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## Food Justice, Food Sovereignty and the Challenge of Neoliberalism

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## Abstract

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Alternative food systems have been criticized as neoliberal because they locate social change potential in consumer market behavior, assume functions that were formerly provided by the state, and produce subjectivities consistent with market logics. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, directly challenges neoliberalism by pairing local and regional ecological agriculture with direct challenges to the corporate food regime. This paper will discuss three increasingly common strategies among US food justice movements that also challenge neoliberalism. These include the creation of worker-owned food businesses, campaigns to improve workers' wages and conditions and policy campaigns to restrict harmful agribusiness practices. It will then consider how these efforts can contribute to the struggle for food sovereignty.

In response to the destructive power of corporate agriculture, citizens are increasingly working to shift the global food regime through the provision of alternatives, reform and broad transformation (Holt-Giménez 2011). Although they are often conceptualized as subsets of a broad and diverse food movement, food activists' strategies and goals can be divided into four discursive approaches (Mares and Alkon 2011). Advocates of local and organic food argue that these alternatives are more environmentally sustainable (through decreased use of toxic pesticides herbicides and fertilizers and fossil fuels for transport), and socially beneficial (through decreased consolidation of farm ownership and lower rates of diet-related health problems). Community Food Security (CFS) attempts to mobilize local/organic alternatives to also address issues of hunger, arguing that all communities should have access to safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate, and sustainably produced diets (CFSC n.d.). Building on this framework, the concept of food justice speaks to the multiple ways that racial and economic inequalities are embedded within the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Activists working from these two perspectives often create local food system alternatives such as farmers' markets, CSA programs, urban farms, and cooperatively owned grocery stores in low-income communities of color, though food justice activists tend to strongly emphasize the need for these projects to be created not only for, but by members of these communities. Lastly, food sovereignty, a discourse rooted in peasant movements throughout the global south, declares the rights of local peoples to define their own agro-food systems rather than remain subject to the consequences and demands of global trade policies. It includes calls for land reform, free access to and control over seeds, and the safeguarding of water as a public good.

Despite the strengths of these various movements, and many parallels and overlaps between them (Holt-Giménez 2011, Schiavoni 2009, Patel 2007), organizations classified as local food, community food security and food justice have all been criticized as reproducing neoliberalism

while food sovereignty fundamentally and directly opposes it (Guthman 2008, Brown and Getz 2008, Alkon 2012, Mares and Alkon 2011). According to David Harvey, neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2005:2). Though complex and uneven, especially on the ground, it can be summarized as a shift from the state as a regulatory force to a facilitator of markets, and from the provision of basic services and entitlements to a privatized, entrepreneurial approach (ibid, Brenner and Theodore 2005). While the local/organic food, community food security and food justice movements are critical of the neoliberal corporate food regime, and work to provide alternatives to it, critics have noted that their responses are often neoliberal as well (Guthman 2008, Brown and Getz 2008).

These movements tend to foster neoliberalism in three basic ways. First, they locate social change potential in consumer market behavior, namely the provision and purchase of organic and local food, rather than collective action. This reflects the fundamentally neoliberal idea that social change should be pursued through economic action and substitutes the creation of alternatives for the restriction of bad actors in the corporate food regime. Secondly, local food, community food security and food justice organizations often enable a neoliberal state by assuming functions that were formerly its responsibility, such as feeding the hungry and nutrition education. This contributes to what Peck and Tickell (2002) call “roll-out neoliberalism” as non-state actors take on the roles abandoned by the neoliberal state. Lastly, these approaches to food system reform produce neoliberal subjectivities. Neoliberal subjectivities are the bio-political disciplining of the self, and one another, in ways that mirror and support the market. Neoliberal subjectivities prize striving for self-improvement through improved health (including and especially healthy eating). Health becomes evidence of personal responsibility, moral character and social worth, and individuals are evaluated as responsible for the maximization of their own well-being. Taken together, these avenues limit what Julie Guthman calls “the politics of the possible,” constraining the “arguable, the fundable, the organizable [and] the scale of effective action” to entrepreneurialism and individual consumer choice (2008: 1180).

Among the four identified food movement discourses, only food sovereignty directly challenges neoliberalism by pairing local and regional ecological agriculture with the large-scale organization of campaigns to challenge the corporate food regime. Food sovereignty activists have used direct action to disrupt meetings of the World Trade Organization and other transnational institutions supporting trade policies that undermine communities’ abilities to determine their own food and agriculture policies. For this reason, Holt-Giminez argues that

only food sovereignty has the potential to transform the global food regime (2011).

Among US food justice activists, however, challenges to neoliberalism are also becoming increasingly common. Three strategies that exemplify this trend include the creation of worker-owned food businesses that, while still market-centric, challenge typical capitalist relations of production. Secondly campaigns to improve the wages and conditions of farm and restaurant workers increasingly seek to connect with advocates for local and organic food, creating cross-race and cross-class alliances to increase social sustainability in the food system around the issue of labor. Lastly, policy campaigns to restrict harmful practices such as the use of methyl iodide and GM seeds restrict the power of the corporate food regime. The paper will consider to what extent these new, more radical and less neoliberal attempts at food system reform can contribute to global efforts toward food sovereignty. I argue that through them, we can theorize a broader notion of food sovereignty focused on countering neoliberalism in and through the food system. This vision may provide an entry point for urban communities, communities in the global north, and workers to engage with the dynamic, visionary and transformative potential of food sovereignty.

