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Occupy the Farm: A Study of Civil Society Tactics to Cultivate Commons and Construct Food Sovereignty in the United States

Antonio Roman-Alcalá

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Abstract

Using the case study of the 2012 illegal occupation of farmland owned by the University of California (“Occupy the Farm”), this paper investigates the promises and practical limits of constructing food sovereignty through direct action in the global North. Many grassroots activists find inspiration in the work of the Landless Peasant Movement (MST), La Via Campesina, and the concept(s) of Food Sovereignty (FS); many also express desires to transcend the market/state dichotomy through the creation of “commons”. Through interviews with Occupy the Farm activists, this investigation will show that despite the theoretical strength of the internationally-recognized “commons” framework for land ownership and management and the framework’s potential articulation with FS as a political movement, its weakly developed state within existing cultural, governance, and property institutions of market industrial societies limits implementation of that framework—even in a case concerning public resources and the presence of an active public committed to commons ideals. Practical challenges to the implementation of land and resource commons within polities lacking a substantial peasantry stem from two unanswered questions: (a) how to suitably, justly, and effectively constitute communities of decision-making vis-à-vis land commons (Ostrom’s “user boundaries”), and (b) how to address socio-economic limitations to individual participation in commoning activities when the base for personal subsistence is profoundly enmeshed in the capitalist reality of waged labor. Within the current complex and interconnected nature of industrial society markets and polities, the ideal of resource commoning as taken largely from the global South is found at present to be largely unworkable.

However, the case study shows that civil society interventions can be context-specific and therefore effective (rather than purely rooted in general ideals), acknowledge a diversity of approaches to food sovereignty, and accept the limitations placed by a lack of a global North FS commons history on the creation of a ‘rational strategy’ towards creating those commons. In the last section of the paper, we suggest approaches through which challenges can be addressed, if not solved, suggesting that iterative mitigation of specific problems combined with a longer-term vision of cultural change and policy improvement can create sociocultural, policy/law, and social movement conditions conducive to greater FS in the global North.¹

¹ Note: this a work of participatory action research; the main author of this paper (Antonio Roman-Alcalá) was a participant in the action described herein, and interviewed the central organizers of the action, who are listed as co-authors due to their centrality in developing the ideas contained; their names are provided unless they requested anonymity. This paper is a work in progress, please do not share or cite without the authors’ written permission. The author in addition wishes to thank Kelly Jewett and Jean Yaste for their editing and support.

1.1 Introduction: FS in the global North

It is a truism that the power of ideas and the power to enforce certain ideas have shaped the landscape and brought us to our historical position. With the globalization of communications technology and infrastructure, social and cultural trends have been transferred widely, and these trends include not just capitalist economic development but also counter-movements situated against this development. This paper surveys the intersections and divergences of FS civil society organizations and organizing between global North and South. Within the context of the United States' own unique history, the paper then examines particularly common challenges to food system activism in the global North. These challenges find their parallels in the South, but operate differently in the North due to the particular roles and conditions (historical and contemporary) of agriculture in the Northern economy, and differences in social movement composition. Differences between North and South in the prevalence of smallholder farming, land access and land prices, and cultural values around property and farming are key contributors to the differential challenges to FS activism.

The global FS movement certainly has Northern and Southern representation. La Via Campesina (LVC), the single organization most associated with FS ideas and action, has member coalitions from every continent on the planet save Antarctica. Representation in the FS movement includes some of the poorest nations on the planet, the up-and-coming BRICS countries, and the long-standing richest nations in the world. Hence, it is clear that FS as a concept or movement is not "owned" by any particular nation or region. Many have seen FS as a movement of peasants, but it appears that FS ideas increasingly appeal to food consumers (not just producers). FS intersects with equally diverse movements for peace, justice, equality, democracy, and environmental sustainability. As such, history is referenced here for contextualization and strategic organizational insight, not to make a claim for FS's provenance.

There are four main points. First, that underlying motivations, aspirations, themes, and tactics of modern political and social movement organizing unite both North and South and that some of this overlap is due to the inter-cultural/inter-societal dialogue that occurs in the globalized era of interconnected networks. Second, that in this dialogue, members of the FS movement in the South and the successful tactics they've deployed (the MST's direct action land occupations, Cuba's urban agroecology, indigenous influences on state processes as political movements, the creation of alternative agricultural economies based on self sufficiency and solidarity not market principles) have influenced the approaches of FS activists in the North. These movement histories and their lessons learned have rightly been leaned upon for inspiration and guidance, yet uncritical emulation of tactics of Southern members of the FS movement may prove strategically detrimental to the long-term success of FS activism in the North. Third, that the

particular conditions of modern industrial nation state market economies create specific challenges for FS activists, and because the North has experienced ‘development’ (i.e. the transition to complex, industrial, and less peasant-based economies) earlier and more substantially, these challenges tend to be more knotty in the North. Lastly, this paper hopes to show that many legitimate courses of action exist for activists in the North, and while these actions should be considered holistically, relationally, critically, and iteratively, the question of how they might match more closely the conditions (and therefore address more comprehensively the challenges) of Northern FS organizing is as yet unanswered and worth pursuing.

This paper also starts from a position of post-development, noting that even if changes should be made in the social order of the global South (the ‘developing world’), it is clear that the Eurocentric vision of development up to now denies both the problems with emulation of typically Northern patterns of change, and the positives of existing but disappearing social and economic patterns in the South (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1998). Beyond these critiques, it is important to acknowledge that change (‘development’) can occur as the result of hegemonic power or the democratic desires of populations or (most likely) both in dialectic interaction, and the line between the two may be difficult if not impossible for social scientists to define.

Though this paper is critical of certain assumptions and limitations of the FS framework (as developed in our case study in the North), and of the expectation that an assertion of correct tactics for social movements is possible, the authors are supportive of the FS project more generally and are members of various FS-inspired projects and groups. We offer these thoughts with the hopes of improving the efficacy, comprehensiveness, and long-term vision of FS action in the global North, without presuming to know what is best across varying circumstances and contexts.

1.2 FS and contemporary social movement patterns

The FS and LVC movements emerged over the last 20 years as a result of complex and long-term global socio-political-economic developments. In brief, these developments include industrialization and the ascendance of global capitalist markets. By the 20th century, the depredations wrought by capitalist accumulation, the injustices meted by the capital class’s close relation to state power, the trial and errors of an alternative to capitalism in nation-state socialism, and the rise of scientifically verifiable proof of human-induced environmental damage all combined to drive worldwide concern for democracy, ecological sustainability, and economic justice. Though the particulars vary, harsh social and ecological conditions have shaped similar struggles around the globe. Amidst the countless debates as to who should be

held responsible for these conditions, and what should be done about these concerns, FS has emerged as one relatively clear alternative and solution to these major overarching social/ecological/economic problems of our time (Rosset, 2008; Wittman, 2009; Altieri et al, 2011; Nicholson in Patel, 2009).

One reason FS is appealing is the success of some of its promoters in providing models of more just and sustainable food systems, or in bringing about substantive changes to their local food systems and state-market regimes. In Brazil, the MST has successfully settled 250,000 families with land titles onto newly constructed agroecology communities (Wright & Wolford, 2003). In Mexico, the Zapatistas have held their autonomy and indigeneity in the face of state repression and 20 years of NAFTA (Muñoz Ramirez, 2008). Cuba has shown that agroecology can produce a bulk of a country's fruit and vegetable needs, even when concentrated in urban areas (Altieri, 1999). Indigenous groups from around the world have provided examples of ecologically integrated rural livelihoods and the cosmologies, worldviews, and philosophies that support them (Aída Hernández, 2005; Ward, 2008). Another reason for FS's appeal lies in its somewhat ecumenical activist pluralism (within limits): since it is an ideal in search of actualization—an aspirational goal—FS allows for many forms of action, within a somewhat simplified set of principles (Patel, 2009).

These FS movements share common attributes with others around the globe. A turn away from traditional forms of hierarchical and institutional organizing towards principled and pragmatic adoption of autonomous, decentralized, horizontal forms has occurred not just in the global South, but has been very visible there (especially in Latin America). Many if not all of these movements reflect generalized principles of democracy/autonomy, ecology, and equality/egalitarianism, linking them into a 'movement of movements' without central organization (Zibechi, 2012). The so-called 'postmodern' turn in activism has further emboldened and reinforced local forms of rhetoric and action that don't claim universality. It is in this context that the form taken by San Francisco Bay Area FS activist group Occupy the Farm (OTF) is small, anti-hierarchical, based in a local geography, and dedicated to ecology and participation.

Additionally, these principles of activist orientation articulate closely with another idea compelling to FS activists in the North: the idea of the 'commons'. In this section, we outline these principles as evidenced in the FS literature and the words of our interview subjects (OTF member/activists). Then, we show how FS and commons can be seen as what we call 'methodological ideals'. Like 'prefigurative politics' (Graeber, 2002; Holloway, 2010), these frameworks are both methods—enacting and instilling guiding principles of democracy, ecology, and egalitarianism—and ideals, since the methods are not failsafe and existing physical

manifestations of democracy, ecology, and egalitarianism have not secured long-term permanence. ‘Principles’ encompass both values and practices, and the use of this term implies that these binary aspects are part of a mutually constructing process.

The important thing that links FS and commons is an imperfect but improvable process of civil society organization—based on democracy, ecology, and egalitarianism as guiding principles—that brings the principles themselves into the world; an ideal of collective self-management. Patel (2009) and others have noted that it is easy to argue that FS does not yet exist, but it is much more difficult to define exactly what it is, beyond “one knows [it] when one sees [it]” (Patel, 2009: 663). The movement for FS—like many other social movements—has been subject to criticism that it does not know what it seeks to replace the current capitalist order with.

