lines’ (Field and Bell 2013, 59), then how will the relevant constituency be demarcated? What political institutions will administer ‘food sovereignty’? How will these differ from existing state institutions? What processes will establish their democratic legitimacy?

Another rarely examined question is the meaning of ‘sovereignty’ itself and its relevance (or the lack of it) in an increasingly globalised world. Food sovereignty advocates face a paradox inasmuch as efforts to strengthen food sovereignty at the national level inevitably strengthen the states with which they are frequently in an otherwise adversarial relationship. Moreover, recent efforts to theorise sovereignty (e.g., Agamben 1998) commonly hark back to conservative, pro-Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt’s hackneyed claim that the ‘sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception’ (2005 [1922], 1, 5). This deeply authoritarian premise would seem to have little to offer democratically-minded proponents of food sovereignty. It does, however, point squarely at an issue about which most food sovereignty advocates have been evasive at best, even those who conceive of the present moment as characterised by a ‘conflict between models’ (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, 169–170). This is the question of the scope of the food sovereign’s power and how it will be consolidated, maintained and enforced.

Long-distance trade and firm size

The ambiguous nature of the sovereign that characterises most discussions of ‘food sovereignty’ is suggestive of another set of problems that require specification if ‘food sovereignty’ is to make the leap from appealing slogan to on-the-ground policy. The idea of ‘food sovereignty’ draws on a rich set of ideas and practices related to local ‘food sheds’, alternative food networks and the localisation of economies as a defence against globalisation. These include reducing ‘food miles’; promoting direct marketing and geographical origin indications; local sourcing for restaurants and institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, nursing homes and prisons; and maintaining greenbelts around urban areas. Food sovereignty advocates differ as to the role of market forces, though most insist that food is not simply a commodity. They also differ as to the role of long-distance and, especially, international trade in a food sovereign society and have generally been silent on the question of small producers who depend on export production (of coffee, cacao, etc.) for their livelihoods (Burnett and Murphy 2013, 5–6). Some food sovereignty proponents explicitly call for tariff protections and ‘an end to international trade agreements and financial institutions

¹⁹ Writing on Canada, Desmarais and Wittman stress ‘unity in diversity’ as a key principle of food sovereignty. They also point to the Canadian Wheat Board, which among other things was the country’s major exporter, as an institution of ‘food sovereignty’ (2013). Surely importing countries would be unlikely to view the CWB that way.

that interfere with the sovereignty and sustainability of food systems' (Field and Bell 2013, 8–9).²⁰

Imagine for a moment a flourishing small farm in a food sovereign society. It produces a wide variety of high-quality foods for nearby markets using sustainable agro-ecological practices. It does as much of the post-harvest processing, packaging, storage and transport as possible in order to capture value-added that would otherwise accrue to intermediaries, agroindustries and retailers. It pays a living wage and benefits to its hired hands and has excellent occupational safety and health standards. Perhaps it has direct links with urban or other consumers through weekly farmers' markets, farm stands or community supported agriculture groups. It generates significant returns because of its varied production (which minimizes environmental and economic risks and generates year-round sales), its low-input (and thus low-cost) technological mix, its highly productive workforce (which appreciates the decent treatment), its financial backing from CSA subscriptions rather than commercial lenders (which lowers costs and protects against risks of price fluctuations, foreclosure, bad weather, pests and pathogens), and its savvy marketing strategies (which also create a risk cushion and fuel further demand). It can, of course, reinvest those profits in the existing farm and in its amortisation fund and take some as income or worker bonuses. It may also decide that it wants to expand the scale of its operations, purchasing or renting additional land and hiring more workers (or, if a cooperative, enlisting more associates). It might even decide that it wants to sell some of its products in markets on the other side of the country or abroad. How does a 'food sovereign' society, where 'the people define their own food and agriculture system', handle this type of dizzying success and these kinds of aspirations?