### Food movements and neoliberalism

Perhaps the broadest critique of food movements as neoliberal comes from their use of individual market actions as the essential pathway to social change. The primary way that one supports the local food, community food security and food justice movements is not through traditional political behavior (voting, contacting other citizens, direct action, etc), but by purchasing food from farmers markets, urban farms and community supported agriculture projects (or from restaurants who do so). This is nicely encapsulated by what I think of as the slogan for local and organic food, that we should “vote with our forks” for the kind of food system we want to see. In a column titled with that very slogan, Pollan refers efforts to create local and organic alternatives to the corporate food regime as a “novel hybrid: market as movement” (2006).

Of course there are advantages to attempting social change through market behavior. Many may find the everyday resistance of shopping for local and organic food to be easier and more pleasant than the often tedious, hard work of traditional political organizing. Moreover, there can be real risks to political participation, particularly in an age where the surveillance state is massive, environmental and animal rights activists are easily labeled as terrorists, and non-violent direct action too often results in outsized charges and violence. The perceived risks of traditional political participation, and the advantages of the market as movement strategy are referenced by the first comment responding to Michael Pollan’s previously described NY Times article. “It sometimes seems daunting to try and change things through the political system – -

you could get shot at or even assassinated – but I dare them to force me to eat high fructose corn syrup!” (2006). Traditional social movement strategies can mark an individual for surveillance and violence, particularly if they hail from the communities of color where food justice activists tend to work. Individual consumer choice, on the other hand, is explicitly valued and protected by neoliberal regimes.

However, some scholars have found that growing demand for local and organic food does not improve conditions for farmers (Hinrichs 2000, Jarosz 2008, Winter 2003). According to Hinrichs, “many direct agricultural markets involve social relations where the balance of power and privilege ultimately rests with well-to-do consumers” rather than with farmers or lower income customers (2000, 301). This dynamic becomes both more problematic and more complicated when the community food security and food justice frameworks attempt to bring the benefits of local and organic food to include low-income consumers. Allen (2004) notes that community food security’s twin goals of farm security and food security are often in tension with one another. Within the logic of the market, farm security requires higher food prices while food security requires lower ones. Taking their cues from the supporters of local and organic food, community food security advocates have generally privileged the economic needs of farmers over low-income consumers (Allen 2004)

The same tension between farmers’ economic needs and customers’ limited abilities to pay occurs among many food justice projects. My own work examined a farmers market in a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood that featured black vendors and emphasized the role of racism in food and agriculture. Despite explicit marketing toward low-income black consumers, few chose to shop there. This was mainly because they sought out the most inexpensive ways to eat, namely chain and discount supermarkets (Alkon 2012).

Other food justice projects have attempted to navigate this tension by seeking out wealthier or institutional clienteles, which allows them to continue to provide good, green jobs to low-income community members, but forces them away from their goal of increasing food security. Allen effectively summarizes this trend, writing that “the alternatives being developed are much more accessible to relatively more privileged people, despite intentions to the contrary” (2008, 159). Taken together, these examples not only demonstrate how neoliberalism affects food justice organizations, but shows the contradiction inherent to opposing inequalities through neoliberal strategies. Despite the important work of food justice organizations creating an anti-racist food movement, operating through the “market as movement” prevents the participation of those who have the most to gain.

In addition to spreading the notion that social problems can be solved through the market, local and organic food, community food security and food justice organizations also embody neoliberalism by doing the work that was once the province of the state. This work includes protecting the environment (through organic production) and feeding the hungry (through provisions of food in food insecure communities). For Peck and Tickell (2002), neoliberalism consists of two phases, a rolling back of state provisioning including a social safety net, and a rolling out of NGO and other third sector actors attempting to take its place, usually with significantly less funding and a reliance on volunteerism (see also Pudup 2008). It is for this reason that author and social critic Arundhati Roy (2004) has said, “It’s almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs.”

Not only do local/organic food, community food security and food justice organizations do attempt to do the work abandoned by the neoliberal state, but in their efforts to secure adherents and funding, they trumpet their own abilities to do it better. For example, supporters of local/organic highlight the federal government’s inability to protect the public and the environment from pesticides, toxic-though-legal ingredients and even contamination. They argue that the best and indeed the only way to protect oneself and ones’ family is through the purchase of organic food from local farmers they can trust. Similarly, food justice advocates call attention to the decades of institutionally racist development patterns that ensured that urban black neighborhoods would not prosper. But rather than calling for government investment in these areas, they argue that local residents and supporters can create green economic development through farmers markets, health food stores and urban farms. These examples suggest that everyday people can work together to solve social problems through the buying and selling of goods. While this is certainly empowering, the lack of a role for government policy, and its replacement with non-government organizations and markets, helps to relieve the state of its responsibility to provide environmental protection and a social safety net.

Perhaps neoliberalism’s most insidious consequences are its affective ones. It pervades our subjectivities, directing us to apply the logic of the market to social life including what we think are proper ways of living and being. One hallmark of neoliberal subjectivities is an emphasis on personal responsibility and individual empowerment. The state’s failure to provide the kind of safety net that enables all citizens to meet basic requirements is accompanied by a moral invective to contribute to national well being through self-improvement (Guthman 2008). Pudup’s (2008) study of organized garden projects describes the way individuals in organized garden projects (school, hospital, prison etc) are encouraged to transform themselves through contact with nature in ways that will allow them to adjust to economic restructuring and other challenges. While a focus on individual empowerment and personal transformation is in many ways beneficial, it can also elide a more collective and potentially transformative approach.



