

# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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## Competing Sovereignties in the Political Construction of Food Sovereignty

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## ABSTRACT

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*This paper provides a preliminary theoretical and empirical exploration into how ‘competing sovereignties’ are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty—broadly defined as ‘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.’ This study was motivated by a lack of clarity on the ‘sovereignty’ of food sovereignty that had been noted by numerous scholars. Earlier on, questions focused on **who** was the sovereign of food sovereignty—was it the state? Was it communities? More recently, as there is a growing consensus that there are in fact ‘multiple sovereignties’ of food sovereignty that cut across jurisdictions and scales, the question has become how these ‘multiple sovereignties’ are competing with each other in the attempted construction of food sovereignty. This question is becoming all the more relevant as food sovereignty is increasingly getting adopted into state policy at various levels, calling for state and societal actors to redefine their terms of engagement. This paper attempts to explore questions of competing sovereignties, first by developing an analytical framework using the lenses of scale, geography, and institutions, then by applying that framework to Venezuela, where for the past fifteen years a food sovereignty experiment has been underway in the context of a dynamic shift in state-society relations.*

### Food Sovereignty at a Crossroads

*“Food sovereignty is not a fixed principle, it’s a process - it’s happening, and it’s been made to happen, through the struggles of peoples all over the world.”*

—Paul Nicholson, La Via Campesina<sup>1</sup>

A source of inspiration, perplexity, fascination, and frustration, few would assert that anything has shaken agrarian studies and related fields in recent decades more than the concept of food sovereignty. Amid debates for more than a century on the persistence of the peasantry, self-described peasant organizations from 70 countries of both the South and North joined together in 1993 to ‘globalize (their) struggle’ in the face of an onslaught of neoliberal policies, founding the transnational movement La Via Campesina (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010: 149-157). Not only did this new movement burst forth on the international scene with a visible presence, but within three years, it brought into public light the galvanizing concept of food sovereignty—broadly defined as ‘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’ (Nyéléni 2007a). Food sovereignty has since served both as an alternative paradigm to the current global food order and as the basis for a new social movement that now spans well beyond La Via Campesina itself, including diverse movements of fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, workers, consumers, urban activists, environmentalists and others among its ranks.

Now with nearly two decades since its emergence, food sovereignty is at a significant crossroads in its evolution. Amidst a deepening of global crises that are exacerbating many of the issues that food sovereignty seeks to address, some hard-fought gains have been won. Some of the very same social movement leaders who fought for years in the streets outside of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calling for food sovereignty now find themselves on the inside through the recent reform of the UN

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<sup>1</sup> This quote by Nicholson is from a talk given at *Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue*, held 14-15 September, 2013 at Yale University (<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/>).

Committee on World Food Security (CFS) (where, as one Indigenous leader put it, the battle continues, but on different fronts (Schiavoni 2011)). At the national level, food sovereignty is part of the constitution and/or national legislation of at least seven countries, and up for consideration in a number of others (Beauregard 2009: 27; Godek 2013). At the local level, food sovereignty-inspired initiatives are increasingly making their way into local policy; the town of Sedgwick, Maine, is a key example, as the first municipality in the United States to adopt a 'local food sovereignty ordinance,' followed soon after by more than half a dozen nearby towns (Kurtz 2013, Anderson 2013). Just as food sovereignty is gradually moving beyond the fringes into policy-making spaces, it is increasingly drawing interest in academia, breathing fresh life into long-standing debates, while generating new areas of debate and inquiry. This paper seeks to contribute to these debates by offering a preliminary exploration into the question of 'competing sovereignties' in the political construction of food sovereignty, looking in particular at the dimensions of scale, geography, and institutions.

### From Social Movement Vision to National Policy Framework—and Back?

The gradual warming of state actors to food sovereignty as a policy framework can be seen as both an advance and a challenge for the food sovereignty movement, raising questions that are at once political, philosophical, and practical. Most fundamentally, what is the food sovereignty movement's relationship to the state? On the one hand, food sovereignty was born out of a perceived weakening of state control over domestic food systems and a need to 'reclaim lost juridical ground (including land)' in the face of neoliberal policies (McMichael 2013: 6). On the other hand, inspired and informed by radical agrarian populism, food sovereignty from the outset has also been associated with community control and a certain degree of autonomy from the state (Borras 2010). A second source of tension is that the state has often been a *facilitator* of many of the very policies and structures that the food sovereignty movement seeks to dismantle, from land grabs to free trade agreements. A third issue is that part of the power of food sovereignty is that the concept as it is known today was conceived of, not in the halls of power, but out of struggle and resistance. To borrow a question being raised over the increasing recognition of collective rights to territory in Latin America, could elevating the principles of food sovereignty to the level of state law 'risk marginalizing the very practices that give them meaning?' (Bryan 2012: 222). Indeed, the adoption of food sovereignty by a state would seem to open up an immediate new arena of struggle—that is, to defend the very integrity and original essence of food sovereignty against possible cooptation, distortion, and weakening; to ensure that the marginalized are in fact in the driver's seat; and to ensure that food sovereignty remains a living, breathing process and not a reified set of norms. The adoption of food sovereignty into state policy, then, calls for a redefining of the terms of engagement between state and society.

What, then, might this engagement look like? While definitions and frameworks abound, the question remains as to what food sovereignty actually looks like when operationalized (Patel 2009). One point emphasized by social movements is that, 'while it is critical to have a common framework, there is no single path or prescription for achieving food sovereignty. It is the task of individual regions, nations, and communities to determine what food sovereignty means to them based on their own unique set of circumstances' (Schiavoni 2009: 685). The call for food sovereignty, then, is not a call for a specific arrangement of the food system, nor is it a call for a set of policies to be implemented (though that might be one element). It is a call for a *process* through which a new ordering of the food system is constructed. Who, then, are the protagonists of this process? Food sovereignty discourse points to a prioritization of those who have been most marginalized and oppressed within the current food system—i.e., the food providers who make up the majority of the world's hungry and the growing ranks of the urban poor—as the main protagonists of food sovereignty. But in the face of the structural violence driving both hunger and exploitation throughout the food system (De Schutter and Cordes 2011), an enabling environment would need to be fostered for such a wholesale transformation to occur. This is where the adoption of food sovereignty by states and the processes that ensue span well beyond food and agriculture, getting to the very heart of questions of state-society interaction. This is a point that will be revisited over the course of the

paper.

### Multiple and Competing Sovereignties

Adding to the complexity of state-society interaction in the construction of food sovereignty is the fact that food sovereignty is built upon a concept deemed ‘a perennial source of theoretical confusion’ (Bartelson 1995: 12), as the concept of sovereignty has been contested and evolving essentially since its rise in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Bartelson 1995, Hinsley 1986, Lupel 2009). One of the reasons behind this confusion, according to Bartelson (ibid: 18), is that sovereignty is associated with both internal and external dimensions. Externally, sovereignty can be seen as ‘a reciprocal agreement among national governments giving independent states the right to pursue policy within their own territory free from external interference’ (Lupel 2009: 3). Conversely, ‘in the context of the internal structure of a political society, the concept of sovereignty has involved the belief that there is final and absolute authority in the political community’ (Hinsley 1986: 158). According to Bartelson (1995: 16-17), this duality of sovereignty, in which ‘the concept seems to connote two contradictory ideas simultaneously,’ has gone largely overlooked and helps to explain why sovereignty has been so difficult to grasp analytically.

