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Food Regime for Thought

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Abstract

This essay engages with Henry Bernstein's critical survey of food regime analysis, focusing on the claim that my interpretation of the food regime takes a misguided 'peasant turn.' I argue Henry's representation loses sight of my reformulation of the 'agrarian question,' as more than analysis of the uneven process by which capital subordinates landed property, and therefore, of the class fate of the peasantry, as such. Rather it is about social and ecological fate on a global scale, involving questions of ecosystem survival, precarious labor circuits, urban slum proliferation, privatization of states, financialization, intellectual (property) rights, climate change mitigation, and so on. Significantly, global recognition of these connections to processes of agro-industrialization and enclosure was informed by a 'peasant' mobilization that would be unthinkable within the terms of the classical agrarian question. Peasant organizations catalyzed challenge to the neoliberal food order institutionalized in the WTO regime, in a time of massive dispossession. Politicizing neoliberal 'food security' as an agribusiness project, the 'food sovereignty' counter-movement used a politics of strategic essentialism to unmask the undemocratic and impoverishing architecture of the 'free trade' regime privileging corporate rights over state and citizen rights. In effect, this counter-movement performed a food regime analysis from within, importantly reaching beyond a peasant project. This essay revisits the comparative-historical method by which the food regime trajectory can be understood, as a contradictory set of interacting forces and relations that complicate and shape and reshape its politics, and yet allow identification of emergent possibilities.

Keywords: food regime, food sovereignty, peasant mobilization, enclosure, historical method, agrarian question

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¹ Forthcoming, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, May 2016

Introduction

At a Critical Development Studies conference at the University of Zacatecas in August 2015, I engaged with a commentator, Darcy Terreault, reviewing the Spanish edition of my book, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*.² Perhaps his most significant question concerned the absence of reference to Alexander Chayanov and a definition of ‘peasant’ in the book. I responded that the book is not about the peasantry *per se*, rather it is about the food regime and a counter-hegemonic movement inspired by peasant organizations.³ It is not a Chayanovian tract about how small-scale producers balance the distribution of their household labor. Nor is it about whether or how peasants exist and/or constitute a revolutionary agency. It is about a historically specific mobilization, in the name of ‘food sovereignty,’ informing an alternative world vision at a time when neoliberal capitalist institutions and policies are destabilizing whole societies and ecosystems.

‘Food sovereignty’ conceptually reorders the world. The food sovereignty movement is not simply about peasants, or food, rather it addresses the undemocratic and unsustainable impact of the contemporary trade and investment regime. It is about reorganizing inter-national political economy, modeling social struggle around democratic principles, gender equity, producer rights, ecological practices, and rebalancing the urban/rural divide. It reconnects the city with the countryside, reformulating the ‘agrarian question’ as a general socio-ecological question, rather than simply a question of class alliances as capital subordinates agriculture (Araghi 2000, McMichael 1997). As one of the founders of La Vía Campesina, Paul Nicholson, stated in 1996: ‘To date, in all the global debates on agrarian policy, the peasant movement has been absent; we have not had a voice. The main reason for the very existence of the Vía Campesina is to be that voice and to speak out for the creation of a more just society... As those responsible for taking care of nature and life, we have a fundamental role to play’ (Vía Campesina 1996: 10-11).

Positioning

This essay is intended to clarify any misunderstanding of my argument about the food regime. The fact that I give prominence to the peasant-based counter-movement might encourage a reader to assume a *simple* binary between ‘capital’ and ‘peasant’ as the axis of contention in the food regime. Not so, as these are abstract (and non-equivalent) terms requiring the kind of historicization integral to food regime analysis. In contradistinction to previous food regimes constructed by hegemonic British and US states, the food regime under neoliberalism institutionalizes a hegemonic relation whereby states serve capital. This, to me, is the distinctive organizing principle, by which corporate rights have been elevated over the sovereign rights of states and their citizens – the WTO rules (among other, ongoing, trade agreements) made this clear. In this sense, this, then, is a ‘corporate’ food regime – but this (comparative-historical) designation does not mean all corporations are the same, nor that they do not mutate as value-chains evolve, financialization proceeds, and retailing transforms. It simply means that corporate interests of various kinds are privileged when it comes to re-organizing food systems as commodified assemblages or empires (Ploeg 2009). And, just as previous food regime dynamics revolved around central tensions: temperate (national) vs. tropical (imperial) tensions (1870s-1914), or national vs. transnational (1950s-1973), so the dynamic in the contemporary food regime involves a key tension between abstract globalism (fractionated industrial ‘food from nowhere’) and concrete localism (ecologically farmed food and nested markets: ‘food from somewhere’). This tension, *and its institutional architecture*, has been well articulated by peasant organizations as they have mobilized around a ‘food sovereignty’ political platform first publicly introduced on a world platform in 1996, at a time of intensified de-peasantization following implementation of NAFTA and the WTO. More than a protective counter-movement, this intervention concerns sovereignty for states as well as food producers, as a precondition for processes of economic democratization, and ecological and public health. As Alana Mann puts it, the movement is ‘recentering agriculture as part of a larger project against the destructive imposition of market relations and commodification on every aspect of life,’

² Darcy’s review is forthcoming in *Estudios Críticos del Desarrollo*, along with my response.

³ For the authoritative account of these peasant organizations, see Desmarais (2007).

and food sovereignty is presented ‘as a solution to multiple global crises stemming from the neoliberal project’ (2014: 3). Local experiences inform global solutions – hardly a peasant project, as such.

This brings me to Henry Bernstein’s essay, which reads as a thoughtful engagement with the early food regime analysis (Friedmann and McMichael 1989) and its evolving threads in others’ work. He finishes by acknowledging the key role of food regime analysis for investigating contemporary changes in the world-historical moment. I salute this claim of course, since the conceptualization of distinctive food regimes was precisely about historicizing capitalism and the state system as they evolve, cyclically, within particular hegemonic relations.

This comparative-historical perspective is a basis for interpreting current events and processes. But it may not be so easy, as Bill Pritchard remarks: ‘The essential feature of the food regimes approach is that it is best used as a tool of hindsight. It can help order and organise the messy reality of contemporary global food politics, but its applications are necessarily contingent upon an unfolding and unknowable future’ (2007, 8). This may have been a prescient insight, and perhaps applies to the observed difference between my own and Harriet Friedmann’s interpretations of whether or not there is a ‘third’ food regime (Friedmann 2005, McMichael 2005). I see a ‘corporate food regime’ since the 1980s, while Harriet sees a possibly emergent ‘corporate-environmental food regime.’ As I wrote to Harriet in a personal exchange (December 28, 2015): ‘In a way I have been looking back, while you have been looking forward. It seems to me a matter of stance: I have been interested in how enclosure via the universalization of export agriculture and agro-exports has transformed agrarian regions/relations, and how this may foreclose landed futures (among other things) – playing out now with land grabbing for biofuels, speculation and offshore food security for East Asian and mid-Eastern states, and how it in turn re-conditions food sovereignty politics. Since you don’t accept the existence of a food regime over the last quarter century, choosing to seek signs of an emergent one, you are more inclined to ask questions about where we are going. I do not see this as a zero-sum situation, regarding whether or not food regime analysis continues to be relevant.’