Taken together, local/organic food, community food security and food justice organizations pursue a “market as movement” approach to social change through which they provide market-based and non-profit replacements for services that were once seen as the responsibility of the state. In doing so, they foster the notion that we as individuals are responsible for maximizing our own physical and economic health, and that we can do so through the consumption of local and organic food. This focus on consumption constrains what Guthman (2008) refers to as the “politics of the possible,” or our collective imaginaries of what kinds of social changes can be brought about. Expanding on this notion, Guthman and DuPuis write, “we have all but abandoned notions of citizenship as participation in the public sphere for a more individualist notion of self as the citizen consumer whose contribution to society is mainly to purchase the products of global capitalism” (2006, 443).

That citizen consumer cannot engage in the kinds of collective policy campaigns that might constrain the actions of the corporate food regime. One cannot ban the use of toxic pesticides like DDT or parathion by buying local and organic alternatives, and we cannot prevent the drift of still-legal toxic chemicals onto the bodies of farmworkers and their communities (Harrison 2011). Nor can we ensure positive development in the urban and rural communities that most suffer from food injustices. These are collective causes that require collective solutions not addressed by the local/organic, community food security and food justice discourses.

### Food Sovereignty and its Opposition to Neoliberalism

The ideal of food sovereignty has developed largely through La Via Campesina, a transnational coalition devoted to the struggles and rights of peasant farmers (especially women) in the global south fighting against the impacts of neoliberal trade and agricultural policies. La Via Campesina defines food sovereignty as “the peoples’, Countries’ or State Unions’ RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries” (2003: 1). More open and flexible than an established paradigm, food sovereignty emerges from “diverse sets of contemporary grassroots production practices and political approaches” (Wittman 2011).

Food sovereignty’s emphasis on rights shifts the focus beyond the “market as movement” model to address fundamental inequalities related to land distribution, resource management, and the commodification of crops (Desmarais 2007). In its engagement with global trade policy, there is direct opposition to many forms of neoliberalism, including protests of the World Trade Organization (ibid) and calls for the reregulation of commodity markets (Rossett 2008). Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) outline how food sovereignty foregrounds entitlements to and the fundamental redistribution of wealth and power through transformational political



campaigns. Hence, food sovereignty activists are not mere consumers “voting with their forks,” but citizens demanding that their right to food trumps the desires of the corporate food regime. It is, in the words of Phil McMichael, “a politicized movement on a world scale to confront the international power, and socio-ecological impact, of capital” (2006: 408).”

Food sovereignty’s emphasis on political self-determination is another point at which it directly counters neoliberalism (Rosset et al 2006). Not only is collective self-determination with regard to food and agricultural processes the movement’s goal, but these practices pervade its organizing structure as well. Here, self-determination comes not from individual control over one’s own food consumption, nor attempts to expand consumer choice to poor communities and communities of color. Instead, food sovereignty advances a notion of self-determination that pairs ecological farming with participation in a social movement intent on overhauling the corporate food regime from its roots.

Although the food sovereignty movement has largely developed through the mobilization of rural peasant farmers in the global south, agro-food scholars and activists see great potential in furthering the movement in urban contexts and in the global north. Raj Patel argues that the vision of food sovereignty is “important not only because it has been authored by those most directly hurt by the way contemporary agriculture is set up, but also because it offers a profound agenda for change for everyone ... [as it] aims to redress the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, wherever in the food system that abuse may happen” (2007: 302). The following three examples highlight work that food justice activists are doing to confront and oppose neoliberalism in the urban United States. This paper will conclude with a discussion of what such examples have to offer the concept of food sovereignty.

### Worker Cooperatives

Worker cooperatives are businesses in which workers own, work in, manage and share in the profits of the enterprise. Salaries tend to have low ratio differences and profits are generally shared on the basis of a worker-owner’s labor contribution. Cooperatives are generally managed through workplace democracy (Adams and Hansen 1993). Worker cooperatives can be found all over the world. The largest is the Indian Coffee Houses, which began when workers thrown out by the colonial Coffee Board in the 1950s seized control of the businesses. Cooperatives have been rapidly growing in Latin America as a result of both economic crises and the election of leftist leaders (Dangl 2005, Malleson 2010).

Food justice organizations have turned to worker owned cooperatives in order to ensure that the benefits of their work accrue to the communities in which they work. One example of this is the Mandela Foods Cooperative in West Oakland, California. Mandela Foods Cooperative (MFC)

was founded in 2008 by a group of local residents and food justice activists in order to address “lack of access to healthy food, healthy jobs, and economic development” (mfc.org) Though independent, it was founded alongside the non-profit Mandela Marketplace, which incubates a larger food enterprise network including local farmers and nutrition educators.

Mandela Foods Cooperative currently has four worker owners, though it hopes to add more as profits grow. All are African American West Oakland residents. Employees are entitled to apply for membership after working 1000 hours. A minimal \$2000 buy in can be paid through a combination of cash and sweat-equity, either up front or over a number of years. Each worker-owner supervises a particular area of the store like produce or bulk goods. Decisions are made by vote, which each worker owner has one vote, and a representative from the non-profit also has a vote.

