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### Translating the Politics of Food Sovereignty: Digging into Contradictions, Uncovering New Dimensions

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## Translating the Politics of Food Sovereignty: Digging into Contradictions, Uncovering New Dimensions

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**ABSTRACT** *Food sovereignty, as a movement and a set of ideas, is coming of age. Rooted in resistance to free trade and the globalizing force of neoliberalism, the concept has inspired collective action across the world. We examine what has changed since food sovereignty first emerged on the international scene and reflect on insight from new terrain where the movement has expanded. We argue that to advance the theory and practice of food sovereignty, new frameworks and analytical methods are needed to move beyond binaries—between urban and rural, gender equality and the family farm, trade and localism, and autonomy and engagement with the state. A research agenda in food sovereignty must not shy away from the rising contradictions in and challenges to the movement. The places of seeming contradiction may in fact be where the greatest insights are to be found. We suggest that by taking a relational perspective, scholars can begin to draw insight into the challenges and sticking points of food sovereignty by training their lens on shifts in the global food regime, on the efforts to construct sovereignty at multiple scales, and on the points of translation where food sovereignty is articulated through historical memory, identity, and everyday life.*

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, multiple sovereignties, relational scale, translation, agrarian change, food systems

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## Introduction

Food sovereignty is not a fixed principle, it's a process . . . it's happening, and it's been made to happen, through the struggles of millions of people all over the world. (Paul Nicholson, La Via Campesina)<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 2013, some 300 scholars and activists gathered at the Yale Program in Agrarian Studies to discuss the challenges and promise of food sovereignty. Paul Nicholson, farmer, Basque leader, and founding member of the international peasant movement La Via Campesina, addressed the gathering in his usual animated voice. 'Today', he told a packed room, 'you go to any kind of social forum and you will see that food sovereignty is the principle alternative presented against capitalism—there is no other. The others are resistance. This is a proposal' (see note 1).

In the last decade, food sovereignty—the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems<sup>2</sup>—was enshrined in the constitutions and/or national laws of Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Nepal, Nicaragua, Mali, and Senegal. The concept has inspired communities from the South Side of Chicago, to the Hawaiian Islands, to Occupied Palestine. Rooted in resistance to neoliberal globalization and free trade, movements for food sovereignty are globalizing as well; the idea now inspires collective action among tens of millions of people all over the world.

Food sovereignty is undoubtedly coming of age—as a movement and a set of ideas about how to democratize both access to resources and political power. But as the movement grows, challenges and contradictions emerge. Some scholars have remarked that food sovereignty has been only minimally successful in affecting policy or changing regulations (Edelman, 2014; Hospes, 2014). Others have noted contradictions in strategies for food sovereignty: between attempts by local activists to create food systems that are relatively autonomous from the whims of the global market and organized campaigns to change state policy and motivate institutional support for small farmers (Clark, 2013; Edelman, 2014; McKay, Nehring, & Walsh-Dilley, 2014); between proposals championing communal vs. individual rights (Agarwal, 2014; Claeys, 2014); and between a focus on making trade more fair and efforts to build autonomous local food systems (Bacon, 2015; Burnett & Murphy, 2014).

Scholars have also noted serious tensions between the interests of different participants in the food sovereignty project. For instance, the interests of small-scale farmers and different classes of rural landless workers cannot easily be reconciled (Bernstein, 2014; Patel, 2009), while the need of producers to receive fair prices seems at odds with the dependence of poor urban consumers on cheap food (Bernstein, 2014). The family farm and systems of patriarchy often go hand in hand (Agarwal, 2014). Furthermore, discourses on food sovereignty coming from the global South do not always resonate with urban communities in North America organizing around racial justice (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). Questions that are at once both theoretical and practical, like 'who is the sovereign in food sovereignty?' persist as well (Edelman, 2014). These debates are not merely academic—they represent serious political challenges for a growing movement.<sup>3</sup>

This collection of articles builds on conversations at two events in which these contradictions loomed large. These 'critical dialogues' on food sovereignty, organized jointly by the Yale Program in Agrarian Studies, the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Transnational Institute, and the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First) in September

of 2013 at Yale University in New Haven and in January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, were held as part of an ongoing process to advance debates on food sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the contradictions outlined above have motivated scholars to question whether food sovereignty can be more than a political slogan. Noting shifting definitions and limited regulatory uptake, researchers have struggled to find a blueprint for realizing food sovereignty that can be scaled up and applied across the board (Hospes, 2014). We argue that this search is misguided and ineffectual. We offer a different approach to understanding the challenge and potential of food sovereignty—and a research agenda for critical scholars of globalization—that engages with the shifting global politics which movements now confront; that recognizes that sovereignty itself is multivalent and always contested; that contextualizes different struggles for food sovereignty as reflections of specific histories and identities; and that takes everyday life as a starting point for analysis.