In my view, the bottom line is that food regime analysis offers a historical method to examine the political and economic (and now ecological) relationships attending the production and circulation of food on a world scale. And by this I mean food regime analysis provides a particular optic on the periodic transformations in political and social relations in the capitalist world economy over the last one and a half centuries, and in doing so it offers key insights into current transformations. It can at least attempt to situate them, and at most offer intimations of the future.

In this sense, ‘food regime’ is not a theoretical construct rather it is a form of analysis. It is a method, in fact a world-historical method. It is a way of organizing our understanding of significant shifts in global power relations through the agri-food lens. As such it challenges international relations theory and world-systems analysis alike. And it reframes liberal and Marxist theories of development. As I argue in *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* (2013a), food regime analysis has thus far established some innovative framing, in relatively stylized ways, to encourage new lines of inquiry and recognition of the significance of food in international political economy, and food relations for humanity and its ecological foundations. But there are substantially more analytical dimensions to include in the repertoire – for example labor, gender, race/ethnicity, ecology, diet/nutrition, financialization, bioeconomy, regional variation,⁴ and so on. In the meantime I commend Henry Bernstein for undertaking such an extensive summary task and raising some important questions.

The So-called ‘Peasant Turn’

Bernstein has serious misgivings regarding my claims for a current food regime, and especially my interpretation of its central tension between ‘food from nowhere’ and ‘food from somewhere,’⁵ which

⁴ See, eg, Dixon (2014).

⁵ Bové and Dufour (2001) first introduced the idea of ‘food from nowhere, prompting the counterpart in ‘food from somewhere’ (McMichael 2002). Not just a spatial issue, ‘food from somewhere’ invokes local common pool resources, managed by self-organizing land users with shared rules which ‘differ from the logic of capital—they reflect, instead the interests and perspectives of the involved producers, ecological cycles and/or principles such as social justice, solidarity, or the containment of (potential) conflicts’ (Ploeg, Jingzhong, & Schneider,

he characterizes as ‘the peasant turn.’ I am pleased to have the opportunity to clarify my argument, which Henry represents as populist or a kind of peasant fundamentalism. As implied above, this representation conflates the ‘peasantry’ (as social category) with a contemporary counter-movement. And this counter-movement is not about a peasant-led future, it is about the initial peasant organizations coming together to articulate a central contradiction of the late-twentieth century world food order, namely, that a claim for food security via neoliberal institutions/policy is an illusion, and has enabled an architecture of dispossession and monopoly power. The legacy of the ‘food sovereignty’ public intervention in 1996 is about peasants and farmers informing a new politics of food and ecology that simultaneously concerns a moral economy of international relations – a politics substantially more than a populist ‘peasant turn.’

My point is that such a categorical response obscures recognition of the broader significance of the food sovereignty movement. It is difficult, *categorically*, to reconcile the alliance between landless workers in Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) and the Indian middle/bourgeois peasant organization, Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS). A class-analytic approach would seem at odds with such distinctive and seemingly contradictory production relations, being unable to account for such an unlikely alliance. As I have argued, a food regime analytic resolves this by recognizing the significance of *circulation relations* in generating such cross-class political alliances, reframing ‘peasant’ identity and the politics of the twenty-first agrarian question.⁶ ‘Circulation relations’ refer not simply to commodity movements, but to a world market instituted by the state system – a world market with particular local effects. Here, land users negotiate the impacts of a global neoliberal regime within particular property relations specific to each state. Structural adjustment and free trade and investment policies subject all farm sectors and food prices to a common set of market forces, nevertheless refracted through domestic class structures. And while export agriculture is a universal in the corporate food regime it is organized by geopolitical monopoly and ubiquitous food empires (Ploeg 2009). Beyond a political slogan ‘food sovereignty’ is a counter-movement expressing the central contradiction of the food regime and its circulation relations, promoting ‘agriculture without farmers’ on a global scale, governed by exchange value.⁷ This is hardly simply a ‘peasant turn.’

The broader implications of the food sovereignty movement inform David Harvey’s quest for an ‘organic link’ between peasant mobilization and worker movements (2005: 23). In my view, such an organic link is ‘... implicit in La Vía Campesina’s linking of the accelerated circulation of food to the accelerated displacement and circulation of people, whether they are peasants or ex-peasants. That is, the corporate food regime conditions the trajectory of wage labour and the social wage precisely by reproducing an expendable global wage labour force’ (McMichael 2009a, 307). In other words, proletarian conditions are intimately connected to the fate of the peasantry. This is arguably a defining feature of twenty-first century capitalism, and situates the food sovereignty movement writ large (via emergent coalitions and alliances) as a key historic force today. Together, these cross-class and cross-sectoral relations reveal the relevance and import of food regime analysis and its methodological value in reconstructing a substantive, historicized account of the political dynamics of class de/formation, as the case may be.

2012, 164).

⁶ Cf an earlier reframing of the agrarian question (McMichael 1997).

⁷ We are now seeing manipulation by industrial agriculture of ‘flex crops’ (Borras et al 2012) for profit in the name of green transition. This extends to food companies struggling to capture (affluent) consumer dollars by producing healthier products for supermarket shelves – anticipating (in part) a ‘corporate-environmental regime’ (Friedmann 2005). A recent study suggests ‘There is a consumer shift at play that calls into question the reason packaged foods exist... much of their time is being spent in the perimeter of the store with its vast collection of fresh products. Sales of fresh products have grown nearly 30 percent since 2009... The outlook for the center of the store is so glum that industry insiders have begun to refer to that space as the morgue’ (Taparia and Koch 2015, 4).

Historical Specification

Bernstein claims the ‘corporate food regime’ concept has an explicit ‘political quality,’ inhibiting analysis. It is not clear to me that political analysis is a contradiction in terms. The concept itself evolves and transforms, with changing organizational content, political coordinates and forms of contention – precisely requiring ongoing analysis.⁸ And besides, analysis is normative insofar as it addresses the epistemological assumptions embedded in the very categories in play. Thus, the counter-movement politicizes the food regime by de-naturalizing its proponents’ claims (notably, ‘food security’ requires the ‘free market’). This intervention has political significance for a world facing serious instability – both environmental (ecosystem degradation, climate change) and social (labor casualization, migration and over-urbanization).

A populist (romantic) would argue food sovereignty peasants are simply defending their way of life.⁹ Drawing on Bernstein’s notion of an ‘agrarian question of labor’ (2003), it is problematic to recommend this way of life at this moment, given recent politically managed onslaughts on farming household livelihoods and communities. Precisely because of the deterioration of peasant/family farming around the world via food regime developmentalism, the food sovereignty movement emerged to draw attention to this global assault on small-scale producers, who still constitute a substantial portion of the global population. Certainly this is not the only constituency facing deprivation and discrimination – but this condition contributes to other deprivations through the process of dispossession, labor casualization, labor circuits (including non-citizen humans), and so forth (Araghi 2000, McMichael 1999, Standing 2011).

