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### Introduction: critical perspectives on food sovereignty

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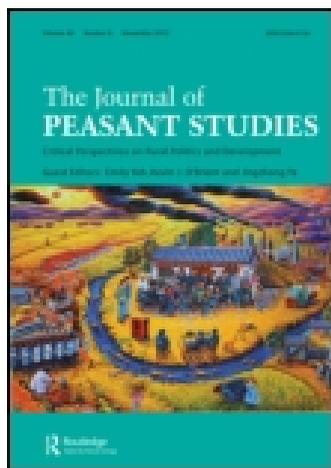
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On: 16 October 2014, At: 07:50

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Journal of Peasant Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjps20>

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Published online: 15 Oct 2014.



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To cite this article: Marc Edelman, Tony Weis, Amita Baviskar, Saturnino M. Borras Jr, Eric Holt-Giménez, Deniz Kandiyoti & Wendy Wolford (2014) Introduction: critical perspectives on food sovereignty, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41:6, 911-931, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2014.963568](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.963568)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.963568>

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## Introduction: critical perspectives on food sovereignty

Marc Edelman, Tony Weis, Amita Baviskar, Saturnino M. Borrás Jr, Eric Holt-Giménez, Deniz Kandiyoti and Wendy Wolford

Visions of food sovereignty have been extremely important in helping to galvanize broad-based and diverse movements around the need for radical changes in agro-food systems. Yet while food sovereignty has thrived as a ‘dynamic process’, until recently there has been insufficient attention to many thorny questions, such as its origins, its connection to other food justice movements, its relation to rights discourses, the roles of markets and states and the challenges of implementation. This essay contributes to food sovereignty praxis by pushing the process of critical self-reflection forward and considering its relation to critical agrarian studies – and vice versa.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty; social movements; critical agrarian studies; food security; agricultural trade; agroecology

Over the course of more than two decades, visions of ‘food sovereignty’ have inspired (and been inspired by) a wellspring of social movements, on-the-ground experiments, policy innovations and – increasingly – heated debates. Even though proponents insist that food sovereignty is a ‘dynamic process’ rather than a set of fixed principles, until recently there had been little sustained interest in grappling with thorny questions of its origins, what its practical and conceptual limitations might be and what it would take to implement it now and in the future in economically, politically and ecologically diverse contexts. That reticence was perhaps rooted in the adoption of food sovereignty by transnational agrarian movements, such as *La Vía Campesina* (LVC), and the foot-dragging of sympathetic activists and researchers who were disinclined to challenge organizations representing peasants and leading figures within them.

Two conferences – at Yale University in New Haven in September 2013 and at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague in January 2014 – widened and deepened growing debates.<sup>1</sup> Questions that scholar-activists had raised in off-the-record interviews with food sovereignty advocates and peasant leaders, or in hushed conversations in university corridors, exploded in fiery polemics – and received

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<sup>1</sup>We gratefully acknowledge the vital contribution of James C. Scott, Co-Director of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program, who presided over key conference sessions and made frequent interventions in plenaries and informal discussions, always with his inimitable wit, good humour and profound insight.

in-depth analytical attention in some 90 papers, 15 of which are represented in this collection.<sup>2</sup> The active participation of numerous food sovereignty and peasant activists at these events and in authoring many of the papers made these much more than typical, run-of-the-mill academic conferences. What began as a dialogue in which academics asked ‘Does food sovereignty have a future in critical agrarian studies?’ was playfully flipped the other way by practitioners to ask ‘Do critical agrarian studies have a future in food sovereignty?’ Indeed, though diverse ideological standpoints led to some intense debates, a striking feature of these ‘critical dialogues’ was the enthusiasm that participants of every provenance and professional position displayed for engaging with each other’s ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation. Readers of this collection will find that food sovereignty is a dynamic process after all, and one that increasingly intensifies its praxis and includes a much more profound process of self-reflection and a broad interrogation of key premises and heretofore unexamined assumptions.

Much of the early literature on food sovereignty involved a considerable dose of idealistic righteousness – and rightfully so, since the concept had contributed beyond anybody’s initial expectations to galvanizing a broad-based and diverse movement around the need for radical changes in agro-food systems. Self-congratulatory celebrations of food sovereignty, however, too often went hand-in-hand with a certain inattention to underlying premises, policy implications and even the history of the idea itself. The critical dialogue in the pages below cranks up the intensity of the debates, leaving behind this oddly complacent past practice and raising difficult questions – including some for which there may be no immediate answers. While unable to capture the full breadth of the growing debate on the significance of food sovereignty as a mobilizing frame, policy objective and plan of action, this collection seeks to put academics, activists and of course activist-academics on a more solid footing as they engage and work with both agrarian studies and social movements struggling towards food sovereignty.

### Challenging questions

To frame this introduction, we consider some of the most challenging questions:

- (1) What are the origins of the concept of ‘food sovereignty’? How does it relate to more conventional notions of ‘food security’? What characterized the context in which food sovereignty emerged as a demand of social movements?
- (2) How does long-distance or foreign trade fit into the food sovereignty paradigm, if at all? Is it possible to incorporate the millions of small farmers that produce commodities for export into a food sovereignty model and, if so, under what terms?

<sup>2</sup>In addition, two other journal special issues forthcoming in 2015 are based on the Yale and ISS colloquia: (a) *Globalizations* journal, guest edited by Annie Shattuck, Christina Schiavoni and Zoe VanGelder, and (b) *Third World Quarterly*, guest edited by Eric Holt-Giménez, Alberto Alonso-Fradejas, Todd Holmes and Martha Robbins. High-quality video recordings of all plenary talks at the Yale conference are available on the websites of the colloquium co-organizers and on YouTube. For the original conference papers, see: Yale University (2013), International Institute of Social Studies (2014) and Food First (2014).