### **Shifting Terrain, Shifting Politics of Sovereignty**

Food sovereignty was born, like all ideas, as a product of its time. The concept has its roots in nationalist food politics of the 1980s (Edelman, 2014), but on the world stage, food sovereignty rose to prominence in the aftermath of structural adjustment. In the mid-1990s social movements were forced to reckon with a wave of free trade agreements. As cheap commodities flooded rural economies in the Global South, the agricultural sector consolidated dramatically.<sup>5</sup> These circumstances left an already weak state apparatus even weaker with respect to regulating flows of food and agricultural goods. The peasant farmers represented by La Via Campesina were, in many ways, the collateral damage of this era. Invoking sovereignty as a rallying cry framed hunger, agrarian reform, and rural economies as an issue of human rights and national control (McMichael, 2014; Patel, 2009). The call to sovereignty was a conscious effort to bring power back to the state from deregulated markets and free trade regimes—and as such, to bolster the rights and livelihoods of peasants.

Since ‘food sovereignty’ rose to prominence in 1996, the ground has shifted under rural social movements.<sup>6</sup> Peasant farmers are dealing with a confluence of events, including the growing involvement of financial actors in agricultural production and food provisioning (Isakson, 2014), increasing ecological pressures and uncertainty (Ribot, 2014), more rural–urban circular migration and multi-cited livelihoods (Hecht, 2014; Nguyen & Locke, 2014), and increasing concern with health, given the rise in diet-related disease and pesticide toxicity in both the Global North and South (De Schutter, 2011; Noyes et al., 2009).

First, as Phil McMichael explains in this issue, movements have had to confront not only a trade-centered assault on peasant economies, but also vast—and vastly complicated—financialization of agriculture (Clapp, 2014; Fairbairn et al., 2014; Isakson, 2014). Since 2007, three spikes in food prices have occurred, all partly fueled by commodities speculation. Corporations continue their patterns of vertical integration, while also turning to schemes such as contract farming to ‘incorporate smallholders into global value chains’: small-scale farmers may own the land, but in many cases, cede degrees of control over their economies and labor (McMichael, 2015). A new wave of investment, in farmland—the oft-cited ‘land grab’—is also bound up in the transformation of global agricultural politics and trade (McMichael, 2012).<sup>7</sup> This ‘investment-led assault’ (McMichael, 2015) is multifaceted and has shifted the terms of opposition to include defending “‘ways of life’ on the land against not only market forces . . . but also organized physical and economic enclosures’ (McMichael, 2015). Meanwhile, in both the global

North and South, food insecurity is becoming an increasingly urban concern, intensified by these new waves of dispossession.

Changes in geopolitics have also affected food sovereignty as the power dynamics between and within states are shifting. While the countries of the G8 remain major players in global food politics (see McMichael, 2015), they must now play alongside other powerful actors, from the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) to the growing ‘pink tide’ of left-leaning countries in Latin America (see Schiavoni, 2015). These shifting axes of power are reflected not only in new relationships among states, but also between states and civil society, as can be seen with the newly reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) (see McMichael, 2015; Claeys, 2014). Such developments simultaneously pose new challenges and openings and raise new questions for the role of the state vis-à-vis food sovereignty—a theme that emerges throughout this issue.

These changes in geopolitics and structural transformations in the global economy come at a time of increasingly unstable climate conditions, among other challenges. Urban and rural ways of making a living are no longer as distinct as they once were: many households are stretched between spaces, with the work of childrearing and caring for the elderly in the countryside and rural youth increasingly drawn to urban life and the economic opportunities there. Migration between city and countryside is often the only way to make ends meet. Pesticide toxicity affects more farmers and farmworkers, as well as consumers, making access to healthy food a rallying cry for urban and rural communities alike; and the global movement for agroecology is rising. Now considered a twin pillar of food sovereignty, agroecology has become the practical method for building food sovereignty at the farm scale (Altieri & Nicholls, 2012).

