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Food Sovereignty

A New Rights Framework for Food and Nature?

Hannah Wittman

■ **ABSTRACT:** Food sovereignty, as a critical alternative to the concept of food security, is broadly defined as the right of local peoples to control their own food systems, including markets, ecological resources, food cultures, and production modes. This article reviews the origins of the concept of food sovereignty and its theoretical and methodological development as an alternative approach to food security, building on a growing interdisciplinary literature on food sovereignty in the social and agroecological sciences. Specific elements of food sovereignty examined include food regimes, rights-based and citizenship approaches to food and food sovereignty, and the substantive concerns of advocates for this alternative paradigm, including a new trade regime, agrarian reform, a shift to agroecological production practices, attention to gender relations and equity, and the protection of intellectual and indigenous property rights. The article concludes with an evaluation of community-based perspectives and suggestions for future research on food sovereignty.

■ **KEYWORDS:** agrarian citizenship, agroecology, food regimes, food security, food sovereignty, right to food

In 1996, an international coalition of peasant, farmer, rural women's, and indigenous people's movements met in Tlaxcala, Mexico to discuss their common concerns around the effects of an increasingly globalized and concentrated agri-food system on their livelihoods, communities, and ecologies. This coalition was consolidated in 1993 as La Via Campesina, or "peasant way" and now is one of the largest and most vibrant social movements in the world, encompassing more than 148 organizations in sixty-nine countries. At the Tlaxcala meeting, members of La Via Campesina proposed an alternative paradigm called "food sovereignty" as a concept and framework that both challenges the foundations of the current agri-food order and proposes a set of concrete alternatives for both theory and practice (La Via Campesina 1996).¹ Since the Tlaxcala conference, the concept of food sovereignty has garnered increasing attention, first from grassroots social movements and the non-governmental sector, then in policy arenas, notably the 2002 World Food Summit and counter-summit, the NGO/CSO Forum on Food Sovereignty, in Rome. In 2007, an international forum on food sovereignty held in Nyéléni, Mali attended by 500 representatives from eighty countries defined food sovereignty as:

The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations. (Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007)²

Since first articulated in 1996, evaluations of the practice and potential of this emerging concept and its many sub-elements were quick in forthcoming, first emerging from civil society publications (e.g., Bagambanya 1999; Menezes 2001; Roberts 2003). Academic analyses began to appear shortly thereafter, mentioned in articles focused on the increasingly vocal, visible, and globally organized peasant movement acting in resistance to the corporate consolidation of agriculture in a neoliberal food regime (e.g., Borras 2004; Desmarais 2002, 2004; Patel 2005; Patel and McMichael 2004), and comprehensively examined in Desmarais (2007). Monographs focusing specifically on food sovereignty began to appear in the NGO sector in 2005 (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005), including a multimedia presentation of the practice of food sovereignty (Pimbert 2008), with the first academic volumes appearing in 2009 and 2010 (Perfecto et al. 2009; Wittman et al. 2010).

Current literature on food sovereignty is rapidly expanding on a global scale, especially in grassroots publications from Latin America and Asia, but this article focuses on English-language publications coming from a wide range of academic approaches and disciplines. Authors reviewed here include anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, political scientists, agroecologists, nutritionists, and crop scientists, responsible for an increasing range of case study material from Africa (Bezner Kerr 2010; Msachi et al. 2009; Quaye et al. 2009), Latin America (Altieri 2010; Perfecto et al. 2009; Reardon and Perez 2010; Wittman 2009c), Canada (Wittman et al. 2011), and Asia (Kassam 2009, 2010; Ramdas 2009). Much of the most recent literature takes a world-historical and food-regime approach to understanding the theoretical potential of the food sovereignty concept for agri-food studies and its practical implications for addressing food and environmental crises. Current documentation of food sovereignty initiatives remains difficult to consolidate, however, because it is “based in the experience and knowledge of community groups, small farmers’ organizations, and those working directly with them” (Ishii-Eiteman 2009: 691) and thus more likely to be published in local languages, consultant, NGO and donor reports, and MA and PhD theses. In addition, “scientific and academic representation of food sovereignty ... remains fragmented among numerous journals that are not widely read beyond the source discipline” (Ishii-Eiteman 2009: 691). This review thus attempts to consolidate knowledge around food sovereignty as an “emergent science” (Kassam 2009), viewing it not as an established paradigm/concept but rather a potential new framework emerging from diverse set of contemporary grassroots production practices and political approaches. This consolidation of knowledge around the potential of food sovereignty is important because its proponents

and practitioners—both in theory and practice—challenge conventional wisdom and policy on how to best “feed the world and cool the planet” and emphasize the importance of acknowledging communities of practitioners and indigenous knowledge in this agenda (CLOC-La Via Campesina 2010).³