The OTF and FS activist response is procedural and committed to action rather than definition. As Christina Schiavoni argues, “while it is important to define food sovereignty in a way that is understandable to the public, the most powerful way of communicating the message of food sovereignty is by doing – for instance, by engaging citizens directly in food system transformation” (Schiavoni in Patel, 2009: 685). What might be achieved “out there” in the world is centered *within* the process of FS organizing, and a less principled process is assumed to result in inadequate results.

Furthermore, many who seek food systems change and social change in general have become disillusioned by previous state and social movement attempts to impose ostensibly humane values or ends through inhumane means. Methodological ideals, then, have largely replaced utopian party lines in contemporary social movements from below, both North and South. Action inspired by ideals, to bring society towards those ideals, is not new. What is new is social movement focus on this process as more legitimate and effective than pursuing social change via the mediating power of state forms and markets. It is this question of efficacy—especially in terms of achieving food and land sovereignty—to which we return in section three.

1.3 Guiding principles of FS: Participation, Democracy, and Autonomy

Food sovereignty advocates are concerned, at the end of the day, with democracy. (Patel, 2009: 670)

I think democracy is a false appeal, a kind of paradox. Historically speaking democracy has always referred to a very small class of people ruling, and how that select “citizenry” makes decisions. And the idea that they’re all equally empowered, that’s egalitarianism. I do believe in egalitarianism. But the fundamental problem in democracy is that even if you define the citizenry as

everyone, and everyone is included in decision-making, the decision-making process is extracted from the executive process. So you're making a decision but who is implementing it? And the moment those things are separate, that creates another hierarchy, another system. The executive class holds an inordinate amount of power. Power is separated, and can't be touched by the people in a meaningful way. So I have a problem with the term democracy because it is often used to deceive people to think they're on the inside of a political process, where power is constructed and exercised, when they're really not. (Krystof, OTF)

Democracy is a well-worn term, and though political scientists continue to elaborate on its many definitions and iterations, it remains an elusive ideal (Cunningan, 2001). In the modern world system of nation state governments, democracy generically refers to the existence of choice on the part of populations in the politicians who represent them and the policies that underpin society's functioning. Modernization theorists argued that democracy develops in stages (Rostow, 1960), in association with a more market economy, from less to more so democratic. While this is far from a complete or accurate depiction of the world history of democratic regimes (Cunningan, 2001) governments can certainly vary in how authentically they incorporate the desires of their *demos*, their population of voting citizens— between periods in a nation's history, or even contemporaneously between regions within a nation. Out of all the critiques of democracy, the one that drives U.S. activist interest in commons and food sovereignty is the critique of the contemporary governance system as hopelessly corrupt (Warren, 2004; Lessig, 2011). In the words of one OTF activist:

In practice, the system we have offers so called choices that don't feel like choices, since the back end—where choices are created— is not really legit. They don't feel legit, and because of this a lot of people don't participate. Our system is heading towards less and less participation. That's where direct democracy, consensus process feels more appropriate, and more in line with FS as well, where the people who are growing and eating are controlling the system. We would like to see something similar in all areas of governance. (Effie, OTF)

Robert Costanza, Thomas Prugh, and Herman Daly (2001) agree that representation is not enough; true democracy allows citizens to deliberate on the issues of the day, in relation to experts and to each other, with divergent value systems out in the open (see also Norgaard, 2010 and Dryzek, 1987). Instead, modern democracy's methods for making social choices are based in elections, which are dominated by huge amounts of special interest money, fear-based campaigning, media spectacle, and party politics. In a sense, there is the ideal of democracy on which the United States constitution is written, and then there is the real democracy on which the United States operates.

In contrast for FS enthusiasts, democratic structures should be participatory not illusory. Policy development should be based on personal autonomy linked to social responsibility, not divisive power relationships where outcomes result in winners and losers. Money, fear, media, and party should be dismantled in favor of consensus building processes that are inclusionary and happen on an ongoing basis, not through periodic elections. OTF activists see this as the basis for a more legitimate democracy:

Right now, for good reason, we tend to blame our lack of being able to make decisions on those in power, instead of taking responsibility ourselves. Instead we could build alternative structures of village-based decision-making, on our block, in our neighborhoods and cities. Then we'd have a way that's real and welcomes participation from everyone, being informed, and coming together. It's important to acknowledge that this is difficult. To revitalize our governance structure would be to localize it once again, instead of broad decisions at state and federal levels, we start where we are and scale it up. (Ryan, OTF)

To Latin American social movement academic Raúl Zibechi, the ideal social movement organization is based on small groups whose leadership isn't separated from the base and where representation is minimal or nonexistent (Zibechi, 2012: 307). However, Zibechi acknowledges that

Organizing on [this basis] is slow and using it to make decisions can be a time consuming process. It probably cannot be exercised much beyond local groups, where there is a lot of personal trust and many small everyday interests in common. So I do not think it is a perfect paradigm for opposing large bureaucracies but it is, nevertheless, a way that thousands of grassroots groups have found to resist autonomously. (Zibechi, 2012: 309)

This hints at the problems of expecting these autonomous forms of organization (and their use of commons as structures for food system resource management) to confront the complexity of the current market-state forces that construct the food system and the powers that resist FS efforts. We will return to these issues in section three.

1.4 Guiding principles of FS: Ecology and sustainability

Ecology, like democracy, is complex, systemic, and lives in realms of the real and the ideal. There are studies of ecology as phenomena, the ecological ideals and ideas that stem from this study, and the ecological worldviews that influence how peoples' ideas of humanity and the natural world develop. Ecologists have described patterns in nature as stochastic, diverse, anti-entropic, and dynamic (Odum & Barret, 2004). The western world developed a view of nature as resources, and (with emerging 20th century concern for human-wrought havoc on the environment) as sanctified "wilderness" in contrast to human influenced-landscapes (Cronin, 1996).

The history of mainstream environmentalism locates its adherents in an ideological position that constructs a separation between humans and the 'natural' world. Environmentalists are therefore often said to be obsessed with preserving and protecting those 'wild and natural' areas defined as places where humans are not and *should* not be in large numbers. (Di Chiro in Cronin, 1996: 300)

The postmodern incorporation of humans into the environment via an ecological understanding of interconnected complex systems contrasted with the worldview driving previous exclusionary 'preservation' environmental movements (Cronin, 1996; Haraway, 1991). Newer literature has elaborated on histories of human roles in 'natural' ecologies (Mann, 2005) and contemporary examples of the same (Dagget, 2005). Researchers focusing on indigenous populations (such as Nancy Lee Peluso's work on forest management in Java) promote a view of the natural world that includes humans in essential management roles (Peluso, 1994). Environmentalist thought now allows more space for positive human roles vis-à-vis non-human nature, and ecological actions supporting the environment can now include those that utilize natural resources.

In the global North, agrarian philosophy has been influential in the development of this newer ecological ethic. Wendell Berry's critique of both industrial society and conservationism maintained that farming can be spiritually fulfilling and ecologically regenerating (Berry, 1977). Aldo Leopold's land ethic elaborated on the importance of place-based stewardship relationships between humans and non-human nature (Leopold, 1949). More recently, a "critical agrarianism" has disputed some of the more conservative aspects of earlier (largely white, male, Christian) agrarian writings (Carlisle, 2011). This critical approach to building on agrarianism's environmentalist ethos has been inspired in part by feminism, eco-feminism, and attempts to incorporate voices of the marginalized and socially oppressed (Haraway, 1991; Shiva, 2005).

In some ways, principles of ecology as evinced in environmentalist movements of the global North have been built on idealized representations of populations in the global South. The more ‘environmentally friendly’ lifestyles of indigenous people—whether real or imagined—are cited by many global North FS and environmental activists as inspirations for the creation of a more ecological culture. Derrick Jensen, a popular radical environmentalist author from the North, argues this way (Jensen, 2006). In studying societies with large proportions of indigenous peoples, academics from the South also rely on such images. Zibechi references ecological perspectives in relation to what he calls “community logic, or the Indian cosmovision (Zibechi, 2012: 321)”. It would seem that the presence or absence of an organized and sustaining indigenous tradition has real effects on the ease of constructing democratic and ecologic FS movements.

1.5 Guiding principles of FS: Egalitarianism and economic equality

Capitalism’s development exacerbates inequalities, but inequalities are not exclusive to capitalism: social, political, and economic power differentials have existed throughout history in many contexts. In the context of food movement organizing in the Bay Area, inequality has been foregrounded as an essential factor that drives the destructive nature of the existing capitalist food system. Racism, classism, and patriarchy are variously indicted for their roles in perpetuating food system injustice and the response from many NGOs and community groups has been to call for “Food Justice”(FJ).

In Herrera’s definition,

Food justice refers to fair, equitable access to fresh, healthy, affordable local food in vulnerable neighborhoods, especially low-income neighborhoods and communities of color; and the people who eat this healthy food own the means of production and exchange. In this way the people in poor neighborhoods also gain access to the economic benefits of their own food system. The fulfillment of this promise requires constant attention to values and a culture which will hold and honor those values. (Herrera, 2013)

Herrera points out the differences and commonalities between the frames of community food security, food justice, and food sovereignty, finding that his definition of food justice “encompasses the essential concepts in both community food security and food sovereignty” (personal communication, 2013). Additionally, Herrera argues that access to good food is fundamental to survival and thereby goes beyond the idea of “rights”, an idea that is reflected in Patel’s analysis.