- (3) What role as a mobilizing concept can food sovereignty play in helping food-deficit nations move towards greater food self-sufficiency? And is this always possible or desirable?
- (4) The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that urban agriculture helps to feed up to 800 million city dwellers – mostly in the poorest quintile (FAO 2002; Zezza and Tasciotti 2010). From 30 to 70 percent of urban families in poor countries engage in urban agriculture, so there is no question that it makes a significant contribution to the aggregate food supply (FAO 2010). What do the growing material and strategic importance of urban agriculture mean for the construction of food sovereignty? How can food sovereignty help bridge the land, resource, market and policy struggles of rural and urban producers?
- (5) What will be required to administer food sovereignty and who will do it? Who is the sovereign in food sovereignty? What kinds of limitations or regulations on particular kinds of production or trade, if any, does food sovereignty imply?
- (6) How much pluralism is acceptable in a food-sovereign society with respect to models of agricultural production, commerce and consumption? What are the obstacles to scaling up agroecology as a strategy of resistance to industrial agriculture and to centring agroecology as a normative farming style in the future? While individual farmers adopt complex farming *styles* that include industrial and agroecological practices, the political food sovereignty movement (e.g. La Vía Campesina and transnational, national and regional food sovereignty alliances) has largely adopted agroecology as a normative *form* of production. How will the centring/decentring of agroecology/industrial practices affect farming styles? What *mode* of production is under construction with agroecology and food sovereignty?
- (7) What kinds of (land) property relations might characterize a food-sovereign society? What combinations of cooperative or collective practices and individual ones are likely to be most effective?
- (8) How does food sovereignty address the complex agrarian transitions to modern food systems? How might it serve to stabilize livelihoods and labour flow to build in greater social resilience? What are the roles and realities of food workers, consumers and people in general in the construction of food sovereignty? Will food sovereignty be able to address situations where agriculturalists manifest a desire to enter, remain in or leave agriculture or where young rural people prefer not to become farmers?
- (9) If food sovereignty is founded on ‘rights’, how does it relate to the many other rights-oriented food movements that do not necessarily embrace the food sovereignty framework?
- (10) What difference does food sovereignty make within broader political-economic transformations? What impacts and implications does food sovereignty hold for transitions to a post-petroleum, post-growth and/or post-capitalist society?

### 1. Origins of ‘food sovereignty’

The roots of ‘food sovereignty’ are much debated and shrouded in myth, as Edelman points out in this collection, while tracing the concept’s origins to a Mexican government program in the early 1980s. In contrast, several of the other contributions echo versions of the established account that LVC ‘first articulated’ (Desmarais and Wittman) or ‘mooted’ (Agarwal)

food sovereignty in 1996 at the Rome World Food Summit. Still others take a sociology-of-knowledge approach to the origins question, linking the beginnings of food sovereignty to the globalization of the 1970s (Bernstein), the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1986–1994), the predecessor of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Burnett and Murphy) or the rapid concentration of giant seed corporations (Kloppenbergs). What is clear amidst this cacophony of views is that visions of food sovereignty have evolved and that no consensus exists, a reality which many activists and scholars see as a virtue, a strength and a reflection and acknowledgment of on-the-ground diversity (as in, for example, Martínez-Torres and Rosset's celebration of the *'diálogo de saberes'* within LVC, van der Ploeg's analysis of the sources of peasant resilience or Desmarais and Wittman's invocation of the tremendous variety of national, regional and cultural identities that exist in a large country such as Canada). By critically scrutinizing varied interpretations of food sovereignty, as well as efforts to implement it, and by posing challenging and sometimes delicate questions, the contributions in this collection will no doubt contribute to the concept's further specification and evolution.

One area of intense political contention and scholarly debate concerns the distinction between 'food sovereignty' and 'food security'. The latter concept generally connotes simply adequacy of supplies and nutritional content, with the food itself produced and delivered under any conditions, including far-off, chemical-intensive industrial agriculture. This technocratic understanding of 'food security', typical of many intergovernmental organizations, has made it a target for food sovereignty activists and sympathetic academics. Indeed, some scholars go so far as to suggest that the food security versus food sovereignty opposition constitutes 'a global conflict' (Schanbacher 2010). This view is reflected in several contributions in this collection, including those by Martínez-Torres and Rosset, and McMichael. Bernstein accepts the food security versus food sovereignty dyad but sees it as one element of a broader set of problematical binaries central to agrarian populist discourse (e.g. industrial agriculture versus 'virtuous peasants'). The contributions by Edelman and Trauger each take a different tack, arguing that many of the numerous definitions of food security overlap significantly with conceptions of food sovereignty (e.g. in emphasizing 'culturally appropriate' food) and that in the early actions around food sovereignty activists either used both terms almost interchangeably or asserted that food sovereignty was a prerequisite for attaining genuine food security.

The peasant movements that adopted 'food sovereignty' as a rallying cry and political program in the early 1990s faced several common threats. These included: sudden market openings coupled with the evisceration or complete elimination of public-sector support for smallholding agriculturalists (e.g. commodities boards, state development banks and subsidized credit, extension and agronomic research programs); the consolidation of giant seed companies and increasing state efforts to tighten and enforce seed certification and intellectual property laws regarding crop genetic material; the criminalization of protest and of trafficking in prohibited goods (e.g. raw milk in the United States, farmer-grown seeds in Europe); and what Martínez-Torres and Rosset describe as 'territorial disputes with Capital and agribusiness' (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014, 980).

Several opportunities also characterized the context in which food sovereignty emerged as a demand of social movements. The most notable, analysed explicitly or assumed implicitly throughout this collection, is the rise of transnational agrarian movements (TAMs) and the coalitions that these formed with advocacy and donor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Europe and elsewhere. The presence of LVC and other TAMs at the 1996 Rome Food Summit and the creation of the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, for example, were made possible by these alliances and were first

steps in opening up spaces where peasants' voices could be heard in global governance institutions. Debates continue to roil the food sovereignty community about the ultimate usefulness of this engagement, but the food sovereignty idea would doubtless have had less traction without it.

## 2. Does long-distance trade fit in the food sovereignty paradigm?

There are many good reasons why food sovereignty advocacy has tended to view long-distance or foreign trade of agricultural products in a negative light. The reconfiguration of land and social relations to produce commodities for export obviously has old roots in European colonialism, and in many places agro-export production continues to be predicated on and/or generative of severe land and social inequalities. Dependence on long-distance trading systems frequently amounts to a double-edged sword for smallholders and farm workers, with especially damaging impacts in many of the world's poorest countries. On one side is the extreme volatility of tropical agricultural commodities, long subject to frequent boom-bust swings. As Martin Khor (2000, 11) puts it: 'many developing countries still dependent on commodity exports have been trapped in a bad corner of the world trading system'. On the other side, rising imports of cheap (and frequently subsidized) surpluses from industrialized countries have glutted local markets and reshaped the nature of food provisioning, a dynamic that will inevitably be threatened by limits to fossil energy supplies at some point in the future (and in the meantime will be tied to ever-more-destructive forms of fossil energy extraction).

