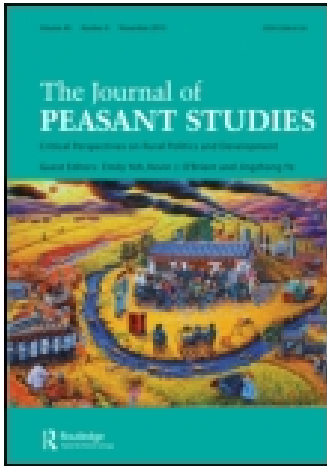


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## Historicizing food sovereignty

Philip McMichael

To historicize food sovereignty is not simply to recognize its multiple forms and circumstances across time and space, but also to recognize its relation to the politics of capital in a crisis conjuncture. This paper traces the evolution of the food sovereignty vision from the initial stages of the food sovereignty countermovement to the present, arguing that food sovereignty politics have not only traveled from countryside to city as consumers/citizens anticipate ecological constraints and compensate for unequal food distributions, but also they have been confronted with transitions in the food regime following the recent food crisis. New enclosures, in the forms of land grabs and value-chains, administered by public-private ‘governance’ partnerships, have contradictory effects: threatening the peasant base of the food sovereignty countermovement, but also threatening to exacerbate the food crisis, as evidenced in recent food riot politics animated by the food sovereignty vision. As the food regime restructures, it reconditions the possibilities of food sovereignty politics. Arguably, the ultimate historicization of food sovereignty possibility is immanent in cumulative energy and climate feedbacks.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty; food regime; historicization

### Introduction

To historicize food sovereignty is not simply to recognize its multiple forms and circumstances across time and space, but also to recognize its relation to the politics of capital in a crisis conjuncture. That is, the food sovereignty vision and movement today are conditioned by the contours of the food regime – now in crisis as its ability to continue to feed the world the illusion of ‘food security’ via ‘free trade’ has lost legitimacy in the wake of the recent and continuing global food crisis (McMichael and Schneider 2011). The crisis, in turn, has generated a heightened struggle between projects of corporate agricultural intensification, and an emerging ontological alternative in ‘food sovereignty.’<sup>1</sup> Politically, this struggle extends from contention over land grabs, evictions and genetically modified organism (GMO) monocultures on the ground (cf Borras and Franco 2013), to discursive and tactical initiatives in and between the G8, the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Under these circumstances, to historicize food sovereignty is to understand the shifting political landscape within and against which it must operate.

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The author is grateful for the constructive comments of two anonymous reviewers.

<sup>1</sup>In many diverse manifestations: from agrarian movements (Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008) through CSA’s, Slow Food and grass-roots fair trade (Fonte 2008, Friedmann and McNair, 2008, Jaffee 2007) seed networks in Europe (Corrado 2010, Da Via 2012, Bocci and Colombo 2013) and *in situ* conservation of Mexican maize culture (Fitting 2011), to the phenomenon of ‘repeasantization’ (Ploeg 2009).

While the term ‘food sovereignty’ emerged in the 1980s (Edelman 2013), the food sovereignty project emerged in the 1990s in the crucible of an intensifying global agrarian crisis exacerbated by trade liberalization and structural adjustment policies withdrawing support for domestic agricultural sectors across the global South. In other words, food sovereignty emerged as the antithesis of the corporate food regime and its (unrealized) claims for ‘food security’ via the free trade rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Food sovereignty’s vision and intervention were governed by its positioning as an alternative principle of food security anchored in a democratic rebuilding of domestic agricultures, where possible, to overcome processes of deepening food dependency and depeasantization inflicted by corporate marketing of cheapened ‘food from nowhere’ (Bové and Dufour 2001). As this essay contends, the subsequent restructuring of the food regime alters the conditions of possibility for the food sovereignty movement.

Historicizing food sovereignty means charting its political-economic coordinates, but its actual forms are quite diverse, and its meaning has evolved with an elasticity implicating groups and practices beyond its roots in the countryside. In this sense, then, instances of food sovereignty organizing in turn provide a lens on elements of the contemporary conjuncture, straddling both rural and urban arenas. Knezevic (2014), for example, argues that anti-smallholder European Enlargement policies in the Balkan states have galvanized civic resistance via informalization, including proliferating urban farmers’ markets, as an incipient form of food sovereignty appropriate to this episode of shock therapy. As Bové and Dufour of *La Confédération Paysanne Européenne* (CPE) observed of the food sovereignty movement:

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

This claim invokes the question of sovereignty, arguably compromised by WTO trade rules privileging transnational agribusiness over the possibility of national food policy. Under these circumstances, food ‘sovereignty’ employs a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ (see below), foreshadowing the more complex notion of the ‘territory of self-determination’, by which societies can be self-governing via their rural producers, agricultural capacities and domestic food needs.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Polanyi anticipated food sovereignty when, observing competitive pressure on European producers from cheap New World grains in the late-nineteenth-century food regime, he remarked: ‘it had been forgotten by free traders that land formed part of the territory of the country, and that the territorial character of sovereignty was not merely a result of sentimental associations, but of massive facts, including economic ones’ (1957, 183–4).

To raise the ‘territorial’ question is to underline the salience and immanence of the food sovereignty movement. As argued below, the salience refers to the growing incidence of

<sup>2</sup>Menser (2014) argues territorial self-determination also requires a re-territorialization of class war, given the violent histories of the state system vis-à-vis indigenous populations. The recent *Land sovereignty manifesto: towards a peoples’ counter-enclosure* represents a practical grounding of the food sovereignty theme in territorial terms (Borras and Franco 2012).

urban political unrest under conditions of food price volatility (with the possibility of rural/urban alliances). And the immanence refers to an unfolding global ecological crisis compressing time by space, as the unsustainability of energy, water and industrial food flows deepens and climate emergency unfolds.<sup>3</sup> I argue here that it is these palpable (and related) trends that food sovereignty addresses, as both countermovement and alternative to a crisis-laden food regime.

### The food sovereignty countermovement

The recent ‘food crisis’ is a culmination of a deeper agrarian crisis associated with the long-twentieth-century food regime,<sup>4</sup> and its reproduction of capital’s labor force via cheap food provisioning. How such provisioning is accomplished, and under what geopolitical relations and institutional rules, registers the food regime’s cumulative forms (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). But the constant is a deepening metabolic rift<sup>5</sup> as food supply chains have lengthened and insulated consumers from ecosystem plundering and the environmental hazards of ‘biophysical override’ (Weis 2007). The central, agro-exporting principle of the food regime has served to displace producers by land grabbing on the one hand<sup>6</sup> and market predation on the other.<sup>7</sup> While the former process characterizes the capitalist era at large, a cheap food regime (characterized by food ‘dumping’) has only been institutionalized, *globally*, during the neoliberal era (Rosset 2006). Here, agro-exporting via *both* southern debt management and northern subsidies has eroded smallholder economy – precipitating a peasant countermovement, organized around the principle of ‘food sovereignty’ (McMichael 2005). This principle ultimately concerns the question of appropriate ways of living on Earth at a time of rising urban redundancy and ecosystem crisis.

