



PROGRAM IN  
**Agrarian Studies**  
YALE UNIVERSITY

# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
YALE UNIVERSITY  
SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2013

Conference Paper #48

**Between empty lots and open pots:  
understanding the rise of urban food  
movements in the USA**

**Jessica Clendenning and Wolfram Dressler**

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# Between empty lots and open pots: understanding the rise of urban food movements in the USA

Jessica Clendenning and Wolfram Dressler

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## Conference paper for discussion at:

### **Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue**

International Conference

September 14-15, 2013

## Convened by

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## Abstract

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As world food prices threaten expanding urban populations, there is a greater need for poor people to have access to and claims over how and where food is produced and distributed in cities. This is especially the case in marginalised urban settings. The global movement for food sovereignty has been one attempt to reclaim rights and participation in the food system and challenge corporate food regimes. However, food sovereignty is often considered a rural issue for developing countries when, increasingly, its demands for fair food systems and rights are intensely urban in form and function. Through interviews with scholars, activists, non-governmental and grassroots organizations in Oakland and New Orleans, we examine the extent to which food sovereignty has progressed in a US urban context as a concept, strategy and practice. We contrast and compare food sovereignty to other dominant US social movements such as food justice, and find that while many organisations do not draw on food sovereignty explicitly, the understandings and motives behind urban food activism are similar across movements as local actors draw on elements of each movement in practice. Overall, however, because of the different histories, geographic contexts, and relations to state and capital, food justice and food sovereignty differ as strategies and approaches. We conclude that the substance of food sovereignty in the US urban context is largely limited by neoliberal framing and political dampening, mainstreaming the approach and lessening its radical framework.

## Introduction

New global challenges have arisen in feeding poor people in rapidly expanding urban areas. Cities currently hold more than half of the world's population. In the next decade, an estimated 3.5 billion people (FAO 2010) largely from rural populations will seek wage labour and income from service industries in sprawling cities (Sassen 1990; Bello 2009). Confounding the challenge of food production in such urban settings are the mounting pressures of high oil prices, climate change and greater demands for land and water in 'built' landscapes. Urban food access and production is further complicated by a mix of social, political and economic marginalization, making equitable urban food production a challenging local priority. In this context, the challenge has not been growing enough food *per se*, but rather producing and distributing food in ways accessible and affordable for the growing urban poor (Weis 2007). The millions of poor who now reside in urban areas remain hungry due to their inability to pay for food or access it through other means due to constraints in society and the modern food system (Patel 2007). Indeed, recent food price spikes show the vulnerability of the urban poor to a range of constraints in food production, access and use. The food crisis of 2007/2008 and 2010/2011—involving an increase in price and decrease in supply—was partly precipitated by

rural commodity speculation and boom crop production, but was felt acutely in cities where food self-sufficiency is often costly and difficult to attain (Lagi et al. 2011; Bello 2009; Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009).

Yet urban populations are becoming increasingly food insecure in places least expected. In particular, the 2008 food spikes also priced 50 million Americans out of the food market (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009: 62). In the USA, one finds expanding ‘food deserts’ near cities where inequitable access to and use of quality land and produce is on the rise. In countless US inner-cities, people live in ‘food deserts’ devoid of green-space and fairly priced goods, requiring the urban poor travel far for affordable fresh food (Ibid.).<sup>1</sup> As the number of urban poor expand, so too has urban food insecurity in the US, with 15% of city dwellers being food insecure (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2011). In response to growing food insecurity, urban food movements are on the rise, demanding greater access and equal rights to food in cities. Whether through empty lots or open pots, urban consumers, families, activists and NGOs place increasing value on how their food is produced where farms and fertile soils were once abundant. This paper examines the emerging trend of urban food movements responding to limited access to costly produce in the face of economic insecurity and scarce land in urban settings; whether through backyard or community gardening, local markets, or community supported agriculture (CSAs). These urban food movements sit within regional networks such as food and farm councils and farm-to-school initiatives, and global movements like Slow Food and Via Campesina, which bring together various actors in cities across continents. Each food movement has different strategies and practices that aim to change conditions in urban settings, but all share common visions of an alternative, more equal food system.

This paper goes further by examining to what extent the pressures and constraints of the current capitalist food system have (or have not) enabled a ‘food sovereignty’ approach to form in select cities of the United States. We focus on US urban food movements for two reasons: first, the US brings a host of contradictions, which makes it an interesting and ironic case study. As a rich, industrialised and ‘leading’ food producer, the US has both hunger and health problems (Weis 2007). And, like many urban centers across the world, US cities are growing. And as cities grow and markets expand, the poorer people priced out of the (food) markets in the urban US, share many common ties in race, class, and injustice (Schiavoni 2009). Second, we focus on US urban food movements in order to question how the movement for food sovereignty works in the urban North as compared to countries in the Global South, from where it originated. We focus on food sovereignty because the approach and its activism is

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<sup>1</sup> More than 80 percent of North Americans live in cities, and recent US Census Bureau statistics show that poverty in the US is increasing, from 15.3 percent in 2010 to 15.9 percent in 2011, affecting 49 million people (Bishaw 2012: 1).

seemingly absent within a US urban context. In order for the global movement of food sovereignty to progress, the extent, significance and connection to urban food sovereignty movements, especially in the US, must be understood in socio-political context. We do so by examining how NGOs, activists and farmers perceive 'food sovereignty' by situating their struggles to overcome constraints in accessing affordable, healthy food by growing it themselves in urban green spaces in the US. We delve further into the concept by examining how Northern academics and civil society actors define the process and characteristics of food sovereignty as a *concept* and *strategy*. We then set this discussion against what is happening *in practice* throughout US urban food movements in terms of 'food justice' and broader transnational movements for food sovereignty in the Global South.

## Methods

Through interviews and site visits with academics, activists and farmers engaged in food movements, we considered two cities, Oakland and New Orleans, to examine how and why US urban food activism unfolds as broader concepts, strategies and practices on the ground. Both cities share similar economic and social injustices, including violence and police brutality, and retain older and newer urban food movements. The lead author visited Oakland because of its long history in activism around the environment, structural racism, and food production. She visited New Orleans because in the post-Katrina years, the city has seen a surge of urban food movements. In both areas, grass roots actors and local urban communities are gaining new awareness of and practices concerning how food is produced in their nearby places. Our interviews aimed to explore the purpose of these food movements, and to examine how they relate to food sovereignty, a 'Southern' approach that confronts corporate, capitalist control of agriculture. Through local interviews, we then began to contrast local perspectives of food sovereignty to the more popular movement, food justice, in US urban centers. We consider what, if any, parallels exist between these two concepts in US food movements.

