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Towards a geographic theory of food sovereignty in the United States

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Abstract

Food sovereignty identifies the state and capital as complicit in the inequities and injustices in the corporate food regime, including and especially the alienation between producers from consumers. Among food sovereignty's many demands, is a call to a return power and control in the food system to producers and consumers through decentering the power of transnational capital. The literature on food sovereignty lacks engagement with theories of sovereignty as an explanatory resource, and thus strategies to achieve its aims may lack key insights into political power. I draw on the insights of post-structuralist social theorists, political geography and anthropologists on political sovereignty to engage the practitioners, theoreticians and supporters of food sovereignty in a discussion of the implications of their political practices. I position food sovereignty within a framework of geographic thought as a partial, temporary and contested territorial claim as an insurgent assertion of autonomy in space. The paper concludes by positing a theoretical frame for future research on food sovereignty in geography.

Introduction

Globally, new struggles are emerging over control of decision-making in agriculture. The governance and control of life—land, seed and food—is increasingly dominated by transnational capital and regulations promoted by some national states to advance the interest of agribusiness in the corporate food regime. The emergence, however partial and contested, of resistance to capital and state signals shift in citizen acceptance of and participation in the neoliberal and biopolitical governance of food. These new struggles often operate under the banner of food sovereignty, and include a variety of rights claims and demands for autonomy and authority. These struggles diverge from the food justice and community food security activism of the past in the way that they operationalize a definitional struggle for power/knowledge in the food system and their implicit critique of the neoliberalization of the food system (Alkon and Mares, 2011)

Food sovereignty, as an emerging political-economic discourse widely deployed in a variety of food justice struggles, is increasingly well documented, but it has a literature without a theory. Writing in various disciplines on food sovereignty has proliferated since the first usage of the term in 1996 at the Rome Food Summit, but it is descriptive rather than explanatory in nature. In particular, global capital is presented as a source of the problem and the state is often presented as a source of solutions without analyzing how state and capital are intertwined and complicit with each other in the corporate food regime, thus making “rights claims” and policy solutions to neoliberal problems potentially contradictory. The scholarly interest in food sovereignty is rapidly growing, but the existing literature also does not sufficiently engage with

critical social theory, and especially absent are theories of sovereignty as an explanatory resource. This paper aims to bring together critical food studies and critical geopolitics to position food sovereignty as a set of spatial, territorial and scalar strategies to contest state and capital control of food and agriculture, and to promote democracy and autonomy in the context of in liberal state sovereignty.

This framing follows Patel's (2009) provocative suggestion that "...to demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space" (668). In this paper, I bring together critical social theories of sovereignty, in both its biopolitical and geopolitical senses, and geography's contributions to understanding space and territory to explain demands for change in decision-making over life and land in the food system. This paper aims to bring some conceptual clarity to the political economy of food sovereignty, to demonstrate how the internally contradictory nature of food sovereignty discourse may bring its varied practices into conflict and to speculate about what food sovereignty could be and do. The paper proceeds in three parts: in what follows this introduction, I highlight the gaps and tensions in food sovereignty's literature thus far that demand a deeper analysis--one that geography is well positioned to provide. I then draw on the insights of social theorists in the disciplines of geography, anthropology and sociology to advance an understanding of sovereignty that allows for *food sovereignty* to emerge as a strategy for power in space and over territory, albeit one that is partial, contested and temporary. Finally, I conclude with some ways of thinking through the political possibilities of "alternative spatial imaginaries" (Bobrow-Strain, 2007).