However, the countermovement is not simply a peasant movement – one might say it is a movement informed by a peasant perspective underlining the importance of revaluing farming for domestic food provisioning and for addressing social inequalities. Hence the growing currency of ‘food sovereignty’ across the rural-urban divide. While the origins of ‘food sovereignty’ certainly lie in a peasant response<sup>8</sup> to a sharpening agrarian crisis

<sup>3</sup>For instance, the severity of drought in the American Southwest now portends a new ‘dust bowl’ devastating the land, crops and farm communities, and an EU commission predicts biannual occurrence of severe heat waves like that in 2003 by 2040 (Abramsky 2013).

<sup>4</sup>As the ‘political face of global value relations’ (Araghi 2003) the ‘food regime’ is a historically specific form of geo/political and human-ecological ordering premised on cross-border flows of (artificially) cheap food and energy.

<sup>5</sup>Marx’s ‘metabolic rift’ refers to the disruption of soil and water nutrient cycles associated with urbanization and the progressive industrialization of agriculture (Foster 1999), inherent in capitalism as an ‘ecological regime’ (Moore 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Colonial land grabbing included requisitioning of subjects’ grain reserves (Davis 2001).

<sup>7</sup>Dumping of northern foodstuffs in southern markets characterized the 1980s–1990s, and this has extended in the twenty-first century to the experience of Eastern European countries joining the EU and being subject to German and French supermarket colonization (La Vía Campesina 2013).

<sup>8</sup>Food sovereignty progenitor La Vía Campesina emerged at a 1992 meeting of farmers’ organizations from Latin America and Europe in Managua. As founding member Paul Nicholson of the International Coordinating Committee put it: ‘At that time, we issued a “Managua declaration” where we denounced the “agrarian crisis” and “rural poverty and hunger” resulting from the neo-liberal policies’ (Nicholson, 2008, 456). Four years later, in Tlaxcala, Mexico, a Vía Campesina working group decided the term ‘food sovereignty’ was to be ‘adopted by the whole movement and then defended publicly for the first time at the FAO World Food Summit in Rome’ later in 1996 (Idem).

under the neoliberal project, the movement's political calculus has been governed by the demands of the historical conjuncture rather than a conventional peasant demand for agrarian reform *per se*.<sup>9</sup> The operative perspective is:

In the context of food sovereignty, agrarian reform benefits all of society, providing healthy, accessible and culturally appropriate food, and social justice. Agrarian reform can put an end to the massive and forced rural exodus from the countryside to the city, which has made cities grow at unsustainable rates and under inhuman conditions.<sup>10</sup>

One of many such proclamations, this statement links the land question to the broader policy issue of producer rights, poverty elimination and reversal of the perversity of urban bias. Contrary to the classical agrarian question problematic, the movement privileges peasant agency in a programmatic approach to restoring the viability of the countryside for farming and addressing domestic food security – as governed by national democratic principles (McMichael 2013c). This has been a first step, anticipating ecological farming initiatives (see e.g. Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012, Massicotte 2014).

From this perspective, processes of differentiation and depeasantization are not simply a trajectory calling into question the existence of peasantries; rather, they are forces calling into existence a peasant countermovement dedicated to protecting conditions of existence on the land. Such conditions may be quite heterogeneous, including contradictory relations (e.g. class, patriarchal, ethnic, debt). They constitute the historicity of the countermovement as it embodies a diversity of local challenges (Desmarais 2007, Wolford 2010). Nevertheless, its formative unity is conditioned by the violence of market hegemony as instituted in a combination of structural adjustment policies, WTO trade rules and an overriding episteme applying an economic calculus to a more complex set of cultural and ecological peasant 'practices' (cf Ploeg 2009, 19).

An historicized understanding would view this protective reflex as analogous to the 'canary in the mine', where 'the condition of the world's peasantries today is an indicator of a toxic combination of ignorance of the ecological and social harm to the planet by industrial agriculture, and its enabling policies of neo-liberalism' (McMichael 2008, 504). Peasant mobilization may be seen as the (not too) early warning of a socio-ecological catastrophe in the making – with a unique ability to name the problem. The uniqueness is the ability to problematize the current food regime as privileging industrial models and urban 'civilization' at the expense of ecosystems and their (*extant* and potential) stewards. The 'peasant' perspective, then, is essentially political, insofar as the defence of farming the land (as opposed to mono-cropping with chemicals) is in the interests of society as a whole.

Phenomenally, La Vía Campesina (2000) problematizes the food regime's 'massive movement of food around the world forcing the increased movement of people' in terms of displacement of farmers by unequal trade rules. *Substantively* (and historically) such dispossession is not simply of land, but of landed knowledge and ways of life critical to planetary health. From this perspective, the countermovement expresses a positive antithesis to corporate industrial agriculture: re-envisioning the conditions necessary to develop resilient and democratic forms of social reproduction, anchored in sustainable management of food systems by land users. That is, the advocacy of farming rights is framed within a broader

<sup>9</sup>This is a key point made by Mann (2014).

<sup>10</sup>(Nyeleni 2006) Monsalve Suárez (2013) underlines this point in distinguishing between land rights and human rights – the latter involving states directly in addressing the socio-ecological function of land, including rights for the landless.

vision of how to rethink the ecological conditions and scale at which human communities can live, and survive. Instead of a ‘dying echo of populist thought’ this movement represents ‘an active anti-systemic struggle’ (Ajl 2013, 9).

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

20 years after the Earth Summit, life on the planet has become dramatically difficult. Expulsion from our lands and territories is accelerating, no longer only due to conditions of disadvantage imposed upon us by trade agreements and the industrial sector, but by new forms of monopoly control over land and water, by the global imposition of intellectual property regimes that steal our seeds, by the invasion of transgenic seeds, and by the advance of monoculture plantations, mega-projects, and mines.

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

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

Accordingly, rather than center its politics in peasant claims alone, the movement chose a political target with a broader, conjunctural theme: the ‘food security’ claims of a privatizing trade regime. ‘Food sovereignty’ politicized this naturalized claim for market rationality in global food provisioning by invoking the ‘collective rights already recognized by the UN [United Nations], such as the right to self-determination, the right to development and the right to permanent sovereignty over natural resources’ (Claeys 2013) – in effect reasserting state sovereignty versus market rule as institutionalized in the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture (McMichael 2003). Use of the term ‘sovereignty’ was arguably a form of ‘strategic essentialism’, given the override of national sovereignty via WTO trade rules. It was a first step toward a subsequent, substantive claim for self-organizing food-secure systems as a collective right of citizens.