In these two cities and their surrounds, the lead author used snowball sampling to interview 32 key informants involved in different sectors of US urban agriculture. She interviewed a mix of ten academics-activists to investigate the history of food sovereignty in the US, and twenty-two NGO members, grass-roots activists, urban farmers and community organisations<sup>2</sup> in Oakland and New Orleans. The latter interviews aimed to understand and situate their views, strategies and practices of urban food activism around the term, food sovereignty. We approached urban

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<sup>2</sup> This paper uses various terms to refer to organisations that participate in urban agriculture. These include NGOs, grass roots organizations, community organizations, farmers, etc. The main difference we draw on these types of actors are their establishment and size within the community. NGOs are legally established and grassroots organizations are registered but often more informal.

food movements by looking at their actors, missions and approaches within cities, asking questions around political activism and understandings in food sovereignty or food justice. Naturally, this would shape and limit the answers of the informants to the keywords at hand. In the paper, we use 'food justice' and 'food sovereignty' as nouns to signal a *movement*; and adjectives to signal the *type* and *approach* of movements.

### Securing food access in urban areas

The 2007/2008 food price crisis underlined the global problem of food production, distribution and access. A 2008 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report found that the main factors driving demand were rising incomes and consumption patterns of China, Brazil and India, along with the increased costs of agricultural inputs, land used for feed and fuel, and climate changes pricing the poor out of the market (Martine et al. 2008). Sassen (1990) theorises on this trend, noting how global economic forces play out as local social costs. In the US, for example, these effects are seen in urban areas, where a disproportionate number of poor blacks, Hispanics and minorities live in (often) unsubsidized housing and depend on low wage employment (in service-based and/or informal economies) that makes purchasing costly food difficult (as subject to inflation) (Ibid.). Urban areas also have high food prices due to infrastructure and transportation costs, with most urban poor relying on rice and wheat, the very products that soared in cost in 2008 (Martine et al. 2008: 6). Where only two percent of the US population still farms and very few, if any, farm extensively in cities (or areas around cities), poverty has become the main constraint in peoples' ability to access healthy food in rural and urban areas of the USA (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009).

In response to global food injustices, social movements like food sovereignty have gained momentum and influence through NGOs, policy arenas, and social movements over the last two decades (Wittman 2011). Questioning the politics of production and distribution, food sovereignty pulls the how and why of food access to the centre stage. The 2007 Nyéléni International Forum on Food Sovereignty defined food sovereignty as:

*... the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and culturally appropriate methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations... (Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty 2007: 673-674).*

Taking root with peasant farmers in South and Central America, food sovereignty's meaning

and terms have spread mostly to farmers in rural areas of Asia, South America and Africa as a response and alternative to global food trading regimes. Through activist meetings, workshops and protests across continents, the discourse of food sovereignty has adapted to changing social contexts and political economic climates, ‘taking bigger picture politics and placing it in local action’<sup>3</sup>. However, home to where big agriculture began and trade policies stem, the United States’ food sovereignty movement remains comparatively quiet in urban areas where the barriers to affordable, quality food remain high for the urban poor.

In this paper, we consider how the rise of global food movements reflects Polanyi’s (1944) ‘double movement’: a process where actors in society respond to unregulated markets going unchecked because of capitalism’s capacity to commodify and ‘dis-embed’ social relations, particularly in terms of land and labour. Often pressured by NGOs and other civil society groups, state governments will respond to the excesses of capitalist privatization by regulating markets, maintaining control for periods of time, until new periods of expansion and increased consumption resume. In this context, we relate the notion of ‘double movement’ to the impact of capitalist food systems and the reactionary rise of urban food movements to capitalist food production systems.

We use the ‘double-movement’ and food sovereignty frame to examine and question the socio-political nature of US urban food movements. The rise of urban agriculture in the US may well represent small attempts at social change to “build” and “re-embed food systems” (Friedmann and McNair 2008: 257). Investigating the extent to which US food movements relate to global food sovereignty movements is crucial, because it sheds light on how politically radical national food movements are (or are not) to the corporate food regime, exposing what strategies and approaches work in the ‘in-between spaces’ of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002). Rather than ‘measuring’ how much US urban food movements build upon international food sovereignty movements, we examine to what extent US urban food movements employ food sovereignty concepts, strategies and practices. We consider further how these actions might enable future, significant connections between global food sovereignty movements.

### **Food Regimes, Capitalist Agriculture and Food Sovereignty**

Despite on-going investments in technological fixes for big agriculture, global statistics show that most of the world’s poor are not being fed, with the number of people in hunger expected to pass one billion (FAO 2010). How exactly were such conditions created, where major populations struggle to eat, while others ‘struggle’ with surplus and overproduction?

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<sup>3</sup> Madeline Fairbairn, New York City, 25 July 2011.

Friedmann and McMichael answer such questions through the notion of ‘food regimes’. They illustrate how growing capital and international trade undercut developing economies, ‘reconstructing consumption relations as part of the process of capital accumulation – with particular consequences for agricultural production’ (1989: 95). From 1870 to 1914, the first food regime organised and specialised trade among European countries and ‘settler’ states across the hemispheres, where primary and processed resources (e.g., wheat and meat) were exported from the latter to the former (Ibid). In return, settler states imported valuable manufactured goods, labour and capital from Europe, often facilitating resource extraction and agricultural production (Ibid: 96). Such trade dimensions worked on an extractive core and periphery basis, building the financial and political power within advanced countries while stagnating the development of agricultural production in the Global South (Friedmann 1992).

The second food regime formed thirty years later, extending from the 1950s to the 1970s. The US became the main trade actor between post-colonial states, redirecting the flow of food from the South to North, with the transfer of agricultural surplus to developing countries (initially as food aid) (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Post-colonial states saw their agricultural exports become more specialised and manufactured, destined for distant markets, while their imports were surplus wheat from (subsidized) US overproduction. The intensification of mono-cropped wheat production and specialisation through trade marked the shift to agro-industrialisation and intense meat production (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2009). This period signaled a widening rift between land and people as well as nations and cultural crops, intensifying the commodification of land and labour. Rather than producing for domestic populations, nations were now producing (Green Revolution) high-yielding cash crops (e.g., Cavendish banana, pineapple) for global markets, squeezing farmers and farmland for surplus accumulation. Peasant lands were consolidated to facilitate transnational food production, just as plots on marginal lands were subdivided to quell resistance and unrest (McMichael 2009). In time as land and people became urban, most food was bought instead of grown. Each successive food regime enabled the US and Britain to gain political and economic power to ‘... determine not only what will be produced and where it will go, but also who will profit from agriculture and who will be vulnerable to food crises’ (Winders 2009: 316).

The third (corporate) food regime, from the 1980s to the present, marked a shift to intensive global and national deregulation of food production. In developing countries, the dismantling of tariffs, price guarantees, and extension systems (as part of structural adjustment and free trade agreements) lead to dramatic reductions in domestic food surplus (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). The basis of this involved Northern governments, corporations, and institutions providing uneven subsidies and trade policies to prop up massive cereal and grain production



for export as feed and food aid, disabling local markets and livelihoods near and far. The North continues to import a range of high quality fruits, vegetables and meat, forcing Southern countries to shape a disproportionate amount of their agricultural sectors for export (McMichael 2009). In the South and North, this regime involved the accumulation of large tracts of land and capital (usually without extensive, direct farm labour) for the intensive, mechanised mass-production of food, fuel and feed for both domestic and international production and consumption (McMichael 2009). Concurrently, the expansion of the agro-food trade and monopoly of agrofood corporations led to the super-marketisation of countries such as the USA and increasingly, India, China and Brazil (McMichael 2005, 2009).