Could the dual nature of sovereignty help to explain some of the confusion around food sovereignty, particularly the oft-cited lack of clarity around food sovereignty vis-à-vis the state (e.g., Edelman 2013, Hospes 2013, Bernstein 2013)? It would seem that the external dimensions of sovereignty are far easier to grapple with conceptually than the internal dimensions when applied to food sovereignty. For instance, the idea of external sovereignty readily translates over to food sovereignty in the assertion that a country’s domestic food production and distribution capacities should not be undermined by the WTO, World Bank, multinational corporations, etc. The internal dimension of sovereignty, on the other hand, is much murkier when applied to food sovereignty, at least following the traditional definition of Hinsley above. By its very definition, food sovereignty runs contrary to the idea of there being any singular, absolute authority when it comes to control over the food system. Food sovereignty, then, entails a redefining of internal sovereignty as it has been traditionally understood, along with a broader reconceptualization of sovereignty.

Some helpful thinking on this matter has been done by Patel (2009: 668):

... one of the most radical moments in the definition of food sovereignty is the layering of different jurisdictions over which rights can be exercised. When the call is for, variously, nations, peoples, regions, and states to craft their own agrarian policy, there is a concomitant call for spaces of sovereignty. Food sovereignty has its own geographies, one determined by specific histories and contours of resistance. To demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space. At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state. In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others...

In Patel’s articulation, the state still figures into food sovereignty, but in a departure from traditional notions of sovereignty, the state is ‘de-centered’ (to borrow a term from Litfin 1998), making way for other actors across a variety of scales and jurisdictions. McMichael (2005: 591) notes a similar phenomenon across many of the movements that have arisen in response to globalization, including the food sovereignty movement: ‘Corporate globalization generates the circumstances in which the modern form of sovereignty, while still relevant to counter-movement politics, is challenged by alternative forms of sovereignty.’ He elaborates elsewhere that, ‘Instead of the single-point perspective associated with the modern state, these movements practice a multi-perspectival politics asserting the right to alternative forms of democratic organization and

the securing of material well-being through *multiple sovereignties* based in cultural, environmental, and economic sustainability (McMichael 2009: 39, emphasis added).

Taking as a starting point the idea that there are ‘multiple sovereignties’ implicit in the concept of food sovereignty (McMichael 2009; Clark 2013), this paper seeks to explore the tensions that arise as these ‘sovereignties’ compete with one another in the attempted construction of food sovereignty. For instance, how is the desire for states to assert their sovereignty over domestic food systems in the face of neoliberal policies to be reconciled with the desire for communities to assert their own sovereignty over local food systems? Can both the state and units that lie within the state be sovereign with respect to food at the same time? And are all communities to be equally sovereign with respect to food, rural and urban alike? What does this mean when some communities have greater food production capacities than others? These questions speak to a complex array of ‘competing sovereignties’ at play in the construction of food sovereignty, particularly when food sovereignty is adopted into state policy.

This paper will explore the question of *how ‘competing sovereignties’ are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty* through the three interconnected analytical lenses of scale, geography, and institutions:

- **Scale** can be understood as the ‘spatial, temporal, quantitative, or analytical dimensions used to measure and study any phenomenon’ (Cash et al. 2006). ‘Competing sovereignties’ around scale can be seen, for instance, in debates over models of production (e.g., ‘large-scale’ vs. ‘small-scale’ agriculture) and in questions over the level(s) upon which food sovereignty is to be exercised, particularly when these levels may intersect and overlap (Patel 2009).
- **Geography** essentially deals with questions of spatiality and ‘social relations stretched out’ (Massey 2004), and is concerned with the processes and relationships by which places and spaces come into being. For the purposes of this paper it is used to look at the spatial divisions constituting ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ and the associated social, economic, political, and cultural divisions that have been constructed around this dichotomy.
- **Institutions** can be understood as ‘both formal organizations and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct’ (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 2). ‘Competing sovereignties’ can be seen both in interactions among different actors within institutions (Fox 1993, Fox 2007), as well in tensions between the different types of institutions competing for power in food sovereignty processes, particularly community-based social institutions vs. institutions of the state.

Underlying each of these areas of tension are questions around the role of the state, the role of society, and the interactions between the two. When employed together, these three analytical lenses can be helpful in uncovering the ‘competing sovereignties’ at play in the construction of food sovereignty in a given context. To explore this issue in a way that connects theory to practice, lessons will be drawn from the case of Venezuela, where for the past fifteen years a multifaceted food sovereignty experiment has been underway in the context of a dynamic shift in state-society relations in the country and surrounding region.

### Country Case Study: Competing Sovereignties in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment

In considering questions of ‘competing sovereignties’ and state-society interaction in the political construction of food sovereignty, it is instructive to look at Latin America, where the adoption of food sovereignty into state policy is among the trends associated with the region’s ‘left turn’ that has brought a new wave of progressive governments into power, in response to widespread poverty and social and economic inequalities (Araujo 2010, Araujo and Godek forthcoming, Menser forthcoming, McKay and Nehring 2013, Clark 2013, Godek 2013, Schiavoni and Camacaro 2009). Perhaps among the most unlikely of the

countries to have adopted food sovereignty in Latin America is Venezuela, which is better known today for its role as one of the world's most important petro-economies and for its controversial politics than for its involvement in food and agriculture. However, it is a little-known fact that issues directly connected to food sovereignty were among the sparks that ignited the process of social transformation known as the Bolivarian Revolution currently underway in Venezuela.

On February 27, 1989, hundreds of thousands of people poured down into the capital from the impoverished hillside communities on the periphery of Caracas, protesting in the streets as they looted shops first for food, then for other basic goods, then for basically anything in sight (Hardy 2007: 25-30). The protest was precipitated by President Carlos Andrés Pérez signing a deal with the IMF to enter Venezuela into a structural adjustment program, causing an abrupt surge in food and fuel prices in which the cost of bread rose by over 600% (ibid). The President's response to the massive mobilization of this day, known as the Caracazo, was to order the military to open fire. The official death toll was 276 civilians, with actual deaths estimated to be in the thousands. Similar events transpired in cities across Venezuela on the same day. The Caracazo, which fits many characteristics of recent 'food rebellions' (Holt-Giménez et al. 2009)<sup>2</sup>, is credited not only with being one of the earliest public manifestations against neoliberalism, but with being a defining moment of popular power that ushered in a politically heated decade and paved the way for the rise of the Bolivarian Revolution, following the election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998 (Ciccariello-Maher 2013).

For insights into why an oil-rich country like Venezuela would embark upon an ambitious food sovereignty experiment, it is important to understand the basic context that gave rise to the Caracazo. The shantytowns covering the hills of Caracas can be seen as a visual representation of Venezuela's withdrawal from agriculture as the country developed its petroleum industry beginning in the early 1900s. As attention was turned to oil, both the land-owning upper classes and the government lost interest in agriculture and stopped investing in land (Wilpert 2006: 250-252:). The flight of capital from the countryside was accompanied by a mass exodus of *campesinos* (peasants and rural workers) into the cities, especially into Caracas (ibid). With little work to be found, many ended up on the edge of existence, living in extreme poverty and arguably fitting the characteristics of 'surplus populations,' as described by Li (2009). For those remaining in the countryside—just over 10% of the population by 1999 (World Bank)—the situation was equally tenuous. 75% of the land was concentrated among 5% of the largest land owners while 75% of the smallest land owners shared only 6% of the land (Wilpert 2006: 251-252), and also faced a lack of basic services and support. The abandonment of its agriculture sector led Venezuela to become among the most urbanized countries in Latin America and the first country in the region to be a net importer of food (ibid: 250-251). At the beginning of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution in 1999, the country was importing an estimated 70-80% of its food supply—much of which was out of reach by the poor—and the Caracazo was still fresh in the public consciousness. It was against this backdrop that renewed attention to food and agriculture became a strategic priority of the Bolivarian Revolution.