The increasing distance and durability of food is also deeply entwined with the mounting concentration of corporate power over global agro-food systems, and contains under-accounted atmospheric costs that must be understood in light of the urgency of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and mitigating climate change. Industrialized agriculture is a major source of GHG emissions (e.g. from large machinery, fertilizers, pesticides, deforestation and intensive livestock operations) and the extreme specialization of landscapes means that both agro-inputs and outputs frequently travel over long distances. While the distance that food moves from farm to mouth is part of its climate impact, it is important to recognize that the nature of production typically has a much greater impact on emissions; or, to put it another way, 'food miles' are just one part of the much bigger environmental case against industrial agriculture (Weber and Matthews 2008). In contrast, labour-intensive and biodiverse small farms tend to reduce GHG emissions in production, enhance the capacity for carbon sequestration within landscapes and reduce the distance that food is transported. In short, there is much to be said for LVC's (Vía Campesina 2009) claim that small-scale farming 'cools the earth'.

Yet while the general motivation for 're-localizing' food systems as far as possible is clear enough, there is still a lot of imprecision about what 'as far as possible' ultimately means. Until recently, activists and scholars have been reluctant to consider this ambiguity. Burnett and Murphy's contribution provides probably the most explicit and detailed effort so far to bring the topics of long-distance and international trade into the food sovereignty conversation. One basic question here is what do we make of the millions of smallholders who produce agricultural commodities (and not only food) for export, particularly when they do so on the basis of relatively equitable land and social relations and sustainable multi-cropped or agro-forestry systems? Burnett and Murphy further point out that the centrality of food to the discussion may lead advocates of food sovereignty to neglect how smallholders cultivating export crops might face plummeting incomes if they were required to switch to growing staple foods for local markets (though we must also keep in mind how

the explicit and implicit subsidization of cheap industrial foods grossly distorts relative prices, and how this distortion is not inevitable).

Another sticky issue for food sovereignty in relation to trade and distance, which Edelman points to, is the extent to which non-local dietary preferences can or should be challenged. While food cultures have historically been relatively place-based and tied to agricultural capabilities in a given region<sup>3</sup> – a connection that constitutes a central pillar of food sovereignty – calls for food sovereignty should not obscure the fact that some distance is inescapable, and that it is difficult to draw fixed lines to separate what is ‘culturally appropriate’ and might be permissible within a food sovereignty paradigm and what is not. The difference between fair trade coffee and Coca-Cola might seem plain enough to most, but translating this to policy and practice is far from straightforward, to say nothing of the even greyer area that lies between these two examples. The extent to which trade and distance (and the fossil energy consumption they entail) can be justified is complicated further by the matter of necessity or nutritional value versus luxury (and pure palate pleasure), in which case coffee, even if ‘fairly traded’, might not fare so well.

So far, most of the attention to multilateral governance in food sovereignty activism and scholarship has focused on attacking the institutionalization of corporate power, most centrally through the WTO. While this criticism is surely warranted, the failure to think with more specificity about the place of trade and distance in food sovereignty means that there has not been enough attention to the sorts of institutions that are needed to help small farmers secure more equitable, stable and democratic positions within trading networks. For Burnett and Murphy, this attention should include the WTO, and they challenge food sovereignty advocates to rethink the conventional stance (‘WTO out of agriculture’) and instead strategize how ‘changes in the existing rules’ might ‘contribute to a broader food-sovereignty-based trade campaign’. They make the argument – highly controversial in the food sovereignty community – that ‘it is possible to imagine the WTO as a place that counterbalances the power of those countries (and companies) that have set the rules to their benefit and to the detriment of small-scale producers and farm workers’ (Burnett and Murphy 2014, 1080).

Outside of confronting the WTO, some of the hope for improving the equity and transparency of relations between small farmers and distant consumers has come to be vested in the expansion of fair trade networks. Food sovereignty advocacy has had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to fair trade networks and certification schemes, with attitudes located on a wide spectrum ranging from explicit support (as though they are a primary mechanism for managing trade in benign ways) to an unhelpful distraction (from the more important, structural work of contesting Free Trade Agreements and the WTO), to little more than ‘greenwashing’ (e.g. in the case of ‘sustainable’ palm oil) or ‘poor-washing’. The latter view is buttressed by growing evidence that fair trade and other certification schemes frequently do little to improve small farmers’ position in commodity chains, as well as often giving rise to troubling new forms of subordination and clientelism (Campbell and LeHeron 2007; Fisher 2007; Sylla 2014). A deeper concern is that fair trade networks and commodity certification schemes are, in their basic conception, pale shadows of earlier and much more ambitious, state-centred attempts to obtain fairer prices and more

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<sup>3</sup>This was altered over long periods of time, of course, by dispersions of plants and animals that were accelerated dramatically by the European conquest of the Americas and the ensuing Columbian Exchange.

consistent, predictable market conditions through South-South supply management regimes, North-South development partnerships (e.g. the Lomé Agreement), and through the United Nations (UN) Conference on Trade and Development (Fridell 2013).

### 3. How will food-deficit regions move towards greater self-sufficiency?

Where agro-export-oriented large holdings continue to command significant portions of the best arable land, redistributive land reform remains the fundamental priority for any efforts to overcome food deficits and move towards greater self-sufficiency, together with increased public-sector investments in all of the smallholder-oriented supports needed to make agrarian reform successful (Borras 2008). But we must not assume that eschewing export production in the interests of strengthening local food production will tend towards progressive or redistributive outcomes. On the contrary, as the contribution by Paprocki and Cons indicates, this transformation can exacerbate other sorts of problems. Based on a carefully controlled study of two polders in Bangladesh – one subsistence-oriented and the other entirely given over to shrimp aquaculture – they argue that food sovereignty permits ‘a full spectrum of agrarian classes to continue to be peasants, though it does not necessarily yield greater equality in agrarian class relations’ (Paprocki and Cons 2014, 1111). In particular, despite some food sovereignty advocates’ claims to the contrary, they suggest that the implementation of food sovereignty *per se* does little to address problems of landlessness.