Three issues stem from this strategic intervention. First, food sovereignty centered on the collective ‘right to produce food’, meaning protection of farm sectors from trade ‘dumping’, and land sovereignty for land users and the landless (Borras and Franco 2012, Claeys 2013). Second, food sovereignty drew attention to the deceit of feeding the world with the claim of providing ‘food security’ through a marketplace in which a minority of the world’s population participates.<sup>11</sup> And, third, food sovereignty’s politicization of agri-food policy includes demands for a democratic resolution to the question of food security, anticipating a broader political alliance focusing on ecological and public health with respect to food systems (cf Lang and Heasman 2004, Wittman 2009, Claeys 2013, Andrée *et al.* 2014). The ‘food sovereignty’ initiative thus outlines a critique of the institutional structuring of the current, corporate food regime at the same time as it reformulates conditions necessary to a human rights-based form of food security. It reformulates a social

<sup>11</sup>This deceit was evident in the process of dispossession and displacement of millions of food producers during the 1990s in consequence of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and WTO trade rules, an outcome informing the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000), and then again evident in the ‘food crisis’ of the late 2000s, in which world hunger figures almost reached the one billion mark (McMichael 2009b, McMichael and Schneider 2011).

contract appropriate to an era of ecological crisis: a sensibility captured in part by Wittman's term 'agrarian citizenship' (2009) – problematizing modernity's urban bias.<sup>12</sup>

While championing an International Convention on the Rights of Peasants, who include farmers, landless and indigenous people who work the land themselves, Paul Nicholson suggests, aptly, that the name La Vía Campesina refers to 'a process of peasant culture, a peasant "way"'. He continues, capturing the societal dimension of a peasant-inspired politics:

The debate isn't in the word 'farmer' or 'peasant'. The debate is much more about the process of cohesion.... It is a process of accumulation of forces and realities coming together from the citizens of the entire planet. Food sovereignty is not just resistances, as there are thousands of resistances, but also proposals that come from social movements, and not just peasant movements. From environmental movements, among others, come many initiatives that develop proposals of recuperation, of rights, of policies. This is also an autonomous and independent process. There is no central committee, and food sovereignty is not the patrimony of any particular organisation. It's not La Vía Campesina's project, or even just a peasants' project. (Nicholson, 2009, 678–80)

It is in this sense that Edelman suggests 'peasantness' is a political rather than an analytical category (Edelman, 2009). That is, rather than a populist atavism, food sovereignty is a historical wedge in a crisis conjuncture to recognize and promote alternative socio-ecological relations to feed citizens rather than long-distance consumers.<sup>13</sup> In short, food sovereignty is a civilizational movement, combining a conjunctural critique of neoliberal 'food security' (equating agro-exporting with 'feeding the world') with long-held principles of self-determination reframed as democratic rights for and of citizens and humans (cf Claeys 2013). The central ethic – food as a human right, not a commodity – expresses the movement's potent politicization of neoliberal 'food security'.

The claim for a civilizational movement suggests that the long-term vision of food sovereignty elevates human security over the increasingly anachronistic principle of national security. This is where 'sovereignty' has multi-dimensional meaning. Initially a form of strategic essentialism for the food sovereignty movement, using the sovereignty idiom to reclaim lost juridical ground (including land) in the short term (the corporate food regime), it reformulates the meaning of 'sovereignty' in the long run. Reclaiming the right of national autonomy over food policy in effect problematizes the complicity of states in agro-export political economy. And this opens up the possibility of a longer-term issue of food security *territorialism* embedded in bioregional stewardship in the interests of human ecology – invoking a philosophy of 'agrarian citizenship' (cf Wittman 2009).<sup>14</sup> Thus the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST) works to link 'the struggle for the land with the struggle on the land' (Flávio de Almeida and Sánchez 2000), developing co-operative forms of rural labor, producing staple foods for the

<sup>12</sup>Which, interestingly, Davis (2010) reproduces in the notion of the Ark-like responsibility of the metropolis in combating climate change (but see Ajl 2013).

<sup>13</sup>Recent evidence establishes the relative/superior productivity of non-industrial, organic agriculture (e.g. Pretty *et al.* 2006, Badgley *et al.* 2007, IAASTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development) 2008).

<sup>14</sup>In 2000, the MST renamed its Sector of Production the Sector of Production, Cooperation and Environment, and published its *Commitment to land and life*, setting out its philosophical relationship with nature. This identity affirmed the rights claims of the 1988 Brazilian constitution, by which citizens' right to land carried a responsibility to fulfill a socially productive function including one of environmental sustainability (Wittman 2010, 286).



working poor and building alliances with, and offering livelihood security to, the urban unemployed (Wright and Wolford 2003).

While the food sovereignty drive for domestic food security may appear to promote a reactionary nationalism, its vision actually involves three historic steps: (1) revaluing humanity's agrarian foundations via a 're-territorialization' of (ecologically responsible) food production – substituting for food dependency on 'world granaries' organized by the food regime; (2) challenging the violence of the 'comparative advantage' principle in the state system, which enables agribusiness to construct (and reconstruct) world producing regions, promoting agro-exporting at the expense of the land and its inhabitants everywhere, and (3) democratizing food systems with the potential to recalibrate urban and manufacturing forms as partners rather than predators of the countryside, and to eliminate the redundancy and disorder of inter-state competition in food provisioning.

### Food regime crisis

The spike in world hunger in the late 2000s underscored the food insecure consequences of the food regime. The food crisis has strengthened initiatives within the United Nations to recalibrate the trade regime to legitimize domestic food security measures. In this post-global food crisis context, UN Right to Food *Rapporteur* De Schutter carried this initiative over to a recommendation to the WTO:

WTO members should redefine how food security is treated in multilateral trade agreements so that policies to achieve food security and the realization of the human right to adequate food are no longer treated as deviations from but as recognized principal objectives of agricultural trade policy ... A more appropriate reframing of agricultural trade rules would explicitly recognize that market-determined outcomes do not necessarily improve food security ... (De Schutter, 2011b, 16, emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

De Schutter followed up this Briefing Note with a report (De Schutter, 2009) regarding *Minimum principles* and measures to address the human rights challenge of what the World Bank termed 'large-scale land acquisitions', directed to states and investors involved in land grabbing and emphasizing investments that respect the environment, increase local food security and create employment via labor-intensive models (Claeys and Vanloqueren 2013, 195).

With respect to the food regime, Friedmann argues it embodies naturalized assumptions as 'implicit rules guiding relationships, practices and outcomes' (Friedmann, 2005, 234). One such assumption is that the market is the most efficient provider of food security in an uneven world. Here, moving food across borders is ideally a market operation, and adherence to the principle of comparative advantage guides WTO trade protocols (debilitating smallholder agriculture). Friedmann's point is that when these assumptions are breached, what was implicit or normalized may become explicit, problematic and contentious. Arguably, 'comparative advantage' as the rationale of market-driven 'food security' has become problematic and contentious as export bans and commandeering offshore land

<sup>15</sup>The recently concluded WTO Ministerial in Bali, December 2013, focused on the question of public procurement for domestic food security programs in the global South (largely at India's instigation), allowing a 'peace clause' limited to protecting extant (rather than future) reserves of 'traditional staple food crops' – arguably this does not alter the WTO trade regime, since the limited peace clause applies essentially to low-income (rather than global) consumers residing in the relevant countries.

for food supplies call the trade regime into question, triggering a process of restructuring (McMichael 2012, 2013a).

The food regime crisis embodies the entwined energy, climate and financial crises, crystallizing in a recent land grab for food and agrofuels (Houtart 2010), carbon sinks (Fairhead *et al.* 2012), water (Mehta *et al.* 2012) and as a new financial asset (Fairbairn 2013, Russi 2013). Capitalizing a new land frontier for agro-industrialization deepens capitalism's second contradiction (O'Connor 1998),<sup>16</sup> at the same time as it threatens the rights and habitats of people of the land.<sup>17</sup> Capitalizing grassland and forestland with agro-inputs degrades the natural foundations of production. Global fertilizer use is now intensified by agrofuels and the removal of cellulose fiber from fields (ETC 2009).<sup>18</sup> When displacement of food crops by agrofuels is paired with financial speculation on food futures and rising fertilizer costs,<sup>19</sup> the ability of the land-grab frontier to provide cheap energy and food supplies to reduce capital's costs of production and reproduction is likely to be short-lived.