### What is the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment?

This paper frames the efforts toward food sovereignty underway in Venezuela as the 'Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment' for several reasons. First is the largely unprecedented and truly experimental nature of what is transpiring. While social movements in many corners of the world are calling for food sovereignty, only a handful of countries have thus far adopted it into state policy, and among the first to do so—by some accounts *the* first to do so (Beauregard 2009:27)—was Venezuela. In 1999, its newly reformed constitution guaranteed its citizens the right to food through 'a secure national food supply based on sustainable agriculture as a strategic framework for rural development' (Ministerio de Comunicación e Educación 1999:

<sup>2</sup> This point was originally made by William Camacaro at the New York City launch of *Food Rebellions: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice* on 5 March, 2010, New York, NY.

108-109), to be carried out through a series of laws, institutions, and programs under the banner of *soberanía alimentaria*, or food sovereignty. This was only three years after La Via Campesina had launched the concept of food sovereignty into public light outside of the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome in response to the failed food and agriculture policies of prior decades (Patel 2009: 665). To adopt a new concept developed by peasants as a key national policy framework could be seen as a leap of faith, especially for a country that had largely abandoned its agricultural sector. Indeed, successfully implementing such a policy framework would essentially entail a 180° turn for Venezuela's food system. Adding to these challenges was the fact that the concept of food sovereignty itself was in its earliest stages of articulation and development in 1999, with no precedent to follow in terms of how to approach the construction of food sovereignty as a national project. Efforts toward food sovereignty in Venezuela have therefore evolved alongside the global movement that originally inspired them.

The 'Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment' is also a helpful way to frame the efforts underway in Venezuela because it allows for an examination of a diverse set of actors and dynamics. This is important because while food sovereignty is part of the language of the Bolivarian Revolution, is enshrined in a variety of national laws, is promoted by a variety of government programs, and is on the agenda of numerous social movements and grassroots initiatives, there is no one single plan or agenda shared by these many actors. What exists is a patchwork of different, and at times divergent, efforts happening at various levels and scales, some led primarily by the government, some primarily by civil society, and most by some combination of the two. This paper refers to this whole complex package when it refers to the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment.

With this in mind, it is important to consider two main dynamics that come together to characterize food sovereignty efforts in Venezuela. First is a national effort, guided by the constitution and a subsequent series of laws, to shift Venezuela from a situation of food *dependency* to one of food *sovereignty*. As described above, this involves moving away from a domestic food system characterized by historically high levels of imports and significant disparities in food access over the past century to one in which all citizens are guaranteed the right to food through a secure national food supply based on sustainable domestic production. The other dynamic, which has received less attention, is an attempted transformation of state-society relations, involving a shift from *representative* to *participatory democracy*, in which ordinary citizens take on a more active role in politics and governance. One of the main vehicles for this has been communal councils: local, self-organized governing bodies through which communities determine their own priorities, manage their own budgets, and interface with the government. Supported by the Communal Council Law of 2006, there are upwards of 43,000 communal councils in Venezuela today.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, coming from both above and below is a major push toward the construction of *comunas*, or communes, through the joining of multiple communal councils across a shared territory. The stated goal is for power to gradually be transferred from the state to the *comunas* as they become increasingly organized, with an ultimate goal of a transition from state power to popular power. As of October 2013, there were 220 *comunas* officially registered with the government and, according to a recent national census, over 1000 more under construction throughout the country (González 2013, Rojas 2013). The construction of the *comunas* is seen as the cornerstone of the latest stage of the Bolivarian Revolution.

There are, of course, many complex dynamics at play in these ambitious visions, which translate into what are often messy and tension-filled processes when attempted on the ground. Perhaps it is this complexity that has led some scholars to bypass these dynamics in their analyses of food sovereignty efforts in Venezuela, focusing primarily on state-led initiatives. This, however, is only one dimension of a multifaceted process characterized by efforts both from 'above' and 'below' and the dynamic interaction between the two. To focus on one component over another would be to miss the larger picture of what is taking place in

<sup>3</sup> Ulises Daal, interview 5 August 2013.



Venezuela, as well as to miss out on some of the most interesting insights to be gleaned from the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment. Here it is helpful to draw from the influential study of Fox (1993) on food politics in Mexico in the 1980s. In attempting to assess the factors contributing to the unexpected relatively successful outcomes of a state-supported food program, he found that both state-centered and society-centered approaches failed to explain the dynamics at play. Instead, the outcomes could only be explained through an *interactive approach* focused on the ‘interaction between state and society, the institutions that mediate such interaction, and the factors that account for how those institutions are in turn transformed’ (ibid: 39). Employing such an approach, Fox was able to uncover how certain openings from above facilitated by reformist actors within the state were met with mobilization by societal actors from below that ‘shifted the boundaries of what was politically possible’ (ibid), yielding unexpected outcomes that empowered rural communities. Similarly, this paper asserts that the most interesting developments related to food sovereignty in Venezuela—and those most relevant to the question of competing sovereignties—are to be found at the intersection of state and society.

This paper explores the question of ‘competing sovereignties’ of food sovereignty through the lens of state society interaction, drawing upon the interactive approach of Fox (1993) to draw lessons from the case of Venezuela. Analysis is divided into the three broad categories of scale, geography, and institutions, as described above. The research methodology of this study was qualitative in nature, including critical analysis of existing literature and field research to gather primary data. The field research in Venezuela was carried out in the summer of 2013, consisting of individual and collective semi-structured interviews complemented by participant observation and building upon seven years of prior research (see Schiavoni and Camacaro 2009). The general aim of the field research was to gain insights into how those who are actually working towards food sovereignty are both perceiving and navigating the ‘competing sovereignties’ that emerge. In particular, the research sought to uncover tensions existing between state and societal actors and how those tensions were being addressed. This entailed looking beyond efforts explicitly focused on food and agriculture to broader processes of citizen participation and state-society interaction in Venezuela, looking especially at the juncture of the two. An area of focus was the process of the construction of *comunas*, as dynamic spaces of citizen organization and main vehicles for state-society interaction in Venezuela today, as described above.<sup>4</sup>

### Beyond Boundaries: Competing Sovereignties across Scale

When social movement leaders from across the globe came together in Sélingué, Mali for the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty to articulate a common framework and collective vision for the growing global food sovereignty movement, among the outputs were the following six pillars of food sovereignty (Nyéléni 2007b):

- I. Focuses on Food for People
- II. Values Food Providers
- III. Localises Food Systems
- IV. Puts Food Locally
- V. Builds Knowledge and Skills
- VI. Works with Nature

Given the explicitly local emphasis of two out of the six pillars of this globally recognized framework, what are the implications for the construction of food sovereignty when adopted into state policy?

In exploration of ‘competing sovereignties’ in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment, among the most

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<sup>4</sup> Further details on the methodology of this study are available in Schiavoni 2013.

contentious issues to surface were those related to scale. For many social movement actors, particularly in rural areas, the construction of food sovereignty is something that must start locally and build outward. Many of the state-sponsored programs, on the other hand, seem to approach food sovereignty primarily as a national-level project, with a focus on increasing the net national food supply, strengthening national distribution channels, and favoring the type of production that most readily lends itself to this vision. As the construction of *comunas* appears to be tilting the balance in favor of more decentralized models, one question is whether and how state institutions are able to respond to this push from below. There is also the question of whether emerging articulations of food sovereignty associated with the construction of the *comunas* can meet the food needs of Venezuela's predominantly urban population. These questions will be addressed in the next two sections, but first, this section will provide a further exploration of competing sovereignties around multiple dimensions of scale in the construction of food sovereignty.