In time, multiple factors have increased the price and amount of food available in the global food supply chain, driving record profits for food corporations, but pricing out marginalised people and hungry peasant farmers. In the midst of record food surplus, global food prices have risen 83 percent in recent years partly due to high cost inputs such as oil and gas for growing industrial feed and fuel demands, and rising consumer demands (i.e., meat/dairy products) in middle income countries (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). As the inputs (and input cost) for industrial agriculture are on the rise, basic food items are becoming inaccessible for a greater number of people, either through price or physical reach (Martine et al. 2008). In pronounced fashion, the localized impacts of the third food regime stoked global food riots amongst landed and landless peasants, demanding equitable access to and use of food---actions that increasingly extended to urban regions (Magdoff and Tokar 2010).

### Linking the consequences of capitalist agriculture and urban spaces

The food regimes' marriage with Northern industry has changed the diets and livelihoods of smallholder farmers facing the economic and environmental pressures of large-scale land acquisition and agriculture (Friedmann 1992). Rigg (2006: 180) summarises how the food regimes have impacted southern livelihoods through loss of profits in smallholder farming (through moves towards industrialisation, surplus dumping (Public Law 480) and declining terms of trade); non-farm opportunities (through foreign investment, manufacturing and export-led development policies); and environmental degradation (industrial cropping, non-farm activities, deforestation), among others. As a result of industrialised production and agro-exporting policies heavily influenced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's (WB) policies, the FAO estimates that upwards of 30 million peasants have lost land, and so often move to urban centres in squalid ghettos where food insecurity increases (McMichael 2005; Madeley 2000 as cited in McMichael 2009: 154). The FAO estimates that currently one-third of the world's population live in slums and informal settlements, often coming from rural areas as farmers, with this number only increasing as the current uses of land and trade policies

continue (2009).

Yet, often forgotten is that capitalist agriculture also impacts the places from where it originates. Similar to peasant farmers in the South, small and medium-sized US farmers have been unable to make profits and compete with heavily subsidised corporate farms, making today's commodity prices lower than 1970 prices, while farm inputs and cost of living have risen (Patel 2007). The capitalist drivers of these food regimes have made small farming increasingly difficult amidst growing support for agro-industrialism and its associated transport and production infrastructure. In fact, by 1999 farms larger than 500 hectares controlled 79 percent of all US farmland, with the remaining small family farmers subject to precipitous decline (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). At the same time, urban sprawl has eaten up prime agricultural land, justified by low rent, cheap housing and specialised industrial zones that cater to mass food production and distribution (expanding further into suburban areas) (Bengston et al. 2003; York and Munroe 2010), impacting the environmental and social health of cities and communities. Moreover, as cities expand, capital, finance, and wealth is often spatially concentrated in inner city areas –fashion districts, financial districts, and culinary areas– as centres of intense production and exchange. The centralization of capital in these areas, dramatically increases ground-rents and cost of living, either attracting those able to handle such living costs or squeezing out those who cannot, due to a lack of affordability (Smith 2008). The poor in or near inner city areas face higher property values, inflation and discrimination (often associated with gentrification), and are often forced to move to lower cost, peripheral areas subject to ghettoization. In these spaces, the poor must contend with limited employment opportunities, few social welfare provisions, social ostracization, and poor health under the vestiges of the free market. The consequences for food security have been pronounced. Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2011) note, for example, that those inner city 'high poverty' households whose rental costs were subject to mounting market pressures (e.g., property values, inflation) had less 'after-shelter' income available to purchase sufficient levels of quality food. They found that 'market families' with housing costs that consumed more than 30% of their income were at greater risk of food insecurity, whereas those with housing subsidies were at lower odds (Ibid: 284). As the inner city poor are squeezed into marginal living areas, they remain at significant risk of food insecurity, poor health and illness, rendering close to 15% of US households food insecure in 2008 (Ibid: 284), and a shocking 17% of children and adolescents being obese due to mass produced, cheap and easily accessible fatty foods (Weis 2007; Ogden and Carroll 2010). As the urban poor must travel further to access better quality foods in peri-urban areas, they also experience structural racism and violence. As one food activist, Brahm Ahmadi of Oakland's People's Grocery notes, "...it is easier to purchase a gun than it is to buy a fresh tomato" (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009: 160).

## Challenging the third food regime: the emergence of food movements

As the industrialised food system often impacts negatively upon land and people, a growing network of people have responded to these injustices. *The Nation* marked it as the 'global food movement' that links "...Florida farm workers and Indian villagers... [all fighting]...a failing frame: one that defines [locally] successful agriculture and the solution to hunger as better technologies increasing yields of specific crops" (Lappe 2011: 1). The multiple responses to the corporate food regime reflect movements seeking local and regional change or stability, further defined by the language and actors that use them (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011: 114-115). Building on this perspective, we examine how the similarities and differences between urban food sovereignty and food justice movements reflect the social, political and economic contexts of the areas and people in which they arose: marginal urban spaces.

## Food security to food sovereignty

Food security grew out of the FAO in 1974, as the second food regime was ending, and food supply constraints and famine concerns emerged globally (Fairbairn 2010). In many ways, the discourse of food security –born out of the FAO's World Food Conference– emerged within the post-war food regime that led to the same problems it sought to address. Initially, a state-centric view of food security meant that food production and allocation was based on 'regulated' markets with 'reasonable' prices that would ensure 'macro-level food availability' (Ibid: 22), suggesting food security was part of national economic development. Soon, however, food security discourse took a neoliberal turn. In the early 1980s, the US dominated the new world (food order) by directing trade channels in grain and feed, reassuring concerned states in the market's ability to redistribute world food supplies. The notion of food security soon became increasingly governed by, and embedded within, market-based mechanisms that promised to efficiently and equitably allocate produce, thereby reducing food insecurity (McMichael 2005, 2009). The prospect of food security now involved supporting 'unconstrained' individual choice and market dynamics that would produce food optimally (as commodities) in line with liberal trade policies (Fairbairn 2010).

However, international actors advocating for food security development measures (e.g., FAO, Consultative Group for International Agriculture Research (CGIAR), International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and other aid institutions) soon recognised that the provision of 'food security' required much more work than governments and markets could offer in reallocating food supplies (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Consequently, in 1996, the FAO revised food security's meaning to encompass the physical and economic needs of citizens, communities and states. In doing so, however, as Patel (2009: 665) points out, the FAO

“...avoided discussing the social control of the food system”. As a result, global ‘food security’ discourse persisted in line with neoliberal doctrine, emphasizing market orientation over state self-sufficiency. The donor community, government circles and some grass roots organizations have adopted a similar philosophy toward food security.

