Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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How to Build Food Sovereignty

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Abstract

Around the world, rural social movements and urban food activist-citizens have proposed that food sovereignty has the potential to be the foundation of an alternative food system that can transcend the deep-seated social, economic and ecological contradictions of the global food economy. However, food sovereignty advocates rarely discuss the kinds of concrete changes to global and local food systems that would be necessary in the messy reality of the present if food sovereignty is to be built. As an entry point into this important discussion, and drawing in part on the author's recent book, *Hungry for Change: Farmers, Food Justice and the Agrarian Question*, this work-in-progress will present a series of ideas that, it will be suggested, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the realization of food sovereignty.

I. The rise of food sovereignty

Since it was first elaborated at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, 'food sovereignty' has come to occupy a central place in the discourse of food activists around the world. For an idea that emerged from a series of discussions around tables amongst smallholder farmer militants that were members of Via Campesina, the global peasant movement, as of August 2013 googling the term generated over 710000 hits, a search on Google Scholar generated over 8000 hits, and multilateral rural development agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development regularly employ the term in their documents and discussions, particularly at the country level. Bolivia, Ecuador, Mali, Nepal, Senegal and Venezuela have embedded food sovereignty within their respective constitutions, and a voluminous and diverse set of food-based civil society organizations across all the continents have enshrined the attainment of food sovereignty as a guiding principle. Around the world, food sovereignty has become part of the basic discourse of social justice advocates and organizations, including many that are not organized around food issues.

The rise of food sovereignty reflects a series of basic failures in the corporate global food regime that has come to emerge in the last quarter century (McMichael 2013). Dominated by global agro-food transnational corporations, driven by financial market imperatives of short-run profitability, and characterized by the relentless food commodification processes that underpin 'supermarketization', the corporate food regime forges global animal protein commodity chains while at the same time spreading transgenic organisms, which together broaden and deepen what Tony Weis (2007) calls 'the temperate industrial grain-livestock' agro-food complex. At the point of agricultural production, the dominant producer model of the corporate food regime is the fossil-fuel driven, large-scale, capital-intensive industrial agriculture megafarm, which is in

turn predicated upon deepening the simple reproduction squeeze facing petty commodity producers around the world and increasing the ranks of the relative surplus population (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010). A core market for the agro-food transnational corporations of the corporate food regime are relatively affluent global consumers in the North and South, whose food preferences in the last quarter century have been shifted towards 'healthier', 'organic' and 'green' products that have large profit margins. At the same time, though, for the global middle class the corporate food regime sustains the mass production of very durable highly processed food manufactures that are heavily reliant on soya, sodium and high fructose corn syrup and whose lower profit margins mean that significantly higher volumes of product must be shifted (Akram-Lodhi 2012). Thus, the corporate food regime simultaneously fosters the ongoing diffusion of industrial agriculture – Fordist food such as MacDonalds – as well as standardized differentiation – post Fordist food such as sushi. The corporate food regime is sustained by capitalist states, the international financial and development organizations that govern the global economy, and big philanthropy. Notably missing from the profit-driven logic of the corporate food regime, however, are those that lack the money needed to access commodified food in markets and who are thus bypassed by the corporate food regime – the relative surplus population that is denied entitlements to food as a result of the normal and routine working of the global food system and who are thus subject to food-based social exclusion (Akram-Lodhi 2007). At the same time, the corporate food regime is predicated upon a model of production, distribution and consumption that significantly exacerbates climate change and degrades the ecological foundations of the production upon which it depends (Akram-Lodhi 2013a).

Although it was first developed to challenge the neoliberal globalization being promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the influence of food sovereignty has grown in large part because it offers a different way of thinking about how the world food system could be organized; it offers an alternative to the corporate food regime and its manifest failings. As developed initially by Via Campesina and further elaborated at the 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty (International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty 2013), food sovereignty is based on the right of peoples and countries to define their own agricultural and food policy and has 6 interlinked and inseparable components:[1]

1. a focus on food for people: food sovereignty puts the right to sufficient, healthy and culturally-appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities at the center of food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries policies and rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity;

2. the valuing of food providers: food sovereignty values and supports the

1 These 6 principles have been paraphrased.

contributions, and respects the rights, of women and men who grow, harvest and process food and rejects those policies, actions and programmes that undervalue them and threaten their livelihoods;

3. localizes food systems: food sovereignty puts food providers and food consumers at the center of decision-making on food issues; protects food providers from the dumping of food in local markets; protects consumers from poor quality and unhealthy food, including food tainted with transgenic organisms; and rejects governance structures that depend on inequitable international trade and give power to corporations;

4. puts control locally: food sovereignty places control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations on local food providers and respects their rights to use and share them in socially and environmentally sustainable ways; it promotes positive interaction between food providers in different territories and from different sectors that helps resolve conflicts; and rejects the privatization of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes;

5. builds knowledge and skills: food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organizations that conserve, develop and manage localized food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this, and rejects technologies that undermine these;

6. works with nature: food sovereignty uses the contributions of nature in diverse, low external input agroecological production and harvesting methods that maximize the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience, and rejects methods that harm ecosystem functions, that depend on energy-intensive monocultures and livestock factories and other industrialised production methods.

