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Food sovereignty: convergence and contradictions, conditions and challenges

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This article introduces this special collection on food sovereignty. It frames the collection in relation to a broader political and intellectual initiative that aims to deepen academic discussions on food sovereignty. Building upon previous and parallel initiatives in ‘engaged academic research’ and following the tradition of ‘critical dialogue’ among activists and academics, we have identified four key themes – all focusing on the contradictions, dilemmas and challenges confronting future research – that we believe contribute to further advancing the conversation around food sovereignty: (1) dynamics within and between social groups in rural and urban, global North–South contexts; (2) flex crops and commodities, market insertion and long-distance trade; (3) territorial restructuring, land and food sovereignty; and (4) the localisation problematique. We conclude with a glance at the future research challenges at international, national and local scales, as well as at the links between them, while emphasising the continuing relevance of a critical dialogue between food sovereignty activists and engaged scholars.

Keywords: food sovereignty; food justice; agrarian justice; environmental justice and sovereignty; transnational agrarian movements; flex crops

Introduction

Food sovereignty – as an idea for an alternative food system and as a global social movement – has constantly evolved since its launch by the international agrarian movement, La Via Campesina (LVC), during the period 1993–96. In 2007 a food sovereignty world assembly was held in Mali, where more than 500 advocates coming from 80 different countries gathered for several days to commit themselves, and their respective movements, to the ideals of food sovereignty.
Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

It is clear from the Declaration that food sovereignty is a political project. The how questions in the political construction of food sovereignty will thus necessarily involve questions about engaging with social forces external to the collective movement that may facilitate or hinder the attainment of food sovereignty. Yet they will also entail a constant, internal renegotiation within the emerging social forces constructing food sovereignty. In the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration, advocates committed thus:

We are committed to building our collective movement for food sovereignty by forging alliances, supporting each other’s struggles and extending our solidarity, strengths, and creativity to peoples all over the world who are committed to food sovereignty. Every struggle, in any part of the world for food sovereignty, is our struggle.

We have arrived at a number of collective actions to share our vision of food sovereignty with all peoples of this world […] We will implement these actions in our respective local areas and regions, in our own movements and jointly in solidarity with other movements. We will share our vision and action agenda for food sovereignty with others who are not able to be with us here in Nyéléni so that the spirit of Nyéléni permeates across the world and becomes a powerful force to make food sovereignty a reality for peoples all over the world.

The political build-up from food sovereignty’s initial public launch during the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome towards Nyéléni in 2007, as well as the
post-2007 momentum in its political construction (idea and social movements), have proven both inspiring and challenging. The initiative has steadily advanced and expanded, albeit unevenly, across space and time. And, in the process, it has answered some questions while also provoking new ones.

A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global discourses, both political and academic, over the past two decades. Since then it has inspired and mobilised diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals; farmers and peasant movements; food vendors and restaurant owners; public health advocates and neighbourhood gardeners; NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways by different groups and individuals. Indeed, as it is a concept that is so broadly defined, it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, pastoralism, fisheries, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labour migration, the feeding of volatile cities, community initiatives and state policies, public health, climate change, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights. Similarly the meaning of food sovereignty has morphed and expanded quite significantly beyond the ‘rural/agricultural’ framing originally given by LVC. Today it stretches across a manifold of socio-political and economic scaffolding: rural/agricultural, rural/non-agricultural, urban/agricultural, urban/non-agricultural, spheres of production, circulation/trade and consumption, the North–South hemispheric divide, state–society institutional spaces, as well as class and other social attributes and identities. Such is a key indication of the relevance – and power – of food sovereignty (FS) as an idea, a social movement, a campaign, and an analytical framework. It also provides us with a glimpse of why FS can be a complicated issue to negotiate within and between social classes and groups across societies.

Since Nyéléni in 2007 FS has significantly gained more ground within the academic community internationally. Slowly FS has been introduced into various academic disciplines, including agrarian political economy, political ecology, international political economy, international relations, ecological economics, world-system studies, social anthropology, development studies, law, sociology, politics, gender studies, public health, and human rights. All the while FS has increasingly garnered the attention of advocates, supporters, sympathisers and sceptics. In the effort to explore what FS means to each of these academic disciplines, and how the academy could contribute to deepening and broadening the conversation around FS, several academics and research institutions organised two international conferences around the theme ‘Food Sovereignty – A Critical Dialogue’. The first conference was held at Yale University in September 2013. It was hosted by the Yale Program in Agrarian Studies and the Yale Sustainable Food Project, and coordinated by James C. Scott. Close to 300 participants from around the world attended that conference, where some 82 papers were presented and discussed. The second conference was held four months later, in January 2014, at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, and attended by around 350 academics and activists from across Europe. The conferences were co-organised by the Transnational Institute (TNI) and the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First). In all, nearly 100
conference papers developed from these two events. Militants, advocates, supporters, and sympathisers – as well as sceptics – from inside and outside the academy gathered at these events and debated in collegial and comradely fashion several critical issues surrounding FS. Indeed, these conferences complemented the earlier, equally critical conferences organised by key scholars including Annette Desmarais, Hannah Wittman, Nettie Wiebe, Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael regarding FS, and proved to be immensely productive, both politically and academically. The editors of this special collection were among the organisers of these two conferences.