In terms of global stability and sustainability, the intensified process of ‘emptying the countryside’ is a principal contradiction. Were it not for the food sovereignty movement this upheaval would remain largely invisible. But, as below, it is not just about visibility, it is about vision – which is not something one can extrapolate from a conventional category such as ‘peasant.’ Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg puts this category (a Chayanovian version) to work to show how small-scale producers today negotiate the historic imbalances they face within the household and their wider networks, detailing an historic process of ‘re-peasantization,’ as producers substitute ‘ecological capital’ for commercial inputs (2013). But the peasant category, as such, does not embody a critical historical sensibility – this is the product of mobilization in a particular time/space. And food regime analysis situates this phenomenon via historical method.

Accordingly, the designation of a ‘corporate’ food regime is not premised on a simple capital/peasant binary. Food regime contradictions are the outcome of a complex series of determinations in which both ‘capital’ and ‘peasant’ are by no means given categories. They are profoundly historical, expressing ongoing and emergent practices. The concept of ‘food from nowhere’ represents processes of agro-industrialization, agro-exporting, global sourcing of processed ingredients, and now ‘sustainable intensification.’ The ‘food from somewhere’ notion represents citizen control, agroecology, farmer-to-farmer exchanges of knowledge, seeds and labor, urban food policy council developments, local energy descent practices in food systems, landscape farming, and so forth.¹⁰

⁸ This is perhaps a key issue in the debate, as a ‘third’ food regime is contemporary and less amenable to the stylized characterization of the first two food regimes (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). As such, it is necessary to understand the shifting political-economic landscape. I analyze various transformations unfolding through the rise and decline of the WTO, the rise of finance capital, agrofuels, land grabbing, the 2007-08 food price inflation and food riots, South-South relations and multi-centrity, institutional reformulation of development agencies and the FAO, and maturation and elasticity of the food sovereignty movement. The following publications speak to these developments (McMichael 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Patel and McMichael 2009). Rehearsing these publications is not for show but to underline ongoing analysis of food regime contradictions.

⁹ Not all ‘peasants’ (mobilize to) defend their way of life, as often, given various processes of ‘accumulation by encroachment’ (Patnaik 2008), it is indefensible or inadequate, requiring other income sources, including export crops such as cacao and palm oil, or carbon forestry (eg, Li 2015, Rist et al 2010, Osborne 2011).

¹⁰ These are relational processes, becoming more concrete to the extent that a counter-narrative is constructed regarding these place-based developments (eg, Lohmann 2003, Patel 2006, McMichael 2010). See also De Schutter and Gliessman (2015).

The food from nowhere/somewhere juxtaposition informs the food sovereignty movement's *overall critique* of the neoliberal agri-food relations institutionalized in the contemporary food regime. This counter-movement exposed the limits of the private regime, restoring a discourse of public control of food systems (understood differently in different places), to enable/promote healthy socio-ecological practices at ground level.¹¹ In short, food sovereignty 'is not about restoring a peasant utopia; rather it is about countering the catastrophic social and ecological effects of the neoliberal assault on the agrarian foundations of society. It stems from mobilization in/of the countryside, but has broader implications' (McMichael 2014a, 348).

Epistemic Dimensions

Projection of peasant voice through the global mobilization around food sovereignty is more than an 'interest politics.'¹² Its epistemic implications transcend the idea that peasant farming is *the* solution to food regime contradictions. It is, rather, the basis of a sensibility regarding how we interpret the world. Thus, the final chapter of *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* is an argument for reaching beyond orthodox value theory, and recognizing what can be learned (and scaled up) from the value of social-ecological relations embodied in small-scale diverse farming systems. It is a critique of how value theory has been understood and applied,¹³ and, therefore, why it might be unthinkable that peasants could be world-historical subjects. It doesn't mean we should jettison value theory, rather it means we should use it *methodologically* by attending to the political history of capital – which is the potential of food regime analysis.

In my view, the origins of the food sovereignty movement lie in its de-fetishization of the commodification of food on a world scale under the neoliberal regime. Peasant organizations bore witness to the violence of value relations and articulated the central contradiction in the powerful essentializing term, 'sovereignty,' as the counterpart to neoliberal 'food security.' In this sense, the food sovereignty movement is not simply about peasants, or food, rather it concerns the undemocratic architecture of the state system, its erosion of social and ecological stability, and its politically, economically and nutritionally impoverishing consequences (Patel 2006, 2007, Desmarais 2015, Trujillo 2015).

Food regime analysis enables an understanding of why and how such peasant mobilization has come about, at this time, and with what consequence. Analysing the political history of capital through a food regime lens allows recognition that the peasant mobilization embodies a general critique of neoliberal capitalism. It combines critique of both production *and* circulation relations in the industrial food regime -- it concerns both labor conditions as well as the geo-political conditions through which an instituted trade and investment regime privileges agribusiness and investors for whom small-scale producers represent an obstacle to capital accumulation. In addition, the movement politicizes 'free trade' and its claims for 'food security,' advocating reorganization of international relations, including support of low-input, regenerative farming systems subsidized by public authorities.¹⁴

¹¹ As noted elsewhere: 'People and communities everywhere are devising social and ecological experiments towards the goal of greater autonomy, or self-reliance. It is not out of the realm of possibility that such self-organizing communities and regions might come to exert increasing pressure on governments to support such home-grown wealth as stabilizing citizenship in a resource/energy-challenged era, thereby transforming states from within, and shifting the language of valuation from price to socio-ecological interdependence. This is an organic process – certainly not easy, nor untrammled, but nevertheless food sovereignty in practice' (McMichael 2014c, 8). In this regard, Martha Jane Robbins thoughtfully problematizes food sovereignty's 'localisation' narrative (2015; see also Akram-Lodhi 2015).

¹² Critics may argue what is 'peasant interest'? The issue, rather, is how land (and water) is used – it is processual and relational, not definitional (cf Hart et al, 2015).

¹³ For the extended version of this critique, see McMichael (2012b).

¹⁴ And these political-economic and political-ecological interventions are undergirded by struggles internal to the movements regarding gender imbalances and participatory learning in proliferating agro-ecological schools, as well as representational issues between constituencies and the newly established Civil Society Mechanism within the FAO's Committee on World Food Security (Trujillo 2015, Rosset & Martinez-Torres 2012, McKeon 2015).

And, notably, the peasant movement itself is not concerned to monopolize the concept and practice of ‘food sovereignty’ -- European *Vía Campesina* activist Paul Nicholson observes: ‘This is also an autonomous and independent process. There is no central committee, and food sovereignty is not the patrimony of any particular organisation. It’s not *La Vía Campesina*’s project, or even just a peasants’ project’ (2009, 678–80). Andrés García Trujillo notes that the global food sovereignty movement’s ‘strong connection to grassroots constituencies provides this kind of movement within a high degree of legitimacy and credibility that facilitates reaching out to other sectors of society’ (2015, 186),¹⁵ including the movement’s ability to connect urban and rural class formation dynamics.