Food sovereignty is thus a concept that is an clear alternative to the concept of food security, because food security says nothing about the terms and conditions by which food is produced, and it is, to them, vital to know what food is produced, who grows food, where and how that food is produced, the scale of food production, as well as the environmental and health impacts of food production (Patel 2009). Food security says nothing about the inequitable structures and policies that have destroyed livelihoods and the environment, and thus produced food insecurity. By way of contrast, food sovereignty offers an idea which is an alternative to the greater vertical integration of agriculture and its domination by global agro-food transnational corporations, which is seen by many advocates to exploit peasants and workers and undemocratically concentrate economic and political power. Rather, advocates of food sovereignty argue that the food system needs to be predicated upon a decentralized agriculture,

where production, processing, distribution and consumption are controlled by people and their communities. In this way, food sovereignty offers a vision of an alternative food system, and this vision has, in less than 20 years, grown into a global movement.

The global food sovereignty movement currently takes on a variety of guises (Holt-Giménez 2010). Some are explicitly transformational, in the sense that they challenge the market structures of contemporary capitalism: Via Campesina, the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, and many food justice and food rights-based movements. Some are transitional, in the sense that they work within but are critical of the market structures of contemporary capitalism: some fair trade chapters, some community food security movement chapters, some community shared agriculture chapters, many slow food chapters, and many food policy councils. Finally, of course, there are those in the food movement that promote more reformist visions of food and 'development': some staff at international development institutions like the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, UN Women and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development; some fair trade chapters; some slow food chapters; some food policy councils; and most food banks and food aid programs.

II. The contradictions of food sovereignty

On the face of it, food sovereignty offers an appealing alternative, and this helps explain its global resonance. However, as a concept, its depiction of an alternative is not a depiction grounded in the messy compromises of the here and now but rather in a fully-fleshed-out depiction of another world, which, the global food sovereignty movement argues, is possible to build, and now. In other words, it offers an outcome to strive for, an endpoint; but, I suggest, the concept of food sovereignty as used by the food sovereignty movement offers only a partial account of how this outcome or endpoint is to be accomplished, and this partial account, I will suggest later, helps explains the fractional character of the movement (Holt-Giménez 2010).

Consider, for example, the implication of the use of the word 'sovereignty' in food sovereignty. The conventional definition of sovereignty is having supreme authority within a territory, but a more contemporary definition of sovereignty would be to have independent and exclusive de facto practical authority over a space (Philpott 2010). For example, in capitalist democracies electoral sovereignty is conferred over a geographical space, which is expressed through representatives, and which gives states the right to exercise authority over coercion and policy, but which does not confer upon citizens the popular participation necessary to have independent and exclusive de facto practical authority (Miliband 1982). Thus, in capitalist democracies there is a lack of popular sovereignty.

Using the contemporary definition of sovereignty in the context of food, it can be suggested that the global food sovereignty movement in practice asserts that the 6 components of food sovereignty are necessary in order to have independent and exclusive de facto practical authority over food. However, place this assertion in the context of our times: is it possible for food providers and food consumers to achieve independent and exclusive de facto practical authority over food given the prevailing social and economic conditions within which the call for food sovereignty is situated? The prevailing set of social-property relations within which food providers and food consumers are embedded are capitalist – the means of production are under the control of a socially-dominant class, labour is 'free' from significant shares of the means of production and free to sell its capacity to work, and the purpose of commodity production is the seeking of profit. The localized smallholder farming model that is so central to food sovereignty's alternative food system cannot be abstracted from capitalist social relations, which are defined by relations of exploitation between capital and classes of labour (Bernstein 2010). Thus, food sovereignty cannot be isolated from the prevailing social and economic conditions within which the call for food sovereignty is situated, which means that food sovereignty cannot be just about trying to reconfigure the existing social conditions and relations of capitalism: it requires transcending the social conditions and relations of capitalism and developing a post-capitalist agrarian – and non-agrarian – alternative. That this is the case is only recognized by one fraction of the global food sovereignty movement, the fraction that is explicitly transformational.

Food sovereignty requires transcending the social-property relations of capitalism because of two contradictions that by definition preclude it from being accomplished under capitalist social-property relations. The first contradiction is that food sovereignty requires the local control of resources by peoples and communities but does not explicitly challenge the structural control of the resources – of land, water and others – that are necessary to achieve food sovereignty (Desmarais 2013). Resources may indeed be controlled by communities, but it is far, far more common to find that resources are controlled by dominant classes and the state. The food sovereignty movement does indeed challenge dominant class control of resources when it is non-local; but in many places and spaces in the North and the South it is local dominant classes and local states that control resources, and who have a vision that is fundamentally opposed to food sovereignty because it is not consistent with the power and privilege of their class interests. Moreover, it is not clear if the global food sovereignty movement is opposed to global political and economic elites, international institutions and transnational corporations that do not directly and explicitly impinge upon the local control of resources, but whose political and economic power nonetheless strongly shapes the choices available to local food providers and food consumers who might nonetheless be in control of their own resources. In

other words, food sovereignty is less than clear as to the extent to which it is predicated upon challenging the control of resources by dominant classes and state irregardless of whether the dominant classes and states are local or non-local.

The second contradiction of food sovereignty is that it says nothing about the political conditions that are necessary to exercise the autonomy necessary to build food sovereignty. The struggle for food sovereignty requires that people are able to use their individual and collective rights. However, this assumes that people are able to claim their individual and collective rights (Patel 2007). In the global North and the global South there are powerful class and state interests that seek to prevent people from claiming their rights, and in many settings these class and state interests are fully prepared to abuse individual and collective human rights in order to reduce public engagement and political interventions by the marginalized. Thus, the achievement of food sovereignty may require a different kind of democracy – one that does not acquiesce to the power of vested class interests but which rather facilitates the capacity of women and men to exercise the autonomy necessary to fully claim their individual and collective rights. Food sovereignty requires the popular sovereignty necessary to ensure that citizens have independent and exclusive de facto practical authority over a space that is significantly broader than that of food.