In what follows, I examine the emergent framework of food sovereignty from a food regimes perspective, comparing its ontological and epistemological underpinnings with a “food security” agenda. This is followed by an exploration of rights-based approaches to food and food sovereignty, including the practice of rights and agrarian citizenship within an agrarian moral economy based on food sovereignty. I then review the demands and strategies of the food sovereignty movement: assessing the elements and substantive concerns of advocates for this alternative paradigm, including a new trade regime, agrarian reform, a shift to agroecological production practices, attention to gender relations and equity, and the protection of intellectual and indigenous property rights. I conclude with suggestions for future research on food sovereignty.

A Food Regimes Approach

In the late 1980s, Harriet Friedmann and Phil McMichael proposed the concept of a “food regime” as a constellation or cluster of class and interstate power relations, norms, and institutional rules, and socioecological/geographical specializations that link the global relations of food production and consumption to periods of capital accumulation (Friedmann 1987, 2009; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2009b). A food regimes approach offers an important lens to understand the historical development of agri-food systems and their transition/transformation within political ecologies and economies while also tracing “networks of actants—human, natural, discursive—from below” (Friedmann 2009: 342). Le Heron and Lewis suggest a food regimes approach as a “composite of political and intellectual projects” and a food regime as a category with “generative potential ... that places the multiple dimensions of food—as final product, intermediary, ingredient, nutrient, cultural performance, social relation, human necessity—into a wider recasting of what it means to be human, changing human-biophysical exchange and value creation” (2009: 345–346).

Friedmann and McMichael (1989) identified a first food regime as in force between 1870 and the 1930s, characterized by the transfer of basic grains and livestock from settler colonies to Europe and Great Britain, where they were used as “wage foods.” This system of exchange included the consolidation of national agricultural sectors in settler states including the United States, Canada, and Australia (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). The second food regime—from 1950s to 1970s—sent subsidized, surplus food from the US via food aid to postcolonial “development states” to extend industrialization and attenuate the threat of communism, while an international division of specialized agricultural supply chains and commodity complexes was developed by agribusiness (McMichael 2009b). Part of this rationalization and shift toward a second food regime was the separation of agrarian components—a move from “agrarian-based policies” towards the emergence of politically differentiated environmental, food, and natural resource-based policies (Bonanno 1991).

Transition from one food regime to another stems from a series of contradictory relations resulting in crisis and transformation to a successor regime (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Le Heron and Lewis 2009; McMichael 2009b). As norms and rules over the distribution of power and property are challenged, in many cases by social movements, stable relationships are

disrupted and space opens for the emergence of alternative constellations of production and consumption practices, and mechanisms of control over food systems. For example, Pritchard (2009) notes the importance of multilateral negotiations around agricultural trade within the World Trade Organization (WTO) in facilitating the breakdown of the second food regime. When national governments joined the WTO in 1995, they “relinquished their powers to unilaterally set their own food and agricultural policies.” WTO requirements caused a major restructuring of food security and rural livelihood programs in developing countries, but “the main effect of bringing agriculture into the WTO was not to reform global agriculture in line with market rationalities, but to aggravate already-existing uneven opportunities in the world food system” (Pritchard 2009: 300), as the effects of subsidy restructuring were felt to a much lesser extent in countries that were part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Increasing resistance by peasants, farmers, and NGOs to the norms and institutional rules of the multilateral trading system were visibly marked by La Via Campesina’s demand to “Get Agriculture out of the WTO” and the work of the international coalition Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) during the Doha Round of WTO negotiations, which fell apart in 2008 (Desmarais 2007). Hegemonic patterns of financing, producing, and consuming food were thus challenged, leading to what several authors in the food regime literature express as a global agri-food system in a period of experimentation, tension, and contestation (e.g., Burch and Lawrence 2009; Friedmann 2009).

By the turn of the twenty-first century, this current but theoretically unconsolidated food regime, has been alternately described as “neoliberal” (Pechlaner and Otero 2008, 2010), “corporate” (McMichael 2005, 2009a, 2009b) and “corporate-environmental” (Friedmann 2005), as a product of the divergent tensions within, and resistance to, the ongoing financialization and corporatization of global food networks (Burch and Lawrence 2009). Resistance to a corporate food regime, characterized by what French activist-farmer José Bové has called “food from nowhere” (Bové and Dufour 2000) has most visibly been manifested in the food sovereignty movement, with its emphasis on rights, autonomy, and “food from somewhere” (Dixon and Campbell 2009; Fairbairn 2010; McMichael 2009b; Wittman 2009c). In this regard, although certainly not yet a consolidated food regime, food sovereignty can be regarded as a new, alternative paradigm and driver of change challenging the current food regime, in its efforts to re-embed economic, environmental, and equity-related concerns around agricultural production, consumption, and trade. Table 1 compares and contrasts areas of contested institutional and value relations within the current, corporate, or neoliberal food regime, contradictions that create openings for the potential emergence of a food sovereignty regime.