Beyond the complex and contextually varied struggles for agrarian reform lies an array of other barriers to greater food self-sufficiency. Dependence on industrial food surpluses has dampened smallholder earnings in local markets, and over the longer term this has served to undermine the viability of small-scale farming – one of multiple reasons why many young people view the prospect of agrarian livelihoods in a negative light (White 2011). Food import dependence has also simplified diets in unhealthy ways, as a few varieties of wheat, maize and rice, along with a range of highly processed foods, have increasingly displaced more genetically diverse (and nutritionally rich) varieties of the ‘big three’ grains, ‘minor’ grains such as millets and quinoa, and whole foods in general. Such dietary changes are often assumed to be primarily a function of cheapness, with the expectation that food sovereignty advocacy will tend to be braced by strong preferences for ‘local’ and ‘culturally appropriate’ foods. Yet while cost has no doubt been pivotal, we must be careful not to underplay the extent to which dietary aspirations have been affected by long-term trade patterns and corporate branding, and the extent to which consumer preferences now lean towards processed products – from white bread and baked goods to fried chicken, packaged noodles and high-fructose corn syrup drinks – not only in urban areas but among smallholders and other rural people.

This implies that food sovereignty might not only be about defending food cultures but also about reinvigorating or even rebuilding them, and consciously working to enhance ‘food literacy’ and modify consumer tastes. Progressive food movements in the United States and Canada (including what Desmarais and Wittman call the new ‘foodies’) stress things like the need to eat seasonally within ‘foodsheds’ and to challenge the pervasive expectation that fresh produce will be available all year round. But it is possible that in food-deficit regions with large agrarian populations, food cultures are a bigger barrier to food sovereignty advocacy than is often appreciated.

Another underdeveloped dilemma in food sovereignty activism and scholarship is that some food-deficit regions and nations simply cannot produce enough food for current populations and have no choice but to engage in long-distance trade, with all of the vulnerability

to food price volatility that this implies. This quandary is deepening with climate change (even before future emission and sequestration scenarios are considered), which now bears heavily on efforts to enhance food self-sufficiency – and in some cases is beginning to completely overshadow them. Many of the Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries identified by the FAO are the ones that are expected to be most adversely impacted by changes such as increasing average temperatures and aridity, greater weather extremes and rising sea levels. This is an exceedingly iniquitous dynamic: low-income countries are especially threatened by conditions they have done little to cause and could become still more dependent upon the food imports from the industrialized world that are part of its extremely disproportionate contribution to climate change (Weis 2010).

As suggested earlier, it is generally clear that efforts to move towards greater localization are consonant with the need to mitigate climate change. The relationship of food sovereignty to climate change – both in the urgency of the mitigation imperative and in the prospect that impacts might devastate the productive capacity of large areas of land – is in some ways a contemporary permutation of the old question of autarchy versus global transformation that animated debates among revolutionaries a century ago.

#### 4. Possibilities and limits of urban food production

One of the most compelling attractions of food sovereignty is the idea of fortifying (or rebuilding) direct, solidarity-based relationships between producers and consumers. In this, it seeks to address the environmental impacts of ‘distancing’ (in particular, from fossil energy consumption and GHG emissions noted earlier), while assuming that more intimate, even face-to-face, interactions could guarantee decent remuneration for food producers and also ensure affordable food prices for consumers. This prospect in turn assumes the co-existence of a ‘floor price’ and ‘ceiling price’, which are broadly and flexibly framed in moral economy terms. Such ‘price bands’ were long used by developing country governments of diverse orientations as a defence against unfair foreign competition (see, for example, French-Davis 2003, 218), though they have fallen out of favour in recent decades. While this is an admirable aspiration, it also presents perhaps one of the biggest challenges to food sovereignty as a political project because producer-consumer relationships are not only marked by the potential for solidarity, symbiosis and synergy, but can contain deep tensions and contradictions, as Bernstein, Agarwal and a number of other contributors in this collection point out. This solidarity/tension dilemma has multiple axes. A central axis is characterized by *rural-urban* divisions, which are growing beyond historic dimensions with so many people now living far from traditional food granaries. A second major axis, less recognized in the literature on food sovereignty, is marked *rural-rural* divisions, which reflects the need to account for the fact that most rural residents are now net food buyers, whether they are farmers or not. It is clear that prospects for producer-consumer solidarity must develop mechanisms for reconciling the desire for better remuneration from producers with the desire for affordable prices from consumers – which would mean resolving the age-old ‘scissors’ dynamic of rising costs and declining returns in agriculture.

Perhaps the most obvious way to reconcile these tensions is to bypass the various layers of brokers in the food system, such as food processors, traders, transport owners, financiers and petty merchants. But to go beyond scattered and mostly localized market arrangements between producers and consumers (internationalized mainly through fair trade), and work towards large-scale food system-wide reform, public policy carried out by the central state is essential. This leads us back to the contentious issue of the role of the state in food sovereignty (as discussed elsewhere in this introductory essay and in a number of contributions to

this collection – e.g. contributions by McKay *et al.*, Giunta, and Bernstein), which includes questions about ‘multiple sovereignties’ (Edelman, this collection; Patel 2009) and ‘competing sovereignties’ (Schiavoni *forthcoming*).

This context partly explains how ‘localization’ has become a central imperative in food sovereignty, both to reduce the ‘distancing’ in the food system, as Clapp (2014) stresses, and to minimize the gap between production cost/mark-up and retail price. As has been stressed, the magnitude of urbanization is a central reason why geographical distance is such a challenge. However, as Robbins (*forthcoming*) argues, the matter of *spatial* distance is further complicated by the matter of *institutional* distance. This essentially implies that some social groups may live in close spatial proximity to sites of food production but face structural and institutional barriers that render food from these sites largely or wholly inaccessible for them. So while localization will undoubtedly remain an important aspect of food sovereignty, it should be understood not just as physical proximity, but also in relation to social, economic, political and cultural proximity.