²⁰ In 1996, Vía Campesina simply demanded the *renegotiation* of 'international trade agreements like GATT/WTO, Maastricht, [and] NAFTA' (Vía Campesina 1996, 23). Later, of course, it called for getting the 'WTO out of agriculture' (Rosset 2006). Food sovereignty advocates' views are evolving. Some 'see a gradual acceptance of trade under certain circumstances..., with the shift away from focusing primarily on local markets to integrating consideration for fairer trade' (Burnett and Murphy 2013, 4).

Figure 3: “Imagine a small farm...” (Noyack, New York, USA, 2009)

Photo by the author.

Like proponents of the many efforts to ‘localise’ economies in the face of globalisation (Hines 2000, Halweil 2002, Nonini 2013), ‘food sovereignty’ advocates rarely consider what sort of regulatory apparatus would be needed to manage questions of firm and farm size, product and technology mixes, and long-distance and international trade.²¹ ‘Food sovereignty’ implies limits on all of these. Who would enforce those limits? One of the ironies of posing the question in these terms is that many food sovereignty enthusiasts favour abolishing or diminishing regulation of local trade and of preferred products (e.g., raw milk and raw milk cheeses). In this respect, their vision sometimes converges with that of the detested neoliberals, who tend to view all regulation as onerous for business, large and small. ‘They [Maine farmers] don’t need inspectors to make sure they are following good practices’, Tony Field and Beverly Bell declare. ‘[K]eeping their neighbors, families, and long-time customers in good health is an even better incentive’ (2013, 43).

Both post-Washington Consensus neoliberalism and food sovereignty movements manifest interest in decentralisation and local empowerment, albeit with very different rationales. The neoliberal vision backs decentralisation as a top-down method of institutional reform that increases ‘efficiency’ and (allegedly) empowers communities vis-à-vis higher orders of

²¹ Ishii-Eitman (2009) and Burnett and Murphy (2013) are among the very few exceptions to this generalization. Hinrichs (2003), Mohan and Stokke (2000) and Robotham (2005) provide unusually thoughtful and grounded discussions of the complexities of constructing ‘the local’.

governance. Food sovereignty movements, on the other hand, favour decentralisation because it might create space for an alternative version of development based on small-scale farming and agroecology. The neoliberal approach assumes a congruence of interests between distinct classes of ‘stakeholders’, with the market resolving questions of trade and firm size. The food sovereignty approach is premised on an on-going tension between market and society, but it prefers to assume—on the basis of what evidence is unclear—that the market can be kept at bay through direct democracy and ‘the people’ exercising control over ‘their’ food system. Again, the question of what that ‘control’ might look like is rarely specified in sufficient detail for it to become workable policy.

My concern here is with two specific imperatives—limiting firm and farm size and long-distance trade—both of which probably imply relatively draconian state control, though of what kind remains little-discussed and unclear. It is worth examining briefly, however, the broader gamut of regulatory possibilities that might arguably be implemented in a food sovereign society. What kinds of control have been tried and what might be learned from these experiences? State-level anti-corporate farming laws in the United States have not been notably successful in stalling the advance of giant agribusinesses (CELDf n.d.). The commodities boards that existed in so many countries before the advent of neoliberalism (and that still survive in some places in hollowed out form) were designed to provide price supports and to regulate foreign trade in a few, internationally traded products. Sometimes they were also in charge of supply management and reserves. Even if resources and political will could be mustered to resurrect and revitalise them, they would not likely be capable of administering the complex product mix of highly diversified food sovereign farms or controlling the successful ones that might want to engage in long-distance trade or even move into potentially profitable monocultures. Ceilings on farm size, which have been a feature of many agrarian reform programs, might begin to check the consolidation of large properties. But such measures have proven notoriously easy to circumvent through titling by different family members or separate corporate entities.²² Environmental protection and food safety agencies (and nongovernmental certifying organizations) could conceivably exercise some control over technology and the use of banned substances or practices, but these would require vastly greater resources in order to be effective and to overcome possible perverse incentives, such as ‘cheating’ with agrochemicals or suborning inspectors. There is no indication that the ‘local food policy councils’ hailed in some enthusiasts’ analyses would be up to any of these daunting enforcement tasks (Halweil 2002, 8, Hassanein 2003, 79–80, Holt-Giménez *et al.* 2009, 170–171, Field and Bell 2013, 70). Some ‘food sovereignty’ advocates call for ‘confederalism’:

²² In peri-urban areas in the United States, conservation and similar easements intended to preserve greenbelts and farmland have sometimes had the effect of creating ownership ceilings, even though this isn’t their intention.