The Salience of the Food Regime

Bernstein questions: ‘is the corporate food regime the most important terrain of struggle in the world today?’ (2016, 28). My answer is it may well be, but not in the way in which Henry frames it. Rather, the issue to me is what is at stake environmentally and socially in a global political economy in which food and its means of production are subject to continual subordination to profiteering (expanding territorial and technological frontiers with claims to ‘feed the world’), rather than social provisioning and restoring land and waterway nutrient cycles, and biodiversity in general. There are a number of recent reports, notably the IAASTD Report (2008), attesting to industrial agriculture’s environmental damage. As the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment noted:

Agricultural expansion will continue to be one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss well into the twenty-first century...

Over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber, and fuel. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth. . . . These problems, unless addressed, will substantially diminish the benefits that future generations obtain from ecosystems. (2005, 22, 1)

Of course there are other struggles underway (civil rights, labor rights, anti-austerity, immigrant rights, reproductive rights, rights to the city, commoning rights, and climate justice). As above, these are not unrelated to land rights struggles. However, this is about the food regime, so it is to be expected that struggles over the political ecology and economy of the global food system would be foundational. But this is not a simple thesis/antithesis dynamic. The agrarian contradictions of the food regime may be posed by the peasant mobilization, but it is fundamentally more than a ‘peasant’ struggle. Widening the lens, I have argued that:

the food regime concept is a key to unlock not only structured moments and transitions in the history of capitalist food relations, but also the history of capitalism itself. It is not about food per se, but about the relations within which food is produced, and through which capitalism is produced and reproduced. As such, the food regime is an optic on the multiple determinations embodied in the food commodity (McMichael 2009b, 281).

The multiple determinations in the food commodity refer, in the first instance, to the political management of the food trade at the expense of domestic food policy and security, to the appropriation of productive resources and market power for capital, and the subjection of farmers and consumers to a process of ‘supermarketization,’ affecting ecological public health (Lang and Heasman 2004, McMichael and Friedmann 2007). In this sense, food sovereignty involves a simultaneous critique of commodity fetishism in neoliberal ‘food security’ claims, and advocates a reformulation of food relations under public rather than private authority. Arguably, the peasant core of the food sovereignty movement operationalizes Marx’s method of political economy, identifying key determinations embodied in the commodification of food, via a globally instituted market. Who knew that ‘peasants’ could articulate this? -- certainly not adherents to the classical agrarian question. The peasant voice is

¹⁵ In my own work with representatives of the movement in the Committee on World Food Security the care with which they strive to maintain trust with (and faithfully represent) their respective constituencies is quite apparent, and distinguishes IPC process from the bureaucratic style typical of other social movements (cf Trujillo 2015).

symptomatic, at this point in time, of a food regime with profoundly destabilizing socio-ecological effects.¹⁶

As I have noted elsewhere, the food regime analytic was originally quite stylized (since it performed a preliminary function of emphasizing the role of global agri-food relations in geo-politics). The initial formulations characterized each food regime as pivoting on a particular tension: for the British-centered food regime the tension between colonial empires and an incipient nation-state system (expressed in the eclipse of tropical by temperate export crops), and for the US-centered food regime the tension (in a developmentalist era) between national and transnational economy (expressed in the food aid program, global food complexes, and the green revolution). Beyond the stylization, food regime analysis has also emphasized the class dynamics attending each regime (Friedmann 2005) – whether restive working class movements in nineteenth century Europe driving the colonization of grain producing lands overseas by anxious ruling classes (McMichael 2013a, 27-31), or rural and urban class unrest in the postwar Third World driving food aid programs and imposition of green revolution technologies as central to Cold War class politics (Ibid, 34-38). The food provisioning arrangements in the first two food regimes were explicit attempts to manage labor (and socialist) unrest via the cheapening of wage-foods. The recent corporate food regime has been clearly revealed as a class project by the food sovereignty movement – in universalizing cheap wage-foods, with the effect of dispossessing small producers and casualizing and under-reproducing labor (McMichael 1999, 2009b; Araghi 2003), and with distinctive gender effects as women’s social reproduction work intensifies (Razavi 2009). As noted in *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*:

The perverse consequence of global market integration is the export of deprivation, as “free” markets exclude and/or starve populations dispossessed through their implementation, consigning people of the colonized hinterlands to an unseen, racialized under-consumption that has been a condition for metropolitan development and over-consumption (McMichael 2013a, 57).

The contemporary food regime has, from my perspective, a simultaneous stylization (a central tension between transnational movement of capital/commodities and the food sovereignty counter-movement) embedded in an ongoing re-composition of the regime (detailed in McMichael 2013a).¹⁷ Re-composition includes a restructuring of geo-political relations – for example, the rise of Brazilian agro-exporting and expansion of the South American soy republic sourcing China’s grain import complex, financial investment in land grabbing - including state firms and sovereign wealth funds exercising ‘agro-security mercantilism’ in East Asia and the Middle East, financial restructurings of food companies and food chain assemblages, nutritionalization, an expanding bioeconomy, seed and pesticide company mergers, and infrastructuring of transgenic production. There are, of course, ongoing sovereignty struggles: from India’s National Food Security Program vs. the WTO through the rise of citizen movements (cf Andrée et al 2014) to an increasing human rights dimension to small-scale producer politics (cf Claeys 2015). In effect, the content and contours of the food regime are fluid, even as the central tension remains – thus, while La Vía Campesina stated in 2000 that ‘the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people,’ this could now be restated as ‘the massive movement of money around the world is forcing the increased movement of people,’ as they are expelled and/or resettled by land grab projects (McMichael 2015, 3).

While the compositional political forces and economic relations of the food regime are in flux, it remains a ‘corporate-dominated’ regime by virtue of the deepening power of the private sector. For instance, there has been a sea-change since 2007 in the narrative regarding ‘smallholders’ – once viewed as redundant, then recognized as a source of rural development in the World Bank’s *World Development Report (2008)*, and now subject to value chain incorporation (Ploeg 2009, McMichael 2013b). Converting peasants from object to subject of development¹⁸ opens a new frontier for capital,

¹⁶ This of course does not mean there is no positive movement within the food regime or on its ‘margins’ – this is also symptomatic: of shortcomings (also) identified by the food sovereignty movement (cf, Levidow 2015).

¹⁷ Les Levidow develops this stylized tension usefully for the European case, noting that: ‘contending narratives justify different trajectories for an agro-food transition’ (2015, 76).

¹⁸ I commented at the time with respect to the Bank’s report: ‘increasing assets of poor households, making

serving to incorporate indebted producers¹⁹ and dampen peasant mobilization, even as their representatives call this strategy into question in the Committee on World Food Security (McKeon 2015a).

