

Canadian Food Studies

La Revue canadienne des
études sur l'alimentation

Book Review

Human Rights and the Food Sovereignty Movement: Reclaiming Control

Priscilla Claeys

Routledge, New York, 2015, 210 pages

Reviewed by Kaitlyn Duthie-Kannikkatt (University of Manitoba)

Critical discussions of human rights have featured prominently in the development studies literature (Charvet & Kaczynska-Nay, 2008; Engle Merry, 1997; Rajagopal, 2015). While many social actors have utilized human rights to advance their goals, the framework has also been criticized for its tendency to individualize struggles and emphasize legal dimensions of justice, while ignoring issues of power. Despite these critiques, rights discourse continues to resonate within the food sovereignty movement—“a transnational movement of rural social organizations that work towards achieving structural changes in the global food system” (Claeys, 2015, p. 1). Some activists and academics who align themselves with this movement are working to subvert simplistic understandings of rights in favour of a more dignified, community-rooted, and radical alternative approach that captures the attention of national and international legislative bodies, while remaining useful to grassroots struggles. However, the strategic utility of this approach is contested within the food sovereignty movement.

Priscilla Claeys' *Human Rights and the Food Sovereignty Movement: Reclaiming Control* offers a critical analysis of the tensions around human rights framing within the food sovereignty movement. Guided by her work as a former advisor to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Claeys details the evolution of rights framing around food, how “right to food” and “food sovereignty” frames have been mutually influential, and how they have affected policy environments at local, national, and international scales. Her nuanced navigation of the progression of rights discourse within the food sovereignty movement challenges the reader to

grapple with some fundamental questions: Does a human rights framework dictate a particular economic and political model of organization? Is the use of a human rights framework de-radicalizing the food sovereignty movement? Or, have food sovereignty advocates successfully subverted the liberalizing, state-centering effect of the rights discourse in favour of an approach that resonates with demands for autonomy, collectivity, and community control?

The book begins by outlining the challenges posed by food sovereignty to the neoliberal expansion of capital. As transnational agrarian movements such as *La Via Campesina* have begun to frame food sovereignty as a right in and of itself, they have shifted the focus of international human rights discourse from the state to the community, emphasizing plurality and local autonomy. Chapter 2 explores the challenges involved in fighting for the right to food sovereignty at national and international scales. Two aspects underlie the framing of this right: internal food sovereignty and external food sovereignty. Its internal dimension recalls the right to self-government, positioning community sovereignty as a countervailing force to state sovereignty. Externally, the right to food sovereignty applies existing notions of sovereignty over natural resources to changing global contexts in which transnational corporations are compromising the economic independence of less powerful political actors. As a result of the advocacy of *La Via Campesina* and other food sovereignty movement actors, several national and international actors have moved to legislatively recognize both internal and external dimensions of food sovereignty, demanding alternative trade rules, legal frameworks, and participation mechanisms. The challenges involved in organizing internationally are examined in more depth in Chapter 3, with a review of the history of the *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants*. Within *La Via Campesina*, the Declaration represents a form of resistance to de-peasantization and an alternative framework for economic and social justice. As *La Via Campesina* has worked to have the Declaration institutionalized at the UN, they have succeeded in advancing an alternative conception of rights, emphasizing responsibility and the interdependency of people and nature.

Before discussions on the right to food sovereignty or the rights of peasants emerged at the UN, the dominant framing for tackling hunger was a “right to food” frame. This frame positions hunger as an access issue, and advances certain entitlements and/or structural changes in order to secure access to food for the vulnerable. Chapter 4 outlines the various ways of viewing the “right to food” frame while Chapter 5 draws together the three rights frames for comparative analysis. Claeys argues that frames are “contested, discursive, and strategic processes” (p. 97) out of which our notions of rights emerge. The “right to food” frame, she contends, has been shaped by other, more radical human rights frames, but still retains its essential insufficiently radical character. The “right to food” frame has failed to provide a space for critiquing capitalism and systemic inequality—issues that are central for food sovereignty movement actors. Ultimately, Claeys concedes that no frame can be wholly abandoned. However, one needs to be aware of how particular frames reflect particular economic models. Without sufficient space to articulate alternatives to dominant capitalist production models, the differences between frames may be irreconcilable.

Human Rights and the Food Sovereignty Movement is an excellent contribution to the study of agrarian movements and the discourse on human rights in the field of development studies. Academic readers will appreciate its deeply analytical approach, although those new to food sovereignty literature may find it challenging to follow the evolution of actors and ideologies that have informed this complex issue.

Claeys provides an interesting launching point for a deeper discussion around how social movements as a whole are subverting, democratizing, or decolonizing rights, and future studies may explore interesting parallels between Indigenous rights movements (Miranda, 2010) and food sovereignty struggles, drawing from Claeys' empirical work on the impact of civil society participation in framing international rights instruments. Furthermore, as the food sovereignty literature delves deeper into conversations around how our notions of sovereignty are shifting amidst expanding linkages between state power and transnational capital (Ong, 2007; Patel, 2009; Trauger, 2014), Claeys' work on human rights is an important contribution to understanding emergent forms of sovereignty. *La Via Campesina's* dual identity as both participant and subversive within international rights discourse is evidence of how critical social movements can meaningfully impact the content and potential application of legal frameworks. Claeys' analysis provides a useful framework for assessing the impact of social movements in shifting discourses, through fostering creative tension and advancing societal transformation.

References

- Charvet, J., & Kaczynska-Nay, E. (2008). *The Liberal Project and Human Rights: The Theory and Practice of a New World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Claeys, P. (2015). *Human Rights and the Food Sovereignty Movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Engle Merry, S. (1997). Changing Rights, Changing Culture. In J. K. Cowan, M.-B. Dembour, & R. A. Wilson (Eds.), *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miranda, L. A. (2010). Indigenous Peoples as International Lawmakers. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, 32(1), 203–263.
- Ong, A. (2007). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press.
- Patel, R. (2009). *What does food sovereignty look like?* *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(3), 663-706.
- Rajagopal, B. (2015). *International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trauger, A. (2014). Toward a political geography of food sovereignty: transforming territory, exchange and power in the liberal sovereign state. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41(6), 1131–1152.