Mandela Marketplace’s Executive Director Dana Harvey and Senior Manager Mariela Cedeño explain why this hybrid worker-owner/non-profit structure works in West Oakland.

Dana: The worker co-op model is because that would bring people from the community together as owners and have a support network for owning the business. It wouldn’t be a sole proprietor with all the responsibility on one person to be the owner because they might not have the experience.

Mariela: It was more for practical reasons. The ideology is important but it was more about how do people have equal power in how it’s run, get equal profits in how it’s run, and have equal say in how it’s run. That, by definition, was a cooperative. And the reason we established ourselves as a non-profit to support and incubate Mandela Foods is because four worker-owners from West Oakland didn’t have the credit or the networks or access to the kind of financing they would need to build out something that was going to cost \$750,000 whereas a non-profit has the skill set to be able to network and access grants to represent them or provide guarantees to help them get that financing.

In many ways, MFC does similar work to many other food justice organizations, focusing on bringing healthy food into neighborhoods with few other options. When asked about the food options available before MFC opened, local resident Ennis Jones responded, “bags of chips, fritos and McDonalds. There wasn’t anything down here.” With it’s large selection of produce, which it sells for significantly less than health food and grocery stores in other parts of Oakland, MFC certainly changes the West Oakland Food Landscape.

But as a worker-owned business, MFC does more than provide a place to shop. Local resident Nwamaka Agbo, describes the added value. “Just to see your neighbors and friends be owners of a business is extremely powerful and empowering for members of the community.”

Worker-owner James Burke expands on this thought:

I think a lot of people in the community are happy just to have another place to shop that offers a different kind of variety than what you see in the other locations here, but for those that understand more about who we are and what we’re trying to do and who we are because you’re seeing people from the community, people you might even see on a regular basis and now they’re part of something. They’re not just employees, but this is their business and they’re opening in their community trying to support their neighbors.

For James and Nwamaka, what sets MFC apart from other food justice organizations is a sense of pride in community ownership.

But I would argue that this is not all that sets MFC apart. Worker-owned businesses are not straightforward capitalist enterprises. Indeed, according to Marx, they are not capitalist enterprises at all, as no one sells their labor in exchange for a wage. In his Inaugural Address to the Working Men’s International Association in London in 1864, Marx himself said that “The value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production... may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands.” Moreover, MFC’s emphasis on making decisions through participatory democracy is consistent with La Via Campesina’s calls for direct democracy as a pre-requisite for food security (Patel 2009).

This is not to say that MFC is never complicit with neoliberalism. It maintains a strategy consistent with the “market as movement” approach that characterizes most local/organic food, community food security and food justice organizations. Those who want to support food justice through MFC largely do so through their purchases, ensuring the businesses’ profitability. It also takes on some of the burden abandoned by a state that offers decreasing benefits to poor and food-insecure families, and that fails to invest in poor communities and communities of color.

However, MFC challenges neoliberalism in several ways. First, as a worker cooperative, MFC explicitly opposes the upward redistribution of wealth that Harvey and other theorists believe is essential to neoliberalism. This, however, could be said to be true of many food justice projects,

whether cooperative or not. Though executive directors likely make much more than hourly workers, it seems unlikely that the pay differentials mirror the corporate world.

In addition, however, MFC does not encourage the development of neoliberal subjectivities through the development of worker owners' identities as workers and supporters' regard for those workers. In this way, worker cooperatives offer a vision of food justice coming about through worker organizing and solidarity, which is quite different from the individual entrepreneurial model advocated by most organizations. Worker-owners develop a class-consciousness often missing from food justice activism. Thus, this model may be more amenable with worker organizing efforts like those described in the next section.

### Food Workers' Movements

One of the strongest critiques of the local/organic food, community food security and food justice movements is that they ignore the injustices faced by workers. Patricia Allen (2004) argues that food activists adherence to the "market as movement" model points their attention to the needs of business owners, obscuring the struggles of workers whose interests may be at odds with their employers.

This, however, is beginning to change. Organizations representing workers in many parts of the food system are gaining ground, in part by connecting with supporters of local/organic food, community food security and food justice.

#### *From the Seed: The Coalition of Immokalee Workers*

Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a human rights organization working to address corporate social responsibility, sustainable food and human trafficking through community organizing. It has grown tremendously from the small group of farmworkers who, in 1993, began working together to improve their community and their lives.

Beginning in 2001, the CIW's Campaign for Fair Food addresses the issue of farm labor exploitation by leveraging the power of major corporate buyers. Under pressure from the CIW, 11 multi-billion dollar food retailers have agreed to enter the coalition's Fair Food Program, which establishes higher wages, a code of conduct for more humane labor standards and a cooperative complaint resolution system (ciw-online.org). Through this program, retailers pay a penny per pound "down the supply chain, directly to farmworkers," which significantly increases pickers' wages (Lappe 2012). In addition, the CIW's Anti-Slavery Campaign has worked with government officials to document, investigate and liberate over 1200 workers and has "pioneered the worker-centered approach to slavery prosecution" (ciw-online.org). These

efforts are connected, as the Fair Food Program includes zero tolerance for forced labor, encouraging growers to police themselves in order to maintain sales.