Three journal special issues have been produced from the said conferences. The first collection appeared in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41, no. 6 (2014), edited by Marc Edelman, James C Scott, Amita Baviskar, Saturnino M Borras Jr, Deniz Kandiyoti, Eric Holt-Giménez, Tony Weis and Wendy Wolford. This collection focuses on the agrarian dimensions of FS. The second collection is forthcoming in a special issue of *Globalizations* (summer 2015), edited by Annie Shattuck, Christina Schiavoni, and Zoe VanGelder. It focuses on general globalisation-related issues and includes a number of contributions linked to issues in the global North. The third collection is this current special issue of *Third World Quarterly* – the content and focus of which we will introduce below.

Building on the critical dialogue at Yale and ISS, this present collection identifies a number of key questions regarding FS. What does (re)localisation mean? Although the concept stands at the centre of the food sovereignty narrative, (re)localisation has rarely been problematised systematically in any academic terms. How does the notion of food sovereignty connect with similar and/or overlapping ideas historically? How does it address questions of both market and non-market forces in a dominantly capitalist world? There is a tendency in the food sovereignty narrative to sidestep divisive issues such as gender: how does FS deal with such differentiating social contradictions? The alternative FS both embodies and promotes often focuses on scattered localised food systems. But how does the movement deal with larger issues of nation-state, where a largely urbanised world of non-food producing consumers harbours interests distinct from those of farmers? How does food sovereignty address the current trends of crop booms, as well as other alternatives that do not sit comfortably within the basic tenets of food sovereignty, such as corporate-captured fair trade? How does FS grapple with the land question and move beyond the narrow ‘rural/agricultural’ framework? These are among the current questions facing food sovereignty (also see the key questions raised in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Globalizations* special issues). Such questions, indeed, call for a new era of research into FS, a movement and theme that in recent years has inspired and mobilised tens of thousands of activists and academics around the world: young and old, men and women, rural and urban. In the remainder of this article we will elaborate on some of these questions.

### Dynamics within and between the rural–urban, North–South divides

#### Farming and non-farming rural social groups

Amid the far-reaching promises of food sovereignty questions still abound regarding where non-food producers in the rural areas of both the global North
and global South fit, intellectually and politically, within the movement’s future trajectory. In 1939 Carey McWilliams’ *Factory in the Fields* put forth the earliest critique of the industrial agriculture that was taking root in the USA and, more importantly, of the impoverished and racialised caste of farm workers that served the emerging order.3 Seventy-five years later McWilliams’ work continues to prove prescient. Just as the now-familiar features of capitalist agriculture – corporate control, land concentration, and increasingly biotechnological industrial inputs and processing – have spread throughout the global North, so too has the system of cheap, racialised foreign agricultural labour that has long underpinned it. And while campaigns for farm worker unionisation and social justice sporadically swept through the USA and parts of Europe between the 1930s and 1980s, such concern for the rural working poor in the North has waned amid the rise of food politics, where method and place of production, from organic and sustainable to slow food and buy local movements, has obfuscated the exploitation and plight suffered by agricultural labour.5

Indeed, food sovereignty, as both a global movement and an intellectual field of study, affords the opportunity to refract important light on rural labour as well as advance discussion on how to bridge the class, racial and ethnic divides that have long impeded collective action and consciousness in the rural North. This is certainly no easy task. As a number of social scientists have noted, the racial minorities and foreign immigrants working the industrial assembly lines of slaughterhouses and processing plants in North America employ a range of workplace logics to formulate quasi-class identities to differentiate themselves not only from those occupying lower status jobs at the industrial plant, but especially from those toiling in the agricultural fields.6 At the same time landless contract farmers – a common feature in the corporate landscape of the global North, who are essentially reduced to selling their labour power – differentiate themselves from rural workers through a class identity, which is significantly reified by race and ethnicity. In all, these barriers underscore how distancing in industrial agriculture operates to sever connections among rural workers as often as between producer and consumer.7