In *Building Relational Food Sovereignty Across Scales: An Example from the Peruvian Andes*, Iles and Montenegro (2013: 7) note a tendency for there to be multiple meanings attached to scale in reference to food sovereignty without consistency and suggest looking at the three following dimensions of scale as related to food sovereignty: *scale as size*, *scale as level*, and *scale as relation*, with an emphasis on the last. This framework will be employed here in an examination of tensions around scale in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment.

### Scale as Size

Iles and Montenegro (2013: 14) argue that 'the tendency in food sovereignty discourse has been to align scale with size (or a proxy such as capital-intensity). Yet size is only one dimension of scale, and arguably the least interesting from the standpoint of food sovereignty.' Robbins (2013: 31-35), on the other hand, makes the case that the size dimension of scale, when associated with capital-intensity, is one of several defining features determining the extent to which a food system is oriented toward food sovereignty. That is, on one end of the spectrum, oriented away from food sovereignty, is larger-scale, capital-intensive, industrial production, while on the other end, oriented toward food sovereignty, is smaller-scale, less capital-intensive production. This is quite relevant to the case of Venezuela, where these two competing ends of the spectrum are a source great tension. Indeed, as a process of agrarian reform is making it possible to re-envision and reshape what agriculture looks like for the country (Wilpert 2006, McKay 2011, Enriquez 2013), there is an internal battle taking place over the model and scale of agriculture upon which Venezuela's food sovereignty should be based. For some, there is no question that the *conuco*, a traditional form of small-scale agriculture with indigenous origins, should serve as the foundation for food sovereignty, with '*Viva el conuco!*' becoming a rallying cry for the agroecology and anti-GMO movements. For others, given the radical shift that Venezuela is attempting to make from heavy dependence upon imported foods to self-sufficiency through domestic production, the only path to reach this goal in the foreseeable future is via large-scale industrial agriculture. In what some point to as a contradiction, both of these competing visions are currently being supported by different state policies and programs, from credits for agroecology projects and support for biological control laboratories to the provision of large-scale agricultural machinery and chemical inputs.

It should be mentioned that the current debate in Venezuela over what model of agriculture should serve as the basis for the country's agrarian transformation, as part of a broader process of social transformation, is neither unique to Venezuela nor to this particular historical juncture. In the opening of *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto*, Ploeg (2013: 2) reflects on debates around agriculture in Russia the aftermath of the 1917 revolution and more broadly:

...should those engaged in the transition toward socialism regard peasant agriculture as something to be continued or transformed? Are peasant models of production a promising way to produce food and make significant and substantial contributions to the development of society as a whole?

Or are other forms of production, such as large, state-controlled cooperatives (be it kolkhozes, people's communes, or whatever) far superior?

A vocal advocate of peasant-based agricultural systems from this period, whose work remains of relevance to this day, is Alexander Chayanov. Based on extensive study of peasant agriculture in Russia, Chayanov argued that peasant-based agriculture was not only superior to capital-intensive agriculture in terms of production, but that peasant-based agriculture, while conditioned by capitalism, functioned with a logic outside of capitalism, and thus held the seeds of broader social transformation (Ploeg 2013: 5-6). Similar arguments can be seen today in Venezuela. According to Gabriel Pool, who is a member of the Jirajara Peasants Movement and works for the state-run 'Legumes of ALBA' Mixed Socialist Enterprise<sup>5</sup>, there is already ample evidence from Venezuela, as well as from neighboring countries such as Brazil, that smaller-scale, peasant-based, agroecological systems such as the *conuco* are not surpassed in their productivity by more capital-intensive forms of production, including those based on biotechnology. Pool is clear, however, that 'this is not simply about an increase in production,' but about reclaiming Venezuela's agrarian heritage, dating back to pre-colonial times, and renewing aspects of it that point toward a more just and sustainable future.

Pool is also among the vocal critics of state support for industrial agriculture, which he sees as being contrary to the interests of food sovereignty. As an example, he points to the recent nationalization of the country's largest agricultural input chain, Agrolsleña, which the state continues to run under the name AgroPatria 'but is no more than a chavista Agrolslena.' Practices such as this, according to Pool, undermine some of the more innovative efforts being supported by the state, such as financing for farmer-led research projects that build upon locally-held knowledge. Relatedly, underway at the moment in Venezuela is a heated battle over whether or not a revised national Seed Law should include a ban on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which has brought a number of internal divisions to the surface (see Mills and Camacaro 2013). In fact, a version of the law that would have paved the way for legal introduction of GMOs into Venezuela was nearly approved by the National Assembly in October 2013 before social movements forced the process to a halt, catalyzing a national consultation process over the law. According to Ana Felicien of GMO-Free Venezuela (Venezuela Libre de Transgénicos)<sup>6</sup>, the controversy over the Seed Law in Venezuela points to the continued entrenchment of Green Revolution ideology as well as to competing interests within the government, both of which are cause for constant vigilance by social movements.

### Scale as Level

The scale of agricultural production has important implications for how the broader food system is organized, which brings us to *scale as level*. In Chayanov's vision, key components of the organization of the food system were 'peasants/small farmers + cooperatives + a supportive state' (Bernstein 2009: 63). Cooperatives were the central component of Chayanov's Theory of Vertical Cooperation, which addressed how peasant-based agriculture, if organized via cooperatives, could fit to a variety of organizational scales (Shanin 2009: 88). This vision included 'a multi-level cooperative movement, a cooperative of cooperatives, organised "from below" and facilitated but not managed by the government' (ibid).

There are some striking parallels between Chayanov's vision articulated nearly a century ago and the visions being articulated by members of the *comunas* in Venezuela today. It is important to note, however, that earlier on in the Bolivarian Revolution, there had been a push for the formation of cooperatives, which was met with only limited success. This emphasis on cooperatives had been tied to the earlier stages of the agrarian reform process, in which priority was given to the granting of collective titles to newly recovered land holdings, coupled with government support for the formation of cooperatives. But while some of these

<sup>5</sup> interview 6 August 2013

<sup>6</sup> interview 6 August 2013

cooperatives succeeded and flourished, many of them failed, for reasons including economic unviability; lack of alignment between the goals and values connected to cooperative promotion program and those of the participants; and lack of experience on the part of participants (Clark 2010, Page 2010).

In response to some of these challenges, the Venezuelan government more recently shifted its approach to promoting Social Production Enterprises or *Empresas de Producción Social* (EPSs), which, as described by Clark (2010: 148-150), generally ‘entail more state oversight and regulation than cooperatives, though they are worker/community-controlled at the local level.’ These new enterprises entail a shift in scale in that they tend to be larger and more industrial in nature than many of the cooperatives that existed before them, and those that continue to exist. Furthermore, the EPSs are for the most part geared to feed into national supply channels via the state-run Venezuelan Food Corporation (CVAL) and distributed through state-run distribution channels.