The control of resources by dominant classes and states and impediments to the use of individual and collective human rights means that food sovereignty is not just an outcome or an endpoint; as an alternative future, it is an objective which must be sought, by popular mobilization and struggle. In this light, it is worth asking: what is the path of struggle mapped out by the global food sovereignty movement? There are basically two avenues deployed by organized food sovereignty movements in their struggles to move forward towards food sovereignty:

> 1. mobilizing and demonstrating in opposition to the policies and institutions that are hostile to the interests of peasants, farmers and workers, in order to prevent or change those policies and institutions. To this end transformational food sovereignty organizations such Via Campesina, the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty and the Foodfirst International Action Network wage specific ongoing campaigns against land grabbing, transgenic organisms, biofuels, the violation of the human rights of peasants, international food trade and aid governance, and the poor living standards of rural workers, and in support of agrarian reform, gender justice, improved terms and conditions of rural employment, action to mitigate climate change, indigenous rights, indigenous knowledge, improved rural nutrition, seed sharing and conservation, fisherfolk rights, and the United Nations Human Rights Commission draft

declaration on the human rights of peasants.

2. negotiating and collaborating with state institutions and international development organizations when it is believed that possible policy changes might be positively influenced through such collaboration. It was through this kind of process, for example, that food sovereignty was noted in the Final Declaration of the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2006 (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006), following which the phrase starting turning up in numerous FAO documents. The clear overlap in the interests and objectives of the global food sovereignty movement and the Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has also resulted in the phrase becoming more common in UN documents, particularly around indigenous rights (de Schutter 2012).

However, in these engagements, only a partial account has emerged in terms of the concrete contemporary policy changes to which the global food sovereignty movement would aspire as an outcome of the negotiation and collaboration that it undertakes. In other words, notwithstanding rhetorical flourishes in international development organizations (and some state institutions, such as Québéc) and some minor policy concessions, this second avenue of food sovereignty has realized little by way of results. As a consequence, while it is possible to identify what the global food sovereignty movement favours, beyond the totem issue of redistributive agrarian reform and food system localization there is only limited guidance offered by it as to what kind of specific changes would bring about the preconditions of an outcome that it would favour. It might be argued that the inability to clearly define a wider range of specific changes that it favours to move forward towards food sovereignty in fact indicates another, third, contradiction of food sovereignty: an inability to identify the possible pathways by which societies can move from the corporate food regime to food sovereignty, transforming the disaster that is the corporate food regime into a more equitable and just future.

III. Pathways to food sovereignty

I have argued for many years that another food system is possible to build. Indeed, I would argue that given the pace of climate change and the role of the corporate food regime in accelerating climate change the construction of an alternative food system is an urgent necessity. Moreover, given the changes that have been wrought by neoliberal globalization in the past quarter century, I would argue that quite significant changes to the food system can be built within a comparatively short period of time: say, a generation. The question, as ever, though, is not the what; it is the how – how can food sovereignty be built?

i. Agrarian reform

The starting point in constructing a pathway to food sovereignty must be the explicit policy change that is espoused by the global food sovereignty movement: pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform. A 'stylized fact' of the reality of development is that at a global level the distribution of land and other rural resources is either the result of the thievery that was imperialism or the glaring inequalities produced by market imperatives as capitalism was introduced into the countryside of developing capitalist countries by imperialist powers (Akram-Lodhi, Borras and Kay 2007). Granted, this stylized fact does not hold in all places and all spaces; but as a general statement it holds true even in 2013. Pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform is defined as a redistribution of land and other rural resources from the resource-rich to the resource-poor such that the resource-poor are net beneficiaries of the reform and the resource-rich are net losers from the reform (Borras 2005). Pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform can involve a plurality of social-property relations, including private and collective forms of property. Pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform directly addresses the historical injustices by which female and male farmers have lost their access to land over the course of the last 150 years (Borras 2003), fundamentally tempers some of the glaring inequalities generated by market imperatives under capitalism (Wood 2008), meets a basic precondition of the way by which rurally-marginalized women and men can begin to improve their livelihood and thus address global poverty (World Bank 2007), and creates the preconditions by which individual and collective human rights can be realized and social and economic conditions transformed in a pro-poor direction (James 2007). Indeed, it is for these very reasons that the global food sovereignty movement consistently proposes that pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform is a urgent necessity for smallholder female and male petty commodity producers around the world.

Moreover, a glaring aspect of the development process is that the foundation of structural transformation in East Asia was pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform that brought forth the incentives to maximize agricultural production amongst the very poorest strata of society, who did so in order to create the preconditions of a better life for their families and their communities (Studwell 2013). However, it is very important to stress that, as in East Asia, pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform is about far more than land reform. Land reform, in the absence of a raft of additional measures that facilitate the capacity of female and male petty commodity producers to increase their production, productivity and incomes, and thus improve their livelihoods, will not on its own by and large be beneficial to female and male petty commodity producers, who need access to inputs at prices that they can afford, access to farm machinery, electricity and water at prices they can afford, credit at the right time and at the right price, and access to markets that pay prices that reflect their costs of production and not the prices that are set in global markets and which are divorced from the on-the-ground reality

of female and male farmers producing wheat, rice, maize and a host of other staple foods. Thus, pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform requires extra supportive measures that are needed for female and male farmers to succeed (Borras 2007).

