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# Security or Sovereignty? Institutional and Critical Approaches to the Global Food Crisis

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## Book Review Essay

# Security or Sovereignty? Institutional and Critical Approaches to the Global Food Crisis

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*Anya M. Galli*

Andreé, Peter, Jeffrey Ayres, Michael J. Bosia, and Marie-Josée Massicotte, eds. 2014. *Globalization and Food Sovereignty: Global and Local Change in the New Politics of Food*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barrett, Christopher B., ed. 2013. *Food Security and Sociopolitical Stability*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Galt, Ryan E. 2014. *Food Systems in an Unequal World: Pesticides, Vegetables, and Agrarian Capitalism in Costa Rica*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Concerns over rising food costs and lack of access to food loom at the forefront of discussions of climate change, sociopolitical unrest, and population growth for the coming decades. How far can technological fixes and stopgap aid programs take us in ensuring the availability, sustainability, and biodiversity of food resources for future generations? What are the long-term consequences of increasing the productivity of industrial agriculture systems to be developed under vastly different economic and ecological conditions than those faced by contemporary producers and consumers? Will policies that regulate the current food regime be sufficient to avert future food crises, or is a more comprehensive change—one that fosters the development of smaller-scale, local food economies in place of transnational corporate agriculture—a viable option for building a more sustainable and just global food system? The books reviewed in this essay take varied approaches in addressing these questions about food production, access, and regulation. Although all three highlight the unsustainability and insecurity of the global food system, the causes they identify, and solutions they recommend vary.

Food security was defined at the 1996 World Food Summit as the conditions under which “all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food.”<sup>1</sup> This concept considered the physical and economic ability of populations to access food that fulfills both nutritional need and cultural preferences, emphasizing the responsibility of institutions in providing solutions to food crises. At the same time, alternative ideas about the sources of global food crises and their potential solutions were emerging within transnational social movements. In 1996, the transnational peasant movement La Vía Campesina defined the concept of food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”<sup>2</sup> At issue is the degree to which food crises can be ameliorated or avoided under the existing institutions and policies that govern the global food economy. Whereas food security focuses on policy fixes that are achievable given the structure of food economies under globalization, food sovereignty articulates collective action goals aimed at promoting indigenous and civil society alternatives to the status quo.

Because of its deep connections to culture, food holds significance far beyond its nutritional necessity: food insecurity threatens not only the ability of a population to thrive, but also the traditions and values upon which it functions. Christopher B. Barrett’s edited volume *Food Security and Sociopolitical Stability* presents an expansive review of the interactions among sociopolitical contexts and food availability, access to food, and utilization of food resources. Written in the wake of food price spikes and related riots surrounding the 2008–2009 global recession, the chapters in this book address the “stressors” and contexts under which food insecurity can lead to social and political unrest.

The core argument of the volume is that while sociopolitical instability threatens food security, food-related risks also lead to the very conditions that exacerbate internal conflict, social uprisings, and state violence. For example, in their chapter on climate changes in the coming decade, Mark A. Cane and Dong Eun Lee emphasize that sociopolitical conditions, rather than climate and weather events alone, contribute to food insecurity or social unrest. Instead, they argue that “while climate events will lead to the worst [food security] outcomes in places where the society is internally vulnerable, external climate variation can also push such societies over the edge” (p.88).

Several chapters of the book cover economic aspects of food security including food prices, labor migration, transnational trade policies, and land demand. Later chapters discuss environment- and industry-related issues including freshwater availability and consumption, overuse of marine resources, livestock futures, and emergent crop technologies. The second half of the book addresses food security concerns specific to geographic, economic, and political

1. United Nations 1996.
2. La Vía Campesina 2014.

contexts in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia.

*Food Security and Sociopolitical Stability* describes a deeply unstable global food system in which rising demand, increasing ecological risk, and persistent social inequality threaten food availability, access, and safety. Intended as an information resource for policymakers, international aid organizations, and development economists, this volume provides a thorough overview of food issues as they relate to a range of policy-relevant topics. However, the chapters only consider potential changes and conflicts within the next decade; Barrett writes in his introduction that looking further into the future is “interesting intellectually but not politically imperative” (p.5). Thus, this volume may lack the critical lens necessary to engage readers interested in longer-term considerations of globalization, economic justice, and environmental protection.