In short, these new realities suggest that the context—socioeconomic, political, and ecological—in which food sovereignty was originally hatched has changed more than a little. The experiences, movements, and positions encompassed under the umbrella of food sovereignty have always been diverse (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014), but the shifts that we are seeing today demand a new degree of flexibility in the way that food sovereignty is imagined, researched, and put into practice.

For researchers, this shifting political terrain is a fruitful space of engagement. While there has been a flush of recent literature on financialization and the global land grab, there have been fewer investigations on other aspects of change in the global food regime, including of the effects of increasing rural–urban circular migration, the way climate change interacts with market volatility and historical inequality, new South–South trade arrangements, and corporate consolidation in the Global South, to name a few. Deeper examination of the spaces in which these changes are negotiated could help to identify where there might be opportunities for structural transformation.

### Multiple and Competing Sovereignties

The circumstances of the current moment also challenge us in our understanding of *sovereignty* as such. There is no one international sphere capable of regulating booming commodities markets, financial investments in farmland, or contract farming schemes. These flows of capital and financial interests represent a real shift in power, an increase in the power of unregulated markets to distribute resources. Unlike in the heyday of the WTO, there is no single governing authority from which to regain (food) sovereignty (McMichael, 2015).

As Schiavoni explains in this issue, some of the apparent contradictions of food sovereignty may in fact be explained by contradictions inherent in the concept of sovereignty itself. She

notes, as do others (Claeys, 2014; Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015), that political theorists describe both internal and external dimensions of sovereignty. External sovereignty, the sovereignty of nations within their own territories, is the most oft-invoked and arguably the most accepted form of sovereignty. However, sovereignty also calls upon the internal political structure of society with the belief that the absolute authority resides within the political community, or with ‘the people’ (Hinsley, 1986, quoted in Schiavoni, 2015). Translated to food sovereignty, this duality of sovereignty could help to explain why food sovereignty might simultaneously invoke national control over a country’s food supply and productive resources, implying a more state-centric vision of sovereignty, *and* people’s control internally, in a more popular vision of sovereignty. These two dimensions of (food) sovereignty need not be mutually exclusive, although how to navigate them is a major question.

Indeed, food sovereignty activists have long worked simultaneously for political change at multiple scales: for national agrarian reform; for international recognition of peasant’s rights; for the creation of local markets; for the development of agroecological farming practices and for transnational farmer-to-farmer networks to disseminate and share them. Iles and Montenegro de Wit (2015) ask both scholars and activists to think about these scales from a relational perspective. In their analysis, the *relationships and processes* between levels of organizing hold the most important questions—for example, how local markets do or do not buffer farmers from the vagaries of financialized commodity markets; how transnational networks reflect and advance the politics of the grassroots; and how state agencies respond to and relate to movements. The notion of *relational scale* (Sayre, 2009, cited in Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015) brings into focus the channels of power through which sovereignty is exercised. ‘In this view, sovereignty becomes a malleable and “negotiable” power which particular movements, peoples, or communities can seize, create, oppose, or reshape as against the state, cities, corporations, and other sovereign actors’ (Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015). They further claim that, ‘Understood in terms of relational scale, food sovereignty becomes as much a practice of creating connectivity as of creating autonomy’ (Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015).

The relational scale approach offered by Iles and Montenegro de Wit can be helpful in research and analysis of some of the frequently cited tensions around the role of the state in food sovereignty. As many authors in this issue point out, efforts centered on the local—on building alternatives, bolstering local markets, building peasant autonomy, practicing agroecology, creating strong base organizations, and resuscitating local food cultures—are all essential and all growing. This local work is necessary, both to address immediate needs and to demonstrate tangible alternatives, but it cannot replace organized efforts to turn the power of the state toward the food sovereignty project. Few other bodies have the power to undertake reforms essential to building food sovereignty—to enact comprehensive agrarian reform, a central tenet of food sovereignty, renegotiate international trade pacts, publicly fund agroecological research and extension, or build national food reserves. Rather than regarding food sovereignty as being either ‘of the state’ or ‘of peoples/communities’, one to the exclusion of the other, understanding sovereignty as relational leaves room for different sovereign actors to coexist, with the terms of their engagement under ongoing negotiation, including which state agencies/powers are worth engaging with in any given moment.