Nurturing and strengthening citizen-centered food systems and autonomy calls for forms of political and social organisation that can institutionalise interdependence without resorting to the market or the central state. Confederalism involves a network of citizen groups or councils with members or delegates elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in villages, tribes, towns and even neighborhoods of large cities (Pimbert 2006, xii).

In this view, ‘confederalism’ would, if all goes well, be followed by a linking of federations and confederations that would produce ‘a significant counter-power to the state and transnational corporations’ and result in a stage of ‘dual power’ (Pimbert 2006, xii, 26). This phrase is, of course, redolent of earlier historical experiences that ultimately did not go so well for small farmers.²³

In an insightful 2008 essay, Boaventura de Sousa Santos pointed to a reciprocal myopia that afflicts both the heterogeneous progressive forces that come together in the World Social Forums and traditional Marxists. On the one hand, ‘the conventional left parties and the intellectuals at their service have stubbornly not paid any attention to the WSF or have minimized its significance’. On the other, ‘the great majority of the activists of the WSF’—and by extension, one might add, ‘food sovereignty’ advocates—have shown ‘contempt... for the rich left theoretical tradition, and... militant disregard for its renewal’ (Santos 2008, 256–257). In thinking about the limitations of ‘food sovereignty’ as policy, it is necessary to go beyond Santos’ affirmations and recognise that apart from their respective refusals to acknowledge the other, neither group has really grappled with the economic lessons that might be learned from what used to be called ‘actually existing socialism’. This failure results in a notable short-sightedness when it comes to thinking through the implementation of ‘food sovereignty’ and particularly the need for strong regulatory oversight of firm size and long-distance trade raised above.

The centrally planned economies were—and to the extent that they still exist, are—notoriously unsuccessful in providing their citizens with basic consumer goods and, in particular, with sufficient fresh and varied foodstuffs. The stress and wasted time that people endured in a system that used queuing up, rather than purchasing power, as the rationing principle for basic goods was arguably an important aspect of the erosion of legitimacy that eventually contributed to those societies’ demise (Verdery 1996, 26–29).²⁴ The Achilles’ heel of the

²³ See Lenin (1964 [orig. 1917]) and Stalin’s unsurprisingly meretricious essay ‘Dizzy with success’ (Stalin 1955 [orig. 1930]).

²⁴ Of course many, if not most, people didn’t just line up, but also worked their connections and resorted to the illegal market economy to obtain otherwise scarce necessities. Cubans sardonically refer to this as ‘*sociolismo*’, a play on ‘*socialismo*’ and ‘*socio*’, which means ‘partner’ but which they commonly employ to mean ‘buddy’ or ‘friend’.

command economies was the ‘plan indicator’, a production goal that could be expressed in tonnes, metres, pairs (e.g., of shoes) or some other measure or combination of measures. In effect, ‘the centre’ set targets for enterprises and then negotiated its provision of inputs and the managers’ delivery obligations. Frequently this led to hoarding of materials and labour, considerable waste, and absurd outcomes, such as extra-heavy sheet metal and pipes (indicator in tonnes), oversupply of small shoe sizes and undersupply of large sizes (indicator in pairs), or overly bright light bulbs (indicator in watts) (Nove 1991, Verdery 1996). These results reflected two fundamental, unresolvable problems: first, the aggregation—for management and planning purposes—of impossibly large numbers of discrete products (e.g., types of light bulbs, sizes and styles of footwear) and second, the failure of the microeconomic signals from end users to be heard or to correspond to the specific products needed or desired.