Another aspect of localization that needs to be taken seriously stems from the fact that urban and peri-urban spaces are not only sites of consumption but are also increasingly key sites of food production (FAO 2002; McGregor, Simon, and Thompson 2005; Premat 2012). While ‘urban agriculture’ contributes only a small part of total food supply, it is estimated that it helps to feed up to 800 million people globally. More importantly, it is practiced by 30–70 percent of poor, urban populations in the world’s poor countries, and is positively correlated with improved food security (FAO 2010; Zezza and Tasciotti 2010). Given the ongoing migrations of the rural poor to slums, the importance of urban agriculture will only increase. Especially in the fast-growing cities of the Global South, urban food production is difficult to quantify, since it stems mainly from independent livelihood initiatives by individuals or groups who squat on vacant lots to produce food for consumption and for the market.

However, the full value of urban and peri-urban food production goes beyond quantifying food output and also includes the potential to amplify solidarity with farmers. This potential is reflected in the fact that the urban and peri-urban-based food initiatives are important sources of political momentum in food sovereignty advocacy, given that such advocacy is motivated not only by an idea of solidarity with farmers in the distant countryside but also by immediate concerns around public health, access to healthy and affordable foods, dismantling racialized food systems, and the culture and lifestyle of food producers, food sellers, restaurant owners and consumers. Here, it must be acknowledged that the groups spearheading urban food initiatives are politically varied, and those conscious of food sovereignty are far from the majority, as is certainly the case in both Europe and North America (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2001; Román-Alcalá 2013),<sup>4</sup> though at the same time it is important to note that there are budding alliances between more radical urban-based ‘food justice’ movements and food sovereignty advocacy. A good example of this is the food justice movement in the United States, led by people from underserved communities of colour, which has a strong, historical affinity with food sovereignty (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2012).

In sum, there are many reasons that urban-based food initiatives should not be dismissed out of hand, and are fertile ground for enhancing alliances in the future.

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<sup>4</sup>One strategic advantage that stems from this diversity is that some urban food initiatives involve social groups much closer to the dominant media, who possess considerable influence in shaping opinions about the dominant agro-food system.

### 5. Who will administer food sovereignty?

A central contribution of this collection is to tackle head-on questions that food sovereignty activists and scholars had often heretofore ignored or been reluctant to examine, with some notable exceptions including Beuchelt and Virchow (2012), Buisson (2013) and Hospes (2014). What, for example, will be required to administer food sovereignty and who or what will do it? Who is the sovereign in food sovereignty? And what kinds of limitations on particular kinds of production or trade does food sovereignty imply?

Trauger provides the widest ranging discussion of theories of sovereignty (as opposed to simply *food* sovereignty) in this collection. Her analysis highlights two dimensions that are central to the ongoing debates: the role in food sovereignty of states (or other governance mechanisms) and the role of markets (or other forms of allocating production factors and distributing outputs). Indeed, it is possible to locate most of the authors represented here in relation to their viewpoints on these two questions. Trauger argues that ‘food sovereignty may implement its radical vision within the existing structures of the modern liberal nation state by working with, against and in between its juridical structures by reworking the central notions of sovereignty: territory, economy and power’ (Trauger 2014, 1145). She further suggests that food sovereignty practices constitute ‘a kind of civil disobedience’ that can, at least temporarily, re-territorialize space, and cites as an example the ‘overlapping sovereignties’ that affect the traditional gathering and propagating of wild rice by the Anishinabe indigenous people in northern Minnesota.

Bernstein declares that the state ‘is really “the elephant in the room” of ... food sovereignty’. Desmarais and Wittman note how the question of the state’s role has divided farm organizations in Québec, with some arguing that food sovereignty is synonymous with producers’ control over the production process and others advocating versions of state-led food sovereignty. Advocates of the latter approach in Québec hope to counter federal government attempts to threaten provincial-level supply management mechanisms. Kloppenburg’s innovative and controversial call for defending ‘seed sovereignty’ through a kind of open-source licensing similar to that used in the world of computer software depends entirely on contract law, which is, of course, a potentially powerful form of state authority. Trauger calls for enacting food sovereignty ‘at multiple territorial scales’ and asserts that its ‘activities are always vulnerable to state power unless food sovereignty’s economic and territorial alternatives are also written into the national state constitution’ (Trauger 2014, 1148). Yet as Giunta shows in the case of Ecuador, the first in a small but growing list of countries which have incorporated food sovereignty principles into their national charters, the elevation of food sovereignty to the level of a constitutional norm has done relatively little to blunt the country’s powerful agro-industrial interests (see also the contribution by McKay *et al.*).

Edelman’s contribution raises several questions about the administration of food sovereignty that he claims require greater specification if implementation is to be effective. These include the limits on farm size, firm size and long-distance trade that are implied (but rarely specified) in most programmatic statements about food sovereignty, as well as the delicate politics of modifying consumer tastes for exotic products as economic localization progresses. Along with the contributions by Agarwal and by Burnett and Murphy, Edelman asks about the limits on producers’ choices – to expand a successful small farm, for example, or to employ noxious chemicals – and who would enforce these limits.

Peschard raises another intriguing possibility in relation to states and supra-state levels of governance. Ambiguities in key international agreements, she asserts, particularly Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS, part of WTO), may provide more room for manoeuvre and more development space than is usually appreciated, particularly when

'cunning states' (Randeria 2007), such as India, engage in foot-dragging or fail to implement the more draconian provisions of treaties they have ratified. Peschard, along with several others in this collection, points to the importance of unpacking the category 'state', with its diverse bureaucratic elements, its contradictory political and economic interests, its efficacy or inertia, its distinct levels of governance and its – at times – limited or overlapping sovereignty over key on-the-ground processes.

The state versus market dichotomy – central to the pioneering work of Polanyi (2001), among others – recurs throughout the debates in the pages that follow. Van der Ploeg, for example, sees food sovereignty as an alternative to the market economy. Peasants, he maintains, 'need the means and space' to fuel agricultural growth, improve livelihoods and increase food provision. Autonomy from input and credit markets 'allows peasant farms to produce for the markets, without being completely dependent on them'. He suggests that innovations that cannot be 'taken over' are central to food sovereignty, such as the system of rice intensification (SRI), a set of low-cost agroecological practices that has resulted in spectacular yield increases on small farms in several Asian countries and elsewhere. This vision of food sovereignty as an *alternative* to the market is not, however, shared by all contributors to this collection. Some, like Edelman, point to the Left's failure to analytically 'own' the often dismal experience of anti-market command economies under what used to be called 'actually existing socialism', while several others point to the necessity of markets that permit small producers to realize income and consumers to obtain a varied supply of foodstuffs (e.g. Burnett and Murphy, Giunta). These contributions, while approaching the market issue from widely divergent angles, share an appreciation for what Giunta, paraphrasing the Ecuadorian constitution, terms 'a dynamic and balanced relationship between society, state and market, in harmony with Nature' (Giunta 2014, 1214).