With this view of sovereignty, it is easier to see how the food sovereignty movement challenges the foundational illusion of neoliberalism—that the state and society are separate domains. The relational view of sovereignty is akin to Gramsci’s integral state—a concept in which civil society, the market, and state institutions are not hermetically sealed spheres; they are different ways of approaching power in a given conjuncture (Anderson, 1976; Hoare &

Nowell-Smith, 1971). Sovereignty, like hegemony, is built and contested within state institutions, within market conditions, within the institutions of civil society, popular culture, and the language with which people understand their daily lives. The integral state is a schema for understanding the delicate balance of coercion and consent that cements power in any given situation. This approach to power is vastly different from politics as circumscribed to struggle for the reigns of state power or narrowly defined policy change—it locates power in multiple spaces and histories, reaching deep into everyday life, identity and history, and simultaneously focusing on institutions (educational and cultural institutions especially) and civil society. Efforts to build food sovereignty must and often do engage in all these spaces, from promoting a culture of political and ecological action, in what Wittman (2009) calls ‘agrarian citizenship’, to social movement engagement with progressive forces within government and civil society (Borras, 2007; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

This effort is not without conflict or contradictions. In her study of Venezuela, where food sovereignty is enshrined in national law and is the focus of a national effort by both state and societal actors, Schiavoni found that diverse attempts to implement food sovereignty are happening both from above, by the national government, and from below, via citizen-led social institutions known as *comunas*, with dynamic interaction between the two. While this interaction is often tension filled, as a result of competing paradigms, approaches, and interests, the tension is the key to meaningful and sustained advancement of food sovereignty over the long term. Thus, building upon the work of McMichael (2009) and Patel (2009), Schiavoni finds it helpful to conceive of food sovereignty not as a singular sovereignty, but in terms of ‘multiple’ or ‘competing sovereignties’, and looks at how these multiple sovereignties are interacting with one another across different scales, jurisdictions, and geographies. As Schiavoni puts it, in resonance with the argument of Iles and Montenegro de Wit (2015), ‘constructing food sovereignty is less about building silos (literally and figuratively) and more about building relationships—e.g., across scales, between the urban-rural divide, and among state and societal actors’. Far from abandoning the state, then, understanding multiple sovereignties requires a more interactive state–society approach (Fox, 1993).

In this issue, Priscilla Claeys offers an example of the kind of engaged research that might shed some light on the interplay between sovereignties at multiple scales. As La Via Campesina and other social movements are putting less of their energies toward challenging the WTO, they are pursuing new openings through which to further the food sovereignty agenda. While Claeys notes that social movements are focusing much of their efforts on regional and local scales, she points to their engagement in the newly reformed UN CFS and an international campaign urging the UN to recognize the rights of peasants as two important sites of struggle. The strategy of La Via Campesina and other actors in the food sovereignty movement involves drawing upon existing architecture, such as internationally recognized human rights language, while also pushing the boundaries of current understandings of ‘rights’, to include the ‘right to food sovereignty’ and the ‘rights of peasants’ (Claeys, 2014). In doing so, social movements are simultaneously calling upon the state to exert its authority toward the realization of these rights, while also recognizing and asserting ‘the multiplicity of decision-making levels’ inherent in food sovereignty (Claeys, 2014)—thereby challenging the state ‘as the only legitimate source of law making and applying’ (Falk, 1988, p. 27, cited in Claeys, 2014).

The WTO, the UN, and the CFS are certainly not the only realms in which these multiple sovereignties are negotiated or contested. We see the spaces where sovereignties begin to compete as fruitful space for both researchers and activists to engage, not a source of irreconcilable contradiction. Again, recognizing multiple and competing sovereignties reveals a research

agenda that interrogates the very heart of the contradictions of food sovereignty outlined in the introduction. Asking who is the sovereign in food sovereignty is a question of power, and the multiple levels on which power is negotiated. Applying a relational approach to sovereignty reflects the different ways that power is being contested and that governance is changing, with the development of new institutions and new spaces that enable movements to contest and transform politics at multiple scales. The Venezuelan *comunas* researched by Schiavoni are one example of new institutions arising to promote and build food sovereignty at the local level and negotiate relationships with national levels of government. There are many more experiments of this kind around the world, and much innovation in institutional form that merits serious scholarly attention.

