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Locating nation, state, and identity in the global food debate

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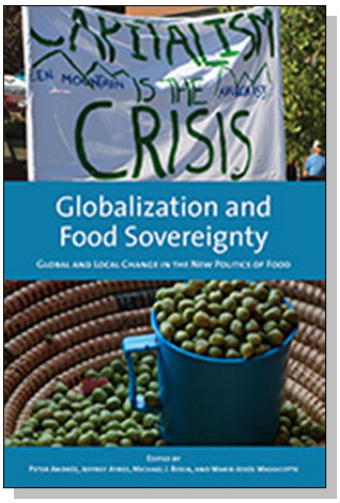

Globalization and Food Sovereignty: Global and Local Change in the New Politics of Food, edited by Peter Andrée, Jeffrey Ayres, Michael J. Bosia, and Marie-Josée Massicotte

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The advocates of food security, food sovereignty, and indigenous sovereignty discuss the relative merits of each movement in *Globalization and Food Sovereignty*, a volume edited by Peter Andrée, Jeffrey Ayres, Michael J. Bosia, and Marie-Josée Massicotte. Like all rich academic discussion, the increasingly complex debate about food may be best understood where the philosophical and the practical converge. A good place to begin a discussion of the food debate may be in chapter four, located in the first third of the book. Professor Martha McMahon, sociologist by profession and farmer by vocation, has written a delightful and comprehensive analysis of one of the most interesting aspects of the food challenge. She describes, among other things, the specter of creeping government oversight and what for some is the equally frightening sensation of anarchical communalism.

So far, government oversight prevails, as McMahon describes what could be an Orwellian vignette emerging in western Canada. Canada's governing authorities have developed a system to monitor farm animals. In this instance, the subject is the rare Cotswold breed of sheep, which now must wear birth-to-death electronic tracking

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devices. McMahon suggests that the effort to "follow the sheep" is rooted in the neoliberal global food program of keeping food "plentiful and safe" (p. 117). According to McMahon, the extremes taken to keep food and farm produce abundant and safe highlight where food security advocates may be unwilling, or unable, to check excesses of corporate and government control; they also appear ambivalent about the need to promote "equitable social change" (p. 113).

For many food sovereignists, equitable social change begins with the right to refuse what they consider to be the dictates of the neoliberal food program. This includes genetically modified organisms and crops (GMOs), monocrop farming, and other strategies related to mass farming for food export. They wish, instead, to produce for their own consumption first, and then for everyone else. What sounds like a return to subsistence farming actually may be closer to "food first" localism (pp. 13, 27). Food first is producing for oneself and one's neighbors, and leaving the global market to fend for itself. Finding a unified means to advance food-first localism, and sovereignty more broadly, remains illusive.

Most, if not all, of the contributors to *Globalization* identify where they believe "movements for change" such as food sovereignty, and possibly indigenous sovereignty, continue to diverge (pp. 116, 121–123, 348). McMahon's chapter is instructive because it examines the origin and current site of divergence on food policy, where so many other political cleavages persist, in the perception of "identity" (p. 119). Identity is subjective, so by definition it is political. Identity quietly informs much of the analysis in *Globalization,* including the work of Noah Zerbe. Zerbe examines the decline of a Fordist model of agriculture, which he dubs "embedded liberalism." He then contrasts embedded liberalism with the contemporary rise of neoliberal financialization and the ascension of transnational corporations (TNCs). Zerbe suggests that these two trends have led to the demise of the family farm (pp. 87–89, 103).

Zerbe's discussion takes note of the state/market imperative, but he also discusses older trends, including ancient patterns of migration and more recent European imperialism, as well as persistent colonial and postcolonial trade routes. All these continue to shape identity as well as notions of food sovereignty. Here Zerbe quotes A. W. Crosby, noting that the Columbian food exchange is responsible for "introducing potatoes to Ireland and paprika to Hungary" (p. 89). Thus what we grow is what we come to know, and this informs not only our identity, but our identity politics.