The private aspect of the food regime is increasingly self-evident if it was not before. Timothy Wise underscores the fact that ‘financial speculators remain free to treat food commodities as just another asset class, often buried within commodity index funds dominated by petroleum and other energy products’ (2015, 10), and details the surrender of the once public-private donor trust fund, the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, to private sector interests, and the conversion of the model public-private partnership, the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, into a mechanism for privatizing host state regulations (2015, 12-13). Meanwhile, The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) seeks (confidentially) to relax the EU’s Precautionary Principle regarding food-associated chemicals (pesticides, packaging and additives), nano-technologies and GMOs, and to regulate procurement at the possible expense of local participatory food democracy initiatives defined as ‘localization barriers to trade’ (Hansen-Kuhn and Suppan 2013). The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which represents a regional ‘free trade’ agreement aimed at China’s growing world influence, intensifies agricultural liberalization rules (in the wake of WTO paralysis), with a further end-run around domestic food security initiatives. Led by the U.S., the TPP is a confidential, corporate-focused initiative aimed at dismantling remaining market protections and it ‘would expand protections for investors over consumers and farmers, and severely restrict governments’ ability to use public policy to reshape food systems’ (Hansen-Kuhn, quoted in Muller et al. 2012, 3).

These developments underline the agentic role of the corporate sector – which is why I prefer the designation ‘corporate,’ rather than ‘neoliberal,’ food regime (cf, Otero 2014). Both make sense of course, but those who prefer the ‘neoliberal’ epithet as recognition of the state’s role in the market may lose sight of the elemental shift from markets serving states (eg, in the ‘second’ food regime) to states serving (corporate) markets in the current conjuncture.²⁰ Value relations have come to dominate public policy to such an extent that at present I prefer to use the ‘corporate’ designation as the dominant organizing principle. Of course there is much research to be done on corporate strategic reorganization in the food system (eg, Baines 2015), but my focus has been elsewhere, particularly on institutional and epistemic issues.

Food Regime Politics

I view the tension between transnational economy and local economy²¹ as central to the politics of the current food regime. This tension is expressed at the grassroots level, with agrarian movements mobilizing around ‘land sovereignty’ issues (see, eg, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42, 3&4, 2015, and Borras and Franco 2012). It also informs UN forums such as the FAO’s Committee on World Food Security (Claeys 2015, Duncan 2015). The previous United Nations *Rapporteur* for the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, played a leading role in shifting UN discourse towards the question of domestic food security and the significance of ‘approximately 500 million small-scale farmers in developing countries making them not only the vast majority of the world’s farmers but, taking into account their families, responsible for the well-being of over two billion persons’ (2011, 13).

Such a recommendation is not simply about advocating for peasant farming as it also concerns reforming the architecture of the inter-state system and reorganizing states themselves, and the meaning of the public interest, not to mention substituting a more reliable and potentially equitable provisioning of food. The food-price crisis of 2007-08 lent legitimacy to this reformulation. Here the inflationary impact of export bans confirmed the food sovereignty critique of the free trade regime’s

smallholders more productive and expanding the rural nonfarm economy [is] logical enough if the goal is to expand the realm of monetary values and developing statistics’ (McMichael 2009c, 236).

¹⁹ Contrarily, Ploeg documents substantial instances of ‘new peasantries’ emerging from debt relations by detaching their farming (ecological) wealth from upstream commercial inputs (2009).

²⁰ Thus, the corporate food regime ‘pivoted on the internalization of neoliberal market principles by states subject to privatization via mandated structural adjustment and free trade agreements – as an alternative to a stable, hegemonic international currency’ (McMichael 2013a, 15).

²¹ This includes some fair trade style food and dedicated supply chains (see Friedmann and McNair 2008).

food provisioning claims, and now land-grab-style ‘food security’ has intensified the threat to food producing communities across the world (McMichael 2013b). It was precisely this legitimacy crisis that led to the FAO’s Committee on World Food Security opening a space for civil society voices in the Civil Society Mechanism (McKeon 2015a).

Bernstein asks ‘whether “corporate agribusiness” (and indeed finance capital) is also a “political” category in an essentially similar sense to peasantry (or peasantness)?’ (2016, 31). It is a leading question, but misunderstands my argument. Henry responds to this question suggesting that if capital is not a political category in the sense he ascribes to ‘peasantness,’ then ‘this gives a strangely lopsided character to the binary structure of McMichael’s third food regime’ (Idem). To clarify, there are two issues here.

First, this is not about capital vs. the other, as the food sovereignty movement formed within the relations of capital – even as it rejects the terms of these relations (cf Beverly 2004). In fact the food sovereignty movement, by definition, politicizes the food regime, to put it plainly. ‘Sovereignty’ combines a powerful critique of WTO-style liberalization threatening national determination of agri-food policy and food security, and a claim for small producer (peasant, farmer, artisan fishers, pastoralists, forest dwellers, farm workers) self-determination, as producers of society. Small producer self-determination politics underscores the material, and epistemic, marginalization of small-scale producers, justified by the pejorative appellation ‘peasant’ in conventional modernist discourse (cf, Schneider 2015). This is partly why the food sovereignty movement asserts the salience of the term ‘peasant’ -- as a provocation to modernist thinking, since such thought routinely invisibilizes this social constituency.²² In this regard, Ploeg has emphasized that ‘peasant-like ways of farming often exist as practices without theoretical representation. This is especially the case in developed countries. Hence, they cannot be properly understood, which normally fuels the conclusion that they do not exist or that they are, at best, some irrelevant anomaly’ (2009, 19). And it is Ploeg’s work on ‘re-peasantization’ -- meaning the *contemporary* practice of smallholders choosing a ‘self-managed resource base’ in co-production with nature (Ibid, 23) – that underlines a reflexive modernity (farmers disengaging from debt relations), and complements the political mobilization of small producers across the world today, inspiring a movement within the movement of capital.

Second, the so-called ‘peasant movement,’ in politicizing the assumptions, architecture and consequences of the food regime, *reaches beyond itself* to appeal to a broader political program, geared to safeguarding the future (of humanity, and of non-human nature). Of course this is not in binary balance, as this is not the point. The food sovereignty movement has more inclusive, universal appeal than simply ‘peasant farming.’ The metaphor of the ‘peasant as canary’ (McMichael 2008) suggests that those closest to the soil and waterways experience ecosystem degradation most keenly. As such peasant mobilization assumed the responsibility of warning the world.²³ Other than dedicated scientists, who else can, and does, do this? The proletariat as social labor may be a vector for democratic productive organization, but it tends not to be associated with an ecological principle (other than via environmental justice struggles, which are appropriately self-referential).

Analysis of the food sovereignty movement’s relationship to the food regime generates two related claims: (1) that there is an *immediate need* to protect and enhance the rights and capacity of small-scale producers²⁴ across the world, currently faced with state-assisted corporate and financial assaults on their farm economy and enclosure of their land and common property resources; and (2) that the countermovement represents and gives voice to an essential *long-term vision* regarding restoring farming landscapes²⁵ for global food security and cooling the planet.²⁶ Urbanization is out of control²⁷

²² Thus Karen Pederson, past-president of the National Farmers Union of Canada remarked: ‘Historically, we were peasants, then when that term came to mean “backward” we became “farmers.” In these days “farmer” has the connotation of inefficiency and we are strongly encouraged to be more modern, to see ourselves as entrepreneurs. I am reclaiming the term peasant because it stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build.’ Quoted in McKeon (2015b).