ii. Restricting land markets

While the global food sovereignty movement is correct is consistently advocating the need for pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform, it fails to buttress this advocacy with a second necessary condition that is required for food sovereignty to be built. Pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform does not guarantee that the livelihoods of rurally marginalized women and men will improve. It does not provide this guarantee because following a reform female and male rural populations will continue to confront the reality of the market imperative, which necessitates that in the commodity economy of capitalism female and male food providers must sell their products at competitive market prices if they are going to remain in business (Wood 2008). This in turn means that female and male producers must continue to strive to be market-competitive, which requires continually striving to lower costs of production, which in turn requires that revenues from sales be directed towards investing in techniques and technologies that continually enhance market competitiveness. Not all producers will be able to meet the logic of the market imperative; indeed, this is a structural characteristic of capitalism. Those women and men that are capable of meeting the market imperative will accumulate, while those that fail to meet the logic of the market imperative will turn, initially, to distress sales to meet short-term cash needs and then, later, asset sales to meet short-term cash needs. Eventually, the market imperative differentiates female and male producers into those that accumulate, innovate and expand and those that lose their assets and eventually have to rely upon selling their labour-power for a wage in order to survive in the capitalist economy.

This has a critical implication for the outcome of pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform: such reform provides a foundation by which those women and men that successfully meet the market imperative can acquire more land and other rural resources by using their accumulated surpluses to buy up the land and other rural resources of their neighbours who are consistently in deficit (Akram-Lodhi 2013a). In other words, pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform establishes the conditions by which land and other rural resources are later redistributed from the less successful to the more successful, and in so doing the pro-poor, and in all likelihood the gender-responsive, aspirations of the agrarian reform are negated. This means, in turn, that a successful pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform requires restricting the market imperative – most importantly, restricting land markets. This is a necessary condition of a successful pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform that the global food sovereignty movement

does not voice.

Three key points need to be made about restricting land markets. The first is that the restriction of land markets is common in capitalist economies. Cadastral surveys define how land can and cannot be used, and there are limitations on the ease by which land defined for one purpose can be used for another. So although restrictions on land markets may appear to be a radical departure from the tenets of neoliberal capitalism, such is not actually the case. The second point is that restrictions on land markets will require the intervention of a power capable of countervailing the power of rural landed classes, and for better or worse that power must be the state – a point to which I will return later. Third, restrictions on land markets beg the question: what would be the incentive for those farmers that successfully meet the market imperative and are capable of sustained accumulation, innovation and expansion? Here, state fiscal incentives need to be created that push relatively more successful, possibly proto-capitalist, female and male farmers to diversify into non-farm activities in order to continue to accumulate. As was the case in parts of East Asia, when relatively more successful female and male farmers are forced to diversify so as to sustain accumulation, diversification usually involves in the first instance the processing of agricultural output, which is more profitable than farming (Studwell 2013). As successful female and male farmers diversify, their need over time for their land diminishes, and while many successful rural manufacturing enterprises continue to hold onto land for reasons of social security and social standing, the amount of land they hold on to is reduced as they continue to grow and expand. This creates additional land availability for those that are not so successful, so that they can more fully utilize their available labour and non-labour resources to increase production and productivity in an effort to improve their livelihoods. In this way, restricting land markets while providing the supportive measures necessary for smallholder farming to succeed can result in the emergence of a livelihood-enhancing productive farm and non-farm economy sitting side-by-side in the countryside, a prosperous rural economy that facilitates a rapid reduction in rural poverty amongst women and men. While not underestimating the challenges facing the development of this kind of policy framework, these challenges are non insurmountable, as this process has been witnessed in some cases of successful late industrialization in East Asia (Kay 2002, Studwell 2013).

iii. Agricultural surpluses

Restricting land markets can, in a sense, partially de-commodify land and in so doing force successful female and male farmers into following other paths of accumulation. However, the key objective of land market restrictions is to facilitate increased agricultural surpluses amongst the more marginalized women and men of the countryside rather than the relatively more prosperous. As is well known, farming has the capacity to produce more than those women and men working in farming need, to live and keep working, and such 'agricultural surpluses' are the

foundation of improvements in well-being in both town and country (Ghatak and Ingersent 1984). A key objective of the global food sovereignty movement, then, must be the creation of a rural development framework that facilitates sustained increases in agricultural surpluses. Historically, of course, during the latter half of the 20th century the development frameworks that sought to sustain increases in agricultural surpluses were the technological traps of the Green and gene revolutions (Buckland 2004). These must be forsaken in the quest for sustained increases in agricultural surpluses, in favour of sustainable pro-poor gender-responsive biotechnological change.

Sustainable pro-poor gender-responsive biotechnological change is predicated upon maintaining rural resources rather than degrading rural resources (Carillo 2004). It requires that the indigenous knowledge of women and men be shared, particularly through farmer-to-farmer networks, as has been done across Central America (Holt-Giménez 2006), East Africa (Wilson 2011) and Brazil (Petersen Mussoi and Dal Soglio 2013); that contemporary knowledge be carefully considered and used if and where appropriate; and that local and appropriate water, seed, fertilizer, pest management and farm equipment technologies have to be harnessed in order to boost production, productivity, agricultural surpluses, incomes and well-being (Pretty 2002). A necessary correlate of sustainable pro-poor gender-responsive biotechnological change in agriculture is the reassertion of agricultural research and extension as a public, not private, good, an end to the privatization of agricultural research and extension, and the reestablishment of publicly funded and disseminated agricultural research and extension that is not directed towards the rurally prosperous, as was the case in the past, but is instead directed specifically towards meeting the livelihood challenges of rurally-marginalized females and males (Wolf and Zilberman 1999).

iv. Agroecological farming

A critical part of meeting the livelihood challenges of rurally-marginalized women and men is to facilitate the deepening and widening of agroecological farming practices, as is recognized by the global food sovereignty movement (Altieri 2009). This requires, as is now widely understood, optimizing the sustainable use of low-impact local resources and minimizing the use of high-impact external farm technologies (Altieri 1995). A correlate of such an agrarian strategy is that farm input and output choices need to be based, as they were for all but the last century or so, on local ecologies and ecosystems and not on the needs of distant external markets (Akram-Lodhi 2013a, Davis 2000).