The conclusion, which some ‘food sovereignty’ advocates may find lamentable, is (1) that market mechanisms, even if they frequently generate injustice and inequality—can be especially efficient at delivering a wide product mix to consumers; and (2) that micromanaging the consumer goods sector—and particularly the agriculture and food sector—has almost always proven counterproductive. This is not to say that supply management and commodities boards and so on are doomed—indeed, these or similar mechanisms will be essential for any meaningful version of food sovereignty—but rather to point very specifically to the strong regulatory control that will also be required to localise and domesticate trade and to maintain farm and firm sizes within tolerable bounds. But the onus is on food sovereignty enthusiasts to grapple with the history of the command economies and to come up with creative mechanisms that encourage diversity, that balance and meet the needs of producers and consumers, and that achieve the basic contours of a truly democratic ‘food sovereign’ production and distribution system. The issues of regulating trade and firm size that are implicit in so much of the food sovereignty literature are rarely acknowledged and have sadly received little or no serious attention.

Consumer taste in a food sovereign society

Kim Burnett and Sophia Murphy (2013) rightly draw attention to the food sovereignty movement’s silence on the question of small producers who depend on export crops for their livelihoods and food security. They argue that having such producers shift from (sometimes) lucrative export crops to low-cost staples for domestic consumption risks exacerbating inequalities by reducing producers’ incomes. A related question concerns consumer tastes and needs (even if the latter are not strictly physiological, but socially constructed).

Sidney Mintz famously analysed the role of sugar imported from the Caribbean in fuelling the workforce that initiated the industrial revolution in England (1986). Together with stimulants—first tea and somewhat later coffee—caffeine and sugar became basic necessities in numerous

countries where they were not produced. They powered workers (Jiménez 1995), actual and would-be elites (Roseberry 1996), and military machines (Haft and Suarez 2013). They kept innumerable sleep-deprived academics, policymakers and activists alert during interminable meetings. A food sovereign society could completely eschew these products, but in the event that prohibition of coffee and tea is not politically popular, long-distance international trade is essential for providing them (unless, of course, we contemplate anti-economic greenhouse production of these crops in cold climates).

If coffee, tea and cane sugar have been constructed as necessities, there is also the question of consumer predilections and whims—the construction of tastes for non-necessities—in a food sovereign society. In Costa Rica in the early 1980s, in the midst of the country's worst economic crisis since the 1930s depression, kiwis from Hawaii suddenly started to appear in supermarkets in upscale neighbourhoods and frequent radio spots extolled the 'exoticness' and 'deliciousness' of this novel fruit. The seductive voice in the radio ads became the butt of comedians' jokes and impressions. The Archbishop denounced the squandering of scarce foreign exchange on kiwis and plaintively asked if there was a more delicious fruit in the world than Costa Rican pineapple, which, he reminded people, was cheap, abundant and locally produced.²⁵ This implicit plea for a kind of food sovereignty identified one problem, but masked another.

Food is not just a source of physiologically necessary nutrients, but a major source of pleasure and sociality. Some food sovereignty proponents, such as Slow Food, make this a central part of their political (and culinary) practice, but most others—and especially those most concerned with policy—have given this dimension little systematic attention. Consumers in cold, Northern countries have come to enjoy not only pineapples and kiwis, but an extraordinary cornucopia of perishable tropical fruits (and other products, e.g., chocolate, macadamia nuts, etc.). They have come to expect these delicacies all year round. Once they've tasted pineapple (or mangos or açai or bananas), they are unlikely to take kindly to food sovereignty scolds who insist on their consuming only local products during those long northern winters.²⁶ The problem is not just how to reverse tastes constructed over long historical time, something that is probably close to impossible, but also how to build political support for 'the people' democratically exercising control over 'their' food system—that is, for food sovereignty. Limiting access to delectable exotic foods is almost certainly a poor road to consensus. An additional, related paradox is that food sovereignty as a set of diverse practices has advanced by incremental steps, while its

²⁵ He was apparently unconcerned that pineapple was produced in pesticide-intensive monocultures.

