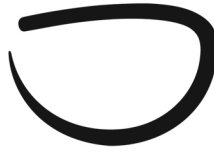


Canadian Food Studies

La Revue canadienne des
études sur l'alimentation

Section V

Food sovereignty

Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape

The gift of food sovereignty

Annette Aurélie Desmarais

Canada Research Chair in Human Rights, Social Justice, and Food Sovereignty, Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba

In April 1996 representatives of peasants, small and medium-scale farmers, rural women, indigenous representatives, and farm workers from the global North and global South travelled to Tlaxcala, Mexico to participate in the Second International Conference of La Vía Campesina. For members of La Vía Campesina, the globalization of a neoliberal industrial model of agriculture had created an acute crisis in the countryside around the world that was accompanied by the rural exodus and disempowerment of peasants and small scale farming families, human rights abuses, and environmental degradation. In refusing to be “disappeared” and struggling for the right to exist as small-scale food producers, they collectively imagined a powerful counter-narrative to large-scale corporate-led agriculture: a socially just, rights-based, ecologically sustainable “future without hunger”, a future based on food sovereignty (Desmarais, 2007; La Vía Campesina, 1996a, 1996b).

Over the years, the idea and practices of food sovereignty gained momentum and are now the rallying cry of numerous social movements in various parts of the world, thus prompting some policy makers and academics to examine more closely its potential and limitations to building socially just, ecologically sustainable and rights-based food systems. This article briefly discusses the origins, meanings, accomplishments, and challenges of food sovereignty while highlighting some of the key social actors involved.

Food sovereignty gains traction

Since it was first introduced at the World Food Summit in 1996 and following a relatively short period of persistent mobilization, La Vía Campesina's notion of food sovereignty gained traction and generated considerable interest and action. First, other rural movements, urban-based groups, and non-governmental organizations in different parts of the world began using food sovereignty to frame their demands for food systems change at the local, national, and international levels. This civil society momentum culminated in what is now called the Global Food Sovereignty Movement. Second, international studies on agriculture and food acknowledged the potential of food sovereignty as an alternative rural development framework (McIntyre, Herren, Wakhungu, & Watson, 2009). As the authors of the recent *Environment and Trade Review* published by the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) argue “Meeting the food security challenge is ... primarily about empowerment of the poor and their food sovereignty” (UNCTAD, 2013, p. i). Third, some governments—for example, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and Nepal—have included food sovereignty into their national constitutions and developed new legislation (McKay, Nehring, & Walsh-Dilley, 2014; also see Wittman, this issue).

Arriving somewhat later on the scene, more academics have begun to research various dimensions of food sovereignty, thus contributing to critical debate. A database search and examination of academic writing produced in 2013 and 2014 reveals that the food sovereignty literature is indeed growing and becoming more robust. While some of the 200 entries¹ of academic literature produced during these two years analyzed the political and economic context in which food sovereignty struggles occur, other contributions deepened some theoretical dimensions of food sovereignty by examining its links to the right to food and food security (Jarosz, 2014),² questions of how it addresses gender and inequality, and the role of trade. Importantly, the Indigenous food sovereignty literature is contributing critical ecological and spiritual understandings to existing food sovereignty theory and practice (Grey & Patel, 2014). An impressive number of empirical studies conducted in various parts of the world highlight the links between food sovereignty and agroecology, its contributions to nutrition and health, the complexities and benefits of building alternative economies, and food sovereignty's deep political roots in struggles for agrarian reform. Interestingly, as some argue, food sovereignty also involves adopting different ways of doing research (La Vía Campesina, 2000; Levidow, Pimbert, & Valoqueren, 2014; Pimbert, 2009).

The momentum generated by civil society mobilization and action, academic research, government programs, and legislation (applied most notably at the municipal levels) means that

¹ Because they were not available at the time of writing, the data search did not include the articles that will appear in two upcoming special editions of *Globalizations* and the *Third World Quarterly*.

² See for example, the Article Forum of the *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Volume 4, Issue 2 for an excellent series of articles that analyze the points of convergence and divergence of food security and food sovereignty.

food sovereignty is perhaps now the most popular of alternative visions of food and agriculture.³ Whether it is called an idea, concept, framework, mobilizing tactic, counter-narrative, counter-movement, political project, campaign, process, vision, or even a living organism, food sovereignty has captured the hearts and minds of many who struggle for social change. Food sovereignty and other closely related concepts like “food democracy” and “food justice”—and the social actors involved—are making food production, consumption, and distribution key social and political issues (Moore, 2014; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Alkon & Mares, 2012; André, Ayers, Bosia, & Massicotte, 2014).