²³ This is analogous to Hannah Wittman’s concept of ‘agrarian citizenship’ (2009).

²⁴ Who are responsible for up to 70% of the world’s food (ETC 2009), and thus a key to reducing food insecurity.

²⁵ Landscape farming is practiced by a number of producer communities (see Hart 2015).

– via the ‘decoupling’ of industrialization and urbanization (Davis 2006) – and restoring ecosystems is a priority for the long term. The latter is not the sole responsibility of ‘peasants,’ but the countermovement has taken the initiative to put this on national and international agendas. As Julian Cribb claims: ‘If the process of industrializing the food chain proceeds to its logical conclusion, without restraint or correction, it will displace up to 1.5 billion of the world’s 1.8 billion farming families (one human being in five) by mid-century, an act of such a scale that no-one appears to have considered the consequences’ (2012).

The reference to ‘agriculture without farmers’ (Vía Campesina’s concept) is salutary here. It not only characterizes industrial agriculture, organized around commercial inputs disconnected with ‘place’ (particular ecosystems), and therefore requiring what Weis calls ‘biophysical override’ (2007). It also anticipated the ‘flex crop’ phenomenon (Borras et al 2012), which intensifies the fetishism of commodity agriculture by converting all crops to exchange value *par excellence*, where they serve alternately as food, feed or fuel depending on market and/or board-room conditions (McMichael 2012a, 686). This trend, intensified by financialization (land acquisition by financiers, pension funds, energy companies, etc) has serious consequences for both food security and ecosystem sustainability.

So this is not about agribusiness ‘vices,’ as Bernstein suggests, instead it is about the displacement of agriculture from social provisioning and multi-functionality. Rather than documenting ‘the vices of agribusiness in order to “verify” them’ (Bernstein 2016, 28), my intent is to reflect the countermovement’s concern for the monopolization of land (and water) as financial assets and the remodeling of agriculture as a site for expanding bioeconomic, transgenic and meatification complexes geared to affluent consumer demand in an increasingly income-unequal world (Fairbairn 2014, Weis 2007, 2013, Abergel 2011), with deepening consequence for both present and future.

Regarding the future, the world is at a significant threshold expressed in the ‘overshooting’ of Earth’s biocapacity and the crossing of planetary operational boundaries (climate change, biodiversity, nitrogen cycle), with others such as fresh water use and oceanic acidification at serious tipping points. Managing the future is now a clear priority. But how that is to be done is the question. In my view the food sovereignty movement is a critical part of answering this question. It doesn’t have all the answers, obviously, but it has effectively given substantive content to the question itself, by insisting on the unsustainable and discriminatory nature of an international regime constructed around the commodification of food systems. Valuing farmer knowledge and the right to (produce) food are key alternatives to such an industrial system, and involve in turn reformulation of international institutions, states, citizenship and food provisioning. Low input agriculture restores ecosystems, and has been identified in recent scientific consensus as both necessary and possibly sufficient, if adequately valued and supported (Badgley et al 2007, Pretty et al 2001, 2003, 2006). It is not surprising that in the meantime ‘conventional’ farmers are embracing more organic and/or agroecological methods (cf Levidow 2015). This is part of the vision for Harriet Friedmann’s ‘corporate-environmental regime’ (2005).

Food Regime Method

André Magnon understands that ‘food regime analysis proposes structured historical narratives – always subject to reinterpretation...[where] historical parts form the basis of comparison, but are understood to construct the whole (food regimes) historically. In turn, food regime analyses track successive periods of stability and change as lenses on the historical evolution of the whole... giving

²⁶ In this sense, what Henry dismisses as website ‘agit-prop’ I regard, in the case of the member organizations of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, as the distillation of substantial experience, deliberation and debate emerging from constituent grassroots organizations, regarding the critique and documentation of ‘food regime’-associated initiatives and struggles. Some of it is ‘evidence,’ and some of it is political intervention to reframe what is underway and to draw attention to what may be at stake. This is not something capital can do.

²⁷ From 2000 to 2010, China lost over a million villages—nearly 300 per day. By 2030, 300 million more peasants are to be ‘urbanized,’ making 1 billion city dwellers in what are called ‘ghost cities’ (Shepard 2015, 24, 27, 7).

priority to heterogeneity and contingency' (2012, 375).²⁸ This is the point of the method of 'incorporated comparison' – which uses diachronic and synchronic analysis of 'world ordering,' combining secular trends with cyclical dynamics (McMichael 1990, see also Arrighi 1994). Analysis of each conjuncture requires identifying and situating its internal tensions, historically, recognizing both residual and emergent threads.

Food regime analysis is precisely about diachronic and synchronic combinations, where, as I argue 'Like capitalism, the food regime takes various historical forms. Indeed capitalism itself is a food regime, insofar as its reproduction depends on the provisioning of foodstuffs necessary to the (economical) reproduction of its labor force' (McMichael 2013a, 21). Thus, over the last century and a half capital's food regime has evolved via periodic transformations, and:

Each food regime episode, then, is a successive part of an evolving historical conjuncture (the age of industrial agriculture). In other words, the particular regimes and the broader conjuncture are mutually conditioning. Each regime embodies an institutionalization of political and socio-ecological forces that structure international agri-food relations for that moment at the same time as they prefigure a further deepening of agri-food commodity relations (Idem).

The so-called 'food regime project' helps to specify historical contingency in the rise and fall of food regimes, recognizing that naming food regimes is only part of the project. As argued previously, 'the point is not to hypostatize "food regimes." They constitute a lens on broader relations in the political history of capital. They express, simultaneously, forms of geo-political ordering and, related, forms of accumulation, and they are vectors of power' (McMichael 2005, 276). Another part is recognizing that the analytical categories assume different meaning across time and space. And a further part is recognizing the secular trends at work. Secular trends give historical specificity to each cycle: 'While each regime is predicated on expansive "spatial fixes" to revitalize accumulation via resource provisioning, there is at the same time a *cumulative* deterioration of ecosystem sustainability whose limits are now evident in acknowledged ecological, energy and climate thresholds' (McMichael 2013a, 109). One might say that progressive spatial fixes deepen diachronic processes of agro-industrialization, involving successive food regimes in tendencies of natural 'exhaustion' (Moore 2015).

With respect to synchronic processes, these define a single regime, constituted by combined and uneven development and the contradictory juxtaposition of social and political forces expressing key tensions in the regime, as a historically situated structure. Food regime analysis thus far has focused on imperial/national tensions, national/transnational tensions, and now transnational/local tensions, as 'world agriculture (vs.) a place-based form of agro-ecology' (McMichael 2013a, 19). But these are only proximate frames, to be concretized with specific elements that contribute to the processes of structuring and restructuring within each regime. It is here that Marx's method of political economy aligns with the method of incorporated comparison to assemble the interactive 'parts' of the food regime 'whole.' Marx's methodological directive is to avoid reification of phenomenal forms of a historical structure, by retracing its compositional relations to produce a historically concrete whole. Similarly, a food regime ensemble, as a historical structure, needs reconstruction via its formative processes to produce a 'totality comprising many determinations and relations' (Marx 1973, 106). This is the directive offered in *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*, and it includes, for example here, reformulating agrarian questions as embodying global (rather than simply national) relations, representing the food regime dynamic as the inter-relations of depeasantization and global labor force precarity, and outlining ways of examining food regime dynamics through the lens of specific regional processes and articulations (East Asia, the Middle East and Latin America).