I. Food Sovereignty Orientations

Since the end of World War II, agricultural production in every nearly part of the world has transitioned to some degree to a vertically-integrated market (versus subsistence) economy of food (McMichael, 2009). Decision-making power about some of the most fundamental aspects of life--land, seed and food supplies—is now concentrated in the hands of national states, supranational organizations and transnational corporations (Goodman and Watts, 1997). The persistent failures of state-led food security programs premised on neoliberal trade mechanisms, with sparked demands for change (Schanbacher, 2010). Food sovereignty has emerged as a discourse demanding more decision-making rights for farmers, the de/reregulation of food production, a return to a peasant- based food production and restructured markets for the trade of food supplies (Fairbairn, 2010; Pimbert, 2009). Food sovereignty aims to return control of productive resources to farmers, and the control of food distribution to communities in a return to the "peasant way of life" (Holt-Gimenez and Peabody, 2008; Patel, 2009; Van der Ploeg, 2009; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe, 2010).

Food sovereignty first emerged as a concept and strategy in the NGO response to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security at the World Food Summit in 1996. Positioned in the document as a “civil society proposal to achieve food security,” food sovereignty appears in Article Six as part of a package of rights to food that “take precedence over macro-economic policies and trade liberalization”. In this document, food is defined as something that cannot be commodified because of its social and cultural significance. Since then, food sovereignty has seen considerable development as a concept and a strategy in both the Global North and South.

La Via Campesina’s definition of food sovereignty from 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, held in Mali, identifies transnational capital at the heart of food security failures and defines its aims as reclaiming,

“...the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations of 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” (Nyeleni Declaration, 2007).

La Via Campesina was created in 1993 in Belgium by a group of farmers’ representatives in response to the diminishing platforms for dialogue about the needs of the world’s small-scale farmers. It defines itself as the “international movement which defends...small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. It strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture and transnational companies that are destroying people and nature” (LVC, 2012).

La Via Campesina is composed of 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries from all the major world regions, and represents about 200 million farmers. It describes itself as “an autonomous, pluralist and multicultural movement, independent from any political, economic or other type of affiliation” (LVC, 2012). LVC’s local affiliates work on a variety of campaigns including anti-GMO activism, gender equity, and agrarian reform (Desmarais, 2007). The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, also known as MST, or the landless rural workers, is perhaps the most widely recognized member of LVC. The MST uses the strategy of squatting on unproductive land to not only produce sustainable livelihoods (Wolford, 2010), but to also restructure the political, economic relations of agricultural production and trade as well as the “transformation of social relations” in the food system (Patel, 2009). As Patel (2007) and others

argue, by returning to the land, organizations such as the MST are not just producing food but also “producing new kinds of people” (205).

Food sovereignty is thus a definitional struggle and a material struggle. This is a struggle that positions itself against state and capital control of food distribution and agricultural production in the wake of both their failures to provide universal food security. That is to say, it is a struggle that emerges from the margins by and on behalf of the poor, hungry and landless, to replace or relocate the center of decision-making in the global food system. This struggle takes place over access to food primarily through access to land and seed. The central political-economic orientations of this struggle vis a vis food, land and seed are through the decommodification of food (Article 6, NGO response to the 1996 Rome Food Summit Declaration on World Food security), the democratization of decision-making in the food system and the reconnection of food producers with food consumers. Food sovereignty diverges from its many partners and predecessors with its overt emphasis on political-economic transformation of the people, systems and spaces in the food system (Alkon and Mares, 2011). With the launch of the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance in 2010 in New Orleans, the United States has joined the movements emerging from the Global South, in a collective struggle for access to land, healthy food and the right to produce food. In the past several years, food sovereignty-oriented activities have proliferated, including municipal scale ordinances, backyard chicken keeping, urban gardening, community kitchens, as well as the development of food sovereignty-inspired associations such as permaculture organizations. When I make reference to food sovereignty practices, at least for the purposes of this paper, I refer to community-based agriculture on squatted land, community food distribution centers, seed saving collectives, non-commodified food exchanges and/or food production, consumption and distribution practices that fall outside the legal structures of the existing agrofood system.