At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state. In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, FS paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others. (Patel, 2009: 668)

The connection of rights to citizenship is what mandates that FS take the egalitarianism/equality notion beyond rights vis-à-vis state power; a more complex enacted rights model is what FJ and FS indicate, across scales of sovereignty and in various socioeconomic circumstances. Hence, because “claims around food sovereignty address the need for social change such that the capacity to shape food policy can be exercised at all appropriate levels” and “specific arrangements to govern territory and space” at these levels, making these rights substantive “requires more than a sophisticated series of juridical sovereignties.” (ibid: 668-670)

To make the right to shape food policy meaningful is to require that everyone be able substantively to engage with those policies. But the prerequisites for this are a society in which the equality-distorting effects of sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class power have been eradicated. ... Egalitarianism, then, is not something that happens as a consequence of the politics of food sovereignty. It is a prerequisite to have the democratic conversation about food policy in the first place. (Patel, 2009: 670)

Anya, an organizer with OTF agreed, arguing “economic equality is a huge part of FS, but only an intermediate stepping stone” towards more compassionate ways of organizing human relations and relations with the natural world. Thus, equality/egalitarianism are ideals that FS seeks to instantiate in food systems, while those struggles create more egalitarian social structures that allow more authentically democratic participation in food system policy construction.

1.6 Commons and FS as methodological ideals to enact principles

OTF activists also express an interest in the concept of “the commons”. Like FS, commons can be seen as methodological ideals that enact the guiding principles of democracy, ecology, and equality, though their theoretical origins lay in real-world examples of community management of common resources². Stemming from the aforementioned critiques of the lack of democracy, ecology, or egalitarianism evidenced in modern political economic systems, OTF sees commons

² Considering how much the lines blur between small-scale governance, cooperative management, and joint ownership, and thus the “taxonomic difficulties plaguing discussions of commons management tools (Garnett, 2012: 2004)”, this paper considers commons more as a conceptual generality than a specific mode of governance.

as an alternative and a solution. What follows is a review of the commons concept, the forms of social choice to which it forms an alternative, and the relationship of commons to FS.

Governments and the laws they pass and implement are perhaps the most obvious means to make social choices. Governments are such generally accepted institutions of society—even considering their problems and the large variation in their individual histories, configurations, and levels of corruption—that individuals tend to internalize their legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). OTF, as a reflection of broader trends within recent social movements, sees governments as corrupt and to various extents illegitimate (but it should be noted that not all OTF members are expressly anti-state).

Fred Block (1977) presents a convincing analysis that the obsession of state actors with economic growth leads to economic thinking that supports continual resource extraction and profit making in favor of other considerations, and there may be a potential structural (rather than ideological) basis for this. Block claims that since states require taxes to survive, and individual state actors (politicians) in representative democracies require consent of the governed, the tendency of government is towards supporting economic growth above any other value. The capitalist or owning class may “capture” the state in various ways to achieve its ends, but it doesn’t need to, since all members of the state apparatus must accommodate profit-making in order to satisfy constituents (by maintaining low unemployment), retain and gain higher levels of revenue (by taking in more tax monies), and avoid making enemies with the power elite who can speed their removal from power (by circumscribing very limited parameters for political discourse and action via rhetoric and policy).

When a politician’s job security is based on public opinion and that public opinion is shaped by the available economic opportunities and circumstances it is not hard to see why politicians would want a growing economy. When tax revenue allows the state to do what the public wants, it is not hard to see why a growing economy solidifies an administration’s legitimacy specifically and government legitimacy more broadly. Add to this the various degrees to which government and profit-making industries are aligned through revolving doors of involvement, lobbying and election bankrolling, or direct corruption, and it is hard to imagine how any non-economic priorities (like those that drive the FS project) make it into law and policy!

The market has an organizing principle whereby many individual decisions are averaged into an average social choice of what is important to have access to (whether a good or service) and how much that access is worth. While the market may be a place where individuals as consumers can make social choices, these choices are under the current system constrained

and unlikely to establish substantially different conditions in the production or distribution of resources (Cahill, 2001).

Factors that complicate simple supply and demand market models and prevent markets from reflecting the full values of market participants include environmental constraints; market monopolies and oligopolies; marketing, advertising and created demand; and the effect of differences between demand (the desire to make a purchase) and effective demand (the actual ability to make that purchase). Poverty, for example can limit food purchase options and lead many consumers to prioritize the consumption of cheap, high-caloric foods. The composite picture of these purchases doesn't in any way prove that fast food is the most desirable choice, or that consumers of food don't care about animals being treated inhumanely or the destruction of the environment through agriculture. OTF and others have argued for the need to balance the social choices made through markets with other forms of social choice, and to some, this can be found in the commons sector.

Commons are ways to manage physical or cultural resources where users participate in resource management as part of a social system outside of or in peripheral relationship to the market or state. Researched and legitimated by Nobel-prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom, commons management has been a reality for as long as humans have collectively managed resources (that is, predating both markets and states), and still occurs and functions well in many parts of the world (Ostrom, 1990). Many "common pool resources" are not threatened by the so-called "tragedy of the commons" (the idea that any resource will be overused by the cumulative decisions of "utility maximizing" individuals using it) because they are managed by communities of interest as a social whole, through agreements and mutual monitoring of compliance with those agreements. In some cases, it is the *lack* of market or state intrusion that preserves the resource. This is what Ostrom proved in her pioneering research.

One thing that makes commons so appealing to FS activists (versus government policies or market-based efforts) is that they offer user/manager/participants new conceptions of how governance and the economy might be organized on a more participatory basis, in order to better ensure equity and sustainability. Commons also promote the idea that patterns of land use, resource use, and cultural production are themselves results of constructive processes—and are subject to social forces and revisions—not undying principles of property rights or state ownership.

Oftentimes it is assumed that policies are enough to address market failures, or that electoral/governmental reform will be enough to address governance failures; yet there are inherent pressures on states and markets that can readily dismantle progress on either front,

and so communities dedicated to change must remain vigilant and constantly engage. This matches well with the idea in commons that resource user/managers are constantly engaged in creating and re-creating social agreements about resource use that they must monitor and enforce; commons are iterative and (like policies and market structures) always contingent. However, because commons are based on empowered user/managers, not disempowered market or political subjects, they hold promise as an alternative approach to resource management.

Ideal does not always match reality, and thus far it has been cultural commons, not land or physical resource commons, that have proven most accepted and successful in the North. The cultural commons that already exist and have proven extraordinarily successful, like Wikipedia and open-source software (where editors and engineers collaborate without personal compensation) manage to address more complex systems, but don't provide easy answers for complex physical resource circuits like food systems.

Also important to note is how much these cultural commons are embedded in a larger market economy, and how much that economy is required to sustain cultural commoners while they do the work of commoning. Software engineers for example may work well-compensated jobs for multinational corporations 12 hours a day, then go home to a well-stocked kitchen and contribute free of charge to an open source project. Setting aside for now the myriad motivations of those participating in their development, open source software and technologies are based in an old principle that intellectual developments are the common property of all humanity, and only deeded to individuals by sovereign powers for specific reasons. Patents and intellectual property were originally conceived as temporary measures to ensure innovation, and such intellectual property was expected to revert back to common ownership as its original state. This is evidenced in how the lifespan for patents has increased since their advent in the 1700s (Rowe, 2013).

Interestingly, we find this ethic reflected in writing on the agrarian ethic of early U.S. colonizers: "As Jefferson himself said, 'while the farmer holds title to the land, actually it belongs to all the people, because civilization itself rests upon the soil' (Carlisle, 2011: 4)". Carlisle uses this quote to show how "critical mass of private property owners with a strong land ethic can never be enough (ibid: 4)" and that the agrarian ideal (a parallel to FS) must be based upon the primacy of the commons over the private.

In sum, because they both rely on methodological ideals of participation, ecology, and egalitarianism and seek their associated outcomes (democracy, sustainability, and equality), FS

and commons both exist in the same ‘movement of movements’. This movement is seen well in the case of Occupy the Farm, to which we turn now.

2.1 Occupy the Farm case study

Our case study concerns the activist-led illegal occupation of a 10-acre parcel of land in Albany, California known as the Gill Tract (GT). This parcel contains some of the last remaining Class-1 agricultural soils left undeveloped in the Bay Area and is also owned by the University of California, the original “land grant” college institution founded in the mid-1860s in order to spread agricultural knowhow and natural resource wealth across the final front of the western frontier. In this section we recount important contextual history preceding the 2012 action in question in order to illuminate the social and political factors that led to contestation of the Tract.

2.2 U.S., Californian, and Bay Area activist context

The San Francisco Bay Area (population about 7 million spread out over 12 counties) has been a known center of political and social activism (Ferris et al, 2001). This history includes some pioneering work in the anti-war, anti-nuclear, and environmentalist movements, and ethnic liberation movements (Armstrong, 2002; Klawiter, 1999). Student movements based in the public universities of the area have also raised the area’s profile as a hotbed of dissent, from the Free Speech Movement of mid-1960s University of California at Berkeley (UCB) (Cohen & Zelnik, 2002; Mitchell, 1992; Eynon, 1989) to the Third World Liberation struggles of San Francisco State University (SFSU) in the late 1960s that resulted in the very first ethnic studies programs in the country (Unemoto, 1989; Chung & Chang, 2010).

Other parts of this history include the combination of environmental and social issues into the idea of ‘environmental justice’, the spread of direct action training and philosophy, and the development of an urban land ethic linked to food gardening. Specific precedents include the social justice organizing of Oakland’s Black Panthers in the late 1960s, who started the first free breakfast program for children—which was later emulated by the federal government. The still active direct action anarchist group Food Not Bombs spearheaded politically motivated and often illegal public meals, sparking a viral activist meme that spread across the planet (there are now at least 500 chapters, according to the foodnotbombs.net website). Battles in Richmond, California against the negative environmental impacts and local political control of the local Chevron oil refinery have continued and only grown with an increased understanding of the reality and implications of environmental injustice. The back to the land movement of 1960s

hippies further integrated countercultural and environmental ideals across the United States, and has had a strong and lasting influence in Northern California.