The land grab signals the restructuring of the food/fuel regime, via transformation of its geography and governance, and a renewed challenge to the world's small producers. It contributes to a general process of relocation of food production to the global South, combining cost saving and state-sponsored 'agro-security mercantilism' (McMichael 2013a). The consequence is to reverse patterns of food circulation associated with the previous food regimes – originating in grain exports from the settler regions and then the global North in general (USA/Europe), with rising Southern agro-exporting creating a multi-centric geography of food and agrofuel circulation enabled by a complex of (hitherto soft law) rules and codes of conduct, beyond the jurisdiction of the WTO (McMichael 2012). Such land acquisition protocols (such as the Bank's Principles of Responsible Agricultural Investment) foreshadow global enclosure in the name of market rule. This process promises to reconstitute circulation patterns of commodities increasingly fungible as food, feed, fuel and plant matter.<sup>20</sup> Such a 'flex crop' syndrome is unlikely to tame an inflationary pressure on food prices, the consequences of which are discussed below.

The food crisis marks a key transitional moment with consequences for the political strategy of the food sovereignty movement. The World Food Summit in Rome, in June 2008, responding to a reversal of declining hunger rates attributed to the 2000 Millennium Development Goals, advocated the intensification of corporate agriculture (McMichael and

<sup>16</sup>Marsden points out that the assumption that 'sustainable intensification' resolves a 'yield gap' misleads insofar as the bioeconomic paradigm reproduces generic and aggregated solutions that override specific ecosystems and their sustainability (2012, 263).

<sup>17</sup>In this regard, Narula comments on the World Bank's approach to land acquisition: 'In many respects, the use of satellite imagery to identify investment-worthy sites stands as a metaphor for the Bank's current approach. Technocrats, physically and professionally removed from the land in question, use tools that are even further removed in time and space in order to assess land's current and potential value. This approach assumes that land and resources can be quantified by objective, distant images, and that the myriad uses, customs, and benefits informing the interests of land users can be captured, guaranteed, and marketized through written, formally-demarcated rights. These assumptions belie the complexity of land's real value to those who depend on it as a source of spiritual, social, and economic sustenance as well as a guarantor of rights' (Nanula, 2013, 169–70).

<sup>18</sup>FAOSTAT (Food and Agricultural Organization Statistics) reports from 1990–2002 China increased fertilizer usage 44 percent, India 33 percent, Pakistan 61 percent and Brazil 137 percent (Cribb 2010, 122).

<sup>19</sup>In addition to oil price inflation, peak phosphate (no substitutes) occurred in 1989 (Cribb 2010, 76).

<sup>20</sup>Borras *et al.* (2012) describe the materiality of these crops as 'flex crops'.

Schneider 2011). Parallel to the Summit, the International CSO (Civil Society Organizations) Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty drafted the *Terra Preta* Declaration,<sup>21</sup> stating:

The serious and urgent food and climate crises are being used by political and economic elites as opportunities to entrench corporate control of world agriculture and the ecological commons. At a time when chronic hunger, dispossession of food providers and workers, commodity and land speculation, and global warming are on the rise, governments, multilateral agencies and financial institutions are offering proposals that will only deepen these crisis through more dangerous versions of policies that originally triggered the current situation ... Small-scale food producers are feeding the planet, and we demand respect and support to continue. Only food sovereignty can offer long-term, sustainable, equitable and just solutions to the urgent food and climate crises. (IPC, 2008)

The food crisis was indeed a turning point – precipitating a political mobilization of the opposing sides to the debate about the content and appropriate mechanisms of ‘food security’. While WTO principles of free trade still held (but under critical scrutiny from key members (India, Brazil, China) of the recently formed Group of 20), the Rome Summit facilitated a shift toward overt public intervention in the name of ‘feeding the world’ projected to reach nine billion by 2050.

The World Bank’s 2008 *World development report* (2007) served as a template in identifying the African smallholder as the new object of ‘agriculture for development’,<sup>22</sup> setting the stage for a series of value chain initiatives, largely focused on Africa, from the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) to the African Agricultural Growth Corridors initiative associated with The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013, see also Patel 2013).

The challenge to small farmers is intensified here, as not only is some of their land subject to, or under consideration for, appropriation – for productive, speculative or even political motives (cf Kerssen 2012), but a more subtle ‘grab’ (control) is foreshadowed in the (primarily African) ‘value-chain project’. The value-chain is a conduit of global value relations, drawing producers into competitive markets over which they have little or no control, in return for contracting for agri-food inputs (seed, fertilizer, chemicals) that extract new value from producers via their products and centralize agricultural knowledge as ‘intellectual property’, with increased exposure to debt and dispossession for producers, and reduction of local food security (McMichael 2013b). The value-chain project is likely to convert otherwise local farming into commodity-producing labor for a deepening global market in food and fuel. While the infrastructure and mode of circulation is still forming, it may well produce a similar outcome to the green revolution, where a sub-set of consumers and farmers prosper (for a time) without altering the incidence and/or geography of hunger (Patel 2013).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>This author contributed to this draft.

<sup>22</sup>See special collection sections of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 3 (2009), and the *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9, 2 (2009) for critical reviews of the Bank’s 2008 *World development report*.

<sup>23</sup>Thus, Baltzer and Hansen found that the recent flurry of agricultural input subsidy programs directed at African smallholders mostly benefit ‘less-poor and politically well-connected households as well as large input suppliers’, ‘mainly attack the symptoms of low input use and poor agricultural productivity rather than the underlying “disease” of high input procurement costs and market failures’, and local elites ‘may use subsidies as a tool to reach political objectives, input suppliers enjoy a stable demand and possibly greater market power’, with the consequence that such input subsidy programs may become ‘more entrenched in the political system and more subject to political manipulation and rent seeking’ (2011, 31).

### Food sovereignty politics

The emergence of a food/fuel regime, combined with ‘agro-security mercantilism’ as states override the WTO’s ‘free market’ via direct investment offshore to secure non-trade based food supplies, has transformed the content and coordinates of the food regime. For the food sovereignty movement, at large, it is no longer simply the massive movement of food around the world but the massive movement of money for a global enclosure that now commands attention – from protecting rights to lands and common property resources to contesting governing principles characterized as a ‘checklist of how to destroy global peasantry responsibly’ (de Schutter 2011a). And, to the extent that food production is increasingly incorporated into (market or non-market) flows across borders to provision global consumers with purchasing power, ‘food dependency’ increases, rendering low-income urban and rural populations increasingly vulnerable to price hikes. These are the principal material conditions confronting the twenty-first-century food sovereignty movement.