Food Security, the Right to Food, and Agrarian Citizenship

The food sovereignty approach can be distinguished as an “epistemic shift” in which value relations, approaches to rights, and a shift from an economic to an ecological calculus concurrently challenge the rules and relations of a corporate or neoliberal food regime (McMichael 2009b). One of the most salient shifts has been in the value relations, justification regimes, and frames around the concept of food security as it has been challenged by new conceptualizations of food sovereignty (Boyer 2010; Fairbairn 2010; Gonzalez 2010; Mooney and Hunt 2009; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). Food security—framed as a universal ideal to prevent world hunger—emerged as a post–World War II development principle enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2010), food security exists when

Table 1: Food Sovereignty: An Emerging Alternative Food Regime?

	Corporate/Neoliberal Food Regime	Food Sovereignty Regime
Feeding the World	Food access/security through intensive production based on principle of comparative advantage and distributed through market mechanisms.	Food access/security through prioritizing local agricultural production and protecting local markets from dumping/subsidized food imports.
Role of Agriculture in Advancing National Development	Increase positive trade balances through increased exports of agricultural commodities. Economically successful communities will invest in infrastructure to improve community well-being (e.g., hospitals, schools).	Sustainable agriculture as part of a diversified economy will improve national well-being through improving food security and ensuring a healthy environment. Fair trade will spur economic growth.
Role of Technology in Advancing Agricultural Development	Increases in productivity come through scientific innovation, adoption of technology, and modern management. Problem solving based on a compartmentalized approach to problems of soil fertility, disease, pest infestation, etc.	Farmers must become efficient and competitive through diversifying production, using alternative technologies, and minimizing use of external inputs. Problem solving is based on a holistic approach to adoption of appropriate technology, including agroecology.
Environmental Stewardship	Protected areas, national parks, and environmental regulations are sufficient, as long as they do not harm the potential for the expansion of agricultural export crops.	Agriculture and environmental policy cannot be separated; sustainable agriculture protects biodiversity and leaves space for conservation areas.

Note: for other comparisons between the food sovereignty model and corporate/ neoliberal/ second food regime paradigms see Desmarais (forthcoming); Rosset (2003); Fairbairn (2010); Reardon and Perez (2010).

“all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”⁴ As critiqued by several authors writing from a food sovereignty perspective, this definition of food security treats food as a problem of insufficient trade rather than hunger by privileging *access* to food rather than *control over* systems of production and consumption. In this conception, food is a tradable commodity rather than a right, and hunger simply a problem of distribution (McMichael 2004; Patel 2010b).

The way that food security is framed has significant implications for how agricultural and food policy is developed and challenged. For example, Mooney and Hunt (2009) suggest several distinct collective action frames around food security that are in concurrent use, including a *hunger frame*, which, corresponding to a corporate/neoliberal food regime, focuses on food aid and technological development to increase global food production and a *community frame* associated with food sovereignty, which addresses hunger by advocating more localized control over food and agricultural policy (see also Mares and Alkon in this volume). Food sovereignty also pushes an *ethical frame* based on control over and access to food as an element of the confluence of economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental rights (Anderson 2008; Gonzalez 2010). This frame connects food as a human right (a focus of consumer and aid policy) to the right to choose how and by whom that food is produced (a focus of agricultural/national food policies and of early proponents of the food sovereignty framework like La Via Campesina). Referring to a recent report by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on creating a human rights framework for world food and nutrition security (2008), which does not explicitly mention the concept of food sovereignty, Marcia Ishii-Eitemann (2009: 698) argues that “ultimately, the HRCR concludes that the right to food can only be realised where the

conditions enabling food sovereignty are guaranteed". She further argues that the rights-based approach that is embedded in food sovereignty is "an explicitly moral enterprise that stands in contrast to the economic processes of market-driven globalization," noting that "this implies a radical shift from the existing hierarchical and increasingly corporate-controlled research system to an approach that devolves more responsibility and decision-making power to farmers, indigenous peoples, food workers, consumers and citizens for the production of social and ecological knowledge" (Dreyfus 2009: 114, cited in Ishii-Eiteman 2009: 691).