The discourse and practice of food sovereignty is contributing to a paradigm shift in thinking about food and agriculture, and the place of agriculture and food in people’s lives (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010). Moore (2014, p. 23) even suggests that “food and agriculture has [now] become a decisive battleground of the world class struggle. . . . Food security, safety, and sustainability have become central questions in the everyday lives of the world proletariat, from Beijing to Boston (Lam et al., 2013).” He goes on to argue that La Vía Campesina—and I would add food sovereignty—represent a key moment in the world history of food and agriculture because both “challenge[s] the very heart of capitalist productivism in agriculture” while “assert[ing] a revolutionary ontology of food – food as biospheric, as democratic, as cultural. . . *all at the same time* (McMichael, 2012; Wittman, et al., 2010; Akram-Lodhi, 2013)” (quoted in Moore, 2014, p. 23, emphasis in original). As “an ontological alternative” to the neoliberal food regime (McMichael 2014), there is not doubt that the proponents of food sovereignty have helped create new spaces for, and shift the terms of, debates about food production, distribution and consumption. Many of these debates highlight the need to transform power dynamics that shape food systems and address the following questions: what food is produced/ harvested? How and where is food produced/gathered and at what scale? Who produces and gathers food? Importantly, food providers and peasants are now seen as key protagonists (Desmarais, 2007; Van der Ploeg, 2014).

What is food sovereignty?

Food sovereignty “is the right of peoples and nations to control their own food and agricultural systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Wittman et al., 2010, p. 2). This concise definition, while capturing aspects of what is at the heart of food sovereignty, perhaps oversimplifies the complex ideas, theory and practices involved. La Vía Campesina conceptualized food sovereignty as “a precondition to genuine food security” in that it entails exercising the basic human right to food, implementing genuine agrarian reform, protecting natural resources, reorganizing the food trade, ending the

³ It is interesting, for example, that a Google search for “food sovereignty” revealed 484,000 results whereas “sustainable intensification”, another term used for food system change, yielded only 186,000.

globalization of hunger, securing social peace, and democratizing control of the food system (La Vía Campesina, 1996b).

Initially grounded in rural politics and questions primarily concerned with production, food sovereignty was later expanded to encompass the interests of other food providers (i.e. pastoralists), gatherers, fisherfolk, and urban dwellers. These are captured in the following much-cited principles of food sovereignty developed at the Nyéléni Global Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Mali. Namely, food sovereignty “Focuses on food for people, Values food providers, Localizes food systems, Puts control locally, Builds knowledge and skills, and Works with nature.”⁴ It is important to note that in Canada, a seventh principal was added: “Food Sovereignty understands food as sacred, part of the web of relationships with the natural world that defines culture and community” (Peoples’ Food Policy Project, 2011). As Cathleen Kneen (2010) explains,

If food is sacred, it cannot be treated as a mere commodity, manipulated into junk foods or taken from people’s mouths to feed animals or vehicles. If the ways in which we get food are similarly sacred, Mother Earth cannot be enslaved and forced to produce what we want, when and where we want it, through our technological tools. And of course, if food is sacred, the role of those who provide food is respected and supported. (p. 92)

Gender equity has been integral to the meaning of food sovereignty since its inception. A close reading of La Vía Campesina positions related to food sovereignty stress the need for women’s equitable access to and control over productive resources, equal participation and representation in all decision-making bodies, and most recently and importantly, that food sovereignty means “stopping violence against women” (La Vía Campesina, 2008a). As La Vía Campesina’s Declaration of Maputo states “If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles, and if we do not create new gender relations, we will not be able to build a new society.” (La Vía Campesina, 2008b, p. 4)

While the conceptual framework and practices of food sovereignty are evolving continually, there are some theoretical dimensions that remain constant. At the core of food sovereignty is a set of goals comprised of strengthening community, ensuring livelihoods, and building social and environmental sustainability in the production, consumption and distribution of nutritious and culturally appropriate food. As we argued elsewhere, “The pursuit of these goals is informed by a range of strategies: respect for place and diversity, acceptance of difference, understanding the role of nature in production, human agency, equitable distribution of resources, dismantling asymmetrical power relations and building participatory democratic institutions” (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014). The strength of food sovereignty lies in its broad vision for social change. It is a vision that understands that the particular nature of each food

⁴ See the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty (2007) document for a broader framing of these principles.

sovereignty struggle in any given place is shaped by a range of factors including history, ecology, politics, and culture. While appreciating a wide diversity of struggles and social actors involved, importantly, food sovereignty also recognizes the connections among these place-based struggles and how they shape one another.

Key challenges to food sovereignty

The challenges to implementing food sovereignty are substantial and numerous. Since many of these are discussed in several contributions in this special edition I will highlight only the most obvious, but significant, ones.⁵ The first, is the sheer extent and complexity of change required. After all, food sovereignty is about social change writ large as it seeks to fundamentally transform societies through the vehicle of food and agriculture (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014). This transformation necessarily involves the redistribution of all kinds of resources, including power. Thus, food sovereignty is up against very powerful economic and political forces, which means that the on-the-ground struggles are intense, long, and often life-threatening.