More research is needed on the institutional, cultural, and economic changes that can make food sovereignty's promises a reality. For example, food sovereignty calls for an end to violence against women, yet a better life for a farm household does not automatically translate into a better life for women and girls (Agarwal, 2014). What further shifts are needed for this promise of food sovereignty to be realized? Similarly, further research is needed on ways to reconcile the needs of urban consumers for affordable food, and the needs of farmers to receive fair prices. This research requires close collaborations with those actively working on such change.

### **Situating Food Sovereignty—The Role of Local History, Identity, and Memory**

Given the many different scales and contexts in which food sovereignty efforts are taking place, scholars cannot simply 'beam down' an ahistorical set of theoretical principles and expect them to apply in exactly the same way in different places. A more relational approach to sovereignty moves away from an ideal, typified notion of what food sovereignty is or is not, focusing instead on how efforts to build food sovereignty change the ways in which power is structured and experienced in people's everyday lives. This allows us to see that food sovereignty does not have to—and will not—look the same everywhere. This diversity is not a product of ambiguity or confusion on 'what food sovereignty means'. Rather, these differences are the product of local history, identity, cultural memory, and political moments. Local specificities are the grounds on which strategy is negotiated, including whether, how, and in what way to engage the state.

Social movements rarely get to choose the terrain of struggle, but local identities and historical memories in this terrain can be a rich source of power. Take a central contradiction of food sovereignty—its rural origins in an urbanizing world (Bernstein, 2014). But if social relations, and not food as such, are the center of analysis (and activism), then food sovereignty principles may translate more clearly (Figueroa, 2015). How might food sovereignty principles translate in a Black community in Chicago's South Side? Meleiza Figueroa (2015) looks to histories of resistance, partly proletarianized spaces, and identity as resources with which to build the new from the skeleton of the old. In her case study of the Healthy Food Hub in Chicago, Black activists used collective buying, itself a practice brought from Jim Crow Mississippi, to carve out autonomous economic spaces, improve access to healthy food, and revive cultural memory. Whether or not the collective members in her case use the language of food sovereignty, Figueroa says, is beside the point. Figueroa asks an inverted version of Bernstein's critique of food sovereignty's relevance to an urban world (Bernstein, 2014)—not how will the opposing economic interests of the city and the countryside be resolved, 'But what does it mean to preserve "traditional" ways of life, or "peasant spaces," in a situation where people are far removed from any kind of referents for what these mean in practice?' Figueroa continues,

addressing the particularities behind the long-standing question about the food sovereignty movement in urban areas, ‘in a global metropolis, the diversity of experiences that exist within even a limited local context can imply very different meanings of food sovereignty for various communities’. The ‘people centered approach’ to food sovereignty she describes focuses first and foremost on lived experience, on the particularities and dynamism at different scales and historical contexts.

Figuroa’s attention to *translation* is a key methodological challenge. Political concepts, like food sovereignty, do not just travel, they are *translated* (Ives, 2004, Kipfer & Hart, 2012). Translation is not a one-way street. As scholar Peter Ives reminds us (drawing on Gramsci), ‘translation requires a change in both the original language and the one into which it is being translated’ (Ives, 2004, p. 163). If the language we use to understand our world is a crucial building block of hegemony, then a key task for both scholars and activists is to translate—the deeply political practice of elaborating and transforming meaning in different contexts (Kipfer & Hart, 2012). Seen as a concept always in the process of translation, food sovereignty can take various forms. In fact, it must. Our responsibility as scholars is to examine the different particularities and permutations that food sovereignty may take.

This special issue examines the politics of food sovereignty as the idea extends its reach into new geographies and examines cases in which social movements navigate constraints and challenges on multiple scales. For example, Visser, Mamanova, and Spoor (2015) explore what food sovereignty looks like in a more authoritarian political context. The authors look at Russia’s resilient peasant sector, and see a sort of ‘quiet food sovereignty’. Given the current state of Russian politics, formal social movements are not strong, and in many ways, not politically possible or likely to be effective. Despite being overlooked by both the Russian state and transnational social movements, Visser and colleagues find that hidden and ad hoc strategies are preserving peasant autonomy in the Russian countryside. Drawing on the concept of ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith & Jehlička, 2013), they ask scholars and activists alike not to write off peasantries that do not see themselves as part of a social movement. They argue instead that the principles of food sovereignty are widely adaptable to a variety of political contexts, including those where direct action, formal organizing, and other common tactics of the food sovereignty movement may not be politically productive.