The UN-based right-to-food approach has been critiqued for focusing on the individual human right to food, rather than the structural problems of agricultural development, food production, and consumption within the world economic system. For example, Mazhar et al. suggest that

The affirmation of individual rights to food, while a useful demand in the political environments of the North, has not been incorporated wholeheartedly into the food sovereignty discourse because it does not directly address the right of communities to produce food and to retain command and control over local food systems. From a food sovereignty perspective, a focus on egocentric rights diverts attention from concrete economic and political relations such as corporate control over agricultural inputs and knowledge and economic policies that structure the global food system. It also runs the risk of reducing the issue of hunger and malnutrition to a humanitarian problem for the rich countries to solve, a prospect unacceptable to societies with long and rich agrarian histories." (2007: 65)

Similarly, in her analysis of rights-based approaches to world hunger in international negotiations on the right to food at the intergovernmental level, Jacqueline Mowbray (2007: 561) critiques the 2004 FAO *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Food in the Context of National Food Security* for focusing on the need for legal, political, and technical reforms at the level of the nation-state, while ignoring effects of the international economic system, and the need for redistributive change. In his analysis of a rights-based approach to food sovereignty, Raj Patel (2007, 2010b) argues that while rights-based challenges may not immediately produce progressive outcomes, they actively work to change social and political contexts and thus are a "means" rather than an end; thus, in the case of food sovereignty, they actually represent a call for a "right to a right." He suggests that the

mass re-politicization of food politics, through a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities, bearing in mind the community's needs, climate, geography, food preferences, social mix, and history ... is *transgressive*, insofar as it orients itself not toward the institutions that enshrine, enforce, and police rights, but toward the people who are meant to hold them. The approach operates not by pointing to extant rights and their violations but by using the language of rights to summon an active politics over a social domain that has, through progressive agricultural liberalization been technicized and rendered "anti-political." (Patel 2007: 91–92; emphasis added)

Although the "elaborate legal architecture" of international rights-based approaches to food may not yet be enforceable or effective in addressing problems of world hunger (Goulet 2009), the food sovereignty framework offers an alternative policy arena in which to discuss the rights and obligations around food production and consumption. In particular, Patel (2010a, 2010b) highlights the importance of understanding the overlapping geographies and jurisdictions in which demands for rights can be exercised at community, regional, national, and international levels, and incorporated into agrarian policy. Above all, food sovereignty proponents demand to participate in decisions and have a voice in establishing food system structures and particular, place-based conceptions of rights (Wittman 2009b, 2009c).

The roles of participation, citizenship, and democracy in a food sovereignty paradigm have been taken up by an increasing number of scholars. Desmarais (2007) provides a detailed critique of the attempts to garner the participation of some farmer organizations as the “fabrication of consent” in international fora such as the WTO, World Bank, and the Global Forum on Agricultural Research. Desmarais argues that at the international level, the spaces for farmer “consultation” can erase differences in political positions and dilute or silence opposition, thus reducing farmer demands to the “lowest common denominator.” As such, participation is charged with political and economic consequences (2007: 118–121). Earlier attempts to erase peasant voices from international agricultural and food policy contexts can be contrasted with La Via Campesina’s current presence in international policymaking fora and the case of the Citizen Space for Democratic Deliberation (or citizen’s juries) in Mali, West Africa, which was organized to allow farmers to make policy recommendations on the adoption of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) after hearing a range of expert opinions. Farmer jurors were selected to represent the diverse types of farmers in the region (with attention to farm size and gender). The jury voted in January 2006 against introducing GMOs to Mali; the deliberations were broadcast live throughout the region and subsequently delayed the introduction of genetically modified crops to Mali, spurring debates on the technology in the National Assembly (Pimbert et al. 2010).

The concept of agrarian citizenship creates explicit links between struggles for political and ecological rights and practices, bringing the rights of nature into the food sovereignty equation (Wittman 2009b, 2009c, 2010). The agrarian citizenship approach acknowledges a socioecological metabolism as a crucial law of motion in agroecological transformation, in which the advent of capitalism and relationships of unequal ecological exchange commodified nature, separated urban consumers from rural producers, disrupted traditional patterns of nutrient cycling, and contributed to both hunger and environmental degradation (Foster 1999; Marx [1939] 1973; Moore 2010). For example, agrarian citizenship acknowledges the diverse voices of human actors within the food system, but also considers how these voices and practices interact with nature’s voice (such as changing weather patterns as a result of climate change), as a “lively” actor that shapes and constrains human activity (Wittman 2009c). Political and ecological voices are actively reshaping food policy and practice, especially in light of the implications of climate change for agricultural systems. By focusing on ecologically sustainable food production and reconnecting producers and consumers via the localization of “food from somewhere,” food sovereignty as part of an “agrarian regeneration movement” is increasingly presented as having theoretical potential to rework (Wittman 2009c), repair (Schneider and McMichael 2010), or heal (Clausen 2007) the metabolic rift.

