

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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Discussion Notes

Tania Murray Li

No Food Sovereignty Here

Organized by:

ISS-Agrarian, Food & Environmental Studies (AFES), Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS), Transnational Institute (TNI), Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First, Land Deal Politics Initiatives (LDPI), *Journal of Peasant Studies*

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Discussion Notes for deliberation at the colloquium:

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Convened by

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Notes for presentation at the Plenary Panel, Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

According to the organizers of this colloquium, food sovereignty 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 Bina Agarwal pointed out in her paper for Yale, the parts of this definition don't naturally cohere – sustainability, proximity, sufficiency, and democracy may pull in different directions. To advance the debate about food sovereignty, it is necessary to take a hard look at sites where the elements cohere, and also at sites where they fly apart. As Henry Bernstein argued, emblems and exemplary places can't ground analysis, nor can they ground a political movement capable of gaining traction across multiple sites. We need, rather, to return to the examination of specific, concrete conjunctures to tease out the processes that shape them, and the political possibilities they open up.

The "here" in my title flags my attention to specificity. Drawing on twenty years of field research in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, I will offer an analysis of a particular place where notions of food sovereignty come under severe pressure. This place, the "here" of my account, is especially revealing because it conforms rather closely to the iconic model of the food sovereignty movement. The subjects of my account are indigenous highlanders living in a relatively remote place. In 1990 when I began my research, they grew most of their own food, managed their land under a collective tenure system, and engaged in systems of reciprocal labor and food exchange. If farmers in any place could both desire, and potentially sustain, food sovereignty, it ought to be here. And yet the concept of food sovereignty had no resonance either as a description of their food-producing past, nor as a plausible or desirable alternative to their commodity-producing present. If activists from the food sovereignty movement were to come to visit them and suggest that they revert to food production, they would be politely but firmly ignored.

Beginning around 1990, highlanders made a radical shift in their food regime when they switched from producing their own food, to mono-cropped cacao. They did this on their own initiative, without the impetus of land grabbing by state or corporate actors, or pressure from state development or agri-business schemes. Their reasons for making the switch were sound, but to understand them we need to rethink embedded assumptions about food security, "natural" economies, risk-aversion, "middle" peasants, communities, and - most importantly - the role of choice. A prominent feature of this transition was the speed with which choice was eroded, as farmers were locked into new relations of production from which they could not withdraw. Another important feature was the virtual absence of state transfers, migrant work or remittances - sources that are often crucial to keeping apparently self-sustaining farm households afloat. In these and other respects, the "here" of my account is extreme but not exceptional, hence useful for bringing some of the submerged assumptions of the food sovereignty movement sharply into view.

The presentation draws from my forthcoming book *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, Duke University Press, 2014.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

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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” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought 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 was 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.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tania Murray Li teaches in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, where she holds the Canada Research Chair in the Political Economy and Culture of Asia. Her publications include *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Duke University Press, forthcoming), *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (with Derek Hall and Philip Hirsch, NUS Press, 2011), *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Duke University Press, 2007) and many articles on land, development, resource struggles, community, class, and indigeneity with a particular focus on Indonesia. Together with Pujo Semedi, she is currently conducting ethnographic research on the social, political and economic relations that emerge in Indonesia's oil palm zones.



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