More recently, anarchist currents have imbued many sectors of political struggle in the Bay Area. As described by Day (2005), many of the ‘newest social movements’ are based in direct action, values of horizontalism, and an anti-oppression analysis conscious of movement intersectionality. As such, recent struggles (for example, around the defunding of public education and related increases in tuition at UCB) have involved tactics from the anarchist playbook: building occupations, a lack of demands on authorities in favor of insurrectionist rhetoric, and attempts to connect the struggles of multiple oppressed groups through anti-capitalist ideas. Occupy Oakland was the most obvious and impactful recent manifestation of this current, leading to two shutdowns of Oakland’s economically-important ports in two months. Tens of thousands of people came out to the November 2nd shutdown protest in response to the militaristic police clearing of Oscar Grant (nee Frank Ogawa) plaza in late October of 2011—the plaza at the center of the Occupy Oakland encampment. This encampment was just one location in the nationwide protest movement Occupy Wall Street that shared so many of these characteristics.

Community organizers have used food and gardening projects as vehicles for social justice, and within the past 10 years there has been an explosion of interest in these kinds of projects, as food systems and sustainability have become more mainstream concerns. Additionally, the gentrification of the Bay Area (largely due to the area’s proximity to the lucrative economic center of Silicon Valley) contributes economic purchasing power to support the increasing local/sustainable/organic food economy. The discourse of economically elite “foodie” culture also contributes to the activist nature of food organizing by elevating the importance of food and food system awareness, yet being ultimately about gustatory pleasure it at the same time obscures and problematizes activism by delinking class issues from the inherent problems in capitalist agriculture (Josée & Shyon, 2010).

Students across the globe have been at the center of many social and political movements; FS in the North is no different: students organize food cooperatives on and near their campuses (CoFED); fight for sustainable and just food procurement policies (UC Santa Cruz’s Community Agroecology Network); and work with farmworker movements (joining the Coalition of Imokalee Workers to found the Student Farmworker Alliance). Beyond the activism constructed around food issues of the school environment (or of using the campus as a space for organizing others in solidarity, like SFA), students have increased opportunities to study FS and food movements as part of the academic experience. Food studies themes and classes are emerging

in diverse areas of academe like city and regional planning, geography, sociology, and the humanities.

This is, of course, just part of the activist history providing the context in which the Occupy the Farm GT action was born, but from this truncated history, it is clear how FS/FJ initiatives emerged.

2.3 History of the Gill Tract and UC research priorities

The modern history of the tract (setting aside the previous history of European colonization, indigenous resistance, and a hundred or so years of urban development) dates back to when Edgar and Mary Gill sold a large parcel of land to UCB, under the premise that it would be used for agricultural research (the Gills were horticulturists). The university sold off and developed most of the original 104-acre parcel, leaving less than 10% of what constituted the original GT.

From 1945 to the late 1990s, the GT was utilized for research in Integrated Pest Management and other forms of biological pest controls, under the UC's Division of Biological Control (DBC). However, developments in biotechnologies and molecular genetics research precipitated a shift in funding for DBC and the GT's use (Jennings, 1997). After a UCB research agreement made with biotechnology corporation Novartis in the late 1990s, DBC was displaced from the Tract. DBC was defunded, and has not used any part of the GT since 2001. One faculty member who was part of the DBC, Professor Miguel Altieri, continues to use part of the GT but funds his own research (and is not funded through DBC). Just before the UCB-Novartis agreement, the Tract had been used for two seasons by an educational organic farming operation, but otherwise GT projects have never been directed towards growing food for human consumption.

The fact that the [DBC] at Berkeley offered one of the best demonstrated records for advancing such applications among various academic units should have resulted in its expansion, despite the reduction in funding experienced among various academic units... Anticipating such an outcome, however, would confuse a compelling social need and an intellectually challenging project with the basis for organizing priorities in the modern university. The ironic twist is that just as the public has grown more demanding of a chemical-free agriculture, the institutional basis for changing agricultural practices has become more anchored in technically- and capital-intensive production orientations. (Jennings, 1997: 268)

As research funds and support from the university dried up for many ecologically focused farming concepts, funds increased for research with product-outcome potential, like genetically engineered seeds (Jennings, 1997; Kloppenburg, 2005). This kind of research often began with

“basic” genetic research, and often used corn as a subject. As an investigative journalist with the local newspaper Bay Area Express learned, most of the research conducted on the GT for the past 10 years has benefited the university and its researchers (who are not professors) through patent development; these patents have all gone into biotechnological applications and many of these have been used by biotechnology companies in their products (Bond Graham, 2012).

By the 1990s, environmental justice movements in the bay area (contemporaneously with peers around the world) had elaborated the concept and practice of urban agriculture, and were looking for further opportunities for education and institutional support (Kaufman & Bailkey, 2000; Ferris et al, 2001). A coalition of organizations dedicated to ecological and socially just urban farming as a vehicle towards more sustainable food systems approached the UC administration in 1997 with a proposal to convert the remaining GT into a site for urban and sustainable farming education. The Bay Area Coalition for Urban Agriculture (BACUA) proposal, supported by a critical mass of 30-plus community-based and non-profit organizations, attempted to integrate the local community’s interest and pursuit of food security and economic justice with the UC’s existing resources at the GT. They were also driven by a vision of collaborative governance, a process described well by political scientists as the bringing of “public and private stakeholders together in collective forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2007: 543)”. Members of BACUA and other local urban agriculture activists made similar attempts to gain access to the GT for the next 15 years, after the original BACUA proposal was rejected by the UC administration. According to Beebo Turman, a long time community gardening organizer in Berkeley and participant in BACUA, the contentious issue that caused the UC to back out without negotiation was the role and involvement of the “public” in managing the GT (personal communication, 2013).

Professor Altieri was also a proponent of BACUA, and the only remaining biological control researcher on the GT when the UC Regent’s Master Plan for the University Village development was published in 2004. In the plan, the Capital Projects division of UCB announced plans to develop the remaining portions of the GT still in agricultural research use. The plan states that the agricultural part of the GT would likely become two little league ball fields in spaces designated recreational and open space. Also planned was a shopping center and senior center complex that was granted an exemption from having to meet Albany city parking regulations. These developments required a re-zoning of the land and for the development agreement with the UC to be approved by the Albany city council.

While some Albany residents and others who had been following the GT/BACUA process for years felt unable to stop the development or achieve a community farm at the GT, OTF

organized a response that others had not ever attempted. The illegal occupation of the GT, as we will see, was successful in stopping the development of the North part of the GT. This was the case largely because of this preexisting history of “legitimate” (i.e. legal, playing-by-the-rules) efforts to secure the space for urban agroecology and community access. Should this history of locally based engagement with the UC (spearheaded mostly by university professors, Albany community members, and established NGOs) not have existed, it is quite possible that the narrative created in the occupation would have been less effective in eliciting support, and that the outcome of the action might have been quite different.

2.4 Occupy the Farm narrative May 2012-August 2013

This is a big problem, to construct, or identify, the new farmers. This means a new and distinct kind of training and education, and also signifies that citizen movements must participate not only in sharing information, but also in the struggle for land to facilitate young people, young men and women entering directly into the sector. (Nicholson in Patel 2009: 681)

The OTF action was organized over a series of months and manifested in a direct action begun on Earth Day (April 22nd) 2012, wherein hundreds of demonstrators marched from a nearby park to the GT. Demonstrators broke the locks on the GT’s gates, entered, and proceeded to weed out mustard plants gone to seed and replace them with over 15,000 vegetable starts that OTF had started and stored in green houses all over the Bay Area. During the succeeding weeks of the occupation thousands more vegetable starts were brought in by other non-OTF community members.

OTF did not just organize a direct action; they also spearheaded a media campaign to spread information about the GT and its importance to FS research in the Bay Area, and supported/participated in lawsuits by local Albany residents that disputed the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) approved by the Albany city council for the proposed GT development. However, the illegal break-in and occupation was the most visible aspect to this campaign in the weeks and months following April 22nd.

During the 3-week occupation of the GT, OTF organized workshops and open meetings on various topics relating to urban farming, the UC’s collaboration with biotechnology corporations, and FS. Response from the UCB administration was unequivocally hostile. From the first day, police were deployed to film participants and threaten anyone on the GT with arrest for trespassing. After this failed to diminish participation in the occupation, the UCB administration called upon OTF organizers to meet in a closed-door meeting. Though it was opposed to such meetings on principles of democracy and transparency, OTF agreed.

Immediately following this meeting (where no agreement on the GT's use was made), 14 OTF members³, as well as 150 "John and Jane Doe" participants were sued by the UC for damages accrued due to cut locks, rent for the land for the time of the occupation, and loss of income due to the disruption of the genetics research. A gang injunction was filed against the plaintiffs of the suit and anyone "aiding and abetting" the farmers. After lawyer for OTF Dan Seigel submitted a counter-suit, the UC dropped its suit and injunction.

Although police were deployed to meet every visit to the GT by OTF, very few participants were arrested. Intimidation was constant for those at the occupation. Editorials in the school paper Daily Cal repeated the demonizing narrative of the administration's spokesperson Dan Mogulof that OTF was attempting to 'unilaterally' decide what the space should be used for. The UC even convinced the paper to retract one of its articles before it went to print because they claimed it did not equally represent all sides of the story. The article was published to the Daily Cal's website before it was retracted.

Mogulof consistently referenced the stake that existing researchers had in the GT, in order to argue the illegitimacy of OTF's contestation of the space. That OTF had trampled on researcher's "academic freedom" was the UC's public relations campaign's most consistent tropes, aside from painting OTF as selfish and naïve interlopers. Yet while the administration claimed that OTF's presence hindered the researchers' ability to go about their work, Professor Altieri was denied access to the GT by UCPD when he came to the GT to plant his research crops. Quite uncommonly for illegal actions like OTF, local print and television journalism was overall supportive of the action; it tended to balance perspectives, interview participants and supportive neighbors, and not just repeat Mogulof's claims. Coming off of the heels of the countrywide Occupy Wall Street movement, media interest in the action was strong and provided an opportunity to extend the narrative and rhetoric of that movement into the world of FS. Occupy activists from around the country expressed solidarity and inspiration from the OTF action, excited to see the "occupy" tactic being taken in a more pragmatic direction.