The benefits of an agroecological rural development strategy are several. First, agroecological practices are far more labour- and employment-intensive than industrial agricultural practices, and as such meet a key challenge of the 21st century: creating jobs (McKay 2012). These may

not be the kinds of jobs that many people would prefer to take, but for the woefully underemployed women and men that constitute the relative surplus population such jobs are a vital part of the process by which their livelihoods are improved. As the East Asian case demonstrates, labour-intensive agriculture squeezes production and productivity out of rural populations as structural transformation occurs, and this would be an important part of an agrarian transition propelled by food sovereignty (Kay 2002, Studwell 2013). Moreover, even in the developed capitalist countries there are many women and men who, if farming provided a decent livelihood, would opt to attempt to farm out of choice. Second, agroecological practices sustain soils and micronutrients and in so doing not only maintain the integrity of the soil but sustain its productive potential. This is of critical importance, because built into an agroecological rural development strategy must be the ongoing effort to not only sustain but in fact increase crop yields by paying far closer attention to ecological requirements, input requirements, output choices, and labour needs (Altieiri 1995). One of the foundational myths of the corporate food regime is that industrial agriculture is required to feed the ever-growing population of the world (Conway 2012). However, this is, as just noted, a myth. Granted, agroecological practices as they are currently constituted are not the dominant form of farm production around the world. However, copious scientific research from around the world indicates that agroecological production has the capacity to be as productive and profitable as industrial agriculture, and indeed once intertemporal environmental impacts are included in the assessment of the costs and benefits of alternative farm production systems agroecological production has the capacity to be more productive and profitable than industrial agriculture (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development 2009). For example, it has been recently estimated that if the world consumption of the grain-fed meat that is so central to the corporate food regime were halved the caloric 'savings' to food balance sheets would allow two billion people to be fed (Cassidy, West, Gerber and Foley 2013). Agroecology, as a production system, is far more attuned to a nutrition-led farm production system than a market-led farm production system, and as such has the potential to supply the world, including those that are currently systemically food insecure, with a nutritious diet that not only generates jobs for women and men but also has far less impact on climate than the current industrial agriculture model. In other words, from the perspective of sustainable human well-being, agroecological production is a necessary component of a 21st century agriculture.

v. Local food systems

A shift to agroecological farm production systems brings with it an important correlate that is widely articulated by the global food sovereignty movement but which is often peripheral to its campaigns: the need to build gender-responsive local food businesses, economies and systems (Patel 2012). For all but the last 150 years food systems have been local; while international trade in grain predates Roman times, the large-scale long-distance movement of food has

always constituted a fraction of global production and as such control of such trade was a foundation of empire (Fraser and Rimas 2010). The benefits of more localized food systems are several. For a start, historically, healthy local food systems are superior when it comes to distributing food to those most in need; localized mechanisms of social reciprocity that are central to moral economies (Scott 1976) ensure that, barring the impact of nature, members of a community are in receipt of a minimum standard of living, including access to food. In so doing, healthy local food systems are far better at ensuring the health of communities – even communities riven by socio-economic and political inequalities (Ó Gráda 2009, Allen 2010). Healthy local food systems are also more resilient in the face of unforeseeable shocks, in that they are better at both ensuring that food is distributed to those in need of it and ensuring the production quickly returns to pre-shock levels (Fraser, Mabee and Figge 2005). Finally, local food systems have far less impact on the climate and are thus far more sustainable than food systems that rely upon the large-scale long-distance movement of food (Erickson 2008).

vi. Tastes

However, the resurrection of more localized food systems requires something of those that consume food: the need to transform tastes (Patel 2012). Contemporary food preferences reflect the shaping of the food system by corporate interests over the last century (Moss 2013). The heavy reliance on processed foods that are inundated with sodium, high fructose corn syrup and soya reflects the needs of food manufacturers for long shelf life and the capacity to travel greater distances without damage (Roberts, P. 2008). This did not reflect the needs of women and men, but rather reflected the need of capitalist economies to expand its labour force during the heyday of Fordism by rendering food preparation more 'convenient'. Moreover, the heavy reliance of processed food on economies of scale reflected the need of capitalism, as a mode of production, for cheap food that lowers the cost of reproducing labour-power and in so doing raises the relative rate of surplus value (Akram-Lodhi 2012).

Similarly, the ongoing 'meatification' of global diets (Weis 2007) and an ever-expanding availability of non-seasonal foods does not reflects the needs of women and men but rather reflects the universalization of a western European ruling class consumption norm, a universalization that did not occur naturally but was instead part and parcel of the development and evolution of global food systems over the last 150 years and which has been accelerated by the supermarketization of the global food system during the heyday of the corporate food regime (Patel 2012). As was noted above, beef in particular is, in the formulation of Francis Moore Lappe (1991), a reverse protein factory, using 8 calories of inputs to produce 1 calorie of output – and it massively contributes to global warming and hence climate change.