As *comunas* are increasingly taking up the issue of food sovereignty, some are encountering tensions with these more centralized mechanisms of the state. This can be seen in an experience described by Angel Prado of the rural *comuna* El Maizal in the state of Lara.<sup>7</sup> As a condition for receiving credit for corn production from a particular state financing agency, all the corn produced in El Maizal is sold to CVAL, through which it is processed into cornmeal (the main ingredient of *arepas*, a major Venezuelan staple) and distributed via state-run food distribution networks. While this system is preferable over selling corn to private intermediaries because producers are guaranteed a fair price by the state, as El Maizal works to strengthen its food sovereignty locally, it is encountering barriers under the current system. For instance, some communities within El Maizal have continued the traditional practice of making *arepas* using fresh corn cooked over a fire, considered superior both in taste and nutrition. Yet the current agreement with the state does not have the flexibility to enable a portion of the corn to go straight to the communities. There is also the irony of there sometimes being shortages of cornmeal in El Maizal due to ongoing issues with food distribution channels, a major challenge currently being confronted by the state, which will be discussed in the next section.

Prado is quick to emphasize that he is not against the state and that El Maizal sees it as its commitment to contribute to national food sovereignty: ‘We want to help Venezuela to stop being a food importer and we believe that we have a great potential here in our countryside (to do so).’ Prado simply feels that national-level, state-run efforts toward food sovereignty should support and not hinder grassroots efforts at the local level. This will involve a shift in thinking and practice on the part of state actors: ‘I think that the functionaries, more than anything, want to show numbers—numbers and results from their work. But they do not have it clear that we are headed toward a communal state with a very clear orientation in which the people organize themselves...’. A goal of El Maizal, he explains, is to shift from supplying raw goods to the national food corporation by developing the internal capacity of the *comuna* to process and distribute its own locally produced food, first, among the 7,000 inhabitants of the *comuna*, and then, to help supply food to other *comunas*, ‘especially to urban *comunas* that do not have the same food producing capacities.’ Prado adds that he does not envision the dissolution of state-run distribution networks, instead envisioning a scenario in which state-run and community-run networks complement one another.

### Scale as Relation

The vision of El Maizal described by Prado, in which food sovereignty efforts start locally and build outward, was a common theme over the course of the field research in Venezuela and gets to the third dimension of scale that will be discussed here, *scale as relation*. According to Iles and Montenegro (2013: 14), this dimension of scale ‘is much more difficult to grasp, as it requires a sharp break from conceiving organizational tiers consisting of bounded, static units. Relational scale is defined as the spatial and temporal relations

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<sup>7</sup> interview 23 August 2013

among processes at different levels, as well as the processes connecting elements within levels.’

This shift from conceiving of scale vis-à-vis food sovereignty in terms of boundaries (e.g., distinguishing efforts that are ‘local’ from those that are ‘national,’ ‘international,’ etc.) to conceiving of it in terms of relationships seems to describe a shift which is already underway in Venezuela, particularly in the construction of the *comunas*. For instance, none of the respondents expressed autonomous local food systems as the end goal. A recurring theme in the interviews was that the local is seen as a starting point in the construction of food sovereignty, which must then extend to the regional and national scales. Among those doing locally grounded work, there was a strong sense of being connected to a broader national effort. In this vision, working to construct food sovereignty necessarily entailed a concern over the food needs of those beyond one’s community. According to Laura Lorenzo of the Jirajara Peasant Movement and the Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise<sup>8</sup>, ‘We’re working to guarantee, first, the food needs of our community, then, of the communities surrounding us, and then, depending on production levels, there’s the need to prioritize the food needs of those in the big cities, because if not, imagine what would become of this revolution.’ Similarly, Ángela Palmenarez of the Tres Raíces Cooperative in the state of Yaracuy<sup>9</sup> expressed that being part of the construction of a *comuna* inherently implies a commitment to work across scales. This means tending to the needs of one’s community, but also looking beyond one’s immediate community to the other communities that form part of the *comuna* and to the needs of the population as a whole.

For some, such as Lorenzo, the idea of looking beyond one’s community in the construction of food sovereignty extends past state borders, as part of a vision of regional integration and solidarity:

Are we going to be happy if we secure our food supply in this country while other countries in the word, including our neighbors, with whom we share political and ideological ties, and ties of unity of peoples, go without? ...The concept of sovereignty goes beyond Venezuelan borders. Take the example of Haiti, a country so close to us that was among the first in the region to lead the struggle for independence, which is now practically in ruins. Why shouldn’t Venezuela help Haiti to be sovereign in its food needs if we are able to? ...Sovereignty as we see it is connected to this concept of unity of the peoples.

Felicien adds another perspective on constructing food sovereignty across scales, explaining that it is not simply about building food sovereignty outward from the local scale, but the fact that other scales impact what is possible locally: ‘One thing that’s clear is that there are different scales involved – some dominate more than others – the local is central, but the national and international scales condition the extent of food sovereignty.’ The point is that even a seemingly local activity is in fact connected to, and conditioned by, practices and policies on a range of scales. Thus, as Iles and Montenegro (2013:8) assert, ‘[u]nderstood in terms of relational scale, food sovereignty becomes as much a practice of creating connectivity as of creating autonomy’ (ibid: 27).

### The Geography of Competing Sovereignities: Addressing the ‘Urban-Rural Divide’

A common concern among both critics and potential allies of the food sovereignty movement that has yet to be sufficiently addressed is how food sovereignty translates over to non-agrarian contexts. Put differently, how relevant is food sovereignty to the broader non-farming population, particularly the more than 50% of the global population (and growing) that now lives in cities? While certain headway has been made in bridging the needs of urban and rural populations in efforts toward food sovereignty, much work remains to be done, and this is an area increasingly being taken up by scholars and practitioners alike (Clendenning and

<sup>8</sup> interview 1 August 2013

<sup>9</sup> interview 1 August 2013

Dressler 2013, Dickinson 2013, Robbins 2013, Schiavoni 2009). This section will explore ‘competing sovereignties’ across urban and rural divides and look at how they are playing out and being addressed in Venezuela.

### Feeding the City

With over 90% of its population living in urban areas (World Bank), concerns over food sovereignty are arguably no more of a rural question than an urban one in Venezuela. As mentioned earlier, among the immediate challenges at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution was to ensure the food needs of the country’s predominantly urban population. Initially, this was largely carried out through a series of government ‘missions’ created to bypass bureaucratic infrastructure by connecting directly with communities. Among the results of these early efforts are 6000 *casas de alimentación* or ‘feeding houses’ run through a community-government partnership that reach 900,000 of the most vulnerable Venezuelans (Mastronardi 2013) and a national network of subsidized supermarkets (Mercal) to make affordable food more universally accessible. Together, these programs and others have dramatically reduced hunger and food insecurity in Venezuela, surpassing the first Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger in advance of 2015, which was recently recognized by the FAO (FAO 2013). According to a national census, 96.2% Venezuelans now eat 3-4 meals per day, and the government has pledged to reach the remaining 3.8% who do not, with the goal of achieving ‘Zero Hunger’ for Venezuela by 2019 (AVN 2013).

It should be mentioned that these developments came at the same time that international media outlets were abuzz over reported food shortages in Venezuela, presenting quite a different scenario from that recognized by the FAO. The fact is that shortages of particular food (and some non-food) items are still a regular occurrence in retail outlets in Venezuela (Mallett-Outtrim 2013a). While some attribute this to government-set price regulations creating disincentives for companies to sell food products in the country, others point to politically-motivated hoarding and withholding of products intended to destabilize the government. They see it as no coincidence that two main items most frequently missing from supermarket shelves in 2013 were corn flour and toilet paper, two items most Venezuelans would agree to be indispensable, and see this as part of an ‘economic war’ by the members of the political opposition who own the country’s largest private food companies (Robertson 2013). The government has taken a series of measures to combat these shortages, including dialogue with the private sector, cracking down on illegal practices, and increasing importations of certain goods from Brazil and other neighboring countries.