In the global South such barriers to collective action and consciousness among rural workers seem even more daunting for food sovereignty. As some of the contributors to this special issue explore in detail, ‘re-peasantisation’ not only risks invoking an agrarian imaginary that, for some, falls far outside the realm of realistic possibility in the twenty-first century, but also homogenises the thicket of social, economic and cultural complexities afflicting the rural communities of the South.8 Class identity – and the varying ideologies, concerns and political allegiances inherent in it – fuels conflict and antagonism between landless labourers, small farmers and petty commodity processors, just as the wide range of economic sensibilities among rural peoples sow additional seeds of fragmentation. Cultural tensions further aggravate such divides, especially for ethnic minorities and women, the latter increasingly accounting for the majority of farm workers in many regions.9 Taken together, these fissures within the rural communities of the global South spotlight the barriers to the ‘radical egalitarianism’ promised by food sovereignty, as well as the mixed appeal – and relatively limited possibility – of the movement’s smallholder, peasant idyll. Where do landless farm workers, especially ethnic minorities and women, fit within this agenda of agrarian change?
Why do some labourers prefer engagement with corporate agriculture to small-scale farming? And what erodes the common ground of solidarity in rural reform movements, from Latin America to Africa to Southeast Asia? These are some of the most sensitive and difficult political questions confronting FS activists and some of the challenging academic research questions that several scholars have also identified. Other persistent contradictions and tensions are those between sedentary farmers and pastoralists, agriculturalists and indigenous peoples, and rich farmers and poor farmers, among others. It is not that FS activists have not spotted these complicated dimensions of the movement-building process – indeed they have. Yet, contrary to sweeping claims and movement slogans, these are political dilemmas not easily resolved.

**Tension in producer–consumer, rural–urban links**

Food sovereignty’s original social base is located in the peasantry of the global South and the small-scale, family farm sector of the global North. Because it is one of the few broad political platforms today globally contesting neoliberal capitalism, food sovereignty has spread across food system struggles to urban and peri-urban areas of the global North, where students, socially conscious consumers, farm and food workers and food justice advocates have embraced it as a banner for social justice and food system transformation. At first glance food sovereignty in the South is primarily rural and peasant-based, while its expression in the North is largely (though not solely) urban and consumer-based – particularly in North America (where there are key farm movements around FS too). While this broadly mirrors the rural–urban demographic distributions of industrialised and less industrialised countries that characterised the ‘development decades’, the de-industrialisation of large areas in the North and the rapid industrialisation of some boom economies in the South (more specifically, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and some key middle-income countries) demands a nuanced understanding of the overlaps, exceptions and contradictions among these actors and settings, as well as analyses from different disciplines and multiple vantage points. The agrarian transitions of capitalist agriculture are part of a longer and larger transition to a globally integrated capitalist food system characterised by the political influence of multilateral institutions, liberalised trade, transnational oligopolies, global value chains, ‘supermarket-isation’ and the grain–oilseed–livestock complex. These structural changes have been central to a number of global-scale crises (such as species extinction and global climate change), disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations and communities around the world, that have also driven the expanding agenda of food sovereignty.

The rise of food sovereignty as a demand signals a significant political shift toward recognising the importance of agrarian organisation in the spheres of both production and consumption. The particular ways in which food sovereignty is incorporated into struggles around food, land, labour and environment in the food systems of industrialised countries depends only partly on how the term has been defined by LVC, the participants at the Nyéléni food sovereignty world assembly (or agrarian sociologists). The fact that so many people and groups are taking up the FS call without consulting with LVC or agrarian sociologists is, after all, what gives FS its political power. How the global
processes of industrialisation, liberalisation and financialisation currently affect people’s food systems plays an equally critical role in the process of FS becoming incorporated into these political struggles. The multiple combinations of factors and contexts – the mix of agricultural biotech industrialisation and market liberalisation; North–South and rural–urban dynamics – are leading to variation, overlap, unevenness and contradictions among and within the communities and social movements struggling for dignified livelihoods and healthy, sustainable food systems. These are further complicated by layers of vulnerability rooted in diverse social attributes like gender, race, caste, nationality, religion and ethnicity, as well as localised conflicts over water, land, jobs and gentrification.