The peasant countermovement already anticipated the recent food crisis, given its experience of the agrarian crisis stemming from structural adjustment policies fashioned in the 1980s against farm sectors in the global South. However, the mechanisms of depeasantization and deprivation have changed – with new enclosures for food, feed, fuel and offsets and financialized (speculative) prices substituting for the WTO-centered ‘cheap’ food market regime.

In these senses, the food crisis is not simply about hunger and food availability, but it is also an expression (and driver) of food regime restructuring, deepening its arsenal of weapons of dispossession. Such weapons may not be as subtle as the market mechanism is purported to be. But they continue to draw legitimacy from a capitalist narrative portraying the peasantry as an historical relic unfit for a productive modern world. And yet it is precisely the peasant experience and presence that is able to articulate not only the problem, but a solution to food regime contradictions that threaten ecosystem health and the fertility of the soil with industrial monocropping, and also the survival of humanity and other species. The unthinkable produces the thinkable. Who else could give voice to such calamity but the ‘canary in the mine’? Thus, a founding member of La Vía Campesina, Nettie Wiebe, claimed:

It’s a movement of people of the land who share a progressive agenda. Which means we share the view that people – small farmers, peasants, people of the land – have a right to be there . . . . That it’s our job to look after the earth and our people. We must defend it and we have to defend it in the global context..(quoted in Desmarais 2002, 98)

The crisis conjuncture refocused attention on the FAO’s Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as the multilateral organization most appropriate to addressing the conditions of possibility of the food and hunger question. In this moment the IPC (International Planning Committee) for Food Sovereignty, with strong support from the Latin American region, negotiated a reform of the CFS whereby civil society would have an institutionalized voice through the newly formed Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), alongside member state delegations and a newly formed Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) (McKeon 2009). Despite its shortcomings (e.g. corporate membership, language of consensus, absence of explicit food sovereignty reference), the reformed CFS acknowledges the right to food, includes ongoing civil society input and recognizes the subsidiarity principle – all essential elements of food sovereignty. The key is that the CFS is a new space for debate at the global level informed by social movement and civil society representations

of food security initiatives beyond the corporate (and often central government and international financial institution) vision. As La Vía Campesina claims:

social movements now have a new international tool they can use when the time comes to demand from their governments local or national measures to stop land grabbing. An important methodological step has also been taken as the [voluntary] guidelines illustrate that direct participation in the drawing up of policies by the people most concerned by the topic is both possible and fruitful . . . . To have managed to withdraw from the hands of the World Bank the monopoly on the definition of policies in the area of land access and agrarian reform is a significant achievement. (2012b, 11)

However, it also acknowledges:

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

Nonetheless, on balance the reformed CFS has positive potential, providing opportunity for a food sovereignty presence via the Civil Society Mechanism, and particularly a forum for articulating the importance of domestic food security initiatives and smallholder support within a framework of human rights (see McKeon 2011). The CFS, in countering the World Bank's support for the rights of capital, has introduced debate on the rights of inhabitants on lands targeted for agricultural investment, underscoring the disproportionate role, and significance, of smallholder investment in farming systems. Key to this initiative are two alternative policy frameworks: the (Voluntary) Tenure Guidelines (designed to strengthen recognition of customary property tenure and address gender inequity), and the Minimum Human Rights Principle proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food.

As above, the food regime crisis has refocused attention on the mechanisms of food security, as rising hunger and state-driven land grabs have together delegitimized 'free trade', deepening the crisis of the free trade architecture.<sup>24</sup> Space is opened for reformulations of food security that ultimately connect to support of small farmers via the principle of the right to food (as opposed to an investor-driven 'right to food' via land grabbing).

<sup>24</sup>The crisis has triggered two significant deregulatory initiatives. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) seeks (confidentially) to relax the EU's Precautionary Principle regarding food-associated chemicals (pesticides, packaging and additives), nano-technologies and GMOs, and to regulate procurement at the possible expense of local participatory food democracy initiatives defined as 'localization barriers to trade' (Hansen-Kuhn and Suppan 2013). The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which represents a regional 'free trade' agreement aimed at China's growing world influence, would intensify agricultural liberalization rules (in the wake of WTO paralysis), with a further end-run around domestic food security initiatives. Led by the US, the TPP is a confidential, corporate-focused initiative aimed at dismantling remaining market protections and it 'would expand protections for investors over consumers and farmers, and severely restrict governments' ability to use public policy to reshape food systems' (Karen Hansen-Kuhn, quoted in Muller *et al.* 2012, 3).

Arguably, this is the pivotal issue at stake at local as well as ‘high-level’ scales. With respect to the food insecurity fallout from the food crisis, de Schutter observed that adopting ‘a human rights framework ... may guide the redefinition of the policy priorities triggered by the current crisis. The question “for whose benefit?” is at least as important as the question “how to produce more?”’ (2008).

In this reformulation context, however, the World Economic Forum and the G8 have countered with the NAFSN – composed of the African Union (AU), its planning body The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), several African governments and over 100 companies. This initiative not only re-appropriates ‘food security’ in quantitative terms, but also regroups to reformulate governing mechanisms to commandeer African land, water and labor, and to monopolize seeds and markets, in effect threatening to undermine the CFS. As British Prime Minister David Cameron put it so bluntly, this initiative will ‘unleash the power of the private sector’, with a pledge of aid to the tune of US\$22 billion, stipulating that recipient governments ‘refine policies in order to improve investment opportunities’ (quoted in Paul and Steinbrecher 2013). If the trade regime is vulnerable to price shocks and export bans, then *public-private partnerships*<sup>25</sup> based on direct, subsidized investment by agribusiness become *the new institutional mechanisms of the food regime*.

GRAIN’s account of rice markets in Côte d’Ivoire is telling in terms of the current food regime trajectory: formerly self-sufficient in rice, the national rice company was privatized along with elimination of public support for agriculture via structural adjustment. By the 1990s, two-thirds of rice consumed was imported from Asia, but, with rice price inflation in 2008, local rice ‘costs 15 percent less than imports...demand is growing ... [and] women rice traders have recently formed several cooperatives and have even created brands for local rice’ (2013, 1). To northern governments, donors and corporations, the re-establishment of control via *non-trade* solutions is irresistible. Thus:

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

Governance mechanisms for the NAFSN include policy commitments by African states to facilitate access to key agricultural lands, using databases, resettlement policies and measures authorizing communities ‘to engage in partnerships through leases or sub-leases’ (5). *In other words, elites from the national down to the local level are being mobilized to participate in a process that La Vía Campesina might well rephrase as: ‘the massive movement of money around the world is forcing the increased movement of people’.* Governance includes New Alliance partners confirming their ‘intentions’ to ‘take account’ of the CFS’s responsible agricultural investment principles (RAIs) in formation, and the Tenure Guidelines (6). This follows a pattern of non-consultation with producer and civil society organizations and confidential Letters of Intent signed between companies and governments (Oxfam 2013, 6).

<sup>25</sup>To date, the G8 has signed Cooperation Framework Agreements (CFAs) since the New Alliance formed in May 2012 with Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania (Oxfam 2013, 3).