Moving Toward Food Sovereignty: Steps and Substantive Concerns

Trade Liberalization and Alternative Trade Regimes

The food sovereignty movement was born out of concerns about the effects of structural adjustment, trade liberalization, and a shift to an agricultural export orientation on local food economies, communities, and ecologies. Walden Bello and Mara Baviera (2010) summarize a large literature on the role of structural adjustment on weakening agricultural investment and support measures in developing countries, leading to supply constraints and an increase in hunger to over one billion people in 2009. WTO protocols, including the Agreement on Agriculture, prohibit price supports in the Global South while allowing developed countries to maintain key agricultural subsidies, leaving small farmers worldwide unable to “compete in markets where

the prices for farm products fell substantially through the decade following implementation of WTO rules” (McMichael 2009a: 287). This period, along with its push to implement export-oriented agricultural systems in developing countries, was accompanied by a “race to the bottom” in terms of environmental and social policies (Rosset 2006). As demonstrated by Marta Rivera-Ferre (2009) in a review of the implementation of industrial, export-oriented shrimp farming in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, large companies benefitted from external financing and bilateral aid, while mangrove forest degradation and land conflicts reduced local food security and generated social exclusion. Similar reviews evaluating the social and environmental effects of expanded soybean production in Brazil (Steward 2007), biofuels expansion (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2010; McMichael 2010; Rosset 2009a), and the expanding livestock-grain complex (Jarosz 2009) highlight structural contradictions in the current food regime that set the stage for the emergence of a food sovereignty orientation aimed at localization and diversification of agricultural production and trade. Following the collapse of the Doha Round of the WTO, food sovereignty advocates argue that a subsequent proliferation of bilateral free trade agreements “will only serve to promote unfair trading practices, lock [countries] into even greater trade liberalisation than would be expected under the WTO, and negatively impact the majority of their fellow citizens and the local environment” (Smeltzer 2009: 14; see also Choudry (2007) for a comprehensive statement of grassroots perspectives on FTAs and food sovereignty).

While often perceived as “antitrade,” the food sovereignty movement is actually engaged in deep, ongoing conversations about what kinds of trade relations will best serve the social, economic, political, and environmental principles of an alternative food paradigm. Themes and issues within this conversation include affirmative action, intellectual property rights, dumping, social, environmental and labor laws and regulations, labeling, denomination of origin, slow food, fair trade, regional networks, farmer’s markets, and community-supported agriculture, many of which do not explicitly link to a food sovereignty framework but express many of the same social and environmental goals.⁵ The vast alternative-food networks and local and regional food-supply chains literature emerging from Europe and North America covers these issues in great detail, but only rarely invokes food sovereignty. Conversely, little discussion of these issues is currently present in the extensive literature on trade and food sovereignty, most of which focuses on identifying trade as an obstacle to food sovereignty. A research challenge remains to connect these literatures and provide case-based examinations of alternatives to the dominant trade-liberalization system.

Rethinking Land and Nature: Food Production, Agrarian Reform and Indigenous Knowledge

A series of food crises since 2007 resulting in almost one billion people living in a state of hunger and even more facing malnourishment (FAO 2010) raises important questions for advocates of a food sovereignty framework: In the face of ongoing demographic shifts in food consumption practices, population increases, and the threat of climate change to agricultural productivity (Godfray et al. 2010; Jarosz 2009), what does a shift from a large-scale, export-oriented, and global trade-based system need to look like? How can a system based on small-scale, family-led farming, as food sovereignty’s proposed alternative, “feed the world”?⁶

Globally since the 1960s, total area in agriculture has risen by about eleven percent (Pretty 2008), but land concentration (including land-grabbing [Zoomers 2010]), urbanization, and environmental degradation have reduced access to productive land for small-scale farmers in developing countries. The FAO estimates that more than thirty million peasants lost access to land in the decade after the establishment of the WTO (Madeley 2000, cited in McMichael