Given these complicated and volatile scenarios, one wonders how a single concept like food sovereignty could have any practical political meaning. Nevertheless, clear linkages exist between the dispossession of peasant and indigenous communities in the global South and the epidemic of diet-related diseases in low-income communities of colour in the USA. And similar links are evident between the oppression of African immigrant farmworkers in the fruit and vegetable farms of southern Europe and their Latino counterparts in North America. Yet while these relationships may be understood by using the food sovereignty lens in the abstract, it is less than clear how FS will bring social movements working under such disparate conditions into a common programme for transformation.

In the global North food sovereignty advocates face tensions and contradictions arising from more reformist approaches from government, the private corporate sector and big philanthropy. Such approaches, in the best of cases, advocate food security without structural changes, which have often led to nothing more than the ‘mainstreaming’ of organic food or Fair Trade products within monopoly firms whose business model is devastating small and mid-sized family farms. The political impossibility of introducing significant change into the US Farm Bill or the European Common Agricultural Policy has driven food sovereignty’s focus to the spheres of local communities and local government. Here advocates might change some local policies and practices, but there are relatively few resources with which to build lasting, transformative institutions or social structures. The lack of public resources drives some factions of the food sovereignty movement towards the non-profit sector, where philanthropic foundations controlling the purse strings tend to depoliticise agendas of social change, diluting both their class power and capacity for coalition building.13

Food sovereignty in the global North is clearly both strengthened and complicated by the broad ways in which the concept has been incorporated across food system struggles.14 Understanding the obstacles to and opportunities for convergence and the re-politicisation of the food movement are perhaps the most immediate political challenges facing the food sovereignty agenda in the global North.15 Further enquiry by researchers in agrarian studies, food systems and social movements will help to shed light on these developments.

**Critical gender perspectives**

Food sovereignty includes a call for gender equality within a fundamental reorganisation of the food system.16 LVC, a key promoter of FS, has stood at the
forefront of advancing such egalitarianism by institutionalising gender balance in its leadership structures and making space for women’s voices (especially through a dedicated Women’s Commission). Moreover, the organisation has launched a global campaign to stop violence against women, a campaign that goes beyond domestic violence to include ‘the structural violence that women have to confront each day and that has been systematically silenced, made to appear natural, and rendered invisible by patriarchal capitalist society’.  

The adoption of FS by the World March of Women (WMW), and their political alliance with LVC is an indication of FS’s deep potential for addressing inequities of gender. By incorporating FS into their demands, the WMW not only broadened and deepened the voice of rural women in their political campaign for women’s rights; they were able to affect political agendas far beyond the women’s movement. As Miriam Nobre of the WMW points out:

We united behind the principles of food sovereignty first because our rural sisters in the World March of Women invited us to join their struggle for land and fair conditions to live and produce as farmers…We also understand that food sovereignty allows us to expand the feminist movement’s horizons…Our contribution as a feminist movement is to link the goal of women’s autonomy with the vision of sovereignty for all people.  

As Park et al note in this issue, food sovereignty – in its reorganisation of power dynamics within the food system – is well placed to explore gender dimensions. Yet they also caution that the unifying discourses employed by FS movements in advocacy and mobilisation campaigns blur important differences, such as experience and class, leading to a tendency towards homogenisation that glosses over gender dimensions. Along these lines Agarwal has critiqued what she views as an important contradiction within FS: advocating gender equality, on one hand, while simultaneously promoting the ‘family farm’ idyll, on the other. She argues that:

More particularly, family farms do not provide autonomy to women workers or the means to realize their potential as farmers. Hence a nod toward gender equality is not enough. The problems women face as farmers are structural and deep-rooted, and would need to be addressed specifically. This would include redistributing productive assets such as land and inputs within peasant households in gender-equal ways, and directing state services to cater better to the needs of women farmers, such as services relating to credit, extension, training, information on new technology, field trials, input supply, storage and marketing. (Ibid., 1255)

Park et al follow this logic of specificity and examine the gender dimension in various case studies regarding land rights, division of labour and access to employment. They make an important call for FS to ‘address gender inequalities systematically as a strategic element in its construct and not only as a mobilising ideology’. This distinction proves equally pertinent for both FS actors and those engaging in the analysis of food sovereignty discourse and practice.