CIW campaigns have included rallies, work stoppages, hunger strikes (especially a month long strike by six workers in 1998), marches (including a historic 234-mile march from Ft. Meyers to Orlando Florida in 2000). They have attacked involuntary servitude by working with federal prosecutors to identify and investigate trafficking, and to campaign for the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection act in 2000. They have also raised wages across the tomato industry, which had been sliding since 1980. As part of the Campaign for Fair Food, the CIW has worked with students, religious communities, labor organizations and communities to pressure one retailer after another to sign the Fair Food Agreement. They are currently focused on adding supermarket chains to their list.

In confronting corporations that claim to provide “food with integrity,” to borrow Chipolte’s slogan, the CIW has built connections with supporters of local and organic food and community food security, and has identified with the struggle for food justice. Noted food movement authors such as Eric Schlosser (2004) Frances Moore Lappe (2012) and Tom Philpott (2011) have written about the organization in major newspapers like the NY and LA Times, and publications often aimed at foodies and other progressives such as Yes Magazine and Grist. Schlosser even testified at congressional hearings about abuses faced by tomato workers, along with former tomato worker and CIW co-founder Lucas Bentez (Williams 2008). Farmworker and CIW organizer Gerardo Reyes Chavez argues that the fair food campaign “marks a turning point in the sustainable food movement as a whole, whereby... farmworkers are finally recognized as true partners -- every bit as vital as farmers, chefs, and restaurants -- in bringing ‘good food’ to our tables” (quoted in Kunichoff 2012).

Farmworkers, however, are not the only exploited workers in the food system,. The Restaurant Opportunity Center is also working to increase pay and improve working conditions among food workers, this time in the food service industry.

#### *To the Table: The Restaurant Opportunities Center United*

Restaurant workers hold 7 of the 11 lowest-paying occupations in the US, earning less, on average, than farm and domestic workers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Tipped workers in many states make only 2.13 an hour, as they have for over two decades. Only 20% of restaurant jobs pay a living wage, and women, people of color and immigrants are often prevented from holding those positions. Few restaurants offer sick days and or benefits. (Jamarayan 2012).

The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) was founded in 2002 by Fekkak Mamdouh, a former headwaiter, and organizer Saru Jamarayan. Today, ROC-United is a national coalition of 26 member groups, and advocates for the needs of the over 10 million restaurant workers across the United States. Although focused on the restaurant industry, ROC-United pursues many issues common to low-wage workers including minimum wage, paid sick days, compliance with basic employment standards and healthcare.

ROC-United differentiates between the low road and high road business models. Low road businesses violate workers rights including wage theft, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, forced and/or unpaid overtime and more. ROC uses a combination of worker organizing, litigation and public pressure to change these circumstances. Since 2002, ROC has won 13 “workplace justice” campaigns against high profile companies. Their victories have netted more than \$7 million in financial settlements and the institution of grievance procedures, raises, sexual harassment and anti-discrimination policies, sick days and job security.

In addition, ROC works to support those who take the high road. They have opened worker-owned cooperative restaurants called COLORS in Detroit and New York, and aim to open more. In addition, they have founded a restaurant association called Restaurants Advancing Industry Standards in Employment (RAISE) whose members provide living wages, offer sick days vacation and/or insurance, and provide training and internal promotions. Through RAISE, member restaurants can receive guidance on compliance with employment, immigration, health and safety laws, access to low-cost health insurance, free training for workers, and recognition such as a positive listing in ROCs National Diners Guide.

Most broadly, ROC also works to change policy in order to improve industry working conditions. Their current lead issue is raising the tipped minimum wage, which has been \$2.13 for over 20 years. ROC works toward this and other issues by conducting participatory research documenting industry conditions. Recent reports have focused on the child-care needs of working mothers, the price impact of raising the minimum wage (which they documented as a dime per day), and the profitability of high road practices. In addition, a series of regional “Behind the Kitchen Door” reports documented inequality and opportunity among workers, and culminated in Jamarayan’s book of the same name.

Jamarayan sees the local/organic food movement as laying some of the groundwork for ROC’s campaigns. She cites bestsellers like *Fast Food Nation* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* as examples of books that have had huge impacts on the food system, and hopes her book can do the same. “The point of this book,” she said, is “to educate people about what’s behind the kitchen door. If you care about your health, if you care about locally-sourced and sustainable,

you can't just care about the cows and the pigs and how they're treated. You have to care about the people touching your food" (quoted in Paulas 2013). Like the work of the CIW, ROC's campaign has been featured in many of the publications that appeal to supporters of local/organic food, community food security and food justice, and Eric Schlosser wrote the forward for *Beyond the Kitchen Door*.

Neoliberalism has been unrelenting in its destruction of worker rights, wages and benefits. Indeed the breaking of prominent workers' strikes by Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher are often seen as moments in which neoliberalism became the dominant political economic philosophy in the US and UK (Harvey 2005). Moreover, Americans tend to think of ourselves as not as haves and have nots, but as haves and will haves, not as workers and owners but as owners and will-be-owners. The development of a worker consciousness has long been considered essential to the transformation of the political-economic system within which our food system exists.

In this way, the worker-based campaigns of the CIW and ROC directly challenge neoliberal policies and subjectivities. They encourage workers to identify as workers, and posit workers as worthy of livable wages, modest benefits, and more generally, decent lives. They demonstrate how businesses large and small are dependent on their workers in order to create sellable commodities, and how, without struggle, workers are not remunerated accordingly.