2009b: 154), following a more extensive period of depeasantization in the second half of the twentieth century (Araghi 1995). Just under half of the world population now lives and works in rural areas, but in most industrialized countries, agricultural producers comprise less than five percent of the population. For food sovereignty proponents, improving control over access to land for an increasing diversity of farmers worldwide is an essential step to implementing food sovereignty and challenging the consolidation of productive land evidenced in the corporate food regime. To this end, a number of recent articles and monographs summarize the case for redistributive land reform, highlighting its importance and implications for food sovereignty (Akram-Lodhi 2007; Borras 2001, 2007, 2008; Patel et al. 2006; Rosset 2009b; Teubal 2009; Wittman 2009b). But Borras and Franco (2010) suggest that the case for land reform is not as straightforward as it may seem—some land policies, including their dynamics, relations, and forms of implementation, are more conducive to food sovereignty than others. The authors argue that redistribution is a matter of degree, according to the extent to which “land-based wealth and power transfers from landed classes or state or community to landless or near-landless working poor” (Borras and Franco 2010: 109–110). This can be contrasted with land reform policies that serve to reconcentrate land, in which “land based wealth and power transfers from the state, community or small family farm holders to landed classes, corporate entities, states, or community groups” (110). This latter concern is increasingly an issue in emerging analyses of the global “land grab” in which corporations and wealthy states secure land in the global south to support their own domestic food supplies (Cotula and Vermeulen 2009; Lippman 2010; Zoomers 2010).

Sustainable agricultural intensification or “producing more food from the same area of land while reducing environmental impacts” (Godfray et al. 2010: 814) is a second area of concern for feeding the world under a food sovereignty framework. In its research on sustainable and ecologically sound production methods, the food sovereignty movement has sparked an increasing interest in agroecology, as a multifunctional approach to food production that incorporates livelihood provision, conservation of biodiversity, and ecosystem function and community well-being. Based on the theory of the inverse relationship between farm size and total agricultural output (Altieri 2009, 2010; Ishii-Eiteman 2009; Rosset 2008, 2009a), proponents of the smallholder, agroecological food production model argue that harnessing social and ecological diversity can lead to higher productivity and resilience to ecological vulnerability and climate change (Kassam 2010; Reardon and Perez 2010; Rosset et al. 2011). Multifunctional agriculture has been shown to produce certain ecological services more efficiently than monocropping systems (Jordan et al. 2007). Further, an important study by Badgley et al. (2007) has shown that organic agricultural production methods—while requiring higher labour inputs—can produce enough food to meet current food needs without expanding the agricultural land base.⁷ A recent review of the literature on agroecology and the right to food (United Nations 2010) suggests that small-scale farmers can double food production within a decade in critical regions by using agroecological production methods, and research consistently indicates that agrobiodiversity based on indigenous farmer knowledge contributes to food security (e.g., Rerkasem et al. 2002, cited in Kassam 2009).

In addition to the potential of agroecological practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture and landscape contamination from agrochemicals and improve long-term soil fertility, food sovereignty has also been proposed as a new conservation paradigm involving “wildlife-friendly farming” (Isakson 2009; Mattison and Norris 2005; Zimmerer 2006). This model of agricultural production depends on the maintenance of an agricultural matrix (Perfecto et al. 2009; Vandermeer and Perfecto 2007) comprised of small, agrobiodiverse farms that preserve a variety of complementary agricultural niches (Chappell and LaValle 2011; Kassam 2010).

Advancing agroecology involves not just the promotion and maintenance of human-designed agroecosystems, but the recognition of the importance of preserving and utilizing local and indigenous seed and livestock varieties (Quaye et al. 2009; Ramdas 2009), indigenous food systems (Moncayo Marquez 2009; Morrison 2011), and uncultivated foods (Mazhar et al. 2007; Vazquez-Garcia 2008). These plants and the local knowledge necessary to cultivate them play important role in sustaining indigenous food sovereignty and are among the elements most threatened by encroachment of industrial agriculture. As indicated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, “agroecology is a knowledge-intensive approach. It requires public policies supporting agricultural research ... private companies will not invest time and money in practices that cannot be rewarded by patents” (United Nations 2011). Food sovereignty practice and analysis has thus also focused on the practice of seed sovereignty and control over agricultural knowledge, technology and genetic resources (Borowiak 2004; Ishii-Eiteman 2009; Kloppenburg 2010a, 2010b), with strong theoretical linkages to the rights-based approach to food sovereignty and intellectual property regimes.