**Flex crops and commodities, market insertion and long-distance trade**

There is nothing in the Nyéléni Declaration that precludes long-distance trade. There are, however, two related issues that bring us back to the issue of trade,
namely the explicit position of FS against food dumping, whether through
official food aid or at prices below production costs, and the call for the ‘re-
localisation’ of the food system. In turn, these drag us back to an old agrarian
political economy discussion that has recently been resurrected within main-
stream agricultural economics by new institutional economists. The discussion
also seems to have found renewed expression in various NGO mantras, includ-
ing ‘corporate social responsibility’, ‘fair trade’, ‘business and human rights’,
sustainable rounds table initiatives’ and ‘insertion into the value chain’. In its
2008 World Development Report, the World Bank claimed that ‘it is time to
place agriculture afresh at the centre of the development agenda’. In so doing,
the World Bank envisages an agricultural system ‘led by private entrepreneurs
in extensive value chains linking producers to consumers and including many
entrepreneurial smallholders supported by their organizations’. This advocacy
received a boost from what Borras et al call the rise of ‘flex crops and com-
modities’ – crops and commodities that have multiple uses and can be flexibly
interchanged across food, feed, fuel, fibre and other sectors. This complex has
led to a recent transition from the conventional ‘value-chain’ to what Virchow
et al call a ‘value web’ – the interlocking of various value chains.

The rise of flex crops and commodities, often embedded in complex value
webs, do not inherently mean something adverse for small farmers or for the
environment. But this growing phenomenon is a new context for many FS
front-liners, which in turn spurs questions regarding long-distance trade, free
trade agreements and international regulations and standards, and, perhaps most
importantly, the placement of small farms within this value web in ways that are
significantly different from Jan Douwe van der Ploeg’s idea of entrepreneurial
‘new peasantries’. Three relevant political processes are important for the fur-
ther examination of the challenges they impose upon FS political construction:
(1) international/multilateral negotiations on trade, investment and trade-related
intellectual property issues, among others, in the World Trade Organization
(WTO), as discussed by Akram-Lodhi and Bacon in this issue; (2) regional
multilateral/bilateral negotiations via free trade agreements, especially after
WTO negotiations broke down in the Doha Round because of the opposition of
BRICS and many middle-income countries to the protectionist measures long
enjoyed by Northern countries; and (3) the proliferation of various regulatory
institutions and standards whose impact on poorer producers and consumers is
not always palpable and positive. Examples of this third process can be seen in
the social, labour and environmental commodity certification schemes exercised
by private bodies like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, and in fair trade
(corporate or otherwise), both of which circumvent the regulatory power of the
nation-state.

LVC framed the original formulation of FS in the context of a struggle against
neoliberal globalisation manifested in unbalanced international terms of trade
negotiated under the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and
Trade and later under the WTO. The objective conditions of agricultural produc-
tion, trade and consumption have since then become even more complicated,
partly through the rise of flex crops and commodities and the reorganisation of
production, fragmentation, industrialisation, circulation and consumption through
their related value webs. How then can FS be repositioned within this changing
context? What does this recent phenomenon imply for FS constituencies? The answers to these questions are not obvious. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the mode of agricultural production envisaged by FS, the ‘terms’ of inclusion in the flex crop value webs, ranging from less to more favourable, are of greater relevance. The politics of inclusion/exclusion in/from capitalist agriculture as producers and/or as workers are discussed by Martiniello in the case of Acholi farmers in Northern Uganda, by Bacon in the case of fair trade smallholder coffee producers in Nicaragua, and by Kerssen in the case of indigenous quinoa farmers in the western highlands of Bolivia (all in this collection). Thiemann brings the discussion to the question of agricultural investment; he challenges the assumption that ‘corporate investment’ is the only game in town. And in her case study of cacao growers in upland Sulawesi, Indonesia, Tania Li also reminds us that ‘even when small-scale farmers are untouched by land grabbing or corporate schemes, as in this case, expanding their capacity to exercise control over their food, their farms and their futures is still a huge challenge’.

There are two important insights that the cases above lay bare. On one hand, the peasantry across the South–North hemispheric divide engage differently with the market and corresponding regulatory institutions. Thus, the notion of socially differentiated producers is a key analytical lens that remains relevant in the study of FS, as consistently discussed in this paper and by Edelman et al. and Bernstein, among others. This would include class and other social attributes and identities, such as race and ethnicity, as well as gender. On the other hand, FS needs to be more explicit about its idea of long-distance trade, and the conditions of trade that could prove beneficial for small-scale producers, family farmers and working people. Burnett and Murphy represent some of the first scholars to systematically address this important and controversial issue.

**Territorial restructuring, land and food sovereignty**

Calls for food sovereignty must address the question of land in ways that fully capture the FS scope. Historically the commodification of land under capitalism has affected all forms of land access, use and tenure. Food sovereignty evolved in no small measure in response to capitalist agriculture’s three-decade neoliberal trend of market-driven dispossession of peasant lands, reflected in LVC’s longstanding demands for state-led, redistributive land reform. More recently, large-scale corporate land grabs and the financialisation of agricultural land have brought forth new calls for ‘democratic land control by working people and peoples’, framed as ‘land sovereignty’ in this issue by Borras et al.