Thus, contemporary food preferences do not reflect the needs of either female or male food

providers or female or male food consumers (Pollen 2008). From the standpoint of female and male food providers, it is only by eating locally, seasonally, and paying prices that reflect actual costs of production, including ecological impacts, that communities and societies can sustain a healthy food system that does not massively contribute to global climate change (Pollan 2006). From the standpoint of female and male food consumers, the consequence of taste formation under the corporate food regime has been the simultaneous onslaught of obesity alongside huge numbers of underfed people: the overserved and the underserved (Holt-Giménez 2011), the stuffed and the starved (Patel 2012). Contemporary tastes have been engineered by corporate interests to produce profits while simultaneously producing food-based social exclusion around the world (Moss 2013, Akram-Lodhi 2007). Gender-responsive localized food systems must be resurrected to reverse this damaging social transformation.

vii. The state

If the conditions necessary for constructing a pathway to food sovereignty that have so far been elaborated are relatively clear, they bring with them a condition that, in an era of neoliberal globalization, may seem somewhat fanciful. Pro-poor gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform, restrictions on land markets, the fostering of sustainable gender-responsive biotechnological change and agroecological farming practices in the face of industrial agriculture, and the resurrection of gender-responsive local food systems in the face of the corporate food regime all require the intervention of a power capable of challenging capital and capitalism. These conditions necessary to build food sovereignty involve heavy doses of new forms of regulation, interventions in the operation of 'free' markets, and challenges to the prevailing capitalist order. The power to undertake this range of interventions remains, for better or worse, the state (Magdoff, Bellamy Foster and Buttel 2000). While changes in the food system may be initiated from within communities and social movements, as is currently the case, these changes cannot be generalized without the involvement of a state that responds to the assertion of popular economic sovereignty by managing markets to the extent needed to extensively tame capitalist impulses.

While the need for pro-poor gender-responsive state intervention to transform the food system may be clear, the possibility of such an occurrence might appear to be wishful thinking. However, despite the stark realities of the capitalist state, the state should not be viewed as inherently a tool of capital or a tool of big business. Around the world the state is a contested space with which advocates of the marginalized and marginalized women and men themselves must and do engage (Borras 2001). Indeed, this is, to an extent, recognized by the global food sovereignty movement on those occasions when it negotiates with or collaborates with states that purport to be advancing food sovereignty. The global food sovereignty movement must continue to engage with the capitalist state, both from within, to make claims on the state and

initiate social, political and economic changes from within the state, as well as from without, to enforce claims that are made on the state and to ensure that there is no backtracking from any positive social, political and economic changes that are initiated (Akram-Lodhi, Borras and Kay 2007). Of course, in dealing with the capitalist state there is an eminent need for caution: compromise can breed betrayal, as evidenced by post-war European social democracy. Yet the post-war social democratic capitalist state demonstrated the extent to which the state can be pressured into making redistributive historic compromises that significantly improve the livelihood security of women and men (Jessop 2007), and in an era of neoliberal globalization this lesson cannot be forgotten; a minimalist objective of the global food sovereignty movement should be the reconstruction of such a redistributive state, as a first step in a deeper and more fundamental transformation of state structures and power. It is recognized that this kind of 'radical pragmatism' (Akram-Lodhi, Chernomas and Sepehri 2004) will be for many a highly contentious assertion, but in the messy reality of the present, the construction of utopias requires working within the interstices of the present in order to forge a future.

When engaging with the capitalist state, the global food sovereignty movement needs to be acutely aware of the level at which it is engaging: in cases where the state is subject to periodic elections it is more likely that claims can be made and changes initiated at the local level than at the regional or national level, if for no other reason than the fact that, in most instances, for voters electoral politics are primarily local. Indeed, one important if imperfect outcome to emerge from engaging with the state for the global food sovereignty movement – the establishment of food policy councils – have been a direct consequence of a focus on the local (Roberts, W. 2008). Granted, local states are more subject to class capture (Mungiu-Pippidi 2003). However, notwithstanding the efforts of food sovereignty advocates to enshrine a meaningful right to food in, for example, the Indian constitution, it is far more likely that, for instance, the labelling of transgenic organisms can be accomplished in a small United States state or Chinese province or indeed a mid-sized United States or Chinese city than in the country as a whole, as a first step. Yet that first step is of vital importance, both for its demonstration effects on neighbouring jurisdictions and for the effect that such a step would have to have on corporate behaviour, concerned as it is with maintaining access to markets.

viii. Global trade

The requirement that the global food sovereignty movement press for the reconstruction, at the very minimum, of a redistributive state is because for food sovereignty to be built there is a need for a more energetic and interventionist state to initiate efforts to restructure global trade relations. Currently, the most powerful global institution is the WTO, and as is rightly stressed by the food sovereignty movement the WTO is inherently neoliberal through to its core (Rosset 2006). Therefore, the global food sovereignty movement has consistently argued that

agriculture should be removed from the purview of the WTO. However, removing agriculture from the WTO does nothing to establish the kind of global trading arrangements that would facilitate the construction of food sovereignty. It would instead allow global markets to continue to operate in ways that benefit global agro-food transnational corporations.

A central demand of the global food sovereignty movement that is not currently on its agenda must therefore be restricting the 'freedom' of global markets, so as to tame, to a degree, global market imperatives. This requires not so much the abolition of intervention in global markets as rather new forms of intervention that are more comprehensive: broader and deeper. The purpose of deeper intervention in global markets should be to reorient the purpose of trade away from the the neoliberal objective of increased profitability and towards the more human-focused objective of improvements in the well-being of women and men. In order to do this, a pro-poor gender-responsive state must lead efforts to replace the WTO with an International Trade Organization (ITO), as originally envisaged by John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White.

In the conception of Keynes and Dexter White, global trading arrangements following World War II were to be organized – and that is the word, organized – by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the International Clearing Union (ICU) and the ITO. Under the auspices of the United Nations General Assembly, the IMF would ensure stability in trade relationships between countries by providing short-term relief for balance of payments problems. The IBRD would facilitate an expansion in global trade by increasing the productive capacities of countries operating a less than full capacity utilization, including, critically, underutilized labour resources. The ICU would operate a global currency to ease trading relationships between countries by ensuring currency convertibility; this function became absorbed into the newly-created IMF, in the form of Special Drawing Rights.

At the apex of Keynes and Dexter White's vision of how to organize global trading relations was the ITO. The ITO was to be an institution that would facilitate economic and social progress by managing international trade cooperation between countries. This was to be achieved by facilitating tariff reductions in commodities while simultaneously governing markets and stabilizing prices in order to foster movements towards full employment under socially-acceptable labour standards and improved wages and working conditions (George 2007). Under the ITO, countries that were weaker in the global political economy would have been specifically permitted to use government intervention, including tariffs, quotas and subsidies, to protect their economies, and foreign direct investment was to be managed so as to preclude companies from intervening in the internal affairs of member countries. A special concern of the ITO, of

importance to the global food sovereignty movement, was to be measures to ensure the viability of small-scale producers. To that end, the ITO would have allowed countries to set up funds to stabilize commodity prices from year to year and would have encouraged primary commodity producers to undertake negotiations to set up commodity cartels that globally managed supply in order to stabilize prices and add value (Shaw 2007). The ITO would also have banned dumping, which works against the interests of small-scale producers around the world. Finally, the ITO was to have aided the global sharing of skills and technology by treating them as global public goods.

The governing of global markets should be an explicit objective of the global food sovereignty movement; indeed, I would argue that the construction of an ITO is a necessary condition of achieving food sovereignty. Yet the global food sovereignty movement cannot construct an ITO; this can only be accomplished by a consortium of pro-poor gender-responsive states committed to improvements in human security through employment generation and labour-intensive production as a precondition of enhancing human well-being.

ix. A new 'common sense'

Clearly, none of the aforementioned measures will come about without pressure from global civil society on the capitalist state and on the international development and financial institutions. As was noted earlier, the global food sovereignty movement currently takes on a variety of guises (Holt-Giménez 2010), some of which are transformational, some of which are transitional, and some of which are reformist. As in all politics, the contemporary politics of global food sovereignty depends on the current relation of forces between these movements and the dominant power of capital, and here the terrain is tipped against what are currently diverse and divergent movements of female and male food providers and food consumers, and in favour of corporate interests, and capital, with substantial support from the neoliberal capitalist state.

The strength of the forces of capital lay, in the domain of food, in the ability of its 'organic intellectuals' to define 'common sense': 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions' (Gramsci 1971: 422), a set of attitudes, moral views and empirical beliefs reflecting an individual's concrete experiences in society but lacking in consistency or cohesion. Capital's organic intellectuals, 'the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class...distinguished...by their...function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong' (Hoare 1971), negotiates individual subjectivity by welding together 'dipersed wills' into a shared awareness and meaning, from which emerges consent for class power because the ideologies which arise from the mediation of experience 'have a validity that is "psychological"' (Gramsci 1971: 377) Thus sustained reiterations become accepted as truths: that the world cannot feed

itself without industrial agriculture, that industrial agriculture requires transgenic organisms, that private property is sacrosanct, that localized food systems and petty commodity producers are relics of pre-modernity, and that the entry of capital into the food system has increased availability, 'choice' and 'freedom'.

However, what is clear, if attention is focused 'violently' to the 'discipline of the conjuncture', and thus focused on understanding what is specific and different about the present (Hall 1988), is that neoliberal globalization and the establishment of the corporate food regime has already produced something new that had not previously existed: the call for food sovereignty and the forging of a global movement for it. So the global food sovereignty movement and its organic intellectuals need to do what it already has been doing for almost a decade: to relentlessly contest contemporary 'common sense' across a range of arenas in social life in an effort to construct a new 'common sense' that configures different subjects, identities, projects and aspirations, building unity out of difference. Thus, as Eric Holt-Giménez (2011) stresses, the diverse global food sovereignty movement, with different and contrasting ideological perspectives on capitalist development and thus different agendas, must seek to inclusively find common ground around concerns shared by transformational, transitional and reformist food movements, 'building the moral and intellectual hegemony necessary for...a broad social consensus' (Akram-Lodhi 1992) that welds together dispersed wills into a new 'hegemonic bloc' around food. One central aspect of food makes this project eminently feasible: the fact that food cross-cuts the narrowly-defined and socially-constructed identities that have undermined class-based politics in the past half-century. As everyone on the planet is a food consumer, food has the potential to facilitate the development of a new globally-recognized inclusive universal subject if it is articulated in unique and specific ways.