The global struggle for food sovereignty has inspired and fostered a variety of strategies to achieve food sovereignty in the U.S. In March of 2011, Sedgewick Maine passed a “food sovereignty” ordinance granting residents the “right to produce, process, sell, purchase, and consume local foods of their choosing” (Town of Sedgewick, Maine, 2011). Residents of Sedgewick drafted a document that would allow them to establish more control over the exchange of food stuffs in their town, and not without consequence. Several farmers have recently been arrested on charges of “selling milk without a license,” and court cases and fines are pending (Bangor Daily News, 2011). This rebellion could be read as an act of civil disobedience, which could allow this for the progressive reform in the laws and regulations around food production and distribution.

This cause, and others surrounding food regulation, is championed by libertarian Joel Salatin, a farmer and food sovereignty icon who writes prolifically about the way state and federal laws make local food production, processing and distribution cost-prohibitive and virtually impossible for small-scale producers (Salatin, 2007). He appeared in the 2011 film, *Farmageddon*, about food sovereignty, from which this quote by him comes:

If I had one thing to say to the USDA and the FDA, I guess my question would be why do you hate freedom so much? What is it about freedom, whether it's the consumer's freedom to choose the food they want to drink, whether it's me as a farmer choosing the customer who wants to buy my product, or how I want to make my product. What is it about freedom that is so horrendous to you that you are willing to take my property, take my life, take my customers, take my animals, take my land, that you are willing to do this in order for me to not have the freedom to even sell a porkchop to my neighbor?

Other approaches to food sovereignty take more anarchist angles. "Guerrilla gardens" temporarily, often overnight, turn urban space into gardens (Lamborn and Weinberg, 1999). Guerrilla gardening is widely practiced by food sovereigntists as is other kinds of direct action such as "seed bombing", "PARKing Days" or 8m2. Guerrilla gardeners work under the assumption that their gardens or other installations may be forcibly removed by the city or state, and they function as both a definitional and material action to redefine the use of public space in cities (Chou, 2010). Rather than aiming for reform or realization of their rights, guerrilla gardening take advantage of the fact that city exercises incomplete or partial sovereignty over space and other resources.

These examples show how some activists are shaping the narratives of food sovereignty to apply and articulate demands for freedom and autonomy from state and capital control of agriculture in the U.S. context. These strategies highlight a variety of approaches (and certainly do not constitute all) to the solutions of the problem of food security. They emphasize autonomy, decision-making authority and independence from state regulations that marginalize small scale producers or consumers. This resonates with narratives from the international food sovereignty struggles, such as this central objective identified in the Nyeleni declaration, which is to "...exercise autonomy in all territorial spaces: countries, regions, cities and rural communities. Food sovereignty is only possible if it takes places at the same time as political sovereignty of peoples" (Nyeleni 2007: 5). If political sovereignty is also the objective, then engagement with what political sovereignty is and does is critical, and how political sovereignty might (or might not) facilitate food sovereignty is a key question to ask. First, a deeper examination of how food sovereignty currently identifies the role of political power in relation to the food system is warranted.

Food sovereignty: crises and rights

Food sovereignty is often situated as a response to “crises” in the food system, the global economic system and the socio-ecological systems that support and sustain peasant agriculture (Rosset, 2008). In these narratives, dramatic collective action is called for, often in the form of public protests, (sometimes dubbed “food” or “IMF” riots) to demand change (Holt-Gimenez and Peabody, 2008). These changes include addressing the issue of power in the food system, namely, that of global capital, national state governments and supranational organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, which work together, largely through structural adjustment programs, to marginalize agricultural producers, also referred to by scholars (and self-referentially) as peasants and produce food insecurity (Bello, 2009; Patel and McMichael, 2009). According to this literature, neo-colonialism and globalization normalize modernist development paths which engage as many people as possible in urban/industrial sectors, accumulate through dispossession, and facilitate the capitalist transformation of the countryside (Bello, 2009; Pimbert, 2009).