²⁶ The ubiquitous plastic bags of mushy, tasteless Macintosh and 'Delicious' apples that were the main source of vitamin C during my childhood in 1950s and 1960s New York are but one dismal example of the alternative to long-distance trade. At least there were sometimes oranges from far-off Florida and California. The glories of summer included abundant local peaches, plums and berries.

advocates typically insist that nothing short of a complete overhaul of food and farming—along with associated changes in values—will be sufficient to reverse the juggernaut of corporate agriculture (Hassanein 2003).

Conclusion

Food sovereignty activists and scholars, almost without exception, attribute the invention of food sovereignty to Vía Campesina and accept the claim that ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘food security’ are diametrically opposed concepts. This paper has shown instead that the proximate origins of the phrase are in a Mexican government program in the early 1980s and that its adoption by Central American peasant movements occurred in a context where for some time ‘food security’, ‘food sovereignty’ and several similar terms overlapped, blended into one another and were used largely interchangeably. Recent suggestions that the author of this paper was the first researcher to mention ‘food sovereignty’ are misplaced, since numerous Mexican and foreign scholars earlier analysed the Mexican government program mentioned above. Several, though not all, of the Central American activists who began to speak of ‘food sovereignty’ in the 1980s eventually went on to participate in the founding of Vía Campesina.

Food sovereignty proponents have been remarkably vague about who or what is ‘the sovereign’ in ‘food sovereignty’, with different organisations and theorists either disagreeing, ignoring the issue entirely, or shifting over time between pointing to the nation-state, a region, a locality, or ‘the people’. This question matters because it speaks to the crucial point of how a food sovereign society will be administered. Will a food sovereign society permit a successful small farm to expand its operations or to enter international markets? If so, up to what point? Who will draw the line and enforce it? There is an urgent need for devoting more attention to the political institutions needed for food sovereignty, as well as to the issues of how these will intersect with or differ from existing state institutions and how they will establish and maintain democratic legitimacy.

The nature of ‘sovereignty’ itself, similarly, is rarely scrutinised in the food sovereignty literature or by food sovereignty movements, most of which find themselves in adversarial relationships with the states in which they operate. The policies that would strengthen food sovereignty at the national level inevitably imply strengthening the states with which the movements are typically in conflict. The experience of the centrally planned economies suggests that the strong state actions required to impose limits on farm and firm size and on long-distance and international trade could easily give rise to unintended consequences that would negatively affect both small agricultural producers and the consumers who sympathise with and depend on them.

The localisation of production and consumption that is central to most conceptions of food sovereignty raises a host of further problems that again have received far too little consideration. How much extra-local trade would be tolerated or encouraged? What will become of the millions of smallholders who depend for their livelihoods on export production and whose incomes would plummet if they were required to switch, say, from cacao or African palm production to cassava and maize? Localisation also raises fundamental problems for consumers dependent on or even addicted to necessities, such as coffee, which are produced in far-off places. Both needs of this sort and predilections for other exotic products are indicative of the extent to which food has deep cultural roots and meanings, formed over long historical time, that go beyond those typically adduced in the food sovereignty literature. Attempts to reverse these tastes and needs would be extremely difficult and would doubtless raise widespread opposition to any food sovereignty program that sought to do so.

Food sovereignty advocates thus find themselves in an interesting and fertile moment. A proliferation of concepts, experiments and experiences provides abundant material for reflection and for practical efforts to solidify the paradigm on the ground and, hopefully, to scale it up. At the same time, the almost wilful neglect of some key theoretical and policy issues impedes further progress. If we are to imagine not only a successful small farm in a food sovereign society, but a successful food sovereign society built on a dynamic small farm sector, we need to devote considerably more attention to some of the challenges and paradoxes outlined above.

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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

[Marc Edelman](#) is professor of anthropology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, both of the City University of New York. He is the author of *The Logic of the Latifundio* (Stanford 1992) and *Peasants Against Globalization* (Stanford, 1999); co-author of *Social Democracy in the Global Periphery* (Cambridge, 2007); and co-editor of *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization* (Blackwell, 2005) and *Transnational Agrarian Movements Confronting Globalization* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). His current research focuses on the campaign to have the United Nations approve a declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas.