

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A NEW SOCIETAL PARADIGM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

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Our Time Has Come! Food Sovereignty Now!

“If we want to overturn the bleak situation of our current food system, we need to attack the roots of the problems. Injustice in land, water and seeds must be addressed. Stop land and water grabbing and also patents of seeds. Genuine agrarian reform must be implemented. We need to focus to rural areas to address our hunger problem by restructuring our mode of production to a more sustainable-agroecology farming. This is also to protect and restore our Mother Earth.”

(Henry Saragih, former Global Coordinator of La Via Campesina, from his address delivered to the 9th Asia-Europe People’s Forum held in October 2012).

¹ Our Time Has Come: Food Sovereignty Now!, available at: <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/food-sovereignty-and-trade-mainmenu-38/1320-our-time-has-come-food-sovereignty-now>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this paper I will present and discuss the origins, development, politics and prospects of food sovereignty as a proposed transformative praxis to address humanity’s most critical challenges in the 21st century. Large claims are made for the transformative potential of food sovereignty by its proponents, and I will subject these to critical, yet supportive, scrutiny in this paper. I will discuss in particular the advocacy of agroecology as a key methodology and practice of socially just and culturally respectful form of authentically sustainable agriculture. I will offer some concluding thoughts about the transformative potential of food sovereignty and some suggestions about its future development in the coming years, drawing in particular on the recent work of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems.

Agricultural systems and rural communities have of course been the objects and subjects of agrarian change for a long time, with the establishment and spread of capitalism as the dominant global political economic system from the 16th century onwards and the consequent dynamics of industrialisation and urbanisation, which have rapidly gathered pace in recent decades. The period from 1980 to the present time, commonly known as the neoliberal era, also saw the rapid globalisation of food and agricultural systems driven by the intersecting processes of debt crises, structural adjustment loan conditionalities, the turn to trade liberalisation, and the growing corporate control, to the extent of duopolies and oligopolies, of key sectors of the global food system.

This is the context in which food sovereignty emerged in the mid-1990s, as the response articulated by small, peasant and family farmers in many countries around the world under the umbrella of *La Via Campesina* (the farmers’ way). Originally developed as a counter-poise to what was perceived as a corporate led agenda of food security via industrialised, globalised and corporate-controlled agriculture and food systems, food sovereignty has since generated a substantive literature and accumulated body of practice around the world. As a result of the successful political advocacy of peasant organisations and

their allies, food sovereignty has also been institutionalised in a number of countries at the constitutional, legislative and regulatory level.

I suggest that in broad terms food sovereignty rests on three major pillars: redistributive agrarian reform, agro-ecological methodologies, and localised and democratised food systems. In this paper, given the subject of the forum, I will spend some time examining agroecology and evaluating how it compares to industrialised high-input agricultural systems. There is insufficient space to consider the other two pillars of food sovereignty in any detail.

My evaluation of the prospects of food sovereignty as a political praxis of transformative change proceeds from the multiple and converging crises – social, ecological, cultural and economic – of what I term the globalising capitalist food system. The dominant system is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and this creates an opening for the food sovereignty alternatives which – agroecology especially – is receiving considerable support from leading experts. That said, there are contradictions and limitations in food sovereignty as it has been unfolding, and in my concluding remarks I make some suggestions as to how it might be strengthened and further developed.

INTRODUCTION

Food is basic to human existence for a number of intricately interconnected reasons. On the biological level, food provides the nutrients and minerals essential to cellular maintenance and repair, which, cumulatively and collectively, sustains – or, as the case may be, according to what one eats and in what quantities, impairs – the healthy functioning of the individual human organism: the person. At the social and cultural level, food (and practices associated with different foods) embodies a wide array of traditions through which social collectivities families, members of ethnic, religious and tribal groups, and nations - obtain shared meaning, history and identities.

Economically, the complex of activities around food and agriculture constitutes a very significant sector of economies both national and global. In particular, in recent decades, the growing commodification of food and agricultural products as a sector of international trade, and the processes and practices by which this has taken place have been profoundly destabilising for large numbers of people in many countries.

Politically, the compact between a society's rulers and the mass of ordinary 'citizens' or 'subjects' has at its foundation the securing of the essential material elements for life, food foremost among them (Guthman 2011, 54). When food becomes scarce, such as when it is priced out of the reach of ordinary people, this compact comes under strain and at times can be at risk of fracturing, as we saw during the Global Food Crisis of 2008 and again during the Arab Spring of 2011. Climate and drought-induced devastations of a country's food supply can, when interacting with other factors, become a major source of national, regional and indeed global political instability, as we have seen with the ongoing Syrian civil war (Gleick 2014).

Finally, the production and consumption of food, and the question as to what becomes of the 'wastes' generated at all steps along the way, are central to the relationship between humanity and the natural world of which we form part. There is, accordingly, a fundamental ecological dimension, which any critical exploration of food and agriculture must account for (Moore 2011, 136; Stuart 2009; Weis 2010; Lawrence et al 2013).

The set of human practices that collectively constitute 'agriculture' have profoundly altered landscapes, changed the composition of waterways, and influenced the stability of the Earth's climate (Manning 2004; Pearce 2007; Shiva 2016). While these alterations have been taking place over millennia, their scale and pace in the past century has been unprecedented,

with impacts that we are only now beginning to appreciate (Shiva *op cit*; Clark and Tilman 2017).

It is therefore little exaggeration to say that food and agriculture lie at the root of all that we are as individual living beings, and a great deal of what we do as social creatures (Counihan et al 2011). The interconnectivities across the various spheres outlined above should not be underestimated. 'Well-fed', well-nourished individuals are likely to be healthy; they are likely to participate fully and actively in society, and they are less likely to be motivated to seek substantive political or economic change. Conversely, under-nourished individuals are more likely to be ill and therefore less likely to participate actively in society; and when large numbers of individuals experience this status, political stability can, at certain times and places, become threatened. Further, it is now quite clear that we can undertake agriculture in ways that are broadly sympathetic with the goal of ecosystem maintenance and functionality; or we can conduct it in ways that are antithetic to this goal. Again, both outcomes can potentially have political consequences for prevailing power formations, particularly in an era when what we might term 'ecological consciousness' is becoming more salient (McMichael 2000; Baugher et al 2016).

It is clear then that food and agriculture, in one way or another, span virtually every sphere of human life and endeavour. While it is obviously impossible to deal exhaustively with all its aspects, I will remain sensitive to the multi-dimensional and multi-functional nature of food and agriculture, as well as to its various interconnectivities across the various spheres of social life. This is captured in what I term the Food Sovereignty movement's *ontology of connectedness*, which I juxtapose to globalising capitalism's *ontology of alienation*.
Contemporary global context: A food system in crisis

When we first begin to look at the system and its impacts, what confronts us appears to be a bewildering and proliferating array of problems and 'crises' (Rosset 2011; Campbell et al 2013). We see, for example, persistent malnutrition and the so-called 'obesity pandemic' affecting, cumulatively, in the region of 1.5 billion individuals (Patel 2007; Swinburn 2011). At the social level, there appears to be a generalised rural crisis, which is claimed to be the result of the widespread dispossession of large numbers of small and peasant farmers, in the wake of the expansion of large-scale, industrialised capitalist agriculture, and liberalised commodity trade, into many countries (Holt-Gimenez and Patel 2009), resulting in what is widely seen as 'accumulation via dispossession' via a 'global land grab' (Hall 2013). Economically, this globalising food system seems to be characterised in many of its sectors by concentrations of power and resources into a small coterie of transnational corporations. Many critical commentators describe the system as oligopolistic (Wilkinson 2010; Howard 2016).

Politically, critics argue that the expansion of the system has been substantially predicated on the dismantling of domestic agricultural sectors in many countries of the South, often achieved through the imposition of conditionalities attached to the so-called 'structural adjustment' and 'stabilisation' loans overseen by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Bello 2009). Critics say further that this loss of domestic productive capacity is a fundamental reason why many poor populations in the South have been exposed to steep rises in the prices of basic grains in recent years (Patnaik 2010). As food prices have risen, so has political instability, with riots in numerous countries in 2008, and the overthrow of some regimes in North Africa in early 2011 (Lagi et al 2011).

It is perhaps for this reason that 'food security' has emerged as a major issue on national and global political agendas in the past decade (Essex 2010; Margulis 2013; Sonnino et al 2014). Nor has the trend passed unnoticed in academia, with the launch of a new cross-disciplinary journal, *Food Security*, by the Springer group in February 2009. In his editorial that accompanied this launch, Norman Borlaug, regarded as the 'father of the Green

Revolution' for his work in developing high-yielding hybrid varieties of wheat, commented that [Since 1998] the challenge of global food security has sharpened greatly. I said in 2005 that we will have to double the world food supply by 2050. Meanwhile the term food security has passed into ordinary vocabulary. In recent months, hardly a day passes without the media focusing on the availability of food, the price of food, food safety and so on, in a global context. (Borlaug 2009).

The manner in which one frames and thereby understands the food security debate strongly shapes the nature of the responses that one considers appropriate to address the underlying human need for sustenance. For example, the late Professor Borlaug and many others argue that the biggest challenge is an increase in production, building on the claimed successes of the Green Revolution in quadrupling global grain yields and thereby staving off the threat of global famine. Alternatively, fierce critics of the Green Revolution like Dr Vandana Shiva argue that its techno-productivism and centralisation in fact proved a disaster rather than a boon; and that a lasting exit from the contemporary 'global food crisis' requires instead a thorough transformation in social, economic, ecological and political relations around food and farming (Shiva 1991).

Since the advent of the Green Revolution, capitalist agriculture has turned increasingly in the direction of monoculture cropping, which at times can reach very large scales; and which is generally dependent on irrigation and the constant addition to the soil of agri-chemicals (McMichael 2010). Paraguay, for example, has seen a 300% increase in the acreage devoted to the growing of soybeans for export as animal feed, to 6.5 million acres by 2008 (Howard 2010). The soy monoculture in Paraguay forms part of the so-called 'Republic of Soy' that spans tens of millions of acres across.

Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, and is associated with numerous forms of violence and dispossession. Meta-analyses, most notably the United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, have documented how such practices frequently entail major changes in landscapes and waterways, such as de-forestation and increasing soil salinity, thus compromising the integrity of eco-systems (UN 2005).

This eco-system degradation takes multiple forms, including a loss of biodiversity brought about through the homogenisation of ecosystems and an anthropogenic acceleration in the rate of species extinction 'by as much as 1,000 times over background rates typical over the planet's history' (*ibid* 4). Further, industrialised monoculture agriculture has made possible the rapid expansion in the past fifty years of 'concentrated animal feed-lot operations': CAFOs, also known as 'factory farms'. The negative social and environmental impacts of such operations are well-documented (Safran Foer 2009; Guthman 2011; Emil and Neo 2011). They are compounded by the lax regulatory regimes under which such facilities typically operate (*ibid.*).

It seems then this system ripples with tensions and 'crises' at every level. *La Via Campesina*, the global farmer movement and principal protagonist of food sovereignty, speaks of 'multiple, converging crises':

In the current global context, we are confronting the convergence of the food crisis, the climate crisis, the energy crisis and the financial crisis. These crises have common origins in the capitalist system and more recently in the unrestrained de-regulation in various spheres of economic activity, as part of the neo-liberal model, which gives priority to business and profit..." (La Via Campesina 2008).

This speaks to what systems thinker Thomas Homer-Dixon and his colleagues describe as 'synchronous failure': that is, "an emerging pattern or architecture of causation that will increasingly characterize the birth and progress of crises in the future", which they conceptualise by reference to its "deep causes, intermediate processes, and ultimate outcomes" (Homer-Dixon et al 2016, 6).

Key tensions of the globalising capitalist food system

What then, is specific and particular about this system? First, and most importantly, it is a *capitalist* system. Capitalism, as a form of organising human societies, has certain core characteristics and tendencies, which manifest in a particular way when applied to the production, distribution and consumption of food. Since it is in the nature of capitalism to organise human productive activities to further the basic goals of capital accumulation and the generation of profit, these become the main goals of a food system organised on capitalist principles. Amongst other consequences, the application of capitalist principles to food production has generated a dynamic of over-production of food, in particular of basic grains such as corn, soy and wheat (Weis 2007; Gutham 2011).

The over-production of these basic grains has facilitated and sustained the expansion of the fast and processed food and beverage industries, as well as the factory farming system (Patel 2007; Weis 2013). These industries have in turn contributed substantially to the obesity pandemic that states worldwide, and in particular the United States itself, are seemingly powerless to stop or even significantly slow down (Swinburn et al 2011). In recent years, health professionals and others have launched campaigns, seeking the greater regulation of these industries. One key demand is the prohibition of the advertising of their products to young children, with recent research confirming suspicions that such advertising results in increased consumption by this age group (Dalton et al 2017). The capacity to date of agri-business and fast food corporations to have resisted successfully any effective regulation in most countries speaks to the extent of their political influence and power.

The dynamic of over-production is inherent within the capitalist organisation of production. In its current form, it is also a direct consequence of the evolution of the political-economy of food and agriculture in the United States and the European Union during the 20th century, notably the practice of paying hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies annually to the larger commodity producers (Guthman 2011). The result is that the over-production of food is concentrated in the core capitalist states, which in turn has generated a complementary dynamic of the under-production of food for domestic consumption in many regions of the South (Clope 2013).

Secondly, the system is globalising; that is, it is expanding geographically, absorbing more and more regions of the world within its orbit. At one level, this spatial expansion is a function of the system's capitalist nature. Since capitalism's basic drive is the endless need to accumulate further capital, it is of necessity an expansionary system (Harvey 2011). It will continually seek out new opportunities for capital accumulation, be they products or services, markets, resources, technologies or regions of production where labour is cheaper and more 'flexible' (*ibid.*, 155).

At another level, however, the system has also been part of the global projection of the power of the United States, as a hegemonic actor in the world system of nation-states in the post-World War II era (Harvey 2003). The United States (and its allies such as the UK, Australia, Canada and the European states) has consciously and consistently sought to organise global economic and political relations in ways that benefit primarily its own citizenry, and in particular the richer sections of that citizenry (Dumenil and Levy 2004; Kolko 2006; Kettel and Sutton 2013). There is, in this view, a global hierarchy of states and peoples based on asymmetric spatial relations; and for the last century or more the United States (and its allies) has sat atop that hierarchy, absorbing a disproportionate amount of the world's resources and wealth, and generating a disproportionate amount of the world's waste and pollution (Moore 2011).

As it results in the transfer of wealth and resources from one set of countries to another, globalising capitalism necessarily produces inequalities between states. Further, because all societies are stratified internally according to social categories such as class,

gender, race, ethnicity and religion, these inequalities are differentially experienced across time and space. In other words, there are not only inequalities between states; there are also inequalities within states. This applies equally to countries and regions in the core capitalist bloc (what we might call the North) and countries and regions outside it (the South). In addition, in the contemporary era of the financialisation of capitalism – neoliberalism – these inequalities have become more pronounced, particularly in the core, Anglo-American, states (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Piketty and Goldhammer 2014).

In the context of the globalising capitalist food system, inequality manifests in diverse forms. Thus, the food-price volatility that has resulted from the wholesale commodification and globalised trade of food produces, on the one hand, record profits for agri-business corporations and multi-million dollar remuneration packages for their senior executives. On the other, it subjects growing numbers of poor people in the South and, increasingly, the North, to hardship, food insecurity and malnutrition. The rise in rates of obesity disproportionately impacts lower socio-economic groups in the North, while the consumption of the foods that cause obesity generates healthy profits for the major food and beverage manufacturers. The rapid growth of the global factory farm system has, as noted, led to increasing amounts of land being cultivated to produce grain for animal feed (Weis 2013). To make this possible, in several places, notably the so-called ‘Republic of Soy’ and its ‘green deserts’ in the southern cone of South America, indigenous and peasant communities have been dispossessed, often violently, from their lands and homes (Ezquerro-Cañete 2016).

The third key tension takes the form of the encountering of certain ‘ecological’ or ‘planetary boundaries’ to the system’s further growth and expansion (Rockstrom et al 2009). Accelerating anthropogenic climate change is one such boundary; depletion of non-renewable resources such as oil is another. These boundaries are said to be manifestations of an ‘ecological rift’ that the expansion of the capitalist system generally, and capitalist agriculture in particular, has been said to produce in the ‘natural metabolic relation’ between humanity and nature (Foster et al 2010).

While these tensions are analytically separate, they are at the same time closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Again, the Republic of Soy provides a good example. The vast monocultures of the soy ‘green desert’ widen the ecological rift, in the form of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation; because they involve violent dispossession of indigenous and peasant communities, they also intensify inequalities. These monocultures feed the expanding factory farming system, with all its attendant social and ecological impacts. And because this mode of production is ‘efficient’ and profitable, the incentives are for production to continue to expand. Soy, and the factory-farmed meat it feeds, is being over-produced, at the expense of a diverse range of food crops for the local rural populations.

What unites the three key tensions is the concept of *alienation*, which, as Marx explained at length, is foundational to capitalism (Cox 1998). Capitalism is premised on so-called ‘primitive accumulation’: the separation of the peasant-producer from the land and her conversion to a wage labourer; and on the separation of the wage-labourer from the product of her labour. The ecological rift, itself constitutive of capitalist production, further reveals the alienation of humanity from nature. Such separations being ontological to capitalism, over-production, inequality and ecological devastation are only to be expected, because the driving imperatives of production are not the satisfaction of human need or the respecting of ecological boundaries, but rather the ceaseless accumulation of capital and generation of profit.

Just as alienation forms part of the capitalist rationality in an ontological sense, it is *connectedness* which lies at the core of the food sovereignty rationality, which is aimed at healing the ecological and social rifts. In its practical manifestations to date, I regard food

sovereignty as constituted by three foundational ‘pillars’, namely: redistributive agrarian reform, agro-ecological methods of production, and (re-)localised and democratised food systems. Each in its own way contributes to the healing of the ecological and social rifts; and integrated as a whole they express the ontology of connectedness.

Emergence of *La Via Campesina* and Food Sovereignty

The Food Sovereignty movement, in a formalised and institutional sense as a recognisably distinct social movement, was brought into existence at a specific point in time – 1995 – and at the instigation of a particular social movement actor: *La Via Campesina*, the global small farmer, peasant and indigenous peoples’ movement (Desmarais 2007). Since then, diverse expressions of this movement – some oppositional, some propositional - have proliferated at the local, national and global levels. These expressions of food sovereignty generally share the recognition that the further spread and intensification of the globalising capitalist food system is deeply problematic in the 21st century, and the firm belief that the alternatives which they claim food sovereignty embodies are necessary, desirable and feasible (Schanbacher 2010).

La Via Campesina's launch of food sovereignty as a key strategic plank of contemporary transnational agrarian activism draws on a millennia-long lineage of peasant rebellion and revolt in diverse agrarian societies and cultures around the world. Many of the demands of the Food Sovereignty movement are informed by what James Scott termed ‘the moral economy of the peasant’, whilst also including new demands (especially around ecological sustainability) that arguably give the movement a somewhat ‘Janus-like’ character, looking backwards and forwards simultaneously (Scott 1976).

The Food Sovereignty movement is both a ‘social movement’ and a ‘transnational social movement’, or perhaps more accurately, a ‘transnational agrarian movement’ (Borras 2010). According to the social movement theory literature, a ‘social movement’ is a ‘sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities’ (Tilly 2004, 83; Edwards 2014). Likewise, a ‘transnational social movement’ is a social movement operating in three or more countries engaged in transnational collective action, that is, ‘coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states or international institutions’ (della Porter and Tarrow 2005, 7).

In terms of its origins, the immediate context for the emergence of *La Via Campesina* was provided by neoliberal restructuring of agrarian relations worldwide to the widespread detriment of the rural poor in general, including the peasants and small farmers (McMichael 2005). The 1992 Managua Declaration, one of the foundational texts of *La Via Campesina*, describes trade liberalisation as an existential threat for peasants and small farmers: Neoliberal policies represent a dramatic constraint on farmers throughout the world, bringing us to the brink of irredeemable extinction and further aggravating the irreparable damage which has been caused to our rural environs...Trade and international exchange should have as their fundamental goal, justice and cooperation rather than survival of the fittest...We reject policies which promote low pricing, liberalized markets, the export of surpluses, dumping and export subsidies. Sustainable agricultural production is fundamental and strategic to social life and cannot be reduced to a simple question of trade (quoted in Desmarais *op cit.*, 76).

In this Declaration and subsequent documents of *La Via Campesina* and the broader movement for food sovereignty we can clearly detect this movement’s continuity with earlier traditions of ‘the moral economy of the peasant’ and closely associated notions of peasants’ rights and justice. Adapting the original usage of ‘moral economy’ by eminent historian of the English working class, EP Thompson, in relation to ‘confrontations in the market-place over access to necessities’, James Scott identified in Southeast Asian peasant communities strong customary values around the concept of a ‘just price’ as well as ‘access to land [and] redistributive mechanisms and forms of reciprocity that linked peasants with elites and with

each other', including understandings of the acceptable limits of processes of commodification and appropriation of commonly-held resources (*op cit.*). As Marc Edelman comments, while '[t]oday the specific resources targeted for commodification are different than a century ago, the moral discourse of the affected peasants is remarkably similar' (Edelman 2005, 332).

While neoliberal restructuring in general, and the push for the liberalisation of trade in agricultural commodities in particular, created the objective conditions for the emergence of a transnational agrarian movement like *La Via Campesina*, the actual emergence and protagonist nature of *La Via Campesina* depended on the actions of groups of organised sectors of the peasantry and farmers in several countries, first in building national-level alliances, and then in establishing the links that would eventually lead to the transnational movement itself (Desmarais *op cit.*, 77-84). These links included solidarity exchanges between women farmers from the Canadian National Farmers Union (NFU) and the Nicaraguan Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG – the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers) during the late 1980s and 1990, as well as between the NFU and farmer groups in China, Mozambique, Cuba, the Caribbean, Mexico, the USA and the Philippines (*ibid.*, 78).

Following the 1992 Managua Declaration, forty-six representatives of farming organisations from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, Europe and Asia met in Mons, Belgium in May 1993 and formally established *La Via Campesina*, the 'Peasant Way' (Desmarais 2007, 76-7). The emergence of a 'peasant International' in the late 20th century has significant historical antecedents.

Organisationally, scholars point to the Bulgarian-led 'Green International' and the Soviet-led 'Red Peasant International (Krestintern)' in the 1920s, noting that these earlier, short-lived Internationals were comprised of peasant-led political parties and governments rather than social movements (Edelman and Kay 2008). Ideologically and politically, Joan Martinez-Alier describes *La Via Campesina* as 'ecological neo-Narodnism', tracing a direct historical lineage to the pre-1917 Narodnik peasant movement in Russia, whose militants and supporters 'dreamt of moving towards a kind of socialism based on peasant communes without relying on the growth of an industrial proletariat' (Martinez-Alier 2011, 154).

La Via Campesina has launched a series of global campaigns responding to particular needs and priorities of its membership. Consistent with its early (and continuing) focus on trade liberalisation, the first of these campaigns was '*Get the WTO out of Agriculture*'. Other prominent campaigns launched subsequently were the *Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform*, and the *Campaign to End Violence against Women*. *La Via Campesina* has made the struggle to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women a high priority, beginning with ensuring parity of gender representation at all levels of its internal decision-making structures (Desmarais 2007 *op cit.*, 161-181).

While *La Via Campesina* has launched many campaigns of which food sovereignty is said to be one, every other campaign, to a greater or lesser extent, forms part of the expanding food sovereignty political, economic, ecological and cultural agenda. Food sovereignty is the systemic alternative that *La Via Campesina* and others are promoting to counter the further consolidation and expansion of the globalising capitalist food system.

Food sovereignty, human rights and peoples' rights

The articulation of food sovereignty draws very heavily on discourses of rights, including historically-based understandings of peasants rights and justice; and the particular role that rights-language plays in the emerging construction of what a number of scholars are terming 'agrarian citizenship' (Wittman 2009; Clark 2016). Influenced by their growing Asian membership, *La Via Campesina* formalised the set of rights-based demands into a campaign for a new United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, which has been slowly working its way through the UN system, albeit with considerable opposition from some

states.² This campaign represents at once the centrepiece of the strategy to institutionalise food sovereignty as a policy framework at the international level; and, through its linkage with the existing institutional framework of the human right to adequate food, creates possibilities for enabling the implementation of food sovereignty at the national level.

In its original conceptions, food sovereignty was expressed to be a national right of self-determination as regards food production capacity, as well as a means of satisfying the basic individual human right to adequate food. The achievement of food sovereignty was claimed to depend to an important extent on peasants and small-scale producers, especially women. For these groups, food sovereignty claimed the right to redistributive agrarian reform; the right to the means of, and resources for, production; the right to produce food staples for their countries; the right to adequate incomes; and the right to be free from all forms of violence. The right to produce food further implied a right of environmental stewardship in peasants and small farmers.

The implementation of these rights, and therefore of food sovereignty, required a number of measures. First, there had to be a reconceptualization of the nature of food, as 'first and foremost [a] source of nutrition, and only secondarily an item of trade'. Each nation should therefore, according to *La Via Campesina*, 'prioritize food for domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency'. Secondly, the 'dumping' of agricultural commodities had to end, and proper regulation of food prices established in order to ensure that they 'reflect[ed] the true costs' of production. Thirdly, food production should not be driven by the need to earn foreign currency to pay interest on debts; and debt forgiveness was required. Fourthly, the growing power of transnational corporations over agricultural policies had to be curtailed, via 'the regulation and taxation of speculative capital and a strictly enforced Code of Conduct for transnational corporations'.

(http://www.fian.org/library/publication/one_step_closer_to_un_declaration/).

Finally, *La Via Campesina* asserted the need to democratise the 'United Nations and related institutions' so that 'peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, have direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels'. This claim was based on the universal rights 'to honest, accurate information and open and democratic decision-making', which in turn formed 'the basis of good governance, accountability and equal participation in economic, political and social life, free from all forms of discrimination' (*La Via Campesina* 1996).

The content of food sovereignty therefore draws very heavily on human rights. This includes rights that are already recognised in the international human rights corpus, such as the right to adequate food (1966 UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), and the right to freedom from discrimination; and many others that are not, such as the right to redistributive agrarian reform, the right to the means of production, and the right to produce for one's country. Their assertion, which builds on historical traditions of peasants' rights and notions of justice, forms a key political strategy of *La Via Campesina*, as seen in the efforts to advance through the United Nations a *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants*. These claims, most of which are expressed in the form of the assertion of collective rather than individual rights, are an important part of the process of building class solidarity, and a shared identity and vision; and therefore their assertion is fundamental to building movement strength. At the same time, the Declaration in its entirety can be understood as the assertion of what political philosopher Hannah Arendt termed 'the right to have rights'; the praxis of claiming rights, Arendt argued, was fundamental to the recovery of human dignity for marginalised and oppressed peoples (Arendt 1973, 293).

Food sovereignty and a peasant identity

The firm assertion of a 'peasant identity' and an associated set of rights can be seen a contemporary expression of the basic historical antagonism between capitalism and the peasantry. In his 2009 book, provocatively entitled *Food Wars*, written in the wake of the

many food riots precipitated by extreme volatility in commodity markets during the first half of 2008, activist-scholar Walden Bello argues that the neoliberal restructuring of agrarian relations since 1980, in the form of structural adjustment loan conditionalities and trade liberalisation, constitutes a sharp intensification of a centuries-long conflict, which he terms 'Capitalism versus The Peasant' (Bello 2009, 37). Capitalist agriculture, he suggests, regards the peasantry as an obstacle to its appropriation of land and other resources in order to expand production for export; and those peasants who cannot or will not make the transition to become capitalist farmers should be, and are being, expropriated (*ibid.*, 35). The global 'land-grab' phenomenon represents an intensification and acceleration of this historical dynamic. Yet even as capitalist agriculture appears poised on the verge of its final triumph in this epic struggle, it is, Bello says, increasingly mired in intractable crises, many of which are of its own making, and it is rapidly losing legitimacy (36). Who ends up as victor in the *Food Wars*, according to Bello, 'will be determined by which paradigm of production can better bring about food security' (15). In Phillip McMichael's terms, this is one of the most important achievements of Via Campesina and the broader Food Sovereignty movement to date: the re-framing of the classic 'agrarian question', from one concerned with the class allegiances of a dying peasantry, to one which problematises the very foundations of the capitalist food system, and claims for a 'recharged peasantry' the right to produce food ecologically and sustainably, and thus reproduce global society (McMichael 2008, 213).

Food sovereignty and a democratised food system

Thematically and philosophically, leading 'organic intellectuals' of the Food Sovereignty movement, such as Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, Nettie Wiebe and Raj Patel, argue that food sovereignty entails a democratised food system; a localised and de-commodified food system; and a 'radical egalitarianism' (Wittman et al 2010; Patel 2010). Amongst other things, a commitment to such egalitarianism implies transformed gender relations and the eradication of all forms of violence against women (*ibid.*).

Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe claim that: The theory and practice of food sovereignty has the potential to foster dramatic and widespread change in agricultural, political and social systems related to food by posing a radical challenge to the agro-industry model of food production. The transformation envisioned entails a changing relationship to food resulting from an integrated, democratized, localized food production model. It also entails a fundamental shift in values expressed in changing social and political relations (4).

The implication is that a process of democratisation of food systems would, according to one senior academic affiliated with the Food Sovereignty movement in Canada, require a complete rethinking of the assumptions that were:

[A]t the very centre of [the] transition [to capitalism, namely the] divorcing [of primary] producers from any right over the goods they produced, and encasing those goods in ever larger, ever more disconnected, ever more monopolized, and ever more destructive markets. Food Sovereignty... demands that we treat food not simply as a good, access to which and the production of which is determined by the market, it demands that we recognize the social connections inherent in producing food, consuming food, and sharing food. In the process it will change everything (*ibid.*, 4).

According to such conceptualisations, food sovereignty envisages the replacement of the capitalist ontology and market-driven praxis of *alienation*, with a new ontology and democratised praxis of *connectedness*. In place of the anonymous 'cash-nexus' which constitutes the sole bond between primary producer and end-consumer in the capitalist food system, food sovereignty is premised on the recovery of social connectivity via more intimate and direct personal relationships between producers (farmers) and the end consumers achieved through localised food systems. In such direct exchanges, it can also be argued that something is being altered in the minds of the participants as regards their understanding of food itself. A monetary exchange is still taking place, but the use value of food – its sensuous,

cultural nature, and its true ecological and social cost - is being recovered, and more properly reflected in the price. The primary consideration is no longer simply about profit; in the process food becomes de-commodified; and this represents a deep and effective engagement with a central element of the common sense of the globalising capitalist food system.

There are other expressions of the Food Sovereignty movement, notably community gardens, and, by extension, the 'growing' practice of individuals growing a portion of their own food, which are further reinforcing this trend of de-commodification. This trend towards self-reliance and even in some places self-sufficiency, represents a recovery of earlier traditions in many countries in the North when such practices were the 'norm'. That they are now making a come-back is significant for many reasons, not least of which is a possible indication of an increasing lack of confidence in the security and even the safety of the globalising capitalist food system.

Food Sovereignty and agroecology

Responding in part to the growing public clamour for effective action on climate change, *La Via Campesina* has been encouraging its members to embrace agroecological production methods; and on this basis has been making the political and ecological claim that 'small farmers cool the planet'.

Central to this claim is emerging research which demonstrates that agroecological production techniques which restore soil fertility by increasing levels of organic matter, and thus soil carbon, has the potential to sequester significant amounts of greenhouse emissions from the atmosphere (Altieri and Nicholls 2017).

Some member organisations, such as the Indonesian Peasant Union, are establishing agroecology training centres and demonstration farms in order to encourage their individual members to transition to these methods and away from reliance on chemically-based production. International meetings on agro-ecology are facilitated by *La Via Campesina*; and agroecology is being promoted as a key component of food sovereignty, most recently at the 7th international conference of *La Via Campesina* held in the Basque country.³

Agroecology as a genuinely liberating practice should not be simplistically confused with certified organic production, or fair trade labels, both of which have been quite comfortably reinserted within the circuits of the globalising capitalist food system. Agroecology, conceived as 'the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agro-ecosystems', is a method of agricultural practice that eschews the uncritical embrace of corporate-led 'high' technology and large-scale mechanisation, in favour of a reliance on building and sustaining local human capacity and peer-based exchanges of knowledge (Altieri 2010). Agroecology captures a range of production and design methodologies, such as nutrient and energy recycling, integration of crops and livestock, species diversification and taking a 'whole-of-system' approach rather than a reductionist focus on a single species (United Nations 2011; IPES-Food 2016).

Agroecology is thus aimed at developing 'agricultural systems in which ecological interactions and synergisms between biological components provide the mechanisms for system to sponsor its own soil fertility, productivity and crop protection' (Altieri 2010). In other words, farming systems operated according to agroecological principles increasingly become self-sustaining, thereby reducing farmers' dependence on synthetic inputs, whilst diversifying their production and raising yields (IPES-Food 2016). These practices represent what Jules Pretty terms '*sustainable intensification*'; that is, 'making better use of existing resources and technologies' in order to increase agricultural production (Pretty 2010).

Farmer autonomy and self-determination lie at the centre of agroecology. This methodology of production is explicitly intended to reduce farmer dependence on purchased external inputs such as seed, agri-chemicals and fossil fuels, because its aim is to build 'agricultural systems in which ecological interactions and synergisms between biological components provide the mechanisms for the system to sponsor its own soil fertility,

productivity and crop protection' (Altieri 2010). As such, it poses a direct challenge to the further consolidation and expansion of the globalising capitalist food system, which is premised on what rural sociologists have termed the decades-long tendency towards 'appropriationism', that is, 'the process by which corporate agribusiness reduces the importance of nature in farm production', and thereby generates multiple opportunities for capital accumulation and profit (Goodman et al 1988). Appropriationism is an expression of how the capitalist food system patterns configurations of scarcity to the benefit of agribusiness; agroecology disrupts such configurations by (re-)connecting farmers with a natural economy of abundance (IPES-Food 2016).

The success of agroecological methods is fundamental, not just to the claims about climate change, but to the underlying question of whether small-scale farmers can feed the planet (IPES-Food 2016; Godfray et al 2010). A key part of the common sense of the globalising capitalist food system is that only large-scale, industrialised agriculture for export is capable of meeting the food demands of a growing world population. Agroecology poses a direct challenge to such claims. To the extent that this challenge is well-founded, it will significantly advance the political credibility of the global movement for food sovereignty.

It is (Altieri and Toledo 2011). Arguably it is through agroecology that the resolution to the dilemma posed by the capitalist food system's encounter with the limits to its 'cheap food' complex will be resolved: not within the terms of that system, but via the combination of a different set of productive forces, based on a different set of social relations, and operating according to an increasingly non-capitalist logic.

The agroecological revolution in Latin America

Miguel Altieri and Victor Toledo trace the development of what they term the 'agroecological revolution' across Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Central America and the Andean region over the past few decades (2011). The capacity to combine high levels of production, whilst progressively reducing the ecologically destructive impacts of agriculture, is what gives agroecology its potentially 'revolutionary' character, according to Altieri and Toledo. They identify and describe the 'cognitive, technological and social' dimensions of this revolution, which interact in a mutually supportive dynamic to sustain and strengthen its growth and impact.

As a 'highly knowledge-intensive' set of methodologies that have their roots in ancestral indigenous cultures, agro-ecology is expressive of a 'peasant epistemology' because it is 'developed on the basis of farmers' knowledge and experimentation' (*ibid.*, 588). The knowledge and innovations associated with agroecological techniques have spread principally through peer-based farmer-to-farmer networks; and these networks in turn are being supported by continent-wide academic and NGO collaborations (607). Amongst a number of 'epistemological innovations' associated with agroecology, Altieri and Toledo mention its trans-disciplinary and holistic character ('joining political ecology, ecological economics and ethnoecology'); its abandonment of value-neutrality and its 'self-reflexive' character; its embrace of a 'long-term vision'; and its dialogic and participatory character, valuing 'local wisdom and traditions' in order to 'constant[ly] create new knowledge' (598). These horizontal and de-centralised forms of knowledge-sharing epitomise the connectedness of this methodology, which contrasts with the dis-empowering and atomising effects of proprietary-based knowledge systems that form the basis of contemporary capitalist agriculture.

In contrast, the techniques associated with agroecology are an expression of what Ernst Friedrich Schumacher calls 'intermediate' or 'appropriate, people-centred', and locally-controlled, technology (Schumacher 1972). As a labour and knowledge-intensive, rather than capital intensive, mode of production, agroecology encourages the development of 'autochthonous technologies' based on 'diversity, synergy, recycling and integration', as well

as locally-available energy resources (Altieri and Toledo 2011, 588, 607). This leads Altieri and Toledo to argue that not only does agroecology support the achievement of food sovereignty, but also ‘technological sovereignty’ and ‘energy sovereignty’, with the former described as ‘the exploit[ation] [of] environmental services derived from biodiverse agroecosystems [using] locally available resources [that] farmers are able to produce without external inputs’ and the latter as ‘the right for people inhabiting farms, cooperatives or rural communities to have access to sufficient energy within ecological limits from local and sustainable sources, such as plant biomass producer on farm, without sacrificing food crops’ (607).

One example of this technology, amongst many, is the elaborate system of terraced cultivation developed by the pre-Columbian and pre-historic Andean cultures of Peru, which ‘provided tillable land, controlled [soil] erosion, and protected crops during freezing nights’ (603). Another example, in the Australian context, is the recent emergence of ‘pasture cropping’ amongst cereal and livestock farmers; in this adaptation, born out of the necessity of adapting to harsh drought conditions, cereal crops are sown directly into pastures, thereby eliminating the need for tillage, substantially reducing inputs, restoring soil fertility, maintaining yields, and helping to secure financial viability for farmers.

The social and political dimensions of agroecology flow from the collaborative, co-operative and communal character of its epistemology and technologies: its connectedness. Practices that are rooted in local customs and traditions; which require for their development and ‘diffusion constant farmer participation [and interaction]’; and which have a sound economic rationale in the form of reduced reliance on external inputs, are likely to be conducive to social movement mobilisation and organisation, as has in fact occurred in many countries in Latin America, Brazil especially (599). The collaborative construction and sharing of knowledge and practices constitutes a concrete manifestation of the ‘circulation of the commons’ (de Peuter and Witherford 2010); and its linkage to social movement formation demonstrates the inherent synergies between forms of economic democracy and effective political praxis (Panayotakis 2011).

Agroecology and sustainable agriculture

What further strengthens the normative appeal of agroecology for progressive and radical agrarian movements is its ecologically benign and regenerative nature. Given that capitalist agriculture and food systems are principal contributors to anthropogenic climate change, contributing up to 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions (IPES-Food 2016), such a claim, if it can be substantiated, is politically significant for at least three reasons.

In the first instance, it serves as a powerful critique of the irrationality and sheer wastefulness of the globalising capitalist food system, when contrasted with an existing and viable alternative, thus undermining the common sense on which the system is based (Vandermeer et al 2009). Understood holistically, the waste this system generates includes not only multiple direct and indirect forms of pollution and contamination, but also the waste of solar and animal energy, as well as human energy, knowledge and capacities. In the industrialisation of agriculture, Wendell Berry observes a paradoxical and ultimately self-defeating transformation, expressive of the ecological rift:

[F]arming, which is inherently cyclic, capable of regenerating and reproducing itself indefinitely, becomes...destructive and *self-exhausting* when transformed into an industry (2009, 63-4)

Secondly, the ecological benefits of agroecology constitute a powerful defence of peasant agriculture, strengthening the claims of food sovereignty to embody the new ‘good sense’, and providing justification for claims that such agriculture should be recognised and supported by governments and international institutions (Martinez-Alier 2011, 149; IPES-Food 2016). Implicitly drawing on the traditions of ‘agricultural energetics’ dating back to the 1880s, *La Via Campesina* makes the justifiable claim that the capitalist industrialisation

of agriculture has transformed it from being a net producer of energy to being a net consumer (Martinez-Alier 2011, 152). Conversely, agroecological production that does not involve large-scale deforestation and land-clearing, and which does not rely on heavy machinery and large amounts of synthetic inputs, not only consumes far less fossil fuels, but also, through the increase of organic matter in soils, increases their carbon capture potential (Vandermeer et al 2009; Aguilera et al 2013). Further, not only does agroecology appear to mitigate the severity of climate change through emissions reductions; its practices and techniques have demonstrated a far higher level of resilience to extreme weather events in recent years (Altieri and Toledo 2011, 596-7).

The lesser reliance on fossil fuels points to a third reason for the political significance of agro-ecology: its capacity to function productively within the emerging resource constraints which capitalist agriculture is encountering in the form of 'biophysical contradictions' (Weis 2009). Forms of agriculture that can reliably produce diverse crops in the midst of a resource-constrained and climatically-changing world, and which can restore fertility to soils degraded by the practices of capitalist agriculture over decades, should be highly prized and supported by governments cognisant of their obligations to ensure the universal right to food to all their citizens (IPES-Food 2016).

Can agroecology 'feed the world'?

Agroecology might be one of the ways in which we can 'cool the planet', adapt to the extreme weather events that will come with a changing climate, and produce food in a post-peak oil world, but can it meet the challenge of producing sufficient food for a global population now in excess of seven billion? The first response to this question is that peasant farmers following these types of practices have 'fed much of the world for centuries and continue to feed people across the planet' (Altieri 2009, 265-6).

Conversely, it must also be remembered that, in global population terms, the globalising capitalist food system presently includes somewhere between 25 to 50% of the global human population (McMichael 2004, 62). Some estimates put the percentage of global agricultural production accounted for by the capitalist system at no more than ten percent, which leads critics to assert that what passes for global agricultural trade is in fact 'an international trade of surpluses of milk, cereals and meat dumped primarily by the [European Union], the [United States] and other members of the Cairns group'; what Tony Weis calls the 'grain-livestock complex' (Weis 2007).

Taking these statistics into account, it becomes clear that the corporate-led food system is still a minority actor as regards the basic task of ensuring the daily sustenance of the global human population as a whole. Somewhere between half and three-quarters of the world's people are, rather, fed primarily by peasant, smallholder and various forms of small-scale urban agriculture (Weis 2007, 9; IPES-Food 2016). Bearing in mind Gibson-Graham's (1996) admonition to 'read for difference rather than domination', this reality problematizes the portrayal of the capitalist food system as 'dominant'; and casts substantial doubt on the assertion that only this form of agriculture can – or, for that matter, does – 'feed the world'. Seen in this light, the vision of corporate-led and technicised world agriculture can be read as a narrative constructed by the powerful of an 'imagined econom[y] of globalization'; and as such it is a project that is immanent and contingent, not achieved and inevitable (McMichael 2000).

The second response is that agroecology, on its own terms as a developing set of production principles and methodologies, is demonstrating the capacity to out-perform large-scale capitalist monocultures. Yield increases are achieved through techniques such as integrated nutrient management, agroforestry, water harvesting, crop and farm diversification, and the integration of livestock into farming systems, as well through the reduction of 'losses due to weeds, insects and diseases' (United Nations 2011; IPES-Food 2016). Research conducted during the 1990s suggested that small farms operating as

polycultures according to agroecological methods achieved total production yields up to 60% higher than conventional capitalist agricultural monocultures (Altieri and Toledo 2011, 595). The largest study conducted to date, involving '286 projects in 57 [developing] countries', found average yield increases in farms using agro-ecological methods to be in excess of 79%, compared with conventional methods. Discussing the study's results, Pretty concludes that:

We do not yet know for sure whether a transition toward the sustainable intensification of agriculture, delivering greater benefits at the scale occurring in these projects, will result in enough food to meet the current food needs in developing countries, let alone the future needs after continued population growth and adoption of more urban and meat-rich diets. But what we are seeing is highly promising, especially for the poorest. There is also scope for additional confidence, as evidence indicates that productivity can grow over time if the farm ecosystem is enhanced, communities are strengthened and organized towards positive goals, and human knowledge, nutrition and health are improved. Sustainable agriculture systems appear to become more productive when human capacity increases, particularly in the form of farmers' capacity to innovate and adapt their farm systems for sustainable outcomes (296).

Thus, while the capitalist organisation of agriculture and the food system is failing to eradicate hunger and malnutrition as well as contributing to ecosystem decline and climatic destabilisation, agroecology has the virtue of making a substantial contribution to meeting the food needs of the poorest sectors of society. Higher yields, diverse income streams and freedom from the need to purchase expensive inputs translate into higher farm incomes, which in turn can boost local job creation and reduce rural poverty (Pretty *op cit.*). This is why the second Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food embraced agroecology as a key means by which the universal right to food can and will be realised.

Does Food Sovereignty offer a paradigm beyond the globalising capitalist food system?

At the national level, *La Via Campesina* and affiliated groups have been successful in working with some governments, such as Ecuador, Mali and Nepal, to secure the institutionalization of food sovereignty principles in national constitutions and framework laws. This process is in its infancy, and has been limited to a few countries in the global South. Interestingly, some communities and municipal governments in a few parts of the United States, motivated by what they see as the unwarranted interference of Federal and State authorities in the operation of local food economies on the pretext of 'food safety', and inspired by the broader transnational movement for food sovereignty, have recently passed 'Local Food and Community Self-Governance' ordinances, asserting their right to democratically determine the conditions under which they produce and exchange food. For reasons discussed below, these processes are not unproblematic.

In addition to these political actions, there are a host of economic and socio-economic practices that have been enacted, such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, food co-operatives and community gardening. These initiatives can be viewed as part of the broader movement for food sovereignty, even though in many cases they may have no 'radical' political agenda of opposition or resistance to the globalising capitalist food system. The reason is that an effective counter-hegemonic movement requires a multidimensional collaborative effort, including the political work of critique, opposition and resistance, and the creative social, cultural and economic work of the development and implementation of the new models intended to transform and replace the hegemonic system.

Leading thinkers within the Food Sovereignty movement have strongly engaged with the 'common sense' of the globalising capitalist food system by identifying some of its key tensions, recognised their nature and significance, and developed their critiques accordingly. The alternatives proposed by the Food Sovereignty movement have substantive normative content, are capable of mobilising significant political constituencies, are capable of being

institutionalised at different levels of governance, and in some cases are being institutionalised. Food sovereignty advocates are developing its principles into an emerging 'good sense' that is beginning to undermine the 'common sense' on which the capitalist food system's hegemony rests. In socio-economic terms, the practices of the Food Sovereignty movement, such as community gardening, farmers' markets, and community-supported agriculture, challenge the primacy and the compulsion of impersonal capitalist market exchanges, and 'expand the realm of the possible'.

However, there are **limitations and weaknesses** in the critiques and alternatives developed by the Food Sovereignty movement, which call into question its status as a counter-hegemonic movement. These limitations assume multiple dimensions. In the first instance, there is a privileging of the voice of farmers at the expense of developing cross-class and cross-sectoral alliances, which will be required if the expressly stated goal of transformative change is to succeed. This has meant that relatively little attention has been paid to the needs and priorities of workers in the food system; and more generally, there has been a failure to integrate the theoretical development of food sovereignty with the emerging fields of economic democracy and the commons. Secondly, there is potentially a misplaced allocation of resources and effort in securing institutional change within the United Nations human rights system, having regards to the well-founded doubts about human rights and legal mechanisms as an effective avenue for transformative political and economic change. Thirdly, a key policy demand of food sovereignty takes the form of greater protection for farmers, especially small farmers. There is a risk that, in an era of apparent economic contraction that potentially bears comparison with the 1930s, this call for protection for one sector of the economy may become conflated with a more generalised call for protectionism, which could substantially impede any campaigns for social justice. The dangers of this dynamic have increased substantially with the election of Donald Trump as US President in November 2016. Finally, and related to this fourth point, food sovereignty has expressly aligned itself with movements for greater localisation of the food system; indeed, as I indicated above, food localisation is the third foundational 'pillar' of food sovereignty. Within the politics of the 'local', there are risks of parochialism, chauvinism, xenophobia and autarky, any one of which would clearly militate against the greater global solidarities, and more direct and participatory forms of democracy, that food sovereignty also calls for.

The case of US regenerative farmer Joel Salatin highlights some of these contradictions and limitations. Joel Salatin is widely praised and admired in the local food and food sovereignty movements in the United States, Australia and elsewhere, for his pioneering pasture-based livestock agriculture at his Polycultures Farm in Vermont. His model has inspired dozens of others to embrace agriculture utilising sustainable pasture-based livestock and direct marketing to consumers, and he has been eulogised in films such as *Food Inc* and in many books and articles. Yet his framing of food sovereignty and food politics is very much informed by his pro-capitalist, pro-free market, libertarian philosophy, in which there is no human right to adequate food, most forms of government regulation should be viewed with extreme suspicion, and in which taxation is essentially regarded as theft, thereby leaving little if any room for government public services and welfare systems.⁴ More recently, Salatin has openly identified himself as someone who does not believe in the scientific consensus regarding global warming and the dangers that it poses to humanity in the 21st century.⁵

These perspectives reveal the difficulties and contradictions for food sovereignty advocates in rich countries like the United States and Australia, where the movement's leadership includes libertarian and anti-government figures like Salatin, who command large followings and who are accorded almost cult-hero status. The trouble with figures like Salatin is that as white, male, pro-market producers who promote market- and consumer-based 'solutions' to systemic food system crises ('vote with your wallet!'), they tend to reinforce the current neoliberal food system paradigm, rather than challenge it in any fundamental way

(Pilgeram and Meeuf 2014).

Notwithstanding these limitations and contradictions, I maintain that the Food Sovereignty movement is a potential counter-hegemonic political force precisely because it has done, and is doing, the essential dual work of critique and elaboration of a political vision, as well as the practical construction of political economic alternatives in diverse sites. In particular, food sovereignty proponents are in the process of articulating a new 'good sense' around food and farming. According to this good sense, humanity is capable of living in balance with the Earth's ecosystems, but that to do so requires that we make two fundamental changes. First, we must adopt a less ecologically exploitative approach to the production of food and the other necessities of human life; and secondly, we must adopt less exploitative forms of social relations amongst people, in the form of much greater levels of equality. These changes respond directly to the intensification of key social and ecological tensions within the globalising capitalist food system.

Recommendations for the further development of food sovereignty and agroecology
Develop a coherent program of political transformation in the universal interest – not just responding to the needs of one sector

The farmer-originated nature of food sovereignty means that relatively little theoretical or practical attention has been paid to the needs and priorities of workers. This weakness must be addressed if the Food Sovereignty movement is to realise its transformative potential. It is however a significant

⁴ For an extensive 2016 interview with Salatin in which he elaborates on these and other matters, see here: <https://www.farmtoconsumer.org/blog/2016/02/17/21233/>.

⁵ See <https://www.desmoglob.com/2017/07/06/hero-farmer-joel-salatin-rejects-climate-change-science-standard-denier-talking-points> for a report on Salatin's views on climate change and his response to this report via the Polyfaces Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Polyfacefarm/posts/10154572977401105>.

opportunity, because the emerging theory and practice in fields such as the commons, the co-operative movement and economic democracy all have natural affinities with food sovereignty, and are gaining increasing interest and practical experience as dominant national and global economies encounter protracted crisis, as in Greece, Spain and Argentina.

All of these movements are expressions of the solidarity economy, which Brazilian author Euclides Mance describes as being practised daily by millions of people: [W]ho work and consume in order to produce for their own and other people's welfare, rather than for profit. In a solidarity economy what matters is creating satisfactory economic conditions for all people. This means assuring individual and collective freedoms, generating work and income, abolishing all forms of exploitation, domination and exclusion, and protecting ecosystems as well as promoting sustainable development (2007, 1).

Build intellectual and political links with allied social movements, especially those working for new economic frameworks, and especially with urban social movements

Having regard to the comments above, the Food Sovereignty movement needs to expand its linkages to build cross-sectoral alliances and collaborations. This is especially important in countries like Australia, where farmers constitute less than 1.5% of the total population, and where farmers sympathetic to the food sovereignty perspective are probably less than 0.1% of the population. Conversely, Australia is one of the most heavily urbanised countries, highlighting the need for farmers to build effective alliances with urban constituencies.

Reaffirm a commitment to principled, progressive transformative politics based on the principle of international solidarity

La Via Campesina's commitment to transformative politics, embracing the *buen vivir* philosophy of an economy and society dedicated to ecological sustainability and human wellbeing rather than short-term corporate profit, has been consistently articulated over many years. However, at a time of increasing nationalism, xenophobia and isolationism, with the growing danger of regional and global military conflict, it is vital that the Food Sovereignty movement continually reaffirm this commitment and distance itself from those who seek to articulate a parochial, highly nationalistic version of Food Sovereignty. As the case of Joel Salatin illustrates, such politics are often linked to pro-market practices that end up reinforcing neoliberalism rather than challenging it in any significant way.

Develop new indicators for sustainable food systems (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 68)

Rather than just measuring single-factor farm productivity (gross yield), develop measures that capture the whole success and performance of agro-ecosystems, including:

- ☐ long-term ecosystem health;
- ☐ total resource flows;
- ☐ sustainable interactions between agriculture and the wider economy;
- ☐ the sustainability of output;
- ☐ livelihood resilience;
- ☐ true food and nutrition security; and
- ☐ the economic viability of farms with respect to debt, climate shocks etc

Shift public support towards diversified agroecological production systems (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 69)

In order to break the 'path dependencies' that trap farmers in certain forms of production and in certain markets, governments must use the fiscal (i.e. subsidies, taxation) and regulatory means at their disposal to encourage and facilitate a large-scale transition away from highly industrialised monocultures towards diversified agroecological systems.

Support short supply chains and alternative retail infrastructures (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 70)

To break down the power of supermarket monopolies and duopolies, expand consumer access to affordable fresh produce and provide viable markets for producers, support forms of direct marketing such as farmers markets and food hubs, and create and support democratic forms of food system governance such as food policy councils.

Use public procurement to support local agroecological produce (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 70-1)

Government purchasing power – through publicly-funded institutions such as schools and hospitals – can be significantly expanded and explicitly directed towards agroecological forms of production.

Strengthen movements that unify diverse constituencies around agroecology (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 71)

Support those movements that are putting in place practical alternatives on the ground (e.g. human rights-focused farmer organisations, food sovereignty organisations); and support regional and global South-North collaborations and participation in global governance processes, foregrounding agroecology as a central element of food sovereignty.

Mainstream agroecology and holistic food systems approaches into education and research agendas (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 72-3)

There should be additional support for agroecology, both within formal education settings in primary and secondary schools, in formal research settings in universities, and

via the expanding peer-to-peer knowledge exchange approaches. The paradigm shift required is from the bulk of research and extension support being redirected away from support for industrial and high-input solutions towards agroecological knowledge-based systems.

Develop food planning processes and 'joined-up food policies at multiple levels (from IPES 2016, From Uniformity to Diversity, 73-4)

IPES identify policy fragmentation and short-term thinking as key barriers to food system change; and to overcome these constraints recommend 'long-term, cross-party, inter-ministerial planning around food systems'. The challenge is to unite diverse constituencies behind a comprehensive long-term agenda for transformation, and support such an agenda in national food policies and strategies, as well as through a strengthened World Committee on Food Security at the global level.

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