After its eviction from the site (resulting in nine arrests), OTF in collaboration with other FJ/FS groups organized a series of open public forums to elaborate a set of principles and goals around the future of the GT, from the community perspective. The forums provided a space to develop an alternative vision for the GT, as well as to bring together community members to further the sense of agency participants felt in the occupation. The process included Albany residents, UCB students and alumnae, current UCB professors, and members of the larger Bay Area urban agriculture movement.

³ Later, the number of defendants became 17, after additional OTF members made their names public.

By a year after the first occupation, six GT re-occupations had occurred, and OTF continued to contest the UC's narrative and actions. Each time OTF re-entered the land, it harvested produce from the part of the farm which had not been tilled in by the UC (about an acre), which OTF then distributed according to what those in attendance agreed was the best use of the food (using the "General Assembly" model common in horizontalist newest social movements). This resulted in hundreds of pounds of food distributed to mainly low-income residents of Richmond, West Oakland, and Oakland. Food Not Bombs received some of the produce for their free food programs as well.

In September of 2012, the dean of UCB's College of Natural Resources (CNR) announced that management authority over the northern portion of the remaining GT had been transferred from Capital Projects to his college. Concurrently, a referendum by Albany residents forced a rescinding of City Council approval of the development agreement, citing an inadequate EIR. When the anchor tenant at the proposed development (Whole Foods Market) pulled out of the agreement citing too many delays, the development project seemed all but a dead deal. OTF celebrated, but went on with organizing.

Meetings with sympathetic faculty and staff at CNR brought OTF organizers into a process of negotiation with the UC. By July of 2013, CNR was proposing to offer a small piece of the north side of the GT for a "community-based" project. This project has been spearheaded by Professor Altieri and in it community groups (including members of OTF) have planted equal area plots and gathered data on output in order to assess the efficacy of various agroecological techniques and approaches. The southern portion, however, remained under management of Capital Projects and slated for development, and OTF continued to organize to prevent this development. Its later strategy for contesting the development, following on Whole Foods' pulling out from earlier plans, was to organize a boycott of Sprouts Market (the ostensible tenant to replace the southern fields of the GT). OTF also attempted multiple re-plantings of the south portion, only to experience arrests and have the crops plowed under. Sensing a war of attrition, OTF has since concentrated on the development of a vision for the north portion of the GT and its community and educational focuses (partly in collaboration with the sympathetic faculty mentioned), while it continues to contest the UC's plans to develop the remaining land by raising awareness and organizing community opposition.

2.5 OTF strategy and reasoning, per organizers

In interviews with OTF organizers, they made the partially joking claim that their strategy rested on a four-step process. OTF's expected phases for their campaign included: 1) land occupation,

2) media coverage and education, 3) “...” and 4) the achievement of a land trust or conservation easement for the GT that would preserve its use for ecological farming, in perpetuity (personal communication, 2013). Step 3, the “...” indicates that OTF did not claim to have figured out the exact route to FS in the particular situation of the GT, just as they do not claim to have an exact route figured out for FS as a whole. Still, they had an idea of how their action would lead towards FS, in relation to the Gill Tract but also beyond it.

Many people see us as a direct action; those of us involved see a broad spectrum of tactics. There is a concern with the questions of governance of the GT, but we're not comfortable with creating that for the GT. We're comfortable with developing our own methods for our own group, also to figure out governance between ourselves and other GT-related groups. When we're dealing with the UC, we see [direct action] as challenging the conditions of access to the GT. But our long-term development processes are going to be difficult, because the networks we need to include are huge and we don't have connections to them all. The forums have not produced a model. Until there is an easement, I'm not sure we're comfortable with [claiming management responsibilities for the GT]. (Krystof, OTF)

This unwillingness to attach to certainty marks FS movements in the global North as imaginative more than prescriptive. As another OTF member asserted, in relation to the notion that occupation was all they planned for,

The ‘...’ is a creative and fertile space that I don't think we should presume to be able to trim neatly into a road map for change. There could be other avenues for the change energy a direct action cultivates. It may not be ‘revolution’ but it may also be something other than ‘policy’. ... [It is crucial] to hold first that undefined space, where new and creative social innovation that lies outside the spheres of state or market solutions can happen. (Effie, OTF)

While such sentiment appeals to humility and openness, support for a “diversity of tactics” is easier in theory than put into practice. How does an individual decide whether or not their efforts are best spent on civil disobedience, or on influencing politicians, or organizing entrepreneurial community efforts? Can one do all three? Other questions also linger: how can tactics relate? How can those of different philosophical and tactical bents support each other while pursuing different agendas? What of when the agendas oppose? What of problems of cooptation, leadership corruption, or when social movement members gain the privilege and power to be on ‘the inside’, but use that power in ways that compromise the work of those on ‘the outside’?

Yet, as OTF organizer Ashoka pointed out, “even thinking about activism as an individual choice shows the deeply ingrained individualism of this [United States] culture.” The idea that activism is a zero-sum endeavor, where effort spent one way is effort not spent another, may be correct—but only on the individual level. Ashoka suggests FS activists start “thinking in terms of what the community can sustain versus what an individual can sustain”. Perhaps the imagination for possibilities of social action increases as individuals begin to think of themselves not only as individuals but also as part of larger collectives that have the capacity to organize in myriad ways.

Even while the OTF experience rewarded organizers with distinct, tangible results (the Whole Foods pullout; the transfer of management to CNR and resulting community-involved parcel; the food grown and harvested from the site), organizers were also proud of other victories:

Less tangibly, there is reawakening the imagination of everyone at the site. The fenced off inaccessible area became a living participatory organic farm, and that shouldn't be underestimated. (Ryan, OTF)

Even someone in such an esteemed position as the United Nations “Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food” Olivier De Schutter agrees with the notion that a “social diversity approach, based on citizen-led” action will prove more fruitful for food systems transformation than action led by governments or market actors. In a recent address to the inaugural symposium of UCB's forthcoming “Berkeley Food Institute”, De Schutter argued that, instead of food system sustainability requiring

the strong hand of the state or the powerful dominant market actors co-opting [niche] innovation in their practices, I would suggest maybe we need neither. Maybe transitions can be neither state-led, nor market-based. And maybe they can be citizen-led, and the source—as a result—of greater empowerment and autonomy. (De Schutter, 2013)

Hence, OTF organizers conceive of the occupation tactic as a way to make tangible progress on community access to the GT, inspire continued resistance to the UC's power, and open up possibilities for further social action that could include occupations at other sites as well as a suite of non-direct-action tactics that might support FS as well—at the GT and beyond it. Even if they are equivocal about exactly which communities will be involved in the eventual management of the GT, or how it will be managed, OTF sees the occupation action as meaningful and progressive for the pursuit of FS. OTF is a direct action group, but committed to that tactic within a larger and longer-term strategy that includes cultural change and policy making.

Everyone in OTF agrees that direct action and mass mobilization is necessary to motivate any sort of significant policy changes. The differences lie in policy changes versus revolution, which people in the group might have different opinions about. ... The more they engage with [policy], the more they grapple with the question of how to make social change without social upheaval. (Krystof, OTF)

There are those of us who think 100% that [policy work] is a waste of time, but there are others in the group who think differently. And those perspectives are evolving even within us, as individuals. (Effie, OTF)

In the next section, we outline various challenges to the implementation of FS via land commons like that which OTF calls for on the GT, and offer (when available) thoughts on how to address those challenges.

3.1 “Common Commons Conundrums”

In California’s Bay Area, market-based, policy-based, and prefigurative/direct action approaches have all made inroads to FS, but have also come up against barriers. Like definitions for FS in practice, no tactic is perfect. Barriers to FS are based in the particular social and political parameters of existing political economic and cultural systems that may differ from North to South. Yet, the generalized tendencies of ascendant capitalist political economy create issues that transcend particularity and thus can be found (albeit to different degrees) everywhere. For the purposes of this paper, these challenges are presented as problems of the North, though it must be acknowledged that they are not exclusive to it. There are clearly barriers to participation in and the success of FS movements, North and South. The question is how these are different in different places, and how activists might account for this when planning actions.

Barriers to FS organizing in the North vary from relatively unyielding factors like socio-economic demography (the lack of a peasant or large indigenous base for FS movements); somewhat more alterable cultural factors that limit commoning (as in prevailing views on property rights); and institutional issues, some of which are deeply embedded (such as the systemic conditions of bureaucratic organizations and economistic government priorities) and others which are more addressable (such as within-institution contradictions). Because of the complex and interconnected nature of industrial society markets and polities, the ideal of resource commoning as taken largely from the global South is currently untenable. In this last section of the paper, however, we suggest approaches through which these barriers can be addressed, if not solved, suggesting that iterative mitigation of specific problems (as seen in the OTF case) combined with a longer-term vision of cultural change and policy improvement can create

sociocultural, policy/law, and social movement conditions conducive to greater FS in the global North.

3.2 User boundaries and stakeholder madness: where is the limit in complex systems?

People who eat and grow the food have the decision making power. –Basic tenet of FS

Defining the boundaries of the resource and of those authorized to use it can be thought of as a ‘first step’ in organizing for collective action. As long as the boundaries of the resource and the individuals who can use the resource remain uncertain, no one knows what they are managing or for whom. (Ostrom, 1995: 35-36)

One of Ostrom’s key components for a functioning commons system is a well-understood distinction between user/managers of a resource and those not holding decision-making power in that system. Ostrom used the term “user boundaries” to denote this differentiation. In the resource management situations that Ostrom studied, communities of stakeholders were relatively easy to distinguish. The situations were predominantly rural, where historically resource management had been the purview of socially cohesive communities that relied directly on the resources for at least some of their subsistence. They were not situations where management had been mediated predominantly through market or government circuits. But what of complex user/manager relationships with regards to resources and products that are situated in and move through complex and widespread socio-economic systems? What about user boundaries in relation to urban commons (like that proposed by OTF for the GT), located in geographies of intense population concentration and diversity?