The emergence of land sovereignty as a political demand reflects two conceptual–geographic shifts: from farm system to food system, and from farm scale to territorial scale. These two shifts originate in separate, but converging, loci. On one hand, agrarian capital and other extractive industries are transforming ever-larger swaths of forest, wetlands and agricultural land, driving hundreds of thousands of rural people from the countryside, or trapping them in adverse incorporation schemes. This has widened the scale of resistance among affected peasantries, family farmers, fisher-folk, pastoralists and indigenous communities as they fight for their respective livelihoods – increasingly in shared territories.
On the other hand, the convergence of consumers, peasants, family farmers, fisher-folk, pastoralists and indigenous communities in the struggle against capitalist enclosures of land, food and resources has produced a widening frame of resistance. Urban, peri-urban and rural lands are being redefined by production and export corridors. The expansion of flex crops and commodities are steadily remaking food sheds, linking them to global value webs, in which ever-growing supermarket networks, modern grain–oilseed–livestock complexes, and emerging biochemical complexes exploiting the multiple uses of agricultural and forest biomass, are deeply reshaping the meaning and workings of ‘agriculture’ in contemporary capitalism. Ancient food crops like teff, quinoa and maca are rapidly being commodified as global speciality products, pricing them out of local markets and turning diverse, poly-cultural landscapes into large-scale monocultures. In this process other key resources – seeds, water and forests, but also knowledge – are redefined and appropriated in the service of capital accumulation.

The academy is also going through an intellectual process of reframing and rescaling. Food systems studies have popped up on university campuses around the world. Some of the largest of these programmes are, ironically, financed by the very companies presently expanding their operations into sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America. Agro-ecology – a multidisciplinary science that has largely co-evolved with food sovereignty – has steadily broadened its scope from farm, to watershed, to food-system scales, meeting stiff resistance from industrially financed science, as well as grudging recognition from the multilateral institutions tasked with agricultural development and food security.

While arenas of resistance are found across the spectrum of institutional scales – from food policy councils in Northern cities and ‘citizen juries’ in Southern rural communities, to the Committee on World Food Security – the importance of ‘grounding’ resistance while integrating multiple actors at multiple scales has never been greater, or more challenging. The call for land sovereignty and the democratic control over land and territory responds to capitalism’s regressive processes of ‘territorial restructuring’. Territorial restructuring seeks control over the places and spaces where surplus is produced by shaping and controlling the institutions and social relations that govern production, extraction and accumulation. Capital exerts this control over specific territories through development banks, private firms and national governments, and by using other global and local institutions and organisations. The accumulated result of these activities, tensions, and alliances between different actors is the regressive restructuring of territorial spaces and places, such as the markets, municipalities, farms, forests and roads that make up local institutions and landscapes. Territorial restructuring encounters friction, slippage and resistance, all of which can lead to unexpected outcomes for agrarian and other extractive capital. Effective resistance in favour of indigenous and peasant livelihoods or redistributive land and water policies requires not only identifying the inherent fissures of territorial restructuring but political mobilization for redistributive and democratic restructuring on a territorial scale. This is the essence of land sovereignty. Whether such broadening of the ‘land’ framework within food sovereignty is politically feasible and, if so, what tensions and synergies it will produce is another critical area for future research.
Localisation problematique

Food sovereignty includes a central call for the localisation of the food system. This is in part a reaction to, and a way to subvert, the various types of ‘distancing’ that the current industrial food system has created. However, localisation discourse is often vague, theoretically or politically assumed rather than empirically examined or specified. As Robbins explains in this issue, ‘the ambiguous nature of defining “local” and “local food systems” makes this task more challenging as they are not only defined in geographic terms but also by “social and supply chain characteristics”’. It is one of the key dimensions of FS that has remained underexplored. It should be on the agenda of any future critical dialogue regarding FS.

Various authors in this collection examine the localisation narrative of FS in different contexts and to varying extents. This stands as one of the important contributions the current collection offers to the literature and analysis of FS. Robbins addresses this question comprehensively. She examines the distancing–localisation problematique from five interrelated perspectives: production and consumption, distant markets, peasant lands, rural and urban, and agriculture and nature. In offering a schematic to categorise local food practices by their method, character and scale, she notes that food sovereignty requires more than just small-scale production or local markets. Moreover, Robbins observes that many local food initiatives neither fit neatly into the food sovereignty framework nor resemble mere extensions of the capitalist industrial model. Instead, most local initiatives fall somewhere in between the two poles.