According to many of those interviewed, the government’s ability to ensure that the population’s nutritional needs are not impeded by the periodic shortages points to the fact that Venezuela has reached food *security*, but is still far from food *sovereignty*. Gabriel Pool explains that at the moment, levels of food imports in the country in no way correspond to levels of production and that continued importation—which has decreased since the 90s but still remains high at 50% (Mallett-Outtrim 2013b)—is more than anything a matter of business interest. According to Pool, ‘Now that a lot of food is being produced in the countryside, we’re trying to structure a proposed alliance between popular movements in the city and in the countryside, in order to cut the “destructive distance” that lies between us.’ Laura Lorenzo shares similar sentiments: ‘We know that food security is achieved through resources, but food sovereignty has to be a process coming from the bottom up—from the peasant, from the communities.’

### Rethinking Territory

The sentiments shared by Lorenzo and Pool point to a new way forward—not only moving beyond a ‘logic of importation’ (Pool), but also beyond the idea of a one-way flow of goods from the countryside to the city. This new vision speaks to the critical need for close partnership and coordination between urban and rural populations, which, according to Felicien, this will involve a process of breaking down barriers that have

traditionally stood between urban and rural populations:

...In the moment in which all of the *comunas* take up the task of producing food and contribute to closing the circuits of production, distribution, and consumption of food, as a necessity and fundamental right of the entire population, we will be advancing toward food sovereignty. I think the coming phase is for all of the *comunas*, in the countryside and in the cities...to break this territorial division of labor in which there are 'agricultural *comunas*' and 'urban *comunas*' – that's an absurdity...

Felicien's point gets to a key challenge confronting the food sovereignty movement as a whole, not only in Venezuela. That is, just as sovereignty has traditionally been understood as authority over a given territory (dell'Agnese 2013: 115, Litfin 1998: 6), food sovereignty is often associated with collective control over the land, water, and other food producing resources within a territory. While this idea might seem straightforward enough to envision, if challenging to implement, within a rural context, what does the association of food sovereignty with territorial control mean for urban populations? This question connects to related discussions underway around shifting notions of sovereignty and territory in the face of global environmental issues. Litfin (1998: 12) argues that global environmental issues, which transcend geopolitical boundaries, call for a new conception of territory: 'The meaning of territory, along with its place in the set of practices associated with sovereignty, is being modified by environmental responses. If territory provides the container for state sovereignty, then transnational environmental problems and efforts to address them seem to be reshaping that container.' This reshaping of the 'container' of territory would seem to bear relevance in the face of the global food system, through which much of the population is distanced both from the process of food production and from those who produce it (Robbins 2013) and reduced to consumers of 'food from nowhere' (McMichael 2009b: 147). One of the goals of the food sovereignty movement is to lessen this distancing, but given a context such as Venezuela, in which the vast majority of the population is physically separated from the territory where most food production takes place, how is this to be done?

To explore this question, building upon Litfin's point, it is helpful to examine how understandings of territory are currently evolving. In *Rethinking Territory: Social Justice and Neoliberalism in Latin America's Territorial Turn*, Bryan (2012) explores how the trend by states to recognize territorial rights as a vehicle for pursuit of neoliberal agendas is leading social movements to rethink how they relate to territory. One way in which they are doing so is by moving away from notions of territory as 'cartographic space' to more culturally-based understandings of space and territory that take on a more relational approach (ibid: 219). These shifting understandings of territory are leading to new perspectives on sovereignty that move away from traditional exclusionary approaches in which sovereignty for one group can mean displacement of another. The focus then becomes 'less about the defense of place as a physical location per se than about maintaining a set of relationships. Under those conditions rights scarcely reference a universal order. Instead they are contingent upon those relationships, enjoyed and exercised in concert with others' (ibid: 222). Bryan's point about notions of territory becoming less about boundaries and more about relationships is strikingly similar to the points made by Iles and Montenegro (2013) in their call for a relational approach to food sovereignty. Particularly relevant here is their assertion that there are instances in which sovereignty 'needs to extend beyond spatial and temporal frame[s]' (ibid: 16), which would seem to be the case regarding the food sovereignty of urban populations. Relatedly, Bryan points to urban-based movements of Indigenous people in Bolivia 'shifting attention from control over land and resources to questions of collective well-being in order to survive territorial displacement' (Mamani Ramirez 2011, cited in Bryon 2012: 223). This example arguably has a strong resonance with the Venezuelan context, in which the majority of the urban poor are those who were displaced from the countryside, or their children.

### *Transforming Relationships and Identities*

The fact that most urban communities in Venezuela are no more than a generation or two removed from their rural counterparts points to what are often artificial or arbitrary binaries erected between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ and ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ (Kay 2009, de Haan and Zoomers 2003, Robbins 2013, Ruiz and Delgado 2008). Among the most problematic of these is arguably the label of ‘consumer,’ as, according to Robbins (2013: 24), ‘The construction of *consumer* as a role within society places limits on the agency of citizens who purchase rather than grow their food. It turns citizens into merely shoppers rather than political, active agents in the food system.’ One of the ways that this is beginning to be addressed in Venezuela is through building and strengthening relationships across traditional urban and rural divides. This is happening not only through the creation of direct marketing channels, but through the co-construction of food sovereignty as a common political project shared by rural and urban Venezuelans. That is, people are increasingly seeing themselves as connected via the *process* of constructing food sovereignty. In this process, they are not only changing their relationships to one another, but also their *relationship to food* and to the processes of food production, distribution, and consumption. Connected to these processes of transformation, a term gaining in popularity among rural and urban movements alike is *prosumidor(a)*, a combination of the words for producer (*productor(a)*) and consumer (*consumidor(a)*), in an attempt to blur the lines, and therefore the distinctions, between the two.

Similarly, Virgilio Duran of the urban *comuna* Ataroa in the city of Barquisimeto in the state of Lara<sup>10</sup> agrees that food production and distribution are tasks that must be taken up by rural and urban populations alike, based on their capacities: ‘Imagine if each one of us produced what we could in whatever little space we have. It would be a totally different situation, wouldn’t it? Because it would break the dependency on those who have been monopolizing food production.’ As a way forward, Duran suggests encouraging urban people to grow food on rooftops, in patios, and in community gardens (practices for which communities can receive free technical assistance and supplies via state-supported programs) in an effort to create ‘productive corridors’ of *conuco*-style agriculture that extend from the cities to the countryside. In the case of Ataroa, the *comuna* was able to acquire land on the outskirts of the city that is designated for agricultural production and has been partnering with rural producers on a large weekly farmers market, to complement distribution of staple goods coming from state channels.

Among the examples of urban-rural partnerships taking place in Venezuela, a particularly interesting one is between an urban *comuna*, El Panal 2021 of Caracas, and a rural social movement, the Jirajara Peasant Movement already mentioned above, who are actively working together on multiple fronts. For instance, El Panal already has an established sugar packing local enterprise that the Jirajara movement will begin to supply sugar for. This is an articulation of a point that came up in a number of interviews—the fact that in cities such as Caracas there are both the people power and the infrastructure for food processing enterprises, and ample possibility for partnership with rural producers in this area. Along similar lines, since every *comuna*, urban and rural, is intended to have a ‘socio-productive’ component (Mills 2013), a number of interviewees, such as Angel Prado, mentioned potential for direct exchange of goods—e.g., rural *comunas* could supply agricultural products while urban *comunas* could provide other goods to the rural *comunas*, such as school uniforms and school supplies for their children.