Irene Knezevic calls these trends the "foodscape" in a chapter in which she outlines current developments in European Union agricultural policy (p. 229). Knezevic presents a theoretical debate where "food security concerns are…predictably absent" (p. 235). This is because food availability "in EU founding nations is generally good" (p. 235). Knezevic reveals the illusion of ever achieving food security when she describes a true tragedy of the Commons. Mines planted by internecine factions during the Balkan conflict of the 1990s now riddle what was once rich and arable farm land. The more mundane reality of neoliberalism is that while Knezevic suggests that Balkan farmers must "play by the rules," these rules are "non-negotiable" and lead to "spiraling debt and political powerlessness" (pp. 236–237). Knezevic reflects on pre-war Yugoslavia, where Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia's food supply was unified and made secure under a Socialist cooperative system. Here she suggests that food sovereignty made food security possible. Knezevic describes the neoliberal program as it stands now in the European Union, where many producers who cannot afford to operate commercially have chosen to opt out of the system. They operate in an informal space best described as food-first localism (pp. 242, 244–245).

In contrast, perhaps, to Knezevic's view, Peter Andrée, Sarah Martin, and Sarah Wright set the tone for achieving common ground. Wright's analysis of food activism in the Philippines finds that these farmers have successfully adopted sustainable agricultural strategies to advance both food security and food sovereignty. Wright argues that this process works below or beneath the capitalist system (pp. 200, 213–214). The success of the Filipino MASIPAG cooperative system suggests areas for potential overlap among the three movements.

Here "indigenous" Global South farmers use a network of neoliberal institutions such as large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local universities to promote the food sovereignty policy of local food rights first, and export second (pp. 205–206).

The emergence of food-first coalitions or alliances "for change," as described by Wright in her analysis of rural Filipino farmers, is reflected in similar campaigns by Global North urban farmers. As to whether food sovereignty is the antidote to state-sponsored neoliberal food security programs, Andrée and Martin argue that food sovereignty — a movement promoted by some left-center governments as "true" agricultural reform — is vulnerable to being co-opted (p. 175). Andrée and Martin suggest that Canada's various "mainstream" farming organizations may be guilty as charged (p. 175). It stands to reason that if food sovereignty could be subsumed by private organizations, governments might co-opt food sovereignty to an even greater extent, thereby preempting devolution and curtailing localism (p. 191).

Among food sovereignty's most determined organizations is La Via Campesina. LVC is the premier transnational coordinating NGO of food sovereignists that so far resists being co-opted. In this regard LVC has emerged as a force for producing "harmonious," if not unified, food-first policy formulation. In fact, Elizabeth Smythe documents LVC's public statements in which it promotes "the need to give primacy to both food security and food sovereignty principles" (p. 293). Andrée and Martin suggest, however, that while LCV may nod its head to food security publicly, it has pushed various food coalitions to abandon the food security discourse in favor of food sovereignty (pp. 179, 191). Further, while Philip McMichael suggests that food sovereignty promotes rather "elastic" definitions and objectives (p. 345), Andrée and Martin go further. They argue that food sovereignty is deficient in a more practical sense, noting that the sovereignists' agenda is focused largely on rural constituencies, such as those Knezevic describes. These groups can opt out of the global food program. Meanwhile new agriculturalists and urban farmers should be counted in this group, who must reform within the boundaries of the neoliberal "food security" program (pp. 177–178, 185).

Many states in both the Global North and South still address food issues within the neoliberal framework. This is true no matter how "conflicted" that system is. Bosia and Ayres suggest that the French government has been conflicted about promoting French culture and cuisine in the age of American fast food, or *malbouffe*. This "tension" extends to reconciling French participation in the neoliberal global food program — and the Wall Street investment banking that supports it (p. 331). Meanwhile, Bosia and Ayres describe a scenario in contemporary rural Vermont, which often views itself as fiercely independent, where among other neoliberal land consolidations and dislocations, the number of dairy farms declined by 81 percent between 1964 and 2004 (p. 335). Food sovereignists, various "mainstream" farmer organizations, and more "radical" cooperatives in Vermont are joining forces and adopting LVC strategies, targets, and campaigns "to strengthen local food systems" (p. 335). No matter how radically conceived, the strategies of these coalitions do not seem radical in practice, and they are certainly not anarchical. This social change seems more like a reform, rather than a rejection, of current transnational trade and neoliberal objectives.