At the same time, the G8 threatens to override the CFS Tenure Guidelines (TGs) by launching a new transparency in land transactions initiative. While the Tenure Guidelines (which insist on Free, Prior and Informed Consent procedures to honor the rights of landed peoples), embody the legitimate requirements of the CFS, and to which states (including the G8) have committed, the G8's new initiative 'is attempting, yet again,<sup>26</sup> to enforce the principle that money and markets decide what is best for the world' (FIAN 2013). In short, political and corporate elites are maneuvering to compromise or even undermine the newly established authority of the CFS as the appropriate forum for global initiatives on land, food and nutrition. A corporate countermovement is in full swing, with the new grab for land accompanied by schemes for governing principles favoring an economic calculus over territorial rights of land users.

Not only has the crisis called the food/trade regime into question, but also its encouragement of land grabbing highlights the subordination of agricultural land to financial markets. The fetishization of agriculture via speculation in land as a financial asset, and episodes of land grabbing, is clearly on display. There is a direct, and an indirect, consequence for the countermovement. In the direct sense, the peasant movement (and allies) are confronted with ongoing construction of appropriation protocols, direct expropriation and expulsion from lands acquired by national or foreign interests. In this context, agrarian movements are substituting a human rights framework to defend territory and land access for the landless as an effective legal method of avoiding entrapment in a discourse of market-based rights – insisting that 'rights are social conquests' (Saragih, quoted in Monsalve-Suárez 2013, 277), and that 'the home states of these companies regulate the behavior of their companies abroad' (243). Reference to international human rights law brings into play international advocacy networks and international forums such as the CFS. This struggle has the potential to build on 'broader alliances among different actors, for instance, peasants, consumers, law professionals, policy makers and scientists, and on the capacity to simultaneously operate at different levels and arenas of action' (Ibid, 248). Land grabbing's open season is already focusing public attention on its violations of rights and sovereignty, irresponsibly threatening the world's peasantry and world food ecosystems resilience (see e.g. Pearce 2012, Kugelman and Levenstein 2013, Liberti 2013).

Indirectly, there are the more seductive methods of tenuous chaining of smallholders to new value circuits controlled by agribusiness and subsidized with public monies (McMichael 2013b). Alongside AGRA, for example, is the African Agricultural Growth Corridors initiative, associated with NAFSN. Many of the NAFSN-affiliated companies<sup>27</sup> represent 'the whole supply chain, from seeds, chemical inputs, production, processing, transport and trade to supermarkets' (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013, 2). The NAFSN goals are

to identify suitable land for investors; to help the private sector to control and increase the use of agricultural inputs (fertilizers) and 'improved' (hybrid or GM [genetically modified]) seeds and halt the distribution of free and 'unimproved' seeds (farmer varieties, often well adapted to local conditions and needs); and to mobilize public largesse to assist investors'. (4)

Part of the latter includes northern pension funds, regarded as 'patient capital' for infrastructural and climate proofing investment and as a public complement to private investment by agribusiness. While such initiatives promise development opportunities for smallholders, it

<sup>26</sup>Following CFS rejection of the Bank's RAI principles, and substitution of the TGs and an RAI process.

<sup>27</sup>For example, Monsanto, Cargill, Dupont, Syngenta, Nestlé, Unilever, Itochu, Yara International, etc.

is argued they are more likely ‘to put Africa’s land, water and seeds [and labor] under the control of international traders and investors’ (13).<sup>28</sup>

### Impending challenges

Land grabbing via such direct or indirect methods is a recipe for intensifying the over-consumption/under-consumption relationship organizing the food regime (Patel 2007) by expelling more farmers into urban slums, and deepening food dependency as more land is commandeered for ‘flex crops’ for export. As such it will likely renew food rioting across the global South, contributing to the ‘urbanization’ of food sovereignty sensibilities (implicit in urban farming systems: endemic in the South and mushrooming now in the global North). Predictions of rising food prices associated with energy, soil and climate crises, financialization and land grabbing have the potential to not only politicize urban populations, but also to direct such politicization towards recognition of the importance of domestic agricultural sectors. As Araghi (2000) reminds us, the agrarian question reaches beyond the countryside to urban destinations of the dispossessed, and this connection operates in reverse as the strategic importance of agriculture to cities becomes clear.<sup>29</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>28</sup>Mozambique, for example, is required to write legislation promoting ‘partnerships’ and to eliminate distribution of free and unimproved seeds, while ‘any constraints on the behaviour of corporate investors in Africa (such as the CFS guidelines on land tenure) remain voluntary, while the constraints on host nations become compulsory’ (Monbiot 2013). Oxfam reports a consistent pattern of land and water acquisition putting farmers at risk (and discounting CFS Tenure Guidelines), as well as promoting seed and input policies privileging the private sector and its intellectual property rights (2013, 7).

<sup>29</sup>Related to this, Cohen and Garrett note: ‘in most countries, in cities other than the very largest “primary” ones, agriculture is even more fundamental. Merchants and mechanics provide agricultural inputs and tools. Traders dynamically connect city and countryside. In some cities, a notable proportion of urban residents farm for a living (most likely on land outside the city). In Egypt and Malawi, 10 per cent of urban dwellers outside major metropolitan areas claimed agriculture production as their main occupation . . . . As much as 40 per cent of the population of some African cities and up to 50 per cent in some Latin American cities engage in urban or peri-urban agriculture’ (2009, 6, 8). See also Vanhaute (2011, 57–9).



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

In Haiti, for example, where President Préval was ousted following an impassive response to rice price doubling in a single week, income inequality is second only to that of Namibia in global terms, and the cost of living was the key cross-class complaint. Formerly a rice exporter, Haiti imports about 82 percent of total consumption, and it is widely acknowledged (notably by Presidents Préval and Clinton, the latter bearing substantial responsibility) that Haiti lost its food security and food sovereignty following externally imposed neoliberal measures (Schuller 2008). Interestingly, Schuller equates Haiti to ‘the canary in the mine’, claiming:

Haiti needs to be seen as an early warning. Haiti’s geopolitical position – especially its proximity to the US and its level of dependence on foreign aid – highlights the contradictions and flaws in the system of international aid and growing global food crisis. (2008)

Related to this condition of food dependency, *The New York Times* recently reported:

Across the Caribbean, food imports have become a budget-busting problem, prompting one of the world’s most fertile regions to reclaim its agricultural past. But instead of turning to big agribusinesses, officials are recruiting everyone they can to combat the cost of imports, which have roughly doubled in price over the past decade. In Jamaica, Haiti, the Bahamas and elsewhere, local farm-to-table production is not a restaurant sales pitch: it is a government motto. (Cave 2013, 6)

This may not be about restoring or constructing a Caribbean peasantry, but food sovereignty is not simply about peasants – its salience is universal, but with distinctive local meaning. Food provisioning is the Achilles heel of government: ‘failure to provide (food) security undermines the very reason for existence of the political system’ (Lagi *et al.* 2011, 2). Under these conditions, the ‘food sovereignty’ slogan is no empty vision, its power stemming from the increasingly obvious shortcomings of a competitive state system embedded in a regime deepening the commodification of food. President Clinton understood this when he waxed Polanyian in his *mea culpa* of 2008: ‘food is not a commodity like others ... it is crazy of us to think we can develop a lot of these countries [by] treating food like it was a colour television set’ (quoted in Patel 2010).