The ongoing and numerous food sovereignty struggles for greater public engagement, social justice, human rights, and widespread democracy in many parts of the world are often met with violence or the threat of violence. The criminalization of resistance, state-sanctioned violence, or violence and murder carried out by private security firms, are among the ways that some powerful interests respond to those who advance food sovereignty. This means that developing deep, extensive, and effective solidarity mechanisms across sectors and geographical distances is one of the most important challenges of the Global Food Sovereignty Movement.

As food sovereignty gained traction it has led to a certain level of institutionalization, thus posing a different set of challenges (Bellinger & Fakhri, 2013; McKay et al., 2014; Wittman, this issue). Meanwhile, at the international level the Committee on World Food Security has opened up space for more civil society actors—including some who are voicing food sovereignty demands—and the UN Human Rights Council is working on an international declaration of peasants rights which is framed as the right to food sovereignty.⁶ These are significant advances, yet they do pose important challenges if the aim is to develop policies and programs truly based on food sovereignty principles. The first involves acknowledging and transforming the inherent asymmetrical power dynamics of these institutionalized spaces to enhance meaningful participation of those who are on the frontlines of food sovereignty. Second, most food sovereignty movements are limited in their capacity to participate effectively in these spaces given their obligations to be most active at the local and national levels. It may also take some time for them to develop the necessary skills and gain sufficient experience to be effective

⁵ This section is a revision of earlier discussions of the challenges (Desmarais 2012, 2014). Because all of them remain critical to the conceptualization and implementation of food sovereignty, I reiterate them here.

⁶ These are discussed further in other contributions in this compilation; see for example, Burnett, Murphy, McKeon, and Claeys.

in those spaces. Third, as food sovereignty is institutionalized, there is greater potential for usurpation and depoliticization by powerful interests who can reshape its meaning and dilute its goal of social transformation.⁷ The task then is to ensure constant vigilance of programs and policies that are introduced in the name of food sovereignty.

The role of research

Community-based researchers and academics can play an important role in advancing food sovereignty by engaging in critical research. There is a growing literature on food sovereignty but I can only mention a few recent works here. While some critique food sovereignty for its lack of clarity (Agarwal, 2014), complexity (Boyer, 2010), elasticity, populism and romanticism (Bernstein, 2014), others point to the need for food sovereignty to be and do more than it is now. For example, Burnett & Murphy (2014) argue that the Global Food Sovereignty Movement should develop “a clearer and more considered stance on international trade” given the importance of export production and international markets in benefitting the livelihoods of peasant and small-scale food producers (p. 1066). In their view, given new political opportunities offered by international dynamics and institutional shifts, a “broader food sovereignty-based trade campaign” might be possible if and when the Global Food Sovereignty Movement were to engage with the World Trade Organization rather than maintain their stance of disengagement with the multi-lateral institution (Burnett & Murphy, 2014, p. 1066). Clearly, more analysis is needed to determine what if any strategic engagement with the WTO is the best path to enabling the practice of food sovereignty. Research also points to the limitations associated with misinterpreting food sovereignty as being restricted to food self-sufficiency and/or local food production for local consumption (Wittman, this issue).⁸ The challenge is how to ensure that the research we do reflects the needs and concerns of those most marginalized, those who are on the frontlines of food sovereignty. How can we ensure that the research supports the food sovereignty struggles for social justice and a rights-based food system?

There is a real dearth of research on food sovereignty questions that could be of great use to the Global Food Sovereignty Movement as it engages with national governments and international institutions. More research is needed to address the following questions, among others:

⁷ An example of appropriation is the recent action (in May 2013) of the Parti Québécois, referencing La Vía Campesina’s notion of food sovereignty, that officially launched a food sovereignty policy as a framework for all future decision-making on agriculture and food in Québec (MAPAQ, 2013). See Desmarais and Wittman (2014) for a discussion of this case.

⁸ Several contributions to this special issue discuss other important aspects of the WTO; see for example, Wise, Kripke, Margulis, and Zerbe.

- How are food sovereignty struggles expressed in particular locales and countries, and how are these connected? What social justice claims, food-producing resources, and environmental, productive, economic, social, and political rights are at stake in the struggles between food sovereignty and industrial agriculture?
- How does food sovereignty strengthen the human right to food, food security, and the right to a healthy and safe environment in particular locales? In what specific ways does food sovereignty lead to more just social relations of production and consumption?

For La Vía Campesina, any solution that has the potential to succeed in addressing the food, environmental and socioeconomic crises must address wealth, dispossession, power, and politics. Through their gift of food sovereignty they are inviting us all to engage in research, debate, community-building, and collective action geared to turn it all around.

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