## 6. The challenges of pluralism in a food sovereign society

Food sovereignty tends to hinge on a broad – but not always ideologically coherent – belief in democratic land control (for the emergence and promotion of smallholder farming) coupled with advocacy for farming systems that are both food securing and ecologically sustainable. This combination is often promoted together, though not always, and an agroecology-centric position is but one of various possible interpretations of food sovereignty. Other competing interpretations pivot on organic farming and/or fair trade-oriented agriculture, and some include views of more industrial but localized farming systems.

In recent years, agroecology has become much more systematically integrated into the food sovereignty discourse and practice, especially among social movement groups associated with LVC, which now explicitly advocates 'agroecology-based food sovereignty' and has developed an extensive agroecology training program. This echoes Altieri and Toledo's argument that the core principles of agroecology must provide the basis of any food sovereignty strategy, including

recycling nutrients and energy on the farm, rather than introducing external inputs; enhancing soil organic matter and soil biological activity; diversifying plant species and genetic resources in agroecosystems over time and space; integrating crops and livestock and optimizing interactions and productivity of the total farming system, rather than the yields of individual species. (2011, 588)

This focus on agroecology as the productive basis for food sovereignty stands in fundamental tension with other alternative farming systems, such as more limited versions of

organic farming and fair trade-oriented exporting which are popular among some food sovereignty advocates. For Altieri and Toledo (2011, 588), such alternatives are far too narrow, as ‘organic farming systems ... do not challenge the monoculture nature of plantations and rely on external inputs as well as on foreign and expensive certification seals’, while ‘fair trade systems destined only for agro-export, offer little to small farmers who in turn become dependent on external inputs and foreign and volatile markets’. Agroecology has come a long way since its original farming systems approach, both geographically (to include whole watersheds) and systemically (to encompass the whole food system). Its ‘mission’ has also expanded socially and politically, in part because it has come under ideological and economic attack, and it has become aligned towards food sovereignty at the same time that food sovereignty began to embrace agroecology (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013).

While agroecology prioritizes democratic land control along with food securing and ecologically sustainable farming practices, there are cases where these three objectives are assumed, though not in the context of an agroecology framework. Borrás and Franco (2012a) sketch a possible set of dilemmas that may arise from the intersection of these three core elements of food sovereignty. In situations where the combination is indeed grounded in agroecology-based production, the task of food sovereignty movements is to consolidate and expand such ideal conditions. But these situations are rare. Much more common are situations where various combinations of these three elements are present. For instance, small farms with democratic land control by peasants may exist, and they may be producing maximum possible output from a given land area without using agroecological practices, employing instead inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified (GM) seeds. In other cases, peasants following agroecological practices might not have enough land to produce sufficient food (or other farm outputs to enable them to buy enough food) or might be making inadequate use of the land and other resources they control. The existence of such varied and less-than-ideal agro-food systems contributes to highly differentiated food sovereignty movements (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

The degree of tolerance for pluralism is one of the biggest and most challenging questions confronting food sovereignty practitioners and researchers. If boundaries are set on farmer choice, what happens to farms that continue with some or many industrial inputs or practices? If agroecology is the aspiration, how can food sovereignty movements contribute to transitional efforts for less-than-ideal farms and farming landscapes? Will the idea of a ‘*diálogo de saberes*’, as analysed by Martínez-Torres and Rosset in this collection, or the concept of ‘unity in diversity’ (Desmarais 2007) allow for a constructive interchange between the various social groups differentiated by their actually existing practices of food sovereignty? The answers to these questions are not obvious and will require careful empirical research and conceptual soul-searching.

## 7. Property and food sovereignty: from titles to the social relations of production

At the core of the food sovereignty vision is access to land. Redistributive land reform and what Borrás and Franco (2012b) call ‘land sovereignty’ are generally considered a necessary foundation for creating a just food system in much of the world. In addition to land, others have added seed sovereignty (Bezner-Kerr 2010; Kloppenburg, this collection) as a way of recognizing both the importance of plant germplasm and challenging the increasing dominance of what Kloppenburg calls the ‘Gene Giants’ in controlling property rights over this basic resource.

Recently, this concern for access of various kinds has led to renewed efforts to provide secure tenure or title to land and seeds (Li 2012; Peters 2013). For a surprisingly diverse set of actors – from the Millennium Challenge Corporation of the US government to the FAO and Oxfam International to an array of social movements under the food sovereignty banner – titling has emerged as a key mechanism to address community and individual vulnerabilities. In the face of concerns over large-scale land deals, secure title seems necessary to ensure everything from progressive distribution (distribution from large to small landholdings, or from rich to poor) and access to resources to fair, prior and informed consent (FPIC), wherein companies are expected or obligated to consult with communities about their intentions to extract, produce or develop (FAO 2014; Franco 2014). This focus on secure property rights is often motivated by a desire to protect the most vulnerable community members, such as women and indigenous peoples, from dispossession. As Agarwal suggests in this collection, women face a variety of threats to their access to land, though they are still as likely to be dispossessed by male relatives (or relatives of an ex- or dead husband) as by a state or corporation. The struggle to include women on land titles has been relatively effective in Latin America (Deere and León 2001) though less so in Africa and Asia (but see Peters 2013 for an example of matrilineal societies where she argues that women would be prejudiced by the distribution of equal titles to male and female household heads).