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

The Tunisian uprising of January 2011, which sparked the Arab Spring, called for bread and water without dictatorship’.<sup>30</sup> Gana’s study of the Tunisian food riots, and the domestic

<sup>30</sup>Gulf states are particularly vulnerable, with food imports providing 60 percent of total demand (Cotula *et al.* 2011, S101). See also Loening and Ianchovichina (2011) on food dependency in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) states.

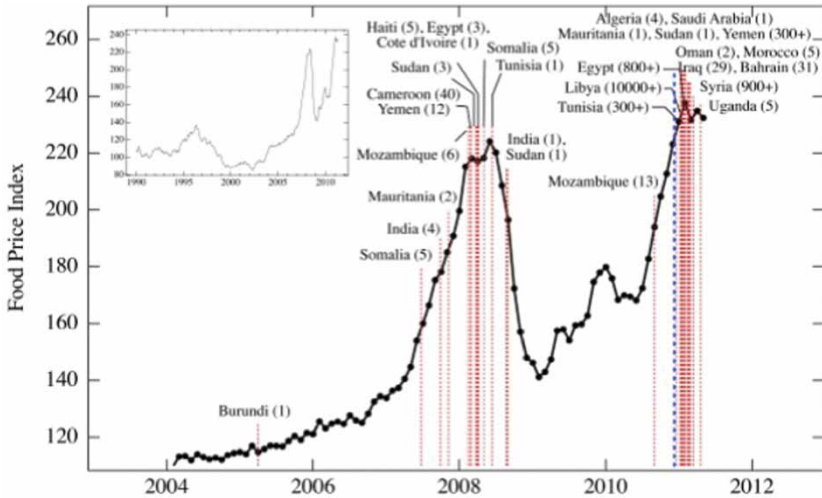


Figure 1. Food price inflation and protest.

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

spatial inequalities linked to liberalization policies discriminating against the rural sector, concludes: 'the politicization of the protest movement indicates that people were making a direct link between political choices and development orientations and the deterioration of their living conditions' (2012, 207). Arguably, under these circumstances, there is an immanent politics of food sovereignty – given capital's need to reproduce its exploitative relations by colonizing land with energy-intensive agriculture, evicting peasantries and manipulating flex crops for profit. As Diamantino Nhampossa, coordinator of the National Peasants Union of Mozambique, remarked: 'These protests are going to end. But they will always come back. This is the gift that the development model we are following has to offer' (quoted in Patel 2010).<sup>31</sup>

How food politics unfold depends not only on the struggles between the corporate and agrarian movements over land and food rights, but also on the potential alliances between town and country prefigured in recent food riot patterning. Bush claims the Middle East offers several cases where 'urban and rural poor as well as the middle class demonstrated against spiraling food prices and persistent local corruption, repressive government and poverty', noting:

Rioters knew too why governments had to be forced to mitigate the social costs of food inflation, why and how authoritarian regimes appeased transnational food companies, and how national food strategies impoverished food producers: low farm-gate prices were well-tested mechanisms to extract surplus for largely urban-based development. (Bush, 2010, 121, 123)

<sup>31</sup>A recent IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) report regarding African vulnerability notes: 'Food security presents a serious challenge for the region because of high dependency on food imports, diminished capacity for generating foreign exchange to finance food imports, rising food demand driven by continued high population growth, and limited potential for agricultural growth because of severe water constraints and water resource management issues' (Breisinger *et al.* 2012, 2).

As political-economic elites continue to implement market solutions to food deficits, such political unrest will continue, providing growing credence to a politics of food sovereignty that connects food dependency to trade overriding stable domestic farm sectors.

Food rioting is just one indicator of crisis, but it draws attention to the perversity of ‘emptying the countryside’<sup>32</sup> at a time of (market-based) food deficits, and the possibility of restoring the countryside with low-input agro-ecological farming to also address the interwoven energy and climate crises facing the world. Industrial agriculture’s declining biophysical productivity (depletion of soil and nitrogen use efficiency) requires increased synthetic (fossil-fuel based) fertilizer applications when fertilizer costs have practically doubled since 1960 and energy prices are rising (Weis 2007, Cribb 2010, 76, Ploeg 2010). Figure 2 depicts the now close integration of food and energy prices.

Beyond rising energy prices inflating food prices, agro-industrialization’s rising material costs (energy, ecosystem depletion) underscore the IAASTD’s suggestion that agribusiness ‘as usual is no longer an option’, and its recognition of the salience of the food sovereignty countermovement’s emphasis on multifunctional farming practices. La Vía Campesina now champions agro-ecology in anticipation of a deepening crisis of industrial agriculture, claiming ‘To feed future populations, we must nurture the land’ (2010, 6). Central to this project are knowledge-intensive practices that reduce chemical and other commercial inputs to farming, and restore local ecological knowledges as essential to both democratic and sustainable food systems (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012, Massicotte 2014).<sup>33</sup> This kind of intervention underscores the epistemic implications of the food sovereignty movement, in viewing the right to farm as both a democratic claim (‘agrarian citizenship’) as well as an assertion of the intricate relations between food, environment and social justice. Whereas capitalist modernity promotes ‘agriculture without farmers’ – extensive monocultures highly dependent on energy, mechanical and chemical inputs – the food sovereignty movement views the multi-functionality of farming as a cultural and ecological practice premised on skilled labor and the solidary economy of seed sharing. In this vision, restoring and sustaining soil and biodiversity are foundational to modern civilization, particularly in the Anthropocene Age.

Thus La Vía Campesina claims integrated agroecological farming systems are widely recognized to be more adaptive and resilient to climate change, including droughts, hurricanes, temperature changes, and shifting planting dates. The higher level of on-farm diversity under agroecology means that if one crop is negatively affected, another one is likely to compensate for it. Mulch and green manures that cover soils protect them from erosion, high temperatures and conserve moisture. A diversity of varieties, as well as greater within variety genetic diversity, make peasant farms more able to adapt to changing conditions than homogeneous commercial agriculture. (2010, 11)

<sup>32</sup>If not always emptying the countryside, certainly discriminating against small farmers with rising input prices (linked to energy prices) and weak price and credit support compromises their ability to increase production when commodity prices rise (Patnaik 2008, El-Dukheri *et al.* 2011).

<sup>33</sup>Thus, La Vía Campesina notes its own research shows: ‘agroecological farms are substantially more productive ... [and] a more integrated farm is one that combines crops and livestock, intercrops and rotates crops, employs agroforestry, and generally exhibits a higher level of functional biodiversity. Such systems are not only more productive but have far lower costs, especially in terms of expensive farm chemicals and machinery’ (2010, 10).

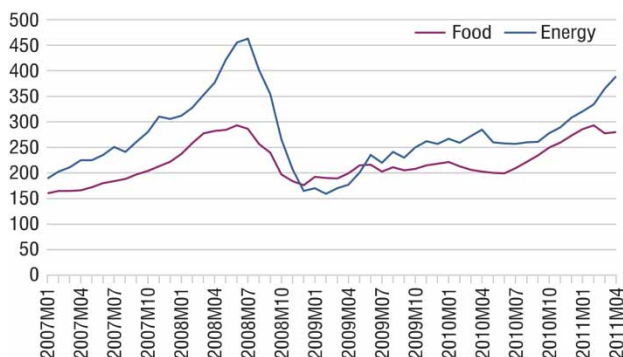


Figure 2. International Food and Energy Prices (Index, current, US\$2000=100).