Neoliberal reform may remain a popular way to organize the global market because, while it has an elaborate set of rules that Knezevic describes as hard to follow, these rules are generally known to all the players. The neoliberal food program is also strengthened by a vast incentive-disincentive mechanism that encourages members to play, cooperate, and even compromise in order to protect the dominant system. Food security advocates may need to make a greater effort to describe the origins of conflict within the food security agenda as they advocate to reform it. Some of these conflicts include tensions over how to assist the disadvantaged and whether states should rely on the market to correct the unequal distribution of goods. Other issues concern unequal access to services such as education, health, and employment. These extend to what Martin and Andrée call the neoliberal "roll-back" or reversal of social welfare programs (pp. 176, 183–184).

Although the authors never quite say it, there is a realization that rather than simply being a set of rules, neoliberalism is also an identity. As such, it remains difficult to challenge. The introductory chapter of *Globalization and Food Sovereignty* suggests a need to examine the Marxist response to the neoliberal food program. This is especially true where Cuba's recent liberalization efforts in the agricultural sector have been cited as alternative to the second green revolution (p. 3). Here Marie-Josée Massicotte's chapter outlining asymmetry, dislocation, and a "feminist ecology" in Latin America may find resonance (pp. 258–260, 268–270).

Power asymmetry and economic dislocation are chief concerns for many food sovereignists, including Raj Patel, whose critique of neoliberal reform is challenged in *Globalization*'s introductory chapter. However, the response as formulated by editors Andrée, Bosia, Ayers, and Massicotte seems somewhat abbreviated or rushed. More specifically, Patel's reliance on Karl Polyani and a preference for the "superiority of ancient communal systems" should be challenged more directly, if not addressed at greater length (pp. 39–40, 74, 179). Feudal land systems in so-called "ancient" cultures have been notoriously resistant to equitable land reform. Michael Menser suggests that even now, and within the emerging food sovereignty movement, there is growing cleavage between the peasants on "rich" land and the "poor," landless, "have-nots." This is especially true in nations with a feudal history, where antediluvian communal inequality, rather than "modern" state-sponsored land grabbing, may be the most significant "flashpoint" (pp. 73–74, 345). A fuller critique of Patel could have provided a context for including a chapter focusing exclusively on identity politics in the aboriginal/indigenous sovereignty movements of North America and Canada.

Readers who want an abbreviated, if rather skeptical, examination of food sovereignty may wish to read McMichael's concluding chapter first. He argues that for many food sovereignists, food is just a starting point, or "flashpoint," to initiate other systemic changes (p. 345). Other critiques of the neoliberal food program describe the excesses of a system, including the overseeding, overmechanization, overfertilization, and vast genetic modification of crops, all of which lead to the overproduction of food for export. More than any of these, McMichael seems most worried about the overfinancialization of agriculture.

According to McMichael, overfinancialization requires massive agricultural investment, which in turn necessitates vast land grabs. Although not defined here expressly, overfinancialization may be the fullest realization of the transnational, neoliberal economic project. It is the incorporation of small farms into ever-expanding TNC control. A preliminary discussion of this and other economic and political science terminology in a dedicated theory chapter would have been useful. These views are echoed outside the food debate by a variety of economists and are the subject of several books by former World Bank director and Nobel Prize–winning economist Joseph Stiglitz. If as McMichael suggests these persistent, large-scale land grabs are increasing, then the icebergs loom large. Under these conditions, neoliberal reform may simply amount to arranging deck chairs on the Titanic amid growing chaos and decline. Further, there is skepticism in this chapter, and in other quarters, as to whether Global North neoliberals would ever commit to a second green revolution, this time for Africa, unless the exercise were extremely profitable (pp. 44, 121, 123).