To ruin a good Zen koan: *If a tree falls in the forest, who cares?* When the products of an industrial process are widely dispersed, and the negative effects of that process are generalized as well (as in the global effects of deforestation), it becomes much harder to constitute communities of relevant stakeholders. The trope in FS that eaters *and* consumers should be involved in crafting food policy sounds practically foolish if we are trying to figure out how FS would exist operationally, since that would mean that *everyone* decides, and even the most dedicated horizontalist might have a hard time facilitating *that* meeting! The pertinent question for the construction of production commons in advanced capitalist economies then becomes: if there is a choice as to whether or not the tree falls, *who should be allowed to participate* in that choice, and *what are the processes* for making that choice?

In many instances in the South, tree felling is a capital-accumulating endeavor, where local needs are subverted in favor of gains for people outside of the communities affected⁴. Since the initial period of colonization of the United States and the close-to-genocidal treatment of its preexisting indigenous people, instances arose where people with a direct sustenance relation to the land (or whose livelihoods are related to the products of the land) were displaced or burdened by the exploitation of natural resources, but these instances are less common in contemporary U.S. than in other parts of the world. Logging in the United States, for example, impacts less the livelihoods of large portions of the population than their environmentalist sensibilities. More often in the North, it is the exploitation of marginalized peoples' labor that is tied to the exploitation of the land (exemplified by the low wage stoop labor employed in Californian agriculture—see McWilliams, 1935).

When land resources are exploited (old growth forest clear cutting; mountaintop removal; housing development on agricultural land as modern examples) the communities that are affected by this exploitation tend to be dispersed in space and through time. We might include those whose fishing opportunities are limited by the despoliation of waterways, all those affected by climate change from coal mining and suburban sprawl, and the future generations who will experience the cumulative results of these destructive acts. Moreover, those whose livelihoods relate to a resource are wont to support the exploitation as a matter of economic necessity, even if the exploitation promises negative futures for the sustainability of extraction (a reality among loggers in the Pacific Northwest recognized by some members of modern deep ecology movements; see Devall, 1991 and Shantz, 2004). Occasionally, environmental tragedies of such large proportions occur that the wide interdependence of production circuits is illuminated, but difficulty in delineating who has been affected by such tragedies—and thus who should be responsible for managing these circuits as commons⁵—remains.

The 2010 U.S. Gulf Coast Deepwater Horizon oil spill was one such recent incident. Thousands of livelihoods, if not millions of people's lives, were altered by the impacts of the spill (Smith, 2010). Yet, the structures of governing oil extraction did not and do not afford a space for the voices of all those potentially-affected (Osofsky, 2013); for example, no Gulf Coast fishermen were involved in decision-making around Deep Horizon. Fishermen were not able to contest the dangerous extraction technique and neither were coastal communities economically dependent on tourism. Osofsky argues "taking a principled approach to [regulatory] reform grounded in governance theory can help to create a more effective and appropriate hybrid system in an imperfect regulatory environment (ibid: 60)". This includes pursuing a "multiscalar"

⁴ Granted, there are many instances in the south where tree felling—for better or for worse—forms part of local subsistence regimes.

⁵ Not to mention *how* this management will be organized.

principle, which aligns well with the “nested institutions” suggested by Ostrom as referred to in the following passage:

Obtaining sufficient scientific knowledge and information to understand complex feedback mechanisms operating in complex ecologies is difficult even when resources are not extremely limited. Local organizations operating alone frequently cannot gain access to the kind of information essential to sustainable management. ... Thus, the romantic view that anything local is better than anything organized at a national or global scale is not a useful foundation for a long-term effort to sustain biodiversity. Any organization or group faces a difficult set of problems if it tries to govern and manage complex multispecies-multiproduct resource systems whose benefit streams mature at varying rates. Relying only on small-scale organizations to manage biological resources would not be an effective form of regulation where many of these resources range over very large scales. Further, without some redundancy in regulative capabilities, success and failure at a local level are not monitored, and no compensatory actions are taken to offset failure at a local level. Nested institutions may help to provide this essential redundancy. (Ostrom, 1995: 41)

Governments and commons advocates in the global North have yet to develop such “nested institutions” for resource management choice making, but this is not surprising as this is both an exceedingly difficult and novel task, and counters the norms of capitalist industrial society, where companies and individuals who make their (socially sanctioned) choices through the market are the only relevant stakeholders in production decisions. Governments fulfill a regulatory role on occasion, but only by top-down mandates, not in convening multi-stakeholder groups to craft consensus-based commons-like management proposals. The idea of regulating (or even discussing) industrial productive processes in their totality, from resource extraction to disposal, is unheard of in ‘legitimate’ policy circles, much less when that regulation involves entire communities affected by such production. Aspirational ideas for regulating global resources like Peter Barnes’ “sky trust” (which would hold and manage for of all humanity the atmosphere’s carbon-absorbing capacity) exist as ideas, but have yet to achieve wide support or even awareness in policy circles (Barnes, 2001).

In relation to the production of food, which need not be an industrial process but *is* in the North to a great degree, these barriers still obtain. Aside from the counter-FS belief pervasive among political leadership that only industrial farming can feed the world, U.S. policymaking never addresses food production as a system though it addresses aspects of the food production system. It may provide subsidies to encourage production; it may regulate land use to some degree; it may disallow certain chemicals; it may even challenge monopoly ownership of food system assets (though this hasn’t happened since the anti-trust lawsuits against the

meatpacking industry in the first part of the 20th century). But for FS to exist in places where most food is produced through and consumed from industrial circuits a commons-like system for decision-making around land, seed, and water access would need to be developed. At this point, user boundaries are unclear, nested institutions do not exist, and decision-making is far from holistic or participatory.

3.3 The effects of lack of sustenance relationship to land, both for cultural development and the pragmatic survival concerns of commoners

Their [recent Latin American social movements] political autonomy rests on their material autonomy—the movements' growing capacity to provide their own subsistence. (Zibechi, 2012: 15)

Food sovereignty is not something that can be brought about exclusively by peasants, particularly in contexts where peasants form the political and social minority. (Patel, 2009: 670)

Developed capitalist economies have almost completely divided us from land. We couldn't live in this society without this reality. FS is coming out from people with preexisting relationships to land, not people creating that connection. This creates an interesting dynamic in our society, because how can we implement FS if people don't even understand the issue? What's really important in the Northern version of FS is cultivating something larger than self, reducing atomization, and integrating that experience into community so that there is a baseline infrastructure of belonging and a deeper sense of place. (Ashoka, OTF)

This is a big problem, to construct, or identify, the new farmers. ... citizen movements must participate ... in the struggle for land to facilitate young people, young men and women entering directly into the sector. ... urban social movements must come together with peasant movements to develop a new type of agriculture and training that dignifies the profession, in order to excite young people. (Nicholson in Patel 2009: 681)

In countries of the global North, where cadastral processes have been completed, lands are hyper-mediated by legal proceedings and private ownership claims and very low percentages of agricultural (or food producing) land are 'owned' in any legal sense by those who do the work of food production. High levels of land ownership concentration mark many nations, but smallholder farming is exceedingly rare in the United States. Even the percentage of farmers (regardless of land ownership) is remarkably low, less than 1% according to the most recent census data for the country (U.S. EPA, 2013).

Sustenance for the average person in the U.S. comes then not from the land itself but indirectly, via mediating systems of ownership, production, distribution, and the monetary effective demand crucial for consumer access to foods-as-commodities. To be sure, there is emerging interest in food sources that are not part of the economic circulation such as backyard garden produce and barter systems to distribute such produce, but these sources are miniscule in relation to the sources required to feed the population of the urbanized North (Zigas, 2012: 8)

Narratives of the self-sufficient homesteader-pioneer have driven western expansion and natural resource exploitation in the United States (Worster, 1979). While these narratives remain, the de-peasantization of the populace has left such narratives largely atavistic. Hunting, gardening, and sustenance relationships to the land remain, but in very limited form. Laws that promoted the rights of resource users likewise remain (for instance, California's "use it or lose it" approach to water rights), yet overall rights of usufruct, squatting, and public resource use are relatively attenuated compared with those of the global South (as well as Northern social democracies like Sweden).

The majority of the global North does not have a basis for commoning or food sovereignty to come 'naturally', as evidenced in the lack of awareness of even basic agricultural realities:

We had a lot of people at the occupation saying they had never done something like that before. The farming was such a big action, just for people to have to learn how to do it! That doesn't happen in other movements I imagine, and that's the difference between us and agrarian societies. Their tactic is the cultivation of a political process, community-based and revolutionary (they are trying to completely change their societies), changing the relationships of power and space through the control of land. One of our tactics and goals is to just reestablish relationships to land. (Ashoka, OTF)

Because of lack of relationships to land, commons-like active management may be an ideal unlikely in the social-cultural-economic matrix of the North. FS advocates face, then, a bit of a chicken and egg problem. Their milieu requires people to understand the commons frame in order to participate in commoning; it requires the existence of more commons for the commons frame to be understood; and it requires more commoners to create those commons. Hence, activism becomes about creating experiences of commoning and legitimacy for it as an idea. OTF accomplished this in the experiences their action engendered and the media narratives created about the right of communities to land for local food production. Activists should continue to find opportunities to do this, and with a reach to broad sectors so that it is not only radical anti-capitalists who find appeal and promise in commoning.