Source: World Bank, DEC (Development Economics Vice-Presidency) prospects group (Loening and Ianchovichina 2011, 17).

Accordingly, the food sovereignty countermovement is developing agroecological schools and networks to assist farmers in conversion to or consolidation of ecological farming, and advocating publicly for reorientation of research and extension systems to support agroecological innovation and scaling up via farmer organizations (Ibid, 13). At the same time, peasant practices include constant innovation for survival on the land under conditions of climatic change. For example, ActionAid's report, *We know what we need: South Asian women speak out on climate change adaptation*, documents how farmers in the Ganges basin bordering Nepal, India and Bangladesh manage livelihoods under conditions of erratic monsoon patterns, evidencing 'that women in poor areas have started to adapt to a changing climate and can clearly articulate what they need to secure and sustain their livelihoods more effectively' (2007, 4). Pionetti has documented women's management of a 'seeds common' in the Deccan Plateau of South India, noting that:

the continuous exchange of seeds for local crop varieties circulates genetic resources from one field to another within a village territory and beyond. The dynamic management of genetic resources enhances the stability of traditional agrosystems, increases the adaptation potential of local crops to evolving environmental conditions and limits the risk of genetic erosion. (2005, 154)

Meanwhile, conventional responses to climate change emissions, organized via carbon markets to promote the new 'green economy' trajectory, threaten to convert farmland into carbon sinks, intensifying the pressure on the food sovereignty movement to protect farmers and their land not only from cheap food and land grabbing, but now 'green grabbing' (Fairhead *et al.* 2012). Green grabbing deploys carbon trading as a method of environmental repair or caretaker services to resolve systemic problems: 'Thus tree farms are to replace peasants' fields and fallows, in order to absorb carbon dioxide emitted by the industrial system; tropical forests and the knowledge of their inhabitants are to provide services to Northern industry, researchers and tourists' (Lohmann 1993, 158). At the recent UN Climate Change conference in Warsaw, where the conversion of farmland to carbon sinks was on the agenda, La Vía Campesina stated its position:

Rights over our farms, lands, seeds and natural resources need to remain in our hands so we can produce food and care for our mother earth as peasant farmers have done for centuries. We will not allow carbon markets to turn our hard work into carbon sinks that allow polluters to continue their business as usual. (2013)

Such climate-proofing threats to small farming and forest-dwellers will only intensify,<sup>34</sup> providing a new front in the struggle to build food sovereignty and value the natural world as a source of life rather than a carbon sink.

## Conclusion

Returning to the food regime/food sovereignty dialectic, the overall point is that while the twentieth-century agrarian crisis has been expressed in various forms of peasant resistance (Wolf 1969, Rosset *et al.* 2006, Borras *et al.* 2008) and movements for reform of the agri-food system (Friedmann 2005, Patel 2007, Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009), it is only now, as a final enclosure ensues in the shadow of ‘the nemesis effect’,<sup>35</sup> rising energy and food prices and destabilization of human populations, that an ontological alternative is universally meaningful and necessary. The canary imagery suggests that at a historical moment like this, with its destructive neo-liberal market path-dependency, a seemingly unthinkable vision can emerge with such power as to remind us of our agrarian foundations. The reminder is driven by direct experience of dispossession, and the obvious deceit of feeding the world with assurances of market efficiency. The absent subjects in the original agrarian question have spoken through the food sovereignty intervention, shifting the focus from capital’s expanded reproduction to the question of stewardship of the land as an act of social provisioning and human survival.

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

While these alliances are momentary and/or incipient, it is likely they will consolidate under pressure of crisis, as the food question is understood for what it is: an enduring political relationship that cannot be reduced/fetishized to a question of ‘how much’; rather, it is a political-ecological relationship. The fact that over half of the world’s food is produced by small farmers, with some estimates up to 70 percent (ETC 2009), is a substantial rationale for advocating support for this producer class (e.g. reversing energy, agribusiness and export subsidies), including the urban ‘peasantry’. Thus:

By one estimate, some 200 million city dwellers produce food for the urban market, accounting for 15–20 per cent of total global food production... In West Africa, around 20 million households (20 per cent of the urban population) are engaged in urban agriculture. They supply 60–100 per cent of the fresh vegetable market in those cities. (Cohen and Garrett 2009, 9)

This is a foundation for domesticating food security, and offers a palpable rejoinder to those who fetishize agro-exporting as the solution to global hunger. It should be a key part

<sup>34</sup>Cf McMichael (2009a).

<sup>35</sup>‘Burdened by a growing number of overlapping stresses, the world’s ecosystems may grow increasingly susceptible to rapid, unexpected decline’ (Bright 1999, 12).

of a counter-narrative – one that also underscores the importance of regenerative local farming practices as solutions to the combined crises facing the planet. Not an easy task, but easier as conditions deteriorate?

Despite the temptation to (crudely) correlate ecological decline and heightened socio-ecological rationality, this paper is simply arguing that the inherent wisdom of food sovereignty, as a real utopia, inspires adjustments. It already has. And it is implicit and/or explicit in the association consumers, smallholders and urban classes make between the food regime and food insecurity. Communities are developing adaptive strategies that intersect with food sovereignty visioning, whether they call it food sovereignty or not. Often under the radar, nevertheless many of these initiatives reach toward resilient practices – not without contradiction, especially when neglecting social justice concerns. But these are the seeds of survival as the shit hits the fan. From transition town origins in Kinsale, Ireland, through the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and D-town Farm, to a decentralized ‘social movement rooted in communities across Mexico but linked to global food sovereignty efforts,’ (Baker 2013, 3–4), political communities are forming in anticipation – building on knowledge networks such as *Movimiento Campesino a Campesino* (MCAC) and seed exchanges (Holt-Giménez 2006, Da Via 2012). In Canada, food sovereignty involves an increasing role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing food access services – in new governance sites abandoned by the state (Martin and Andree 2014), giving rise to community food governance schemes (cf Friedmann 2011).

Such ‘urbanization’ of food sovereignty underscores the potential for linkages between rural and urban movements that implicitly understand the vulnerabilities of an ecologically compromised world and the socially bankrupt neoliberal vision of market solutions to the food question. The myopia of the current TTIP critique of local procurement as a ‘trade barrier’ is not only telling, but it also suggests a new stage of corporate market colonization: whereas the WTO prised open farm sectors in the global South for cheap imported food from the North at the expense of domestic producers, the emerging trade agreements target localized food systems in the name of ‘free trade’.

Food sovereignty is, therefore, continually in dialectical tension with the food regime, and while the terms of the power struggle unfold across time and space, as argued above, it is ultimately about an ontological contest between distinct visions regarding agriculture: as an economic sector with producing units employing a short-term market calculus, or a landscape inhabited by farmers/pastoralists/fisherfolk geared to sustainable ecological relations. That is, while the struggle reflects a historic power inequality, it will be increasingly governed by a different order of historicization – the imminence of energy and climate feedbacks fundamentally altering the conditions of possibility of human survival.

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