Food movement activist and author Raj Patel describes 'food sovereignty' as a term “...born out of peasant struggle [that]...comes from a particular trajectory of being something food security is not.<sup>4</sup>” In response to the inadequacies of food security and its neoliberal leanings, food sovereignty took root in the 1990s as rural farmers in the Global South felt the pressures of producing for world agriculture. Through trade schemes like the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture, Southern markets were subjected to global demands, destabilising countries’ sovereign abilities to produce for their own people (McMichael 2005). In the process of sustained dispossession and production devaluation, peasant farmer groups organised politically, and in 1993 Via Campesina was born. Via Campesina introduced ‘food sovereignty’ to challenge whether ‘food security’ could really be achieved as it failed to address the political economy of state trade policies and the global food system. Patel (2009) states that Via Campesina’s definition of food sovereignty re-legitimises the idea of ‘food security’ “... in international discourse by making claims on rights and democracy...” over food production (665).

Since the mid-1990s, the food sovereignty concept has spread as a global movement where today, Via Campesina “comprises about 150 local and national organisations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Altogether, it represents about 200 million farmers...<sup>5</sup>” Other international groups have also joined the movement including the People’s Food Sovereignty Network and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (Wittman et al. 2010). Recent international forums, such as the 2007 International Forum on Food Sovereignty in Nyeleni, Mali, and most recently, the international La Via Campesina conference in Jakarta, Indonesia, demonstrate how the movement has grown in influence over the past twenty years.

Within US food activism, however, the food sovereignty movement has been slow to spread influence. Holt-Giménez stated that food sovereignty was “...a term that doesn’t rally people in the US like it does in the South.<sup>6</sup>” While the corporate food regime is most evident in the US, similar radical struggles against it (as in the Global South) have not appeared to the same extent.

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<sup>4</sup> Raj Patel, San Francisco, 26 July 2011.

<sup>5</sup> La Via Campesina’s website:

[http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44](http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44)

<sup>6</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.

Yet in a place where eighty percent of the population lives in urban areas (WHO 2011) and money buys healthy food and access, the question begs as to why food sovereignty has gained such little traction in the country.

### US food movements

Inequality and injustice mirroring race and class lines were (and are) key catalysts for US urban food movements. As US cities expanded with infrastructure and industry, green spaces were built upon, and lower cost areas were filled in by racially marginalised minorities. As Piven and Cloward (1977: 257-258) noted, after World War II, that large numbers of African Americans moved to cities for work, leading many poor blacks to be “shut out of the system, progressing from slave labour to cheap labour to no labour at all”. Today, African-Americans and Hispanics populate many low-income areas of US cities that lack access to basic social, educational and health services, including places for affordable fresh food. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010: 43) note a pervasive trend of limited access to fresh food that relates directly to “health related disparities based on race, ethnicity and income” in communities across the US (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2011), otherwise known as ‘grocery gaps’ and ‘food deserts’. In a country of ‘abundance’, fifteen percent are still hungry and food insecure with blacks and Hispanics bearing much of this burden (Patel 2009; Bishaw 2012).

In response to a food system that serves the white and wealthy, US food justice movements arose to address the social and economic inequities that shaped low-income urban communities’ access to affordable, healthy food. Mares and Alkon (2012: 15) argue that “more than any other strain of the food movement, US food justice activists mobilise at the grassroots level to dismantle the classist and racist structural inequalities that are manifest in the consumption, production, and distribution of food.” Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011: 124) describe it as “...possibly the largest and fastest growing grassroots expression of the food movement.” Food justice grew from US civil rights and environmental justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Mares and Alkon 2012; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011), and in Oakland there are historical roots with the Black Panthers. Many food justice organisations use concepts such as empowerment, self-reliance and local food systems to promote leadership and economy building in marginalised communities, particularly in urban settings (Ibid). The strategies of many urban food justice programs include rural-urban food buying programs, CSAs, and urban agriculture and farmers’ markets programs that link low-income communities to fresh food sources. These strategies are increasingly popular across the US, with farmer markets seeing a 17% increase from 2010 to 2011 (USDA 2011). While these local strategies are positive for linking farmers to urban communities, how they address ‘justice’ and bigger political issues are still questioned. By using market-based strategies, researchers find that

many food justice movements re-create similar, less accessible food options, but only as ‘alternative’ schemes (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2008; Allen and Guthman 2006). Or they “conversely ignore the ways that racial and economic privileges pervade both conventional and alternative food systems” (Alkon and Mares (2012: 4). In this context, as a response, we ask to what extent food sovereignty relates to food justice and the broader context of US urban food movements.

### Relating food sovereignty and food justice in US urban food movements

In practice, the US food justice movement mobilises communities to solve local problems, which Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) characterise as both its strength and weakness. While food justice strategies positively bring some community development initiatives with a fresh food/urban agriculture approach, many strategies still fail to address the bigger, structural and political issues that define who has access to food and who does not. Moreover, as food justice initiatives use market-based strategies that attract white consumers, the power over access and control remains with the privileged (Alkon and McCullen 2010; Allen 2008; Guthman 2009). The overall weakness of US food justice movements when compared to food sovereignty, is reflected in how locally-based strategies do not engage with the bigger politics of the corporate food regime that governs urban access to affordable, healthy food choices (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Instead, food justice strategies simply ‘work around’ the larger food system in small ways to provide communities food access. As Alkon and Mares find, “none of the US based discourses [food justice] engage with global food politics to the degree food sovereignty activists have” (2011: 5).

Given its historical roots, food sovereignty’s approach is much more political, directly challenging the corporate food regime for structural change to the international (and national) food systems. Via Campesina provides a hopeful example and possible answer. In contrast to food justice, their movement for food sovereignty has influentially spread across countries in a ‘boomerang pattern’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Friedmann and McNair 2008), using international allies and networks to strengthen and legitimise domestic movements. However, as Edelman (2008) notes, food sovereignty movements also remain challenged in facilitating bigger, structural changes to expanding international trade and finance. Edelman states that<sup>7</sup>:

*... boomerang strategies work best when the government being pressured actually has power of decision over the policy domain with which the people doing the pressuring are concerned and when the opponents are able to gain*

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Marc Edelman, New York City, 14 November 2011.

*mastery over the technical questions and significant legitimacy as critics in the eyes of the public and of opinion-makers. This is a tall order. For trade, investment and macroeconomic policies, the situation is more complicated than for human rights or environmental ones. The former are harder to understand and communicate about than the latter. It is more difficult to claim expertise as well.*

The quote above encapsulates the difficulties of integrating the international food sovereignty movement with US food justice strategies. We explore below the context, conditions and constraints of food sovereignty finding broader traction in US urban food movements.

### Food sovereignty in the urban USA: concepts, strategies and practice

#### *Assumptions and associations of food sovereignty*

To examine how food sovereignty is interpreted in a northern urban context, we interviewed several key actors engaging and informing food sovereignty *as a concept* in academic and civil society settings. Hannah Wittman, food sovereignty scholar, argues that food sovereignty is a complex and ambiguous idea with political barriers, because it is “... too radical—it scares the government away, they [North Americans] see it as too difficult to frame because it is big... food sovereignty is not as general [as food security], it needs a more localised action plan and there is no guidebook.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, David Tracey, a writer on urban agriculture from Vancouver, describes some assumptions and tangled understandings around the food sovereignty language, noting that, “sovereignty itself is hard to define...” and “there are some reactions to the labels of food sovereignty as French! Or socialist!”<sup>9</sup> These statements indicate that the concept and language of food sovereignty is ‘extreme’ by demanding too much of a change that is not easy to grasp, and is not well understood by many Northern audiences. The deeper question here is why do Northern reactions make assumptions about food sovereignty being ‘too radical’ or ‘socialist’, whereas elsewhere the term (and its ideology) has widespread, global support?