The class basis for activism, a side critique of anti-capitalist dogmatism

Like it or not, [OTF] is an elected choice. You decide to spend time on it or not. I'm below the poverty line, and others in OTF are as well, but it's definitely a choice that I'm making to participate. Because of my privileged position, I could have a corporate job if I wanted to, but I choose not to. Someone from Central America, say, might not have that choice. ... Not knowing enough about the people who make up movements in other parts of the world, I don't know what the mix of immediate necessity and political ideology is. I imagine it's a mix of both. But in OTF, we don't really have the immediate visceral needs that require those politics and choices. (Anya, OTF)

Political theories conflict as to the proper class to form social movements, some arguing that the poor are the revolutionary class, others that it is educated middle class populations. The reality is that no class is perfect, and each poses particular issues for social movement organizing. At the very least, the existential imperative of survival is a primary concern for those at the economic margins of society, though that does not mean they cannot be politically aware or active. Rather, this only indicates that grand political projects of overthrowing the social order are minimized in such populations in favor of those that provide pragmatic returns. FS as conceived by economically marginalized peasants is a project that has a role in improving those peasants' lives, even if it also has a more ambitious political aspect. If, in contrast, FS is discussed and promoted as a utopian anti-capitalist project, based in the educated middle classes of industrial societies, it is unlikely to gain purchase outside of already anti-capitalist circles (including large segments of the economically marginalized).

In the case of OTF, educated and middle class organizers played key roles, but so did folks from more marginalized social, economic, and racial groups. As long as there is clarity on the part of FS activists in how their actions or ideas or policies affect and are affected by class, race, gender and other social positionalities, it may be a distraction to delve too far into arguments over who should create the FS movement. One key aspect to this clarity is an acknowledgement that not all members of society are ready to put aside their own sustenance needs in order to make political statements. Thankfully, OTF organizers recognize this.

As mentioned, sustenance is largely linked to the monetary economy for most of the population of the global North. People require sustenance, and without access to land and the abilities and conditions to reap sustenance from it, most people have to purchase food. Farming—overall—is a consolidated endeavor, with very few people growing even a small portion of their own required diet. If people in the North prioritize making money over other activities, it is for an obvious reason: money brings food. The modern political ideal of growing

the economy and bringing jobs cannot be seen outside of the imperative of money-based sustenance. Increasing the number of jobs increases peoples' ability to eat sufficiently, as well as to provide for their family and community and deal with a host of other needs beyond food; as the connection between mouths and sustenance is mediated by the presence or absence of money, so is access to money mediated by the presence or absence of jobs. If, however, money could be taken out of the equation, we would see that the important aspect is the food, not the money that buys it or the job that provides the money to buy it.

A politics based on appealing to a moralistic rejection of the monetary economy is in this context bound to fail. Further, it can be driven by an elitism and uncompassionate ignorance when aimed from people of relative social privilege to those in positions of marginalization. However, a critique of the monetary economy is an essential component to FS (in this, we agree with the recent commentary of Akram-Lodhi, 2013). Since power structures the food system, and that power interpenetrates the monetary economy and the land distribution patterns associated with it, a critique of existing food systems without a mention of the destructive powers of money would be incomplete.

Actions like OTF and the concepts of autonomous social movements in general are built on the actions of people that inherently sacrifice in opportunity cost the time they could be using to seek money (i.e. access to survival) in order to contribute to a cause that is to some degree outside themselves. In this, we can see the contradictions raised by Minkoff-Zern (2013) in her study of Mexican immigrant farmers struggling to create their family farms in the U.S.: while exemplifying some of the values of FS, these farmers do not conceive of themselves as fighting the capitalist food system so much as using it to provide a meaningful living.

Indignity, the underlying force driving so many social movements, is often based on perceptions of labor and social contract rights (Flacks, 1988). Peasants have upheld their own dignity in constructing FS as valorizing their essential labor. But in societies where the most essential professions (farming, housework, care of children, infrastructural work) are the least valued, there haven't been major working class movement successes for almost half a century. How will the dignity of the food-producing classes hold forth in this context, except to demand better compensation and working conditions for food production, to revalorize farming in general? On one hand, it seems obvious that FS entails growing more food outside of the market system; on the other, it seems obvious that FS entails valuing the work of farming, and in the United States value is—in a practical sense—the equivalent to money.

What are the ways we sustain ourselves? That's a primary contradiction: I can't live without money, but I can't live with money (in the sense of knowing the ecological crisis is based in capitalism). The middle space is navigating how to move forward ...how do you create spaces to sustain yourself in order to work towards commons? This speaks to the ways that CBOs and NGOs can 'use money to end the use of money'. (Ashoka, OTF)

Working towards the expansion of the money economy (for the precarious working classes) seems counterintuitive to subverting the money economy (a goal of anti-capitalist FS advocates). However, if an expansion of money power reaches greater spread (that is, closer to economic equality and away from wealth consolidation), the social choices that money makes end up directed to some degree away from ruling class interests, and towards the needs and desires of larger percentages of the population. What we call "the market" reflects what members of society with effective demand consider useful. There's obviously a limited extent to which this strategy of increasing working class economic power can succeed. The neoliberal turn of the 1970s was partially precipitated by the ruling class reasserting control over a population that had through social democratic policies achieved a greater piece of the economic—and thus political—pie (Harvey, 2005). Therefore, helping people make money is not the full answer.

The more social movement members extend outside of themselves to provide for one another substantively (i.e. the free kitchens, medical clinics, bike loans, etcetera) the more they reduce opportunity cost for each other, just as they build solidarity. Certainly, the more that actions reduce the need for money, the better—but this does not mean that FS should be anti-money or anti-commerce, as money and commerce help people to survive and to resist. This is one reason why land occupations in the North, should they be well organized and prove successful, complement other more market-based strategies: they literally increase the spaces upon which movements can provide themselves sustenance (even if there is not an exact correlation between occupier/activist and consumer of the land's harvests, and even if in the current urban context the land available is quite limited).

3.4 Less powerful communal/indigenous/peasant cultural worldviews and the prevalence of the public versus private property dichotomy

By and large the characteristic of traditional peasants is a much higher degree of formal or informal (mostly localized) collectivity, which both tends to inhibit permanent social differentiation within the peasantry and to facilitate, or even impose, communal action. (Hobsbawm, 1973: 3)

[Latin American has] an official society, hegemonic, of colonial heritage, with its institutions, modes of doing, forms of justice, and all that. But there is another society, which may be based in remote rural areas and organized in communities ... Non-capitalist social relations are the mortar of this other society. (Zibechi, 2012: 318)

The U.S. simply does not have the same ‘peasant’ base as many other countries, at least not in the traditional sense. But what we do have are major urban hubs, where a movement for food justice is already spreading throughout communities who are grappling with hunger as well as obesity and other life-threatening diet-related health problems. These communities, predominantly low-income and predominantly communities of color, are calling attention to the health disparities and unequal food access they face. They are taking matters into their own hands, building upon their own community assets, their culinary traditions, and their cultural knowledge to find ways to grow, access, and provide healthy food. (Schiavino in Patel, 2009: 686)

The unfortunate fact of FS organizing in the United States is that our indigenous communities are heavily marginalized, beset by social and economic ills, and lack much access to land from which to gain subsistence (having been forced onto reservations located on some of the country’s least arable lands). This is not to say that they are unable to fight for FS⁶, but that—as compared with indigenous populations in many other parts of the world, particularly FS-active Latin America—their power is fractured and the kinds of partnerships required to expand North American indigeneity into mainstream culture and policy have not been well developed (compare this with Canada for example, where First Nations are influencing policy through a discourse of FS—see Desmarais & Whittman, 2013). If FS movements in the United States are to succeed, they must more willingly and proactively incorporate the words, actions, values, and struggles of indigenous peoples. It is additionally imperative that FS consciously connect the struggles of indigenous communities with the struggles of the urban communities referred to by Schiavino.

In the United States, where private property has a deep history, and equivalently developed structures for creating, managing, and resolving disputes regarding private property, property is often conceived in dichotomous terms: it is either private (owned as a commodity) or public (owned by government). In contrast, recent histories of commonly-held or commonly-managed lands (often connected to larger and more prominent communities of indigenous peoples) problematize this dichotomy in other regions of the world. Indigenous histories of land management on all continents, the common lands histories of Northern Europe, complex large

⁶ Fairbairn surveys briefly FS efforts led by Native Americans (2012: 25).

scale land management practiced in the Amazon basin: these all leave a space (ideational and political) for alternative conceptions and implementations of property.

The United States tradition of western expansion, indigenous genocide, land conflicts, and pioneer ideals have led to private property primacy. Even when land is public, it is subject to the whims of governing bodies and their economic priorities, and—especially in times of increasing austerity—public resources are easily converted to commodities and privatized. A land commons ideal is rare and land has moved much more often from common or state management to private ownership than the reverse. This contrasts with cultural commons, which have been steadily chipped away through intellectual property law but nevertheless remain as an ideal. Part of the power of the idea of private property is its equation with individual and family liberty. Land property in particular is seen as the best means towards accomplishing the ideals enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and its Declaration of Independence. Especially due to the demonization of communism throughout the 20th century, Marxist analyses of capitalist property relations and notions that dispossession and alienation are the corollary of private property are not encountered in everyday political theorizing. The bulk of U.S. citizens feel that respect for private property is paramount and are generally skeptical of political action that threatens it.

As mentioned, the OTF action was successful partly due to the occupation having occurred within a context that brought multiple narratives to the fore that appealed to residents, even considering their potentially pro-private property bias. These included the *GMO versus agroecology* narrative; the *community/public access versus privatization* narrative; the *participatory versus bureaucratic governance structure* narrative; and the *green space/food production versus development* narrative. Narratives like these legitimized the occupation in many peoples' minds, even if there were still many responses that critiqued the action because of its illegal ('trespassing'-based) nature.

Libertarian political trends have even further dismantled efforts to conceive of and administer property rights in social rather than individual terms. Garret Hardin's tragedy of the commons idea, which reached out of scientific discourse into the worlds of environmentalism and political theory, also ideologically obstructed alternative property models for attending to resource issues, suggesting instead that the answer to environmental destruction and resource conflict is inevitably privatization (Hardin, 1968).