These worker campaigns do make use of the "market as movement" to build support, but the market is not their fundamental vessel for change. Both the CIW and ROC reward and publicize businesses that take the "high road. However, they are doing much more than creating alternatives and encouraging consumers to "vote with our dollars" in their favor. They also go after businesses engaging in egregious practices to demand they improve, using not only consumer choice but also demonstrations and lawsuits to achieve this. Moreover, these organizations go after the kind of policy change that will shift industry standards nationwide, making fair pay and treatment not only benefits that accrue to those lucky enough to work for high road employers, but to all workers throughout the food system.

Workers rights organizations are not the only ones who go after bad actors and use legislative campaigns to raise standards across the food system. Other organizations use the same tactics to restrict the use of pesticides and genetically modified foods.

### **Bad Actors**

Supporters of local/organic food mainly seek to create and support market-based alternative food systems, and community food security and food justice activists work to make these



alternatives accessible to low-income communities and communities of color. Other activists, however, work to restrict the use of harmful agribusiness products such as pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). While these campaigns do make use of the market, particularly when regulatory avenues fail, their collective campaigns challenge the neoliberal logic by restricting harmful practices rather than providing optional alternatives.

### *Methyl Iodide*

For years, methyl bromide was widely considered one of the most dangerous pesticides in US agriculture. A pre-plant soil fumigant best known for its use on California strawberries, it has long been associated with respiratory, kidney and neurological effects. (Baselt 2008).

Methyl bromide is also recognized as an ozone-depleting chemical, and was phased out in countries that are signatories to the Montreal Protocols. Agribusiness companies began to search for alternatives.

One prominent alternative was methyl iodide, developed by Arysta LifeScience Corporation. But many scientists and activists feared that it was even more toxic than methyl bromide. Not only is it listed on the California Proposition 65 list of carcinogens (methyl bromide is not), the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) found that it is toxic to fetal development and thyroid levels, and increases risk of miscarriage (Lim and Reed 2010). Both pesticides are particularly toxic for farmworkers and rural communities because of their ability to drift from application sites.

Despite these concerns, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved the pesticide in 2007. But California, where the pesticide would be used, has its own process. In 2010, Governor Schwarzenegger gave this approval, ignoring the advice of the scientific community, who wrote “use of this agent would result in exposures to a large number of the public and thus would have a significant adverse impact on the public health” (Friones et al 2010).

The following year, amidst investigation as to whether the approval process was improperly politicized, Governor Brown agreed to reconsider. Anti-pesticide groups like Californians for Pesticide Reform, Pesticide Watch, Earthjustice and the United Farm Workers began a campaign to convince him to deny approval.

The campaign was multi-pronged and multi-faceted, and according to Dana Perls, an organizer with Pesticide Watch, this was an important part of its success.

I think the reasons that the methyl iodide campaign was a success, and it took 8 or 9 years, were a couple of things. One was that there was so much clear science opposing

this chemical. But the other reasons was that there was a vey multi-pronged approach, so you had legislative and you had people working at the national and state level, and you had people working at the grassroots. The people who were going to be on the front lines were communicating with the people who were sitting behind closed doors.

First, there was standard political activity. Activists convinced 44 state legislators to sign on to a letter demanding Brown take action on this issue. A petition garnering more than 30,000 signatures was delivered to Brown by more than 100 community leaders.

Earthjustice and California Rural Legal Assistance filed a lawsuit against the California DPR challenging their approval of methyl iodide. Within the course of this lawsuit attorneys obtained the public release of documents substantiating that state officials had manipulated the scientific evidence in order to support approval, mixing and matching “risk assessment methodologies that are not interchangeable” (quoted in Urevich 2011).

There was also public protest and direct action. During one protest on the capital steps in Sacramento, activists donned moon suits and gas masks, and used dry ice to stage a mock fumigation. On the day that the first spraying occurred in Fresno County, community activists held a demonstration outside the county Agriculture Commissioner’s office. Activists also protested outside the offices of Arysta, urging the company to protect public health and the environment.

The campaign also promoted alternatives to chemically-intensive agriculture. Anti-pesticide activists highlighted the strength of organic strawberry production in California. For example, Jim Cochran, a 30-year veteran farmer, testified at the State Labor Employment Committee hearing that the chemical is unnecessary to successful agriculture.

After years of this campaign, Arysta pulled methyl iodide off the market, citing concerns about the fumigant’s “economic viability in the US marketplace”. This was a major victory for the anti-pesticide campaigners. In a statement headlined Si Se Puede, the United Farmworkers wrote “We did it! Through public pressure and supporting litigation ... the use of this dangerous poison has been limited... The UFW will stay vigilant to ensure Arysta does not bring the toxic back” (ufw.org). Perls, the previously described organizer, confirms this interpretation, noting that “the grassroots got so loud that there wasn’t any point in approving it.”

While this is certainly an important victory for the anti-pesticide community, it is worth noting that Arysta avoided a larger one. When it pulled methyl bromide, Arysta made null the above-described lawsuit, which was about to be decided. Alameda County Superior Court Judge Frank

Roesch had announced that he was about to decide against the manufacturer (Standen 2012). Had that decision been rendered, it would have affected the processes through which future pesticides would be registered. According to Perls, Arysta was getting pressure from other agribusiness companies to pull the product before that could occur. “If they lost the lawsuit, it would have huge implications for other pesticide companies and that would just have a crushing affect on the market. They gave up that one product in order to keep status quo of the process that was in their favor.”