Raj Patel begins to answer this question when he describes the origins of food sovereignty. He says it is “... a term born out of peasant struggle and from a particular trajectory of being something food security is not...”<sup>10</sup> This trajectory, reflected on earlier, was about addressing the rights of people and nations to have rights and choices in the production and distribution of their food that is non-exploitative, particularly in terms of tenurial security. Even Northern

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Wittman, Vancouver, 26 July 2011.

<sup>9</sup> David Tracey, Vancouver, 19 July 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Raj Patel, San Francisco, 26 July 2011.

actors, Patel states, have *not found* it useful to use the words ‘food sovereignty’, though their approach is often similar. He states that<sup>11</sup>:

*“the US partners from La Via Campesina didn’t find it useful to use the term in the North American context... their terms for food sovereignty were all context dependent, just about rights of taking over the food system.”*

But what is different about the North American context that prevents ‘food sovereignty’ from being well understood and incorporated into food movement? Many food movement scholars state that the concept of food sovereignty has not matched the interests of America’s poor, urban communities. Holt-Giménez, for example, explains that “... [food sovereignty] tended to be a white concept that underserved communities didn’t hear about... We have the US Food Sovereignty Alliance... [but] they aren’t from the neighbourhoods, they are white, so there are a lot of barriers to cross.<sup>12</sup>” Dr. Alison Alkon, Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of the Pacific, adds: “Food sovereignty [in North American context] takes the focus away from poor communities of colour in the cities which food justice comes out of and puts it on the ‘romanticisation’ of poor peasants in the Global South... [and] this is a depoliticising move.<sup>13</sup>” While Northern organisations like the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) reflect similar goals as Via Campesina, the food sovereign approach changes meaning in a US context as it is adopted by mainstream organisations, making food sovereignty, as a concept, fit into less racial and a more socialised framework.

Instead, US food movements have adopted a framework that addresses racial politics and equality in access to and use of food. Holt-Giménez explains that the reason for this is because initially, a key part of food sovereignty was about being ‘sovereign’ from capital, at least in South America, which is difficult to translate in a North American context. In the urban north, he argues, “...people don’t understand that there ...they think the state works in their interest and they don’t understand that the state and capital are mutually constructed.<sup>14</sup>” Food sovereignty in a US context gets lost in translation, where state power and capital are not tied with access to food. Instead, In the Global North, people’s expectations of the state to provide fair and equal rights is one reason why Holt-Giménez explains ‘food justice’, as opposed to food sovereignty, is more popular in US food movements. He concludes: “food justice because they expect the state to give them that. I think this is a fundamental ideological piece of why food

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Alkon, Oakland, 1 August 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.



sovereignty doesn't resonate in the US.<sup>15</sup>”

## Strategies

On the surface, food sovereignty and food justice have two different histories and problems. Food justice confronts problems of racial and class inequality, while food sovereignty confronts problems of capitalist agriculture (Patel 2011; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). What, then, are the strategies by which these movements confront local rights around urban food access? What are the main differences and similarities?

Historically, the strategies of the food justice and food sovereignty movements began on two separate paths. Holt-Giménez explains that “food sovereignty at the beginning was always about production [not consumption]. Whereas food justice was about consumption and lack of food access...<sup>16</sup>”. Annie Shattuck, Food First policy analyst, pointed out a missing piece from US food justice movements: “I don't think the food movement in the US understands labour or the role of the state, I think those are fundamentally under-emphasised sectors...<sup>17</sup>” Holt-Giménez identified further that the “the missing piece in food sovereignty is race. Food justice does that. You won't get anywhere in the [US] food movement unless you talk about race.<sup>18</sup>”

Alkon describes the difference she sees in the two approaches: “It's [food justice] weak point is not directly dealing with the status quo structures. Via Campesina [referring to food sovereignty] tries to straddle that line by dealing with the current structures but also making their own path.<sup>19</sup>” Not questioning status quo structures leads many US food movements [like food justice] to reproduce similar ‘market approach’ strategies. Alkon says that, “Where the US food movement [most often food justice] falls short is they say we cannot work through policy we have to work through markets. When they work through markets they automatically favour people who have more money – either through access or money.<sup>20</sup>”

However, many respondents also shared that there were similar strategies and actors between food sovereignty and food justice. Christina Schiavoni, former Director of the Global Movements program at WhyHunger in New York City, relates that, “Something powerful about food sovereignty is that it comes from people most impacted from the injustices of the food system...those people and communities who are disenfranchised or marginalised and in the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Annie Shattuck, Oakland, 3 August 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Alison Alkon, Oakland, 1 August 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Alkon, Oakland, 1 August 2011.

‘food deserts’.<sup>21</sup>” Schiavoni argues that in many urban areas there are common characteristics between people and contexts of the food justice and food sovereignty movements: “When you look at the populations in [US] urban areas it turns out a good chunk of them are immigrants from other places displaced from their land... What kind of relations created these circumstances to begin with was the same landscape that created the food sovereignty movement.<sup>22</sup>” For instance, the Black Panthers, a movement identified with the roots of food justice, was also a movement practicing food sovereignty. Patel notes “they [Black Panthers] addressed food sovereignty without working in agriculture because they wanted their kids to have good food in school...”<sup>23</sup> Holt-Giménez adds “the Black Panthers started the free breakfast program on their own but their movement talked about health, land, police brutality, etc. and food was one small part of it. Gardens are good, but we also have to talk about other issues.”<sup>24</sup>

These interviews thus show that in each movement, strategies and designs can merge along certain points, regardless of their labels and history. For example, Patel states that “People I have met in Detroit and Cleveland have been saying they are curious to learn about the term [food sovereignty], and this brings importance for food sovereignty in the movements from rural to urban...”<sup>25</sup> There is also the potential of what food justice activists feel they can learn from the food sovereignty movement. Schiavoni connects the common characteristics between actors in rural and urban food movements, by stating that “the most obvious allies and partners are populations in urban areas that are equally disenfranchised and facing many injustices...these injustices are connected to issues faced in the rural context...<sup>26</sup>”, bridging social connections between food movements of the urban North and rural South.