The groundwork for the construction of a new, inclusive 'common sense' around food has already been established: the global food sovereignty movement has already been able to foster concern, of admittedly differing and variable degrees, among food consumers about the circumstances facing female and male food providers, whether they be the 'family farmers' of Northern agrarian populism or the 'peasants' and 'workers' of places 'out there'. At the same time female and male food providers are often aware that food consumers are sympathetic to the straightened material circumstances that they face under the corporate food regime. The issue, then, is to find more common ground that can foster a unity that is capable of managing inherent diversity in a way that can enforce a global right to food predicated upon food sovereignty.

Here, it would appear that the global food sovereignty movement needs to further elaborate two clear aspects of the corporate food regime that can be turned into sources of a stronger

claim for change in the food system. The first is that the temperate industrial grain-livestock agro-food complex of the corporate food regime is centrally implicated in climate change and ecological degradation (Weis 2007). Food – climate and food – ecological degradation links need to be relentlessly stressed by the global food sovereignty movement when arguing that a new food system must be a source of climate resilience rather than climate degradation. Sharply intervening in the ongoing evaluations and deliberations of the extremely visible Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is but one example of a way of inserting food more prominently into efforts to achieve climate justice, bringing out the linkages that are needed to give wider traction to the idea of food sovereignty than is currently the case.

Second, it needs to be stressed that food not only transcends the narrowly-defined socially-constructed identities of the corporate food regime but is centrally implicated in the livelihood inequalities that define the current conjuncture. Thus, there are food – class linkages. This may not appear obvious, especially to food consumers. While female and male petty commodity producers continue to be widely found in developing capitalist countries, it is often argued that food and agriculture occupies a minor place in the employment pattern of the developed capitalist countries. However, consider this: while in 2006, of an employed labour force of almost 17 million in Canada, only 2.2 per cent were directly working in agriculture. But work in the corporate food regime is not in farming; it is primarily in service-sector jobs: restaurants, bars and caterers; corner stores and supermarkets; and wholesale food trade. This has a very interesting implication for those that are involved in the global food sovereignty movement: the numbers of people who are employed in jobs related to the plethora of activities that are part and parcel of the corporate food regime are not directly known.

If the numbers of those employed within the food system were directly estimated, it would be clearly established that there is in fact a shared interest between female and male petty commodity producers in developing capitalist countries and female and male workers in developed capitalist countries. Thus, aggregating industrial classifications in the 2006 Canadian census that can be directly linked to the food system demonstrates that 13.8 per cent of all employed Canadians were employed in a food system-related activity in that year (Akram-Lodhi 2013b). It needs to be said that this is a dramatic understatement of the actual numbers of those whose livelihoods depend upon the food system in Canada: it does not include educators, researchers, government civil servants, financiers, or logistical operators, among others, who might be employed in a food system-related activity. It is significant that many of those that can be counted under the current classifications as working within the food system are not unionized and work in lower-wage jobs, while many of those that cannot be counted under current classifications but are in fact working within the food system are unionized and are working in better-paid jobs. The implication is very clear: under the corporate food regime food

is a critical livelihood issue for far more people than female and male food providers. So, the character of the corporate food regime must become a central concern for classes of labour in both the South and the North; there is a shared livelihood issue rooted in the inequalities promulgated by the corporate food regime, and this needs to be a key dimension in trying to construct a new 'common sense' around food amongst a broad democratic alliance of citizens united for change. Sharply intervening in the ongoing activities of organized labour, from the perspective of establishing collective bargaining units and negotiating over both the terms and conditions of employment and health and safety, is but one example of a way of inserting food more prominently into efforts to achieve economic justice, bringing out the livelihood linkages that are needed to give wider traction to the idea of food sovereignty than is currently the case.

IV. Towards agrarian sovereignty

The objective of the global food sovereignty movement should thus be a livelihood-enhancing, climate-friendly food system that does not exclude anyone from food because it is available to all as a basic right of citizenship. In other words, food must become what economists call a 'public good': something which is available to all and from which no one can be excluded (Akram-Lodhi 2013a, Saul and Curtis 2013). Public goods are not immutable but are constructed through the struggles of citizens that seek to dis-establish the role of markets in social provisioning (Wuyts 1992). Thus, the transformation of food into a public good would go a significant way towards de-commodifying food and re-establishing the Polanyian idea that markets should be embedded in society rather than societies being embedded in markets (Polanyi 1944).

The agenda described in this paper is consistent with but goes beyond food sovereignty, with a set of suggestions that I believe are necessary to both establish and sustain food sovereignty but which have not yet been voiced by the global food sovereignty movement. As it goes beyond food sovereignty, I have come to call it 'agrarian sovereignty' (Akram-Lodhi 2013a): the independent and exclusive de facto practical authority of broadly-defined female and male food providers and food consumers over food and the resources necessary to produce and access food. The establishment of agrarian sovereignty can be argued to be a precondition of achieving what Hannah Wittman (2009) calls 'agrarian citizenship', where the political and material rights and practices of rural dwellers are based not solely on issues of rural political representation but also on their relationship with the socio-ecological metabolism between society and nature, defining society to include not only female and male food providers but also food consumers. Agrarian citizenship recognizes nature's role in the continuing political, economic, and cultural evolution of a broadly-defined and evolving agrarian society, being predicated upon transcending the metabolic rift between humans and nature. It is agrarian sovereignty that would allow agrarian and non-agrarian citizens to fully claim their individual

and collective rights by transcending politically-focused notions of democracy and establishing notions of democracy rooted in democratic economies, ecology and the need for harmony between humans and nature.

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Food Sovereignty:
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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University and the Journal of Peasant Studies, and co-organized by Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI), the conference "Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue" will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an "intellectual future" in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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