Reclaiming control of production and distribution via food sovereignty is seen as the solution to the crises precipitated by the transnational food regime. Thus, in crisis narratives, food sovereignty is often used synonymously with food “self-sufficiency” on a national scale as a policy solution to hunger and poverty within the bounds of territorial national-states (Shiva, 2004; Altieri and Nicholls, 2008; Bello, 2009). The crisis narrative largely mirrors food sovereignty statements and declarations about the sources of and solutions to problems in the food system. These narratives advocate for a return to a decentralized, autonomous production and distribution, also referred to as a “peasant way of life” (LVC, 2012) as the solution to world food, agro-ecological and social justice crises. The narratives also position the territorial state as an important actor in curbing the power of multi-national corporations and supranational organizations, such as the IMF, and giving decision-making rights to peasants. These narratives also mobilize politics, such as anti-GMO campaigns, at a variety of scales and across spatial divides, such as those between the Global North and South.

Criticism of food sovereignty question whether its demands for rights could (or could not) be accommodated within the existing juridical order of liberal democratic states. Nearly all the declarations emerging from transnational food sovereignty organizations and campaigns for autonomy in the food system contain an appeal to states for rights, such as those outlined above. Patel (2009) and Schanbacher (2010) engage with these narratives, but take relatively more nuanced and critical positions on food sovereignty than those found in the crisis narratives, and position it as a precursor and pre-condition for food security as part of a universal right to food. In rights narratives, solutions that do not critically examine the systems

of power that produce inequity, poverty and ultimately hunger, will not be adequate for transforming the food system (Schanbacher, 2010; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe, 2010). Rights narratives suggest that food sovereignty should work within the structure of liberal democracy to establish more rights for producers and other marginalized actors in the food system, such as rights to determine the terms of trade.

While appearing progressive, these narratives veil contradictions in the “rights talk,” within which individual and universal human rights are often at odds (Patel, 2009; Schanbacher, 2010). These tensions chiefly include the inability of food sovereignty discourses to address the uneven distribution of productive resources (i.e, rights to land) in liberal democratic political systems that privilege private property rights. In addition, rights narratives gloss over the absence of an alternative rights guarantor, gendered political-economies that marginalize women, and the way food sovereignty “paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others” (Patel, 2009: 668). Patel (2009) identifies food sovereignty as fundamentally (albeit problematically) about rights and the practice of democracy, even while recognizing that the radical demands of food sovereignty are disciplined and muted by the liberal structure of the state (Patel, 2009: 669).

Thus, the rights narratives, much like the crisis narratives, see the state as the both the source of and the solution to the problem. The fundamental paradox of demanding rights, especially to land, while simultaneously critiquing capitalism (which rests on private property rights guaranteed by the state), needs to be resolved to mobilize coherently food sovereignty. As Patel (2009) points out, who will guarantee the rights that work against the interests of the state and capital? If such a rights guarantor exists, at what scale? Furthermore, given the way capitalism and liberal states have been mutually constituted (Patel and McMichael, 2009; Barkan 2013) suggests that any appeal to the state for rights to determine trade or access land, will necessarily result in failure of some essential elements of food sovereignty. The answer as proposed in rights narratives, then, is reduced to doing democracy better by broadening or expanding rights to producers and consumers, without questioning whether the way liberal democracy is currently practiced may be part of the problem as well.¹ This paper seeks to make a theoretical intervention in the literature on food sovereignty to both frame the problem as arising from the way state and capital work through the technology of political sovereignty, as well as articulate with this theoretical framing a way for food sovereigntists to achieve their aims through specifically spatial and territorial strategies.

¹ Throughout the remainder of this paper, I refer to this mutual co-constitution of capital and geopolitical power in the sovereignty of the national state as state/capital and (neo)liberal states. State/capital refers to the way capital works in and through the state regulatory apparatus and state power capitalizes on free market ideology. (Neo)liberal states refers to the way neoliberalism is embedded in and arises from liberal democratic rights.