An argument made in the middle section of the book, that in using food sovereignty to build a better "system," food advocates could lose food security and still not achieve this sovereign system, is quite compelling (p. 256). Other topics that could benefit from further illumination are the Slow Money movement that will have to gain strength if it hopes to challenge fast food and "fast money" (pp. 42–44, 297). Despite these constraints, Martin, Andrée, and Zerbe suggest the local food and fair trade movements (and urban farming could be mentioned here as well) are neoliberal reforms that have "led to an improvement over the conventional system" (pp. 94–96, 103–104).

There is, however, room for improvement, as Elizabeth Smythe suggests. In her chapter on trade rules and food origin, Smythe examines the increasing power and reach of organizations that claim to be small NGOs or think tanks, but are

really more akin to lobbying organizations for transnational food giants. These lobbyists fight regulation regarding GMOs and country-of-origin labeling, both within their nations and across international boundaries. Most dramatically they fight regulation at meetings of international agencies such as the World Trade Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which seek agreements on regulation (pp. 298, 305–307, 310). Smythe concludes that sovereignty will not be achieved until food consumers join the fight concerning how their food is regulated (p. 313). The same could be said for food security.

McMichael's concluding commentary that the state system is merely the remedy to a world with violent histories (p. 350) explains a major point of divergence within the food debate. Those promoting neoliberal food security reform continue to view the sovereignty movements, with their elastic viewpoints regarding self-determination, as a problem of theoretical or even administrative concision. States, on the other hand, tend to view these "radical" attitudes as falling squarely within the landscape of "national" security, an arena where McMahon suggests that opinions and activities are very closely monitored (pp. 268–270).

It would have been useful for the contributors to *Globalization,* who offer both a critique and a defense of the "neoliberal food program," to have defined their terminology with greater precision or attention. McMahon suggests that the food security model "is dangerously under-theorized and carries concealed tensions" (p. 128). A remedy to this problem could have been a short theory chapter in the first section of the book. This chapter could start with the rise of the modern European state beginning with the treaty of Westphalia, a term used throughout the book. It might then move to an analysis of neoliberal state, political, market, and economic theories, including the concept of neoliberal overfinancialization that is much discussed in the book. Further, the basic notion of what constitutes neoliberal reform as understood by the authors of *Globalization,* and as discussed in the broader foodscape, seems to differ from other, more pervasive, definitions of neoliberal reform. In broader discussions of economic theory, contemporary neoliberal reform (often dubbed the Washington Consensus) seeks a restructuring of national economies that previously relied on state-sponsored, socialist and sometimes Marxist-leaning, centralized economic planning. A simple definition to delineate how foodscape neoliberal reform (which seems to revisit Keynesian welfare intervention and promotes the reform various aspects of the neoliberal market-based model) differs from the Washington Consensus (which is known for its anti- Keynesian, pro-market, minimalist state-planning approach) would clarify the unique parameters of the food debate. These, and a range of other concepts, are presently dispersed throughout the chapters of *Globalization,* diffusing their impact.

A unified theory chapter could have introduced new readers to neoliberalism and served as review for others. It is important to note that the contributors to *Globalization* often imply what many neoliberal economists and political scientists state more explicitly: namely that the primary imperative of state building, national security, and even the establishment of relations between states is to promote the territorial integrity of the state within each "state." This is pursued while simultaneously advancing the ascendancy of the global market both above and below the state. Having said that, a latent factor influencing neoliberal economic state building, but one rarely if ever discussed, is how identity influences "rational" economic behavior.

In an effort to explore the potential deficiencies of both food security and food sovereignty, *Globalization and Food Sovereignty* provokes more questions then it answers. This of course is how any good introduction to a new or expanding field should be: thoughtful and provocative.