El Panal and the Jirajara movement are also working on joint farmers markets and other distribution projects, but perhaps most interestingly, the Jirajara movement has helped El Panal to acquire land in the countryside, which they will work together in partnership. Lorenzo explains that to understand this relationship one must look outside of the logic of capitalism and see it as part of the broader process of social transformation

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<sup>10</sup> interview 30 July 2013



underway in the country. Robert Lanza of El Panal<sup>11</sup> concurs: ‘We’re building national points of connection between the urban and the rural that allow us to break capitalist chains of distribution and production.’ Lanza explains that the *comuna* has several other projects underway in the countryside, which include training and educational components that enable *comuna* members to connect (or reconnect) to processes of production. These efforts are complemented by a fairly extensive urban agriculture effort within El Panal. Lanza explains that it is a process of ongoing learning that combines life in the city with life in the countryside.

It is interesting to note that these efforts differ significantly from earlier efforts in Venezuela, such as the ‘Return to the Countryside’ program, to encourage people to move out of the city and into the countryside (see Page 2010). The focus is not on people moving out of the city, but about city people developing new relationships to the countryside, and rural people developing new relationships to the city. On the question of whether it is actually feasible for Venezuela to feed itself given the current ratio of urban to rural inhabitants, Gabriel Pool asserts that it is quite possible, even without any changes to the geographical distribution of the population, for Venezuela to be able to feed itself. Above all, it is a matter of political will, along with good planning and coordination.

Pool’s point brings back in the role of the state, which was interestingly missing from many of the discussions on bridging ‘competing sovereignties’ across urban-rural divides. It is important to recall, as mentioned at the start of this section, that Venezuela’s hunger rates were drastically reduced through a major effort on the part of the state, in partnership with communities, and through an approach that most of those interviewed characterized as falling more within the paradigm of food security than food sovereignty. At the same time, some of the most cutting-edge efforts to bridge urban-rural divides at this moment are squarely within the paradigm of food sovereignty. A question moving forward, going back to the vision of the *comuna* El Maizal mentioned in the previous section, is the extent to which these two paradigms are able to come together. A key factor of relevance here is the role of institutions, which will be addressed in the next section.

### New Institutional Frameworks for Navigating Competing Sovereignties

The question of institutions may sit rather uncomfortably among advocates of food sovereignty, both for the tensions between the food sovereignty movement and the state mentioned earlier, and for the perception of institutions as being static, bureaucratic, and intended to maintain the status quo, which would seem to go against the intentions of food sovereignty. Yet as food sovereignty is increasingly adopted into policy, the question of what type of institutional framework might best support it becomes increasingly important (Godek 2013).

In an overview of institutionalism in comparative politics, Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 16-17) describe four types of institutional dynamism. First is when new socioeconomic or political circumstances give a new sense of relevance to an existing institution. Second is when existing institutions are put to the service of different ends, as ‘new actors come into play who pursue their (new) goals through existing institutions.’ Third is when external changes lead to new goals being pursued by old actors within existing institutions. Fourth, in ‘moments of dramatic change,’ is when circumstances give rise to entirely new institutions. It appears that a combination of each of these forms of institutional change is currently underway in Venezuela. The construction of *comunas* is giving rise to a new form of social institution, while existing state institutions are being mandated both to facilitate the construction of *comunas* and to work in partnership with them once they exist, which for many, entails a radically different way of functioning. Added to these dynamics is a gradual blurring of the lines between state and societal actors, as societal actors are engaging in governance not only through the *comunas*, but increasingly through existing state institutions as well—a process not without its tensions.

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<sup>11</sup> interview 25 August 2013

To begin an exploration of what can be learned from this process of institutional change in Venezuela as related to ‘competing sovereignties’ of food sovereignty, it is helpful to go back to the study of Fox (1993) on the politics of food in Mexico in the 80s, in which he found that among the keys to the relatively successful implementation of a state-sponsored food program was the creation of ‘community food councils.’ According to Fox (ibid: 217):

The Community Food Councils became a new, two-way institutional access route that connected state and societal actors. From above, state reformists structured new patterns of representation within rural society. From below, these new opportunities for participation became autonomous channels for interest articulation that in turn left their imprint on the state.....

There are some important parallels between the councils described by Fox and the *comunas* of Venezuela in that both serve as mechanisms for dynamic interactions between state and society. One of the aspects emphasized by many of the grassroots actors interviewed in Venezuela is that rather than having clearly delineated roles and responsibilities between the state and society, what felt most important was to have ongoing, open dialogue with the state—and many looked toward the *comunas* as spaces to facilitate such dialogue and interaction. Furthermore, because they viewed food sovereignty as an evolving process, they recognized that what was true one week/month/year may very well not be the case the next, and therefore it was important for institutional relationships to have certain degrees of flexibility and dynamism to them. This connects to a point raised by Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 6) that, ‘More important than the formal characteristics of either state or societal institutions per se is how a given institutional configuration shapes political interactions.’ It also connects to Iles and Montenegro’s (2013: 17) point about sovereignty being a relational concept: ‘sovereign units are always defined in relation to something else and are always a process rather than “a state.” Sovereignty is not fixed in nature and does not have an endpoint...’

In fact, in many ways, the construction of *comunas* appears to fit Iles and Montenegro’s call for ‘multi-scalar social institutions’ necessary to facilitate relational food sovereignty (ibid: 19). First, connecting back to Bartelson’s (1995) point raised earlier about sovereignty having both internal and external dimensions, it is important that those working toward food sovereignty have both internal and external recognition of their sovereignty. That is, ‘sovereignty must be legitimized both by and within the communities seeking sovereignty and by external institutions and publics at other scales’ (Iles and Montenegro 2013: 21). The very formation of a *comuna* is a demonstration of internal sovereignty in that, through joining together and organizing themselves into a *comuna*, the communal councils and communities that run them are demonstrating their desire to function as a sovereign unit. In doing so, they also lay the groundwork for external recognition of their sovereignty because *comunas* are recognized by law, and as mentioned above, most state institutions have been mandated to work with and support them. A third key factor in addition to creating a base of sovereignty and building recognition of sovereignty is the creation of ‘multiple, interdependent bases of sovereignty’ (ibid: 27). The *comunas* also fit this description in that they are forming the basis for a national network of semi-autonomous communal bodies that interface not only with the state, but with one another. Gabriel Pool speaks to the role of *comunas* as vehicles for both food sovereignty and political sovereignty, which he sees as interconnected:

So for me food sovereignty means political sovereignty. Yes, I think that structurally it’s that—achieving food sovereignty as a fundamental basis for political sovereignty as well. This has to do with sovereignty in the territories, with seed sovereignty, and with sovereignty in knowledge and technologies. And the *comuna* is the fundamental space within the Venezuelan process to achieve this, as a cell that can generate politics that transcend scales, the different scales that have to do with food sovereignty.

