



Amy Trauger, *We Want Land to Live: Making Political Space for Food Sovereignty*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780820350271 (cloth); ISBN: 9780820350288 (paper); ISBN: 9780820350264 (ebook)

Making Room in Geography for Land and Food Sovereignty

[T]he margin always communicates something about the center... (p.2)

How do scholars understand, analyze, and assess a term that is deliberately provocative? A discourse that seeks to upend? One can treat it like an object, tracking its feisty movements. But, arguably, a more effective way to grasp the force of a rallying cry is to engage it directly, to dive deep into its drivers and to listen closely to its calls to action.

Food sovereignty grows worldwide as a fraught yet fierce political vision. Political Science has largely kept its distance, which is ironic, since questions of sovereignty serve as the discipline's bread and butter. But then Indigenous sovereignty also remains overlooked by the nation-state-as-dominant-scale-of-reference and the modernist spatial imaginaries it engenders. Yet, here is a burgeoning grassroots invocation of a poli-sci throughline in action. Meanwhile, the social sciences only recently began addressing food sovereignty politics head-on. Agrarian change scholarship grapples with the *longue durée* capitalist roots of conditions that grew so egregious under neoliberalism that they catalyzed the current wave of improbable, transnational activism. But this book is not about La Via Campesina. It goes further, giving the contours of movements emerging in the margins of global North centers—from community seed libraries in Pennsylvania to guerrilla gardening in Brussels alleys. These movements arise even in the outskirts of centers of a dominant agri-food system, driven by the failure of food security under (neo)liberalism. The movements remain innumerable, yet they hang together around the nebulous phrase “Food Sovereignty”. At this point, academia can ignore the curious term no longer.

In her new book, *We Want Land to Live: Making Political Space for Food Sovereignty*, Amy Trauger invites us into the world(s) of food sovereignty, and in so doing invites food sovereignty into the worlds of critical geography. Welcome on all fronts. She contends that critical geography provides a useful perspective within academia from which to grasp the diverse contexts and meanings of this phenomenon. These are realms that have much to contribute to each other, with their shared radical goals of economic, social, and political transformation. It is going to be a bumpy, uphill ride, but, as the book argues, the stakes are too high to turn back.

We Want Land to Live is worthy on many fronts. Firstly, Trauger lays out a helpful threefold framework for grasping the unruly yet significant breadth of the term: from national food self-sufficiency, to rights-based resistance, to autonomous food production. She wishes to avoid “one totalizing narrative” (p.34) about the subject, but still manages to offer a timely contribution to food sovereignty scholarship—and thus to activists who are increasingly partnering with scholar-activists, and perhaps even to policy-makers wishing to understand their constituencies. The book follows the lead of food sovereignty movements themselves in that it centers and connects the margins and strives to dissolve binaries: between rural and urban, global North and South, scholar and practitioner.

Herein lies another fruitful tension in the book. Methodologically, it emerges from conviction—personal, political, and intellectual. Trauger analyzes and advocates for food sovereignty by identifying as a food sovereigntist herself. Having grown up in a semi-subsistence Northern Minnesota homestead, “I feel lucky to have learned what I did as one of the last peasants, albeit a settler colonist, in my family” (p.10). The disarming autobiographical interlude self-situates the author as feminist geographer with deep personal *and* academic experience in, knowledge of, and commitment to food sovereignty. She justifies her authority self-reflexively, as countering the extractive power-dynamics of conventional research. On her asserted lack of objectivity, she admits this could make her “the best and the worst person to study it” (p.11). Overall, I am persuaded it strengthens her argument and helps clarify her subject.



But it may also carry its limitations. The book's cover shows a bright, hand-painted mural in Detroit's Growing Power urban farms;¹ its introduction hinges upon a quote by food justice leader Malik Yakini on the twin nemeses of capitalism and white supremacy (p.2); and Chapter 2 begins with a quote by Blain Snipstal (a leader of the Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network and *Coalición Rural/La Via Campesina*, though the book leaves out these affiliations). Yet, other than a paragraph on page 51, this introduction to US food sovereignty movements overlooks civil rights roots and current resurgences of Black agrarianism. Likewise, the European case studies mention South Asian immigrant communities in Lisbon, but the fieldwork does not reflect enough on race. For this reason, the Anishinabek case study stands as the exception that holds the book together. It introduces the survival of Indigenous *manoomin* wild rice traditions as modes of resistance to settler colonialism and to the racism of (neo)liberal agri-food systems and land tenure. Future analyses of food sovereignty, however, would need to attend more closely to the ways white privilege and white supremacy insulate, corrode, obscure, and enable food hegemonies—from Brussels to Maine, Georgia to Pennsylvania.