II. Theories of sovereignty

Sovereignty as a concept has long figured into geopolitical thought, particularly as it relates to the development of the modern nation-state after the Peace of Westphalia. Taylor (2000) defines sovereignty “as a condition of final and absolute authority in a political community” (766). Typically (and historically) this political community has been the “nation”, and sovereignty refers to the state’s (sometimes democratic) control over a certain delimited territory. Historically, sovereignty territorialized the nation-state, both in terms of controlling what lies within its boundaries in its internal spatiality, but also its reciprocal relations with other nation-states who recognize it (and are recognized) as sovereign in external relations (Brenner, 1999; Benhabib, 2004; Agnew 2009). The powers that inhere to the sovereign state give it the right “to kill or to allow to live” (Mbembe, 2003: 11) that which it is able to “capture” or appropriate (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) with the right to non-interference in these decisions by external actors (Storey, 2001). The sovereign right to kill cultivates a parallel function in the sovereign right to foster and manage life, or what Foucault (1978) refers to as biopower. The management of life as a power held by the state is predicated on the sovereign right to decide what constitutes life, which makes those it can “capture” subject to the state valuations of life (Agamben, 2005). In short, the sovereign is that which holds the power to value and foster life according to the political or economic usefulness of its life (or death) (Rose, 2007).

The actual practice of sovereignty is far more contested than the discourses that surround it might suggest; sovereignty itself is rarely absolute (Agnew, 2009; Elden, 2010). While having real effects, sovereignty is a social construction that makes the territorial national state possible (Storey, 2001; Nyers, 2006; Agnew 2009). The degree to which territorial boundedness figures into the sovereign power of the state is a matter of much debate (Agnew, 2009; Ong 2007). These debates reveal the way in which the myth of the territorial basis of the Westphalian state system is increasingly challenged, and is being replaced with a network ontology in which sovereignty is an emergent property of social relations. In this model, sovereignty emerges from neoliberal economic relationships between states, which extend the reach, or hegemony, of individual national-states into the economic or political space of other states in imperial ways (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Agnew, 2009). Some would say that the rise of supranational arrangements erode the power of the territorial sovereign state (Anderson, 1996). Others, however, argue that the nation-state is often strengthened rather than weakened with the rise of globalization, and that global capital mobilizes certain powers of the nation-state to control resources, territory and people (Agnew, 2005; Watts, 2000; Ong, 2007). Without doubt, however, the contemporary era presents challenges to existing ideas about the spaces and territories of the nation-state, particularly with regard to what constitutes authority and

autonomy over space in transnational, if not post-national, political arrangements (Appadurai, 2003; Benhabib, 2004). What remains is a carefully maintained fiction about the territorial basis of the sovereign state and its potential to exercise naked decisionism.

Nyers (2006) suggests that this fiction is a product of “statism” as a social movement, “so powerfully successful that the state has become normalized as the only authentic community that can serve as a site for political activity” (xii). The state is created through the repeated performance of activities that create and recreate its powers, such as those associated with citizenship, allegiance and belonging. Benhabib (2004) writes, “Citizenship and practices of political membership are the rituals through which the nation is reproduced spatially...to ensure the purity of the nation *in time* through the policing of its contacts and interactions *in space*.” (18). Through this normalization and naturalization of the state, alternative political practices, such as self-governance or popular self-rule are rendered “unacceptable or unthinkable” (Nyers, 2006, xii). What constitutes the normative, necessarily produces the non-normative, or what constitutes the chaos outside the juridical order that the state must guard against. The “state of exception” is thus invoked in emergency situations to prevent the collapse of the state order into chaos, according to Schmitt (1922). Agamben (2005) extends the idea of the state of exception to suggest that it is no longer necessary to invoke exceptions in emergencies; that the current state of political affairs is one of the suspension of civil liberties in order to sustain the sovereign power of the state.