Nonetheless, this campaign demonstrates the positive impact that collective campaigns can have, broadly protecting those who are most vulnerable to toxic pesticides, as well as the soil, air and water.

### *Genetically Modified Foods*

Globally, perhaps the largest collective agrifood campaign has been to regulate and restrict the use of genetically modified (GM) foods. Genetic modification involves the mutation, insertion or deletion of genes. Plants have been engineered for faster growth, resistance to pathogens, production of extra nutrients, and other purposes. Roughly 85% of US corn, 91% of US soybeans, and 88% of US cotton are genetically modified ([centerforfoodsafety.org](http://centerforfoodsafety.org)).

Opposition to genetically modified foods has long been a central issue for food sovereignty activists. GMOs promote increased centralization in agriculture, becoming another input to which access favors large, well-capitalized farmers. Food sovereignty activists like Vandana Shiva also argue that the seed supply is itself centralized, making it more difficult for farmers to access alternatives to non-GMO, non-hybrid seeds that they can save and reproduce. In this way, farmers are no longer in control of what is planted in their fields.

In Europe, anti-GMO activists created consumer campaigns and direct action aimed at shifting public opinion against the new technologies by characterizing it as “risky, unhealthy, and linked to the ills of industrial agriculture” (Schurman and Munro 2010, 86). They achieved bans and significant restrictions on many GM technologies, including the halting of new crop approvals by the European Commission. Many additional countries, particularly former colonies that export primarily to Europe, have observed these dynamics and chosen to forego GM foods as well (Paarlberg 2006, Herring and Roberts 2007).

The striking percentages of many US commodity crops that are genetically modified would suggest that activists have had little effect. In *Fighting for the Future of Food*, however, Rachel Schurman and William Munro draw on counterfactual logic to argue differently. Without anti-GMO activism, they claim, the technology would be much more widespread. US activists

succeeded in delaying the release of GM products such as rBGH and wheat, and have convinced fast food companies to forego the use of GM potato. Moreover, Schurman and Munro argue that activists have thwarted the development of new GM products by forcing biotech companies to factor boycotts, lawsuit and other political factors into the cost/benefit ratio through which they calculate new product development. US activists have also worked to support GMO restrictions in other nations, contributing to the creation of a global regulatory regime that governs trade in GMOs.

Of all the strategies discussed in this article, collective action campaigns such as the struggles against methyl iodide and GM foods counter neoliberalism most directly. Harvey writes that the role of the neoliberal state is “to be activist in creating a good business climate [and is therefore] necessarily hostile to all forms of social solidarity that put restraints on capital accumulation” (2005, 75-79). Activists opposing methyl iodide and GM foods urge the state to side instead with popular movements to protect public health and the environment. It is worth noting, however, that in the US, these campaigns have not been successful in compelling the state to do so. Rather, public opposition has used the threat of state sanctions to change the economic calculus through which companies decide which products to pursue.

One factor that Schurman and Munro cite in explaining why GMO restrictions were particularly hard to come by in the US was the lack of consumer interest. Compared to their European counterparts, US consumers were more concerned with price and convenience, and less concerned with food quality. This observation, however, is based on campaigns from the late 1990s and early 2000s, before the rise of US movements for local food, community food security and food justice. Schurman and Munro speculate that consumer campaigns against GMO foods will have wider appeal than they did a decade ago.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Restaurant Opportunity Center have successfully mobilized consumer campaigns, not to create alternatives, but to target bad actors and convince them to improve their practices. It seems possible that, as GM products such as wheat resume field trials, consumers will successfully mobilize against them. Consumers will also likely continue to play important roles in state campaigns to label GMOs, as they have in Maine and Washington.

### **Challenging Neoliberalism: Implications for Food Sovereignty**

Food sovereignty is rooted in the struggles of peasants in the global south to regain control over their food and agricultural systems in the face of neoliberal trade regimes. To this end, they blend support for small-scale agroecological production with opposition to the corporate food regime. Supporters of local/organic food share this opposition, and advocate for small-

scale, decentralized, local agroecology as an alternative to it. Community food security and food justice activists work to ensure that these alternatives are accessible to low-income communities and communities of color. But by relying on the “market as movement,” taking on some of the roles abandoned by the state, and fostering notions of the self-aligned with market logics, these movements also reproduce neoliberalism. Food sovereignty activists, on the other hand, openly confront neoliberal capitalism, providing a pathway through which the corporate food regime can be transformed (Holt-Giménez 2011).

The above-described strategies do not all directly confront neoliberalism directly but they push on it in ways the “market as movement” approach does not. Worker-ownership provides an alternative to capitalism without distinction between owners and laborers. Moreover, their use of workplace democracy provides a model for creating organizations that promote justice internally and externally. Workers rights campaigns advocate for those who are most harmed by the corporate food regime, and challenge a neoliberal state to accede to the demands of labor. They simultaneously make visible important dimensions of the corporate food regime too often ignored by US food activists. Lastly, policy campaigns restricting the power of agribusiness corporations most directly confront the power of neoliberal capital by attempting to mobilize the state to prioritize human and environmental health.