In other spaces, explicit efforts to carve out local autonomy have become a basis for engaging and resisting a wider suite of colonial violence. Kamal, Linklater, Thompson, and Dipple (2015) found that indigenous food sovereignty in Northern Manitoba is a practical strategy for rebuilding the economic autonomy and food security lost when tribes were dispossessed of their ancestral lands for hydropower development. The O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN) has a staggering rate of food insecurity—100%. This is higher than any other community in Northern Manitoba, despite OPCN having rich and diverse traditional diets. The community initiated a ‘food from the land’ program (Ithinto Mechisowin), revitalizing cultural tradition as a basis for rebuilding sovereignty over food resources. The simple act of collecting wild foods and redistributing them in the community has become not only a helpful remedy to hunger, but also a focal point for cultural resurgence and resistance in what Kamal and colleagues see as a key step toward economic and cultural decolonization.

As Clare Gupta (2014) explains, the broad definition of food sovereignty means that it can be used as a basis for building coalitions between diverse actors. In her work with native Hawaiian food sovereignty activists on the island of Molokai, she found that food sovereignty is understood through the local concept of ‘aloha āina’. Literally translated as ‘love of the land’, aloha āina also refers the political movement beginning in the 1970s to tackle native Hawaiian

dispossession and build self-determination. Activists, both native and white, are organizing against biotechnology companies that produce genetically modified seeds on the island. This activism, for Gupta, is an interesting place to explore the tensions between indigenous political work to preserve cultural memory and autonomy, and engagement with the state over regulatory changes. She concludes

Aloha 'āina embodies several layers of kuleana, or responsibility . . . These layers of responsibility associated with aloha 'āina do not hold in opposition a sense of personal responsibility rooted in project-based work with state-oriented engagement and activism . . . On the contrary, aloha 'āina is about putting one's hands in the soil as well as taking the political action necessary so that Hawaiians can access that soil in the first place.

While these experiences are diverse, they all highlight the ways in which the relations of production, consumption, and cultural politics can change as a result of food sovereignty organizing. Another excellent illustration of the unexpected and diverse ways that food sovereignty is being translated on the ground is provided in this issue by Antonio Roman-Alcalá (2015). Roman-Alcalá describes an activist group in California, Occupy the Farm, who directly borrowed the language of food sovereignty and the tactic of land occupation from global peasant social movements. He uses this case to examine how the politics of food sovereignty articulate with complex histories in an urban community in the global North and examines how 'land sovereignty' specifically translates into a context vastly different from the context in which it was born.

These points of translation and articulation—between broader global understandings of food sovereignty and local, context-specific iterations—are also potentially fruitful places for collaboration between researchers and activists. How can food sovereignty be adapted to local needs without shying away from the race and class conflicts, local political limitations, and everyday desires of people on the ground? What lessons can be learned from these different translations of the food sovereignty project?

## Conclusions

Food sovereignty makes sense for people in both rural and urban areas, and poor and wealthy countries. It is as much a **space of resistance** to neoliberalism, free market capitalism, destructive trade and investment, **as a space to build** democratic food and economic systems, and just and sustainable futures. (Nyeleni Newsletter, 13 March 2013<sup>8</sup>)

As we can see from the many examples above, food sovereignty is indeed 'happening'—or a diversity of attempts toward it are—and this multiplicity of efforts is occurring at a rate that is outstripping current academic debates. Movements on the ground are navigating multiple and competing sovereignties, and developing highly context-specific iterations of food sovereignty that vary dramatically from one space to the next. To advance the theory and practice of food sovereignty, then, we need new frameworks and new analytical methods to move beyond binaries—between urban and rural, trade and localism, and autonomy and engagement with the state. Food sovereignty, and thus these debates, exist within the movements that give them life; the concept needs to be treated as the living breathing process that it is.

The oft-cited declarations of La Via Campesina and others serve as important goalposts of this growing movement, but one cannot point to a declaration and say that it encompasses all the multiplicity of efforts across geographies equally well. The movement has simply become much more extended in reach and much more multifaceted than it was two

decades ago. Scholars of agrarian politics thus require analytical frameworks that allow for an examination and engagement of the multi-scalar, multi-dimensional landscapes of power connected to food sovereignty. This special issue showcases some of these emerging frameworks. In particular, the relational approach to food sovereignty embedded throughout this special issue keeps the focus where it should be: on *power*, not simply on food (Figueroa, 2015). As food sovereignty spreads its reach, the movement offers both a practical path toward ending hunger and a proposal for a new kind of relationship between the state and society.