In the discussion of (and practice around) property and secure access to land, there is of course the danger of assuming that (1) titles are the best means of securing access and (2) such access will necessarily provide the stability that will generate entrepreneurial or productive behaviour on the land in ways that align with the goals of either neoliberal rationality or food sovereignty. In the end, the property form may matter less than the struggle to have new forms documented and distributed – the key is the documentation (visibility and voice) and distribution (the move towards equality). Access, as Ribot and Peluso (2003) have argued, is a complicated and often contradictory and overlapping bundle of relations that is ultimately rooted in various forms of authority and power (see also Fairbairn 2013). Those who have the authority or power to dictate the conditions of access are able to circumvent or construct legal frameworks if they choose; indeed, titles may provide a legal means of foreclosure, alienation and expropriation (Mitchell 2009). Similarly, claims of having observed FPIC may allow external actors to operate in areas where otherwise they would have been viewed with suspicion or barred (Franco 2014). These troubling realities are among the main reasons why the landless movement in Brazil (the Landless Rural Workers Movement, or MST) officially rejects the government's attempt to provide new land reform beneficiaries with title to their land. In addition, the movement fears that in the context of Brazilian agriculture, with its focus on large-scale production, those receiving titles would become ineligible for state support, including credit and political representation provided to land reform beneficiaries but not to small holders.

Kloppenburg's analysis in this collection of the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI) provides an excellent example of the potential for open-access property regimes to allow wide distribution of seed technologies, even as the OSSI runs the danger of being drawn into the exclusionary world of contract law. Open-source seeds would unquestionably be a significant blow to corporate plant breeding in the early twenty-first century. As Kloppenburg notes, 'Negotiating the dense accumulation of intellectual property rights that potentially surrounds the material and methods of their work in order to assess and to obtain "freedom to operate" is now a substantial transaction cost for breeders' (Kloppenburger 2014, 1230). The dangers of open access are even more apparent in relation to land where the concept has been commonly understood as *res nullius* or land belonging to nobody, the thesis that underwrote the conquest of the Americas and which is currently

being repurposed in the form of the ‘yield gap’, whereby land is considered to not be fully owned if its use does not lead to what is considered the highest possible yield when compared to global productivity standards. Assertions about yield gaps are a crucially important means of claiming that land in use is open-access land, available for those who promise to increase production levels.

Ultimately, there can be no single vision of the most appropriate form of property ownership for food sovereignty. Open access, public property, individual, communal, cooperative and collective ownership all have different merits in different contexts, and the best solution may be to recognize the merits of different property forms and allow for flexibility. Agarwal’s piece in this collection cites LVC leader Paul Nicholson’s preference for collective rights over individual land ownership (cited in Wittman 2009, 679), but this may be a difficult rule to force on farmers who have historically resisted large-scale, top-down collectivization efforts. Instead, attempts to integrate individual land ownership with various forms of collective organization and institutionalization, such as credit and machinery cooperatives, have the potential to build solidarity and benefit from economies of scale while allowing traditional or culturally appropriate ownership forms and norms to survive and multiply.

## 8. Food sovereignty, a multidimensional concept

Food sovereignty is inherently a multidimensional concept. The only way to be food sovereign is to develop networks of aggregation, processing, commercialization and distribution that are themselves linked to other sectors of the economy. Food sovereignty discourses have often focused narrowly on food and on farmers (and on idealized examples of these, as Bernstein notes in this collection), but if food producers and consumers are to be truly sovereign, then both will have to be supported by and incorporated into a variety of social, economic and political fora that go well beyond food itself. In other words, food sovereignty requires a healthy, sustainable and diverse rural economy that goes well beyond food production. Most if not all children of farmers want to be educated and to have the option of exploring non-farm occupations (White 2011) – to have the opportunity to become doctors and poets and mechanics as their interests and talents would allow. Food sovereignty will not offer a sustainable vision for the future if these activities and options are not part of the larger picture.

Contemporary life on the land in much of the world suffers from the historical legacies of urban bias and industrial development. Influential theorists and policy-makers have contended that agriculture generates only limited backward and forward linkages and that development, therefore, necessarily meant the rapid transition from rural economies to urban ones. Particular industries and urban areas were targeted for development while the rural poor (smallholders and the landless) were seen as sources of cheap labour and the wealthy landed classes were seen as producers of raw materials and cheap food. Food sovereignty advocates, as Agarwal indicates in this collection, argue that migration out of rural areas into urban ones has less to do with a rejection of farming *per se* than with a rejection of farming under the negative, insecure conditions fostered by urban bias. Visions of food sovereignty are a way of correcting this historical prejudice and revalorizing life on the land, but the attempt to revalorize small farms should not entail new anti-off-farm prejudices. If food sovereignty is to be more than simply a populist claim for a return to traditional life on the land, then the vision will need to accommodate flourishing rural economies that include industry, services and entertainment, a point on which Bernstein and McMichael agree.

If food sovereignty is to be the banner for a broader struggle, then the campaign for the sovereignty of food producers will need to be embedded in struggles for:

- the social function of property, which is about the collective obligation to organize the means of production, including land, seeds and capital, in ways that benefit society and nature as a whole;
- the social function of food and livelihood – or the ‘right to be free of want’, which is how, in a landmark legal case, the judicial system in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul interpreted the right of landless squatters to remain on their land (Houtzager 2005);
- the struggle to increase value and distribute according to need, which is embodied in the vision of food sovereignty to build agroindustry in rural communities to increase economies of scale, create forward and backward linkages and generate added value, all under the control of those who labour;
- the social function of political representation, which requires democratizing access to representation through building ties to sympathetic political forces.

Ultimately, these social functions can only be realized if they can be internalized and socialized, and so movements for food sovereignty will need to build educational programs and work to develop a collective will (Meek 2011; Tarlau 2013). It is also important to recognize that all of these struggles are contained within the struggle for access to land, but they are not necessarily visible if land is seen as a narrow ‘thing’, rather than as a set or web of articulated relationships situated in particular places and times. Rethinking food production might help to build a better and more just food system, but sustaining that and including people and sectors not directly (or willingly) linked to the land requires a much broader, multidimensional struggle for land, seeds, rural economies, education, representation, embedded markets and global, regional and local connections.