Unity in Diversity: Gender, Class, and Ideology

Since its inception, women within La Via Campesina have pushed the movement to address asymmetrical gender relations; this led to substantial structural changes within the movement in 2000 to ensure gender parity for regional and global representation (Desmarais 2004, 2005, 2007; Wiebe 2006). In 2008, La Via Campesina launched a world campaign “For an End to Violence Against Women” (La Via Campesina 2008), rearticulating its focus on gender as an integral component of strategic mobilization around food sovereignty (Desmarais and Hernández Navarro 2009; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Food sovereignty activists frequently cite that though over half of the world’s agriculture work is performed by women (60 to 80 percent in developing countries), women own less than 2 percent of the land (FAO 2006, cited in Patel 2007). But reshaping gender relations is not just about shifting property relations, as Raj Patel (2010) points out, but rather in challenging base inequalities in power that include sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class. For example, significant class and cultural differences exist between “small-scale” farmers in different world regions; bridging these differences has posed a challenge to consolidating a way forward on achieving a food sovereignty regime. However, a continued focus on eradicating class and gender inequality, in addition to resource inequality, forms part of the food sovereignty’s frames’ particular attention to diversity and difference in the construction of an alternative food regime.

Some authors question, however, to what extent the food sovereignty paradigm offers a “coherent political economy of an alternative global agrarianism” as either a reconfiguration of capitalism or a non-capitalist alternative (Akram-Lodhi 2007). The question of differentiation of political, ideological, and class-based interests, and how these interests and positions affect both the experience of neoliberal globalization and the strategies and tactics to achieve food sovereignty, have thus continued as a topic of academic theorizing (Borras 2010; Borras et al. 2008; Wolford 2010). Many organizations associated with La Via Campesina and other alternative food movements experience internal tensions on how contradictions within the current global food system should be resolved. For example, although the food sovereignty movement as a whole expresses opposition to the use of genetically modified seeds, by 2007, 90 percent of the 13.3 million producers cultivating transgenic crops were small-scale farmers, mostly growing Bt cotton in China and India (ISAAA 2008). Debates about the relative merits of growing GM crops among smallholders reflect a complex set of issues having to do with economic survival, available markets, property rights, values, and politics (Scoones 2008). Finally, Bor-

ras (2010) notes that the shifting structures of global political economy have encouraged rural social movements to localize and internationalize at the same time, resulting in the emergence of “polycentric” rural social movements with different visions of development and demands for level of integration within and among local, regional, and international food systems.

As one former member of La Via Campesina’s International Coordinating Commission argues,

One of the principal characteristics of La Via Campesina is its social and cultural cohesion, within a comprehension of diversity. It is not a question of seeking out differences in order to synthesise or explain them. ... We have achieved a sensibility of these diverse cultures, in a common base. This common base is that we understand that the crisis of rural family agriculture is the same all over the world. The causes are the same, whether it be in Wisconsin or São Paulo. The reality is the same, and the same neoliberal, or more plainly, capitalist policies have caused this crisis (author interview with Paul Nicholson, cited in Wittman 2009a: 678).

In a similar vein, at the Nyeleni forum on food sovereignty, participants emphasized that “while it is critical to have a common framework, there is no single path or prescription for achieving food sovereignty. It is the task of individual regions, nations, and communities to determine what food sovereignty means to them based on their own unique set of circumstances” (Schia-voni 2009: 685). Thus, ongoing research into the framework of food sovereignty seeks to gain a richer and deeper understanding of that diversity as an element of niche complementarity leading to strong and resilient local food systems.

Community-Driven Research and Emerging Research Directions

A key challenge of theorizing food sovereignty lies in the problem of understanding the “diversity in unity.” Food sovereignty actions and movements are vibrant, regionally, geographically, politically, and practically diverse, making generalizations difficult about what food sovereignty is or will be in a definitional sense. For example, semantic confusion related to the “stacked meanings” of multiple demands and scenarios has been noted by several scholars studying the ways that the terminology and usage of the food sovereignty frame, particularly in contrast to a globally more prevalent food security frame, plays out in political organizing and agrarian change.⁸ In addition, the conflation of the human right to food with other goals for reforming the food system, particularly in the Global North, can confuse “means, ends and complementary goals” (Anderson 2008) related to food sovereignty as an element of, rather than framework for, overall food system reform. Thus it is important to note, as Annette Desmarais points out, that “the principles of food sovereignty are not a checklist of separate ‘things to do’ [but rather] integrative goals of a praxis that plays out differently from one organization, locale, region, country and transnational context to the next” (cited in Boyer 2010: 334).