The issue of scale is of particular interest at the intersection between localisation and food sovereignty. Can local food systems adequately feed a burgeoning global population? What does scaling up local food look like and is it possible to achieve without losing the ecological and social connectedness that food sovereignty promotes? Many of the authors in the current collection grapple with this conundrum in various ways. Bacon outlines the case that fair trade can be in line with food sovereignty, and through his dissection of the divergence between ‘Fair Trade’ governing bodies, illustrates the perils of ‘mainstreaming’ or scaling up an alternative approach. He highlights how the defining features of the alternative tend to erode as the consumer base grows. Thiemann offers a theory of how to move between what he terms the ‘layers’ of FS discourse – the abstract layer of generalised principles and stances, and the concrete layer of implemented ideas – using what he terms an investment lens. He proposes that by fleshing out gaps in the FS framework, the potential of FS will become clearer. What localisation within a food sovereignty frame looks like and how local food systems can radiate outwards to reach a large number of consumers while addressing questions of accessibility, affordability and ecological sustainability is one of those gaps. Brent et al outline the challenge of maintaining affordability for low-income urban consumers, while simultaneously maintaining decent prices for struggling producers, without engaging in depoliticising schemes such as corporate sponsorship. Iles and Montenegro’s concept of ‘relational scale’ is an important contribution to bringing the critical dialogue on the localisation problematique forward.36
Continuing a critical dialogue at various levels between activists and academics

Moving forward, food sovereignty stands as a significant and fertile field for academic research. As many of the contributors in this collection underscore, such research needs to advance a multi-lens view and examination of FS, a comprehensive approach that grapples with the cultural, economic and political complexities that confront the movement at the international, national and local levels. Such explorations will not only help further develop future intellectual and political pathways for food sovereignty, but also better situate academics, policy makers and citizens to more effectively address political questions in global agriculture in the twenty-first century.

Neoliberalism has increasingly become the all-encompassing political catchword in critiques of global capitalism and the facets of international political economy that underpin it – and, in view of international trade policies and development schemes, for good reason. Yet in contemporary agriculture the term can obfuscate more than it highlights, especially in the global North where the term ‘neoliberalism’ has come almost to resemble a rhetorical act of group think rather than empirical analysis. For well over a century agriculture in the North has thrived upon an ever-expanding array of state subsidies, policies that by any stretch of the definition do not fit the neoliberal ideal popularly ascribed to the political likes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Here scholars of the global North need to forward a stringent delineation of political economy between domestic production and trade policy, and explore the various political and economic mechanisms that have allowed this chasm of contradiction to continue between the North and South. Moreover, such examinations would help address the international impediments FS confronts, and advance more revealing and in-depth studies on the hindering roles and policies of global institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank, whose programmes have long sowed the seeds of financial and food dependency.

Future research also needs to contextualise the changing global context food sovereignty increasingly confronts. The converging crises of food, fuel, energy, climate and finance, as well as the development of the flex crop and commodity complexes that have significantly contributed to the rise of newer hubs of global capital, such as BRICS and some middle-income countries, have significantly reshaped international political economy. How has this change affected local (agrarian/food) political economies? Moreover, how have the instruments of international governance been transformed as a result of these recent phenomena? That these developments are all largely linked to the global food system highlight additional facets of future food sovereignty research.

At the national level future research in the global South needs to more thoroughly engage with regional politics and navigate its complexities to better reveal the areas in which the nation-state can hinder and facilitate democratic control over key resources: land, water, forest, seeds. For scholars and FS advocates alike this line of study would not only entail a deconstruction of the state – an entity all too often homogenised – but would also involve grappling with what is ideal and what is possible in regard to reform, as Godek has attempted to do in this issue in the case of Nicaragua. How reform agendas have fared in the halls of government stands as a rich example. To date, FS legislation has
been passed in Mali, Venezuela, Senegal, Nepal, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. Comparative examinations of these (partial) political victories, as well as of those efforts thwarted, would greatly further analysis and understanding of the successful strategies, activism, narratives and imagery employed in the respective regions. Other areas of research relating to the state and resource/territorial control would include political representation, access to public and private land, economic and trade policy at both state and local levels, sustainable water and infrastructure development, as well as seed and other farm input control. Building upon both state and international analyses, future research could also help provide a better understanding of the political-economic linkages between farm, statehouse and market and, in so doing, unpack the complex interrelationship that exists in some regions between food sovereignty, food security and international trade.