Marx's method offers concretization of a synchronic whole – thus: 'The concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many determinations, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears, therefore, in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting-point – although it is the real

²⁸ This is the method of 'incorporated comparison,' which brings spatially, and temporally, separated processes into relation to understand the complexity of the food regime at large, as a succession of periodic cycles across modern time, or as a stable conjuncture expressing a dominant configuration of power (cf McMichael 1990).

point of origin, and thus also the point of origin and perception' (Marx 1973, 106). Incorporated comparison, drawing on Marx's method, makes explicit the political history of capital in forming successive geo-political forms of a food regime as 'a generic feature of capital's structuring of agricultural relations across time and space as the foundation of accumulation and processes of production and reproduction of labor forces' (McMichael 2013a, 109). It is this diachronic perspective that is critical to an understanding of the exigencies of the current food regime, which 'embodies both synchronic and diachronic processes and contradictions that, together, have produced a food provisioning crisis' (Idem), which became a key crisis of legitimacy for the neoliberal trade regime.

With regard to the food price crisis of 2007-08, it embodied:

a layering of spatio-temporal relations – in particular the longer-term cycle of agro-industrialization, involving simplification via monoculture and growing fossil-fuel dependence, combined with conjunctural declines in food production yields, and current inflation-producing effects of agrofuel offsets and financial speculation. Rising costs, related to peak oil and fuel crop substitutes, combine with pricing by agribusiness to inflate prices, globally transmitted via liberalized forms of finance, trade and food security' (Ibid, 110).

The penultimate chapter in *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* on 'Crisis and Restructuring' is dedicated to addressing some of the principal forces and relations undermining the legitimacy of the corporate food regime, by revealing the illusion of 'food security' via a privatized regime. This was not a crisis produced by peasants, even if the food sovereignty movement called such 'food security' into question a decade earlier. This chapter reviews the 'moving parts' of the world food order, showing that the crisis did not have universal origins nor uniform effects, and that it involved a series of significant grain export bans, biofuel mandates reconstituting the global grain trade and food supplies, cascading food riots across North and South, financial speculation on agri-food futures and land, development of bio-economy and bio-capitalism as 'smart agriculture,' the growing integration of oil and food markets, geographic transformation of the food regime towards trade multi-centricity and the rise of 'agro-security mercantilism,' and the reformulation of 'world agriculture' by officialdom to include an entrepreneurial role for 'smallholders' via public-private partnerships in promoting 'value-chain' agriculture.

While these dynamics, in combination, restructure the food regime, possibly initiating a transitional period, the earlier dynamics of *formation* of a corporate food regime involved the reformulation of prior relationships. As laid out in *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*, these included the re-division of international labor in food production, the rise of New Agricultural Countries, global financial relations substituting for an international currency, a debt regime eliminating farm sector supports and promoting agro-exporting, and building the infrastructure and justification for elaboration of a 'world agriculture' under the auspices of the WTO. The WTO, in Pritchard's view, represented a carryover of the mercantilism of the 'second' food regime (2009, 297), but in my view while this was so formally, substantively 'it was the first time farmers universally were confronted with a world market price...' thereby changing the rules of the game (McMichael 2013a, 46). And it was this game change that intensified dispossession and precipitated the peasant/farmer mobilization, in its various forms. José Bové and Francois Dufour, recognizing that Europe's export agriculture had different consequence for European family farms and Southern peasant producers alike, brought an incorporated comparison approach to the analysis of the global counter-movement:

The strength of this global movement is precisely that it differs from place to place... The world is a complex place, and it would be a mistake to look for a single answer to complex and different phenomena. We have to provide answers at different levels – not just the international level, but local and national levels too (2001, 168).

As above, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) strives to operate according to this directive, with its global representations reflecting the outcomes of internal, local struggles. As Jun Borrás maintains, La Vía Campesina is both *actor* (on the global stage) and *arena*, of debate and exchanges among national, sub-national and regional peasant and farmer groups (2004, 3). This combination of an 'inside' strategy with an 'outside' strategy -- governed by the need to engage

with international institutions and forums (most recently, formally, in the FAO's Committee on World Food Security). At all scales, the movement is confronted with an evolving regime, most recently an intensification of land and water enclosure, reversing exchange from 'outside' to 'inside,' as efforts to monitor land grabbing at the ground level reflect a new global politics of rights and 'land sovereignty' (Monsalve Suárez 2013, Claeys 2015, Borras and Franco 2012, McMichael 2014). This new phase of struggle represents a sea change in the organization and impact of the 'corporate' food regime since its inception.

Corporate Food Regime Dynamics

Here it is necessary to summarize the argument regarding construction of the 'corporate' food regime – in part to underscore that this is not a regime simply of corporations and peasants. The 'food regime' is a capitalist world order with specific rules structuring the production and consumption of food on a world scale (Friedmann 1993, 30-31). I concretize this, in value relational terms, as 'a particular world-historical conjuncture in which governing rules define a world-price-governed relationship of food provisioning' (McMichael 2013a, 8). This formulation is central to my claim for a 'third' food regime. As Bernstein notes, it is somewhat at odds with Friedmann's formulation of an emergent corporate-environmental regime (2005). Chapter 3 of *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* is devoted to a substantive (and respectful) distinction from Harriet's take, arguing for the significance of the rise of a private regime of global trade managed by transnational corporations, not necessarily allied with a particularly dominant state. The GATT Uruguay Round represented a negotiated settlement between the two principal ('dumping') competitors for world markets in food, the US and the EU – with corporations exerting substantial influence in shaping the 1995 outcome: the WTO and its trade, investment, and intellectual property regime. At that time, 'food security' was redefined as the right to *purchase* food, and market rule was consolidated. This was centered on an artificial world price for traded grains, enabled by the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (universally outlawing price supports, except those concealed in the WTO Box system favoring northern agribusiness).