Barrett proposes institutional actions aimed at increasing agricultural productivity by introducing new biotechnologies that yield higher outputs and reduce crop losses, maintaining strategic grain reserves to combat food price spikes, and improving food assistance programs for impoverished populations to prevent both food insecurity and sociopolitical instability. The book considers solutions that work within existing political and economic institutions to prevent food-related conditions under which social unrest might emerge. These are practical suggestions, considering that the most easily achievable policies are those that create short-term solutions within existing governance structures. This approach, however, fails to consider the complex ways in which those structures themselves may contribute to food insecurity.

*Globalization and Food Sovereignty*, edited by Peter Andre , Jeffrey Ayres, Michael J. Boscia, and Marie-Jos e Massicotte, departs from the system-based fixes endorsed by food security frames. In their introductory chapter, the editors write that “cranking up industrial production without concern for its broader ecological and social consequences will not solve the food crisis, and definitely not in a way that will address the exigencies of justice and sustainability” (p. 32). Instead, they frame food crises as symptoms of the broader ecological and social unsustainability of transnational capitalism and neoliberal policies. While the food security perspective considers food availability and accessibility, the food sovereignty approach taken in this volume considers food crises more broadly. In this formulation, food crises can be identified across a range of scales and situations. These include food shortages; climate change impacts on food production; starvation and malnutrition; disproportionate consumption between the global North and South; use of agricultural and land resources for the production of biofuels; public health concerns; food safety scares; ecological consequences related to industrial agriculture; declining access to land; negative impacts of trade agreements and crop subsidies; and land rights violations.

The authors compiled this volume with the goal of emphasizing the political centrality of food (as represented by the crises listed above) for a political

science audience. The first section, “Food Sovereignty in Theory and Policy Debates,” begins with an in-depth chapter by the editors describing the theoretical underpinnings of food sovereignty as it relates to critical analyses of political economy, social movements analysis, Karl Polanyi’s critique of self-regulating markets, feminist theory, and the sociology of knowledge. Compellingly written and jargon-free, this introductory chapter serves as an excellent primer on the topic and a grounding framework with which to consider the cases presented in later chapters. In his chapter on the concept of food sovereignty, Michael Menser compares what he calls “state-supported” food sovereignty in Cuba to the “indigenous sovereignty” (p. 55) exemplified by La Vía Campesina. Menser’s chapter provides an important historical overview of the ways in which food sovereignty has shifted the focus from the right to *access* food to the right to *produce* it.

The second section, “Food Sovereignty in Comparative Perspective,” explores the degree to which sustainable agricultural practices and localized food economies are providing alternatives to neoliberal food regimes. Noah Zerbe’s chapter in this section contends that although consumer-based food movements such as fair trade and “buy local” campaigns are important steps toward food sovereignty’s goals, any movement that ends with consumer agency will be unable to effectively challenge broader, systemic issues of inequality and exploitation. The final section, “Food Sovereignty in Contentious Politics,” analyzes contemporary food sovereignty movements in terms of their connections to the alter-globalization movement, food origin labeling campaigns, and local food movements. *Globalization and Food Sovereignty* examines sovereignty as a protectionist civil society reaction to the injustices of the “globalizing food regime.”<sup>3</sup> In doing so, it addresses the systemic causes of food crises and highlights the possibility of grassroots resistance to those systems.

Ryan E. Galt’s case study of pesticide use in Costa Rica, *Food Systems in an Unequal World*, complicates broader food security and food sovereignty perspectives represented in the edited volumes by exploring how national and global markets, transnational corporations, and local farming practices interact. Similar to André et al., Galt rejects the notion of agricultural industrialization as a solution to food crises. In the introduction he argues that seemingly apolitical discussions of technological fixes serve to shift the discourse away from questions of power and social inequality to more neutral questions of how to produce more food. However, the solutions Galt proposes to pesticide overuse—the introduction of stronger national regulations that limit the power of agrochemical companies, stabilization of market prices, and the development of participatory initiatives that train farmers to use more sustainable pest control and cultivation methods—fall between the institutional approach of food security perspectives and the radical visions of food sovereignty.