### Locating ‘Practice’ in Oakland and New Orleans

Oakland is a city marked by lines of inequality, where neighbourhoods like West Oakland have “... 30,000 residents, thirty-six convenience and liquor stores and a single supermarket” (People’s Grocery, as cited in Patel 2007: 250). Not surprisingly, the same ‘food desert’ neighbourhoods of Oakland that gave rise to the historic Black Panthers movement, are now home to many ghost towns which sit opposite to the elite food markets in Berkeley and the Bay Area’s trendy, high dollar restaurants. New Orleans is a bit more novice. The city, like Oakland, is known for its structural racism with fresh scars left by Hurricane Katrina’s high water marks in communities of colour. While it is a city and culture known for its love of food, it is also one of

<sup>21</sup> Christina Schiavoni, New York City, 31 August 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Raj Patel, San Francisco, 26 July 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, Oakland, 28 July 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Raj Patel, San Francisco, 26 July 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Christina Schiavoni, New York City, 31 August 2011.

the unhealthiest states in the US (*The Nation* 2009). Before Katrina, the city's food access was poor, but as huge migrations of people, businesses and grocery stores fled the city with the storm, food access and availability became much worse (*Ibid.*). In response to these food insecurities, people in both cities have begun to farm in vacant lots and empty pots.

### *Oakland*

The urban agricultural organisations visited in Oakland worked through a variety of CSAs, local markets, community gardens, and education outreach programs to reach goals of equitable food production systems. NGOs and activists interviewed, while recognising the term food sovereignty, readily identified personally and professionally with the notion of food justice. Phat Beets, for example, is a new organisation in North Oakland with a mission statement that says:

*“Phat Beets Produce aims to create a healthier, more equitable food system in North Oakland through providing affordable access to fresh produce, facilitating youth leadership in health and nutrition education, and connecting small farmers to urban communities via the creation of farm stands, farmers’ markets, and urban youth market gardens”.*<sup>27</sup>

From local grocers, markets and CSAs connecting rural farmers and urban markets, many mission statements focused on local, fresh food access, education, and connecting resource poor communities to markets. There was also a sharp awareness for how food markets were accessible to resource poor communities. Rue Mapp, Strategist of an urban youth environmental education organisation, Outdoor Afro, said [about the Phat Beets’ market day]:

*“Right now we have old, young, black, and white mostly from the community. That’s a good sign. You go to a farmers market in Berkeley it’s all white and foodie types, and a re-appropriation of food that’s not accessible or affordable for most people.”*<sup>28</sup>

Food justice resonated with key informants because of Oakland’s historical roots, which many community organisations used in their food activism language. When asked about food sovereignty, Mapp said she did not know the term, but could identify with its meaning. Moreover, she related how many urban agricultural NGOs miss connections in practicing food sovereignty in communities of colour:

<sup>27</sup> See Phat Beets website: <http://www.phatbeetsproduce.org/about/mission-statement/>

<sup>28</sup> Rue Mapp, Oakland, 30 July 2011.

*“...I hear organizations say we tried this and nobody comes. I challenge organizations like that. Are your staff people of colour? Do you go to the community events? A lot of people aren’t willing to do that work. It takes a lot of relationship building and less about the thing itself and more about those relationships.”<sup>29</sup>*

Another organisation in West Oakland called Mandela Market Place began in 2001 with a mission “to improve health, create wealth, and build assets through cooperative food enterprises in low income communities<sup>30</sup>” through partnering with community members, businesses and farmers. Mandela MarketPlace’s Executive Director, Dana Harvey, recognized the term food sovereignty from Food First, an Oakland Institute for Food and Development Policy. She related her understanding of food sovereignty by sharing how, in practice, it was difficult to compete with corporations and shift people’s ‘convenience mindset’ within West Oakland: “... it takes years to build the local economy... there is just so much marketing, convenience, and comfort about McDonalds that we have to fight...<sup>31</sup>”

Mandela Marketplace aims to set up a wholesale distribution centre to better support the region’s family farmers while providing accessible, fresh produce to the local area. Harvey describes the challenges they face in West Oakland: “I don’t care how much food we can think we can grow in the urban setting, we have to keep connections to our family farms or Monsanto moves in. Urban centers are the place for rural farmers to make their living.”<sup>32</sup>

Mandela MarketPlace’s approach reflected both food justice and food sovereignty through its support and awareness of the needs of lower income urban communities connecting to rural farmers.

### *New Orleans*

New Orleans, like Oakland, showed a mix of practices falling between food sovereignty and food justice. Sanjay Kharod, Executive Director of the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN), saw the need for stronger links between rural and urban areas. He argued that: “...local food sheds will be the alternative and the expansion of our work when oil makes California lettuce expensive... NGOs must cooperate for a bigger system to support small agriculture.”<sup>33</sup> He found it important to rely on an NGO and farmer network to build an alternative food system for the greater New Orleans area. Another viewpoint came from

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See Mandela MarketPlace’s website: <http://www.mandelamarketplace.org/>

<sup>31</sup> Dana Harvey, Oakland, 3 August 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sanjay Kharod, New Orleans, 8 August 2011.

Margaret Curole, a fisherwoman in the Gulf of Mexico, who readily identified and explained the multiple ways food sovereignty is practiced in the US. She noted:

*“I see a lot of similar things in the US but it’s not called food sovereignty. Here people don’t know what you are talking about if you use those words. But things are similar, trading, bartering, keeping it in your local system. Every year I see it getting better and better...”*<sup>34</sup>

Many local respondents stated their goal was to tap into the local economy of New Orleans. They stated that the area’s culture was one to support the ‘local economy’ rather than arguments for ‘know where your food comes from’. Kharod noted that “...down here it is more about having good food and less of where it comes from...[but] there is a basis for wanting to support your own economy...there are movements to protect seafood, etc., but vegetables are harder.”<sup>35</sup> Nat Turner, a prominent urban food activist, manages ‘Our School at Blair Grocery’ in the Lower Ninth Ward, a poor neighborhood near the French Quarter devastated during Hurricane Katrina. Turner hopes to secure more land through grant funding and tap into the local food economy: “The French Quarter has a 49 million dollar a year food bill. If I had one percent of that – how many jobs is that? A ton.”<sup>36</sup>

Others identified practices they considered to be significant for building the local food economy. Well known Macon Fry ‘the Garden Guy’ claimed that “the food justice movement has made gardening a viable economic activity... If it hadn’t been for NOFFN and Holly Grove<sup>37</sup> I would not be a market gardener.”<sup>38</sup> Turner also thought it was key to build relationships: “...if I can employ kids to sell a local egg and cheese sandwich and people know those people then we can build relationships... Poor people don’t want to support local farmers just because of that, it’s more about supporting those relationships.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Joseph Brock, Director of NOLA Green Roots, had a business model, linking urban gardens, communities, compost programs and restaurants. The urban food movement in New Orleans was also practicing elements of both food justice and food sovereignty through markets, local economies, and NGOs connecting small farmers and poor people.

Urban agriculture in New Orleans, however, did not necessarily begin from a ‘food sovereignty’ mindset. Rather, the reasons were more immediate in nature concerning the rebuilding of

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Curole, New Orleans, 30 September 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Sanjay Kharod, New Orleans, 8 August 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Nat Turner, New Orleans, 31 August 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Holly Grove is a neighborhood garden, market and resource centre named after the community it is in.