A fourth, and crucial, point made by Iles and Montenegro (ibid: 19) is that sovereignty need not imply complete autonomy: ‘Power sharing is implicit in this concept of relational sovereignty...We want to emphasize how some forms of sovereignty grow out of sharing, not pure self-reliance alone.’ This is highly relevant to the *comunas*, not only for the relationships that they are building with one another, but also for their relationship to the state, which is framed in terms of *corresponsabilidad*, or ‘coresponsibility.’ First, *corresponsabilidad* is seen as necessary in the construction of the *comunas* through a massive push both from above and below. Second, once a *comuna* exists, *corresponsabilidad* describes the process through which institutions of the state must actively work to transfer power over to the *comuna* while members of the *comuna* organize themselves to be able to assume new responsibilities. In this sense, *corresponsabilidad* is seen as a means of bridging the formation of popular power and the existence (and gradual redistribution of) established state power. Of course, such processes have their tensions. According to Ana Felicien, although certain transformations have been made, the underlying structure of the state remains bourgeois in character, and as long as that remains the case, ‘We have to be clear that constituted power (of the state) and constituent power (of the people) are going to be in permanent conflict with one another.’ This connects to what Ciccariello-Maher (2013) has described as a situation of ‘dual power’ characterizing the Venezuelan process, in which constituent and constituted power interact in a ‘complex dialectic.’

Still to be addressed here are the other types of institutional dynamism mentioned by Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 16-17), involving changes to already existing institutions. As mentioned above, parallel to the construction of the *comunas* is a reform of state institutions, which are being mandated to work directly in partnership with *comunas*. On the one hand, this is an example of old actors taking on new roles. At the same time, this institutional reform is also characterized by new actors coming into existing institutions. One example of many is Laura Lorenzo of the Jirajara Peasant Movement, who also holds a position within the Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise, which lends machinery to farmers. Speaking of her experience, Lorenzo shares:

A lot of us who have come from organized popular movements have had the opportunity to be in spaces of government. We see the institutions as Chavez did – as a tool for organization. And so now that we are occupying government spaces our duty is to make all of the processes easier for communities—because we come from these processes and we know how difficult it is...our duty is to serve communities who have organized themselves, be they *comunas* or farmers councils – we need to make it easier for them...

Dussel (2008) cautions, however, that: ‘The excluded should not be merely included in the old system-as this would be to introduce the Other into the Same-but rather ought to participate as equals in a new institutional moment (the new political order). This is a struggle not for inclusion but for transformation...’ In the Venezuelan context, this means the transformation of institutions through the incorporation of new actors as mentioned above must not simply be a matter of ‘grassroots engagement’ or ‘bringing everyone to the table,’ but instead about a fundamental transformation of the institutions from within. According to Ulises Daal, former National Assembly member and current advisor to the National Assembly<sup>12</sup>, this is beginning to happen today in Venezuela as part a new institutional framework referred to as *nueva institucionalidad*. Daal emphasizes, however, that that as long as the Bolivarian Revolution continues, there will be a permanent confrontation between traditional power structures and new emerging structures, and this confrontation will produce both contradictions and polarization. This connects back to the point of Felicien mentioned above, as well as to a similar point about state institutions made by Fray Silvera of the Tres Rs Cooperative in Yaracuy<sup>13</sup>, in an apparent paraphrasing of Gramsci (1971: 276), that ‘the old has not yet finished dying and the new has not yet finished being born.’

<sup>12</sup> interview 5 August 2013

<sup>13</sup> interview 16 August 2013

## Conclusion: ‘Competing Sovereignities’ and Beyond

This paper has attempted to provide a preliminary theoretical and empirical exploration of how ‘competing sovereignties’ are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty. It has attempted first, to develop an analytical framework through which to explore ‘competing sovereignties,’ and then to apply that framework to Venezuela, one of the first countries in the world to adopt food sovereignty at the state level and therefore a rich source of empirical material after fifteen years of efforts on the ground. The findings and conclusions of this preliminary study are summarized below.

### Scale

Several different dimensions of scale are important to consider as related to food sovereignty, with examples of ‘competing sovereignties’ found in each. While Iles and Montenegro (2013) have argued that *scale as size* is the ‘least interesting,’ dimension, this paper argues that this is in fact the most fundamental, conditioning the other dimensions of scale. For instance, the scale of agricultural production impacts how the food system is organized, and arguably how relations are built around food as well. The type of agriculture and food systems that social movements and *comunas* are calling for likely have more to offer in terms of potential for building relational food sovereignty than do systems based on large-scale industrial agriculture. At the same time, interconnected, decentralized, community-based food systems are likely to be considered a lot more of a gamble for a government that has committed to eradicate hunger by 2019. Here, however, it is helpful to go back to Fox’s study of Mexico (1993: 217), in which he found that it was only by ceding a certain amount of control over to autonomous, representative social organizations that the food program of the Mexican government was able to accomplish its goals. If the Venezuelan state is indeed committed to the political experiment of the construction of *comunas*, then it must be prepared to support the *comunas* in guiding forward food sovereignty efforts. These efforts will likely look quite different from how they currently look today, including in matters of scale. Another point to emphasize related to ‘competing sovereignties’ vis-à-vis scale is that identification as part of a national effort toward food sovereignty can be helpful in bridging food sovereignty efforts at the local and national scales, as demonstrated by several of the *comunas* studied.

### Geography

While there is no simple answer to ‘competing sovereignties’ across the urban-rural divide, the types of relationships being forged between urban and rural *comunas* and social movements in Venezuela point to at least one important way forward. As described earlier, a reconceptualization of ‘territory’ could help to facilitate such relationship-building, and in an instance of synchronicity, creative thinking about relational approaches to territory (e.g., Bryan 2012, dell-Angese 2013) is happening right as La Via Campesina and other social movements involved in food sovereignty are in the midst of their own processes of ‘rethinking territory’ (Rosset 2013). It is thus important that these processes inform one another. Among the many lessons to be gleaned from how popular movements in Venezuela are addressing urban-rural divides is the emphasis on building relationships that extend beyond markets, focusing instead on shared identities and shared struggles. Similar initiatives are taking place in other parts of the world, such as the Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners Conference in the U.S. and the solidarity economy movement that is gaining ground in various countries. It will be interesting to see, if the construction of *comunas* continues to advance, the extent to which *comunas* could be a vehicle for ‘scaling up’ such initiatives. There is also the question of how these efforts are to be combined (if at all) with existing efforts that are more food-security focused.

### Institutions

As food sovereignty is above all a *process*, and not simply a series of laws to be enforced or measures to be

implemented, it requires institutional arrangements that are flexible and dynamic and that create spaces for interaction. As mentioned above, one of the most critical factors that grassroots actors identified as being necessary for food sovereignty was ongoing dialogue and collaboration with the government, described as *corresponsabilidad*. Among the vehicles for such interaction are the *comunas*, which fit many of the characteristics of ‘multi-scalar social institutions,’ as described by Iles and Montenegro (2013). While existing state institutions have been mandated to work in support of and partnership with the *comunas*, this cannot effectively take place without a significant amount of institutional change, which can happen in a variety of ways (Thelen and Steinmo 1992). While some significant transformation is taking place in this regard in Venezuela, many barriers remain. One thing that appears to be clear is that state and non-state actors both recognize that the other has an important role to play in food sovereignty efforts. It is a matter of negotiating the terms of engagement, as well as reconciling competing paradigms.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

## INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM PAPER SERIES

### Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting was to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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

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[Christina Schiavoni](#) is currently doing graduate work in agrarian studies at the International Institute for Social Studies in the Netherlands. Previously, she directed WhyHunger’s Global Movements Program based in New York City, where she worked with diverse networks to grow and unify food movements in the US and globally. For nearly a decade, she has been closely following efforts toward food sovereignty in Venezuela for their relevance to the broader global food sovereignty movement—a focus of her current research.



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