The politics of scale pose a second theoretical conundrum to conceptualizing food sovereignty. Who ‘gets to be sovereign’ and who is responsible for conceptualizing and enforcing rights to food policy is an important emerging area of inquiry (Patel 2005). The food sovereignty movement focuses on local and regional autonomy in food system definition, but also depends on the enforcement of trade rules and supportive agricultural policy at the national level (see Scott et al. [2009] for a discussion of the challenges of institutionalizing agroecology in Cuba). These intersections of scale provide for some interesting potential contradictions, especially in areas where food sovereignty is now formally emerging in national constitutions (e.g., Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nepal) and national and municipal-level agricultural policies (e.g., Brazil, Maine).

Finally, the vast majority of research on food sovereignty has been focused on the relations of production, following the rural, agrarian, and productivist orientation of the social movements that gave rise to the concept. Many of these same movements are making or strengthening connections with urban consumers through alternative marketing relationships, including community-supported agriculture projects, farmers' markets, institutional procurement programs, and direct marketing. Yet, as mentioned above, the extant, primarily North American and UK-based literature, on the urban consumer in local food systems development and revitalization almost completely ignores the food sovereignty framework (see Mares and Alkon in this volume). In an important exception, in a case study of debates around sustainable of agriculture in British Columbia, Condon et al. (2010) advance the idea of "municipal enabled agriculture" as an opportunity to integrate issues of supply, the focus of food security, with control in municipal planning processes, as an element of food sovereignty in cities. Likewise, Moncayo (2009) examines the potential of school-based food sovereignty programs in urban Bolivia to address the "nutrition transition," where traditional diets comprised of healthy, indigenous foods have been replaced by the Western diet comprised of "junk food." The community garden movement in New York City has also been referenced as a potential driver of urban food sovereignty (Schia-voni 2009: 687), but much more research is needed in incorporating urban and consumer-driven elements into a food sovereignty framework.

In conclusion, the community-driven nature of food sovereignty conceptualization, practice, and more recently, research, has allowed the transformation of knowledge and ways of knowing in new and important ways. An excellent recent example of how peasant organizations and researchers have worked together to promote, analyze, and advance practices leading to food sovereignty is documented in Rosset et al. (2011), which documents a self-study using a "social process methodology" by La Via Campesina and the Campesino-a-Campesino Agroecology Movement in Cuba that involved identifying successful experiences and agroecological practices and disseminating lessons to other peasant organizations across the globe. Eric Holt-Giménez (2006, 2010) also documents the contemporary development of farmer-to-farmer movements as an important participatory method that acknowledges and prioritizes local and indigenous knowledge as well as local needs, culture, and conditions, rather than "replacing peasant knowledge with purchased chemical inputs, seeds and machinery, in a top-down process where education is more like domestication" (Rosset et al. 2011: 170). By documenting innovative practices and conceptualizations around the way that food, ecology, citizenship, and social organization are connected, communities of social practitioners have led a research agenda that has only recently been "noticed" by university-based communities of inquirers, but one that is sure to expand exponentially in the face of urgent demands for alternative agricultural and food policy models that can address the imminent effects of global climate change.

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NOTES

1. For comprehensive examinations of La Via Campesina as an international peasant movement and progenitor of the concept of Food Sovereignty, see Desmarais (2002, 2004, 2005, 2007), Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010), and Borras (2004).
2. There are many related conceptualizations of food sovereignty; the International Planning NGO/CSO Committee for Food Sovereignty definition is: "Food Sovereignty is the right of individuals, communities, peoples and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies." See www.foodsovereignty.org.
3. Food sovereignty proponents are increasingly focusing on peasant agriculture as a way to prevent and mitigate further climate change; related strategies and statements proliferate in recent grassroots publications; e.g., La Via Campesina's Declaration in Cancún: The people hold thousands of solutions in their hands; Statement from the People's Movement Assembly on Food Sovereignty; international food summit in Madrid: Time to Change European Agricultural Policy. See www.viacampesina.org.
4. This definition has been in use by the FAO since 2001, as the latest of several modifications of the definition developed in 1974 at the World Food Summit: "availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices."
5. For a discussion of the goals and objectives of the Slow Food movement, see Petrini (2010); for an extended discussion of the relation of a wide range of food movements with food sovereignty, see Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011).
6. It is important to note that current levels of hunger are closely linked to issues of poverty and distribution failure, rather than to a global failure to produce enough calories for human consumption (Sen 1981).
7. Organic agriculture is not a "proxy" for agroecology and food sovereignty; as important studies by Buck, Getz, and Guthman (1997), Hall and Mogorodoy (2001), and Guthman (2004) have shown, organic production systems are also susceptible to potentially negative power disparities and environmental impacts in production and marketing.
8. For an excellent discussion of this issue in agrarian social movement organization in Honduras, see Boyer (2010).

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