Public lands are also intimately tied to narratives of "conservation" and the human/nature dichotomy mentioned previously. Further, the idea of private gain from public land is problematic from multiple political starting points; even though much of the U.S. federal

government's property (in particular, Bureau of Land Management) is used for private profit making, the dichotomy that private land is open for whatever use and public land is for conservation and public gain remains. Commons, operating somewhere in the middle, are anachronistic.

This dichotomy leaves U.S. activists in a milieu where public land use cannot benefit anyone in particular while private landowners have no responsibilities to others and can make their own decisions almost regardless of impacts. The "takings clause" of the Constitution in theory allows the government to interfere with property markets by appropriating private property, but this provision still privileges the owner (in cases where the owner would have made money off of the property, even in a socially damaging way, the government is required to compensate the owner for loss of profits). Further, the takings clause and its relative 'eminent domain' have more often been used to privilege the already privileged, rather than used to redistribute land more equitably, or prevent harmful uses of land (the opposite situation of the Brazilian Constitution's 'social function' of land use clause—upon which the MST bases their legal claims to the lands they occupy and settle).

Land trusts and conservation easements on private property rights have become the only mechanisms within this cultural and legal framework to create active land commons. Land trusts take lands off of the development market and convert them to resources held in perpetuity, in trust, by a legal entity that is mandated to keep the land in a certain condition (often, as "conserved" open space, sometime as affordable housing or in agricultural use). Conservation easements are bought from private property owners to preclude certain kinds of development and subdivision.

In the case of the San Francisco Community Land Trust (CLT), which owns apartment buildings and preserves their use as affordable housing, those who live in its properties form parts of the governing body of the Trust. Such trusts cannot by their very organizational structure or founding documents subvert their mandates, and since no one who is involved in the CLT 'owns' the property in question, no one can benefit by selling it off. As such, they approximate the systems of commons described by Ostrom because they involve active management by user/managers to ensure the resource's sustained availability. We see, then, why OTF chose a land trust or 'affirmative' easement (requiring ecological farming as the site's use) as its ultimate goal for the GT.

4.1 Conclusion

Because of the diverse local and international diversity of academic and activist opinions on what FS could be, this paper has not asserted a definition for what constitutes an action “towards FS”. Is an individual who grows vegetables for themselves on their balcony contributing to FS? Do those feeding hungry children free breakfast (as the Black Panthers did) contribute to FS? Or does FS require an active engagement with the political systems of a particular place? Does it require engagement with the nation-state polity in particular, as that is where sovereignty is most commonly vested? Can FS be achieved through market efforts, or even international trade, or must it be constructed through a *displacement* of market activities—through efforts of self-sufficiency and solidarity? The answers to these questions are clearly still in debate, and—much like the activists of OTF—we don’t presume to know the right answer. FS’s strength is in its particular relation to actually existing conditions, rather than its theoretical universality.

However, if activists and scholars maintain too a broad definition of FS, the benefits of inclusivity may be outweighed by the downside of an uncritical acceptance of all forms of action and misdirection of activist energy towards failed strategies. An inability or unwillingness to debate the efficacy of actions might also lead to an impasse, beyond which FS cannot look or act like a cohesive social movement. FS adherents with a critical or anti-capitalist bent are wont to support actions that challenge conventions of private property and government hegemony, while others promote policy changes and market reforms. How and if these approaches can be reconciled (or even made synergistic) is an important question for FS. How and if individual or local group actions will result in movement towards FS—even if we can’t know with certainty the answer—is a question that individuals and activist groups must ask themselves constantly.

De Schutter’s premise and promise of citizen-led initiatives indicates that a lack of models does not mean nothing can be done; it means we must continue to act as autonomous communities, and learn how to reflect and build capacity and knowledge as we test these unproven models. The term ‘iterative mitigation’ can be used to describe these processes (Roman-Alcalá, 2012), as they are about mitigating a range of existing problems at many scales, while iteratively analyzing the outcomes of those interventions, in order to do better the next time.

Caminando, preguntamos.

Walking, we ask questions.

Un mundo en donde quepan muchos mundos.

A world in which many worlds fit.

-Zapatista slogans

These slogans reflect two important aspects of a critical approach to constructing FS, and of promoting the commons as an alternative/opposing sector to both market and state. First, that it is not always possible to know the most effective way to structure new initiatives, institutions, and movements. Nonetheless social movements continue to attempt new forms while they also repeat models and tropes. Second, that the construction of FS will involve myriad tactics in the global North and the global South that may not necessarily seem (or be) aligned; differing theories of change and differing definitions of FS will likely continue in social movements, and this can be embraced as a source of power in diversity, rather than a liability, if social movements continue to be self-examining and subject themselves to tactical critique. In particular, the ability to be critical of tactics across subjectivities—while accepting that those subjectivities themselves limit and determine the kinds of actions that activists pursue—will prove crucial to the progression of FS. Concretely, there are some who will want to challenge and break down the rule of private property and the dysfunctions of the state-market duopoly; there are others who will want to run businesses; there are those who will prefer direct action and peoples' empowerment, while others will prefer to work within the systems as they exist.

In some peoples' minds, direct action may be is all that is left from a suite of broken tools in the political change toolbox. Media spectacles, letter campaigns, mainstream environmental nonprofits, and government policy may all fail to achieve FS singularly or in combination (see Gitlin, 1980 for a critique of media-focused social movement tactics, for example). But this doesn't make direct action a *more certain* route to FS. If anything, direct action is in the end not the creator of FS, but more likely its protector. Land rights and "property" rights are always in contention, even in supposedly fixed property regimes. In the end, it is often the power to enforce territorial access (through physical force and 'governmentality') that determines land rights, most often a power held by the state (with its monopoly on violence). However, we share the conviction that FS is (and should be) premised on "an alternative conception of rights that is more collective and decentralized, with implementation depending not just on states, but also on communities, peoples, and international bodies (Desmarais & Whittman, 2013: 3)." The state's theoretical monopoly on violence only reminds FS activists that space, in the end, will always have to be defended physically and through cultural/ideational hegemony, and that therefore no movement that lacks mass characteristics will be successful in the long term securing of rights to manage space. It is this work (of building mass movements, culturally and organizationally, and providing those movements with resources that sustain them physically) that must be done with even more intention in the North.

In the end FS comes down questions of the land that sustains humanity: who has access to it, and who has access to the products of its bounty. While attempts to create truly democratic societies where access to land is equitable and directed towards the creation of widely

distributed and sustainable forms of wealth might find different conditions between the two 'worlds' (and these conditions require attention and analysis), the FS movement tends towards the same value systems. Ultimately, there is no North-South FS distinction, as the principles guiding the FS movement remain the same at either pole. For this reason, additional solidarities and connections between North and South will prove invaluable for the development and success of the global FS movement.

4.2 The importance of movement skepticism

Movement sociologists and others (mainly, left intellectuals) have tried to advance theories of appropriate action, attempting to make a normative distinction among tactical options according to various factors of society. It is tempting to attempt the same for FS in the global North. However, what is most obvious about the newness of contemporary social movements is their commitment to pluralism and uncertainty. OTF does not claim to have the "right" solution to FS organizing, though some of its organizers do see a particular need for the kinds of actions they took, and believe in the efficiency of those actions to achieve both physical differences (in access to territory) and cultural differences (in the way publics conceive of themselves and the 'proper' relations of power). OTF organizers have not attempted to tell others how to organize, but they have promoted their own particular theory of change (explored earlier in the paper), which itself relies on assumptions about the 'proper' way to organize for change.

This leads to another trope of social movement critique: the level of organization within social movements. Some, like Raul Zerlich, argue forcefully against any sort of unifying tendency (arguing that it replicates capitalist western thought), while most left observers have argued that a *lack* of organization or cohesion has been the left's biggest failure (Harvey, 2012; Feenberg in Reed, 1986). We skirt this question by offering instead that even in matters of great seriousness a certain amount of skepticism and openness about "what is to be done" can be worthwhile. The most inhumane social disasters have most often come from positions of certainty (for instance, the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot, authoritarian state communism, Nazism, the U.S. War on Terror). If the FS movement expects to make radical changes to the structure of food systems in the North, it has to admit that it does not know with certainty how to make that change. Rather, the FS movement can know values that might direct that future food system; it can know the tactics that can begin to instill those values into citizens, eaters, producers, and politics; it can know the structural failures of its market and government systems and how these limit the solutions that can be expected from them; and it can know how to question itself enough to gauge if its efforts are bearing the desired fruits.

The postmodern tendency in the newest social movements and FS is one that cannot be defended on grounds of efficacy. Theorists can study the past to tease out patterns of action and outcome, just as modern activists can analyze their own actions and determine how outcomes related to goals, but all we can say with relative certainty is what did or did not work in the past. We never can know enough about whether an action will work or not to determine whether it is worth trying. While land occupations may not always be the best action for achieving particular goals within the circumstances of the global North (OTF's case has such unique contexts that extrapolation is dangerous), they also are not a tactic to be dispensed with. Tactics to social movements will always be reflections of individual desire; community indignation, cohesiveness, and size; social norms and state responses. Tactics cannot be right or wrong but they can be more and less appropriate, and because the difference matters, it is important for movement activists to have a capacity and willingness to vet the difference.

It is suggested by the words of OTF, as well as the normative literature on what will solve the environmental crises of the 21st century, that this capacity to know the difference will only come from trial and error. The willingness to subject oneself to criticism—without expecting to achieve some unassailable tactical position—is essential for activist groups in the global North. The fact that OTF members offered to share with me their motivations and subject their action to scrutiny for this paper shows that—thankfully—this is already the case.

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See also:

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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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

[Antonio Roman-Alcalá](#) is an MA student at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and co-founder of the San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance. His work focuses on the intersections of global environmental politics and local deliberative democracy, with food and farming as vehicles for political-economic critique and praxis-based interventions. His interest in participatory action research and improving activist/academic collaboration is reflected in his paper for this conference. Email: antidogmatist@gmail.com