As researchers, these shifting political, ecological, and socio-cultural landscapes force us to seek out new methods and frames to capture, understand, and, perhaps, advance these new relationships. This volume highlights examples of research that does just this, by both zooming in and zooming out from the cutting edge of theoretical debates on food sovereignty to the front lines of current struggles and innovations on the ground. Of course, the research presented here leaves just as many, if not more, questions than we originally started with. For one, how can we continue to push the bounds of what food sovereignty research looks like, particularly engaged forms of research that challenge typical power dynamics and ways of knowledge generation, or what Brem-Wilson (2014) describes as ‘active engagement’? Similarly, how can we forge new ways of research that are most effectively informed and guided by the realities on the ground, and the people behind them? And how can researchers balance transparency and accountability to communities and social movements with the need for objectivity and rigor? If this issue leaves readers with further burning questions, then this reflects the reality that food sovereignty remains an unfinished business; as long as that is the case, we will be pushed into new bounds in our pursuit to understand it. A research agenda in food sovereignty must not shy away from the rising contradictions in and challenges to the movement, nor should it obsess over consistency in movement rhetoric or the even application of policy. These places of seeming contradiction may be where the greatest insights are to be found. We suggest in this issue that by taking a relational perspective, scholars can begin to provide insight into these contradictions by training their lens on shifts in the global food regime, on the efforts to construct sovereignty at multiple scales and the places where those efforts come into conflict, and the points of translation where the food sovereignty is articulated through historical memory, identity, and everyday life.

As Raj Patel notes (2009), food sovereignty consistently means a ‘right to act’. This ‘right to act’ can and must contest spaces of sovereignty across scales and other boundaries. In a time where global financial flows, land grabs, climate change, and urbanization have left millions with little access to food, livelihoods, or political recourse, food sovereignty requires *both* efforts to re-direct state powers and to carve autonomy from them, *both* a tactical engagement with markets and spaces of autonomy from market logics. In the widening cracks left by decades of neoliberal crisis, food sovereignty is building spaces where a new popular economy can take hold.

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### Notes

- 1 This quote by Nicholson is from a talk given at *Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue*, held 14–15 September 2013 at Yale University (for further details, see <http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/>).
- 2 Food sovereignty was popularized by the international peasants’ movement La Via Campesina in 1996. For a more extensive definition and framing of food sovereignty, see the Declaration and the Synthesis Report of the Nyéléni (2007) Forum for Food Sovereignty, from which the above definition of food sovereignty has been excerpted ([www.nyeleni.org](http://www.nyeleni.org)). While a profusion of definitions and frameworks for food sovereignty exists, the authors recognize these documents from the Nyéléni Forum as being the outcome of an important process of articulation and consensus-building among major social movements involved food sovereignty globally. For further background on food sovereignty and the context from which it was born, see Edelman (2014), Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010), Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe (2010), and Patel (2009).
- 3 These important and persistent tensions and debates in agrarian studies are addressed in greater detail by our colleagues in the introductions to two other special issues on food sovereignty, *Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty* (Volume 41, Issue 6 of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*), and a forthcoming special issue of *Third World Quarterly*.
- 4 Along with this issue, two other special issues showcase highlights of the more than 90 papers discussed at these two meetings: a special issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (41:6) released in 2014, and a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* (36:3) released in 2015.
- 5 Eight companies now account for over half of global sales of agricultural inputs (Fuglie et al., 2011).
- 6 For an excellent discussion of current issues in studies of agrarian change, see Fairbairn et al. (2014).
- 7 Investment funds and asset managers are increasingly interested in global agricultural markets and arable land. Though initially largely characterized as Northern sovereign states ‘grabbing’ land from Southern nations, evidence suggests that these large-scale land acquisitions frequently also run South–South, often involving webs of local elites, domestic and transnational corporations, state agencies, and sovereign wealth funds (Margulis, McKeon and Borrás, 2013; McMichael, 2015).
- 8 Available at: [http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni\\_Newsletter\\_Num\\_13\\_EN.pdf](http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni_Newsletter_Num_13_EN.pdf)

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