At the local level future research needs similarly to address the complexities of rural communities and their urban and peri-urban neighbours. Here again comparative studies would not only greatly enhance our understanding of how food sovereignty is expressed and interpreted on the ground, but also highlight the various impediments to democratic resource control that persist at local levels. As some of the contributors to this collection note, FS cannot be exported in a blanket manner but needs to adapt to the political, social, and cultural rhythms of local peoples. Exploring these rhythms at the ground level would help foster such local and regional adaptations, and resituate scholarly attention toward the praxis of rural communities. Within this vein, future research needs to more thoroughly examine the social and cultural constructs of hierarchies within a given region and community, such as ethnicity, gender and class-identities, and how these constructs pervade local institutions and impede, or not, collective action for reform. Moreover, grappling with these cultural and economic complexities would also correct the homogenised – if not idealised – view of the ‘peasant’. Indeed, this correction would deepen our understanding not only of the blurring line between consumer and producer in the global South, and the grey zone between market and peasant economy in which many rural people reside, but also the preference for farm labour over small farming among segments of the rural population in the South.

How the political dynamic in each of these levels reshape one another is a critical process to pay closer attention to in the future. How to carry out rigorous research that takes these linkages between levels into account is an urgent and important challenge. Iles and Montenegro have offered useful ways on how we can think about these questions.37

We close by returning to the declaration of principles and strategies for FS political construction that opened this discussion. The Nyéléni Declaration is a call to action for all peoples to unite and overthrow the currently dominant food system with an alternative, namely food sovereignty. It is a call for a pluralist, broad-based, cross-class alliance spanning intra- and inter-social class and other attributes and identities, rural and urban, and North–South divides. An anti-systemic campaign for a comprehensive alternative food system has to be simplified, direct, clear and easy to grasp. In this context the principles and slogans expressed in the Nyéléni Declaration fit the bill in a powerful way. Yet
reality often proves much more complicated. Social relations between classes and groups who have a stake in developing an alternative food system can be messy, with socioeconomic interests and political standpoints often spurring competition and antagonism.

There are twin tasks for activists and academics. On one hand, confronting – rather than backing away from – these contradictions and dilemmas will be a necessary political task for all food sovereignty advocates. What activists cannot afford to do is to stand idle because of the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions and dilemmas they face. On the other hand, researching these contradictions and dilemmas in acute ways that raise difficult, but helpful, questions will be a vital contribution from engaged academics. What scholars cannot afford to do is to avoid the food sovereignty issue, or heckle it from afar without fully appreciating the messy contradictions and complexities that ensnarl the movement. The present collection is a modest but important contribution to these twin tasks.

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Notes

2. Ibid.
3. In addition, the conference organisers also managed to produce high-quality video clips of the plenary speakers at the conferences. These video clips are available on the websites of the conference co-organisers (Yale Program in Agrarian Studies, Food First and TNI) as well as on YouTube. It is important to read the individual contributions in these collections in the context of the broader critical dialogue launched at Yale and ISS. Moreover, re-reading other key academic texts on FS, such as Claeys, Human Rights; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, Food Sovereignty; and Patel “Food Sovereignty”, is also encouraged.
4. McWilliams, Factories in the Field.
5. Majka and Majka, Farm Workers; and Mooney and Majka, Farmers’ and Farm Workers’ Movements. On food politics, see Pollan, Omnivore’s Dilemma; Pollan, In Defense of Food; and Weber, Food Inc. For an important exception, see Guthman, Agrarian Dreams.
6. Pachirat, Every Twelve Seconds; and Striffler, Chicken.
10. See, for example, Bernstein, “Food Sovereignty via the ‘Peasant Way’”; and Agarwal, “Food Sovereignty.”
13. See Brent et al. in this collection
14. Ibid.
15. Amin, “Food Sovereignty.”
17. LVC, “La Via Campesina.”
19. Agarwal, “Food Sovereignty.”
20. See Robbins in this issue.
22. Ibid., 8.
27. Se also Kay, Positive Investment Alternatives; Kay, Policy Shift; and HLPE, Investing in Smallholder Agriculture.
30. Burnett and Murphy, “What Place for International Trade?”
33. On water grabbing, see, for example, Franco et al., “The Global Politics.”
34. Holt-Giménez and Altieri, “Agroecology.”
35. Holt-Giménez, Land, Gold, Reform.
36. Iles and Montenegro, “Sovereignty at what Scale?”
37. Ibid.

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