The state of exception, according to Ong (2007) is selectively used to generate “overlapping or variegated sovereignties” (19) in which there are exemptions to state sovereignty (for transnational corporations) to produce value for capital. Ong’s framing of neoliberalism operating as a Schmittian state of exception (and vice versa), allows for the creation of “sites of transformation where market-driven calculations are being introduced in the management of populations and the administration of special spaces” (4). While Ong (2007) makes visible the links between transnational capital and state powers of exception, Barkan (2013) argues that the state and the corporate body have never been separate. In fact, “corporate capitalism emerges as a mode of liberal government” and this “clarifies how reforms unwittingly reinvest the sovereign power they seek to subvert” (13). Together, Ong and Barkan advance an understanding of sovereignty that is bracketed from its basis as a singularity of power over territory, and also demonstrates how liberalism and transnational corporate capital are so deeply intertwined they cannot be approached as separate entities.

If sovereignty is thought to be decoupled from territory, and is the “outcome of a biopolitical process” (Barkan, 2013), this begs questions about what characterizes the relationship between sovereignty and territory. Elden (2010) describes territory as a technology of power in which

space is produced by the state in order to measure and control populations and resources (i.e., life). Territorial formations are thus geographical expressions of power upon which state/capital makes a claim. Storey (2001), however suggests that territory is always and already a temporary spatial strategy as competing interests may appropriate space over time. Spatial strategies are key to mobilizing contentious politics (Martin and Miller, 2003), and space itself can be considered an ongoing process and product of power (Massey, 2005). As such, space is held together through the process of being made and unmade; it is temporary, transformative and subversive in multiple dimensions. Massey writes (2005) that “any politics which acknowledges the openness of the future... entails a radically open time-space, a space which is always being made” (189). This view lends itself to understanding how space and territory are mobilized for political purposes by both the state/capital and their agonists.

This framing of sovereignty as both partial in its exercise of control over territory, and also produced in complex heterogenous ways through the action of transnational capital in space is instructive for understanding how the transnational food regime works, and how opposition to it might be mobilized. It also helps to understand why and how appeals to the liberal state for rights are not necessarily viable solutions to the ecological, social and economic crises identified by food sovereigntists.. For example, protesters demanding food sovereignty in “IMF riots,” have seen for their efforts, the “brazen return of corporate power under the guise of *national* sovereignty” (Patel and McMichael, 2009: 30). Additionally, any alternative that exists outside of the neoliberal order and its associated sovereign powers of exception granted by the state, is simply rendered illicit and illegitimate, thus criminalizing and “capturing” those who produce and exchange food outside of the neoliberal order. The Maine food sovereigntists encountered limits to their rights to change the rules of food production; the act of challenging the law constitutes a criminal de/re-territorializing of sovereign state space only resulted in (re)capture by the national state. How then, might food sovereignty employ alternative spatial and territorial strategies to avoid “capture”?

The crisis and rights narratives outlined above help us understand the origins of food sovereignty and its somewhat contradictory discursive power, but don’t do sufficient work in terms of explaining how space, territory and scale are mobilized in the everyday strategies of resistance to state regulation and capital control of food and agriculture. An “alternative spatial imaginary” (Bobrow-Strain, 2007) may be useful in thinking through how food sovereignty can be seen as a collective, insurgent re-territorializing of space to contest and elide hierarchies of territorial power, albeit in temporary, partial and contested ways. In what follows, I explore the ideas of sovereignty, territory and space to frame political sovereignty in a way that might inform how food sovereignty can achieve its aims.

III. Towards geographies of food sovereignty

Sovereignty is a social construction which produces imaginaries of space and territory, and articulates with taken-for-granted assumptions about the boundedness of territory, the subjection of populations and the hegemony of state power. Food sovereignty, in both its discourse and practice, argues for political sovereignty over space and territory, but current literature is missing theories of sovereignty as an explanatory resource. Some new angles, derived from the theories of sovereignty presented above and a (necessarily) cursory look at actual practices of food sovereignty, present themselves as productive avenues for understanding the implications of food sovereignties political practice, as well as for framing future research. In light of the gaps in the literature, I argue that research questions should be mobilized around the subversive power of space, place and territory to contest state and capital.