But what does this mean for food sovereignty, and particularly for its conceptual and political development? First, it creates roles for urban dwellers to contribute to food sovereignty as more than consumers. The majority of the world’s peoples now live in cities, the fastest growing of which are in the global south (Davis 2007). Many of these new migrants are former farmers forced from their land, the very scenario food sovereignty activists seek to prevent. They may, in this sense, be sympathetic to and well positioned to align themselves with the struggle for food sovereignty. Food sovereignty has established itself not only as a farmers movement but as a women’s movement, in that women’s full participation in society is a precondition for democratic control over the food system. Mandela Foods Co-op, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Restaurant Opportunity Center suggest that perhaps it is also a workers movement, in that workers need to have fair pay and good working conditions in order to participate as well. La Via Campesina has long been a leader in the struggles for landless workers, but in these movements, the goal is for land reform so that workers can return to peasant farming. The examples in this paper highlight the role of workers who will stay workers, but who nonetheless demand the right to participate in the definition and development of their food and agricultural systems. Perhaps, in addition to an end to all forms of violence against women, food sovereignty also means the fair pay and treatment of workers in all aspects of the food system. This would be one answer to the question of what a food sovereignty movement looks like beyond farmers.

Secondly, the corporate food regime is certainly global, but most of the agribusinesses that control and benefit from it are based in the United States. The examples described in this paper weaken the power of the corporate food regime where it lives. Globally, food sovereignty activists have certainly constrained the power of the corporate food regime, with campaigns against genetically modified foods serving as a prime example. Nonetheless, it seems likely that a stronger and multi-pronged movement to constrain agribusiness power in the country in which it is most often headquartered may have additional, positive global repercussions. For example, because many countries look to the US EPA's pesticide registry to decide their own regulations, activists' victory with regards to methyl iodide may have global repercussions. This is an important success in the global movement for food sovereignty.

Additionally, these campaigns may help to create stronger connections between US movements for local/organic food, community food security and food justice, and the global struggle for food sovereignty. Holt-Giminez (2011) has noted the potential for food justice to aid US food movements in transitioning to more radical approaches that can truly transform the corporate food regime. The examples in this paper push US food movements to question the centrality of capitalism and entrepreneurialism, particularly their ability to meet the food needs of low-income people. Instead, these examples embody visions of more cooperative and democratic food systems. In these visions, individuals can participate not only as farmers and eaters, but as class-conscious workers intent on collectively taking control of the means of production. This is certainly much more radical than starting green businesses.

This development of a working-class consciousness within the food movement may also radicalize it by creating cross-racial alliances around worker exploitation. It can help to create connections between largely Latin@, rural workers, predominantly black residents of food deserts, and the multi-racial (though mostly of color) workers in the restaurant industry. Organizations like the CIW and ROC have also successfully forged alliances with the predominantly white foodie community, convincing at least some of them that a truly sustainable food system also includes the fair pay and treatment of workers. Moreover, work is an issue that sidesteps some of the more problematic aspects of interracial alliances in the US food movement to date. A campaign around work would not involve bringing good food to others, and teaching them how to eat "properly," efforts that problematically posit more privileged groups as purveyors of proper food (Guthman 2008a). Campaigns against worker exploitation do not depend on how an individual eats, and may therefore create solidarity rather than resentment and othering. Cross-race and cross-class coalitions can not only help to radicalize US food movements, but can build the power necessary for policy campaigns aimed at restricting bad actors.

These campaigns, when successful, can change food system for everyone, not just those who opt in through consumption. Farmworkers and their communities, for example, face a host of health effects not because they fail to eat organic food, but because they live, work and play in close proximity to the toxins beloved by corporate agribusiness. Methyl iodide, however, is not among these toxins, because workers and others have created an economic climate so hostile that their producers choose not to release them. Worker's rights campaigns have also recognized the importance of national policy, as can be seen in ROC's work to raise the tipped minimum wage. While raising wages and eliminating singular pesticides is certainly reformative and not transformational, what is radical about these campaigns is that they will restrict what the corporate food regime can and cannot do. By changing agribusiness practices rather than creating alternatives, these campaigns ensure that their benefits will accrue to all workers, all communities and all eaters.

Efforts that challenge neoliberalism in the US have much to offer to the global movement for food sovereignty. They broaden food sovereignty's focus on small producers to also include the struggles of workers, and provide an opportunity to target the corporate food regime the nation that has been its most powerful ally. In return, challenging neoliberalism can help movements for local/organic food, community food security and food justice in the US to create a stronger alliance with food sovereignty activists worldwide. This can radicalize the US movements through a stronger emphasis on participatory democracy, highlighting issues ripe for cross-racial alliances, and building collective campaigns that go beyond the "market as movement" to pursue benefits that do not depend on an individual's ability to access and buy sustainable food. These efforts can bring all of these food movements closer challenging the corporate food regime in a way that can create real transformative change.



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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/index.html>

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

[Alison Hope Alkon](#) is assistant professor and chair of the sociology department at the University of the Pacific in Stockton California. Her research examines the ways that local and organic food systems shape and are shaped by racial and economic identities and inequalities. She is co-editor of *Cultivating Food Justice: Race Class and Sustainability* and author of *Black White and Green: Farmers Markets, Race and the Green Economy*, as well as over a dozen articles and chapters on this topic.