<sup>38</sup> Macon Fry, New Orleans, 6 August 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Nat Turner, New Orleans, 31 August 2011.

economies, health services and community living. Joel Tilton of Delachaise Community Gardens gives a frank opinion:

*“... we started this because we had two blighted lots, no bigger ideas. There was a whorehouse, crack house and a bad place for kids. And there was nowhere for affordable groceries. We knew we wouldn’t be able to feed a lot of people, but it’s a start.”<sup>40</sup>*

Curole thought that the food sovereignty looked different in the US and would be slow to spread (compared to the South) because:

*“... until someone in America is hungry, food sovereignty is never gonna be the same thing to somebody who can go next door and get a Burger King sandwich ... the food movements in the US are all perceived as being upper class people or back to the land. Well, ya know, people in the city don’t have land and they don’t have money to buy organic eggs. Big families can’t afford Whole Foods... that’s the whole problem.”<sup>41</sup>*

The neoliberal discourse and politics that label food movements in the US as being for the upper middle class (colloquially referred to ‘foodies’ etc.) is the fundamental divide between many US urban food movements and more political, global movements. The New Orleans interviews showed that practices of food sovereignty existed in how NGOs, farmers, and activists understood their roles in supporting food networks, social relationships and the local economy. In contrast, food justice was a term more actors identified with in practice and perhaps a better description of why many were compelled to act, volunteer, or farm.

### Discussion: food sovereignty’s meaning between the US urban and global contexts

Food sovereignty and food justice as concepts, strategies and practices in northern urban agriculture share similarities and but also some fundamental differences. How and where these two movements come together and separate is important for historical, political and economic reasons. Moreover, the extent to which food sovereignty is found within northern urban agriculture depends on how one interprets and understands food sovereignty’s evolving meaning, context and process in both regions. We discuss and elaborate upon these broader comparisons below.

<sup>40</sup> Joel Tilton, New Orleans, 9 August 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Curole, New Orleans, 30 September 2011.

### *Concepts*

Analysing how and why the concept of food sovereignty is (not) spreading within the urban US helps to understand and interpret how the social movement is changing over time and space, and points to how food sovereignty can be contrasted with the more popular US concept of food justice. Many informants pointed to how US groups such as the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), USFSA and their local partner organizations in Oakland and New Orleans used the language and frameworks of food sovereignty. Similarly, Schiavoni (2009) and Fairbairn (2011) argue that food sovereignty is partly adopted due to its potential to address social inequalities found within the urban US because of common ties to similar marginalized groups in the Global South – the very same groups that helped form the food sovereignty paradigm. However, Fairbairn’s (2011) research on the transformative potential of food sovereignty within the US, also shows how the food sovereignty frame dampens among US actors. Her study finds that in many cases food sovereignty loses its overall ‘transformative potential’ within US food movements because it often gets pushed towards localism or is simply used in reference to international food movements (not domestic). Relatedly, while many informants understood and shared similar views with food sovereignty, they related this concept more to food justice: supporting local economies and poor neighborhoods, ‘knowing’ your farmers, and to some extent, fighting fast food corporations. As such, these discussions failed to grasp the bigger picture of food sovereignty’s initiative to address the bigger politics that inform food production and its connections to social and racial inequalities.

In contrast, marginalized groups in the urban US used food justice to highlight structural racism. The concept, as used by local NGOs and community organisations in Oakland and New Orleans, demonstrates the rights their communities have to equal access and participation in food access, distribution, and economies. In our interviews, explicit notions of food justice were not considered in the food sovereignty frame. While researchers argue that food sovereignty is a concept that could be used to address this sort of social inequality, our findings suggest that food sovereignty is not a term readily used in US cities, but that elements of both concepts exist in practice. Many food justice organizations, for example, use regional structures and markets to address structural racism and improve access to food, jobs and opportunities within poor communities. These movements are localized within communities and largely address distribution issues around food, and while politically significant, they appeal to mostly white circles because of societal structures influencing the terms of access. The problem with class-based localization in food movements is that it reproduces many of the same elements found in neo-liberalism: meaning only people who can pay have access to the resources, reproducing the same race and class inequalities (Allen and Guthman 2006; Alkon and McCullen 2010). While these movements serve a vital space for bringing awareness to needs for fresh, local food, and supporting local communities and economies, many food justice movements do not

politicise the underlying problems that dictate poor communities' access to good, affordable food. Holly Grove Market in New Orleans showed this clearly. Staff, volunteers, and other farmers readily pointed out it was not a market that was 'owned' or supported by the neighbourhood, which was a poor community the market was named after. At the same time, however, the market was a positive resource; it helped urban farmers like Macon Fry sell their produce (mostly to those living outside the community) and build the local food economy.

The concept of food sovereignty addresses the politics of food production, but given its history and radical roots, it has been slow to emerge in US urban food movements. As Wittman notes (2011: 5), food sovereignty is not "... an established paradigm/concept but rather a potential new framework emerging from a diverse set of contemporary grassroots practices and political approaches", and one that has emerged slowly and awkwardly in the urban US.

### *Strategies*

The challenge for both food sovereignty and food justice movements, especially in the urban US, is controlling how their strategies are influenced by neoliberalism. Guthman (2006) states that the "politics of the possible" is shaped through neoliberal political discourse and societal structures that change radical food movements to individualised consumption (Keck and Sikkink 1998), reconfiguring the original scope and claims. Our results suggest that food justice movements, while positive in intent, employed market approaches to improve access and address what the state or policy ignored. While some interviews shared that this strategy was successful in reaching poor communities, some were not, highlighting needs for strengthening designs in the movement. Food sovereignty, while less popular domestically than food justice strategies, was largely interpreted to mean more local support for the economy. Consequently, the food sovereignty movement in much of the urban US has yet to take hold and practice its radical political discourse and long-term alternative food systems approach. The difficult question is how to create space in neoliberal environments for more political, contentious action. Other studies investigating food sovereignty strategies in the US, found that in places like Vermont, where comparatively, the movement is quite strong, showed that while local food movements were meaningful in making rural to urban connections and building food economies, many were de-politicized and risked being labeled as elite practice because of the move towards 'gourmet' foods (Ayers and Bosia 2011).

We have shown that food justice grew out of racial inequalities, and was initially designed to alleviate poor food access which led to more distributive food movements, such as the Black Panthers' free breakfast program. From these radical roots, food justice spread throughout the urban US and NGO realm where "... foundations really loved food justice and wanted to fund



food justice...<sup>42</sup>” to address social inequity. Slowly, however, the critical language of food justice also became depoliticised. Similarly, informants shared that many US food movements did not understand ‘labour or the role of state’<sup>43</sup>, pointing to its limited political scope, and weak associations between the state and food production compared to movements like food sovereignty. These depoliticising trends in US food movements context has made it difficult for actors to build substantial support and power for what is ‘alternative’. While many organisations visited in Oakland and New Orleans focused on small-scale ways to improve neighbourhood access, many had limited success due to their project size or staff (especially those depending on volunteers) and poor communities’ resource base (time, money, transport, knowledge etc.). Guthman (2006: 1180) explains that, “for activist projects, neoliberalisation limits the conceivable because it limits the arguable, the fundable, the organisable, the scale of effective action, and compels activists to focus on putting out fires.” The limiting effect neoliberalism brings to urban food movements considered in this paper, constrained power and interest to small-scale neighbourhood actions.