But, in general, Trauger listens to the movements, highlighting how food sovereigntists are *in situ* political theorists. She begins, appropriately, with a careful political analysis of the landmark 2007 Declaration of Nyéléni. She corrects the prominent mid-90s FAO "origin story": food sovereignty was not launched as a counter to food security, but as its necessary prerequisite. It is born of a critique, but a constructive one, grounded in pragmatism. Here, she lets her interviewees' insights shine through, in their own words, from the Maine Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund's analysis of "Regulatory Fallacy" (p.73) to movement leaders' defense of their raw milk circulation civil disobedience as not illegal per se, "just not legal yet" (p.78).

From this practitioner vantage, even the seeming fault lines of logic in "food sovereignty" open, rather than close, avenues of understanding. Sovereignty conjures monarchy, but also independence from it. The phrase does not mean food independence. It strives for interdependence rather than isolation. It reclaims subsistence production, but not exclusively.

¹ http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/we_want_land_to_live

Here, political tensions abound, but remain generative. Food sovereignty demands independence from the criminalization of seed-saving and raw milk, but it also calls for supply management, antitrust law, CAFO regulation, agrarian reform, labor union protection. The nebulosity is what originally turned away scholars, but Trauger dives right in to trace how the state stands as the problem, in its subservience to capital accumulation, and in its policing. But it also stands as a leverage, a point of intervention and engagement. Trauger shows how food sovereignty movements decry the spatial fictions—the “lie” (p.123)—of nation-state sovereignty and of self-regulating markets, as well as the fiction of their independence from and antagonism against each other. Sovereignty is a raw cry for freedom and a direct response to neo-regulatory tendencies of mid-90s agri-food neoliberalism, which remain “hardly laissez-faire” (p.6). The tensions driving food sovereignty political goals are born of the irony that there is, in the US, nothing more hegemonic than “freedom” and patriotic than consumption (p.1), yet the right to food is conditioned by what state and corporations deem safe, legal, and profitable. These movements strive for liberty but need federal regulations on corporate consolidation to achieve it. Of note, a strength of the book is its clarion call to fight corporate personhood. Navigating a way forward therefore raises questions of governmental layers, with the federal level framed as oppressive, but the county level a site of collective self-governance. Yet, a reader may wonder if federal governance and regulations are not needed to protect against abuses at local and county levels. In general, the book resorts to framing the federal government monolithically, despite assertions of its multiplicity, fluidity, and flexibility. Trauger ends the book with a call to re-conceptualize the state as a “living thing” (p.127); agreed. Future food sovereignty work will need more (auto)ethnographic attention to those involved in the US Department of Agriculture, county offices, agricultural extension, and governmental food provisioning. The book includes conscientious attention to food policy councils and, as an appendix, “An Ordinance to Protect the Health and Integrity of the Local Food System in the Town of (Name of Town), (Name of County)”. Who knew subsidiarity (“exchanges that do not require oversight by anyone but the two parties involved in the transaction” [p.123]) was such an emancipatory realm?

As a grassroots invocation, food sovereignty asserts self-governance, and as Trauger demonstrates, a re-territorialization from dominant spatialities of corporate rule and government collusion. With food added as descriptor, an Old World word takes on new dimensions. Foregrounding food prioritizes the responsibilities and rights of nourishment and situates them as central to governance, autonomy, power, and—as the title of the book reminds us—life itself. The world is awash with food surplus and councils on food security, but according to food sovereigntists these have only compounded the crises of hunger and malnutrition, of land degradation and exploitative agri-food systems. Food sovereignty is needed for food systems to work.

What this book does well is make space in geography for contemporary critical agrarian studies, via the term and movement of food sovereignty. After an astute overview of how state power territorializes and food sovereignty power de-/re-territorializes, Trauger launches an insightful analysis of the temporality of commons-making in autonomous food production: the multiple, divergent ontologies of property, the role of the margins in defining the center, the oppositional fertility amidst the ashes and wake of failed developmentalism. In this fertile ground, alternative “prefigurative” (p.117-118) food systems are explored and practiced, razed by police and then rebuilt by communities. Amidst binaries, dichotomies, and individualizing tendencies, food sovereigntists resist with and for “radical collectivism” of mutuality and love.