## **9. Food sovereignty and ‘rights’**

The food sovereignty movement focuses on the rights of farmers and consumers, usually seen as occupying the two ends of the food chain. This conception does not adequately recognize that the positions may often coincide, and that farmers in many countries are simultaneously food producers and buyers, peasants and proletarians. Increasing off-farm employment in rural areas and seasonal or long-term migration into urban settings means that, even in countries with large populations involved in agriculture, more and more farm households depend on purchased food, a dynamic that Agarwal analyses in this collection. Their stake in policies that make food affordable is a political hot-button issue; public discontent expressed through food riots – 51 instances in 37 countries over the last eight years – threatens political stability (World Bank 2014, 6). Social movements such as the Right to Food Campaign in India are based precisely on this notion of citizens’ entitlement to food: that the state is the primary institution to which claims must be directed (Drèze 2004, 1726; Mander 2012). By asserting the right to food along with the rights to work, education and health, the campaign attempts to realize a democratic welfare state that is responsive and accountable to its poorest citizens. Its success is predicated upon a political calculus where the state is expected to privilege proletarian identities over peasant ones, a contradictory dynamic in which people may lose as farmers but gain as citizens. While the food sovereignty movement argues that a right to food that relies on industrial agriculture is unsustainable and plays into the hands of global agribusiness

(see Trauger), many right-to-food activists remain sceptical about the food sovereignty movement's ability to address the issue of chronic hunger and malnutrition in an increasingly non-agrarian world. This challenge is easy to dismiss when it is posed by agribusiness, but harder to set aside when asked by rights activists. Food sovereignty activists, on the other hand (such as Desmarais and Wittman or Martínez-Torres and Rosset in this collection), argue that it is a broader concept than the right to food since it raises the issues of what food is produced, where, how and by whom.

The right to food, however, is an accepted principle in international law, legally binding for the 162 states that have ratified the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the subject of various more recent specifications of states' obligations (although obviously not 'a guarantee', as Trauger observes). Several governments have incorporated it into law as well, some at the level of national constitutions (Golay 2011; Ziegler et al. 2011). While food sovereignty has also become a constitutional norm in various countries, as several contributions in this collection discuss (e.g. Giunta, McKay *et al.*), the concept is far from enjoying the legitimacy among international and national policy-makers that is the case with the right to food. Moreover, even when food sovereignty has achieved constitutional or other legal recognition, it has often been *in combination with* the right to food. Advocates of the latter approach have generally neglected to consider access to productive resources – and distributional questions more broadly – as part of the right to food. Food sovereignty supporters, in contrast, have given these elements a central place in their analyses. Nonetheless, the vastly greater international legitimacy of the right to food, as opposed to food sovereignty, suggests that it may be a more effective advocacy tool for building consensus and for beginning to resolve urgent crises related to food and agriculture – at least until food sovereignty makes further gains (see, for example, the analysis of the engagement of the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, in Burnett and Murphy's discussion). As McMichael indicates, in his contribution to this collection, even the FAO's Committee on World Food Security, which opened to significant civil society participation in 2009 as a result of pressure from the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, lacks explicit references to food sovereignty in its program and mandate. This observation echoes Beuchelt and Virchow (2012, 262–3), who point out that

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank have not worked further with the concept of food sovereignty. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) also has no official definition, but the concept of food sovereignty is at least mentioned in some documents. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) appears to deal more frequently with the concept of food sovereignty but no official FAO document contains the concept either . . . . The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) seems the only UN body which intensively discussed within its documents and meetings the concept of food sovereignty.

Supporters of food sovereignty tend to view it as a precondition for achieving the right to adequate food, but few have given in-depth attention to the questions that sympathetic critics, such as Beuchelt and Virchow, raise about the term's relative lack of acceptance among policy makers.

#### **10. Food sovereignty's agrarian question: what difference does food sovereignty make?**

Food sovereignty has been at the centre of global resistance to capitalism since the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999, in which a broad-based coalition of farmer, worker and environmentalist

organizations brought the neoliberal project to establish the WTO to worldwide attention (Edelman 2009). The dramatic and tragic events of the 2003 protests against the WTO in Cancún, Mexico – in which South Korean farm leader Kun Hai Lee stabbed himself to death, claiming ‘WTO kills farmers’ – reflect the desperate human struggles that have given rise to the food sovereignty movement.

Over the last two decades, food sovereignty has captured the imagination of farmers, workers, consumers and citizens, staking out ideological territory of resistance and hope in the face of neoliberal projects for the unrelenting privatization, deregulation, corporatization and financialization of the world’s economies. Much is expected of food sovereignty. Despite its broad political currency (or perhaps because of it), food sovereignty is often taken up as a set of demands, principles, policies, reforms and rights that together will somehow transform the neoliberal food regime, without identifying the profound structural changes needed in the capitalist economy and the liberal state for food sovereignty to feasibly exist. This oversight plagues many of the demands that adhere to food sovereignty (such as ‘food democracy’, ‘food justice’ and the ‘right to food’) with intractable political contradictions. While it is unreasonable for food sovereignty practitioners and scholars to assume the task of charting a global course through late capitalism, none of us can escape the need for political reflection on the particular role of food sovereignty in pushing this transition in a *post-capitalist* direction.

Trauger (this volume) tentatively open this door with a reflection on territory and strategies

that work within, against and in between the powers of the sovereign liberal state. These include reframing property rights as use rights, engaging in non-commodified food exchanges and practicing civil disobedience to usher in reforms without compromising on essential elements of the food sovereignty agenda. (Trauger 2014, 1131)

## Conclusions

The big questions are now on the table. Food sovereignty is entering its ‘second generation’, as Olivier De Schutter remarked at the Yale conference. This new stage will be marked by greater specificity and a refusal to seek refuge in vague and comforting platitudes. It will likely be characterized by an intensified and better-informed dialogue, increasingly complex alliances between producers and consumers, and greater integration with agroecology and with new paradigms of social and cultural change such as the Andean concept of *buen vivir* (Fathauer 2011). The challenges remain daunting: corporate influence in politics at all levels and control of global food chains (and those for non-food agricultural products), as well as markets for inputs, especially seeds; the industrial ‘cheap food’ model on which too many consumers still rely out of necessity, preference or habit; the tenacious defence of globalized agricultural trade by influential states and powerful multilateral agencies, with their robust judicial apparatuses and dispute resolution and enforcement mechanisms; and the fact that biophysical threats to production from climate change are intensifying and beginning to wreak havoc on production in many of the world’s poorest regions. Perhaps the largest overarching question is whether food sovereignty can generate transformational reforms – or the sort of ‘nonreformist reforms’ Jack Kloppenburg invokes (following Erik Olin Wright), implying ‘social changes that are feasible in the world as it is ... but which prefigure in important ways more emancipatory possibilities’.

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