If territory and space are decoupled from totalizing theories of sovereignty, and state/capital sovereignty itself is seen as a partial and temporary strategy, this opens up possibilities for subversive political uses of space that do not necessarily appeal to the state or capital for solutions. Guerrilla gardeners and the like do their work with the full knowledge that the gardens or other installations may be removed when the state or city reasserts control over the territory. The gardens may not actually be removed, and thus, the reterritorialization of space constitutes an exercise of sovereignty over the space, even if it is temporary in a larger sense. The assumed and widely accepted temporality of these installations reveals something about the territorial strategies employed by food sovereignty activists. These can be thought of as temporary autonomous zones (TAZs) in cities which offer a space of bounded autonomy for dissidents and free-thinkers, and often operate at the political and economic margins of the state for the purposes of expanding the range of normative discourses (Bey, 2003; Bishop and Williams, 2012) Territory can be temporarily mobilized to avoid capture by the biopolitical state, in the way TAZs work. This presents an opportunity for thinking about food sovereignty strategies as temporarily mobilizing space and territory for autonomy. In many ways this functions as its own kind of “state of exception”, which could be examined for activist orientations toward anarchism, civil disobedience and libertarianism. This raises questions about what kind of political sovereignty food sovereignty requires.

If we take Patel (2009) seriously and agree that food sovereignty is (however problematically) about remaking (not just reforming) democracy, then what does this new democracy look like? Agro-ecological change, such as that advocated by food sovereignty, requires a political imaginary that Wittman (2009) identifies as “agrarian citizenship”. This conceptual frame places the allegiance of farmers and other stakeholders in the food system with nature and

communities rather than with the state or corporations. Allegiance, citizenship and sovereignty are co-produced through the repeated performances of individuals and communities across space and time (Benhabib, 2004) and citizenship itself is a mutable and potentially subversive category (Holston, 1998). Thus, food sovereigntists, like those in Sedgewick, Maine, might contest state/capital sovereignty by refusing to perform the sovereignty of the state, or conversely, performing what Nyers (2006) calls the “unthinkable”? Perhaps these collective performances can be framed through Deleuzian “assemblages” of actions knit together through a kind Nancian “being in common” (Nancy, 1991) or what Hardt and Negri (2004) more recently refer to as the “multitude.” In this way, food sovereignty might recapture meanings of sovereignty and citizenship that have less to do with transnational capital and territorial states and more to do with “popular self-rule” (Agnew, 2009:48).

These questions put the production of subjects at the heart of food sovereignty. From one perspective food sovereignty might be producing obedient neoliberal subjects who take responsibility for their own health, welfare and politics (Guthman, 2008) in the libertarian ways Salatin advocates. As such, food sovereignty may be seen as part of the post-political, in its resignation to the inevitability of the neoliberal order (Swyngedouw, 2010). Seen another way, the resignation to neoliberalism may constitute a form of denial of the power of the (neo)liberal state. Resistance to the (neo)liberal state in many ways co-produces its existence, and the production of alternative imaginaries of belonging and citizenship outside of state/capital, may be already creating radical alternative futures in its own state of exception. These possibilities appear not without consequence on the political map, and as such, food sovereignty, with its attention to direct action and democracy, deserves attention as a potentially powerful (however problematic) alternative to the current neoliberal, transnational order.

Subject formation is a key concern of Patel (2009), who argues that for food sovereignty to achieve its aims, “every culture, must without exception, undergo transformation” (671). LVC and others argue that a return to “a peasant way of life” is the social, ecological and economic solution to contemporary crises in the food system. As Patel (2007) and others argue, this return to the land produces new political subjects. This begs a question about what kinds of people are created and for what political future? Neo/liberal democracies are constitutive of identity and relations as we know them, in place and across space (Barnett, 2005); if gender (for example) is not pre-given category, then how does food sovereignty as a state of exception imagine and mobilize sexual (among other kinds of) difference? Answering this question also requires an engagement with the “peasant way of life” as a political possibility for either North or South in light of a variety of internal contradictions, not the least of which is the gendered

division of labor on farms. How might the agricultural aims of food sovereignty be achieved without reverting to gender-based oppression in both peasant and capitalist agriculture?