In contrast to food justice, informants shared that food sovereignty was first about production and over time the concept adapted to confront trade politics of the corporate food regime. Alkon and Mares (2012: 26) note, the strategy of food sovereignty gives both a critique of capitalist agriculture and strategies for transformation. While these radical strategies have spread across the Global South over the past twenty years, movements in the urban US have been quiet. Our study points to several reasons: First, the history and context of US urban centres demanded that food and other social movements address race, something that is missing in food sovereignty from a North American perspective. Second, food sovereignty’s radical discourse would have to find a place within a stifling corporate environment, challenging people’s minds and government leanings (and expectations). Fairbairn’s (2011) work highlighted this point, showing that domestically, the food sovereignty discourse loses political momentum with domestic issues, while maintaining its momentum for international issues through support by white non-governmental organizations. Our findings echo this point: for many, food sovereignty had more to do with local economic development than with claiming space for unfettered rights to food and land. The depoliticising effect neoliberalism has on strategies like food sovereignty are striking (Guthman and Allen 2006; Fairbairn 2011).

### *Practices*

In the two cities examined, the practices of food justice and food sovereignty intermingled within urban agriculture activities, but tended to vary in response to food insecurity. We have shown that the differences in practice across both movements have been strongly influenced

<sup>42</sup> Alison Alkon, Oakland, 1 August 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Annie Shattuck, Oakland, 3 August 2011.

by capitalist agriculture and neoliberalism, particularly the socio-political and economic constraints and opportunities emerging from each. Crucial is that neoliberalism's reach is not only to 'big institutions' and markets but also the spaces in between where social movements are often originally forged (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 387). In Oakland and New Orleans, neoliberal discourse directly informed the way society – in this case, community organisations, small businesses, activists and NGOs – responded to issues of food insecurity and mediated the extent to which northern actors formed their goals, strategies and actions within food movements. From markets to cooperatives, from 'sovereign' economies to rural-urban partnerships, US urban food movements practiced many elements of food sovereignty (and food justice); however, many of these urban agricultural practices were limited in their political 'transformative' acts.

Pudup (2008: 1238) states that neoliberalism has a

*“supple skill in cultivating consumption projects based on the notion of consumer choice as the right that most needs preserving in global capitalism (as if it were under attack) and that citizenship achieves its most perfect expression through consumer choice in the marketplace”.*

In both Oakland and New Orleans, many actors used practices that emphasised consumer choice through lower-priced markets, community led grocery stores, CSAs and urban gardens based in low-income neighbourhoods. However, while many of these practices were originally informed by grass roots motives, there were sustained efforts to match up or connect produce with the 'choice' and preferences white communities had. In New Orleans, for instance, Nat Turner of Our School at Blair Grocery spoke of the motto: that partnering with corporations worked because “the work we are doing is too important to have enemies<sup>44</sup>”. Turner noted, “that the number one interest of poor people is the bottom line. So we call it the Robin Hood approach and we sell things cheap. And if we can sell it Whole Foods for more, then we will.<sup>45</sup>” Turner’s overall purpose was to grow food that was accessible to poor folks in the Lower Ninth Ward and educate kids in agriculture along the way. His school, and other actors in New Orleans, kept their organisations supported through partnerships with major corporations, showing how “...neoliberalisation incorporates, co-opts, constrains and depletes activism...” (Bondi and Laurie 2005: 395). In Oakland, however, the Phat Beets’ market was set against the higher-class ‘foodie’ movement in Berkeley, identifying movements that were not accessible to communities of colour (Berkeley) and those that were (Oakland/Phat Beets).

<sup>44</sup> Nat Turner, New Orleans, 31 August 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

In this sense, then, as food movements partner with large corporate players to remain viable and sustainable, they necessarily miss food sovereignty practices. However, while many organizations may not fully adopt a ‘food sovereignty’ approach as the Global South, they do have a deep purpose for challenging the food system in small, local, and regional ways. Moreover, food sovereignty practices were found in the bigger ideas of why actors supported and initiated urban food movements. In New Orleans, for instance, supporting local production and economy was central for everyone – especially due to the loss of businesses post-Katrina. Many movements sought to re-connect the social and business links between gardens, communities, and restaurants, emphasizing the importance of building social relationships through multiple actors, something important to food sovereignty – as key to building strong and supportive communities in the context of industrial agriculture, corporations, and capitalism.

The activism within urban agriculture in Oakland and New Orleans failed to reflect food sovereignty per se, but does engage elements in practice, often with the aim to change food politics and policies in favour of the urban poor. However, outcomes and impacts of these changes are often limited due to neoliberal constraints, pushing practices toward similar market forms and similar class-based injustices. Herein lies the opportunity for the food sovereignty movement to recreate itself within the US. Bondi and Laurie (2005: 398) argue that these ‘weak’ points in how food sovereignty addresses neoliberalism in urban US centres is “...a process that calls upon activists and intellectuals to rethink the parameters of political agency.” New processes and definitions for food sovereignty can thus open up the structural possibilities of food system change and opportunity, creating room for the multitude of responses that occur to re-embed food systems.

## Conclusion

This paper examined how and to what extent food sovereignty is unfolding in US urban agriculture. From interviews with urban food movement experts and activists in Oakland and New Orleans, we find food justice to be the dominant concept, strategy and practice, but that elements of food sovereignty are found in concepts and practice, but are heavily influenced and weakened by neoliberalism. Originally, the differences found between the food sovereignty and food justice movements were focused on the scale and depth of their message, as well as the context in which they were founded. Food sovereignty was founded by peasants, and grew to be an international call for a more equal, democratized food system. Similarly, food justice was founded to fight structural racism and access to resources, but unlike food sovereignty, did not challenge the bigger politics of food production; instead, food justice movements focused on the distribution of food within low-income communities. As such, the political, international,

and ideological changes called for by food sovereignty were seldom present in US urban food movements.

Nevertheless, the fact that many US urban food movements formed from actors being excluded and marginalised from the food system mirrored a similar context within which food sovereignty was formed by the exploitation of peasants in the Global South. While US urban food movements in the form of CSAs, urban gardens and markets did not make explicit links to food sovereignty, other larger US organisations did. Moreover, deeper reasons for *why* actors were leading urban gardens, CSAs, and building rural-urban connections within and outside their cities showed similar claims (in purpose and intent) for a new, alternative food system.

Ideally, both movements could benefit from one another: food justice spurring short-term action and rights in domestic contexts, while food sovereignty supporting longer-term national, regional and international networks. More importantly, though, is that, food sovereignty must negotiate a neoliberal environment. Adaptations, new 'alternatives' and ways of thinking about its framework within a US context could give the movement greater strength and legitimacy, as more actors open pathways to spread influence and constitutive change for sustainable agriculture in fast growing cities.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## 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” 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.

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