Galt’s argument centers on Polanyi’s analysis of socially embedded markets and collective social responses that seek to limit the impacts of capitalist

3. McMichael 2011.

commodification.<sup>4</sup> Although this book draws on the same notions of social self-protection as the food sovereignty perspective articulated by Andréé and colleagues, it moves away from sovereignty's focus on alternative food systems to instead explore what Galt calls "agrochemically dependent agricultural and food systems" (p. 5). This approach fills a gap in existing literature by refocusing the critical lens of political ecology on the conventional agricultural practices that make up the vast majority of the contemporary global food economy.

Overall, *Food Systems in an Unequal World* is an information-intensive book that presents both a carefully researched empirical case study and a compelling theoretical argument. Galt locates local farming practices within broader economic policies and trade arrangements by presenting national agricultural data in tandem with project-specific survey data and findings from qualitative interviews and participant observation. Galt also contextualizes his analysis of food systems governance (trade agreements, contract farming, regulation, etc.) by considering the role of biophysical factors (local climate, crop biology, susceptibility to pests, etc.) in agrochemical use. He contends that the introduction of pesticides has allowed agricultural production to expand onto land that increases in value despite poor suitability for farming.

Galt's findings run counter to the expectation that production for transnational export causes more environmental degradation than production for local markets. Instead, he finds that Costa Rican farmers tend to use fewer pesticides on crops grown for export than they do on crops that will be sold on the national market. Galt situates these findings within the country's specific history of capital expansion under structural adjustment, free trade, and rising demand for fresh vegetables in developed countries. Crops grown for export markets are more heavily regulated and are subject to more stringent quality and chemical residue standards. However, farmers' decisions about how and when to use pesticides on export crops occur under "contradictory economic pressures" (p. 157). Although farmers face the risk of regulatory sanctions if they are caught using banned agrochemicals or if their produce is found to have noncompliant levels of pesticide residue, they also face economic risks if their products are cosmetically imperfect or if crops are lost due to pests or disease.

In the case of agricultural production for the national market, the governing logic at work in farmers' use of dangerous pesticides prioritizes potential economic risks over known environmental and health risks. Unlike export crops, produce sold to Costa Rican consumers is subject to less stringent regulations and is rarely inspected for residues. Without the constraints of regulatory risk, farmers tend to use highly toxic chemicals that require less frequent application and are more effective against pests. Farmers often harvest crops soon after they have been sprayed in order to take advantage of price variations. In some cases, they use the national market as an outlet for crops that are unsuitable for export due to

4. Polanyi 1957.

high levels of residues. Although the farmers Galt studied were aware of the risks posed by the application and consumption of certain agrochemicals, their decisions were determined by the prices they received for their products and the challenges associated with farming in inhospitable locations.

Galt's study demonstrates that agricultural practices at the local scale do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are shaped by economic, ecological, and social contexts associated with dominant systems of production. Local production is not without its complications. As Andréé et al. point out, the alternative food networks exemplified by fair trade cooperatives, civic agriculture groups, and local food campaigns present opportunities for sustainable production practices and economic justice, but they do so under the overarching structure of neoliberal policies. Although food sovereignty provides a radical theoretical frame for critiquing and reformulating the global food regime, it has yet to provide politically viable solutions to basic concerns about how to address hunger, malnutrition, and rising food costs. For now, the most viable solutions to food insecurity are those that can be achieved through transnational governance bodies, national governments, and non-governmental organizations—settings where food security functions as a dominant frame. By introducing the core values of food sovereignty—support for indigenous and small-scale producers, preservation of local food cultures, and enhanced protection of land rights—into these arenas, academics and activists have an opportunity to transform global food policy.

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