This question raises the unavoidable issue of political-economic difference (which often falls on North/South lines) between the struggles against state/capital of those who are trying to protect the privilege to produce food for themselves (e.g., the Sedgewick residents) and those who are trying to create conditions which would make it possible to produce food for themselves (e.g., MST). How the politics of back-to-the-landers in the Global North and peasants in the Global South resonate with each other, and how these movements are actually constitutive of both state/capital and North/South distinctions is something that needs to be empirically and theoretically analyzed. At its surface, food sovereignty appears to engage with a politics that rejects both militant particularism and totalizing solutions in a way that tries to break down distinctions between North/South, urban/rural, etc. However, uneven development involves the production of inequity across space (Smith, 1992). Therefore, it is worthy of further investigation into the material and political differences between “back to the land movements in the North and “peasant ways of life” in the South, and the way re/peasantization is entangled in the tension between individual and collective rights as articulated by Patel (2009).

Concluding Thoughts

This paper attempts to engage with the gaps in the food sovereignty literature and to point toward some productive research directions in conducting theoretically informed empirical research. What is at stake in food sovereignty is not just access to food or mitigating hunger; there is something more politically fundamental afoot. Thus, food sovereignty must be read as a strategy for individuals, organizations and community to attain political autonomy, with the liberation of people from repressive structures of power inherent to its aims. Understanding the implications of this kind of imagined social transformation, and understanding how it might be “captured,” requires thoughtful and theoretically informed empirical investigation.

What can be drawn from geographic perspectives on sovereignty and extrapolated to food sovereignty is that “sovereignty” refers to the politics of self-determination of individuals and communities. For a food sovereign, this means that the community in question, whether a garden or a town or a nation, determines its own territorially bounded affairs without external interference from state or capital. While the discourse of food sovereignty appeals for the right to do this, those who practice food sovereignty appropriate land, resources or markets with actions that usurp and transcend any other political authority including the city or the state.

The strategies given as examples above illustrate that the practitioners of food sovereignty claim and appropriate space for their own purposes via a variety of political orientations.

Through the quasi-legal appropriation of resources, actors in these imaginaries are also partially and temporarily freed from the state's legal apparatus of the territorial space that they inhabit. Using the examples of displaced persons, Appadurai (2003) illustrates a post-national geography of power by describing how transit communities reterritorialize space through the appropriation of resources in a particular place. Denying access to productive resources is a strategy of the biopower of the state, and displaced persons often must siphon them off from legitimate structures in quasi-legal ways. Food sovereigntists who also reterritorialize space and appropriate resources without permission from the state, can be seen as displaced persons in food system governed by regulations of the national-state which uphold and defend the monopoly of power enjoyed by corporations in the food system. Territory thus, is mobilized by food sovereigntists as a partial and temporary technology of power (Elden, 2010) to shift the scale and locus of power from the nation or the city to local affiliations.

This assertion of a local autonomy over the productive resource of the food system in a new and critically important assertion of space and territory, which has important implications for the way citizenship is constructed and the role of policies in achieving food sovereignty. Because food sovereignty discourse in the United States so often identifies the problems of the food system as lying with the state, the rhetoric can easily be interpreted as anarchist, anti-statist, libertarian or secessionist. Examinations of food sovereignty practice, however, reveal a strategy of reterritorialization of space that claims allegiance to the moral universals of ecological and community health. Thus, food sovereignty can be read as a territorial strategy of organizations and community to attain political autonomy; the movement may be about food on its surface, but inherent to its aims is the liberation of people from repressive structures of state/capital power. Geographical understandings of political sovereignty are thus central to its aims and need to be incorporated into our understandings and analyses of food sovereignty practice.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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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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