While there has not been a true international currency as with previous sterling/gold or dollar/gold regimes, the corporate food regime was nevertheless constituted by a distinct set of relationships that depart from the conventional understanding of an international regime (Krasner 1983). Ploeg captures the difference in one sense by his implicit distinction between state-based empires (British, US) and what he calls 'food empires' (2009). States serve the market under this private regime, with international financial governance shifting 'from states to 'private' institutions such as the Bank of International Settlements' (Nesvetailova and Palan 2010, 7-8). As Harvey has argued, the World Bank, the IMF and the Bank of International Settlements partner with the OECD, the G-8 and the G-20 in coordinating central banks and treasury departments 'to constitute an evolving global financial architecture for an international version of the state-finance nexus' (2011, 51). Through this mechanism ruling classes negotiate currency stability with their representatives in the international financial institutions – characteristic of a specific conjuncture in which states have increasingly privatized, and taxpayers serve as the default in the event of crisis. Market stabilization, such as it is, has depended on three decades of austerity conditions, generalized from the global South to the global North across this period, and expressed in a food regime universalizing export agriculture. While the food sovereignty movement initially challenged the destabilizing effects of EU and US agro-exporting, under the WTO/IMF-sponsored trade regime, agro-exporting is now generalized across all states in a corporate-structured economics of 'competitive advantage.' Raj Patel noted:

The new political economy of food rested not on control through the United States' food surplus, but through the Global South's fiscal debt ... the Global North found itself able to access cheap food from the Global South under the aspect of magnanimity – every bite of cheap food eaten in the North was helping the South pay back its debt (2007, 93, 96).

I would add that each bite helped the South pay for its imported food bill, given the substitution of high-value export foods for staple domestic foods under this regime of austerity, with the proliferation of 'New Agricultural Countries' (Friedmann 1991).

A private regime requires ‘governance,’ and *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* outlines how GATT multilateralism enabled the elaboration of global regulatory mechanisms that compromised national sovereignties in developing a specific structure of global accumulation (eliminating farm program protections and supply management and depressing food prices). GATT’s procedural standardization and general tariff reduction embodied a distinctive constitutional dimension attractive to the growing nation-state membership of what became the WTO (Winters 1990, 1298). Thus the new regime obtained certain legitimacy, imparted by WTO Director-General Renato Ruggiero, who remarked at the first ministerial meeting of the WTO: ‘We are no longer writing the rules of interaction among separate national economies. We are writing the constitution of a single global economy’²⁹ -- in the absence of a hegemonic state fashioning its own rules of the game. The agricultural subsidy system that formerly regulated national economies was now transformed into a competitive world market instrument, to the advantage of grain traders and food retailers, institutionally embedded in the WTO. The rules were premised on standardizing market conditions as if all states were equal (with some exceptions for LDC’s), subject to a binding integrated dispute settlement mechanism to ensure freedom of trade and investment.

The elevation of agri-food economy to the international sphere depended fundamentally on such ‘freedom’ of trade and investment – as executed by transnational firms, and, later, financial houses and investors, as financialization consolidated in the new century and became consequential in the so-called ‘land grab’ (Clapp 2012, Fairbairn 2014). As La Vía Campesina claimed at the turn of the century, ‘the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people’ (2000). Such ‘agit-prop’ (Bernstein’s term) specified a critical relationship in the food regime, namely the significance of the circulation relations of capital – a veritable blindspot in orthodox class analysis of agrarian change. The ability of the food sovereignty countermovement to identify the significance and socio-ecological impact of surplus food circulation reveals an astute political analysis of the structuring of the state system in this particular regime, its paradoxical effects on sovereignty, its deepening of the agrarian crisis as the new century dawned, and its long-term unsustainability.

In this sense, of course the food sovereignty movement *anticipated* the crisis of food price inflation in 2007-08, when export bans exposed food dependency. This episode underscored the compromise of national sovereignty, as expressed by urban riots drawing attention to decades of rising food dependency (Patel and McMichael 2009). These food riots were explicit about linking the food price crisis to liberalization policies of the food regime, in addition to expressing a growing political alliance between town and country regarding food commodification and the appeasement of transnational food companies by southern regimes reproducing urban bias (eg, Bush 2010, Gana 2012, McMichael 2014, 948).

The ‘food crisis’ and the associated phenomenon of land grabbing reflect a restructuring in what may be called the food/fuel, or ‘flex crop,’ regime (McMichael 2012a, 2014, Borras et al 2012, Baines 2015). It may be the beginning of a long transition, since the combination of displacement of food crops by agrofuels with financial speculation on food futures and rising input costs (oil, phosphates) will reduce the ability of the land-grab frontier to provide cheap energy and food supplies to reduce capital’s costs of production and reproduction (cf, Moore 2015). It is not surprising that agro-ecology is gaining ground in FAO circles and among enlightened agriculturalists, and peasant producers are embracing new methods of biodiverse farming, supported by agro-ecological schools and seed and knowledge-sharing networks (Vía Campesina 2010, Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012, Da Vía 2012, Fonte 2013, Massicotte 2014, <http://www.ipes-food.org/>). The food sovereignty movement is adapting its politics to emerging realities (McMichael 2014), but not without contradictory circumstances and consequences (see the special issue of *Third World Quarterly*, 36(3) 2015).

Conclusion

In my view, food regime analysis is ongoing. Given the proposition that modern capital is a food regime, the key is to identify moments of crystallization in particular globally institutionalized food orders. Arguably, the period traversed by the rise and demise of the WTO constitutes a food regime

²⁹ See UNCTAD (1996).

characterized by cheap food relations represented as ‘food security,’ depending on a process of dispossession and impoverishment of displaced food producers, and replaced by an expanding frontier of ‘agriculture without farmers.’ The incubation of a food sovereignty counter-movement within this world-scale process of enclosure necessarily politicized the regime as unsustainable as such. Whether and how it is in transition now is an open question. Certainly the Doha Round is dead. But capital, in its changing forms, continues the pattern, enlisting the G8 in the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition as a land/water enclosing counteroffensive via public-private partnership (McKeon 2014), instigating new regional and bilateral trade agreements, and monopolizing intellectual property relations. Meanwhile the pattern of displacement continues as states join investors in commandeering offshore land for food and fuel supplies.

One consequence of the peasant movement has been to strengthen an epistemic alternative to capital’s value relations. As argued elsewhere, the food sovereignty critique articulates the ‘epistemic rift’ stemming from what Marx called the ‘metabolic rift’ (McMichael 2012b). This refers to the disruption of agriculture’s natural metabolic relations and the subsequent privileging of value relations in theorizing capital’s subordination of agriculture. Here economic relations substitute for ecological relations in determining agrifood value, discounting farmer knowledge and licensing agro-industrialization. By reclaiming the significance of ecological relations, the food sovereignty movement presages an ontological alternative to neoliberal capitalism: how the world and its inhabitants might be organized according to ecological principles – instead of economic principles of commodification, efficiency, and private interest. A tall task it is indeed, nevertheless emergent in a multitude of alternative experimentations across the world.

I draw *analytical* insight from the food sovereignty as a counter-movement, and its methodological critique opening up alternative possibilities to capital’s food regime and its conventional categories of analysis. If food sovereignty was *simply* critique it might be simply ‘peasantist,’ but it is clearly more than that, given its presence in a variety of ontologically-informed counter-hegemonic struggles at different scales across the world (cf, Martinez-Alier 2002, Kerssen 2012, Vanhaute 2008, Teubal 2009, Da Via 2012, Fonte 2013, Andrée et al 2014, Mann 2014, McKeon 2015a, special issue of *Third World Quarterly*, 36(3), 2015).

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