At the heart of the political paradoxes of the term lie its economic tensions. Trauger reminds us that such brazen persistence of non-capitalist exchange “bears scrutiny” (p.86) and is “revolutionary” (p.90). This is not, however, a story of revolution, as adamantly stated: “State overthrow has never been, nor will it ever be, the answer to securing food for populations” (p.136). Rather, the goal and mechanisms of food sovereignty—from permaculture to anarchism—entail transforming the relations within existing systems. Food sovereigntists are not Marxists per se; they employ permacultural, anarchist, or Indigenous practices and visions to heal from and survive the oppressive collusion of capital and state. Food sovereignty asks and acts upon the burning question “how to avoid capture?”—both by law bent on the criminalization of seed-saving and guerrilla gardening, but also by neoliberal cooptation. “What I saw and heard most

frequently in my research was an articulation of goals for radically collective notions of self-governance, egalitarian socio-natural relationships, and the sharing of food through relations of care” (p.122), with social transformation and political autonomy as prerequisite to these goals. Resistance “requires the implementation of specific spatial strategies to create zones of autonomy” around food production (p.125): critical geography in action!

Though largely illuminating, the book leaves a few economic tensions unresolved. It may sound radical and “ridiculous” to say, “first and foremost, that we produce for subsistence not for profit” (p.124), but Trauger (and food sovereigntists) have a point, that the current agri-food system fails on its own terms. People are hungry despite bounty, food insecure because of surplus and waste. Plus, dominant agri-food systems fail on broader terms of equity and dignity. How do we avoid reducing the use values of food to mere exchange values, to mechanisms for accumulation? With its direct action, collective rights, non-monetized exchanges, and alternative democratic forms, food sovereignty evades neoliberalism, working to undermine it by making it irrelevant, by showing its limitations and dysfunctions.

But, for most people, once they are already enmeshed in a monetized economy, with loans, debts, and expenses, then some degree of income and revenue remain important—and quality, cooperative food production would be a dignified way to earn a living, assuming farmgate prices covered costs of production. Food commodification remains antithetical to food security, and a key source of hunger: yes, this bears repeating. But what of the livelihood aspect of food growing, distributing, and preparing? The Anishinabek case study demonstrates a way to foreground the cultural and social (and agroecological) dimensions of rice harvesting, gift exchange, consumption—even as it also moves through a money economy these days, with ricers selling their surplus (above what they consume themselves, and gift to elders and others in the community) to the White Earth Land Recovery Project for website sale to make extra income. Rice circulates “as both gift and commodity, sometimes simultaneously” (p.98). In a community struggling with poverty and unemployment, such sales provide important financial supplements, while supporting the continuity of the ricing tradition and its knowledges for younger generations. Trauger draws on feminist geographers, J.K. Gibson-Graham and others, to trace the



ways exchanges of value move in and around and through monetized and non-monetized economies. “As long as food is bought and sold, it will be subjected to the disciplinary power of capitalism” (p.95)–necessarily? More work is needed to explore the nuances of these implications for other low-resource growers in the global North and South and how such opportunities could be amplified.

Finally, the book gives critical geography a powerful tale of the power of land-based life and the centrality of land to life itself. Frontline communities, impacted neighborhoods, Indigenous nations, and grassroots coalitions unite in professing their love, desire, and need for land. To live. Trauger boldly proposes an emancipatory new Homestead Act that prioritizes agrarian reform for Indigenous farmers, farmers of color, immigrants, “refugees from places the United States has destroyed with its foreign policies and wars” (p.128), and, only then, migrant settler descendants. Though future work on food sovereignty would benefit from more explicit engagement with decolonial theory, Trauger’s book works diligently to move in this general direction. Royalties from the book go to White Earth Tribe opposition to a tar sands pipeline across the headwaters of the Mississippi River and its ricing ponds, and to the Anishinabek “who were forced off the land on which I was raised” (p.11). The book brings integrity and insight to the crucial subject of food sovereignty, and as such deserves our attention.

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